

Delmore Schwartz: A Critical Reassessment. By Alex Runchman. Pp. 189. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2014. £57.50 (HB). ISBN 978-1-137-39437-8.

Justifying the novel interventions of a chorus of ghosts in his long poem *Genesis* (1943), Delmore Schwartz pointed to the ‘story-succeeded-by-commentary’ as ‘one of the profoundest most deeply-rooted and most accepted experiences of modern life’. It is a binary that relates to so many aspects of Schwartz’s work: not just the formal and stylistic hybridity, but also his dual roles as creative writer and critic, his ceaseless fascination with the specific moment and its wide-ranging causes and effects, and his exploration of Jewish-American identity, which he said could generate a ‘double experience of language’.

Alex Runchman’s monograph, which draws on the full range of Schwartz’s output as poet, essayist, storyteller and playwright, demonstrates the virtues of commentary in offering clear and concise explication of Schwartz’s often idiosyncratic ideas, many of which derive from his graduate studies in philosophy under Alfred North Whitehead. Moreover, Runchman proves himself to be a brilliant close reader, above all of the poetry, and the way it responds to his approaches is revelatory. The importance of this reassessment lies at once in the unparalleled sensitivity to Schwartz’s language, and in the central argument it supports, that the notion of an ‘international consciousness’ is key to Schwartz’s thought, and can be traced throughout his work.

Such internationality is for Schwartz a defining feature of the modern world, increasingly facilitated by modern technology, and it involves an awareness of the implication of the individual person or instance in the wide workings of the world. It enables us to discover the universal in the particular, and the pre-eminent example of this international condition for Schwartz is his own situation and that of his family. He transfigures the history of his grandparents’ and parents’ emigration from Europe into an allegory of displacement in *Genesis*; and he shows how continuity can be traced across a geographical divide in ‘The Ballad of the Children of the Czar’ which, set in 1916, juxtaposes the fated children of Czar Nicholas II in Moscow with the poet as a child in Brooklyn.

The emblems of this internationality in poetry for Schwartz are Yeats, as an Anglo-Irish poet who comes to understand ‘that the particular event signifies a typical kind of event’; and T.S. Eliot, as an Anglo-American who advocates an ‘historical sense’ involving ‘a perception, not only the pastness of the past, but of its presence’. Schwartz gives far greater prominence to social history than Eliot, and moves far closer to examination of the personal life, even if in the service of the universal; but, as Runchman convincingly demonstrates, Eliot would remain an unresolved influence, a poet to whom Schwartz would continue to allude, including in his habit of allusion: for both poets wide-ranging literary reference is put in the service of a living history.

Runchman is highly attentive not just to the dialectical oppositions in Schwartz, but to the slippages in between: the case is made for Schwartz being an important national poet, a poet of America, and this is understood in some respects to be inseparable from his international impulses. As a national poet Schwartz’s primary subject is the American Dream, and its own

interconnectedness with its apparent opposite, actuality. One continuity between Schwartz's notion of the international and his critique of the American Dream is to be found in his continual investigation of deterministic forces which put acute pressure on the question of free will; their chief spokesmen, in articulating the material and psychological powers at work on us, are Marx and Freud, who are among the ghost-commentators in Schwartz's poetry.

Schwartz's critical neglect perhaps has something to do with his in-between-ness. He is neither wholly Modernist nor does he belong fully to the post-War generation and their new emphasis on 'personality'. As a critic too, he was caught between the New Criticism and, as Runchman puts it, the 'proto-New Historicist social criticism' of his *Partisan Review* circle. But the greatest challenge to the critic, especially acute in a chronological study, is Schwartz's putative inverse trajectory: his greatest work is widely held to be his first collection, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* (1938), whilst his late poetry is readily dismissed as excessively abstract and tonally bizarre.

Runchman doesn't entirely disagree, but he is astute identifying the problems presented by Schwartz's later work: he carries forward Auden's diagnosis of the problems of *Genesis* lying in its indecision, to argue that at worst Schwartz's dialogic tendencies can lead to impasse. These negative effects of in-between-ness are felt the most strongly in *Vaudeville for a Princess* (1950), in which the conflict between desire for social engagement and withdrawal into aestheticism seem to stymie the whole project: the philosophy becomes ostentatious, the masks now worn are crude caricatures. Nonetheless, the guiding terms of the argument remain insightful, demonstrating new turns in Schwartz's treatment of the relationship between illusion and reality, in which actuality itself is understood as a kind of dream; and, on the international front, showing how Schwartz's reading of Oswald Spengler conditioned his cyclical understanding of history.

The Dream for Schwartz increasingly becomes an internal state, and the 'Summer Knowledge' poems (1959) are revealed to pursue a dream logic, and to explore the nature of knowledge as always relative. Despite their diversity, coherent patterns of imagery and euphony emerge; and in a sustained reading of 'Seurat's Sunday Afternoon along the Seine' Runchman proves that there are still exceptional poems worthy of intense scrutiny, which gain in significance when considered in their published contexts. Such readings amount to a powerful protest against those who relate the changes in Schwartz's style to his deteriorating mental health.

From the outset Schwartz's work was remarkable for its autobiographical frankness, yet his framing of his life in art is never straightforward. In an extraordinary move in an early poem, 'Faust in Old Age', he refers to himself in the third person, bringing Walt Whitman's strategy from the 'Preface' to *Leaves of Grass* into the realm of poetry itself: 'you must be judge,/ Deliver judgement, Delmore Schwartz'; but judge he will not. One of the most shocking self-references comes when the poet turns to specific events from his own childhood in 'Prothalamion'; but this most disturbing of incidents is introduced by denying that it should be invoked at all:

I will forget the speech my mother made
In a restaurant, trapping my father there
At dinner with his whore.

There is an occasional tendency in Runchman's study, despite its international contextualisation, to assume too readily that a speaker is the poet himself. The question of what is at stake when a poet invokes autobiography could be pushed further, especially with regard to how such self-representations intertwine with Schwartz's ongoing reconfiguration of the categories of lyric, dramatic and epic verse. Equally, a more theoretical perspective might work to bring out further implications of the attempts to write ethnic and immigrant identities (with regard to the notions of doubling and hybridity for example). Nonetheless this study presents an invaluable body of research upon which such further explorations might build; indeed, part of its significance is in paving the way after years of neglect for renewed interest in Schwartz's work, and its critical framework will become the starting point for all subsequent scholarship.

Implicit in this study's drawing on later responses to Schwartz is the influence he had on the Middle Generation American poets – pointedly and refreshingly not here called Confessional. Time and again key features and concerns of the poetry of John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath are revealed to have their origins in Schwartz's early work: their later negotiations of the self and of the world might be thought of as the end point of what Schwartz called his pursuit of a 'method which would make it possible to refer, with the least strain and the quickest transition, to anything from the purely personal to the international'. This is just one of many additional avenues opened up by this important reassessment, which firmly reinstates Schwartz as a 'laureate of the Atlantic'.

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