

## PREFACE

*Among those literary theorists who have played a role in their country's intellectual life well beyond the field of literature itself—a list longer in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries than the late twentieth—the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz occupies a special position. For while nearly all his work has focused on the culture of Brazil itself, a marginal region par excellence of the 'world republic of letters', its theoretical arguments and implications are of universal effect; and the first feature has always been the unmistakable condition of the second. The impact of his ideas can be seen most recently in Franco Moretti's reflections on uneven development in 'Conjectures on World Literature', NLR 1; as in the conclusions of his Atlas of the European Novel. Born in Vienna in 1938, but brought up in Brazil, Schwarz developed very early a highly distinctive style of intervention, crossing the methods of his teacher Antonio Candido, Brazil's most original literary historian, with ideas from the German-language Marxism of Adorno, Brecht, Lukács, Benjamin. His first book, A Sereia e o Desconfiado, appeared in 1965. Under the Brazilian military dictatorship of the late sixties and early seventies he was in exile in France, resuming university positions in São Paulo on his return.*

*Schwarz has famously devoted much of his attention to the fiction of Brazil's greatest writer, Machado de Assis, but has also written widely on his country's poetry, drama, film, and culture at large. 'Nationalism by Elimination' in NLR 1/167 (1988) explored paradoxes of Brazilian cultural politics and imperialist social relations. Schwarz's principal form has been the essay, and a significant amount of his work has appeared first in supplements of the newspaper, Folha de São Paulo. In 1992 Misplaced Ideas was published by Verso—the first of his books to be translated from the Portuguese. This year his chef d'œuvre on Machado, A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism, appears with Duke University Press. Here we publish the essay Schwarz has written on what he takes to be the most important Brazilian novel of the past decade. Far from the standard recipes of magic realism that feed metropolitan expectations of 'the Latin American novel', Cidade de Deus offers another and more bitter panorama, to be found in all big cities of the Third World today. Schwarz's laconic annotations mark out its disconcerting form.*

ROBERTO SCHWARZ

## CITY OF GOD

**T**HE 'CITY OF GOD'—there is no irony in the name—is a slum of some 200,000 inhabitants on the western edge of Rio de Janeiro. It is famous for the unending shoot-outs there between drug gangs and police—an uncontrollable, escalating war, emblematic in various ways of wider social developments in Brazil. Five years ago, a remarkable novel depicting the life of the place appeared. Its author, Paulo Lins, was born in 1958 in Estácio, a black district of Rio, close to the docks; after the disastrous floods of 1966 he was rehoused with his family in the City of God. This development scheme—product of bungled planning by Carlos Lacerda, the notoriously reactionary governor of the times—was still quite new. Lins went to school there, and carried on living in the *favela* while he studied at the university. He knew the local gangsters—delinquents he had grown up with; and they came to trust him as someone who could mediate with the community on their behalf.

The most reflective and artistic circles in the *favelas* were alert to the subterranean cultural ferment against the military dictatorship in Brazil. By the seventies, discussions about popular music had become a locus of opposition, a form of political debate. On a much smaller scale, something similar occurred with poetry, where a subculture of casual colloquialism and mimeographed leaflets, passed from hand to hand, operated as an antidote to official censorship and conventional publishing. Some of these circulated in the City of God. In the early eighties the anthropologist Alba Zaluar, arriving to make a field study of the new criminality, provided another opening and source of intellectual energy. Lins became her research assistant, responsible for interviews. It was through the course of this investigation that he acquired the formal discipline and range of empirical knowledge that would make his novel a work of quite another cultural order.

Five hundred and fifty pages long, *Cidade de Deus* appeared in 1997.<sup>1</sup> The explosive nature of its themes, the scope and difficulty of its ambition and its unprecedented form of internal narration marked it out immediately as a major event—a work pushing back the frontier of literary possibilities in Brazil. It traces the world of what Lins calls the *neo-favela*, underlining the transformation of the older slum-world under the pressure of the narco-traffic wars, and the parallel developments in police violence and corruption.

### *Epic of the street*

The teeming, quasi-encyclopaedic scale of the novel's recreation of this process is reminiscent of the great gangster movies; but the story opens, subtly enough, with a relaxed scene of popular life. Young Barbantinho is sharing a joint with a friend, and daydreaming of a future as an ultra-fit lifeguard on the beach. Not one of those lazy loafers who let the sea carry people away—he'd make sure he took every chance to keep fit, even running back home from the beach after work: 'Need to keep at it, feed well, swim as much as possible.' Illicit activities coexist, calmly and guiltlessly, with altruistic impulses, modest ambitions, punctuality and respect; keeping up with the latest health fads while trusting in the protective powers of Yemanjá;<sup>2</sup> emulating the good example of his father and brother—also lifeguards. A degree of hesitation is introduced in the following pages, as this hopeful, conformist outlook is cast in doubt by poverty and unemployment—and by the first corpses, floating down the river. Quite another facet of popular life is about to predominate; but the contrast between the two, potentially surfacing at any moment, has a structural function, as if to suggest a historical perspective.

It is when the gangsters erupt on to the scene with the first armed robbery that the novel picks up the mesmerizing rhythm that will drive it to the end. Any serious reading of *Cidade de Deus* depends on taking the measure of this relentless dynamism. The figures in the action-packed foreground are lit up, as in a thriller. Revolvers in hand, the Tenderness Trio—Duck, Nail Clippers and Long Hair—tear across the playground into Loura Square to emerge 'opposite the Penguin Bar where the truck loaded with cylinders of domestic gas is parked'. The driver tries to

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<sup>1</sup> Companhia das Letras: São Paulo, 85 7164 680 5.

<sup>2</sup> Goddess, of Yoruba origin.

conceal his takings but they order him—‘the worker’—to the ground, then kick him in the face. Does the class description make their violence more reprehensible, or does it collude in jeering at the sucker who had tried to fool them? Impossible to tell. The ambivalence of the vocabulary reflects an instability of viewpoint, embedded in the action—a kind of con-artist’s to-and-fro between order and disorder (to adapt, for our times, the terminology of Candido’s ‘Dialectic of Trickery’).<sup>3</sup> Besides, the robbers themselves now hand out the cylinders of gas to the frightened bystanders, who had been trying to slip away from the scene but who now, instantaneously, carry the whole consignment away.

All is as clear as it is complex. Choreographic exactitude fuses with a blurring of good and evil. Cops and gangsters, exchanging fire, both put ‘half a face round the edge of the corner’—*meia cara na quina da esquina*. The internal rhyme and acute visualization suggest not only art as a concentration of life, but life as a process inspired by TV series that are watched by criminals and police alike. In the escapes and chases that follow, the *favela* is a series of crumbling walls, backyards and alleyways, where one character, setting off round the block to surprise a second from behind, comes face to face with a third he didn’t want to meet. The tension and danger, the vivid settings—seemingly made for such encounters—create a certain empathy; but any sense of adventure is undercut by the sheer brutality of what goes on. In the end, one is left with a kind of stunned comprehension.

Less palpable is a quasi-standardization of sequences, a sinister monotony in their very variation. First come the drugs, or some other diversion. Then the boys set off for a hold-up, maybe with killings; for a rape, or some other sexual revenge; to knock out rivals from another gang, or from their own. Going out for a good time—to play football on the beach, or to stir it at some party—always runs into complications and

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Dialética da malandragem’, 1970; see Antonio Candido, *On Literature and Society*, Princeton 1995, pp. 79–103. Candido’s essay is a study of the novel by Manuel Antônio de Almeida, *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* (1854–55), taken as an example of a dialectic between order and disorder profoundly characteristic of Brazilian popular existence. The Princeton editors decline to translate *malandragem*—roughly, ‘roguey’—which refers to the specifically Brazilian figure of the *malandro*, a layabout and trickster, living on the edge of legality. He is often portrayed as Zé Pelintra, Joe the Rogue—a black man, whose skin-colour denotes poverty but who wears a natty white suit, two-tone shoes and a slouched hat.

the same brutal outcome: one of the book's most disillusioning themes. Finally, after the violence, escape—on foot, by bus, in a stolen car or taxi; and then holing up, till the necessary twenty-four hours have passed. Shut up in some room, the *bichos-soltos*—‘animals on the loose’—knock back milk or do more drugs, to chill out and get some sleep.

### *Dynamics of escalation*

For all the constant repetition, there is a sense of crescendo—although nobody knows where it is leading: and here the novel confronts us with the inescapable nature of our times. The overall rhythm of the book depends not so much on points of inflexion in individual lives—although there is no shortage of these—as on escalations that take on a collective meaning. For example: an attack on a cheap hotel disintegrates into slaughter while, on the same night, a man revenges himself on his mistress, hacking to bits the white baby to which she has just given birth; on another corner, a worker mutilates his rival with a scythe. There is no link between these crimes; but the next day, the City of God emerges from anonymity, hitting the front pages as one of Rio de Janeiro's most violent zones. In their own eyes and those of the city, the gangsters' importance has grown. The hotel attack—which had only degenerated into a bloodbath because the boys were so nervous—becomes a newsworthy event, an elevation of the hoodlums' authority and that of the terror they inspire. A new mechanism of perversely inflating integration has been set in place: the most inhuman acts acquire positive value once they are reported by the media—which, in turn, become a kind of ally in the struggle to break the barriers of social exclusion. “Gangsters got to be famous to get respect,” Long Hair told Little Black.’

Another instance: Little Joe is badly disturbed by his friend's injuries. He strikes out at random, murmurs incomprehensible prayers, wants meat bought for a barbecue, and readies his gang for war with heavy doses of cocaine. Next day, they set out for the kill, eyes bulging and teeth on edge. But their craziness has an unexpected logic: its victims are the owners of corner drug-joints—‘smoking mouths’.<sup>4</sup> Revenge is Little Joe's pretext to move up from robber to local drug boss. Now his concern is to impose order within the terror, so as not to deter customers from outside. Just as, on the night of the hotel attack, their blunders pushed

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<sup>4</sup> *Bocas-de-fumo*: places where marijuana and other drugs are bought and sold.

disorganized robbers onto a higher level of integration, so here, a random outburst of personal rage triggers the unification of local power and business. The immense disproportion between immediate cause and necessary outcome in the novel is one of those conjunctures in which the inexorable weight of contemporary history makes itself felt.

Such haphazard episodes slowly distil into a periodization, shared both by the internal order of the fiction and by Brazilian reality: from individual robbery to organized gang; from improvised assaults to regular drug-trafficking; from simple revolvers to specialist weapons (at the height of gang-warfare, Little Joe tries to buy ex-Falklands rifles); from seizing odd chances to the control and management of a territory. In successive waves, the violence grows, the age of the assailants drops. It soon comes to seem logical that seventeen-year-old leaders should dispatch ten or twelve-year-olds—freer from vigilance than the older boys—to shoot down the eighteen-year-old owner of another *boca-de-fumo*. With tears in their eyes, the children accomplish their mission, to earn the status of *sujeito homem*—real men—and the esteem of the rest of the gang.

What are the frontiers of this dynamic? The action takes place within the closed world of the City of God, with only a few forays outside—mainly to prisons, following characters' destinies. Events are portrayed on a grand scale but the space in which they unfold is far more limited than the social premises on which they rest. The higher spheres of drug- and arms-trafficking, and the military and political corruption that protect them, do not appear; their local agents, if not gangsters themselves, are scarcely any different. The real-estate speculators and public administration that ensure the *favela's* segregation from the rest of the city barely figure either, save for odd glimpses—though these are quite enough to suggest that they, too, are all the same.

This limited compass functions as a strength in literary terms, dramatizing the blindness and segmentation of the social process. On their own patch—that of the excluded—the gang leaders are powerful figures, men with brains and hard experience, who can withstand the highest levels of nervous tension. Yet they are still poor devils, dying like flies, far from the opulence the drug trade generates elsewhere. This dizzying oscillation in our perception of their stature gives literary form to an overall social fracture, reproduced within the criminal world. Dead on

the ground, the cunning, violent lord of life and death is a gap-toothed youngster, under-nourished and illiterate, often barefoot and in shorts, invariably dark-skinned in colour: the point on which all injustices of Brazilian society converge. Crime may form a world apart, with a spell that lends itself to aestheticization; but it does not dwell outside the city that we share. It is this that prevents aesthetic distancing, that forces us to a committed reading—if only out of fear. This is a literary situation with peculiar properties of its own.

Locked into the action, the narrative viewpoint captures its instantaneous options, logic and dead ends. Pressures of danger, of necessity, bear down on the characters with the immediacy of breaking news. The result is a kind of irremediable reality and an absurd, stress-induced form of objectivity that cuts the ground away from any moral judgement. Yet *Cidade de Deus* refuses the exoticism and sadism of commercial gangster fiction. The closure of the horizon here is a calamity, although its implications are left for the reader to assess. It becomes immediately comprehensible, for example, why young children should start out by mugging pregnant women and the elderly. It is perfectly rational to beat up the disabled and steal what they've got. It is quite understandable why prostitutes should pull knives when they can't find clients; why gangsters live on their nerves; why so-and-so 'has never had sexual relations with a woman of her own free will'; why the best get-away vehicle after a crime is a bus—'a black who takes a taxi is either a gangster, or at death's door'. The subject matter could be grist for sensationalism and black humour; it is treated in quite another spirit here.

The tight focus gives no respite from this murderous sequence of events. As maximum tension becomes routine, the trivialization of death pushes us far beyond any thrill of suspense towards a disabused, all-encompassing standpoint, only one degree removed from mere statistics; a point of view focused rather on the decisive, supra-individual parameters of class. To be intimate with horror, yet still need to be able to see it from a distance—if possible, an enlightened one: this is our situation today.

### *Scientific stamp*

As in nineteenth-century Naturalism, *Cidade de Deus* owes something of its boldness of range and conception to an association with social enquiry. Under a different historical constellation, the findings of a vast

and highly relevant research project, Zaluar's 'Crime and Criminality in Rio de Janeiro', have been fictionalized from the perspective of the objects of study—and (without promoting any political illusions) with a corresponding activation of a different class's point of view. This is in itself a significant move. In addition, the reordering of materials produces a distinctive tone and vigour, powerfully at variance with 'well-wrought prose'. The systematizing, pioneering force that lends the book's cartography its specific weight is closely related to its origins both in scientific work, and in a team. On the final page, as 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.

If the methods of interviewer and researcher contribute to the artist's schematization, they also stamp his material with literary unevennesses which themselves have wider implications. The worker, the con-artist, the hoodlum, the drop-out, the go-between are no longer defined within stable, separate roles. They are elements—some, legacies from the past—of a new structure, still in formation, that is to be investigated and understood. It is within this totality that precise yet mutable new distinctions and relations begin to distil, bestowing on the fictionalization its fine-textured relevance. The subjective testimony of the field-notes sets up an immediate complexity. There is the boy who would rather listen to gangsters' talk than pray in the Assembly of God with his father; the *bicho-solto* who's so in love with a pretty black girl that he dreams of becoming a manual worker. 'Slaving on a building site—never,' says another; then he turns believer and starts work for a big construction company; his faith helps to keep at bay 'his feelings of revolt against the segregation he had to suffer for being black, half-toothless and semi-literate'. The relational world set up by the play of these positions stands at the intersection between the logic of everyday life, imaginative literature, and society's systematic effort to know itself.

Another aspect of this composite art finds form in the intervals between the action, in passages that explore the present or recapitulate the past. Such explanatory gestures owe their origins to the Naturalist narrative but here, they take on quite a different register. Unadorned field data, evoking the harsh efficiency of the scientific report, combines with the sensationalist tone of the popular press—mined for factual



documentation and ideological raw material—and the brutal terminology, at once obtuse and bureaucratic, of the police. This thick mixture, laden with its cargo of degraded and alienated modernity, has played a real part in the universe of its victims. Social policy has long worked on, if not improved, the terrain on which they are abandoned. The playground—the ‘Leisure’—the gangsters tear across was undoubtedly the contribution of some town planner. 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. In the circumstances, such reasoning takes on an outdated, unreal look, even though soaked and whores are everywhere. 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.

### *Dialectic of song*

The vivid transcription of popular speech—lively and concise, almost to the point of minimalism—offers a contrast to this mortar, up to a point; yet it can also seem, through its very brutality and repetition, its purest and simplest expression. But the most daring strand in the language of the novel is its quite unexpected—perhaps risky—insistence on poetry. The verbal resources of samba are combined with a delinquent, Concretist word-play—the book takes its epigraph from Paulo Leminski—opening a seam of popular potentialities.<sup>5</sup> ‘*Poesia, minha tia*’, begins Lins’s own eulogy to poetry, with a rough caress—*tia* is aunt, but here, rather: my baby, my old lady, my whore—that defies translation:

*Poesia, minha tia*, blaze against what they say is—bullet-blast the phonemes of the prose. Speak the word that swells beyond its bounds, that talks, acts, happens; staggers from the shot. From a toothless mouth, a gaping cavity: our alleyway plans, our deadly choices. The sand shifts on the ocean floor. Absence of the sun darkens even the jungle. Iced strawberry-crush melts

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<sup>5</sup> Paulo Leminski, 1944–1989. Born in the southern state of Paraná, Leminski used the stylistic devices of Concretism to create an irreverent popular poetry.

the hand. The word distils in the mind, takes soul as it's released from lips to ear—but sometimes, sound-magic cannot leap to the mouth. It's swallowed dry, choked in the stomach by black beans and rice; defecated instead of spoken.

Speech fails. Bullet speaks.

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, difficult to imagine in a less heterodox author. It is tempting to wonder about the connexion between this improbable lyricism and the strength of mind required to change the class viewpoint of a social enquiry, from scientific object to subject of the action.

'All is true', announced Balzac, at the beginning of a novel full of the wildest flights of imagination.<sup>6</sup> Lins, too, is concerned not to deny the part of fiction in his work, but to sharpen its powers of prospection and demystification. Faced with the task of giving novelistic form to his vast subject-matter, he has availed himself of every support, from *Angústia* and *Crime and Punishment* to cinematic super-productions.<sup>7</sup> If his universe is adjacent to the sensationalist and commercial imaginings of our period, it is quite opposite in spirit: anti-manichean, anti-providentialist, anti-stereotypical. Its structuring themes are the mirroring of all intentions—Mané Galinha, gangster as sympathetic avenger, ends up as bad as his enemies—and the general dissolution of meaning within energies that become ungraspable. Which is to say: we are in the valid ambit of modern art, where there are no cheap consolations. So when, in epic scenes of collective action, interrupted and resumed to heighten suspense, police and gangsters head for a final, Hollywood-style showdown—nothing is resolved. Death always comes, but before the projected climax, from adventitious hands, for half-forgotten reasons, with no bearing on the act at stake. Salgueirinho, the best-hearted con-artist in the City of God, is run down by a reversing car. The worst crook of all catches a bullet in the stomach—a meaningless death that does nothing to restore justice, to re-establish a balance in the world.

Behind this methodical discarding of conventions can be traced another, more subtle transition between stages of transgression, no less

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<sup>6</sup> *Père Goriot*, 1835.

<sup>7</sup> Graciliano Ramos, 1936; trans. *Anguish*, 1946.

disconsoling. When Salgueirinho dies he is mourned by the samba schools, by his girlfriends, companions and disciples; and with him disappears the wisdom that people should only rob outsiders and not fight senselessly among themselves; that there are pickings enough for all. When Big Head—the hated police chief—dies, the *favela* is shaken up again, in a different way. But when the new-style gangsters die, the authentic sons of the *neo-favela*—nothing happens. The earlier forms of marginality were more sympathetic, perhaps, and less anti-social. In the months leading up to Carnival, the *malandros*, thieves and prostitutes would rob full-steam ahead, to get funds for their local samba school. The crimes were no less but they could be said to be outweighed by a larger objective, of bringing good times to the city—as if there had been a certain homeostasis within the older inequality that made it bearable, up to a point; and that the narco-traffic wars have destroyed. One of the book's most impressive achievements is to show how the liveliness of popular life and the splendour of the Rio landscape itself tend to disappear, as if in a nightmare, under the exigencies of their reign.

It has been said, in a perceptive phrase, that present-day society is creating more and more 'monetary subjects with no cash'.<sup>8</sup> Their world is our own. Far from representing anything backward, they are the product of progress—which, naturally, they qualify. Deep inside, the reader is at one with them—and with their regressive fantasy of simply seizing the glittering goods on display.

*Translated by John Gledson*

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Kurz, *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung*, Frankfurt 1991, p. 225.