

## Paradigms at Play: The Short Stories of Machado de Assis

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**Abstract.** In reference to the question of characterization, Machado de Assis' theoretical statements are consistent and show a commitment to psychological truth. At the same time, the author's doubts about the realist school are manifest as a method of characterization different from the usual practice of creating lifelike individuals. Machado's interest, widely demonstrated in his short stories, is more relational and consists of building models of contrasting personalities or perspectives. Frequently, this contrary relationship between characters suggests opposing theories. However, the categorical nature of such dichotomies is generally called into question through devices such as the double.

The construction of characters is an interesting factor in Machado de Assis' aesthetic vision. The author published only a few words on the subject in his literary essays, but the consistency of these few comments suggests that he dedicated serious thought to the matter. We know that Machado had grave doubts about the realism/naturalism of his contemporaries; consequently, it should not surprise us that his aesthetic vision is rather distant from the notion of verisimilitude as it is conventionally understood. It is not that the Brazilian author rejected the idea of convincing characters but rather that he proposed a different kind of plausibility. As he wrote in his review of the novel *O primo Basílio*, by Eça de Queirós, "Let us look for reality, but exclude Realism, so as not to sacrifice aesthetic truth" (3.913).<sup>1</sup>

Here, after examining some of the primary critical statements about characterization, I wish to demonstrate that the short stories offer an excellent exhibit on Machado's theory of the literary character. His brief fiction, in spite

of its enormous variety, also presents a consistency in many areas. Perhaps the short stories are the best complement to the suggestive critical essays of the author. The scarcity of detail in the latter leaves many doubts about the meaning or intention of some declarations. In the former, a laboratory of repeated practices offers, implicitly, the needed clarification for the critical texts.

The essay "Instinto de nacionalidade" exemplifies this lack of explanatory development. It is evident that Machado does not see the answer to the search for a unique and national literature in the empirical or objective aspects that distinguish Brazil from other countries. Although he recognizes that there is a place for Brazilian flora and fauna, for local color and popular traditions, for the Indian and for regional types identifiable with Brazil, Machado does not see this as the way to create an authentically national literature. The answer for Machado resides in a much less objective reality, an essence of the Brazilian soul, "certo sentimento íntimo" ("a certain intimate feeling") (3.804). However, once the essay puts forth this notion of an authenticity of character or psychology, it declines to furnish a precise demonstration of what would constitute such an intimate sentiment.

The review of the novel *O primo Basílio*, besides providing a good analysis of some defects of Eça de Queirós' novel and of the realist school, amounts to a dissertation on characterization. The essay finds Luiza, Jorge, and other characters inadequate because of a lack of psychological profundity. They seem to be "puppets" (3.905) because their actions depend too much on circumstances (stolen letters, a husband's absence, the arrival of a cousin, etc.) and because they do not derive sufficiently from psychological truths. Machado makes an appeal for a "moral person" (3.906-07), while again leaving little explanation of the concept. The general tenor of the review, however, leaves no doubt that the "moral person" is a being whose behavior is consistent with a psychological makeup. The actions should be highly motivated by prerogatives that are emotional and cultural—in a word, human. Once again, the best demonstration of Machado's theory is in the laboratory of his fiction itself. His last response to Eça de Queirós seems to be *Dom Casmurro*, for here Machado plays on the same theme (that of adultery) as *O primo Basílio*, but with a rich psychological and cultural foundation.

A third theoretical statement by Machado may be found in the preface to his first novel, *Ressurreição*. Machado declares, "I did not try to write a novel of customs; I proposed the outline of a situation and the contrast of two characters" (2.116). This is a short affirmation that has long implications. First,

we again see an insistence on not building character on superficial or merely objective factors. The novel is not a “novel of customs.” The project of studying the “contrast of two characters” reinforces the already mentioned search for a psychological truth (a “*sentimento íntimo*”), but it also introduces a new concept. The important thing for Machado in this novelistic debut (and as I see it in the whole of his literary project), is the *contrast* of characters. Characterization is not a question of delineating individual psychologies. The priority is on examining the *relations* between individuals. Machado seems to intuit that a true psychology of character (or at least of his characters) will only reveal itself to the extent that the character participates in social interactions. He seems to perceive what the urban anthropologist Roberto DaMatta will propose a century later—that the essence of Brazilian culture or of a Brazilian “personality” is not in the individuals themselves, but rather in the relations among the same (DaMatta 119-120). The “*sentimento íntimo*” sought by Machado, therefore, does not appear in romantic, individual isolation, in which characters are the heroes of their adventures of self-discovery. On the contrary, it will appear as an essence that in a certain sense is non-essential, because it does not reside in a fortress of being but rather in the circumstances of existence, in the contingency of one’s contact with another.

DaMatta emphasizes the relational nature of Brazilian culture because he sees that culture as a space of contrasts—contrasts of race and ethnicity, of social class, of political tendencies, of family values. For him, Brazilians are constantly involved in a mitigating enterprise that renders such dichotomies relative; Brazilians try to break the strong tensions that surround them, to make them softer and more tolerable. In my view, Machado’s literary project fits well with this sociological framework, especially when one thinks of characterization. Machado’s characters, like DaMatta’s Brazilians, live in a constant negotiation between dichotomies.

If, therefore, characterization is an exercise of contrasts, we will see that its mode of operation is different from that of an aesthetic based on the individual. Any study of contraries must effect for heuristic purposes a certain reduction. In such an analysis, it is not a manner of comprehending the totality of the unique case’s characteristics. Rather, it is a question of finding a basis of factors that belong to the two elements to be contrasted and that consequently lend themselves to a differential examination. Every contrastive exercise is also a comparative exercise; the study of the difference between strawberries and ski-lifts would not make sense, while the study of the contrast between a “*gaúcho*”

(a native of Rio Grande do Sul) and a “baiano” (a native of Bahia) seems very logical. Unavoidably, such a study would be schematic, because several factors that might seem important in other contexts cease to be so now because they fail to enter into the contrastive (and comparative) play. But the partial and schematic nature of the analysis does not render it less revealing. Once we give up on totalizing intentions (wanting to understand the elements in their wholeness), we see that the analyses become both valid and interesting. I believe that it is important to remember these rules of contrastive analysis when studying Machado de Assis’ characterization, for they help us to understand how his practices can seem, simultaneously, both schematic and true.

### The play of perspectives and personalities

As we have said, the prefatory declaration of *Ressurreição*, in which Machado speaks of his intention to examine the contrast of two characters, is not restricted to that fledgling novel. We find the same project in many short stories. In these, the partial and abbreviated nature of the characterization is evident, so much so that in many cases the author does not even depend on human beings to represent the psychological perspectives under discussion. The “characters” do not need to prompt in the reader an association with persons of flesh and blood because they are merely receptacles for ideas, points of view, or values. They are, as it were, paradigms at play more than they are people.

An excellent example of this is the short story, “Um apólogo” (“An Apologue”),<sup>2</sup> in which the main characters are a needle and a spool of thread. They are arguing about who is the most important in their world, which consists of the elaboration of dresses for a lady. Who really does the sewing? The thread says that the needle can merely “pierce the fabric [...] nothing more; I’m the one who sews. I attach one piece to the other, and give them substance” (2.555). But the needle also has an understandable point of view: “I’m the one who punctures the cloth, leading the way, pulling you along afterwards, obedient to what I dictate” (2.555). Only during the dénouement of the story does the narrator introduce a human character: “I told this story to a professor of melancholy, who shook his head and told me: — I have also served as a needle for many a common piece of thread” (2.556). The human significance of this fable is clear enough, even before the humanization brought about in the last paragraph. Some people are needles, penetrating and original, but for their very sharpness they seem to lack presence, or the capacity to attract others and solidify relations. Others, more flexible morally but also less acute, have the gift for

taking advantage of others' efforts and for creating strong contacts and establishing a presence in the world. This play of opposing human paradigms could not be more reductive and simple. Never is there a question of creating true-to-life characters. But, at the same time, it seems to me that the story creates a convincing view of social interactions. The sense of truth is in the relation between beings and not in the individuals themselves.

The story "Idéias de canário" ("A Canary's Ideas")<sup>3</sup> also shows that lifelike characterization can arise from actors who are reduced and less than human. The main character in the text is Macedo, "who had a fancy for ornithology" (2.611) and who seems to inhabit a world of disasters and injustices. Upon escaping a coach that almost runs him over, he enters a secondhand store. The space seems dark and dirty to him; it has an air of the "disillusioned sadness inherent in the objects which were remnants of past lives" (2.611). Finding a canary in a worn-out cage, he asks himself what "detestable owner," motivated by "misery" or "laziness," would have brought the bird to this "cemetery" (2.612). In the end he buys the canary and transfers it to more and more positive spaces—from the darkness of the store to a garden, from the original, small cage to a much larger one. Some time later, the canary escapes from his new cage.

In all these settings, the canary carries on a dialogue with Macedo, expounding to him his vision of the world. In the store, when asked about his previous abode and his "detestable owner" the bird responds that he never had an owner. About the proprietor of the store he says, "That man over there is my servant. He gives me food and water every day" (2.612). While at the store, the canary declares that the world "is a secondhand shop, with a small rectangular bamboo cage hanging from a nail" (2.613), and that the canary is the lord of that cage. When transferred to the more spacious cage in the garden of his new owner, the bird says, "The world [...] is a sufficiently broad garden with a fountain in the middle, flowers, shrubbery, [...] clean air, and a bit of blue up above. The canary, lord of the world, lives in a spacious cage, white and circular, from which it looks out on the rest of the world" (2.613). The canary has yet another *Weltanschauung* after escaping from the cage; he denies having said that the world was anything else: "The world [...] is an infinite blue space, with the sun up above" (2.614).

The tale, then, amounts to a play of two opposing subjectivities. The student of birds also seems to be a "professor of melancholy," for he sees everything in negative terms. The canary came to be his through miserable motives, and while he is in his possession, he always has a controlled and limited exis-

tence. For the canary, each one of his new conditions is the best of all possible conditions. Although these "personalities" are partial and simplified, in their association they give a valid picture of human beings in their optimistic and pessimistic tendencies.

Short stories with human characters are sometimes just as schematic as the ones with sub-human actors. "O machete" ("The Uke"), for example, outlines a psychological dichotomy similar to that of "Um apólogo." Inácio Ramos is sincerely dedicated to music, and in particular to the cello. The disciple works seriously on his instrument until he is able to extract from it "a pure and austere poetry, a severe and melancholy quality that went along with his soul" (2.857). An acquaintance, Barbosa, on the other hand, plays the *cavaquinho* more "with nerves" than "with soul" (2.861). His music has great impact upon its listeners, but depends as much upon the visual gestures of passion with which it is produced as upon the sounds. In this dialectic, the carnival ukulele player comes to be the "hero of the night" (2.862), to the extent that, after several evening sessions at the house of the cellist, he runs off with the other's wife. While in "Um apólogo" there was a more symbiotic relationship, "O machete" outlines a similar dichotomy involving the psychological makeup of the characters. Those possessing grave, dedicated, and profound natures suffer while the frivolous and superficial have hardly a worry. And perhaps the greatest pain of the grave characters is the fact that the frivolous ones, and not they, capture the hearts of the public.

Still another story that is based on contrasting characters is "As academias de Sião" ("Siam's Academies").<sup>4</sup> Here the dichotomy involves, in a much simplified way, notions of gender. In an imaginary kingdom, Kalaphangko, the king seems to have a sweet, feminine soul, while his favorite concubine, Kinnara, seems to possess an ambitious and aggressive masculine soul. It is clear that the definition of "masculine" and "feminine" is reductive. The first seems to amount to a categorical attitude about facts, a strong active impulse, and a violent tendency. The latter is the perfect opposite of the first, for it consists of seeing everything in relative terms, in adopting a passive attitude, and in preferring peace above anything else. The powerful potential of the king becomes softened by his feminine soul, while the aggressive tendencies of the concubine are controlled by her lack of power. When the souls are traded, a grave crisis of disequilibrium arises. Kalaphangko plans to assassinate Kinnara, so as to keep her masculine soul forever. Such a catastrophe is avoided, however, when the king discovers that the concubine is pregnant with his baby.

A rejection of realism in the story is obvious, for the text begins by undoing the factor of verisimilitude: "Have you heard of Siam's academies? I know very well that in Siam there never were academies, but let us suppose that there were, and that there were four of them; so listen to me" (2.468). Here, once again, the text seeks a reality that does not depend on the norms of the realist school. The play of opposing models, supposedly masculine and feminine but in fact simply human, reveals that the stability of things depends upon a balance between the two and that, fortunately, the world has mechanisms that seem to guarantee such control.

### Theories in action

Until now we have examined in the short stories several binary schemas involving dispositions or perspectives, which reveal a particular notion regarding characterization. Machado clearly is fascinated by the psychological possibilities of human consciousness. But many times he goes beyond this domain, examining the opposition of concepts or theories as well. "O alienista" ("The Psychiatrist") (*Papéis avulsos*; 1882) is a clear example of this theoretical analysis. I do not wish to suggest that there is not a study of opposing personalities as well, for this is also a part of the package. On the one hand, there is Simão Bacamarte, and on the other, everyone else. Bacamarte is the stereotype of a man of reason who never digresses from methodical efficiency. When at 40 years of age he decides to marry and a relative asks him why he chose an unattractive woman, he replies that

[the bride] Dona Evarista enjoyed perfect digestion, excellent eyesight, and normal blood pressure; she had had no serious illnesses and her urinalysis was negative. It was likely she would give him healthy, robust children. If, in addition to her physiological accomplishments, Dona Evarista possessed a face composed of features neither individually pretty nor mutually compatible, he thanked God for it, for he would not be tempted to sacrifice his scientific pursuits to the contemplation of his wife's attractions. (2.254)

Just as Bacamarte's function is to demonstrate this rational consciousness, the function of the other characters is the opposite, for they all have logical aberrations of some kind. It is in relation to this basis of characterization that Machado enters a philosophical space, inquiring what, in the final analysis, is mental health (or at least normalcy).

The first theory of the psychiatrist gives priority to rationality: "But what is reason if not the equilibrium of the mental faculties? An individual, therefore, who lacks this equilibrium in any particular is, to that extent, insane" (2.261). By choosing this theoretical basis, Bacamarte prospers in his asylum. He discovers that insanity, which before seemed to be "a small island in an ocean of sanity," now begins to appear as "a continent" (2.260). In his categorical thought, the psychiatrist wishes to distinguish precisely between the healthy mind and the sick one. But the very metaphor that he uses to describe this separating project reveals an unexpected enormity: "our first task [...] is to extract the pearl—that is, reason. In other words, we must determine the nature and boundaries of reason" (2.261). And, in fact, Bacamarte discovers that the mass or tissue of insanity, like that of the oyster, is much larger than that of the pearl, and that the pearls of reason can be extremely rare objects. Here is where the story gives us its amusing catalog of examples of imbalance. After his most trusted assistants, including his own wife, are consigned to the insane asylum, and after there is serious opposition against his program to intern almost everyone, Bacamarte begins to look for an alternative theory of insanity. He begins to believe in a second hypothesis, based upon the notion of normality: if imbalance and rational inconsistency are much more frequent than their opposite, "that normality lay in a lack of equilibrium and that the abnormal, the really sick, were the well balanced, the thoroughly rational" (2.281). Further, if the abnormal ones (and therefore the insane) are the well-balanced, then the first and perhaps only candidate for this new distinction is the doctor himself: "Simão Bacamarte [...] had found in himself the perfect, undeniable case of insanity. He possessed wisdom, patience, tolerance, truthfulness, loyalty, and moral fortitude—all the qualities that go to make an utter madman" (2.287). Above all, "O alienista" is impressive for its biting satire of the lack of logic in the human heart, on the one hand, and of the abuse of power and scientific obsession, on the other. The mocker's voice sounds loud and clear. But at the same time the story offers us an incisive inquiry into opposing theories of health or well-being. Is such a condition a matter of conforming to a predetermined standard, or is it rather a question of not diverging too much from the norm?

"Ex Cathedra"<sup>5</sup> presents another educated or scientific protagonist, as well as another play of theories related to the previous theme. Fulgêncio, a man who is rich and therefore free to spend almost all of his time reading, realizes that his goddaughter Caetaninha has become a young woman and is inter-

ested in men. At the same time, he discovers that his nephew Raimundo has reached the age for marriage. As the guardian of both, he decides to get them to marry each other, and assembles an impressive plan—rational and methodical—to bring this about. “Calamities or mere perturbances in questions of the heart could be blamed on the fact that love was so often practiced in an empirical way; it lacked a scientific foundation. A man and a woman, having learned the physical and metaphysical underpinnings for that sentiment, would be more prepared to receive and nourish it efficiently” (2.459). The young man and woman would receive a course of study consisting of twenty classes, articulating all the physical and metaphysical aspects of the problem. Caetaninha and Raimundo neither understand nor want to understand these lessons. But during the sessions, taught in the open air of springtime, they are highly impressed by the stirrings around them—the calls and flights of the swallows, the impassioned buzzing of the bees, etc. Naturally, they are also quite impressed by the looks exchanged with each other. At the end of the course, the students hardly understand a word of what Fulgêncio has said to them, but they claim to understand it all, and in fact are more than ready for marriage.

“Ex Cathedra” gives opposite paradigms for the realization of projects. The theory of the uncle and guardian seems to be that positive things are accomplished by the direct and rational application of a predetermined plan. Preparation is primarily a matter of comprehending the relevant principles. Once the “razões físicas e metafísicas” are apprehended, the completion of the plan is practically automatic because the participants are adequately enlightened. In the text the total ignorance of this plan on the part of the young people is amusing. Their approach demonstrates another theory of positive results, one in which things happen spontaneously through the conjunction of favorable conditions. The sympathy, courtship, and marriage of Caetaninha and Raimundo bear out the importance of propinquity and not of rational method.

The satirical target of the story, clearly, is the scientific mania of the obsessive devourer of books.<sup>6</sup> Fulgêncio’s mistake is all the more erroneous because, in his arrogant satisfaction, he gives absolute credit for the love affair to his method. The author pokes fun at this intellectual pride, but seems not to discount the old man’s theory entirely. After all, it was his plan that began the fruitful encounters of the infatuated youths. The union seemingly would not have happened without his efforts, in spite of their misdirected intentions. In the structure of contrary models, neither destroys the other completely.

Analyzing the interaction of these opposing concepts, the short story reveals understandable human tendencies that have a real impact on social life. The fanaticism of Fulgêncio, for example, resounds with Brazil's intellectual history, especially insofar as the philosophy of Positivism is concerned. But it is clear that the story does not need realistic characters to examine real attitudes. For Fulgêncio, an obsession with ideas and a bit of love for his god-daughter and nephew are the only characteristics required. For the young man and woman, just hormones.

"Cantiga de esponsais" ("Nuptial Song")<sup>7</sup> also develops opposing theories,<sup>8</sup> this time about artistic creativity, and these are represented by maestro Romão, a well-known conductor, and by his neighbor, a recently married woman. The professional musician's vision is consistent with that of the Parnassian school (and also with that of Positivism and paternalism). The maestro wants to write an "espousal canticle," a monument to his marriage and to his deceased wife, in order to immortalize his existence and to leave an enduring legacy, "a little of his soul on earth" (2.388). For him, creation consists essentially of hunting for a fugitive essence, "capturing on paper the sensation of an extinct happiness" (2.388). His work will be realized by study, method, and especially by effort. As he imagines the project, he compares himself with a bird fighting to break through the walls of its cage (2.388). It depends on preparation and on tools—the harpsichord, paper, and naturally a pen or pencil. The maestro struggles in vain to write a worthy but always elusive melody, until overwork and frustration destroy his health.

On his death bed, however, he hears the newlywed woman next door as she begins to "hum aimlessly" (2.389) at the backyard window of her house, which faces the maestro's back window. The melody that she sings, "unconsciously," contains "something never before sung or known, in which a certain note was followed by a beautiful musical phrase, precisely the one maestro Romão had been seeking for years but unable to find" (2.389-90).

The young woman's position suggests a theory of creation quite contrary to that of the maestro. It does not depend on work or on method, but rather on spontaneous inspiration. It is a more social theory than that of the conductor, because the woman receives her creative impulse from another; she is embracing her husband and is "absorbed in [his] eyes" (2.389). There is no notion of hunting for a fugitive note, nor of leaving a legacy for future generations. She does not want to capture a phrase on paper; her melody is free, airborne, the celebration of a unique moment never to be repeated. The pen

of the maestro (a masculine emblem) is replaced by the mouth of the woman (a feminine emblem). The melody's production suggests a gestation, for it grows in the inner recesses of the woman until emerging at its own time and on its own terms.

Although success belongs to the young woman and, therefore, to her more "feminine" theory of creation,<sup>9</sup> we should not conclude that the maestro's theory is completely invalidated. It is suggested that the woman would not have been able to sing the phrase sought by the maestro if she had not heard his repeated attempts, played at the harpsichord and transmitted through the back yard. The maestro's preparatory attempts seem to have amounted to a kind of melodic embryo for the girl, and the seed seems to have undergone a kind of pregnancy in her unconscious until coming to light in her spontaneous "cantarolar."

In these "theoretical" short stories, the value of verisimilitude is not among the most important. Characterization is not highly developed and actions tend to be exaggerated. The characters are more receptacles of concepts than persons. But the machadian "reality" does not reside in the creation of objectively convincing characters. Using a relational logic, the author builds a scenario of opposing visions, and it is in the perception of these paradigms that the reader encounters a kind of authenticity.

### **The double: beyond dichotomies**

In his program of putting paradigms, theories, or perspectives into play, Machado often uses the figure of the double,<sup>10</sup> that is, characters having equal or complementary characteristics, where one does not seem to have an existence independent of the other.<sup>11</sup>

The story "Uns braços" ("A Woman's Arms")<sup>12</sup> is an example of this type of text.<sup>13</sup> Inácio, the message boy employed by the lawyer Borges, is identical to the latter's wife, Severina, in the sense that both suffer the abuses of the head of the household. But the similarity goes beyond this shared fate. Inácio is "poorly dressed" (2.490), while D. Severina must expose her bare arms because she "had worn out all her long-sleeved dresses" (2.491). The physical description of both, typically vague as in other texts by Machado, uses similar language: Severina's "twenty-seven good substantial years" (2.491) seem to echo Inácio's "well-grown fifteen" (2.490).

At the beginning of the story, the narrative function of Severina is essentially opposite from that of Inácio; with her attractive arms, the woman serves as an object of the adolescent desires of the young male subject. As the tale

unfolds, however, these functions begin to become intertwined. Feeling the boy's eyes upon her, D. Severina begins to ponder more and more about him, until the roles of subject and object become inverted. She sneaks into his room, tenderly gazing upon him while he sleeps; thus, she does with him exactly what he did with her. The glorious kiss, which occurs in Inácio's dreams at the same moment when Severina leans over him to place her lips upon his, is emblematic of Machado's treatment of dichotomies. For him, it seems not to be simply a matter of examining opposing models but rather of observing that binaries (such as subject and object) tend to obey a complex logic in which their functions are reciprocal and interchangeable.

"Pai contra mãe" ("Father versus Mother")<sup>14</sup> displays a similar use of the notion of the double. The dichotomy between victim and oppressor would seem to be clear and categorical in many cases, especially when slavery is concerned. At first glance, then, the hunter of escaped slaves, Cândido Neves, would clearly represent one of these categories while the escapee, Arminda, would represent the other. But the motif of the double creates an ambiguity that greatly problematizes such a moral classification. The bounty hunter is desperate to earn his reward because, in his dire financial circumstances, he needs it to avoid giving up his newborn daughter for adoption. This creates a doubling between him and the slave, for she is expecting a child and cannot stand the idea that it will be born into slavery. So rather than a clear dichotomy that might reinforce a simplistic morality, we have in the story a deep well of mitigating matters, a situation whose complexity prohibits easy judgments.

The theoretical nature of "O espelho" ("The Looking Glass")<sup>15</sup> is evident in the story's subtitle: "Rough draft of a new theory of the human soul." The protagonist, Jacobina, proposes an idea of consciousness, or of the "soul," consistent with the binary tendency identified.<sup>16</sup> He declares that human beings have two souls. The one that looks "from the inside out" (2.346) reminds us of rationalist philosophy, in which the mind with its innate capacity to comprehend and organize the world gives origin to knowledge. The soul that looks "from the outside in" (2.346) recalls the empirical worldview, which sees the mind as a *tabula rasa* upon which the world inscribes its information through the senses.

The figure of the double enters into the picture because Jacobina insists that the two souls have a mutual dependency, like that of the fruit of an orange and its peel (2.346). The tale he tells to demonstrate this interdependence suggests that human beings are doubles of themselves, constantly alter-

nating between their two souls. Jacobina's exterior soul takes on an exaggerated function when everyone begins to praise him for having been promoted to "alféres" ("lieutenant") in the national guard. Suddenly, however, the protagonist finds himself in a solitary situation and the exterior soul suffers a crisis. At that point, the interior soul discovers a cure for the problem. For a few minutes each day, Jacobina puts on his military uniform and looks at himself in the mirror. The image of a human being in front of the mirror, at the same time impressive and impressionable, is an emblem of the eternal interdependence of our "duas almas" ("two souls") and of the play of double functions that each person negotiates day by day.

### **Machadian paradigms and the idea of character**

I hope to have demonstrated that Machado's concept of character has more to do with the relations between beings ("o contraste de dois caracteres") than with the construction of convincing individuals. This preference for models of comparison and contrast creates an aesthetic of characterization that is schematic, structural, and at times even abstract. A short quote from the novel *Esau e Jacó*, perhaps the most evidently "structural" text by Machado, shows how the author was developing an idea of characters based less on the persons themselves and more on the notion of the interaction of play between them. The narrator compares the elaboration of a story to a game of chess, suggests the possibility of "a diagram of the beautiful or challenging positions" and says that "Everything will proceed as if you really saw the match being played among people" (1.966). Discussing this novel, Massaud Moisés correctly claims that the main characters, Pedro and Paulo, are "more like sketches than anything else" (13). We have seen here that this tendency to see the characters in terms of a "diagram of positions" is equally applicable to the short stories of Machado.

In this, Machado anticipates some ideas from the structuralist school of thought. The revolution caused by Ferdinand de Saussure and his followers in the area of linguistics centers on the idea that signs are differential. Meaning is produced by means of the relations between linguistic units, and not by any value inherent in such units. When these concepts are extended to literary language, the narrative character is treated as one of these discursive units. With A. J. Greimas and other structuralists, there arose a theory in which characters are thought of in terms of the functions they perform in the relational scheme of the story, rather than in terms of personality or other human characteristics.<sup>17</sup>

Up to this point, we can see a kind of sympathy between the “diagram of positions” of Machado’s characters and these structuralist concepts of characterization. But I think we should not go too far in this alliance of ideas. In its logical conclusion, structuralism rejects mimesis in favor of a grammar of functions. Roland Barthes declares that the notion of character as the representation of a person is obsolete (95). Jonathan Culler claims that the school’s emphasis on conventional relations creates an analysis antithetical to the individual, and rejects the concept of character as person (230). Joel Weinsheimer says that the character is a mere textual segment like other segments, subject to the same play of recapitulations and permutations. Referring to Emma Woodhouse, a creation of the novelist Jane Austen, he insists on using the pronoun “it” instead of “she” (187).

Although he may have avoided the realist tradition of characterization, it does not seem fair to associate Machado with a radical manifestation of structuralist thought. In “Instinto de nacionalidade,” we recall, his key for the creation of a national literature is a “sentimento íntimo.” His project never ceases to be a search for authentic human representations. In his review of *O primo Basílio* Machado is clearly more in favor of a sense of character as person (“dê-me uma pessoa moral”) than against it. Upon criticizing certain of Eça’s characters, calling them puppets, the Brazilian author is far from giving up on the mimetic tradition of constructing believable characters.

In addition to the structuralists, certain writers in the area of modern aesthetics also proclaimed the obsolescence of character. Abstract art thrives on the notion of “pure form” without reference to the empirical world. Walter Pater’s famous sentence, “All art constantly aspires to the condition of music” (135), shows the aesthetic impulse toward form, for music is the only art in which there is no separation between “form” and “content.” The essay *La deshumanización del arte* by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset summarizes the general principles of a modern aesthetic that seeks to cut the ties with daily life, which centers upon human passions (353-60). Passionate response, which involves identification with characters, is abandoned in favor of aesthetic enjoyment, which depends on more properly artistic values.

Machado de Assis defends aesthetic values and attacks programs in which they are abandoned by a supposed commitment to reality. His critique of realism in “A nova geração” (“The New Generation”) and in the review of *O primo Basílio* leaves no doubt about it. But it is not possible to conceive of a Machado who sees an incompatibility between the aesthetic domain and the

human domain. His primary critical statements involve a search for an appropriate humanism. His practice as a fiction writer is continually directed toward the mysteries of the human heart. If Machado creates formal displays, placing characters in symmetrical relationships, inverted structures, and recursive spaces, it cannot be attributed to an exaggerated aestheticism that would set aside the “merely human.” It would be better to tie that tendency to a desire for equilibrium between form and idea, art and humanity.

There is yet another perspective through which we should approach Machado’s peculiarities as far as characterization is concerned. Any attempt to explain our author’s artistic program will be incomplete if it does not take into account a great interest in the reader. It is well known that Machado had a fascination for the reading process and that he gave a special place to the reader in his aesthetic vision. The short story “A chinela turca”<sup>18</sup> is a veritable dissertation on the importance of the reader’s participation, and concludes by saying that “o melhor drama está no espectador e não no palco” (2.303). The chapter “Convivas de boa memória” in *Dom Casmurro* constitutes another treatise on literary theory and in many aspects anticipates the phenomenological vision of reading (Iser). In that chapter, the narrator affirms his preference for “livros falhos,” and explains how he enjoys closing the book and visualizing all of the things that were not actually there (1.870-71). In the end, it is important to recognize that Machado de Assis is a master of the unsaid and that he creates a kind of art in which the reader is constantly invited to function as a co-producer of meanings. The phenomenon of the partially delineated character is consistent with such a vision. Creating reduced characters, the author gives the reader an opportunity to complete them through the imagination.

If in the area of characterization Machado’s method seems reductive or schematic, it should be remembered that in addition to other motivations there is this ever-important relationship with the reader. We have seen that elements with Machado tend not to have an isolated, individual existence. Just as his characters only take on life when they relate with other characters, so also it is important not to restrict Machado’s theory of character to the practices of the author. It is more understandable when the author and the reader interact. It is also more easy to understand why, with Machado, many times doing less is doing more.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All translations from the original Portuguese are my own, except for "The Psychiatrist" (1-43), "A Woman's Arms" (46-55), "The Looking Glass" (56-65) and "Father Versus Mother" (101-12), which are from Grossman and Caldwell and "The Devil's Church" (38-46) and "A Canary's Ideas" (156-61), which are from Schmitt and Ishimatsu. Parenthetical volume and page numbers are all from the *Obra completa*.

<sup>2</sup> See Assis, *Várias Histórias*.

<sup>3</sup> See Assis, *Páginas recolhidas*.

<sup>4</sup> See Assis, *Histórias sem data*.

<sup>5</sup> See Assis, *Histórias sem data*.

<sup>6</sup> Gomes 10 and Brayner 16.

<sup>7</sup> See Assis, *Histórias sem data*.

<sup>8</sup> Dixon 44-50.

<sup>9</sup> Bosi 449.

<sup>10</sup> Cunha 123-27, 162-64.

<sup>11</sup> See Keppler, Rogers, Rosenfield, Tymms.

<sup>12</sup> See Assis, *Várias histórias*.

<sup>13</sup> Dixon 29-35.

<sup>14</sup> See Assis, *Relíquias de casa velha*.

<sup>15</sup> See Assis, *Papéis avulsos*.

<sup>16</sup> Dixon 18-28.

<sup>17</sup> Rimmon-Kenan 29-42.

<sup>18</sup> Assis, *Papéis avulsos*.

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