Four Stomachs and a Brain: An Interpretation of *Esaú e Jacó*

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Abstract. Drawing inspiration from the narrator's statement in *Esaú e Jacó* (*Esau and Jacob*) that the reader "has four stomachs in his brain," this essay attempts to identify what the four corresponding levels of meaning of Machado de Assis' novel might be. The following four readings of the novel are proposed: 1) mythic-religious immanentism; 2) national allegory; 4) the narrator as skeptic; and 4) the novel as *roman à clé*. Finally, the interpenetration of these four levels within *Esaú e Jacó* is analyzed.

In Machado de Assis' eighth and penultimate novel, *Esaú e Jacó* (*Esau and Jacob*, 1902), called by Earl E. Fitz a "complex and often overlooked novel" (59), the narrator/character Counselor Aires uses the metaphor of the cow's digestive tract to allude to the relationship between reader and author: "the attentive, truly ruminative reader has four stomachs in his brain, and through these he passes and repasses the actions and events, until he deduces the truth which was, or seemed to be, hidden" (144). One way of interpreting this sentence might be to say that the Brazilian novelist is alluding to the four levels of significance traditionally ascribed by medieval rhetoric to the literary text, that is, the literal, the allegorical, the moral and the anagogic.[1] Looked at from this perspective, *Esaú e Jacó* would have a literal meaning: it is the story of how two men, Pedro and Paulo, from a powerful family in nineteenth-century Brazil, vie for the love of a beautiful young woman called Flora who, tragically, dies; an allegorical meaning: the novel is an allegory of the struggle between Monarchism and Republicanism in nineteenth-century Brazil; a moral meaning: by showing how Pedro and Paulo re-enact the biblical narrative of Esau and Jacob, the story allows us to interpret their actions in terms of right and

wrong; and an anagogic meaning: the novel is a fable about original sin and the dangers that arise when man fights against his brother; Flora's death would then be the "payment" for the wages of sin. Tempting as it would be to pursue such a line of reasoning in the interpretation of Machado de Assis' novel, I will be arguing in this essay that such an approach would be a misreading. Machado de Assis lived in the "Age of Doubt," a time that Nietzsche deemed the "Twilight of the Gods," when the epistemological certainty underlying the medieval rhetorical scheme described above had been dissipated. If anything, the unreliability of the narrator in Machado de Assis' fiction, to which a number of critics have referred[2]—and note that the notion of unreliability is absent from the medieval epistemological scheme—would give us cause to doubt the overall applicability of such a rubric to Machado de Assis' fiction. But my intention is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In this essay, I will attempt to keep the notion of what Machado de Assis calls the "four stomachs," and thereby produce an interpretation of *Esaú e Jacó* that has four levels while maintaining the important ingredient of the unreliable narrator.

Our first question will clearly be: what would these four levels consist of? I propose that the best way of doing this is to evaluate the criticism written to date on the novel in order to see whether it produces any sense of pattern. Based on a literature review, I believe that four distinct though overlapping approaches to *Esaú e Jacó* may be identified. They are as follows:

1) mythic-religious immanentism: by virtue of this type of reading, the lives of the two boys, Paulo and Pedro, re-enact the biblical narratives of Jacob and Esau in the Old Testament as well as of Peter and Paul in the New Testament, and thereby fulfil the prophecy described in chapter I;

2) national allegory: Paulo and Pedro's lives encapsulate the drama of Brazilian nationalism in its progression from Monarchy to Republic;

3) the narrator as skeptic: according to this approach, Aires, the narrator, describes, but does not give credence to, the various mythic and allegorical meanings ascribed to the lives of Paulo and Pedro, namely, as described in 1 and 2 above;

4. the novel as *roman à clé*: here the story is seen not so much as a struggle between Pedro and Paulo to win Flora's hand, but rather the hidden story of the unconfessed love affair between Flora and the narrator Aires.

I. The mythic-religious-immanentist reading

The mythic-immanentist approach is that typified by Eugênio Gomes's essay, "O testamento estético de Machado de Assis," which appears as the introduction to the 1973 edition of the novel. Gomes offers a careful analysis of the role of myth in Machado de Assis' novel, arguing that, "the mythicization of the characters of certain scenes demanded a figurative language, through an atmosphere of transfigurations, thus broadening the perspectives of the novel" (20). Drawing on Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, Gomes analyzes the ways in which a series of archetypes drawn from the Bible: the story of Esau and Jacob from the Old Testament and that of the apostles Peter and Paul from the New Testament; various myths: the Delphic oracle, maternity, rebirth, paradise, prophecy, Time; philosophical texts: Schopenhauer; and literary texts: Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, provide an appropriately mythified backdrop that thereby animates the events portrayed in *Esaú e Jacó*. The description in chapter I of Natividade and Perpétua's visit to the "cabocla" on the Morro do Castelo, for example, and particularly of Barbara, who has "a touch of the priestess" with "mystery in her eyes" (7), as well as the moment, "all of her was on the verge of wresting the word from Fate" (9), suggests that the narrator is prepared to countenance the possibility of an expression of a deeper, "mythical" truth. Even the opening sentence of the following chapter—"All oracles are double-tongued, but they are understood" (11)—appears to accept the possibility that there is truth in the utterance of the oracle. Introduced in chapter I, the mythic-religious-immanentist leitmotiv weaves its way through the novel, surfacing in comments related to the story of Esau and Jacob (XV.46), Natividade's comment about "Things fated to be!" (15), Perpetua's comment to the effect that "when I recited these two names [Pedro and Paulo], I felt something in my heart" (27), and the narrator's comment on Pedro's nurse that, "It was plain she had been sent by God" (29), apparently without irony. In all of these instances the assumption is that, as readers, we will be peering over the narrator's shoulder, eavesdropping on what is said, and taking everything we "witness" at face value.

II: The novel as historical allegory

The second approach to the novel involves reading it as an allegory of an important transitional moment in Brazil's history. Eugênio Gomes, for example, mentions it in passing: "Another interpretation of the allegorical meaning of *Esaú e Jacó* sees Flora as a representation of the Republic or the Nation,

as well as the twins as two political parties fighting mercilessly for the right of possessing her" (33). However, that is as far as the allegorical interpretation goes. Earl E. Fitz makes some allusion to this reading of the novel when he calls *Esaú e Jacó* "the most symbolic and mythic of Machado's works," and, furthermore, argues that Flora's death may be interpreted as a national allegory: "When Flora [...] later dies, the idealism that empowered the republic seems to die as well. The twins, political enemies, both mourn her loss, implying that Brazilians of all political persuasions could legitimately mourn the passing of the republic" (59). Some critics see this as the most important aspect of the novel. Danúbio Rodrigues, for example, states: "*Esaú e Jacó* is the most political of Machado de Assis' novels. The rivalry between the brothers Pedro and Paulo represents much more than a trite lyric dispute over Flora; both embody fundamentally political ideals, which at the time dominated the streets as well as the salons, with the Republic menacing to overtake the country" (9). The main reference to this substratum in the novel occurs in chapter XXIII. Though born on the same day—7 April 1870—the two young men give a diametrically opposed interpretation of the historical significance of that event: "Pedro repeated, slowly, 'I was born on the day His majesty ascended the throne.' And Paulo, after him, 'I was born on the day Pedro I abdicated the throne'" (61).

Both of these are legitimate readings of the historical significance of that day. The motif of "bottle half-empty or half-full" is explored in the following sequence of witty chapters (XXIV-XXVI), which describe the struggle over the two paintings, one of Robespierre—the architect of the French Revolution—and the other of Louis XVI—the last French monarch, executed in 1793. This idea is followed up in subsequent chapters when the two young men have diametrically opposed views of the proclamation of the Republic, as described first from Aires' point of view (chapters LXIII-LXIV), and then from the point of view of the two sons (see in particular chapter LXV, which contrasts Pedro's heavy heart with Paulo's "liberated heart" (169). An argument can certainly be made, according to this mythical-nationalist interpretation of the novel, that Flora stands for Brazil. Despite their ardent political leanings, both young men dream of the beautiful Flora: "During their sleep, the revolution ceased, and the counter-revolution, there was neither Monarchy nor Republic, Dom Pedro II nor Marshal Deodoro, nothing with the slightest odour of politics. One and the other dreamed of the lovely inlet of Botafogo, of a clear sky, a bright afternoon and a single person—

Flora" (174). True to the standard trope of the nineteenth-century Latin American novel enunciated by Doris Sommer, Flora, though representing the prize of Brazil won by a particular political party, is unaware of her allegorization: "While they were dreaming of Flora, she did not dream of the Republic" (175). The interesting point about this particular reading of Machado de Assis' novel is that—given that neither Pedro nor Paulo get the girl—*Esaú e Jacó* becomes an allegory of the failed political experiment of both republicanism and monarchism in nineteenth-century Brazil.[3] Flora's death, according to this formula, would be interpreted as the outward manifestation of this internal, political failure.

III: The narrator as skeptic

The third and fourth approaches are similar in that they are predicated on the notion that irony is intrinsic to the novel form, and particularly in the context of the narrator's stance towards the reality he is depicting; yet there is a difference, as we shall see. This third approach to the novel—which focuses upon Aires as a skeptic—is exemplified by José Raimundo Maia Neto's monograph, *Machado de Assis, The Brazilian Pyrrhonian* (1994). In his study, Maia Neto argues that Machado "deserves a place in the history of the skeptical tradition" and, furthermore, that he should be viewed as "a skeptical thinker rather than a literary author" (xiii). In particular, as belonging to the Pyrrhonian tradition, which is characterized as "an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of 'unperturbedness' or 'quietude'" (1). In the chapter on Counselor Aires—which focuses on Aires as he appears in *Esaú e Jacó* as well as in *Memorial de Aires* (1908)—although there is less on the former, unfortunately—Maia Neto argues that, "the main and unique thing about Aires is that although he is back in social life, he is inwardly detached from it. He keeps the theoretical stance and lets himself be affected by the appearances of social life without being disturbed by them" (164).

But how, we find ourselves asking, does this skeptical stance manifest itself in *Esaú e Jacó*? The first point to make is that Aires often appears to take a disarmingly distanced approach to the events he describes. Helen Caldwell, who translates the Counselor's name as "Ayres," suggests the following: "Although the narrative is in the third person, Ayres (like Julius Caesar)

introduced himself as one of the actors. As narrator, Ayres remains rigidly in character: he is always the old diplomat: he is never Machado de Assis" (vii-viii). But the comparison with Julius Caesar only goes so far. We first see Aires in chapter XI when he "held out his hand to the newcomer" (37), and this is just about as verisimilar as far as the Julius Caesar narrator-model is concerned. At other junctures, the split between Aires the narrator and Aires the man becomes logically untenable, and Aires comes perilously close to what we normally understand by the role of the narrator in the nineteenth-century novel. Chapter XLI, for example, begins with the following: "If Ayres had followed his inclination, and I him he would not have gone on with his walk; not would I have begun this chapter; we would still be in the last one, without ever finishing it" (101). The subjectivity of the narrator is problematized to such an extent that, rather like in the work of writers such as Pirandello, Unamuno, and Borges, there is no logical space in which he can exist in an empirical sense. It is a non-space, a little like those ambiguous pictures of labyrinths, which show shapes coming together in ways that Euclidean space cannot allow.

There are many examples of this type of narratological *trompe l'oeil* in the novel. At the end of chapter V, for example, we are left hanging in the air: "If the soul of João de Mello saw them from on high, he could not but rejoice at the chic with which they went to pray for a poor stenographer. It is not I who say it, it was Santos who thought it" (20). Sometimes the narrator seems unclear about certain details: "As for the time the three of them spent in that activity of purchases and comparison, there is not record of it, nor is one necessary. Time is properly the function of a watch, and not one of them consulted his watch" (147). This sense of the unreliable narrator is taken one step further when Aires actually re-interprets an event previously portrayed in the text in a different way. The scene we had witnessed in chapter III when the beggar receives a 2,000 *réis* note from Natividade (13) is given a new inflection when recalled in chapter LXXIV. As the narrator tries to explain: "No, reader, you have not caught me in a contradiction. I know very well that in the beginning the collector for souls attributed the banknote to the pleasure a lady had got from some amorous escapade. I still remember his words: 'Those two have seen a little green bird!' But if he now attributed the note to the protection of the saint, he did not lie then or now. It was difficult to discover the truth" (191). There are a number of other examples in the text—which become more and more frequent as it advances—that undermine the narrator's ability to insert significance into what he is witnessing. Their grad-

ual cumulative effect is to deconstruct the mythic-religious-nationalist significance of the events. The possibility is raised that the events are not produced by anything as grand as Fate or Destiny but simply by chance.

IV: *Esaú e Jacó* as *roman a clé*

The nearest example of an approach to Machado de Assis' fiction seen as a *roman à clé* is that provided by John Gledson in his monograph, *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis* (1984), although he does not use this term to describe *Esaú e Jacó*. Gledson focuses on the narrator of *Dom Casmurro*, showing him to be "deceptive" in the sense of being "a deceiver who is out to persuade us of one version of the facts of his story" (17). It is important to underline that Gledson's approach—although it involves a sense of the irony of the narrator—differs in some crucial ways from Maia Neto's approach described above. Maia Neto, for example, mentions Gledson's monograph, as well as his important article on the narrator of *Memorial de Aires*, in order to argue the following: "My disagreement with the critics begins when they claim that Brás Cubas', Dom Casmurro's, and Aires' views are either false or partial in the sense that they do not present the whole truth that is present in the novel. This implies that it is then the job of the critic to uncover the truth picture (or the whole truth) that is assumed to be implicit or hidden in the novel" (13). As we can see, an important feature of Maia Neto's approach to *Esaú e Jacó* is that it takes for granted Counselor Aires' complete "detachment" from the people around him (including Flora), a point that will become crucial in the analysis of the fourth-level interpretation of the novel.

Now let us turn from the external evidence (i.e., the view of critics)[4] to the internal evidence within the novel itself in order to assess whether *Esaú e Jacó* can legitimately be interpreted as a *roman à clé*. The most important piece of internal evidence, of course, is the quotation with which this essay begins: "the attentive, truly ruminative reader has four stomachs in his brain, and through these he passes and repasses the actions and events, until he deduces the truth which was, or seemed to be, hidden" (144). It is, indeed, characteristic of a *roman a clé* for the truth of the story to be "hidden." But this is not the only piece of evidence. In chapter III, Aires refers to the epigraph of his book in the following terms: "Well, there is the epigraph of the book, if I should wish to give it one, and no other occurred to me. It is not only a way of rounding out the characters and their ideas, but it also a pair of spectacles with which the reader may penetrate whatever seems not quite

clear or wholly obscure" (41). The reference here to the reader "penetrating" the meaning of events reinforces the notion that there is a hidden level to the action portrayed in the novel. One other piece of internal evidence needs to be mentioned, which occurs in chapter XLI, entitled "Incident of the Donkey," a supremely ironic chapter. Aires imagines that he can hear the donkey meditating, and then we read the following observation:

> Then he quietly laughed at himself, and went on his way. He had made up so many lies in the diplomatic service that perhaps he made up the donkey's monologue. That's what it was: he did not read anything in its eyes, except irony and patience, but he could not help giving these the form of speech, with its rules of syntax. Even the irony was most likely in his own retina. The eye of man serves to photograph the invisible, just as his ears record the echo of silence. (102-03)

The ironic detachment taken up by Aires with regard to his own thoughts and interpretation about reality is extraordinary and introduces a level of uncertainty into the text that dissipates certainty while at the same time not invalidating the need to interpret or produce interpretations of phenomenal reality. That the "irony" is in Aires' "retina" suggests that the very act of perception introduces a note of irony (namely, distance). It is not the case that reality is perceived and then irony added. This passage also introduces the notion that the novelist's eye is able to "photograph the invisible," which implies that the novelist is able to bring to consciousness—to develop, to use the metaphor of photography—what is invisible to others.[5]

Halfway through chapter VI, for example, Aires address the reader in such a way that can only be interpreted as mocking: "Reader, you are about to learn the reason for that look, and for those interlaced fingers. It was actually told you some time back, although it would have been better to let you figure it out for yourself; but you would probably not have figured it out" (21). This is not even gentle mockery and could also legitimately be seen as a sly reference by Machado de Assis to his novel as a *roman a clé*. But what is this hidden level to the text?

The mystery of the *roman à clé*

There are two essential features of the *roman à clé*, first, that it should have a hidden meaning, and, second, that the unwitting reader should be none the wiser when he has finished the novel. (For this unwitting reader, for example,

the first two levels of *Esaú e Jacó* may be *prima facie* evident—namely its mythic-religious and allegorical levels—but not its hidden, secondary plot.) There are, of course, a number of mysteries in *Esaú e Jacó*—why does Aires write about himself in the third person? why does Flora not make a choice between Paulo and Pedro? why does Flora see the latter, as her sketches suggest, as one person? why does she refuse Nóbrega's offer of marriage? what is the illness that kills her so rapidly?—but the most significant mystery, one around which the other mysteries coalesce like planets around a star, is the identity of the third party, the person whom Flora really loves. As we read in chapter XCV: "Do you remember the lady vacationer at Petrópolis who attributed a third suitor to our young lady? 'Or of the three men,' she said. Well, here is the third lover, and it may be that still another will appear" (235).

The third party introduced in this chapter is Gouveia, but when Flora finally rebuffs him, his identity as the third party is revealed to be a red herring. Similarly with Nóbrega who offers his hand in marriage to Flora, but Flora also refuses his offer.

As the text suggests, the identity of her lover is a secret that she takes with her to her grave: "But what crime could the girl have committed, except the crime of living, and perchance of loving, it is not known whom, but of loving?" (261). Aires specifically introduces the notion that "it is not known whom" she loves. The comment that Aires makes immediately after this observation is significant because it introduces the possibility that Aires was that secret admirer. As he continues: "Forgive these obscure questions, which are not appropriate, but rather strike a discordant note. The reason for them is that I do not record this death without pain, and I still see the funeral" (261). This introduces a level of concern on his part that would be appropriate for a friend who is grief-stricken at the loss of a friend, but the detail that "I still see the funeral" introduces a note of obsession, which goes beyond Platonic friendship. As we shall see, there are other details in the text, which confirm the possibility that there is an emotional attachment between Aires and Flora, but they are not presented in a straightforward way and indeed they suggest that a number of interpretations of that relationship are possible.

Aires' unconfessed love for Flora

The first possible reading is that Aires has an unconfessed love for Flora, of which he is also unaware. There are a number of junctures in the novel that reveal that Aires feels attracted towards Flora. His conversation with Flora in

chapter XXXIV, for example, is interrupted by the arrival of Paulo and Pedro, and we read: "Flora forgot one subject for another, and the old man for the young men. Ayres waited only long enough to see her laugh with them, and to feel within himself a twinge of something like regret. Regret at getting old, I think" (86). Aires is beginning to feel jealous, but the narrator refuses to confirm this, since the statement is mitigated by the phrase "I think." Pointing in a similar direction, when Aires recalls Flora's gratitude at his comment to her to the effect that "Every free soul is an empress!" (122), he writes: "The dear little thing thanked me for those five words" (123). His choice of the expression "meiga criatura" already indicates that he is forming an attachment for her. There is a level of the text that allows us to interpret Aires' undisclosed feelings for Flora as latently sexual but as covered with the discreet patina of the paternal: "After a few moments, Ayres began to feel that this girl awoke gentle voices within him, voices that were dead or sleeping or unborn, paternal voices" (134-35). The same notion of paternity occurs later on in the novel, but this time it is shrouded in ambiguity. Aires has been engaged in conversation with Flora and we are suddenly allowed access to his thoughts:

> He had determined to see happy—if marriage was happiness, and her husband happy, notwithstanding the exclusion: the excluded would be consoled. Now whether it was for the love of the twins, or for love of her, is something one cannot really say for certain. Even to raise the corner of the veil, it would be necessary to penetrate his soul even deeper than he himself had gone. There, perhaps, among the ruins of a half-celibate, would be found the pale, late-blooming flower of paternity, or, more properly, of a longing for it. (217)

There are two features of this passage that I wish to draw attention to. The first is that it introduces the notion that the narrator—and in turn the reader—has penetrated deeper into Aires' soul than he had himself. Despite this overturning one of the cardinal rules of the text—the narrator is Aires and therefore cannot be expected to know any more about himself than he already does—it introduces the very interesting dimension into the text that Aires is unaware of the depths of his soul. As suggested above, there are a number of other details in the text that confirm this reading, namely, that Aires is in love with Flora but is in denial about this fact. This double-layeredness of the text is confirmed when we read subsequently that the "flower of paternity" has begun to bloom in his soul. This phrase is ambiguous. It could mean: 1) Aires

has paternal feelings towards Flora (what Aires thinks); or 2) Aires desires to have a child with Flora (what Aires does not realize but what we as readers realize). As we have seen, there are a number of elements within *Esaú e Jacó* that suggest that Machado de Assis' novel can be interpreted as a *roman à clé* portraying the love that Aires has for Flora, even though he is unaware of it.

Flora's unconfessed love for Aires

The second possibility is that Flora too has an unconfessed love for Aires. This is first suggested in chapter XXXI when Aires makes the comment that he finds Flora to be "a mystery." Santos invites him to play cards—typical of the chiaroscuro effects of this novel, it happens to be a game of men—but he declines because he notices the effect his comment has had on Flora: "Ayres was reluctant to accept, so disquieted did Flora appear, with her eyes on him, questioning, curious to know why she was, or would come to be, 'a mystery'" (79). That Flora is fascinated is suggested by the detail that concludes the chapter: "Off they went to the game, while Ayres stayed in the drawing room, in a corner, listening to the ladies, and never once did Flora take her eyes off him" (80). Not taking one's eyes off someone all evening is often an indication of something more than casual interest. If Flora were in love with Aires, this might explain why she dies so unexpectedly; there are indications that the mysterious illness that kills her is unrequited love—such is Aires' surmise in any case, as already mentioned. This indeed would not be an unusual occurrence in a nineteenth-century novel.

The novel as smokescreen

The third possibility is that Aires and Flora are lovers and that the text is a deliberate cover-up of their relationship. This would mean that the text is the result of a cynical scheme designed to fool the unwitting reader. Aires mentions on a number of occasions—some of them already alluded to—that his career as a diplomat taught him to lie. The possibility that this deceit could be specifically associated with Flora is suggested by the comment that rounds off chapter XCVIII. Doctor Aires is attempting to provide a diagnosis of Flora's mysterious illness—she has a fever—when he sees something in her eyes that he finds difficult to define:

> It is a great deal to read in a pair of eyes, but good diplomats retain their talent for understanding everything a silent face says to them, and even the contrary.

> Ayres had been an excellent diplomat, in spite of the Caracas adventure; if it wasn't that this too sharpened his gift for uncovering and for covering up. All diplomacy is in these two related verbs. (242)

There are (at least) two mutually contradictory ways of interpreting this passage. The first, and more obvious, is to see it as referring to Aires' ability to see into the depths of Flora's soul, and to see (we may speculate) that she is in love. This would be to interpret Aires' analysis of the gaze in terms of his skill at "uncovering" the truth. The second less obvious interpretation inclines us to see some trickery in this description, for the text says that diplomats have the gift for not only "uncovering" but also for "covering up" the truth. This passage could thus—though more tendentiously—be interpreted as hinting that Aires is deliberately covering up the truth of Flora's gaze. We might speculate that Aires and Flora are about to become lovers, and that this gaze is a code word for their secret affair.

The possibility that Aires and Flora are engaged in an affair, before her untimely death, is hinted at by a number of events, which lack an objective correlative. The text, for example, does not provide a coherent reason why Flora needs to move away from Rio de Janeiro and move in with Aires' sister, Dona Rita, who lives in Petrópolis. The chapter that immediately follows the "doctor's consultation" provided by Aires is entitled "A título de ares novos" ("On the Pretext of a Change of Air"). If this chapter heading is interpreted literally—and it is of course possible that it should not be interpreted so—it suggests unequivocally that Flora's move to Petrópolis is a pretext. This introduces the possibility that Flora has moved there in order to be able to meet Aires via his sister. Otherwise, why would Aires say the following to her: "'I am going to arrange a fine house for you,' he said as he left" (242)? This hypothesis—and it must remain at the level of speculation—would explain some of the ambiguity that underlies Aires' comments about Paulo and Pedro. Once she has moved to his sister's house, for example, he thought to himself: "Not seeing them, she is forgetting them" (243). Aires' motive for wishing Flora to forget about the twins is not made clear. When Flora shows him a sketch of the twins portrayed as one person, he simply tears it up (246). There is one other detail that suggests that there is more in the events than the narrator wishes to disclose, and this is the embrace that occurs in the empty, unnarrated space situated between the end of chapter IC and the beginning of chapter C. Dona Rita, Flora, and Aires are involved in a dis-

cussion about Dona Rita's decision to cut off her hair and put it in her dead husband's coffin when we read the following:

> Whereupon Dona Rita took the girl's hands and placed them on her own shoulders, and concluded the gesture with an embrace. Everyone had praised her for the unselfishness of the act; this was the first person to find it unique. And so another long embrace, much longer. (244)

On the face of it, of course, Dona Rita and Flora hug each other twice. This appears to be confirmed by the opening three sentences of the following chapter: "The embrace was so long that it took the rest of the chapter. This one begins without it or a third one. Even Ayres' and Flora's handclasp, though lingering, finally ended" (244). Given, however, that there is so much ambiguity hovering over the circumstances of Flora's stay at Dona Rita's residence, it is possible to see the text in another light, as perhaps a coded reference to an embrace between Flora and Aires. Viewed in this light, the sentence, "And so another long embrace, much longer" would be a coded reference to the nascent love between Flora and Aires. This is admittedly a tenuous reading of the text, but the fact that the narrator deliberately draws attention to a veil that has been drawn over the interstice between chapter IC and chapter C ("The embrace was so long that it took the rest of the chapter"), and that he has previously referred to his skill at "covering up" suggests that this is a possible reading of the unnarrated embrace that as readers we are prevented from witnessing.

Coda

In this essay I have suggested that Machado de Assis' *Esaú e Jacó* contains four levels of meaning—the mythic, the allegoric, the ironic, and, also, that it can be interpreted as a *roman à clé*, the latter in three guises, namely, Aires' unconfessed love for Flora, Flora's unconfessed love for Aires, or the novel as coded smokescreen. I do not suggest that the most daring of these interpretations—the novel as coded smokescreen—is the "correct" reading of *Esaú e Jacó* but rather that each of the four levels supports itself by a verisimilar web of allusions. The final mystery of the novel is that these four levels of interpretation—especially the first two versus the last two—are mutually exclusive, leaving the reader in a state of hermeneutic suspension. For the ruminative reader, *Esaú e Jacó* remains undigested.

Notes

[1] See Jospovici 124.

[2] See in particular Gledson's *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis.*

[3] For further discussion, see Sommer, who provides a reading of two nineteenth-century Brazilian novels, *O Guarani* and *Iracema*, in which she interprets the love story as also a drama of Brazilian nationhood (see 138-71). She does not, however, mention Machado de Assis' novels.

[4] An already suggested reference would in the first instance be made to Gledson's *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis*, although this work refers to *Dom Casmurro*, as well as to Gledson's article, "The Last Betrayal of Machado de Assis: *Memorial de Aires*" (121-50), which likewise does not refer to *Esau e Jacó*. Reference would also need to be made to Kinnear (54-65) and Nunes. But this approach would need to be balanced by reference to Maia Neto, as well as to Dixon. To give one example of the divide between these two sets of critics, I quote the following statement by Maia Neto about Gledson's 1985 article: "John Gledson is uneasy about the fact that Aires' point of view is perspectival, relative, and shaped by his subjectivity. Gledson assumes that there must be a plain, objective, absolute truth and reality, so Aires' version of the plot is unreliable and must be dismissed by the intelligent reader. A more subtle, political plot must be 'allegorically' deduced—this is Machado's point of view (Gledson, 'Last Betrayal'). Gledson's interpretation is inappropriate because it is a dogmatic one, whereas the novel is skeptical" (219, n. 2).

[5] The intriguing feature of Machado de Assis' novels is that they seem simultaneously to express a mythic, immanentist worldview while at the same time expressing an ironic vision of those very same principles. Roberto Schwarz has an interesting essay, "Machado de Assis: A Biographical Sketch" that throws some light on what might be called the chiaroscuro effect of Machado's later fiction. Machado de Assis' father was a housepainter, but more important than this denomination was the fact that he was part of the class of *agregados* ("retainers") who, in the special social and economic circumstances of nineteenth-century Brazil, were dependent on the landowner class. As Schwarz has pointed out, while Machado went up the social ladder—he became a government employee at the age of twenty-seven and rose in the ranks to eventually become a senior civil servant—"it is inaccurate to say that Machado was breaking with paternalism" (78). In the first phase of Machado's work, which lasted until he was forty, Machado in effect "practiced the you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours system of paternalism with insuperable elegance" (81). But this changed from 1880 onwards. As Schwarz suggests:

> After looking at Brazilian society from the point of view of the poor dependant, who shines by the discernment with which he expresses his esteem for the established order, developing his talent in order to be recognized and co-opted by the ruling elite, the writer would now look at society from the point of view of someone nicely set up within it. The time had come to relativize the experience he had gathered. Instead of the positive vision, he now adopted the disillusioned one, whose aim is not to criticize, but to vouchsafe the splendor and the calm of an unfettered intelligence; it is as if understanding the mechanism of society were a consolation for the lack of meaning of this very mechanism, and for its horrors. (82-83)

As Schwarz points out, the paradigm shift did not involve simply a progression from conformism to criticism since Machado was still in a sense dependent on the system, even if he saw "its horrors." This may explain why we find in Machado's later fiction, and particularly in *Esaú e Jacó*, an immanentist reading of social events coupled—seemingly in a paradoxical fashion—with an ironic reading of the same events.

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