

Around My Room and Around Life

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Translated by K. David Jackson

Abstract. It is argued in this essay that Xavier de Maistre, who adopted many of the mannerisms of Sterne but who was indeed the one who used dotted chapters, could have influenced Machado de Assis as much as or even more than Sterne, to judge by some indications. Therefore, from Maistre's *Voyage autour de ma chambre* much of the *free* technique could have passed to *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, prompting a *diffuse* work; indeed, even some fictional situations may have been transmitted.

Everyone remembers the note "To the Reader" that opens *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*:

The truth is that it's a question of a scattered work where I, Brás Cubas, have adopted the free-form of a Sterne or a Xavier de Maistre. I'm not sure, but I may have put a few fretful touches of pessimism into it. It's possible. (5)

In the "Prologue to the Third Edition," commenting on Antônio Joaquim de Macedo Soares' observation that the book reminded him of *Viagens na minha terra* by Almeida Garrett, Machado concluded, after citing the above passage attributed to his main character: "All those people traveled: Xavier de Maistre around his room, Garrett in his land, Sterne in other people's lands. It might be said of Brás Cubas that he traveled around life" (3).

Sterne is famous in world literature; Garrett is famous in the literatures of the Portuguese-speaking world; Xavier de Maistre is obscure even in French

literature. It is understandable, therefore, that one only thinks of the first on encountering the fragmentary chapters of *Brás Cubas*—55 and 139—as well as the very short chapters—such as 102, 107, 132, or 136—or Virgília's scribbling in chapter 142. Nonetheless, Xavier de Maistre, who adopted many of the mannerisms of Sterne but who was indeed the one who used dotted chapters, could have influenced Machado de Assis as much as or even more than Sterne, to judge by some indications that we shall present below. Perhaps he may have served as an intermediary between the two, thanks to the dominant presence of French literature in Brazil.

When Machado talks about "free style" he is thinking about something practiced by Maistre: a capricious, digressive narrative that goes and comes, leaves its track to take byways, cultivates apropos, erases the straight line, hides connections. This narrative is aided by short, apparently arbitrary chapters that dismantle continuity and allow it to jump from one thing to another. Instead of coordinating variety by way of long divisions, the author prefers to emphasize the autonomy of its parts in brief units, which by facilitating its *diffuse* manner enrich the overall effect with the insinuating charm of suspended information, characteristic of the fragment.

In Machado de Assis' novels this procedure corresponds to his entry into the second phase. The first four novels that he publishes are composed of relatively long chapters, linked according to the normal logic of the time. The five last novels are composed of brief chapters, frequently connected in a random way because of their function as intercalations, something added, or off the subject. My hypothesis, to repeat, is that the passage from one world to the other could have been helped by reading the *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1794), by Xavier de Maistre, also composed in this manner, and whose marks are visible in *Brás Cubas*. From the *Voyage* much of the *free* technique could have passed to *Brás Cubas*, prompting a *diffuse* work; some fictional situations could also have been transmitted; who knows, even certain aspects of the irony and a certain refinement rather precious in its naturalness, which Machado assimilated because he felt an affinity with this style. However, Machado knew how to keep Maistre's precious refinement under control. As for the material, it is obvious, for example, that chapter 154, "The Ships of the Piraeus," repeats an anecdote mentioned in chapter 36 of the *Voyage*, which Xavier de Maistre had taken from Fontenelle, according to what I read in a note to an edition of his work made in Italy. However, for my suggestion what is more important is the question of involuntary acts, which in Xavier de Maistre are

a mainstay of the narrative but which only appear episodically in *Brás Cubas*, though in a way that leaves no doubt about their transposition.

Here one must remember that the *Voyage autour de ma chambre* marks a significant moment in the process of the development in literature of an awareness of the problem of the divided personality, a theme of notorious importance during Romanticism, which would arrive in our times with overpowering force. In fact, that awareness is not the only precursor element in the work of Xavier de Maistre, but here it is the only one I will comment on.

Count Xavier de Maistre—the youngest brother and godson of the famous reactionary thinker Joseph de Maistre—was born in 1763 in Savoy, a region of French language then belonging to the kingdom of Sardinia, where he engaged in the army. Later, he emigrated to Russia, where he married, became a general, lived the greatest part of his life and died of old age in 1852. Because of a disciplinary transgression when he was a lieutenant, he was imprisoned for some days in a fortress in Piedmont, and there he described with talent and grace an imaginary voyage around his prison room. This and other writings enjoyed a certain success in France, to whose literature Maistre belongs, in spite of being a foreigner who only visited Paris when he was already an old man. On the occasion of this visit, Saint-Beuve wrote an article praising him, which is included in the Garnier edition of his complete works in one volume.

The *Voyage*—obviously influenced by Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and *Sentimental Journey*—describes his movements in the room as if they were *étapes*, rising and going to bed, meals, paintings and objects, small incidents, his dog Rosina and his servant Joanetti, all filled with digressions and reflections, mostly centered around his interest in involuntary acts, even those that later would be called "Freudian slips."

These acts presuppose a disconnection between the levels of psychic life, as if within ourselves there were more than one being and they could eventually enter into disagreements and even conflicts. Xavier de Maistre explains the division by means of a *philosophical law* that humoristically alleges to have discovered, namely, that inside each one of us there coexist, not always in a peaceful manner, "the soul" and "the animal" (*la bête*), also called "the other." The "soul" is reason and consciousness, in the psychological and moral sense; the "animal" is the instincts, but also the spontaneity of feelings and of acts. By way of amusing cases and incidents he will suggest that the relations between the two are complicated, and although Maistre always pretends to take the side of the

“soul,” his greater complacency with the manifestations of the “animal” is obvious in many cases.

One curious passage is one that tells of a nocturnal pollution, a typical outburst of the “other,” which is observed severely by the “soul,” but nevertheless analyzed with tolerant sympathy. Later, when properly installed with respectability, Xavier de Maistre rejected such literary excess and expressed his desire to suppress the said chapter in future editions—which, in our times, was attended to by the prudery of the editor of the aforementioned Italian edition.

The “soul” and the “other” can thus act as if they were independent, maintaining a capricious relationship illustrated through accidents and distractions that seem as meaningful and as natural a part of us as the conscious acts are. It is as if, a century before Freud, Xavier de Maistre were inaugurating something resembling what the former would call the “psychopathology of everyday life,” based on the analysis of what we call today “Freudian slips.”

One example: the narrator tells us that, upon leaving home to go to the Royal Palace in Turin, he sunk into thought about painting, and when he came to himself again he was arriving at the house of a beauty—about whom he would be dreaming many pages ahead when the pollution occurred. Here is the final excerpt from chapter 7:

— Pendant que mon âme faisait ces réflexions, l'autre allait son train, et Dieu sait où elle allait! — Au lieu de se rendre à la Cour, comme elle en avait reçu l'ordre, elle dériva tellement sur la gauche, qu'au moment où mon âme la rattrapa, elle était à la porte de Mme de *Hautcastel*, à un demi-mille du palais royal. Je laisse à penser au lecteur ce qui serait arrivé si elle était toute seule chez une aussi belle dame. (56)

The narrator insinuates the type of loose behavior that the “other” would have for Madame de Hautcastel without the control of reason, but what the Brazilian reader thinks is that he has already read something similar, in chapter 66 of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, “Legs.” In this chapter, the “deceased author,” thinking about his lover, tells us how his legs carried him without his noticing to the hotel where he normally took his meals:

Yes, legs, my friends, you left the task of thinking about Virgília to my head and you said to one another, “He’s got to eat, it’s dinnertime, let’s take him to the Pharoux. Let’s divide up his consciousness, one part can stay with the lady, we’ll take over the

other part so that he goes straight ahead, doesn't bump into people or carriages, tips his hat to acquaintances, and, finally, arrives safe and sound at the hotel." (106)

Here, contrary to the text cited above, automatism leads to the right ends, not the wrong ones, but the mechanism is the same, as well as the implications and the tonality of humor.

It seems clear, then, that there were impregnations from Xavier de Maistre in the narrative change which occurred in Machado de Assis, as he suggests in the above-cited note "To the Reader." A talent of infinitely superior breadth, he perceived that in the modest and enchanting *Voyage* the theory of the *other* was a mild resource with which to illustrate without pedantry the complexity and the contradictions of behavior as well as the contradictions of the mind. In Machado's work, in *Posthumous Memoirs* as well as in other texts, automatism articulates itself with a much richer and more expressive treatment of the divisions of the self, but his debt is for that reason no lesser in relation to the writer whom few today think about, and some even despise, as did André Gide in a certain passage in his diary, where—as if he were thinking about Machado de Assis acrimoniously—he writes that nothing irritated him more than a certain conventional spirit of "the type of Sterne and Xavier de Maistre."

Works Cited

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