

Machado and Modernism

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Abstract. Focusing on centennial commemorations of Machado de Assis as a series of paradoxical events linked to both truth and value, this paper discusses Machado de Assis' reduction of life to literature through a movement that also allows him to create two radically heterogeneous orders: reality and culture. In other words, Machado (as well as Borges) paradoxically posit literature as a machine that reduces both the state and literature, in a simultaneous and aporetic manner. Consequently, the enigma of the state (the aporia of reading) generates other enigmas that point out the verbal decomposition of truth, the perpetual ambivalence of texts, and even the secret of literature as a social institution.

The institution of the lottery still has a few good decades of life left in it. God save it! It aids economic piety, organized in fraternities that enlighten the Almighty with a percentage of human foolishness, which is [...] the best insurance policy that I know of, not criticizing those of the state. It distributes bread and sheets, builds bridges, repairs roads, and cares for man in his entirety, body and soul, inside and out, in life and death.

Nevertheless, when it not be so, science has nothing to do with the utility or perversity of institutions. The social dimension does not belong to it, only the mechanical does. Besides, there is a principle of solidarity that connects all of the institutions of a country, the lottery, and engineering.

—Lélio [Machado de Assis], *Balas de estalo* [Fireworks], Rio de Janeiro,

24 March 1885

It has been argued that we must consider literature an in-between construction that is neither simply culture nor reality, but something else. As Alberto Moreiras has said, perhaps it is not just otherness that marks the possibility of the radical separation or initial difference between culture and reality, but an otherness that becomes other only as it strives to achieve, impossibly, absolute autonomy.¹ In writers like Machado de Assis or Borges this point is essential. Both authors reduce everything to literature through the same movement that allows them to create two radically heterogeneous orders of the real: reality *and* culture. In other words, both Machado and Borges paradoxically posit literature as a machine that reduces all differences between reality and culture. Based on Josefina Ludmer's work, Moreiras explains that such a trip is parallel to the apotheosis of the modern state, which is constituted by the very autonomization of the political, and hence by the reduction of everything to the political, with the obvious exception of the state itself. As a matter of fact, with and through this reduction, the state establishes, just like literature, in a simultaneous and aporetic manner, an essential, if enigmatic, difference between the order of reality and the order of culture. Consequently, the enigma of the state (the aporia of reading) generates enigmas that point out the verbal decomposition of truth, the perpetual ambivalence of texts and even the secret of literature as a social institution.

In Latin America, centennial commemorations of canonical modernist texts exhibit a series of paradoxical events linked to both truth and value. We know that, in the context of modernity, the celebration of events not only consecrates the victory of planning over arbitrariness but also imposes a cyclical order on a mere continuity devoid of any value of its own. The outcome of such a process is a singular and homogeneous event, sharply standing out from an anonymous series of heterogeneous happenings. It is thus that commemorations distribute value. They fix a cultural consensus. They consolidate, in the end, a secular liturgy of intellectuals while reinforcing the construction of national identities with the resources of the state. Such acts of remembrance require a specific rite of civil religion, one that defines itself as the display of a religious, or quasi-religious, respect for the civic values and traditions that recurrently appear in the history of the political state.

However, we also know that these civilizing efforts euphemize the destabilizing forces that are part and parcel of every cultural construction. Nietzsche called this Western celebratory compulsion monumental history, a narrative that invokes illustrious antecedents to appease, if not to avoid, a

problematic present. Freud recognized in this gesture an unelaborated filial rivalry that awaits the disappearance of the founding fathers to pay one's respects to them, and thus to profess posthumous devotion. Through this practice, imitation, a sentiment possible in the simultaneity of dissimilar times, gives way to commemoration, a means of separating us from this past while, at the same time, avoiding direct confrontation between predecessors and future generations. Borges, more closely aligned with Nietzsche than Freud, knew how to see a transgressive strategy in the invention of predecessors and in that of erroneous attribution and deliberate anachronism; these two oblique strategies were ways of undoing the conflict between the canon and its margins. Wittgenstein, in turn, did not fail to point out our radical disengagement in relation to the old masters, recognizing, behind the celebratory and condescending language of commemorations, an ambivalent attitude, a mixture of distinction and banishment, by means of which contemporary desires to suspend retrospective obedience to traditional institutions became evident.

Interestingly, this complex of ambiguous representations surfaces in some texts published in 1939, the year when Machado de Assis' centennial was celebrated. On this occasion, Mário de Andrade, one of the foremost figures of Brazilian modernism, postulated a peculiar divorce between ethics and aesthetics by admitting that, sometimes, "no matter how much people greatly admire and highly venerate a great man, they are not able to love him." Insofar as Mário argues that "you can only disapprovingly venerate a Machado de Assis," it becomes possible to interpret his readings of Machado as part of the Oedipal dialectic of love and fear with which he himself reads Brazilian Romanticism. We can easily recognize in his readings of Machado the same sentiments of retrospective, parodic obedience that are fictionalized in his short story "The Christmas Turkey," an allegory of the homoerotic ambivalence of the smaller in relation to the larger.

In the meantime, we must not forget that the year of the Machado centennial coincides with the death of Freud, and concludes a vital cycle threatened by war. Therefore, it should not surprise us that Mário de Andrade, torn between bohemian abjection and public reverence, praised Machado's decorum in a self-referential exercise concerning his own position as head modernist, claiming that, "the extremely honest life that [Machado] lived completely discredited the sexual, as well as the moral, inquietude of the artist." This individual sublimation resulted, however, in unequivocal collective eth-

ical benefits: Machado thus became, in the view of the modernists, a purified and celebrated national civic icon: “In these times dominated by spontaneous technicity, in which nearly all of our artists dwell, we would have to seek in Machado de Assis, now more than ever, that necessity through which all great technicians become moral forces” (Andrade 95).

Governed by abstinence and severity, Mário de Andrade’s reading is oriented by an authorizing effort, that is, an effort to become an author, one of national and unanimous import. Another modernist, Aníbal Machado, published a little known essay in the *Diário de Notícias* of Rio de Janeiro, just as Mário had done, in which he discredited the moral and national force of the process of canonization (Machado 1-2). Taking our cue from Andrade’s assessment of Machado de Assis, one could say that Aníbal Machado’s analysis ultimately presupposes the recognition of a moral, if not sexual, inquietude that destabilizes the solidity of the national canon. As Aníbal Machado states:

Evidently, it is not possible to evaluate a writer’s “intimate strain of nationality” by the nature of the themes that he chooses; this point is hinted at by Machado when he talks about the “independence of the outward appearance of things.” Merimée, when writing *Carmen*, a Spanish novel, does not stop being French, just as Shakespeare continues being English in *Antony and Cleopatra*, or in any of his works inspired by Plutarch. Machado is not Brazilian in the way that Cervantes and Unamuno are Spaniards, Voltaire and Giraudoux are French, Schiller is German, Dostoyevsky is Russian and Whitman, American—because in each of them there is a recognizable intimate strain of their respective nationalities. For me this does not occur with Machado, a writer who admirably painted the carioca customs and who would be equipped to accomplish in France, for example, what the French Merimée, and the American Hemingway, did so magnificently in Spain. Will the work of Machado be Brazilian for the simple reason that he took his characters from carioca society in a particular moment of its evolution—But Machado’s themes were, as we stated above, simply a pretext to be able to affirm a tendency of the spirit, a human disposition, which, to me, has very little to do with the Brazilian psyche.

It escapes no one that, in fact, this passage converses with the “Instinct of Nationality,” but also that it does so with obvious reservations. Whereas Machado bets confidently on destiny—“literature will be Brazilian”—Aníbal plays down such enthusiasm by cautiously asking: “will the work of Machado

be Brazilian?” If Machado’s move gives preference to evaluating the national in terms of instinct, Aníbal, in contrast, unequivocally leans toward an institutional definition of the national, thereby separating institution from canon.

It should be briefly noted here that the canon limits, in an objective manner, symbolic actions, while the institution furnishes a positive model for such actions. Normative theories of canon formation, as we know, only see that which lies favorably outside of the social—for example, the natural condition of a biological identity—and generally consider the contractual limitation of society as something negative. One follower of such normative theories, Astrojildo Pereira, builds on Stalin’s concept of nationality so as to exalt Machado de Assis’ conception of national instinct (Pereira 43-85). The modernist theory of the institution, which Aníbal Machado deftly illustrates in spite of his support for Astrojildo Pereira’s position, already puts the negative emphasis outside the social, that is, on unsatisfied needs. But this modernist theory of the institution also presents the social as a space that creates certain relations, one that, at its most extreme, equals a version of politics where social exchanges try at all costs to satisfy and satiate needs. Still, such needs remain unsatisfied, although no less essential, precisely because they are impossible to satisfy and because their satiation, insofar as it is illusory, is merely satirical. In other words, these needs remain by definition infinite and political.

Because these needs can never truly be satisfied, they decidedly distance themselves from the biological inertia of instinct and prepare the groundwork for the acephalic autonomy of drives. For this reason, Aníbal Machado’s reading not only deconstructs the national character of the Machado-de-Assis institution, but simultaneously shows the uncanny, perhaps even *Unheimlich*, character of all national canonical representations. But the task at hand does not become easier because of this acknowledgement. Aníbal Machado himself is well aware of the difficulties involving instinctual representations that lie ahead:

This task requires the dangerous adventure of defining the psyche. The essence of this psyche will less easily be found in analytic laboratories than in our folklore and the instant illumination offered by poetry. It is still not possible, notwithstanding the notable sociological attempts in recent times, to define with certainty, in conceptual terms, the characteristics of the Brazilian soul. At any rate, it seems that these spiritual characteristics are almost completely absent from the work of Machado. Certainly, in this murky quagmire, the only thing that can guide us is a secret instinct, which is less unsure, for the time being, than logical

knowledge. Only in this way can we speak of the Brazilian spirit before clearly defining it. On the one hand, lyric disorder, instability and avidity, the superficial roar in the face of life, small contradictions, instant gallantries and never-ending enthusiasms, laziness, and sweetness; on the other, the sigh of the land, the drama of the rural population, the interference of the landscape in the poetic life of man: all of these forces, forms and densities can only be translated by lyricism.

Aníbal Machado has a certain distrust for constructions regulated, in Hegelian fashion, by the idea of formation, overcoming, and rationality. Therefore he tends, like any good surrealist, towards “elements of an irrational, poetic nature,” that is, towards cultural representations gathered by anthropological research as well as towards the illumination produced by poetry. This tendency puts Aníbal Machado’s ideas in harmony with what was happening in interwar Europe.

Indeed, all of the following elaborations—the idea of an ethnographic surrealism disseminated among dissident artists of the avant-garde (notably between French acephalics and minotaurans), Benjamin’s vindication of the fragmentary in his theories of experience and of the narrator, and Lacan’s own readings of Freud—have one element in common: the search for a third term outside of the system, something that allows us to leave the binary logic of the avant-garde.² In all of these cases, the possibility of an escape resides in the insight that laws exist to be broken, a proposition that Georges Bataille elaborated in *L’Érotisme*, among other works. There Bataille argues that, because the prohibition on which the world of reason rests is not itself rational but rather tainted by violence, the violation of a prohibition is not so much concerned with logic as with a conflict of contrary emotions:

If the prohibition were a reasonable one it would mean that wars would be forbidden and we should be confronted with a choice: to ban war and to do everything possible to abolish military assassination; or else to fight and to accept the law as hypocritical. But the taboos on which the world of reason is founded are not rational for all that. To begin with, a calm opposite to violence would not suffice to draw a clear line between the two worlds. If the opposition did not itself draw upon violence in some way, if some violent negative emotion did not make violence horrible for everyone, reason alone could not define those shifting limits authoritatively enough. Only unreasoning dread and terror could survive in the teeth of the forces let loose. This is the nature of the taboo which makes a world

of calm reason possible but is itself a shudder appealing not to reason but to feeling, just as violence is. (Human violence is the result not of a cold calculation but of emotional states: anger, fear or desire.) We have to take into consideration the irrational nature of taboos if we want to understand the indifference to logic they constantly display. In the sphere of irrational behaviour we are reviewing we have to say: “sometimes an intangible taboo is violated, but that does not mean to say that it has ceased to be intangible.” We can even go as far as the absurd proposition: “the taboo is there in order to be violated.” This proposition is not the wager it looks like at first but an accurate statement of an inevitable connection between conflicting emotions. When a negative emotion has the upper hand we must obey the taboo. When a positive emotion is in the ascendant we violate it. Such a violation will not deny or suppress the contrary emotion, but justify it and arouse it. We should not be frightened of violence in the same way if we did not know or at least obscurely sense that it could lead us to worse things. (63-4)

In his considerations about the secrecy of festive expenditure, Bataille goes well beyond Roger Caillois’ theory of transgression in *L’homme et le sacré*. By defining the transgression not as a negation of a prohibition but as its overcoming, that is, as its supplement, Bataille ultimately gives a corporeal character to Marcel Mauss’ notion that taboos were established to be broken. It is by pursuing the implications of his concept of transgression that Bataille arrives at the simultaneous formulation of a theory of war—the present of enunciation, 1939—a theory of the state—dominated by chance and not by reason—and a theory of economic exchange—based on expenditure and not on accumulation.

Bataille’s theories reveal the staging of an ethical and historical conflict that can be viewed as the great legacy bestowed upon us by the nineteenth century: the debasement of all values. We all know various manifestations of this process. Consider, for instance, Marx’s thoughts on the return of tragedy as a revolutionary force; or the Nietzschean theme of the last man and the Eternal Return; or, finally, Michelet’s diatribes against his own time, which he labeled the time of tedium. Indeed, Machado de Assis partakes in this same lamentation. But far from longing for bygone days, Machado gives his lamentation a peculiarly progressive direction. He thus escapes the axiological moment in his lament for the debasement of values and thereby places himself outside of the usual terms of binary evaluations. In short, one could say that, after Bataille, the (postmodern) modernity of Machado de Assis consists, precisely, in suggesting a way out of the paradigmatic fatality of binarisms.

Thus, to the aristocratic exaltations of a society whose labor value is held captive in practice by slavery, Machado de Assis does not oppose a view based on the master/slave—that is, on the worthy/unworthy—dichotomy. On the contrary, by means of his cynical use of irony, he introduces a non-paradigmatic moment that suggests the lawless character of the society of his time. Here, let us remember Barthes' comment. For Barthes, the third term, which in this case is the abject, does not exhibit any regularity or predictability. It is neither a neutral (worthy or unworthy) nor a composite term (worthy and unworthy at the same time) (Barthes 1614-22). It is an eccentric and excessive idea that is not, I would assert, out of place (Eurocentric of a production),³ but rather outside of the structural law of society itself. Therefore it should not come as a surprise that someone as close to Bataille as Roger Caillois used "Jogo do bicho," a short story from the *Relíquias da casa velha* collection, in order to illustrate the role of cultural lotteries as norms of a post-production society, just like the one that emerged in Europe after the last world war (Caillois 162).⁴

Hence, in Machado's story—but also perhaps in peripheral modernity more generally—there is something that exceeds the emulative or agonistic order professed by modernization. One could say then that Machado's game anticipates the aleatory character of postmodern social institutions. In this sense, our reading echoes Silviano Santiago's observation that Machado's aesthetic of discipline questions its own notion of discipline at the exact moment of its greatest dominance (Santiago 3-5). This move thereby gives rise to a causal reversal of position that makes the authentic precursors of Machado the practitioners of the literature of exhaustion—Mallarmé, Joyce, Borges—which ultimately places Machado de Assis squarely in the center of the language game that subverts all communication and accumulated production.

In effect, the game of dice, or *alea*, as the singular cipher of productive exhaustion under whose logic contemporary societies of control function, reveals in all instances the force of destiny. In the game, the player never exhibits effort; on the contrary, she shows complete passivity in the face of need. She does not value qualities or innate aptitudes. She believes that being ingenious is completely irrelevant. Therefore the only thing to do is to wait for the arrival of a social value—that is, justice or happiness—under the guise of non-value, the arbitrary decision of luck. Such justice or happiness, which is always slow, private, and oblique, rewards the player in proportion to the risk taken, but in a manner inverse to the agonistic effort. In the society of

production and work, out of which all *Bildungsroman* emerge, the players' probabilities of success in the game are evened out by hard work and tenacity. In contrast, in the society of expenditure, the society of games and war—whether the war is waged on a national level, as occurred in Paraguay, at an international level, as with the avant-gardes, or a global one, as with business mergers—the aleatory game negates work and its related values: skill, training, the work ethic, patience, and perseverance. In short, in a single stroke it cancels all accumulated results. As Caillois briefly puts it, *alea* presents itself as the insolent and supreme derision of merit that separates seeing from looking, and thus forcing the conscience to turn inward and look at what it sees.

While the agonistic attitude typical of Modernism's anxiety of influence tends to value personal responsibility, aleatory logic reveals an abdication of personal will and an abandonment to destiny, thus making one's relation to money more crude. What is lacking in aleatory logic is the mediation of merit or qualifications that used to regulate the subject's relation to capital. Under such conditions, individual superiority is abolished in the face of random luck, and sudden prosperity invariably acquires an illicit quality.

But it would certainly be an exaggeration to simply oppose the postmodern aleatory logic to the modernist agonistic logic. Rather, it seems that both complement each other, symmetrically, insofar as they share a law that determines the arbitrary and artificial creation of an equality between peers, one that is normally refused and foreclosed in mass society.

For Aníbal Machado, this arbitrary, artificial, and aleatory equality was derived from a peculiar nihilistic conception of life that Machado de Assis depicts in his work as the immediate and spatial unreality of the present. I allude here to the divorce between event and value that Machado de Assis enacts in his fiction. Indeed, there is no narration in Machado de Assis unless an event transpires, unless something partakes of the order of history. But, at the same time, the value of such an event remains an enigma in the story as the presence of an absence. Consequently, something much more complex than a simple binary opposition between life and death is postulated. This might help explain why Aníbal Machado states that, for Machado de Assis, "life is only interesting insofar as it serves to confirm his already disenchanted view of life." It is then possible to discern in Machado de Assis, at least in the poetic-irrational interpretation carried out by modernism, a division of life into, on the one hand, normal, commonplace, ordinary, and, on the other, scabrous, infamous, abject. It is as if Machado de Assis were dividing that

which never ceased to die because, in fact, it was dead-alive. With respect to his concept of death, it is also possible to discern a division between an inert, palpable death, and a no less real, machine-like death that is pure movement—hence the parasitic notion of an in-between space of tedium that supplements the basic life/death opposition. In Machado de Assis, Aníbal argues, tedium is the obtuse element that places the author outside of structural law (and, therefore, beyond realism, beyond nationalism, beyond materialism):

Machado, always correct, always punctual, while begging his close friends to excuse him, aimed his machine of sarcasm and irony at humanity. A machine that was as admirable as it was silent and terrible. Humanity at the time was the bourgeois class of the Second Empire. But this was hardly important. The main thing was not to photograph it in a still pose but rather to outline a general and nihilistic conception of existence, to manifest, by means of literary fiction, a tedium that “n’est en soi que la vie toute nue, quand elle se regarde clairement.” (Valéry)

La vie toute nue. In this passage that links sovereign power and bare life, Aníbal Machado introduces a formula that will subsequently be developed by Giorgio Agamben: potentiality and actuality are two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being and, at the limit, pure potentiality becomes indistinguishable from pure actuality. So the important thing is neither the absolute particular nor the sovereign contingency of a pose. In the end, it is not the modernist fatigue but rather the postmodernist tedium that reveals a life that escapes the disciplinary techniques and therefore becomes endlessly available, ready to sink itself into the abjection of bare life. As Aníbal Machado further notes, this unfaithfulness to life, which could have made Machado de Assis “an anonymous suicide or a profoundly hopeless man like Kierkegaard,” was in fact “compensated by a gift that, in itself, made existence worthwhile: the power to express such unfaithfulness to life.” It is important to note here, nevertheless, that Machado de Assis’ expression is far from serving the solar values of a biopolitical integration. Instead, it delineates the acephality of a *zoé* in a perpetual displacement. “It is not, as the author of *João Ternura* points out, the song of life that this voice sings; it is, on the contrary, the negation of all that it offers us, a negation formulated with diabolical grace by someone who measured his own solitude and later smiled and took pleasure in showing the moral misery of man and his most wretched motives.” What is at stake here, then, is the sovereignty of the artist situated beyond, or outside, any institutional arrangement.

In this regard it is important to note that Aníbal Machado, who anticipated Blanchot's theory of disaster by developing his own peculiar and subtle theory of failure combining the tragic precipitation of rhythms, the interruption of the astral protection, and the sudden, haphazard combination of quantities, acknowledges that:

Machado must have hated disasters, whether they occurred on the physical or the moral level. His arrow was invariably pointed toward Nirvana. Can it be that at the root of this anguish was a man comparing all of the aspects of the world with an ideal, fixed model for everything, a man distraught by the dialectic contradiction of things, a man for whom reality was eternally immutable and always suffocating? A man, finally, who was permanently disappointed, without hope, without happiness; a writer who, in contrast to Dickens and Balzac, never sympathizes with his characters, except with the insane ones with whom he seems, given the long and warm welcome he gives them, to maintain a secret complicity. Here a liberty proportional to the previous oppression is felt, as if alongside his insane characters the author wanted to better manifest his distrust, if not loathing, for the good sense that drives the automatons of the everyday. Even his style, in these moments, seems to acquire a greater grace and the inventive power of quiet madness.

In his analysis Aníbal Machado avails himself of an aspect of the theory of disaster—in which the happiness of the one who escapes disaster is proportional to the number of those who die from it—so as to present a Machado de Assis redefined by *alea* as a writer who is as much national as foreign, alien:

Thus, this exceptional artist who lost the power to be inebriated with the images of the world, who was afraid of making a mistake, of abandoning himself to the ingenuous forces of life, who was cruel and sadistic in treating other fellow human beings, depicts himself as the least Brazilian of our writers. And this, far from hindering his universality, furthers it.

At this point it becomes possible to establish a symptomatic, axiological ambivalence. On the one hand, we are confronted with what one could term an assured universalist failure: Machado is not Dickens, nor Merimée, nor Hemingway. On the other hand, we witness a relative, universalistic victory, which is not exclusive to the author but is part of the system in which the author places himself—Machado's extraterritoriality foreshadows other, no less

telling, extraterritorialities. It is, therefore, within the limitations inherent in the extraterritoriality of Machado's fiction that the modernist narrators who have Machado as a referent can discern the horizon of their present, that is, 1939.

Machado's skepticism with regard to narratives caused them to be received with anomy, like the aleatory effects of a fleeting happiness. Like the incredulous Camilo in "A Cartomante," Machado did not believe in anything and yet, unlike the modernists, he did not bother to argue against faith. Says Aníbal: "He limited himself to denying everything. I articulate this poorly because to deny something is to affirm it, and Machado did not even express incredulity." A textual digression might be of use here to clarify the axiom of aleatory credulity that we are reconstructing in Machado, an authentic modern *homo ludens*.

Borges, or rather his specter,⁵ when translating the short story "A Cartomante," from *Várias histórias*, singled out, in a supplementary gesture, certain passages that reveal how a modernist sensitivity might read Machado. For example, he suppressed the character's affinities, by omitting the sentence: "Iam os mesmos livros, iam juntos a teatros e passeios" ("they read the same books, went for walks and to the theater together"). However, Borges did not fail to point out that difference, which for Machado was established "by other words," was established with words (*hecha con palabras*). In other words, difference is a *culto protestante*, as Mário would say, accomplished by means of language, which thus reinforces the global significance of Machado's narrative: the aleatory happiness of literature consists of transferring the major to the minor, the canonical to the national or, to echo the narrator, of translating Hamlet into the vernacular. This is why when Borges, or whoever translated Machado's story, renames "A Cartomante," he emphasizes that difference is a trace, a *parergon*, a word. The story is then given a vulgar title like those of the chapters of the national or even post-national history of infamy, "El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro" ("Tom Castro, the Implausible Imposter"), "El asesino desinteresado Bill Harrigan," ("The Disinterested Killer Bill Harrigan"), "El incivil maestro de ceremonias Kotsuké no Suké" ("The Insulting Master of Etiquette Kôtsuké no Suké"). "A Cartomante," thus, comes to be called "El incrédulo frente a la cartomante."

There is, however, another element that more clearly reveals the subtle modernist appropriation of Machado. It concerns a small syntactical slippage that singles out the scabrousness of sovereign contingency. When Camilo, consumed with worry about the future and fearing himself at death's door, stumbles upon the fortuneteller's house, he decides to consult her. Machado

writes: “ela fê-lo entrar. Dali subiram ao sótão” (“she made him enter. From there they went up to the attic”). But Borges translates the same line as: “ella lo hizo pasar. Entraron. De allí subieron al desván” (“she made him enter. They went in. From there, they went up to the attic”). The *staccato* rhythm of the translation, which slows the action and thus makes “entering” an autonomous event, symptomatically coincides with the enunciative structure of the *Aleph* in the family’s attic on Garay Street. The narrator of *Ficciones* will say: “Cerré los ojos, los abrí. Entonces vi el Aleph. Arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato” (“I closed my eyes, I opened them. It is then that I saw the *Aleph*. Now, I arrive at the unspeakable core of my story”).

“A Cartomante” becomes a text within the text of “El Aleph.” The original story, which by chance revolves around invention (*invenit*: she discovers), returns as an unfaithful story with an encounter that embodies, at its core, a lack. We are thus confronted with a mechanical repetition (let us not forget that “El increíble frente a la cartomante” is just an irreverent translation of Machado de Assis published in an Argentine sensationalist newspaper) of something that is unassimilable, something that will never be able to occur on an existential plane because, as an event, it attracts all attention to itself, foreclosing the possibility of an equivalence with or passage into another register. Therefore the syntax of the translation exalts and punctuates, between “the meanders of the real” (Aníbal Machado), the *tuché*, the occasion, the chance, that is, the encounter with the “anjo-máquina de costura-caos” (Mendes 526-27) or, in other words, the Real.⁶

As noted above, Machado’s problematic extraterritoriality became the reference for later fiction. The most obvious instance of this is Aníbal Machado’s strategy of “unreading,” which is still very much an agonistic gesture. For instance, when he claims that Machado, like the character José Maria in his story “A segunda vida,” rejects his own life, thereby replacing all spontaneous feelings with reflection, Aníbal is in fact foreshadowing a traumatic scene in one of his own stories, “Viagem aos seios de Duília,” where he reenacts the recuperation of an impossible origin. But the affinities between “A segunda vida” and “Viagem aos seios de Duília” do not stop here. In both stories, the main characters, who suggest timeless youth and thereby negate the overwhelming passage of time, have the same ambivalent name: José Maria. Finally, both “A segunda vida” and “Viagem aos seios de Duília” narrate life in the manner of Bras Cubas, that is, from beyond the grave, thereby undoing or unworking the concept of limit itself.

At this point, I would like to suspend the above encounter with the Real, abject and unrepresentable, and return to the encounter imagined by Machado in "A cartomante," later transformed by Borges in "El increíble frente a la cartomante," in order to discuss a more recent story by Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*. This move might in turn help us better understand the passage from modernist fatigue to postmodern exhaustion, that is, the passage from the strategy of "unreading" to the strategy of deconstruction.

Fatigue, as noted above, is concerned with a confrontation that artificially levels the possibility of victory between dissimilar contenders. Furthermore, it refers to the imaginary search for an equality of opportunities, the essential law of rivalry between antagonists who have recourse to the focused attention, the continuous effort, the deliberate willingness to win and the techniques of discipline and perseverance to come out of the fight victorious. None of these elements, however, obtain in deconstructive exhaustion.

Indeed, in *The Hour of the Star*, the narrator goes beyond Borges' simple syntactical *rallentando* when she imminently faces a similar encounter with chance. It is at this precise moment that *tuché*, "being so dark that she looks like the statue of Fatality" (Mendes "A cartomante") suddenly erupts into and interrupts all identification, doubling all represented action with reflection: "Madame Carlota ordered Macabéa to enter (It is annoying to deal with facts, the quotidian destroys me. I am too lazy to write this story that will barely unburden me. I see that I write above and beyond myself. I do not accept responsibility for what I write now)" (Lispector, *Hora* 72).

As we noted above, Machado takes the first step when he places himself outside of the structure by considering the aleatory logic of the favor as the predominant social bond in peripheral modernity. Borges, for his part, establishes a link between this situation and mass reproduction. Clarice Lispector, who progressively distances herself from agonistic logic, understands her practice as a "system beyond being";⁷ renouncing the responsibility and disciplinary perseverance of modernism, she places her writing "above and beyond" so as to disassemble the machine called literature by thinking of literature precisely as a machine, and by stopping this machine at the point (*punctum*) in which this promise of life borders on her own death. In a parenthesis that clarifies this position, which should not be identified with disbelief but rather with an authentic exhaustion in the face of the modern experience, the narrator of *The Hour of the Star* concludes: "(I see that I cannot deepen this story. Description tires me)."

For the writers who come after Machado, this is precisely the point. In 1939, while in Paris, Guimarães Rosa noted in his private diary that Machado was the blind spot, the equivocal instance of Brazilian literature. For him, continuous reference to Machado was the way to go astray. It thus looks as if a good part of post-Machado de Assis writing would be nothing more than a *re-flection* on the problem of contemporary nihilism anticipated by Machado himself.

If it is possible to interpret nihilism as the transformation of use value into exchange value, it then seems fruitful to ask: what are these uses? And how many are there? Two types of negation, in my view, impose themselves on the horizon of modern literature. The first type of negation is antithetic and, therefore, affirmative. Bearer of its own denial, it carries the weight of the tradition of a problem by imperatively affirming only one alternative in a disjunction or dilemma: *tupy or not tupy*? The antithetic negation considers that nothingness, as *néant*, nullifies while, at the same time, in a compensatory gesture, makes humanity a positive notion. The second type of negation, by contrast, is negative because, being thetic, the affirmation comes first. It marks a distance, a difference, in relation to the history of the problem. It traces an exterior that is, nevertheless, inclusive: *tupy* and not *tupy*, barbarian and civilized. The thetic negation interprets that nothingness nullifies without a trace, with no remainder, as an acephalic *rien*.

Modernism's paradigm was antithetic negation. Machado de Assis par-takes, by contrast, in thetic negation. His disbelief in the face of chance will later manifest itself in Guimarães Rosa as *nonada* or *tutaméia*;⁸ in Murilo Mendes as insignificance, “a ceitil [an old coin], a sixth of real or unreal, a thousandth of zero”;⁹ in Clarice Lispector as *objecto*;¹⁰ and, finally, in Paulo Leminski or Régis Bonvicino as a self-crossing by the other.¹¹ In all of these instances, the distancing in relation to the Thing, which only becomes possible once that thing is distanced from itself, that is, when that thing is at a paradoxical point where outside and inside converge, this distancing implies a non-totalized, disseminated, concept of truth. Rather than emphasizing the imaginary totality implicit in all social bonds, this “untrue whole” of thetic negation thus becomes a truth not completely materialized in its own heterogeneity.¹² It is precisely this self-invention of the living that conspires against any homogeneity of the modern understood as imaginary Totality.

While, on the one hand, Machado de Assis' search for a non-binary solution that is always at risk of sinking into the emptiness of representation allows

us to read Machado's works as postmodern, on the other hand, his drive to assuage the uneasiness of a decentered identity through an instinctive, biological logocentrism makes it possible to talk about Machado's modernism.¹³

In the end, what the modernist's antithetic negation reveals is that agonistic struggle can function without law or even with its own matter reduced to sheer emptiness. Conversely, the postmodernist's thetic negation reveals the same thing; however, additionally, it reveals the aleatory indifferent and arbitrary character of the game itself, whose object functions alternatively as a charismatic apparition and a repulsive dejection, as a sublime release and an amorphous abjection. In sum, modernism consolidated itself as a movement that aimed at redefining national life only after singling out the convulsive beauty of Machado de Assis' arbitrariness, a gesture whose purpose was to completely authorize, to echo Mario de Andrade, the sexual and moral iniquity of the artist as a function of the extremely honest life that they, the modernists, imagined Machado to have lived. This was, in effect, the sublimated and restrained life that was possible in 1939.¹⁴

Notes

¹ See Moreiras "The Villain."

² I allude here to the considerations on scopoc drives that Lacan formulates by appropriating *Méduse & Cie* by Caillois and *Jeune Parque* by Valéry. See Lacan *Seminar*.

³ See Schwarz *Misplaced Ideas*.

⁴ For a historical discussion on soccer and the "jogo do bicho" in the carioca *Belle Époque* society, see Herschmann and Lerner. See, also, Antelo "Pedagogical Potential."

⁵ "A Cartomante" was published in March 1934 without translator credits in number 31 of the *Revista Multicolor de los Sábados*, a supplement of the newspaper *Crítica* directed by Borges and another modernist writer, Ulises Petit de Murat. The story was illustrated by Andres Guevara (who would later be the graphic designer for several carioca newspapers, including *Dom Casmurro*). For further reading on *Revista Multicolor*, see Saitta 31-47.

⁶ In his Seminar XI, Lacan says that no praxis, more than analysis, is oriented toward that which, at the heart of experience, is the nucleus of reality. This is so, Lacan goes on to explain, because what is at stake in psychoanalysis is the encounter with a real that constantly eludes us. It is in this context that Lacan offers us the Aristotelian logic of *tuché* (which he translates as the encounter with the real) to refer to something that is beyond the automaton, that is, the simple return. For Lacan then, there is always something that occurs as if by chance; he stipulates: "the function of the *tuché*, of the real as an encounter—the encounter insofar as it is essentially the missed encounter—first presented itself in the psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma," or, in that form that can not be assimilated (Lacan 55).

⁷ See Gasché 177-255.

⁸ "Tutameia: insignificance, bead of sweat, inanition, nonentity, trifle, emptiness, mean-

inglessness, almost nothing; mea omnia” (Rosa 166).

⁹ Mendes, “Ossos de borboleta” 50.

¹⁰ See Antelo, *Objecto textual*.

¹¹ Whether it is the Freudian profusion of the *Wolf Man* or the Mallarméan hymen of *Un coup de dés*, we are always skirting around the problem of castration. See Derrida 300-1.

¹² In other words, the sovereignty of self, the *souci-de-soi*, is precisely the insignificance that consists of a process of indefinite heterogeneity. Interestingly, at the end of *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, it is possible to read an echo of Bataille—or of Agamben’s translation of such an echo in his concept of *nuda vita*: “You are a superior [sovereign], circumspect man. We are friends. It was nothing. There is no devil! What I say is, if he did.... It is man who exists. The passage” (Cunha, *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* 492).

¹³ Heloisa Starling singles out the political dimension of this postmodern insignificance that is alternatively understood either as exile (the dimension of need as seen in the essay of national self-reflection from Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s *Raízes do Brasil* to Jorge Luis Borges’ *El tamaño de mi esperanza*) or as modernizing re-territorialization (the dimension of excess orientated toward the capitalization of rootless nomadism). The *nonada*, from this perspective, would constitute an allegory of a difference that may be integrated within the nation.

¹⁴ I am extremely grateful to Vicky Tuma and Javier Krauel for their support in the final version of this paper.

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