

IN THE LAND OF *ELEFANTE*

**I**F THE LYRIC MODE classically inscribes the poet as individual, the Brazilian writer Francisco Alvim is, in Cacaso's nice phrase, 'the poet of the others': finding his own voice by ceding the right to speak to all the rest—to the extent of transforming this attentiveness towards them into a new poetic technique. There is, of course, an element of irony in this depiction of the writer as good Samaritan: such close concern for one's neighbours can also be, as Cacaso himself insists, a literary device for catching them *in flagrante*. For the 'others' here are not the abstract figures of philosophical discourse. We should think rather of the 'Brazilians just like me' of whom Mário de Andrade wrote in the 1920s; his eponymous hero Macunaíma also the 'little heart of the others'. Or of the atmosphere, saturated with familiarity, to which Carlos Drummond referred with cordial ambivalence when he wrote in 1930: 'at least we know everyone's rubbish around here'.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, three quarters of a century after the modernist movement began in Brazil, the investigations carried out by its leading figures into the peculiarities of national life—its speech, its rhythms, the interactions of its people and their unspoken pacts—re-emerge in Alvim's new book, *Elefante*. Quite a few things have changed since the twenties, and the poet's historical and aesthetic sense for these shifts is one of his fine qualities. The essence of his approach can be conveyed in four words:

*Want to see?*

Listen<sup>2</sup>

This is the work's poetic; more complex than it seems, once its shifting grammatical coloration taken into account. The ill-disciplined slippage

(a very Brazilian habit) between third and second-person modes of address, from the polite *Quer?* to the more intimate *Escuta*; the informality of treatment; the Oswaldian modernism, its brevity not without a glint of humour—all jar with the universalist tone of the maxim. In fact, without the colloquialism and grammatical licence, this would be an impersonal, lapidary lesson about the relation between desire, vision and the spoken word. But the poem is not timeless in this sense: the social and cultural particularities of its intonations pull it towards a specific world setting, just as they destabilize its meanings. The poem's equivocal placing within the collection also needs to be taken into account. It can be read either as the last of a series of verses dominated by lyrical feeling, or as the first of another set, marked by a critical-realist note and a shrewd sense of specifically Brazilian absurdities. Fitted between these two, the 'Want to see?' of the title-question could as easily be an invitation to poetry, or the mocking humour of someone well acquainted with the beast of which he speaks—and in whose belly he belongs. The same words might, on one reading, be those of any intelligent person who recommends the humility of listening; of a poet, learned and concise; or again, of an unillusioned Brazilian, advising his interlocutor on what to expect. Importantly, this three-in-one is sustained within everyday speech, with no sense of the interiorized conflict of the Romantic ego, or of exceptional beings or situations. Its context is the complexity, the peculiarity of Brazil's daily life—and here, I think, lies the secret of the work. Its language and contexts are rigorously commonplace, but they pertain to a specific social formation that is itself at odds with the conventions of contemporary civilization.

The book's consistency of tone lies in its dramatization—through the multiple freedoms modernism establishes—of a central, enduring concept: that of Brazilian interrelations between norms and informality; a heterodoxy that can be seen either as a manufacturing defect or a gift from the gods. Much has been written on the theme of informality; the point here is that its systematic transposition into the structure of these

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<sup>1</sup> Francisco Alvim, *Elefante*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras 2000. For Cacaso—a leading member of the anti-dictatorial 'marginal poetry' movement in Brazil in the 1970s—see 'O poeta dos outros', in *Não quero prosa*, Campinas 1997, p. 308. For Mário de Andrade (1893–1945): see, respectively, 'Dois poemas acreanos', in *Clã do jaboti*, and *Macunaíma: the Hero without a Character* (1928). For Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902–1987): 'Explicação', in *Alguma poesia*, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> *Quer ver? // Escuta*

poems forms the watermark of Alvim's book.<sup>3</sup> The dissonances corresponding to this mismatch can be detected in every aspect of national life. They can be collected as anecdotes that encode a historical condition; reduced to diagrams or modules with variabilized powers of explanation; or invented, constructed so as to explore the extremities of the concept. Alvim, who has a devilish ear for these things, has done some of all three. The variety of which he is capable runs from the apparently innocent—

*Argument*

But they all do<sup>4</sup>

—to almost imperceptible touches that are not easy to pin down as instances of informality, yet which nevertheless bring the notion to life. Thus, for example, the elaborate constructions of a French functionary, highly articulate if somewhat ridiculous, throw into relief the stumbling steps of a local civil servant on the opposite page:

I wanted to propose something along those lines  
but then I thought  
but oh my god  
then he said<sup>5</sup>

In analogous fashion, the clarity and integrity at work in Spanish expressions is set in contrast to the slipperiness, or lack of finish, of local diction. Both are ways of configuring the external face of a specifically Brazilian literary existence through its contrasts with the tones and languages of other nations.

In a remarkable poem, 'Open', about the gaze as it wanders through the field of light—a plausible subject for philosophy—the movement is introduced by 'At times', which instantly de-universalizes it. This is followed by an assortment of passing colloquialisms that render the

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<sup>3</sup> The classic systematization is in Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's *Raízes do Brasil* [The Roots of Brazil]. For literature, see Antonio Cândido, 'Dialectic of Malandroism', in *On Literature and Society*, tr. Howard Becker, Princeton 1995, pp. 79–103.

<sup>4</sup> *Argumento* // Mas se todos fazem

<sup>5</sup> *Debate* // eu quis colocar esse tipo de coisa / mas então pensei / mas meu deus do céu / aí ele disse

encounters with ‘time’ and ‘eternity’, which ‘is not far’, more like meeting with acquaintances on a streetcorner, somewhere everyone stops, with no particular destination in mind, simply asking, ‘—place?’. In other words, there is an inflection towards the specific, to a situation beyond the anthropomorphism, that softens the rigorous abstraction. In the opening poem, ‘Carnival’, the paradoxical, devaluing transfiguration of water into desert might simply be explained by the protagonist’s hangover, as he sits watching the sea with a thirst no water can slake; which—once this premise has been guessed at—raises a smile at the final question: what is the reality of poetry? In ‘Commentary’—where one does not know who is who and the phrases do not fit together—the secret of the discontinuity lies in fear, in the voids that install themselves in people’s heads when they talk about the military dictatorship.

Not all these dissonances seem, at first glance, to resonate with the structural malformations of the country; it is in reading the work as a whole that a wider set of references begins to assert itself, giving the poems—the briefest, in particular—a broader field of allusion to which the reader gradually grows attuned. Thus, in:

*Football*

There are balls that he doesn’t go after<sup>6</sup>

the wisdom, or complaint, applies not only to the player but to all those obliged to exercise a certain caution: the politician, the head of the family, the drug-trafficker; women too, as the case may be. The subject may be sport, but no clear border separates the zone of risk that the player might run into from the terror deployed—in the past and in other pages of the book—by the Brazilian military regime. The discovery lies in the relationship between the fears, between the decisions of how to play them.

*Text and world*

Once polarized by the same forces as the social totality, the poems can deploy new possibilities of allusion, equivalence and ellipsis that permit them an even greater degree of concision, to the point where humour ceases to be an objective. But if the wit at play within each poem is

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<sup>6</sup> *Futebol* // Tem bola em que ele não vai

restricted to the absolute minimum appropriate to a form that is still akin to the *trouvailla*, or joke, the contrary is true of the space glimpsed beyond the frontiers of the text, which open directly onto historical reality. But are we dealing just with 'texts', when ellipsis plays so great a part? Rarefaction and raw experience are conjoined here, though their objects are dispersed. This is a poetry of summary indications, a join-up-the-dots: cerebral, hypothetical, now realist, now allegorical—like the 'Itineraries. Itineraries. Itineraries. Itineraries. Itineraries. Itineraries. Itineraries' recommended in the 'Cannibal Manifesto'.<sup>7</sup>

In these poems—there are around a hundred of them here, in a collection of 128—the appropriate reading is frankly activist, as free, informed and observant as possible, to complement the extreme ellipticism practised by the poet. It is for the reader, alert to indications of every sort, to imagine the situations in which the spoken words arise, to grasp how sharply one-sided they are and thus to enter into the material, putting the poems' perspectives into perspective—often ending by turning the original phrase, the starting-point, inside out. Each poem, even when it is composed solely of a title and a single line, can be seen as an episode, a co-ordinate, within the life of the whole. In this sense, while on one plane the poet takes compression to the absolute limit, he compensates on another by offering the full breadth of the social-historical world, represented without resort to any of the continuities of plot and character or the epic and dramatic frameworks offered by literary tradition. The outdated or illusory aspects of individualism—and their crisis in nineteenth-century literature—are rendered explicit in the miniaturization of these 'poem-drafts': sexual jealousy, social resentment, class guilt, family feuds, fear of contagion, delusions of grandeur, the urge to pull a fast one, are all present here, utterly reduced, yet without any loss of proportion or subtlety. In other words, *Elefante* belongs to that special category of works in which the reciprocal verification between artistic forms and historical experience is being worked through.

The poems group themselves together in a series of unexpected ways—through simple contrasts, scathing mutual commentary or more distant interreaction.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros. Roteiros.': Oswald de Andrade, 'Manifesto antropófago', *Do Pau-Brasil à antropofagia e às utopias*, Rio de Janeiro 1978, p. 15.

*Park*

It's nice  
but it's very mixed<sup>8</sup>

gives expression to a typical middle or upper-class opinion: in favour of social improvements but hostile to popular participation—a key variant of the national form of progressivism, still bound to its colonial origins. The implication, of course, is that an ‘unmixed’ park would not admit the miscellaneous mass of the poor, black and white, unless they were employed in some sort of service role: child-minder, park-keeper, taking old people or dogs for a walk. The antiquated expression *misturado*, predating the media’s pseudo-integrated Brazil, may bring a smile; but anti-poor sentiments have not disappeared and continue, with the necessary adjustments, to fortify the faultlines of Brazilian society. Out of context, the vignette could be read as nostalgia; documentary; pro-oligarchy or against it. One of Alvim’s sure hits—and one of his originalities—is the way in which he integrates such a moment into the present crisis:

*Look*

A black man speaking  
with such clarity  
and human sympathy<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to ‘Park’, this apparently records a victory over bigotry, but is itself so prejudiced as to make one balk. The critical impact is subtler, and more devastating, when we realize that even such an appreciation of clear, sympathetic speech—objectively, an enlightened response, entraining a genuine recognition of the other and with it, the possibility of his or her emancipation—has ceased now to carry any weight; so that this moment of deepest prejudice currently appears to be a lost opportunity for moving beyond it. In

*But*

she’s quite clean<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Parque* // É bom / mas é muito misturado

<sup>9</sup> *Olha* // Um preto falando / com toda clareza / e simpatia humana

<sup>10</sup> *Mas* // é limpinha

the content of the poem consists in what it does not say, all that precedes the title: the encyclopaedia of objections that those with property raise against those without it, those obliged to labour for them—of whom the best that can be said is that they are not very dirty. The term loses nothing (a friend has pointed out) if the context is shifted from the drawing-room to the red-light district. Again, in

*Disposable*

feel like throwing me away<sup>11</sup>

we do not know if the wish is the speaker's, or someone else's; perhaps both. In either case, we find an internalization of the same class attitudes.

Time has passed between the earlier 'very mixed' and this 'disposable'. One was born with the end of slavery, while the other belongs to the age of mass consumer society. Nevertheless, the class formations to which the two refer have remained almost constant: on one side, the distinguished and enlightened, the 'civilized' who give the orders; on the other, the multitude of the rightless. The reciprocal conditioning of the two sides, within the para-legal terms of authority and informality, is a central, enduring nexus of Brazil's historical experience. Alvim's ear for the variations within this equation allows him to bring together, in sure, surprising ways, spheres that never usually meet: anecdotes from Minas and the rural hinterland; gossip from the time of the dictatorship; drug deals; houseproud mothers, working the streets; casual labour abroad; a car crash caused by jealous rage; the stresses of bureaucratic life; politics and corruption; the guilt-ridden sparring of marital break-ups; she-loves-me, she-loves-me-not—all share some undercurrent of the *not right*, which this work aims to know. In the great tradition of Machado de Assis, the poet is aware of the internal connexions between the opposite poles of Brazilian society, and refuses their stereotypical obsessions.<sup>12</sup> Those without rights are capable of a special kind of courtesy, as well as the truculence learnt from those above; while the civilized resort quite naturally to the double-dealing ways of small-time crooks, without imagining that these could impinge on their lofty moments of love, reflection or barbarity.

<sup>11</sup> *Descartável* // vontade de me jogar fora

<sup>12</sup> See Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*, Durham, NC 2001.

In describing Alvim as the 'poet of the others', Cacaso wanted to stress the non-bourgeois generosity of the impulse that takes an educated artist across the barrier that separates the approved from the rejected or despised, to seek the awareness expressed in words and situations there. Alvim himself, as a writer, certainly breathes an exceptional aura of humanity that derives from this approach. But such a stance in itself does not abolish social divisions; indeed, far from erasing them, the effect of the poet's attentive sympathy is rather to expose these fractures. There are, perhaps, no other works in Brazilian poetry in which the brutal subtleties of class have such presence. Ironically, by lending his voice to others, this disinterested, brotherly artist gives free rein to all the species of degradations produced by this system of conflicting interests. In 'Tradesman, manicurist, decorator', for example—the gestures of suburban melodrama already played out in the title—more or less tolerable ways of earning a living get ranked to produce a result somewhere between the democratic and the seigneurial-sardonic. In a darker tone, but still linked to the discoveries of listening, there are the rumours connecting land deals, the presidential succession and the torture of political prisoners—hinted at in passing, the sentences interrupted—of 'Commentary'. Alvim looks for poetry, and for his country, in unwonted places, normally frequented only by the tabloid press or those at home in squalor.

### *Work of generations*

The voices that speak through the poet are not those of anyone in particular; but nor do they belong to everyone. Anonymous yet typical, neither individualized nor universalized, their utterances have the polyvalence of everyday use combined with a structural fit into the collective processes of Brazilian life that conveys its patterns and enacts its saliences. The poet ensures that we often do not know who is speaking, whom they are addressing, whose viewpoint provides the title—itsself no neutral frame, but a player within the overall field of uncertainties. This precise yet undetermined structure, demanding a set of diverse readings, allows systemic inequalities to speak for themselves—their asymmetries functioning as an immense, automatic subject, shaping destinies and teaching us how small we are before it. Is the point of view so-and-so's, or someone else's? The words might serve for either, but the effect is completely different when the roles are reversed. Is Cristiano the one who recalls the car crash, the idiotic slamming on of brakes that

causes it, or is it—with a slight change of intonation in the last line—Darlene? We know nothing of them save their names and the social differences these suggest—a refined young man; a young woman who sounds like an actress—which may not correspond with reality; may be no more than prejudice. We are given no more objective evidence than this possibly non-existent opposition, of no importance in itself, but in which the internalization of social power structures becomes tangible.

Alvim's poems contain a special sort of evidence, from which the writer—in keeping with one of the radical promises of the avant-garde—has practically disappeared. The material itself, pre-forged within daily life, is crucial to this achievement, as is the expository technique, the pared-down, interrogative form learned from Oswald. Underpinning these, and informing both the scope and accuracy of the project, lies a profound critical understanding of Brazilian social relations, their covert correspondences and deviations from modern norms viewed as if from a distance, yet always as 'ours'. This is an aesthetic approach that refuses to individualize either the poems' characters or the poet's *persona*, for Alvim—with certain exceptions, as we shall see—does not write from the basis of a personal mythology. The complexity he seeks lies in the public domain, accessible to all, as the radical modernist João Cabral had hoped, in contrast to the musty attics of private life. The same refusal is at work at the level of language, whose basic unit is not the line of verse or written word but the spoken phrase, culled from the lived relations of 'a problem country'. The consequences of this—apparently anti-lyrical—engagement with second-hand experience as a point of departure are decisive.

Alvim's last collection, *O corpo fora*, took Baudelaire's famous phrase from '*Fusées*' as its epigraph: 'Immense profundity of thought in commonplace turns of phrase, holes burrowed by generations of ants'.<sup>13</sup> What is expressed in everyday speech is an actual social system at work, through which—thanks to the invention of this literary architecture—we can recognize and examine ourselves, for better or for worse. In part, the hard currency of this sort of talk is extrinsic to the artistic process, impossible to improve upon. The product of collective use, often popular or semi-popular, it has a tried-and-tested quality quite different to that of individual creations. To note these intricacies is always to do

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<sup>13</sup> Francisco Alvim, *Poesias reunidas*, São Paulo 1988, p. 9.

more than merely understand the poet. Modern poetry's desire 'to be' rather than 'to communicate' finds an unforeseen realization here. As immediate responses to contemporary social situations, these utterances just are, with the simplicity of behaviour sanctioned by practice. They have a dense, objective existence that challenges the reader from an unexpected direction; their contingency dependent on other factors than poetic whim. Not that the poet's ear has been limited to passive recording. These phrases have been finely tuned, scoured clean of superfluity, redundancy, cliché or generalizations: in other words, of conventional literary features. His work is to distil their experiential content and render them commensurable, as parts of the same system. The process is not dictated by poetic tradition but by a sense for the most effective means of representing this regime of generalized social ambiguity, through what he describes as the

irony  
of polymorphous voices  
sibylline  
unsettled in the ear  
of language<sup>14</sup>

The line divisions—into something other than verses—also serve to expose and confuse the logic of the action, to make it polycentric. Something similar occurs with punctuation, where the organizing role given to capital letters dispenses with the need for full stops; the opportunities for confusion that this creates are, again, fully exploited.

### *Relative perspectives*

The work's most striking technical move—borrowed from modernist fiction—is the discontinuity of perspectives within the poems, which lack any stable point, even in their titles. These changes are effected with astonishing dexterity. Although tiny, the field for manoeuvre is regulated by the largest social forces, so that the inversions of viewpoint acquire a didactic dimension, providing distances and revelations. There is something Brechtian here, though without Brecht's political certainties. The minimalism, inspired by attitude and gesture as well as social

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<sup>14</sup> *Escolho* // ironia / das polimorfias vozes / sibilinas / transtornadas no ouvido / da língua

and historical insight, also has a demonstrative aim, parallel to Brecht's. We have to hear to see. The paring down of speech, scenes, sequences and digressions, far from impoverishing the poems, gives greater force to the play of connexions, while the proliferation of virtual relationships within these miniatures intensifies the logic of the situations. The aim here is quite overt and provides a set of tasks for literary investigation far removed from the art-for-art's-sake approach of much experimentalism. The economy of minimal forms results in an almost modular reduction and an extreme concentration of the social relations within them—thereby gaining a force to which the brevity of the formulations should not blind us:

*She*

Hit her

Hit<sup>15</sup>

Depending on who is speaking, and who listening, 'she' is ordering someone to be hit, or is being hit herself—unless the poet is getting orders from the woman. Or is it he who is demanding she be hit? The precarious grammar—taken as an indicator of class—could explain the vehemence of the request, but the opposite is also possible: revealing that the tenuous commitment to grammatical correctness on the part of our educated elite can be shaken at the first jolt.<sup>16</sup> In sum, the systematic changes of focus work in tandem with the social investigation and serve it as a means of analysis and exploration, in close contact with the actual material relations.

*You think I'm stupid*

You're the boss

and you let him act the way he does?

He'd better pay

what he owes you<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ela* // *Soca ela* / *Soca*. On its own, *ela* can mean both 'she' and 'her'.

<sup>16</sup> An attentive observer lists the 'colonial linguistic regime' among the general conditions of Brazilian literature. Reflection on the aesthetic and class consequences of this regime, which did not disappear with decolonization, has hardly begun. Luciana Stegagno Picchio, *La letteratura brasiliana*, Florence 1972, pp. 27–28.

<sup>17</sup> *E eu é que sou burro* // *Você é o dono / e deixa fazer o que ele faz? / O que ele te deve / vai ter que pagar*

Here, too, the voice that speaks in the body of the poem might not be the same one as in the title; which in turn could be either introduction or conclusion. The provocateur—a woman? a hanger-on?—is in the right, from the money point of view. The listener, well aware that reason and legal right offer no guarantee in this instance—but what are the other powers in play?—has the bitter satisfaction, linked to the presence of third parties, of giving a title to this scene, getting the last word but without changing its essential parameters. Action and joke come in the dialogue, but the substance to be deciphered lies in the relations of power in the background, which are neither named, nor even touched, by its sarcasm. If the title comes before the poem, not after, and is thought by the person who speaks the text, another, less interesting, reading is possible.

### *Connivance and accommodation*

Given the current Concretist–Cabralist conjuncture within Brazilian poetry, it is worth noting how Alvim, at the formal level, takes his own path. He too is looking for the gains to be had from reduction and combination, but without paying tribute to asceticism and geometry, and above all without abandoning the world. Again, as in Brecht, a high degree of subtlety combines with a type of robust reflection that we do not normally recognize as a literary category. With no loss to the multiplicity of perspectives, there is a preference here for the lively, unaffected use of language, a stress on pragmatic fluidity and accuracy of vision: this is an avant-garde aesthetic opposed to deference, displays of authority and the grand abstractions of the bourgeois social order, to whose rigidity and falseness, here and now, it objects. It is a refusal that has its sights set on the posturings and façades of both individual and institutional dignity:

So get off your high horse  
and say what you really think<sup>18</sup>

This is another point of contact with Brazilian ‘informality’, which relativizes everything, even the law; with the permanent, personalized game of accommodation to power that permits the breaching of all formal rules and with them—when taken to the limit—the state’s guarantee

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<sup>18</sup> *Em família* // Então bota de lado essa cerimônia / e diga logo o que você pensa

of rights. The dizzying revaluations involved in these movements, in which the illicit goes unpunished and critical reaction and regression are confused, is a feature of many of the greatest moments in Brazilian literature.<sup>19</sup> There is a possible affinity between situations in which bourgeois categories only half hold sway, and the deconventionalizing tendency of modern art: one that is problematic in every sense.

In this light, we can look at the various deals made in Alvim's work, none of them within the law:

*Business*

We'll sort it out later<sup>20</sup>

Once this stance—expressed aesthetically in the tone of this ubiquitous refrain—has been taken, bourgeois legality is out of the question. The economic transaction, when it happens, will not be encoded in a contract, create any formal equivalence between the subjects or provide any self-standing guarantees. In other words, the imbalance of power between the parties will not be suspended by the egalitarian fictions of the law. Legal rights must always take other incidental factors into account, making each case *sui generis*. When a sense of human sympathy makes itself felt it does not come from respect for norms, but from informal gestures that infringe the rules, and seem to constitute a community inseparable from some kind of connivance. 'Business' acquires its full weight when read in conjunction with the poems already quoted—'Go on, get off your high horse / and say what you really think', 'There are balls that he doesn't go after', 'But they all do' and others—which allow the reader to sense their common framework, and give a different form to the whole; one in which the rule of force always plays a role.

*Saddles*

I tried it  
He didn't resist<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Antonio Cândido, 'Dialectic of Malandroism', pp. 97–103.

<sup>20</sup> *Negócio // Depois a gente acerta*

<sup>21</sup> *Selas // Experimentei / Não reagiu*

The language is equestrian, the audience a family member or similar, and the probable victim is a menial or a relative, in no position to object.

### *Peripheral conditions*

The subject matter raises another set of questions. Is this the poet's preferred choice of theme? Is it an involuntary diagnosis, the result of his effort to be mimetically precise and faithful to the language as spoken? Let us say that the rule of not abiding by the rules is a paradox that condenses the moral and intellectual condition of a peripheral country, where today's canonical forms, those of the countries at the centre, cannot be put into practice in their entirety; which does not stop them being obligatory as mirror and yardstick. Clearly, there is a negative sign, a deficiency, inherent in this condition—complemented by the positive sign of the other, situated in different latitudes. The problem country may be presented as a form of exoticism; at its most serious, as an excrescence. But at another level, the logic of the situation produces not only an inferiority complex but a mutual contempt. From the Brazilian viewpoint, the rule of law can look questionable and outlandish, if not hypocritical and domineering, with its lack of spontaneity, lamentable impersonality, unreal abstraction, ridiculous presumption and so on. These clashing views, each with enough reason on their side to undermine the other, open up critical perspectives:

#### *Hospitality*

If your country's  
that great  
why don't you go home?<sup>22</sup>

Underlined by the clear irony of the title, we witness the resentful rudeness of the hosts, citizens of a rich country, who cannot forgive the homesick immigrant and demand his social conformity as well as his labour. Central to the poem but left to the reader's imagination are the marvels that the poor devil has extolled in relaxed, informal Brazil, the country that he has fled from and to which he has no desire to return. If, on the contrary, the speaker is Brazilian, the sense of the words changes, but not the co-ordinates within which they operate. The poem highlights

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<sup>22</sup> *Hospitalidade* // Se seu país é assim — / tão bom — / por que não volta?

the complementarity of the resentments or alienations in the peripheral and core countries, the joint system they create and the truths they tell about each other.

There are no good grounds for recommending informality: its foundations lie in social fracture, in the precarious integration of the poor and their lack of rights—which does not stop them taking advantage of informal practices for their own ends. But with this basic proviso, there is no reason to ignore the freedoms and polemical scope inherent in this quasi-state of nature, especially in comparison to the stiffness and artificiality of the bourgeois regulation of life. Alert to both aspects, and independent enough not to close his eyes to either of them, Alvim has much to teach in this respect. His de-idealized and debased world, structurally second class, nevertheless breathes a peculiar kind of poetry, linked to the advantages of naturalness that follow the relativization of law and the suspension of the sacrifices necessary to sustain the ‘formal’ brand of superiority. Yet how are we to assess the force of such despised, outcast material?

*Let me tell you*

A little pest of a pain  
 It starts I lose my stride  
 Hurts here and hurts there  
 Silly nuisance<sup>23</sup>

The discomfort—it has no scientific name, evinces no remedy from the pharmaceutical industry—clearly falls on the peripheral side of the equation. There is no way to get rid of the pain, which does not kill and has no clear cure, but does not for that reason cease to exist. This does not make it more ‘natural’ than pneumonia, say, which can be treated with antibiotics and figures in medical statistics; but it connects to other inescapable aspects of life that science and medicine have not been able to reach yet, or which they relegate without comment to a secondary order or sweep under the carpet. From this point of view, the arbitrary, capricious little pain is a radical presence, representing an unavoidable memory, a backhanded victory over modern presumption.

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<sup>23</sup> *Tê contar // Dorzinha enjoada / Ela começa perco a graça / Dói aí e dói aqui / Dorzinha chata*

That said, the pain's 'naturalness' is ambiguous, drawing now from nature itself, now from an out-of-joint social order; above all from the interchange between the two. The intimate relationship between the sufferer and the pain; its personification; the diminutives and irritated adjectives applied; the anecdotal form; the colloquial grumble of the title and the unceremonious way the pain comes and goes and changes place—all are thoroughly familiar. The pain and its victim conform to the ideal pattern of Brazilian informality, pressuring and being pressured, seeking some ad hoc compromise on the margins of medical progress. This in turn domesticates the unavoidable meeting-place between human creature and physical suffering, giving it the stamp of naturalness and with it, a certain metaphysical dignity, despite the fact that the object itself hardly exists. The conversation is inconsequential, but its horizon is the way things are, the inexorable flow of time and the *terra incognita* ahead of us: truths that are taboo in modern life and which subtly come to seem like forms of knowledge proper to Brazil. In

*And now?*

We were there yesterday  
 He's much cheerier  
 He's had a lot of pain<sup>24</sup>

the perplexity of the title comes after the relief which, contrary to what one might expect, has only worsened (or prolonged?) the problem. The outstanding quality of a poem so devoid of emphasis, so far advanced in its avoidance of any kind of conventionality, can be hard to grasp. The almost spatial simplicity of the positioning of the terms of the impasse, each one temporally specific, is a striking moment of materialist awareness.

Assimilated into the world of informality, with which it shares its diminished status, this complaint acquires a national coloration. As the title 'And now?' informs us, this is a case of patience being put to the test. The sense of physical existence reflects a form of sociability: the pain that there is no way of getting away from takes on the features of a person one knows, a member of the extended family. But the same theme can also recur in an explicitly social version:

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<sup>24</sup> *E agora?* // Ontem estivemos lá / Está mais animado / Teve muita dor

*Irani, tell Gilson to make off*

I told him to  
but he won't<sup>25</sup>

This drama presupposes property, but in a precarious (antiquated?) version, not independent of the rule of force. The girl with the indigenous name—she could be a daughter, a poor relation, an employee or a dependent—gives the command as a sign of obedience. As for Gilson, there is no way of knowing why he disobeys. It might be cousin-love, the dog-like faithfulness of an employee or a tenant, or the despair of someone with nowhere to go. His insubordination is silent but obstinate and disarming. The inconvenience of this refusal to move, from a bourgeois perspective, is obvious; its logic imposes a different parameter on freedom, so long as the forces in play are not too unequal, and paternalism does not swap its amiable face for that of the unrestricted modern property owner.

In the intimate struggle with the ailment in 'Let me tell you', a give and take with no fixed rules, the sufferer brings to bear all his resources of will, patience, adaptability, humour, at a certain comforting distance from universalized forms of right and wrong. There is a parallel with Gilson, who doesn't want to go, or with the business deal which 'we'll sort it out later', or again, in domestic warfare: 'The more you say it / the more I'll do it'.<sup>26</sup> It is as if, below the equator of law, science, grammar, progress and all the other modern imperatives, there opens up another civilization, more malleable and less abstract, governed by relationships between people (which include the arbitrary use of power and force). Its anachronistic satisfactions seem to be lacking in the life spent within the constraints of reified civil norms. This non-official, non-model civilization, somewhat disgraceful but with a utopian potential in its contrasts, is the non-bourgeois dimension of the reproduction of bourgeois society in Brazil: inferior but necessary, with its own wisdom and even, for some, a superiority. Its multiple aspects, from the sympathetic to the horrendous, are the substance and problem that Brazilian historical experience has to offer.

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<sup>25</sup> *Irani, manda Gilson embora // Eu mando / mas ele não vai*

<sup>26</sup> *Briga // Quanto mais você fala / mais eu faço*

Informality changes aspect depending on whether it is in the service of one class or another. When it helps people find their way through the privations of a post-colonial poverty that provides neither civil rights nor paid work but is sanctified by the preposterous formalisms of law, it has a popular connotation, even in its way a civilizing role. Its sharp eye for the damage caused by bourgeois abstractions is an element of humanity and reason, linked sometimes to a certain unmistakable charm in Brazilian speech, behaviour and literature. Thus, for instance, the case of a cunning Portuguese ex-market stallholder, who ‘brought up a niece / who gave him grandchildren’.<sup>27</sup> But it also often works as an ideological alibi for those on top, allowing them to feel easier about riding roughshod over those below. In tune with the times, the stress of Alvim’s book lies on this second form.

*Factotum*

Nothing worse  
 than owing someone a favour  
 Look Virgílio  
 you don’t owe me a thing  
 only your leg and<sup>28</sup>

The opening words underline the humiliation of debt, sufficient to sour one’s whole existence. In reply, whether to ease the situation or aggravate it, the boss tells his dependent that he owes him nothing—just ‘your leg and’. What is not said—and the sordid taste this brings—is left to the imagination of the reader, who can choose between the disgraces specific to this universe (but avoidable by intervention above): jail, mutilation, death, a dishonoured daughter and much more. The note of perverse paternalism is stronger still in the iniquitous calculation, reeking of the plantation store, that imposes itself when we think about the title. After a lifetime of service, the factotum is still indebted while his protector owes him nothing, much less any sense of obligation. It is a version of the double bind between dependents and property owners, in which the dependents’ debt lies not in money but in unending personal obligation, whereas that of the owners is a question of convenience and calculation. Moving between two worlds, they can come and go at their leisure, swapping the roles of faithful protector and objective, carefree

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<sup>27</sup> *Vizinho* // criou uma sobrinha / que lhe deu netos.

<sup>28</sup> *Factótum* // Pior coisa / é dever um favor a alguém / Olha Virgílio / a mim você não deve nada não / só sua perna e

individual. In both cases, informality gives to those on top the impress of a pleasant civility, disguising the social chasm.

### *Unspoken zones*

There is another variant of this theme in the poems linked to Brasília, power, the time of the dictatorship and of fear. Here the dimensions of bureaucracy and state expand the malign side of informality, producing the paradox of an anonymous personalization while reducing the country to an underworld. Stripping off its old rural and patriarchal disguise, informality now oppresses everyone, even its beneficiaries.

#### *Archive*

it can't be for memories<sup>29</sup>

Why not? The backdrop here is the political police, who make the very concept of an archive frightening, and the notion of memory futile. The phrase could be the black humour of a potential victim or the words of a torture expert.

#### *Jangle*

Sometimes there's news  
of a less agreeable sort  
and your ears jangle<sup>30</sup>

What news? As in 'Factotum' and 'But', what is left silent is the most important part. The jittery speaker does not dare go into it but sticks to euphemisms and limits his political commentary to his nervous reflexes, assimilated to the irritation caused by an ill-tuned radio. In 'Shadow',

that black edifice  
in the yellow shadow, immense  
astounds the whole city

Not you<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Arquivo* // não pode ser de lembranças

<sup>30</sup> *Chiado* // Às vezes corre notícia / dessas menos agradáveis / e o ouvido chia

<sup>31</sup> *Sombra* // Aquele edifício negro / na sombra amarela, imensa / assombra toda a cidade // A ti, não

With terrible deliberation, the speaker, or poet, is excluded from the ranks of the frightened, thus levelling at himself the grave accusation of being one of those who know (but know what?) and, for the same reason, owe. This is the current stage of evolution of the dependency, above all of the educated, upon power. Once again, all reference to social terror lies in silence. In sum, these are figures from a constellation that is both familiar and enigmatic, in which the pores of the state are intimately associated with the trade-offs of paternalism, marital rows, corrupt business deals, the habits of disease, liberties with the law, grammatical carelessness.

### *Selection and montage*

If they are harder to pin down, the qualities of the collection considered as a whole are at least as substantial as those of the individual poems in *Elefante*. Some of these features are intentional constructions; others, unplanned by-products of the work, can be equally suggestive. Alvim is a master not only of reductions and shifting configurations but also of selection, which here plays a structural role similar to the choice of episodes in a realist novel. The process seems to go something like this. After panning for suggestive trivia and reducing these to their active nuclei, the poet will select a few, create a vacuum around them and leave them alone on the page, in order to note how they interreact with each other and what insights and correspondences they generate. The point of departure is arbitrary and contingent, but the procedure is disciplined by the systematic objective of putting one's ear to the country.

The sequence of the poems is plotted with the purposeful precision of *montage*, though it also draws on the skills of the stage-director, pamphleteer and social analyst. The surprising thing is that these operations—their critical, demonstrative spirit much closer to thought than to spoken language—manage to succeed in this long-distance harmonization of the words without distorting their natural qualities. It takes an ear closely attuned to a certain tone to resolve the discord between current speech and constructivist limpidity, receptive passivity and conceptual energy, the immediate 'given' and the allegorical device. The reductions of modernism play a role here, too, as does its radicalism—though this is now a second-half version: not the explosive project for a more transparent, habitable world, but the identification of the actual global order through an attentive listening that recognizes the

little we have been reduced to, in an implosion of identity that is itself a sign of the times.

Informality serves not only as a principle of selection, but also one of rejection, laden with structural consequences. Intimations of duty in speech or actions are relativized or pushed to the margins, since here they would sound a discordant note. Observed with rigour, this decision to be un-rigorous imposes its socio-historical stamp on everything. Yet the resonances of the inner imperative do not disappear: excluded as subject matter, they return in the severe objectivity of artistic composition, hovering over the book like a troublesome ghost, fully alive only in another hemisphere. That said, the whole has no separate, self-sufficient existence. The majority of the things, terms and ideas of which it is composed—the *modernized* part, to be precise—have no shape of their own; or better, have the shape of the world from which they differ. The discrepancy is the result of functional differences, which give rise to a kind of abstract local colour. Dissimilar and correlative, the social universes of centre and periphery are interwoven. Nonetheless, any awkwardness here would be no less noticeable and artistically fatal than it would be in prose works as distinctive and removed from the dominant usage as, say, *Macunaíma* or *Grande Sertão: Veredas*; works that are an inventive halfway house between dialect and idiolect, based on local, grammatical and orthographic peculiarities. It is as if, unbeknownst to itself, modernized Brazil were developing an irregularity, a kind of regionalism, in the present context of a world presumed to be homogeneous. This differentiation demands a literary discipline of enormous subtlety.

The aim of the ironies is to measure up to the disappointments brought on by the actual course of events. The figurative task and clear-eyed conclusions of nineteenth-century realism act as a baseline of lucidity, although here they are extremely condensed, and far removed from the internal dynamism they formerly nourished—notably in the years prior to 1964, during the radical phase of developmentalist populism. The mini-episodes aspire to a certain loose representativeness, conveying something of capital and provinces, Brazil and Europe, mansion and slave quarters, educated and colloquial speech, plenty and destitution, rural patriarchy and urban anonymity, decorum and danger, all against an elided background of unsolved social problems. Once this order of oppositions is accepted, other poems find their place: the discordant informality in one resonating with its neighbouring variants to

give the whole not only a common scale but the material breadth and dimensions of a historical formation, a literary universe. What is new in *Elefante* comes not so much from the glaring social contrasts—these are well known—but in a certain modification of the interconnexions between them, which seem to have been abandoned by an integrating, transforming tension. The present has expanded not only in space and time but in the social order, which now includes elements to which it was until recently opposed, or which it believed it had overcome. Some of the *dicta* in these poems go back to the end of slavery, others to the Old Republic—between the fall of the Brazilian Empire in 1889 and the 1930 revolution—and many more to modernized Brazil, including the leaden years of the dictatorship and the subsequent period of political liberalization ('the time of lean kine / when the country had been redemocratized', as an ex-state governor explains in 'Ancient History').<sup>32</sup> Despite the great disparities that slot themselves effortlessly into this succession of historical periods, the emphasis is on what remains constant, giving rise to the counterintuitive feeling—the realization?—that change has made no difference. The past has not passed, and it no longer helps, as before, to invent a future that remains hidden from view. The persistence of the present marks it as different; but more in the sense of being defective than original, or backward, or on the road to recovery. Above all, the present makes one find in the past premonitory signs of the current impasse, again refuting the appearance of progress.

In analogous fashion, the interplay between informality and norm has lost the temporal axis once linked to the promises of modernization. Informality has not been defeated, nor does bourgeois normality seem to lie ahead; indeed, it could be said that the norm is *passé* while informality has taken hold for the foreseeable future. It is worth pointing out that the static background to this dynamic is a silent relative to the scandalous discoveries made by Tropicalism three decades ago, which gave shape to the aesthetic consequences of the counterrevolution of 1964 and subsequent conservative modernization.<sup>33</sup> The typical image

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<sup>32</sup> *História antiga* // Na época das vacas magras / redemocratizado o país

<sup>33</sup> For an account of *Tropicalismo* see Roberto Schwarz, 'Culture and Politics in Brazil, 1964–1969', in *Misplaced Ideas*, London 1992, pp. 139–44. The movement's heyday came between the coup of 1964 and the accession of Garrastazu Médici in 1969; its most famous proponent was the popular singer and composer Caetano Veloso, whose lyrics often juxtaposed modern and traditional aspects of Brazil in deliberately jarring ways.

of the time, presented above all in theatre, film, popular music and the graphic arts, was an allegory of the Brazilian absurd, understood either as the ultra-modern reproduction of social backwardness or an incomprehensible penchant for recidivism. It was a formula for dramatizing the incongruous and depolarized coexistence of elements of the patriarchal–personalized world, outdated, ridiculous, and flourishing as never before, with international patterns of modernity, themselves equally open to question. This was a picturesque, strident, shameful and true juxtaposition, with no future in view, saying in its own fashion that the hypothesis of a historical reshaping on a different level had disappeared. The parallel between these artistic methods—*Tropicalismo*, Alvim’s *Elefante*—and the respective historical moments at which they appeared merits reflection.

In a hostile review that came out soon after *Elefante* was published, one commentator drew attention to the connexion between Alvim’s poetry and a strand of critical thinking on Brazil, indebted to modernism and with links to the aesthetic and theoretical work of politicized university groups.<sup>34</sup> The observation is correct, but the objection is surprising. Is it inappropriate for poetry to reflect upon its country? Does the poet’s proximity to political and social debate reduce the scope of what he writes? Is the attempt to give meaning to the world of the modernists, in changed circumstances, a failing in itself? Of course, it would be possible to consider the poet’s ‘intimate feeling for his time and for his country’ recommended by Machado de Assis, and certainly present in *Elefante*, as no more than a nostalgic myth. There would be some truth in this if the nation really had ceased to exist, which is not entirely evident; but even this would not detract from the historic desire that it should exist. Besides, there is no reason why the weakening of the national pulse should not serve as material for reflection and poetry in its turn.

### *Across the universe*

There is, however, another side to the book, composed of properly lyrical poems, to which nothing of what we have said is applicable; at least, not directly. Here the mythology and language are personal, the intention expressive, the transfiguring power of imagination operates to a high

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<sup>34</sup> Paulo Franchetti, ‘O ‘poema-cocteil’ e a inteligência fatigada’, *Caderno 2, O Estado de São Paulo*, 5 November 2000.

degree and the subject is 'first' not 'second' nature—light and shade; water, sand and wind; animals and landscapes—rather than the system of our social constraints. A literal translation can give only the faintest sense of what is at play in this work:

*Elephant*

The air of your flesh, dark air  
 darkens stone and wind.  
 Enormity courses within your body  
 the air of crushed skies. The firmament,  
 a blaze of pilasters,  
 is not outside—it is collapsing inside.  
 On the shield there reverberates the dull brightness  
 of the swollen battering ram  
 with which you enrage distance and time.

Your smooth, dancer's tread  
 ennobles the cold, feminine  
 bellies.

When you turn everything sings.  
 Everything does not know.<sup>35</sup>

These are difficult poems, of great beauty, requiring a second round of commentary that will have to wait for another occasion. For the moment, a few preliminary observations. Everything depends on understanding the reasons that would lead the poet to combine such discrepant imaginary forms. Is he saying that, removed from the shared ground and realist anecdotes of Brazilian life, his lyricism begins to spin off kilter? Or that the atmosphere of contemporary reality is necessary to the integrity of his poetry? Or again, that this highly transfigured first nature should be seen as a character within the other universe, with which it forms a unity? If this is so, what is the connexion between these two spheres, of such differing tonalities? What do they say about each other? As a suggestion, we could ask what relations might exist

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<sup>35</sup> *Elefante* // O ar de tua carne, ar escuro / anoitece pedra e vento. / Corre o enorme dentro de teu corpo / o ar externo / de céus atropelados. O firmamento, / incêndio de pilastras, / não está fora — rui por dentro. / Reverbera no escudo o brilho baço / do túrgido aríete / com que distância e tempo enfureces. // Teu pisar macio, dançarino, / enobrece os ventres frios, / femininos. // A tua volta tudo canta. / Tudo desconhece.

between the degraded social world and the visions of the elephant, the rhinoceros, the sea: giants whose darkness contains light, whose imposing, unified mass does good and whose onslaught seems more likely to fertilize and repair than to destroy. The intense moral suffering that dominates the book's final poems may be seen as part of the same world: in this case as its truth. Here, the lyrical side of the book occupies a sphere of revelation, analogous to the adventures of the central characters within the realist novel, to which correspond the constraints that operate on the secondary characters, even when neither know anything of them. That does not mean the anti-lyrical poems are secondary; quite the contrary. Still, the distance between the cosmic feeling and the interplay of interests is telling, and relates to history rather than to nature. The collection ends:

*In a churchyard*

Clouds go by  
The gaze does not perceive the screech of the stars<sup>36</sup>

The formal operations through which Alvim works are incisive. By means of purification, juxtaposition, cutting and pasting, analytical dissection, a whole repertoire of intensely Brazilian scenes and phrases is mapped out against unforeseen co-ordinates. Instead of the lines and stanzas that would correspond to poetic traditions, we have a feel for living language and its written presentation; or, better, an ear for the objective ironies of everyday speech, pared to the bone—which is, in the end, no more or less than the aesthetic refinement of historical consciousness.

What is taking place is the deconventionalization of form, its liberation from confinement, the removal of its esoteric element, and its replacement by an open, amphibious state, in which the poetic process and the real order of things are truly joined to each other. There is no desire to renounce form and its true value, nor to abandon refinement. Quite the contrary, the impulse is one of actualization, of bringing up to date. Opened up by local, national or cosmopolitan perspectives that can bear a negative or positive sign, depending on the angle and moment, phrases from common speech take on a dizzying resonance

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<sup>36</sup> *Num adro // Nuvens passam / O olhar não percebe o barulho dos astros*

that dispenses with metaphor; that is itself metaphor and poetry. Pop art and the ready-made are obvious referents, albeit from a different context. In this case, however, the objects randomly selected for our contemplation do not derive from industrial civilization, but specifically from the workings of a peripheral society, captured as such, as a modern focus of perplexity. 'Poetry exists in facts.'<sup>37</sup>

But if Alvim is the contemporary poet who has most deeply assimilated the lessons of the Brazilian modernists, it is within horizons completely changed. It is enough to recall the dazzled fascination with which that earlier generation discovered our social and cultural peculiarities, embraced them and longed to transform them into historical solutions—'so Brazil'. These social forces persist in *Elefante* and compose a system; there are a few fine moments of playful magic. But in essence they constitute our hard political and moral inheritance. As Alvim himself has said, it is a question of Oswald revised in the light of Drummond; or of the problem that lay hidden within the picturesqueness of Brazil.

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<sup>37</sup> Oswald de Andrade, 'Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil', in *Do Pau-Brasil à antropofagia e às utopias*, Rio de Janeiro 1978, p. 5.