

De nobis fabula narratur

Fabio Akcelrud Durão

State University of Campinas (Unicamp)

Insurgent Imaginations has fortunately been receiving the attention it deserves. To my knowledge it has so far been the object of no less than twelve reviews and one interview, which is quite considerable for a book published just three years ago¹. The present forum will further even more the understanding and the implications of this remarkable work, but since its central claims have been competently presented and explained already (for example, by Mahapatra and Peruchi), I will allow myself a less expository and more speculative approach. I will also not dwell on Majumder's specific readings, mainly because, even though well acquainted with the Brazilian content of the book, to which we shall partly revert below, I feel incompetent to pass judgement in what I deem are illuminating analyses of South Asian cultural artifacts and political texts² – indeed, be remarked in passing, the variety of literary genres, different media and narrative modes, which incidentally has not sufficiently been noticed by reviewers, deserves mention as it enriches the reader's experience and the arguments' persuasiveness. We can start with the text's conceptual kernel, that of "peripheral internationalism," which opens a new horizon of investigation. In Majumder's words it stands for "a decolonizing vision challenging the unidirectional traffic of ideas from the metropolitan core to the peripheries." (21) Rajan offers a nice definition when he writes that "[p]eripheral internationalism asserts that it is in the histories, locations, and decolonising vision of non-Western peripheralisms, at both global and national levels, that conceptions of the world, world literature, and internationalism emerge distinctly from their Western, metropolitan, Anglocentric conceptions. Through their cultural and aesthetic productions, writers and activists in the peripheries undertake revolutionary acts of resistance against not only the West but their own national class hegemonies and bourgeoisies" (84).

This quote is also useful to show how several commentators, and to a certain extent Majumder himself, peripheral internationalism is perceived as a

contribution to the debate on world literature, which I believe is ultimately not the most productive way to explore it. “Internationalism” possesses a freshness of its own that is weakened when placed in the extensive and often sterile discussions on world literature. In an interview, after mentioning the older meaning of internationalism, “developed by the Communist Manifesto and taken over by Lenin in his theory of imperialism: the notion of workers’ unity beyond national borders” (Peruchi 2021, 231), Majumder argues that “when we talk about internationalism today, after the demise of the Soviet Bloc, we have to do mainly with an echo of a second vision, that defended by Woodrow Wilson, of external policy to face isolationism. In the present context, this would correspond approximately to the differences between the Democratic and Republican sectors of the American political establishment” (Peruchi 2021, 231; my translation). This might be the case as far as political science is concerned, but in literary studies, “internationalism” immediately presents itself as materialist counterpart to “cosmopolitanism”, the inevitable conceptual underpinning of world literature. Instead of an insipid universality, we encounter the interconnection of agents of revolt, or insurgent imaginations, to borrow the book’s ingenious expression. As Ganguly (2002) points out “internationalism is a fighting word, uttered on behalf of an ineluctably singular and universal equality among peoples of the globe. At the most general level, it speaks in the name of the collective and, more particularly, under the banner of visionaries, rebels, and revolutionaries from the periphery of the capitalist world system; those, that is, who serve as the basis of Majumder’s wide-ranging explorations. Forms and practices that have emerged under the auspices of internationalism, Majumder argues, deliberately swerve away from elite understandings and bourgeois conceptions of subjectivity, desire, or reconciliation, centering instead on nuanced depictions of a world opposed to the one that dominates metropolitan consciousness” (406). And further on: “what I find compelling about Majumder’s dialectical account of the capacity of literary practices and practitioners to inhabit and advance the utopian (though material) goals of internationalism is that he shows these efforts to be organic – simultaneously located within specific social and regional contexts and linked to wider political and even existential aspirations” (Ganguly 2002, 407).

But it is when we focus on the sense of “peripheral” that the force of *Insurgent Imaginations* becomes more palpable. Here reviewers provide cogent characterizations in vehement formulations. First, Anam: “[i]n turning exclusively to the periphery, Majumder asks us to envision a mode of international exchange that need not pay heed to the hegemonic political and cultural formations of the metropole” (2022, 426). Then, according to Cevasco “[t]he main object of study of this counterhegemonic version of world literature is peripheral cultural production examined horizontally, that is, in relation to other peripheral productions” (412); for Elam, in turn, “Majumder argues that there are texts that circumvent metropolitan *litérasation* in favour of a more

egalitarian world republic of letters, formed by the connected peripheries of the postcolonial world” (2021, 2).

From these assessments one might be tempted to derive a binary opposition contrasting positive, revolutionary South-South exchanges to a nefarious vertical, North-South circuit of influence. The problem here is that the center-periphery model is that which sustains much of the work of Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwarz, important references for Majumder. *Insurgent Imaginations* poses an instigating challenge to anyone working in context of the São Paulo School of social theory and literary criticism³ – this is why I have to disagree with Cevasco, when she posits a simple continuation between Schwarz’s work and Majumder’s, failing to contemplate the productive distinctions pertaining to both projects.⁴

In a nutshell, we can describe the kernel of much of Candido’s and Schwarz’s work, epitomized in the former’s pathbreaking and unexplainably untranslated *Formação da Literatura Brasileira* (1959) and the latter’s now classic *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, as a rigorous dialectical logic of part and whole. Candido shows how Brazilian literature became a self-enclosed and organic totality through the appropriation and acclimatization of foreign models, that is, by means of its subordinate status, whereas Schwarz discovers in Machado de Assis’ narrators, oscillating as they do between pre-modern and fully capitalist worldviews, the embodiment of an exception that reformulates the rule.⁵ The challenge that emerges with *Insurgent Imaginations*, then, is how to articulate both models in a broader framework. The space of a review is obviously insufficient even for hinting at an analytical solution; it must suffice to start by posing some questions which may work as provisory guidelines: Is it the case that the *Formação* must precede, lay the foundations of peripheral internationalism? Or can they peacefully coexist within the same time frame? If so, in different times and spaces or simultaneously in the same occasion and the same object? Or are they inherently incompatible, a matter of choice for the aspiring critic? Would it be meaningful to suggest, as was hinted above, that peripheral internationalism is more progressive and politically committed than the *formação* outlook? Or, inversely, would the latter allow for more imaginative appropriations? Would peripheral internationalism weaken aesthetic autonomy?

I believe that a convincing answer would have to avoid the facile extremes of assuming that *formação* and insurgent imaginations are either immediately compatible or ineluctably mutually exclusive. An important step can be made by questioning the current status of the formation of Brazilian literature. In “A Book’s Seven Lives”, an illuminating essay (as usual), Roberto Schwarz muses on several conclusions one can draw from Candido’s *Formação* fifty years after its publication: “one of them is that such national integration, which is an ideal, has lost its meaning, disqualified by the course of history. The nation will not come together [*não vai se formar*], its different parts will remain disarticulated, the ‘advanced’ sector of Brazilian society has already integrated

itself into the more modern dynamics of the international order and will let the rest fall on the wayside.” Or, differently, literature remains the only successful sphere in which “the formed culture, which achieved a certain organicity, functions as an antidote to that of the dissociating tendencies of the economy”, which is an idealist and defensive position. Another hypothesis still is that “[n]ational formation as a project, centered on a certain political-economic autonomy, may no longer exist, but is still subsists as a historical feature and may even function as a commercial trump in the international commercialization of culture” (9). I would like to propose yet another perspective for consideration, which will lead us to an unexpected place: on the one hand, literary formation has indeed been achieved in Brazil, and strongly so, for the country can now boast of a robust intellectual system comprising authors, presses, and a resilient public, significantly anchored in the nationwide public, tuition-free, university apparatus; such organicity as far as literature is concerned, however, contrasts with *theoretical* dependency. Consider this manufacturing metaphor: if cultural manifestations can be regarded as raw materials in need of explanation, then criticism processes them, thus producing consumer goods; literary theory in a strict sense, concerned as it was with different ways to bring intelligibility to large group of artifacts, would fabricate durable goods; Theory, finally, would correspond to capital goods, since it produces interpretative machines. Not surprisingly, these different levels are not just superposed by, but end up erecting a hierarchy of their own, which then reconfigures the academic ladder, the producers of reading machines now occupying the higher positions. In the same way that technology is conceived at the center of the world’s capitalist system and then exported to the periphery, so new conceptual elaborations (assuming the concept as the machinery of thinking) are imported by marginal countries. In Brazil, theories are normally explained or applied, and only seldom evaluated through metatheory; moreover, new autochthonous concepts and theories are only rarely proposed (see Durão, 2011; 2022). Worse still, theories’ contents are never put to the test of Brazilian reality, its peculiarities or collective experience. Indeed, one would have to revert to the work of Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwarz themselves for the single powerful theoretical elaboration produced in the country, which tellingly has Brazil as its focus.

Now, when we ask how *Insurgent Imaginations* functions as theory, and again, not in the debate on world literature, we realize that it could *not* be applied in the Brazilian context, or better, it could only be applied by means of a schizophrenic dissociation whereby the subject deals with itself as an untouchable object. This is a work that is best approached through its performative effects. In other words, and to clarify, by discussing the book sympathetically we reenact, however feebly and *mutatis mutandis*, its content. The reason for my paying so much attention to, and quoting so abundantly from previous reviews, is precisely in this: to show the performative short-circuit created as we exercise our own insurgent imagination in the gesture of figuring

out that of the eponymous book. At least this is how I imagine the spirit of these short pages you have just read.

Notes

- ¹ In *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* book forum (2022), there are the texts by Banerjee, Cevasco, Ganguly, Varma, with a response by Majumder himself; individual reviews are those of Anam, Bagchi, Chakraborty & Dutta, Elam, Mahapatra, Rajan, Ratti and Tvede; as for the interview, it was carried out by Peruchi.
- ² I do have something to say in passing regarding *White Tiger*, though, namely, that the meaning of the narrator's sending letters to China's Premier, Wen Jiabao, might be seen, in its ambiguity, as the nucleus of the novel. The illocutionary force of this gesture is impossible to determine, and it makes all the difference whether the missives are sent in earnest or whether, conversely, they are ironic through and through.
- ³ It is surprising that this designation has not crystalized yet into a concept. Had Antonio Candido, Roberto Schwarz, Paulo Arantes and Francisco de Oliveira carried out their work in any metropolis of the North, we would certainly already have a name for such a school associated with the city. In other words, the fact that the São Paulo School does not exist as an operating category, as say the Frankfurt or Chicago School, is itself a sign of unequal exchanges between core and periphery, which ironically validates its own theory.
- ⁴ "Majumder takes on from there and shows how the conceptual ground provided by Roberto enables him to formulate a peripheral aesthetics, which does not ignore "the particular histories of the societies and of the literatures these engender." (413)
- ⁵ Roberto Schwarz's work has been insightfully commented on by Nicholas Brown, Neil Larsen, and Silvia López, among others. The forthcoming collection *Roberto Schwarz and World Literature* organized by Thomas Waller, by Palgrave Macmillan, will offer the most thorough critical appraisal so far.

Works Cited

- Anam, Nasia. 2023. "Peripheral Constellations." *Contemporary Literature*, 63 (3): 424-429.
- Bagchi, Barnita. 2022. "Insurgent imaginations: World literature and the periphery." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 58(3): 432-433.
- Banerjee, Sandeep. 2022. "Requiem for a Dream." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9 (3): 399-404.
- Candido, Antonio. 2009 *Formação da Literatura Brasileira*. São Paulo: Ouro sobre Azul/Fapesp, [1957] S.
- Cevasco, Maria Elisa. 2022. "Peripheral Convergences." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9 (3): 411-416, DOI:10.1017/pli.2022.13.
- Chakraborty, Dhritiman & Debarati Dutta. 2022. "Insurgent imaginations: World Literature and the periphery". *Textual Practice* 38 (12): 1-4.
- Durão, Fabio Akcelrud. 2011. *Teoria (literária) americana*. Campinas: Autores Associados.
- . 2022. "Responsible Reading of Theory". In: Stephen Ross. (Org.). *Modernism, Theory, and Responsible Reading: A Critical Conversation*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 41-58.

- Elam, J. Daniel. 2021. "What should world literature do?" *Postcolonial Studies*
DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2021.1984027.
- Ganguly, Keya. 2022. "The Stakes of Internationalism." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9 (3): 405–410.
- Helgesson, Stephan. 2022. *Decolonisations of Literature: Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Mahapatra, Aruni. 2021. "Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery, South Asian Review", DOI: 10.1080/02759527.2021.1951461.
- Majumder, Auritro. 2022. "Language and the Periphery' Response to Book Forum on Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9 (3): 424–430.
- Peruchi, Camila. 2021. "A periferia contra-ataca: entrevista com Auritro Majumder." *Remate de Males* 41 (1): 224-237.
- Rajan, Romy. "Internationalism and the Global Moment: Rereading World Literature." *Mediations* 35 (1-2): 79-84.
www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/internationalism-review
- Ratti, Manav. 2022. "Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery", *Wasafiri* 37 (1): 99-100.
- Schwarz, Roberto. 2015. "A Book's Seven Lives: Translated by Adriana Michele Campos Johnson." *Wasafiri*, 30 (2): 4–10.
The Brazilian Contemporary, Suman Gupta & Fabio Akcelrud Durão (eds.)
Wasafiri, vol. 82. Summer, 2015
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2015.1011384>.
- Tvede, Øystein. 2022. "Subalterne i periferien, forén Eder!" *Agora* 40 (2-3): 269–287.
- Varma, Rashmi. 2022. "Primitivism in the Peripheries: Reflections on Auritro Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9 (3): 417–423.

Fabio Akcelrud Durão is Professor of Literary Theory at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp). He is the author of *Teoria en fragmentos: Instantáneas de vida académica* (Fondo de Cultura Económica/Editorial UNAL, 2024), *Ensinando Literatura* (with André Cechinel, Parábola, 2022), *Metodologia de pesquisa em literatura* (Parábola, 2020), *O que é crítica literária?* (Parábola/Nankin, 2016), *Teoria (literária) americana* (Autores Associados, 2011) and *Modernism and Coherence* (Peter Lang, 2008). He coedited, among others, *Modernism Group Dynamics: The Politics and Poetics of Friendship* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), and organized *Culture Industry Today* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010). He published articles in journals such as *Critique* (Paris: Minuit), *Cultural Critique*, *Luso-Brazilian Review*, *Parallax*, *The Brooklyn Rail* e *Wasafiri*. His research interests include the Frankfurt School, Anglo-American Modernism and Brazilian critical theory.