

Moacyr Scliar

THE ENIGMATIC EYE

A Collection of short stories translated from the Portuguese by Eloah Giacomelli

New York: Ballantine Books, 1989. Pp. 100. \$5.95

Reviewed by Robert DiAntonio

The Enigmatic Eye is another welcome addition to the growing body of fiction being created by Moacyr Scliar, one of Brazil's most highly acclaimed and internationally respected authors. The majority of Scliar's novels and short stories incorporate little known aspects of Judeo-Brazilian historiography: the setting of Baron Hirsh's agricultural communes; the Jewish gauchos; the world of the Yiddish Mafia; a Brazilianized accounts of the life of the charismatic false messiah, Sabbatai Zevi; and the white slave trade in Rio Grande do Sul. However, *The Enigmatic Eye* leaves behind Scliar's historical perspective to underscore the magical inventiveness of his writing. In this work his chimerical fictional world is wedded to an ironic, slightly off-centered, existential vision of contemporary life.

The book—faithfully translated from the Portuguese by Eloah Giacomelli—contains twenty-six *minicontos*, minitexts. The wide range of stories are masterfully created in the manner of Italo Calvino or Jorge Luis Borges, but always richly framed in Scliar's personal vision and humanistic concerns.

The work's opening story, the one that gives title to the collection, "The Enigmatic Eye," is an intricately composed tale of the obsession of an art lover who steals a painting that slowly takes control of his senses. The story is conceived without the rigidity of the writer's or reader's roles being clearly defined.

Other intriguing stories are "Root Canal Treatment," "Life and Death of a Terrorist," "A Brief History of Capitalism," and the author's first attempt to deal with the theme of the Holocaust, "In My Dirty Head." In this last piece a young boy wants to believe that Mischa, an impoverished Holocaust survivor, is a fraud, and dreams of exposing him in front of the whole community. The boy imagines that he alone is able to unmask Mischa's lies, for he can no longer bear the man's accounts of life at Auschwitz. The story's oblique and original perspective shows Scliar to be one of today's most imaginative fabulists.

Moacyr Scliar's as yet unpublished collection of short stories, *A orelha de van Gogh* ("Van Gogh's Ear"), has just won this year's Casa de Las Américas literary prize in Havana, one of Latin America's most prestigious. For his many English-speaking fans already familiar with novels like *The Centaur in the Garden* and *The Strange Nation of Raphael Mendes*, it will be at least a year for the work to appear in translation. Until then, the stories contained within *The Enigmatic Eye* will make fascinating reading.

Moacyr Scliar's many literary accomplishments are made even more impressive by the fact he is a full time physician in the field of public health, an

active member of Marc Chagall Center of Judeo-Brazilian studies in Porto Alegre, on the editorial board of the Israeli publication *Noah*, and a regular contributor and commentator on national, social, and artistic matters in local journals newspapers. In brief, Moacyr Scliar is fast becoming a Brazilian national treasure and a source of pride during one of his country's most difficult political moments.

Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, eds.

FAULKNER AND THE CRAFT OF FICTION

Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989. Pp. xv & 226. \$32.50 & \$15.95

Reviewed by K.J. Phillips

Originally presented at the 1987 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference at the University of Mississippi, these essays retain the fresh and direct style of oral delivery as they present Faulkner in relation to literary tradition, literary theory, and social context.

Looking at the way Faulkner uses traditional pastoral and heroic modes, Cleanth Brooks argues that Faulkner successfully gives us Ike Snopes as pastoral faun in *The Hamlet* and women and blacks as unexpected heroes in *The Unvanquished*. Moreover, by making Bayard a hero for *not* firing, Faulkner is not just using *The Unvanquished* to glory in Confederate deeds of derring-do, as is usually thought.

Also locating a tradition, Christopher LaLonde situates the traveling salesman who narrates the last chapter of *Light in August* in 19th-century American oral humor. True to his genre, the salesman types Lena first as a sex object and then as a deceiving woman. Although LaLonde does say that Faulkner was "knowingly depotentiating and delegitimizing" the salesman's opinion, this critic at times conflates author and narrator, assuming that Faulkner felt a "certain allegiance" with the salesman's doubts because the first part of Faulkner's relation with Estelle ended in "betrayal" (102-03). LaLonde thus concludes that if Lena has come a "fur piece" on foot, "in some sense she has gone nowhere at all," because of Faulkner's supposed sympathy for the salesman (103). Instead, LaLonde might have pointed out how far Faulkner does in fact change stereotypes by making Lena's primary goal *not* to get a legitimate father for her child, as everyone expects, but rather to travel—a quest or wandering motif usually reserved for men.

Two essays, by Philip Weinstein and Donald Kartiganer, draw heavily on current literary theory, in a way that genuinely illuminates and applies these philosophical ideas. In "The Vertigo of Faulknerian Identity," Weinstein shows how *Absalom, Absalom!* "uncannily responds" to the Marxist theories of Althusser and the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan (183). In Althusserian terms, Quentin becomes "a porous container of others' throw-away discourse"; in Lacanian terms, Quentin is "precariously poised between Imaginary mergers and Symbolic distinctions" (174, 182). Weinstein deploys these theories most astutely when he shows how characters like Quentin and Henry Sutpen have internalized their culture's Symbolic order or ideological scripts to the extent that they constitute a painful and inalienable selfhood. But I would prefer that Weinstein object more to Lacan's assignment of language itself (and not