

Machado de Assis' Reception and the Transformation of the Modern European Novel

Earl E. Fitz

Abstract. This essay is concerned with Machado's contribution to the evolution of the modern novel's form. My thesis is that, because of the innovations that he wrought, Machado now needs to be considered as one of the modern novel's great masters. In making this argument, I stress three points: 1) that Machado knew the European novel very well and that he knew in his own mind how he could improve it; 2) that Machado did improve it, breaking new ground for its form and structure in a series of works published between 1880 and 1908; and 3) that we should now rank Machado de Assis among the greatest practitioners of the modern novel and that we can regard him as the "missing link" between Flaubert and Proust.

My comments in this essay center on Machado de Assis' sense of the novel as a literary form. In the course of this discussion, I shall also focus on some of the particular techniques that Machado either invented or surgically altered as he undertook what I believe was his systematic and entirely deliberate transformation of the European novel, which was, at the time, the genre's defining critical context. I am not, therefore, primarily concerned with issues of theme or characterization, two of Machado's greatest strengths as a narrator (see Nunes), except insofar as these aided and abetted his under-appreciated efforts (except, of course, by Brazilianists) to redefine the nature of modern narrative fiction. My argument is twofold in nature: first, that Machado changed the development of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novel, and, second, that only now, by means of a comparative

methodology, can we see precisely how he achieved this goal. In terms, then, of my own revised view of the modern novel's formal development, I see Machado as providing the missing link between Flaubert and Proust, the writer whose best work presents us with the most profound and most imaginative transition we have in the Western tradition from Realism to Modernism.¹

But when we claim that Machado transformed the modern novel, what, exactly, does this mean? In responding to this question, two issues stand out: first, that Machado was keenly interested not just in writing fiction but in actually renovating the novel form itself, in exploring it as an issue of profound intellectual and artistic significance. Machado's formal interest in the novel thus puts him in the same category as such luminaries as Flaubert, James, and Proust, writers for whom the "art of the novel" (as James, deeply impressed by Flaubert, put it) was of the highest importance. Based on solid evidence regarding Machado's reading habits, his languages, and the numerous literary allusions that dot his work, we can confidently conclude that he was deeply knowledgeable about the European novel, even though this tradition did not, with the exception of Anatole France (who was perhaps the first European champion of Machado's work), recognize him as a major player in it. The second issue is that, as a critically discerning reader (a point we see vividly demonstrated in Machado's famous critique of Eça's *O primo Basílio*), Machado knew the European novel quite well, so well, in fact, that he must have felt that he knew how to transform it, and how to improve it. And when we add to this Machado's own inventiveness, his iconoclasm, and, above all, his extraordinary originality, it becomes easier to see how and why he decided to create what I have come to call not merely the first "nova narrativa latino-americana," nor even the first "new narrative" of the Americas, but the first truly "modern" novel of the Western tradition. I do not think this is an excessive claim; or, if it is, it is certainly one that we can—and should—defend. To a large extent, it is precisely the oddly anachronistic quality of Machado's post-1880 work, both his novels as well as his stories, that led the American novelist John Barth to praise Machado as the "proto-post-modernist" (Fitz, *Machado* 45), as a writer better appreciated now, in the early years of the twenty-first century (and even in the old irony laden twentieth century), than as a faithful adept of the traditional realistic novel.

As scholars like Eugênio Gomes and others have shown, Machado's reading took him into many different literary and philosophical traditions. Not to minimize the marvelous complexity of his vision, however, I believe we should

focus on three particular European traditions, all three of which were particularly important for Machado and his sense of what *he* could do with the novel genre: the English, the French, and the Spanish. Space does not permit me to attempt the sort of extended comparative reading that seeks to evaluate the prime novels of these traditions in terms of Machado's later work (such an endeavor would require at least a book and, more likely, an entire lifetime of scholarship). Nonetheless, the salient points of comparison need to be recognized and considered, even if only in a rudimentary fashion. By examining, then, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, my hope is that we can better see how Machado's mature novels compare to what was being done in these other, more canonical works. Specifically, I will seek to show how, in effect, Machado "reinvents" these European models and, in so doing, makes a major—if almost, as yet, wholly unacknowledged—contribution to the protean form we know as the modern novel.

We can begin by looking at Laurence Sterne's 1759 classic, *Tristram Shandy*, a novel that, as many have argued, exerted a considerable influence on Machado's growing sense of how he himself might begin to cultivate a new kind of novel (Caldwell 99; Bloom 673-680). The two texts provide, as Brazilianists know, many opportunities for comparative study: a comical self-conscious narrator, a constant dialogue with the reader, the role of death, textual digressions (particularly prominent in *Tristram*'s case, so much so that by the time the entire narrative comes to an end our hero is barely five years old!), and numerous formal surprises, such as missing words and black, or marbled, pages. "Even Brás' famous 'pessimistic' final sentence," Helen Caldwell points out, "may stem from a remark" uttered by Toby Shandy's valet, Corporal Trim: "[...] I have neither wife or child—I can have no sorrows in this world" (99).²

But my intention here is to pinpoint which of these many issues Machado, whom Harold Bloom regards as Sterne's "foremost disciple in the New World" (674), seems most interested in and how—and why—he changes them as he does. Basically, I think these issues fall into three categories: the tonal, the structural, and the readerly, all of which show Machado expanding upon Sterne's work. Indeed, I think it can be shown quite convincingly that Machado, far from being a passive receptor of his predecessor's art or an unimaginative recreator of it, actually goes considerably further than Sterne, particularly in terms of what we might call the epistemological basis of his art. Readers and critics have long applauded the breeziness and slightly

naughty tone of Sterne's text. In general, Tristram's tale does evince a basic geniality, or sentimentality, that is hard to resist. This sauciness, in fact, surely stands as one of the novel's most attractive features.

Machado's *As Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, on the other hand, offers up what I think is a much darker—some say pessimistic—outlook. Machado's novel is certainly comedic—indeed, it ranks as one of the funniest Latin American novels ever written—but under the smiling visage of its self-conscious, ironic, and subtly unreliable narrator/protagonist it is also grim, and never more so than at the end, where our thoroughly defunct narrator famously (perhaps even cynically) declares that when he died, he was actually a little ahead of the game because he, like Corporal Trim, had engendered no children:

Because on arriving at this other side of the mystery I found myself with a small balance, which is the final negative in this chapter of negatives—I had no children, I haven't transmitted the legacy of our misery to any creature. (*Posthumous* 203)

I have long felt that it is not for nothing that Machado thus elects to have “miséria” (“misery”) be the final word of the narrative, the last thought the reader is left with, and a verbal sign that comes devastatingly close to summing up the kind of cruel, hypocritical, and exploitative society erected and maintained by the Brás Cubases of this world.³ Stunned by this chilling revelation (which, deriving from unchecked egoism, also calls into question the morality of capitalism, its socio-political analogue), the reader can only ponder the earlier words and deeds of the seemingly affable narrator and wonder if everything that he has said and done now needs to be reconsidered.

Tristram's story, by way of contrast, ends on a much more upbeat note, with our jovial narrator seemingly giving us a wink and a knowing nod of the head in order to signal that what we have just read is a great put-on, a delightful farce in which we have just had the pleasure of participating: “L—d! Said my mother, what is all this story about? ——— A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick. ——— And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard” (539). Riven with cynicism and bleak in terms of its prognosis for our future happiness (or for our future period, since, if we all took Brás' position, it would spell the end of the human race!), Brás' similarly funny narrative ends not with a knowing wink of complicity between the narrator and the reader but with a body blow, a thematic punch to the solar plexus that unexpectedly knocks the wind out of us and that, suddenly and dramatically, thrusts our face into

what later critics will call the sense of despair that characterizes the modern condition. The darkness that inhabits Brás' outwardly witty and urbane voice is, I believe, what led John Barth to see in Machado's groundbreaking novel not only the essence of postmodernism but, more importantly, the road to nihilism, or, more precisely, how the road in this direction might, ironically enough, be negotiated via the comic mode. Barth had wanted to write a novel about nihilism and felt that he had found in Machado's three great middle texts (then just appearing in English translation) what he thought was the key to achieving this (the novel in question, his first published novel, eventually appearing under the title of *The Floating Opera*).⁴

In addition to tone, then, two other very clear differences between *Tristram Shandy* and the post-1880 Machado have to do with issues of structure and with the role to be played by the reader. Although many structural parallels can be easily identified between the two texts, one—the still daunting idea of a page without words—stands out from all the rest. Sterne, as we know, ends chapter XII of volume I with a page that is totally black. Prefaced by the words, “Alas, poor YORICK!” (a reference to a character whose death dominates the entire first volume), this black, wordless page, in the opinion of Robert Alter, “reduces death to a literary and typographical joke, yet paradoxically confronts us with death as an ultimate, irreducible fact, the final opaqueness beyond the scope of language and narrative invention, beyond even the tracery of significant black lines on the white ground of a printed page” (95). I agree with Alter in his interpretation of the black page's function in the context of Sterne's novel. But, given the purpose of this essay, I want to consider for a moment what seems to have been Machado's reaction to this famous page, that is, how Machado seems to have seen in it an opportunity to break new ground, and, in fact, to establish what I believe was one of his most important contributions to the modern novel form: not merely the role of language in it—that is, the question of proper style—but the very nature of language itself.

What I mean by this is the following: for Machado (who, in *As Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, creates a narrator who is deceased), death is not only overcome by language, it is transformed by it. In other words, Machado goes beyond Sterne, showing us, in fact, that nothing lies “beyond the scope of language and narrative invention,” not even life itself. More than this, he shows us that language and narrative do not really describe reality as much as they create, shape, and imbue it with significance. Death is death, of course,

but its meaning for us is always a function of language and narrative invention. Meaning, Machado insists, is little more than the production and reception of language. This point comes up repeatedly in *As Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*—and in Machado's other post-1880 narratives as well—but perhaps nowhere so pointedly or delightfully as in chapter 55, “O Velho Diálogo de Adão e Eva” (“The Venerable Dialogue of Adam and Eve”), which offers us a wordless yet elaborate dialogue between our hero, Brás Cubas, and his equally self-centered paramour, Virgília. Instead of words, however, Machado gives us punctuation marks (has any writer ever used the ellipsis more effectively than Machado?)⁵ to guide our response to this sexually charged exchange. My point is that while Sterne basically says that, in the face of an event as insurmountable as death, language fails, that it cannot do what we want it to do (be a perfect medium of communication), and that it is overwhelmed by reality, Machado—in a radical breakthrough for the novel genre—is busy developing what is in effect a new theory of language, a theory that basically argues that nothing overcomes language, and that language essentially defines who and what we are, that our sense of reality is not so much imitative (as in the traditional sense of mimesis) but creative. For Machado, language thus trumps reality, rendering it, in the process, a fluid and unstable semiotic system; for Machado, language, in all its semantic elusiveness, becomes the real subject matter of his post-1880 narratives—even as his sardonic, metafictional, and exceedingly disengaged narrator, Brás Cubas, leads us (albeit ironically) to make some very serious judgments about the nature of the world in which he and his characters lived.

For me, the clearest proof of this comes in what is the third basic narrative innovation that Machado undertakes—the role of the reader in the construction of the text's meaning. Indeed, this development, coupled with his new sense of the symbiotic relationship between language and being, may well be Machado's greatest single innovation in modern narrative. Although the importance of the reader had long been recognized (as in Sterne), Machado's revolutionary approach to the matter was unprecedented, particularly in terms of the reader's response to the relativistic and quicksilver nature of meaning. Interestingly, this is a conclusion also suggested by Harold Bloom, who writes that the “genius of Machado de Assis is to take hold of his reader, address him frequently and directly, while avoiding mere ‘realism’” (680). In contrast to Sterne, who, as we know, also has his narrator Tristram talk constantly to the reader, Machado, working through the mouth of his

narrator, the deceased bourgeois Brás Cubas, actually makes his reader become not merely involved but *actively involved* in the interpretation of the text. The reader's role emerges from out of the text itself and thus establishes itself, for the first time in modern Western narrative, as what is essentially the destabilizing force of *différance* in the literary experience. Although Tristram does occasionally berate his reader for being obtuse or for being too gullible, Machado's agenda is more extreme, with the Brazilian master not only berating his reader but, gradually, as the text progresses, pressing her, like it or not, into confronting the basic semantic mutability of language, into becoming part of the text itself and, finally, into accepting responsibility for any meaning that may be adduced from it. In a nutshell, I would argue that while Sterne's reader is basically passive, Machado's reader is forced to be active and engaged, an active accomplice in what Borges would later describe as the irremediable artifice of fiction. This explains why, although Machado guides his reader's response to the wordless dialogue of chapter 55 by means of punctuation and, more importantly, by the marvelous characterizations of both Brás and Virgília that have preceded it, every reader supplies the interpretative words that she or he most wants to have come into play. Thus, a religiously devout reader wants to see Brás and Virgília as not about to undertake an adulterous affair, while a reader who has strong feminist views cheers at being able to argue that this is a scene in which a strong, determined woman is choosing to demand—and get—sexual freedom for herself and to defy the hypocritical social mores that allow men like Brás to have illicit affairs but that prohibit women from doing so. Working with the very same language as the narrator works with, the reader has to provide the missing meaning. Put another way, Machado structures his novel and builds the reader into it so that the interpretive act itself—rather than the story—begins to reign supreme.

As early as 1880, then, Machado de Assis is creating not only a “new narrative” but a “new reader” as well and this, I believe, constitutes Machado's greatest innovation, his most definitive contribution to the art of fiction. Machado's final word on this seems to come in chapter 138, “A Um Crítico” (“To A Critic”), in which a hitherto patient narrator, now exasperated with what he suspects is not just the reader's failure to grasp the requirements of his “new narrative” but the failure of the critical establishment to do so as well, writes:

My dear critic,

[...] I don't mean that I'm older now than when I began the book. Death doesn't age

one. I do mean that in each phase of the narration of my life I experience the corresponding sensation. Good Lord! Do I have to explain everything? (*Posthumous* 183)

Overall, then, I think that while it is clear that Machado recognized and appreciated all that was innovative in *Tristram Shandy*, it also seems clear that he recognized how he might go further, how he might extend and deepen several of the structural, stylistic, and thematic breakthroughs achieved by Sterne. In short, I think Machado radicalized Sterne.

I would like now to offer a few observations about two other highly influential and canonical European novels, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, both of which were important for Machado and his sense of how this protean genre might be further refined. In terms of its relationship to Machado's mature work, the case of *Madame Bovary* is particularly difficult to compare. Partly, this is because I regard it as a more artistically sophisticated novel than *Tristram Shandy*, and partly because I see Machado and Flaubert as being much alike on some key issues, particularly two: 1) the parallels between Romanticism and Realism as narrative modes, and, 2) a belief in the novel as a work of Art (Nunes 72), as an art form rather than as a vehicle by means of which a story could be told to and received by a reader. Disillusioned with Romanticism and contemptuous of Realism (which for him was too closely associated with the hated bourgeoisie), Flaubert, like Machado, understood that Art was the only goal worth pursuing, and that "composition, the achievement of the finely cadenced sentence, the page wrought like poetry, the book as internally balanced and self-sustaining unity" was the creative activity on which the artist should concentrate. Content would never again be separable from form. For both Machado and Flaubert, "art alone" could offer, and *be*, something else, something higher and better than the middle-class culture whose crass and meretricious values dominated the worlds of both Flaubert and Machado. To paraphrase an argument advanced by Stephen Heath concerning the French writer, Flaubert, like Machado, "initiates a subversion of the novel—of the genre of the bourgeois appropriation of the world, of the expression of its coherent 'reality'" (Heath 31, 147).

As a point of distinction between the two writers, however, it must also be noted that while both Flaubert and Machado undermine, or "subvert," the realistic novel as a form, Machado, expanding his experiments with irony, unreliable narrators, and reader response, also subverts the bourgeois notion

of language as a stable, objective, and fully controllable medium of communication. This radically new concern with language (and, specifically, with the semantic instability of language) rather than with a particular literary form constitutes a major difference between Flaubert and Machado, and it highlights the latter's singular importance to the modern novel's peculiar ethos. While in our Western tradition Flaubert is famous for being both the creator of literary Realism and, at the same time, disdainful of it and of its claim to veracity, we have Machado showing his own skepticism of Realism as a system of artistic creation by declaring, according to Afrânio Coutinho, that, "reality is good; it's Realism that isn't worth anything." Although they are far from identical, the positions of Flaubert and Machado on this decisive question (the nature of Realism, the relationship between language and reality, the aesthetic problem of verisimilitude, and what these mean for the art of the novel) suggest, to me at least, that this is an issue on which Machado and Flaubert would have found a lot of common ground, had they been able to discuss it. We need more rigorously comparative examinations of the aesthetic views of Flaubert and Machado as they relate to the crafting of the novel form and to its status as Art. Indeed, it is fascinating to imagine a conversation between the two of them regarding this still imperfectly understood question. Then, too, we know that Flaubert's great work was well known to Machado, who, given his own situation *vis-à-vis* both Romanticism and Realism, would certainly have appreciated what Flaubert was trying to accomplish. And he would have understood what Flaubert wanted to achieve in *Madame Bovary* and, more importantly (in terms of the art of the novel), why he wanted to do so. Indeed, Silviano Santiago, one of contemporary Brazil's most acute critics, has written that Machado kept *Madame Bovary* "intact in his mind" while engaged in writing the text that would eventually become known as *Dom Casmurro* (Santiago 47).

But should we really say that *Dom Casmurro* is an imitation of *Madame Bovary*? I think not. Rather, I think we should say that, in several important ways, Machado actually surpasses Flaubert, exceeding him, or diverging from him, in certain areas of narrative experimentation. For example, as Maria Luisa Nunes argues, at a time when writers such as Flaubert and Henry James were insisting on the "disappearance" of the narrator, Machado was actually experimenting with new forms of unlimited omniscience (Nunes 21)—an omniscience that could be more unlimited, or at least more unfettered, than that of a gimlet-eyed dead bourgeois like Brás Cubas! While Flaubert, by

means of his famously “objective” indirect style (*le style indirect libre*), neither praises nor condemns Emma’s actions, Machado creates, in *Dom Casmurro*, what we must regard as a more complex narrative structure, one that is deliberately anti-realistic in style, structure, and theme, one in which the play of the text itself emerges as the main character, and one in which a carefully controlled, perfectly balanced, and continuously decentering ambiguity comes to reign supreme. If, as Tony Tanner contends, Emma is caught not between two conflicting semiotic systems (reality vs. unreality) “but [between] two ways of using language, two different modes of constituting ‘meaning,’” Machado’s more tragic narrator, “Dom Casmurro,” is just the opposite, an embittered old man who, perhaps destroyed by an inner fear—never expressed—that at an earlier period in his life *he* interpreted something incorrectly and caused the death of several innocent people, is painfully aware as he begins his very self-conscious narration of just how profoundly language can be manipulated. For Tanner, the “fog” in Emma’s head “can be attributed to a large extent to her vague and hopeless yearning for a kind of meaning that the existing language into which she was born seems to promise (with its religious and romantic vocabularies, etc.), but that in fact it can no longer deliver or bestow” (59). For Machado, however, there exists no such illusion in *Dom Casmurro*’s crafty, calculating head; a career lawyer, and thus experienced in presenting the facts of any given case in ways that benefit his client (in this case, himself), he knows full well that meaning is what we make it out to be, and this absolutely revolutionary vision, working in close consort with the role the reader plays in the text’s reception, slowly emerges as the novel’s great theme. Meaning, Machado shows us, turns out to be entirely malleable, a function always of time, place, circumstance, and desire. Just as the process of signification requires that the *signifier* and the *signified* differ, so too does *Dom Casmurro*’s supposed “master discourse” undercut, dismantle, or deconstruct itself via the several secondary discourses that are inscribed in it, one of which, of course, is that of Machado’s ideal new reader, the one he wants to create along with his “new narrative.” This explains why so many chapters in *Dom Casmurro* deal not with one of the several plot lines but with the craft of fiction writing and the reader’s necessarily active role in it, a role that for many ends up challenging the account of what happened as it is spun out by the narrator.⁶ So while Flaubert’s text simply refuses to judge its main character’s actions, Machado’s shows us why we *cannot* judge, why we *cannot* claim to know anything with absolute certainty, and why in the end we are

effectively lost in the “prison house of language,” trapped in a semiotic system that (prefiguring Kafka) we can neither fully comprehend nor control. Not to put too fine a point on it, but whenever I reread Machado these days, I come away feeling, as I suggested earlier, that our Brazilian master discovered the essence of *différance* long before Derrida coined the term. Although he would have eschewed the jargon that accompanies poststructural thought, Machado would have immediately recognized its most basic principles. “Flying in the face of Realism,” Alfred MacAdam writes, “Machado chose fantasy” and, in so doing, “found a structure he could adapt to a representation of Brazilian reality with more success than he would have had if he had attempted to rewrite *Madame Bovary* in a Brazilian setting” (17-18). More than this, Machado de Assis wrote the first novel in the Western tradition in which language is the real protagonist, the elusive and mutable force that shapes characters, that determines their actions, and that leads the reader to make certain judgments about it all (judgments that, the more the reader thinks about it, then begin to interrogate their own reliability).

In the space I have remaining, I would like to finish by saying a few things about Machado and *Don Quixote*, another text that Machado knew well and whose tragic sense of loss, of failure, infuses *Quincas Borba* (1891), the second great novel of Machado’s so-called mature period and a text that continues his experimentations with metacritical allegory, with anti-realistic narrative, and with the reader’s role in it all. I am not arguing that *Don Quixote* is a tragedy—though no less a figure than Dostoevsky once declared it to be the world’s saddest book because it was about disillusionment. What I mean is that when Don Quixote enters into the castle of the cruel dukes (and is forced to see his dreams degraded into reality), and then again at the end, when Don Quixote dies, are we not witnessing the death of idealism? The defeat of a higher, nobler kind of existence by a baser one? And is this not essentially the same ethos that we get at the end of *Quincas Borba*, with the expiration of our hero, whose basically good but perhaps naive aspirations are hopelessly exploited by the deceitful and rapacious society in which he finds himself?

Well—if, in the tradition of Brás Cubas, you will permit me to answer my own question—yes and no. Although I am attracted to this reading—one that equates the defeat of idealism in *Don Quixote* to Rubião’s demise in *Quincas Borba*—deep down I know it is not entirely justified. If Aristotle were with us today, and if he had read these two novels, he would point out immediately that Cervantes’s hero and Machado’s hero are two very different

creations, and that their stories, though not entirely lacking in similarities, end up eliciting very different responses in the alert, questioning, and socially aware reader—the very kind that Machado wanted to create.

So why do I bring this reading up if I do not even believe in it myself? Well, I am wondering if Machado, in recognizing the source of the power that animates *Don Quixote's* famous conclusion (his crushing disillusionment in the castle of the dukes), saw a way—an ironic way, to be sure—of parodying Cervantes's great novel, of rewriting it for his own time and place. If, as Araripe Júnior, John Gledson, and David Haberly have suggested, Rubião represents the Brazil of Dom Pedro II and the Empire, then his pathetic death does not provoke a sense of tragedy so much as bathos and frustration, a sense that the Empire collapsed because, in Haberly's words, it was really a "fiction," one "held together by its central character, Pedro II" (xv). This is a very different situation than the one Cervantes creates, although again, the parallels are not altogether wanting, particularly in terms of the social significance that the two texts exhibit. One might say, however, that if the death of Don Quixote does in some way symbolize the defeat of idealism in a deceptive and violent world, then the death of Rubião turns this around, emphasizing, instead of the death of idealism, the utter victory of both "savage capitalism" and of what Santiago describes as "savage Brazilian modernization" (121), the utter victory of materialism and slavery and deceit, of exploitation and hypocrisy. Yet if there is a bit of idealism struggling to survive in Rubião's world, we would have to conclude that, in the end, it too fails because, as Roberto Schwarz has shown, it is fatally "misplaced," ill-suited to the toxic social, political, and economic realities of late nineteenth-century Brazil.⁷

And it is perhaps all of this—the invidious, anti-heroic nature of modern life—that puts the bitter taste in our mouths after we finish reading *Quincas Borba*. Although he does not recognize it as such, Rubião's world, the world of the Empire, may, the reader finally feels, be more like the castle of the dukes than anything else. If *Don Quixote* leads us to feel the pathos that comes with the defeat of idealism, then *Quincas Borba* leads us to feel just defeat. Leaden and depressing. As Machado's narrator resignedly opines at the end of the novel, commenting to the reader on the significance of the deaths of Quincas Borba, the man, and Quincas Borba, the faithful dog:

I should like to speak here of the end of Quincas Borba, who also fell ill, whined ceaselessly, ran off unhinged in search of his master, and was found dead on the

street one morning three days later. But on seeing the death of the dog told in a separate chapter, it's possible that you will ask me whether it is he or his late namesake who gives the book its title and why one instead of the other—a question pregnant with questions that would take us far along [...]. Come now! Weep for the two recent deaths if you have tears. If you have only laughter, laugh! It's the same thing. The Southern Cross that the beautiful Sophia refused to behold as Rubião had asked her is so high up that it can't discern the laughter or tears of men. (271)

The sense of these lines, which bring the novel to its close, exudes a near palpable sense of existential despair, of futility and of impotence in the face of a seemingly indifferent universe. And if this is not exactly the cathartic purging of emotions that Aristotle looked for in tragedy, then it might, at least, be read as a call for action, for the creation of a new, more authentic, and more equitable form of governance for Brazil. Read in this fashion, the reader may be justified in feeling that Machado, in his inimitably ironic and metaphoric style, is telling us, in *Quincas Borba*, that modern Brazil must not be allowed to become yet another dreary version of the dukes' castle, the place where dreams come to die.

In conclusion, then, let me say that I believe there are three main areas in which we can say Machado transformed the European novel of his time: first, the nature of the narrative voice, the—for Machado—typically ironic, metafictional, and unreliable vehicle by means of which the story is narrated and the vital link between the text and the reader is established; second, a new sense of the relationship between language and reality, one that, with its constant probing of both verisimilitude and our concept of truth (of Logos itself), may fairly be viewed as the first full expression we have of the terrible disillusionment that underscores our sense of the modern world (and as a legitimate precursor to both structuralism and poststructuralism), and, three, the creation of a new kind of reader, one who anticipates the later development of not only reader-response theory in general but much of the work of Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, and Michael Riffaterre in particular. Taken together, I believe we can also see more clearly that, in larger terms, Machado was seeking to liberate the traditional novel from the bondage of Realism and give it wings, elevating its status as a self-referential art form built on new ideas about both epistemological and ontological issues—chief among these being Machado's concerns over language, being, truth, and knowledge. In thinking about Machado and his reception of the European novel, I hope that

these categories may be of some use to us as we seek to integrate Machado's narrative art into the larger discussion of the modern novel's formal development. To the extent that we can achieve this goal, we will have accomplished something that is not only eminently justified but long overdue as well.

Notes

¹ See Fitz 1990. I should also add that, underpinning my basic point, which is that between 1880 and 1908, I think Machado de Assis rather radically transformed the novel genre, I also believe that Machado continues to be overlooked by scholars who study the novel in an international and comparative context and that this amounts to an egregious critical oversight that we who know the great Brazilian's work should now be correcting.

² Caldwell refers to the following passage: *Tristram Shandy*, IV.4.220-221.

³ As Professor K. David Jackson of Yale University has pointed out to me (in conversation), however, this same reference to Brás' not having any children at the time of his death also functions as a kind of ironic double negative in that it hearkens back to the child that Virgília lost when (apparently by Brás) she had become pregnant.

⁴ See Fitz, "Influence"; "John Barth's."

⁵ In terms of punctuation, of course, the ellipsis serves to keep a thought open for a moment so that the reader will contemplate it and, perhaps, consider other possible meanings. As a mechanism, then, it serves to build the reader's active, engaged, and *questioning* response more directly into the text itself and thus helps to create the "new reader" that Machado felt was so crucial to the "new narrative" that he was simultaneously seeking to develop.

⁶ As Dominick LaCapra notes (see LaCapra), it is the trial portion of *Madame Bovary* that most obviously takes up the problem of how the novel should be read, with the roles of prosecutor and defense attorney having parallels with *Dom Casmurro*. For Machado, however, this "trial" is intrinsic, and not extrinsic, to the text itself. The prosecutor, for example, is the narrator himself, "Dom Casmurro," who is seeking a particular verdict (guilty) from the reader, who eventually plays the role of, first, defense attorney (gradually coming to subject that Capitu cannot be "convicted" on the basis of circumstantial evidence alone) and then juror, the person who listens to the evidence and, on the basis of her or his reaction to it, must render a decision, a judgment, about what happened—i.e., our interpretation of the novel's two basic conflicts, the alleged adultery of Capitu and the very real self-destruction of the narrator, his transformation from the callow youth, Bento Santiago, into the self-centered monster, "Dom Casmurro."

⁷ See Schwarz.

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Earl E. Fitz is Professor of Portuguese, Spanish, and Comparative Literature at Vanderbilt University, where he teaches courses on Brazilian literature and courses that take a comparative approach to the development of literature in Brazil, Spanish America, and the United States. Professor Fitz is the author of *Brazilian Narrative Traditions in a Comparative Context* (MLA, 2005) and *Sexuality and Being in the Poststructuralist Universe of Clarice Lispector: The Difference of Desire* (Texas, 2001). Professor Fitz's current research projects involve modern Brazilian and Spanish American literature and the development of inter-American literature as an emergent field. E-mail: earl.e.fitz@vanderbilt.edu