

The Cannibal Metaphor in Machado de Assis

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Abstract. Humanitism, the philosophical system of the character Quincas Borba, whom Machado de Assis created in order to satirize the Darwinism and Positivism of his time, anticipates certain key themes of the literary vanguards of the twentieth century and the 1928 "Cannibal Manifesto" of Oswald de Andrade.

Two impertinent theories

Anthropophagy in Machado de Assis? The theme—so emblematic of this century, the focus of the 1928 vanguardist "Manifesto Antropófago" ("Cannibal Manifesto") by Oswald de Andrade, and revisited (in 1998) in expositions of the recent XXIV Bienal of São Paulo and the Museum of the Republic in Rio de Janeiro ("Anthropophagy: Rereadings")—also received special attention in the work of Machado de Assis. Humanitism, the philosophical system invented by the "shipwreck of existence," unforeseen beggar, philosopher, and heir Quincas Borba—in *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, published in William L. Grossman's translation as *Epitaph of a Small Winner*—details a cannibal theory comparable to the future vanguard manifesto. After a meal, between the cheese and the coffee, philosophically sucking on a chicken wing, Quincas reveals the principles of Humanitism, an idea so radically reductionist that everything is explained by the "consummation of things," a kind of endo-cannibalism on a universal scale. Each man being a reduction of a universal principle, Humanitism continually consumes its own viscera. The sacrifice of one part does not mean death, but only an equilibrium that

assures the survival of others. Quincas explains to his successive disciples, the two “ignoramuses” Brás Cubas and Rubião—the latter in *Quincas Borba*, published in Clotilde Wilson’s translation as *Philosopher or Dog?*—this supreme system that solves the profound struggles and the psychological and ethical sufferings of societies, in a discourse that joins an easy Panglossian optimism to the need for national regeneration:

The practical effects of my system are revolutionary: it purifies the human spirit, eliminates sorrow, insures happiness, and glorifies our nation. I call it Humanitism, after *Humanitas*, the basic principle behind all phenomena [...] and if there is anything that can make me forget the bitterness of life it is the satisfaction of having finally captured truth and happiness. I have them in my hands, these two fugitives; after so many centuries of struggle, inquiry, discovery, systems of thought, and failures, here they are at last in man’s hands. (*Epitaph* 144)

In this overarching satire of grand and providentialist scientific theories such as Darwinian natural selection and Positivist order, so influential in Brazilian sociopolitical thought in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Machado further anticipates certain key themes of the literary vanguards, above all Futurism—primitivism, hunger, war—everything that represents an appeal to aggression through transcendence.

Availing themselves of the techniques of distancing, Machado and Oswald create playful and comic contexts in which to present their “contrary” theories, whether in the paradigm of a patriotic speech chosen by the character-author Quincas or in the aphoristic formulations of the manifesto. A space is opened where local otherness, exaggeration, and the inversion of values are incorporated into “imported” philosophical currents from Europe—whether in the grain of madness that Brás Cubas notices in Quincas Borba, or in the manifesto’s revisionism of colonial civilization en masse in a cannibal banquet. Humanitism, although more discreet—the veiled, elegant style is also found in Fernando Pessoa’s cannibal story, “A Very Original Dinner”—anticipates both the impertinent tone as well as the actual concepts of the vanguardist manifesto, such that Machado’s and Oswald’s cannibals are eating off the same plate. The manifesto continues some of the concepts found in the novels while, in the spirit of Machado’s defunct author, Brás Cubas, the novels “repeat” some of the celebrated phrases from the manifesto, above all those that associate happiness with primitivism.

Majorie Kilgour's notable study *From Communion to Cannibalism* demonstrates that anthropophagy has been a constant theme throughout Western literature. The unexpected affinity between the periods at the turn of the century and the historical vanguards can be explained by a common source, the primitivist germ active in currents of sociopolitical and "scientific" Darwinism that circulated toward the end of the nineteenth century in the theories opposing nature to culture of Comte and Spenser. For Machado, the new, so-called scientific concepts—vitalism, instinct, natural selection—would have to be evaluated in the light of the destructive impact they were having on culture, which the author registered in notorious cases of cruelty and eroticism in the social (de)constructions present in his novels.

The vanguard movements, in turn, were always nearer than one thought to their sources in end-of-the-century aestheticism, according to Jorge de Sena,¹ leading them to exaggerate their shocking attacks and virulent language in order to hide their association with a past that would reveal their "ideological duplicity" as merely one more radical expression of the crisis of bourgeois societies. The profound social ill ease observed at the root of the cannibal metaphor by Luiz Costa Lima reflects a general preoccupation with the implications and consequences of the supposed natural laws: in this case, the struggle for survival and the mentality of primitive man in a state of nature.² If one finds in Humanitism and the "Manifesto" delightful satires of determinism and post-Darwinian social stoicism, constructed rhetorically by their authors with fine, ironic comedy, there is at the same time in the two authors an implicit recognition of the new presence and even the utility of the savage condition, accepted as one of the constants of our social and philosophical evolution. In cannibal "madness" there is a serious meditation about Western values. A comparative reading of Humanitas/anthropophagy will help to evaluate the contribution of cannibal thought to theories of cultural philosophy, as a criticism of scientific rationalism, from the origins of a kind of new primitivism in end-of-the-century post-Darwinism up to its radical appearance in the first phase of vanguardist modernity.

Eternal hunger

The cannibalism of Humanitism, although it does not use the term, appears in its primitivism and in the concepts of hunger, struggle, and body associated with a state of nature. Humans are thus reduced to the basest primitivism: observing the fight between two dogs over a simple bone, Quincas thinks

about another more beautiful spectacle, a fight between men and dogs over the little miserable food left in the world. The main strain of his philosophy is hunger, the simple physical condition that for Quincas is the only law of life and the principle of survival. Since everything makes up a part of the universal body of *Humanitas*, an absolute substance, hunger always ends in an act of unification instead of ingestion: "Only cannibalism unites us," as Oswald de Andrade wrote in the "Cannibal Manifesto." Humanitism is a cannibal with Kosmic appetites: through hunger, he even consumes himself, makes himself manifest, and unites his primitive body, from where everything was born and to which everything belongs.

Remembering his grandmother who was run over by a carriage, Quincas cogitates:

Humanity was hungry. If, instead of my grandmother, it had been a rat or a dog, it is true that my grandmother would not have died, but it would still have been true that Humanity needed to eat. (*Philosopher* 10)

Both Machado and Oswald take advantage of the anthropomorphism of this jump in logic, which extrapolates from a primitive attribute the terms of a new universal philosophy of culture. The satire is redoubled in the passage from an individual to a generic context: the abstract hunger of Humanitism ended up devouring the concrete grandmother of the philosopher. There is no death, explains Quincas, denying any significance to the individual and considering the absorption of his grandmother as necessary for the survival of the larger body of Humanitism. In the imperative "*Humanitas* needs to eat," one may read another vector of the formulation of Oswald's "Cannibal Manifesto"'s "only law of the world."³

Primitive and unrepressed, hunger follows an ethic of evolutionary struggle, now the principal function of human existence, causing wars that cleanse society of the weakest. As an illustration, Quincas turns to mythical primitivism, inventing the fable of two hungry tribes that fight over a field of potatoes; there are enough to feed only one of the tribes and permit it to cross the mountain and save itself.

Holding survival as the greatest value, Quincas inverts the moral, declaring that only war preserves life. Supported by another cannibalistic metaphor, that of the organic decomposition of nature, he alleges that war is also hygienic, eliminating rot, corruption, and social infection. Quincas concludes that the most pro-

pitious path to the happiness of the human species lies in war-like paganism: “Happiness is the Proof by Nines,” another formula of the “Cannibal Manifesto.”

The struggle for supremacy reaches philosophic systems: Quincas affirms that Humanitism is “destined to bring down the other systems.” The competition between philosophies is the target of another broad satire, in this case being close to madness, in the imaginary dialogue that Quincas holds with Pascal. The question of the primacy of hunger carries the former to begin a debate with the French thinker in order to prove the philosophical superiority of Humanitism. Based on cannibalism, he affirms that hunger is more meaningful than death, because the consciousness of death lasts little and ends once and for all, while hunger prolongs consciousness of the human condition and promotes understanding of the universe:

[Pascal] says, “Were the Universe to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which has slain him, because he knows that he dies ... The Universe knows nothing of this. ...” [...] “Knows that he dies” is a profound phrase, but I believe that mine is still more profound: “knows he is hungry.” [...] With all due modesty, I believe that Pascal’s thought is inferior to mine, but I do not deny that it deserves to be called great nor that he himself was a great man. (194-95)

Cannibalism is thus established satirically at the root of existential philosophy.

The joyous formula

On composing a cannibal satire, Machado, like Oswald, must have delighted in the force of his humor and intellect, in the echoes of his high-minded sayings and the power of his out-of-place expressions. His theory has the same “indolent grace” as his narrator/author, Quincas Borba, characterized by Brás Cubas for his impertinence. Brás had become as well acquainted with the “fresh house, extremely fresh,” where Quincas slept in the open air, as with hearing his philosophical seriousness: “The devil with it!” he concluded. “Some problems are not worth five minutes’ thought” (*Epitaph* 200). Rubião, without meaning it, deprecates the philosopher’s great work:

— I know, I know that you have a certain philosophy...

— A certain philosophy! How disdainfully you say that! Go on, repeat it. I want to hear it again. A certain philosophy! (*Philosopher* 8)

It seems as if one hears the censure of Machado's realism in the plain words of the doctor who treats Quincas Borba: "but philosophy is one thing, and actual dying is another. Good-day" (*Philosopher* 7).

In the light of Humanitism, one can more fully appreciate the playful, farcical, and incongruent humor of the manifesto, not as social theory and much less as socio-cultural recipe, but as pure bravado. Machado had already commented on the restless style of this kind of humor in Brás Cubas' observation about the letter that he had received from Quincas Borba: "This pulling and pushing between different mental attitudes put me off balance" (*Epitaph* 163). Machado's own irony goes further. Rubião, after Quincas Borba's death, suddenly remembered the deceased philosopher's most famous phrase:

To the victor, the potatoes!

He had completely forgotten both the formula and the allegory. Now, suddenly, as if the syllables had lingered in the air, untouched, waiting for someone who could understand them and put them together, he combined them into the old formula, and uttered it as emphatically as on the day he had accepted it as the true law of life. He did not recall the anecdote fully, but the phrase conveyed a nebulous sense of struggle and victory. (*Philosopher* 267)

The concision of the old high-sounding phrase, now out of context, is more lasting than its philosophy. Everything leads us to suppose that Machado would have recognized an homage to his potatoes in the indigenous formula of Oswald's "Cannibal Manifesto," in the well-known cannibal re-reading of Shakespeare, so often cited by the master: "Tupy or not Tupy, that is the question."

The consummation of things

The theory and the manifesto are both based on the application of the cannibal metaphor to psychology and to social philosophy, at the service of imagined utopian goals meant to rejuvenate, preserve, or diversify civilization. Besides reacting against post-Darwinian scientism, both authors formulate a new staging of the devouring god, not only in reference to indigenous primitive gods but also to those of the Orientalist biblical tradition. In the mythical context, both theories echo Cronus, devourer of his own children, whose image is registered in the vanguard by the grotesque and frightening painting by Siqueiros. Cannibal hunger, as Kilgour notes, is an inverted metaphor for

communion, being a subconscious and transforming reference to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation.

In spite of the points of comparison involving concepts and expression between Humanitism and the vanguard manifesto, anthropophagy in Machado evidently has a very different sense and arrives at diverse conclusions about nationalism and literature than Oswald. Machado uses cannibal discourse in order to satirize it, bringing out the melancholy and pessimism of his narrators, Brás Cubas and Rubião. He differs from the manifesto on numerous crucial points.

First, with Humanitism there are no borders, or exterior; there is only interior. Machado avoids the problem of the other that complicates anthropophagy, recently studied by Luciana Stegagno Picchio. Second, in Humanitism there is no possibility of political revolution; difference is limited to a correction in the natural and measured evolution of things. Third, the intellectual-writer of the turn of the century is fascinated by the savage, but does not idealize incorporation of the values of the tribe into cultured civilization, where the consumption of the other remains occult. The hero-savage has not yet been converted into modernism's savage hero. In both cases, theory and manifesto, the cannibal metaphor serves as a pretext for another greater purpose: in Machado's case, the satire of systematic philosophies; in the manifesto, the assumed utopian values of indigenous life that point out the path towards a telluric nationalism: divination, magic, instinct, rhythm, and happiness.

How far, then, does Machado's anthropophagy go? His high comedy combines a human search for wisdom with satire of the aberrations of authoritarianism and egoism, producing a state of transcendent madness comparable to the true humanism of the Cervantine hero, the wise madman Don Quixote, a book quoted by Quincas Borba. Humanitism, in the style of a libretto of *opera buffa*, dignifies through comedy. Even Quincas ends up believing in human nobility: "that delicate and noble sentiment, the pride of servitude—absolute proof that man, even when he shines shoes, can be sublime" (*Epitaph* 206). The sublime, as in the manifesto, is Humanitism's "litmus test." Who was, after all, finally eaten in Machado's banquet, to give a "certain spice to life?" (*Epitaph* 204). It seems that it was you, reader.

Notes

¹ See Sena, "O Vanguardismo."

² See Lima.

³ The contradiction between individualism and species that appears forcefully in Machado's satire has a possible origin in Swift. In the fourth voyage, impressed by the information about the existence of a race of immortals, the Struldbruggs, Gulliver begins to envision humanity as a garden of tulips in which the importance of any single flower is lost in the constant renovation of the species with each spring.

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