

How is the Second Life of Brás Cubas Different from His First One?

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Abstract. This paper takes advantage of some aspects of Niklas Luhmann's concept of a second-order observer to present some cognitive gains with reference to the materiality of composing *posthumous memoirs*, the intentional control of action and writing, moral judgment, the book as metaphor, and the omniscient narrator in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Did Cubas learn from his first life? Does Cubas control as a narrator what he could not control as a protagonist? At this juncture, this paper is a preliminary contribution to addressing the following relevant question: What are the consequences of a second-order observer approach to the critical reading of Machado de Assis?

For (and in part from) Anna Klobucka

1.

In the opening paragraph of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, the narrator takes stock of his first life from the vantage point of his second existence, a minimalist life on the other side of death. "A Second Life" is also the title of a short story by Machado de Assis (more on which below); for now, I will restrict this designation to Brás Cubas' explicit and implicit actions following his death in August 1869 and read them in the precise terms in which they are presented in the novel. In a broader sense, I resort to the allegory of a second life in order to describe the novel's protagonist as the figure of a second-order observer, which makes it possible to interpret the observer observing himself in his role as the participant in his first life.¹ The activity of Brás Cubas in his second life is largely limited to the writing of his *Posthumous Memoirs*, in which discursive games related to his philosophy of composition play an

important role. One such game may be observed in the last paragraph of the novel's last chapter ("On Negatives" ["Das Negativas"]), which, notwithstanding the radical promise of its title, ends up revealing some positive aspects:

This last chapter is all about negatives. I didn't attain the fame of the poultice, I wasn't minister, I wasn't caliph, I didn't get to know marriage. The truth is that alongside these lacks the good fortune of not having to earn my bread by the sweat of my brow did befall me. Furthermore, I didn't suffer the death of Dona Plácida or the semidementia of Quincas Borba. Putting one and another thing together, any person will probably imagine that there was neither a lack nor a surfeit and, consequently, that I went off squared with life. And he imagines wrong. 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. (Ch. 160)²

Brás Cubas' list of failures includes the poultice he invented, which in the film version of the novel (*Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*), directed by André Klotzel, is curiously transformed into a successful invention that traverses successive decades of the twentieth century presenting an alternative future of sorts for our hero's original fiasco. Although the film leaves open the possibility that this counter-narrative might be produced by the delirious mind of the protagonist himself, this cinematographic conversion of a stated failure into concrete images of success points toward a recognition that some of the presumably negative aspects of Brás Cubas' life-balance are clearly viewed in a positive perspective. In effect, there is no correlation in the text between the "negatives" it enumerates and the narrator's resulting unhappiness: for example, his not having to work for a living is referred to as "good fortune." Similarly, the passage describing his own death in the first chapter of the novel is nothing less than a gentle paean to the Freudian death drive.

In engaging with his task of accounting for what I have called, respectively, his first and his second life, Cubas employs the vocabulary of arithmetic ("Putting one thing and another together" ["somadas umas coisas e outras"]) and finance ("balance" ["saldo"]). As is habitual throughout the novel, the readers—represented by the figure of "any person"—are hectored by the narrator with denunciations of their mistakes: they probably think Brás Cubas departed "squared with life" ("quite com a vida"), when in truth he left it with a "small balance" ("pequeno saldo"). The term "quite" in Portuguese is used precisely to

signify “free from debt,” while “saldo” is the difference between the sums of debit and credit. Since the narrator was and remained a wealthy man until the end of his life, we would certainly expect his life’s financial balance to be positive.

Interestingly, however, we are explicitly informed by Brás Cubas that the balance, as analyzed by him, is negative and that it consists in his not having children. The relationship he establishes between not having children and not transmitting “the legacy of our misery” points to biological procreation as a means of hereditary transmission, in this case, a failed transmission. On the contrary, “the legacy of our misery” seems to have been quite successfully transmitted in his *Posthumous Memoirs*, which ends with this very expression: the entire novel may be read as an ambitious act of propagating “the legacy of our misery,” which no poultice is capable of curing. In this sense, the narrator’s negative conclusion, according to which he has not transmitted this legacy to anyone, is evidence of his blindness since it is inscribed in a cultural object, a book, that will have at least five readers (in the very modest estimation of his prefatory remarks addressed “To the Reader”).³ Indeed, the author Brás Cubas states that he hopes “to entice sympathetic opinion” (“angariar as simpatias da opinião”) and therefore reveals that he fully expects to convey to his readers the legacy of his written misery. In other words, the book *Posthumous Memoirs* does exactly the opposite of what its narrator conclusively states as having done. For this subtle reason among others, the narrator Brás Cubas merits little confidence on our part.⁴

The last paragraph of chapter 98 contributes to the collection of textual moments in which Brás Cubas says one thing and his book very openly does its exact opposite:

I had an urge to suppress this chapter. This is a slippery slope. But, after all, I’m writing my memoirs and not yours, my peaceable reader. Alongside the charming maiden I seemed to be taken with a double and indefinable feeling. [...] No, I am most certainly going to suppress this chapter.

The Portuguese original of the last sentence of this passage suggests a performative: “Não; decididamente suprimo este capítulo.” Brás Cubas’ explicitly stated intentions and his discursive actions take separate paths, shattering whatever confidence in him we may have remaining. In a parallel situation at the psychological level, Brás Cubas appears unable to control the move from intention to action in an episode that is symptomatic of his relationship with Marcela:

Marcela kept herself seated, tapping her teeth with her nails, cold as a piece of marble. I had an urge to strangle her, humiliate her at least, make her crawl at my feet. Perhaps I would have, but my actions took the opposite turn: It was me who threw myself at her feet, contrite and supplicant. (Ch. 17)

This inability to exercise intentional control over one's actions merits a closer analysis. In the novel's last paragraph in chapter 160, in chapter 98, which Cubas claims to suppress but does not, as well as in the comic and revealing episode involving Marcela, declared intentions are exchanged for their opposites. In other words, in *Posthumous Memoirs* the loss of intentional control is subject to a particular kind of conversion dependent on contraries, which can be exercised both at the level of action and with regard to the philosophy of composition.

2.

As already noted above, I have purloined the expression "second life" from the title of a story by Machado de Assis, included in the volume *Histórias sem data* (1884), which stages the scene of the transmigration of a soul, relying on a theory that goes back at least to the Pythagorean philosophical tradition. The fictional nature of the reincarnation experience is suggested by the sceptical attitude that greets the telling of his story by José Maria, the man who claims to be living his second life. Monsignor Caldas tells a black servant that a "madman" ("um sujeito doido") has told him a story that included an account of his own death:

— As I was saying, I died on March 20, 1860, at 5:43 in the morning. I was then sixty-eight years old. My soul flew through space until it lost sight of the earth, leaving the moon, sun, and stars far below. It finally penetrated an empty space which was only dimly illuminated. I continued to rise and began to see a tiny dot shining brightly, very far off in the distance. The point grew larger and became a sun. [...] I kept rising. At one point I heard some delightful music coming from a distance of about 40,000 leagues, and when I was 5,000 leagues away from it, a throng of souls descended and carried me away on a litter of ether and feathers. Shortly thereafter, I entered the new sun, which is the planet of the virtuous souls of the earth. [...] Once inside, I found out that my arrival marked the completion of another group of one thousand souls—that was the reason for the extraordinary celebrations they gave in my honor, which lasted two centuries or, by our measurements, forty-eight hours. (*The Devil's Church* 52-3)

As always happens when we compare one thing to another in detail, we realize that what transpires in “A Second Life” is quite different from the story told by Brás Cubas.⁵ In “A Second Life,” José Maria died and was born for a second time in the world as we know it: “I was reborn on January 5, 1861.” His second life began about eight months after his death in March of 1860. The more restricted second life of Brás Cubas is confined to his activity as a zombie-like writer with the consciousness of an adult, which suggests some form of continuity between the before and the after of his death. At the same time, his writings as a dead man do not depart greatly from certain narrative patterns established by such literary precursors of his art as Laurence Sterne or Almeida Garrett—writing in the course of their first lives—and in particular from their treatment of the figure of the reader as a character and individual. In his second life, Brás Cubas may do without sex or money, both of which he enjoyed in abundance during his first existence, but the style of his prose is not radically different from that cultivated by members of a genealogical lineage of authors who wrote on this side of death.⁶ For this reason also, the description of the condition of Brás Cubas the narrator as a kind of life remains correct, although it is certainly a very particular kind of life. One of the advantages of his specific condition is to have embodied accidentally the paradigmatic Romantic model of literary creation, William Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility.”⁷

Let us juxtapose the scene of Brás Cubas’ death in *Posthumous Memoirs* with the scene of death in “A Second Life.” What happens in the former?

Now I want to die peacefully, methodically, listening to the ladies sobbing, the men talking softly, the rain drumming on the caladium leaves of my suburban home, and the strident sound of a knife a grinder is sharpening outside a harness-maker’s door. I swear to you that the orchestra of death was not at all as sad as it might have seemed. From a certain point on it even got to be delightful. Life was thrashing about in my chest with the surging of an ocean wave. My consciousness was evaporating. I was descending into physical and moral immobility and my body was turning into a plant, a stone, mud, nothing at all. (Ch. 1)

Brás Cubas’ will to die (“I want to die peacefully”) is accompanied by various radical changes in his body, moral judgment, and consciousness. Let us take them one by one. His body is disappearing, moving from the animal kingdom through the vegetal and mineral domains to “nothing at all.” This

a relevant point in what regards the practical aspects of Brás Cubas' second life, knowing as we do that he is going to write his *Posthumous Memoirs*. We do not know exactly when he made the decision to produce his work, but nothing leads us to believe that it happened in the course of his first life. Does the dead author still have hands to write with or does he belong to a world in which it is possible to write without using hands? Does not writing a book require some form of corporeal presence on the part of the author? Does he read what he writes in his second life? Cubas' second life is quite minimal: his body is not available anymore and he has no social life. He is a writer who cannot see (ch. 71); therefore, he is unable to edit what he writes. Cubas' *blindness* would explain why it is the zombie author's strategy to produce further chapters instead of going back to correct or suppress earlier ones, as he repeatedly announces he would like to do (e.g., ch. 72 and ch. 98).

As for the suspension of morality at the moment of death, the question is not exactly a new one for our protagonist: there is a passage referring to Cubas' first life in which moral judgment is described as a "moral and mental torpor" ("torpor moral e mental") (ch. 137). A paradigmatic case of the suspension of moral judgment is that of the narrator's lover Virgília and her extraordinarily persistent moral blindness. Not even the death of her husband, Lobo Neves, brings on any moral insight with regard to her recurrent betrayals of the deceased. The pathos of her sincere weeping at the funeral is but a defense mechanism staving off moral judgment (ch. 150), as explained in the narrative of her lover Brás Cubas, also dead and an ironic writer.⁸

As for Brás Cubas' consciousness at the time of his death, it brings forth some issues related to the construction of his character.⁹ We are told that his consciousness has evaporated as he died. It is not believable, however, that it should disappear forever, given that in his second life Brás Cubas as a narrator will require a measure of consciousness to write a novel as sophisticated as his *Posthumous Memoirs*, even if we concede that it is possible to conceive of a world in which one can write a book without using one's hands. An unconscious Cubas the writer is not at all plausible, even within the fictional and critical parameters of the non-realist reality he inhabits after dying. It is necessary to claim, therefore, that Brás Cubas' loss of consciousness at the precise moment of his death is temporary. The bridge between his experience of death, described in so extraordinarily expressive terms ("I seemed to feel my own sudden decomposition" [ch. 7]) as a collapse of consciousness, and his existence as an exuberantly inventive narrator manipulating ambivalences

and ironies, this passage from his being-in-life to his being-in-death, is not explicitly narrated in *Posthumous Memoirs*.

But Machado's novel does not entirely renounce representing the unrepresentable: the gap between the disappearance of Cubas the character and the appearance of Cubas the narrator. In surveying the middle ground between life and death, chapter 54, "The Grandfather Clock," is a crucial reference. One night, Cubas, lying in bed, is unable to sleep and engages in an exercise of imagination stimulated by the ticking of a clock:

Usually when I couldn't sleep, the chiming of the grandfather clock would upset me very much. The mournful tick-tock, slow and dry, seemed to say with every note that I was having an instant less of life. Then I would picture an old devil sitting between two sacks, that of life and that of death, taking out the coins of life and giving them to death, counting them like this:

"Another less..."

"Another less..."

"Another less..."

"Another less..."

The strangest thing is that if the clock stopped I would wind it up so it wouldn't stop ticking and I could count all of my lost instants. There are inventions that are transformed or come to an end; institutions themselves die. A clock is definitive and perpetual.

The "old devil" ("velho diabo") recalls Cubas' childhood nickname, "Devil Child" ("menino diabo" [ch. 11]), a devil now all grown-up and living in a different time. In effect, there are several episodes in the novel in which the protagonist dispenses money to others. He is highly imprudent in giving money to Marcela (ch. 17), but quite circumspect in all of the other situations in which he needs to disburse it: a coin for the muleteer who saved his life (ch. 21), a dirty bank note for Quincas Borba (ch. 54), five "contos" for Dona Plácida (ch. 70). In *Posthumous Memoirs*, people and money are viewed as interchangeable. The most striking case is that of Virgília and the gold coin; the title of the respective chapter 51, "Mine" ("É minha!"), plays precisely upon the ambiguity of its double reference to the woman and the coin. Money is even comparable to the corpses of family members. As Cubas tells us, leaving registered in writing his irreverent lapse, followed immediately by its no less irreverent correction, "My uncle the canon died during the

interval along with two cousins. I didn't feel shocked. I took them to the cemetery as one takes money to the bank. What am I saying? As one takes letters to the post office" (ch. 116). One of the most decisive aspects of the value of money is its ability to obliterate its own history. The money that is the corpses of Brás Cubas' uncle and cousins has this very quality, defined by him as a "Vespasian's coin: it doesn't smell of its origins" (ch. 152). The advantage of money resides in the possibility of abstracting it from the realms of sensitivity and morality; in this sense, it is the equivalent of an imagined world without morals. In the above quote from chapter 54, the representation of money is the figure of what exists between life and death. The visualization of what is the most difficult narrative task in *Posthumous Memoirs* (the transformation of Cubas' status as an observer from a character into a narrator) is performed through abstract entities such as money and time. The management of this automatic and completely asymmetric commerce is controlled neither by the "old devil" nor by Brás Cubas. Although they are "inventions" like clocks and watches, the imagining Cubas and the imagined "old devil" are puppets that serve the machine of time and the *decapitalization* of the first life. The economy of the progressive passage from life to death takes away all of the passage's intimacy and pathos in the irrevocable ruthlessness of its one-way monetary flux.

The brief chapter 124, "As an Interlude," offers some complementary information about the life-to-death trajectory with reference to Eulália Damasceno de Brito: "What is there between life and death? A short bridge. [...] Jumping from a portrait to an epitaph can be a real and common act. The reader, however, is only taking refuge in the book to escape life." One in a long chain of episodes of manipulation of the reader extending throughout *Posthumous Memoirs*, this remark, like the others, is certainly not a compliment. In this passage, a very precise equivalence links the bridge to the book. The book makes it possible to place both the reader and the author on the side of the second life; the reader because in the act of reading he or she temporarily escapes from life, and the author because he is unappealably dead. Like money, the book appears therefore as an intermediate object between life and death and functions as a meeting point in the space beyond life; this is why death is a necessary presence in the small community of characters assembled in *Posthumous Memoirs*. The metaphor of the bridge, however, is not clarified adequately, be it in this chapter or in the rest of the book. The only other bridge appears in chapter 22, in a passage that allows us to answer

the question “Where does Brás Cubas go after he dies?” A good answer to this question can be a valuable contribution to the analysis of the novel’s narrator as a second-order observer. Thinking back to the fate of the deceased in “A Second Life,” we might imagine that Cubas’ soul would have flown through space far beyond the lunar circle. Let us read, however:

Well, I left all that [Venice], innkeeper, doge, Bridge of Sighs, gondolas, poetry of the lord, ladies of the Rialto, I left it all and took off like a shot in the direction of Rio de Janeiro.

I came ... But no, let’s not lengthen this chapter. Sometimes I forget myself when I’m writing and the pen just goes along eating up paper to my great harm, because I’m an author.

Brás Cubas’ second life does not take place beyond the lunar circle: the author is writing his *Posthumous Memoirs* in Rio de Janeiro. What identifies his place is his use of the verb “to come” (“vir”): if Cubas were in a place other than Rio, he would use the verb “to go” (“ir”). In Portuguese, the distinction between the verbs “vir” and “ir” is absolutely unequivocal and Cubas’ employment of “vir” locates him firmly in Rio. In the following chapter 23, the use of the same verb is reinforced by repetition: “I came. I don’t deny that when I caught sight of my native city I had a new sensation.” Since it can be thus proven that Brás Cubas writes in Rio de Janeiro, it is reasonable to infer that his second life, however minimalist, also takes place in the same city. Supplemental information is offered here with regard to the material conditions of his writing. The author writes using a “pena”—in Portuguese “pena” has the double meaning of “pen” and “sorrow”—and he is writing on paper. In an observation relevant to the notion of the loss of intentional control of the author’s actions, Cubas bemoans the autonomy of his “pena” in the act of writing. As we have seen above and again now, the author reiterates this notion at different levels, including that of narrative composition proper. The book *Posthumous Memoirs* is not necessarily a product of its author’s specifically articulated will to write.

3.

The conclusion that the resuscitated corpse of Brás Cubas is writing in Rio is incontrovertible. The question that follows seeks to know where, precisely, the author can be found in the city. In which neighborhood is he writing his book?

You [reader] love direct and continuous narration, a regular and fluid style, and this book and my style are like drunkards, they stagger left and right, they walk and stop, mumble, yell, cackle, shake their fists at the sky, stumble, and fall ... And they do fall! Miserable leaves of my cypress of death, you shall fall like any others, beautiful and brilliant as you are. And, if I had eyes, I would shed a nostalgic tear for you. This is the great advantage of death, which if it leaves no mouth with which to laugh, neither does it leave eyes with which to weep ... You shall fall. (Ch. 71)

At the very beginning of his narrative, in chapter 1, Brás Cubas offers a hint as to his location when he defines his condition as a writer: "I'm not exactly a writer who is dead but a dead man who is a writer, for whom the grave was a second cradle." In the midst of the extraordinary proliferation of "second times" in *Posthumous Memoirs*, "a second cradle" signals that the author's second life begins in the grave or, let us say, at the cemetery. Chapter 71 confirms this supposition. There, Brás Cubas compares his style of writing to "drunkards." The drunkards fall, as the leaves of the cypress tree, and it is precisely the verb "to fall" ("cair") that establishes the linkage between the "drunkards" and the "leaves of my cypress of death" ("folhas misérrimas do meu cipreste"). In the context of the Mediterranean tradition, inherited by Brazilian culture, cypresses are trees associated with cemeteries and with mourning; furthermore, we are told that "the book is tedious, it has the smell of the grave about it" (ch. 71).¹⁰ These are all good reasons to assume that Brás Cubas is writing his book at a cemetery in Rio de Janeiro, although, given that cypresses are evergreen trees, the author's reiterated prediction ("you shall fall like any others [...]. You shall fall.") points to the physical laws of another world in which cypress leaves do indeed fall.

Abel Barros Baptista offers an imaginative interpretation of this very chapter, in which he posits that the description of the cypress tree functions as a metaphor of the book (97). His analysis, although it presents substantial metaphoric gains, misses out on some metonymic potential. The charade that requires answering the question "What is the cypress tree?" is resolutely solved with a good argument. What is lost in this brilliant interpretation is the analysis of the contiguity of the hybrid environment surrounding Brás Cubas between his first and his second lives, in the midst of the crisis related to the writing of his memoirs that emerges in chapters 71 and 72. What are the means and the trajectory of the transfer of the author's literary production from his scanty second life lacking in pathos (with no "eyes with which

to weep” and “no mouth with which to laugh”) and the life of the book’s reception outside of the cemetery?¹¹ Situated between a kind of “philosophy of misery” (ch. 59) and the “philosophy of old pages” (ch. 116), the cypress that will grow old and lose its leaves demonstrates that the narrator is not a pure eternal spirit, inscribing the writing of Brás Cubas in a concrete space and time.¹² The cypress is a transitional object, which, in rhetorical terms, is best read as an allegory. The falling of its leaves, like the fall of the black butterfly in chapter 31, which fell but did not die, are told as brief stories. One of the questions that can be legitimately asked about the second life of Brás Cubas has to do with his use of time. In the novel’s first chapters, we are informed that one of the advantages of his new condition is his great disgust with eternity, from which he distracts himself by writing his book: “this book is written with apathy, with the apathy of a man now freed of the brevity of the century” (ch. 4). However, in chapter 116 the narrator tells us, referring to the time it takes to compose his memoirs, that “no, I don’t want to waste any time.” In other words, time-sensitive issues are not absent from the second life. The passage of time allows for growing old, for a second chance. Thus, “The Philosophy of Old Pages” consists precisely in the possibility of reading the pages of old letters for a second time, with the benefit of “seeing yourself from a distance, in the shadows.” This is a perfect description of the second-order observer engaged in the task of self-observation in life. The situation of the narrator of *Posthumous Memoirs* is mirrored by the case of the elderly reader and the letters from his youth. The “miserable leaves of my cypress of death” (which in Portuguese are just “folhas misérrimas do meu cipreste”) are part of a story that grows old and can even be slated for erasure, as the following chapter makes clear: “Maybe I’ll leave out the previous chapter” (ch. 72). Interpretive exercises aimed at solving this charade of *the role of the chapter* can only stress, invariably, an analysis of temporality and of the material constraints that prevent the narrator from returning to and editing his writing.

The temptation to discern in *Posthumous Memoirs* metaphors in which one of the terms is “the book” has seduced many of the best critics of Machado de Assis’ masterpiece. I have already noted that for Abel Barros Baptista *the cypress is the book*. For Enylton Sá Rego, “the ‘Poultice Brás Cubas’ really dies with its inventor, but is reborn beyond the grave in the form of his book” (176-7). This metaphorical equivalence said to exist between the poultice and the book situates *Posthumous Memoirs* in the sphere of therapeutic literature; however, if Cubas’ degree of success with his novel is to be the same as with his poul-

tice, we are about to witness a splendid tale of a double failure. At the same time, Sá Rego's insight rightly stresses a repetition of the same function in two distinct environments. Good literature replaces the poultice, but demands a high price: the end of the author's first life. In literature, once is not enough; it requires a second time. The therapeutic treatment to which the first life is subjected arrives late, when the protagonist has already been transformed into a narrator. According to Juracy Assmann Saraiva, chapter 53 demonstrates that Cubas' life and his book are interchangeable (71). But his identification of the cold flesh of his corpse (in the novel's opening dedication) with the material being of his book allows also for an extension of this proposition, according to which Cubas' corpse is the book, its critics are the worms that gnaw at him, and so forth. The crucial role of the book in *Posthumous Memoirs* is sustained by a wealth of interpretive metaphors in whose realm it dwells.

For my part, I wish to add a counter-intuitive note to this opulent assembly of metaphors. The miserable cypress tree has at least one element in common with the successive appearances in the novel of its miserable reader (ch. 71): it grows old. This process cannot be controlled. The only refuge allowed by the passage of time is the privileged space of a second time: "Believe me, remembering is the least evil. No one should trust present happiness" (ch. 6). The benefits of literature, according to Cubas, reside in the second-time experience: the book-bridge, the book-corpse, the book-poultice, and the book-cypress all possess this specific common denominator. In *Posthumous Memoirs*, the book carries the benefits made possible by the figure of repetition—the second time, the second life—and, somewhat redundantly, this is what the novel says and does over and over, at various levels.¹³ Juracy Assmann Saraiva comments on the "incisive repetition of the verb 'to come'" in Brás Cubas' mechanical writing in chapter 26 (74). The houseboy Prudêncio enacts for the second time the scene of dominance that victimized him (ch. 68). The narrator, claiming there is no point in telling but nevertheless telling, writes chapter 145, "A Simple Repetition." Enylton Sá Rego observes that the return of the epic in *Posthumous Memoirs* occurs through its ironic rewriting as comedy (165). Language, action, narrative construction, and literary genre: all are organized according to the principle of a second time.

4.

One of the probably unsolvable mysteries of *Posthumous Memoirs* is to know how and when the narrator was able to read Lucian, Sterne, and Garrett in

order to write his book. We do not have any sort of Cubas' literary *Bildungsroman* embedded in the story of his first life. And yet, signals of the narrator's learned readings appear already in his introductory note "To the Reader," with its mention of authors such as Stendhal and Xavier de Maistre. In fact, the education of Cubas the writer must have been particularly thorough, given that he is arguably the most accomplished novelist writing in Portuguese. The evidence of his memoir, however, reveals that the genius that produces the work is not supported by an account of an equivalent literary education. Roberto Schwarz believes that Cubas' character can be explained by his "miseducation" (86-9). There are few signs in his first life that may be taken to anticipate his future identity as a writer. In chapter 64, the protagonist is shown to be writing—we do not know what—as a remedy for sleeplessness: "I wandered through the streets and retired at nine o'clock. Unable to sleep, I set about reading and writing. At eleven o'clock I was sorry that I hadn't gone to the theater." Writing leads to regret, as also happens in chapter 71. On the night he did not go to the theater, Cubas' writing activity could not have occupied more than two hours; we are not told what it was, but we do know it happened because he had nothing better to do. We also know that in his first life Cubas produced both political and literary writings, since Lobo Neves praises the former ("excellent, well thought out and well written") and says he does not understand the latter (ch. 50). The most plausible explanation for the genius of the narrator of *Posthumous Memoirs* is, therefore, that it results from the extraordinary conditions in which he finds himself in his second life.

In order to describe more comprehensively the scanty evidence of Brás Cubas' material life and mental states in the course of his second life, let us scrutinize briefly some passages of his work, taking as our point of departure the following supposition. It would appear that the process of composing *Posthumous Memoirs* must have been of an idealist nature, since the author does not write with his first-life body, but either—to be gruesome—with what remains of his corpse or, alternatively, with his spirit. In either case, he has the use of neither his eyes nor his mouth. These physical limitations, so to speak, have their advantages (they permit one to avoid pathos) and disadvantages (they seem to restrict the author's ability to edit his writing, as if the blind Cubas were able to write but not to read or rewrite what he has written). The compensation for the physically challenged writer may thus reside in his augmented intellectual or moral powers, making him a mentally challenging author.

In chapter 24, we are informed by Brás Cubas that his second life comes much closer to realizing the disinterested nature of aesthetic experience, as described by Immanuel Kant, than his first life did.¹⁴ Money, for example, plays a crucial role in the development of his first life's narrative: let us recall the episodes of Marcela, of the muleteer, of the disagreement about the price of a house. In Cubas' transition from life to death (ch. 160 and ch. 44), representations of money make it possible to tell by analogy what is the most difficult narrative task in the entire work: not what happens in Cubas' first or second life, but his conversion from the former to the latter. Nevertheless, money does not exist and does not fulfill any function in Cubas' existence as an author; although he treats his readers and critics badly—as, at another level, he used to treat his houseboy Prudêncio—he cannot buy them in the same way that money allowed him to buy people in his first life. There are no fellow dead men to buy in Cubas' second life, nor money to buy them with: such value as there is resides entirely in words. According to the theory espoused by Cubas' father, the most reliable value consists in the opinion of others (ch. 28). Therefore, and notwithstanding what the author himself explicitly states, his only interest in his second life lies with living people, particularly his readers and critics. Whether or not they exist, Cubas' deceased companions are completely ignored by him.

“Perhaps I'm startling the reader with the frankness with which I'm exposing and emphasizing my mediocrity. Be aware that frankness is the prime virtue of a dead man” (ch. 24). In view of Cubas' declaration, we can conclude that the difference between the narrator and the protagonist is above all of the moral order. Briefly, his first life is contaminated by dishonesty and cynicism, while his second is cleansed of those negative moral qualities. It remains to be considered, in a more thorough way, whether this self-proclaimed moral elevation of the narrator is not contradicted by his own philosophy of composition, whose outcome is his *Posthumous Memoirs*, or by his deployment of ambiguity, or by the relationships he establishes with his readers and critics.¹⁵ The obvious suspicion is that the value of narrative resides precisely beyond the virtue of frankness. Let us displace Cubas' new attitude from the realm of morality to that of narrative epistemology. To reveal and emphasize the mediocrity of a protagonist who is also the narrator is a complex narrative task that produces a double bind for the author. On the one hand, if the mediocre protagonist is given a voice consistent with his or her mediocrity, the resulting work will certainly also be mediocre. On the other

hand, if the protagonist does not speak in a mediocre voice, the author is compromising the objective to reveal his or her mediocre character. The solution to this problem in *Posthumous Memoirs* lies in the use of free indirect discourse: the voice of the mediocre protagonist (who, let us recall, lacks intentional control of his actions) is mediated by the voice of the talented narrator (supposedly frank, disinterested, and consequent in his transitions from intention to action). It is in this mediation that value resides; thus, Cubas' second life is a moral and epistemological correction of his first one. Aesthetics occupies the place of money.

We know little about the process of publication of the pages written by Cubas. What is certain is that time passes between the writing of the novel and the possible moment of its being read by some special reader, such as Cubas' lover Virgília:

You who read me, if you're still alive when these pages come to life—you who read me, beloved Virgília, have you noticed the difference between the language of today and the one I first used when I saw you? Believe me, it was just as sincere then as now. Death didn't make me sour, or unjust.

"But," you're probably saying, "how can you discern the truth of those times like that and express it after so many years?"

Ah! So indiscreet! Ah! So ignorant! But it's precisely that which has made us lords of the earth; it's that power of restoring the past to touch the instability of our impressions and the vanity of our affections. (Ch. 27)

I stop this quote immediately before the very famous lines, symbolically explored in many excellent interpretations, in which Machado writes that man is "a thinking erratum." The erratum principle is not exactly compatible with the conversation Cubas imagines having with Virgília and therefore cannot be legitimately considered as its theoretical corollary. This is not a dialogue between the dead. The narrator is dead, but, to the best of our knowledge, Virgília is alive. This is, then, another good opportunity to analyze more closely the relationship between Cubas' two lives. With regard to his use of language, Virgília's love obliterates the difference between the masquerade of his first life and the sincerity of the second. It is so if we read the passage on Cubas' own terms, but, strictly speaking, they are all we have before us; there is nothing else. His "language of today" is, with regard to his "frankness," the same language of his first life. On this point, all of us readers are

like Virgília and the doubt she expresses about the inevitable construction of the past irritates Cubas so much that he ends up contradicting himself. The indiscretion of which he accuses Virgília is not compatible with his generous offer of frankness that presides over the writing of his memoirs. And this is precisely the moment in which the highly optimistic vision of shared knowledge dispensed from the vantage point of the second life is transformed into a question of power. In the end, Brás Cubas' principal concern is how to become a "lord of the earth" through "that power of restoring the past." If we accept that he composes his memoirs at a cemetery in Rio de Janeiro, it becomes even easier to comprehend that his interests do not belong at all to the world beyond the lunar circle, but are aimed at gaining power over the dwellers of the earth who are still living out their first lives. Cubas' truth is an instrument of power: his use of language is the currency by whose means he interferes in earthly affairs. What he presents as a disinterested aesthetic intervention in the form of sincere memoirs serves, in the end, the interests of his power that are realized through language, the currency of this exchange between the dead and the living. And the exchange is certainly not equitable: the narrator retains his unnegotiated and non-contractual "power of restoring the past" and even of making other characters voice their objections, to which he then responds when and as it is convenient for him.

Juracy Assmann Saraiva argues in favor of a reading according to which Cubas the writer of *Posthumous Memoirs*, freed from the constraints of his first life, is an omniscient narrator (50). If so, this would constitute a highly significant difference between the first and the second Cubas. The cognitive advantage of the narrator would consist in his knowledge of both the point of departure and the point of arrival of his story. Cubas is not a narrator who knows all and sees all, as Assmann Saraiva is well aware. One of his chief limitations as an omniscient narrator is his having access only to his own past thoughts and feelings and not to those of other characters. Another shortcoming of Cubas' omniscience results from the impossibility to reproduce the past faithfully. The opening of chapter 47 is a good example of his difficulty with believable representation: "Marcela, Sabina, Virgília ... here I am putting together all the contrasts as if those names and people were only stages of my inner affections." It is useful, in this context, to bring up Cubas' discovery of a letter written by Virgília, in which she asks him to meet her at night in her garden; after some hesitation, Cubas decides to go (ch. 111). The letter, however, is old, taken out of a drawer by Dona Plácida. Strictly speaking, the pro-

tagonist finds Virgília's note for the second time; he does not, however, recall the first time he has read it. This is a case of time recollection that, in specific passages in Cubas' first life (ch. 111), takes the form of forgetting his own history and, in his second (ch. 47), collapses the times of both lives.

Jorge de Sena also comes down in favor of omniscience as a benefit enjoyed by the dead narrator:

Brás Cubas narrates his life from the point of view of a deceased man, that is, as a man who is privy to an all-encompassing, complete, and omniscient perspective, but also, due to his being dead, to a perspective that is theoretically detached from life: a profound satire on what is fundamentally impossible, since objectivity such as his is only possible in "posthumous memoirs" that, in turn, can only be an aesthetic fiction (and, what is more, many pages in the book denounce ironically that even in death such a stance would be impossible). (331)

Similarly to Juracy Assmann Saraiva, Jorge de Sena declares Brás Cubas to be an omniscient narrator at the same time as he stipulates his limitations. Sena's parenthetical observation that "many pages" in *Posthumous Memoirs* precisely question the narrator's omniscient status ends up undermining his principal thesis. The "all-encompassing, complete, and omniscient perspective" is an interpretation of good critics such as Sena; it is not an explicit promise of the narrator of *Posthumous Memoirs*, who expresses his regrets (ch. 71) and ironizes his complex form of "recapitulative knowledge" (Saraiva 54). In these circumstances, to take away from Brás Cubas his presumable status as an omniscient narrator is a way of enabling one's prosaic labor of detailed analysis of the novel to continue on its course. An idealization of the narrator's cognitive powers obscures the empirical recognition that one path to dissipating somewhat the mystery of his death lies in calling it his second life, filled with such unexceptional states as sadness, fatigue, and melancholy (ch. 116). Cubas, the second-order observer, needs to be removed from his death and from the invisibility that protects his actions in the exercise of hetero-observation and, especially, self-observation.

Notes

¹ The notion of second-order observer was developed by Niklas Luhmann. This article's project is not to "apply" Luhmann to Machado de Assis, which would be tantamount to short-changing critical labor, but to read carefully some passages of *The Posthumous Memoirs* that occasionally evoke an association with Luhmann's central insight.

² Unless otherwise indicated, "Ch." refers always to a specific chapter of Gregory Rabassa's translation of Machado de Assis' *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*.

³ This denunciation of the narrator's blindness presupposes the existence of a third-order observer: the protagonist Brás Cubas is, most of the time, a first-order observer; the narrator is a second-order observer; the critical readings of his narrative have to be placed at a third level of observation. Therefore, this paper adds one more level of observation and focuses on analyzing what the protagonist, the narrator, and other critics *cannot see*.

⁴ Roberto Schwarz stresses that in Brás Cubas "we have a narrator who is deliberately impertinent and lacking in credibility" (9, original emphasis).

⁵ The best analysis of the important activity of comparing is offered by Putnam 264-78.

⁶ One of the most useful genealogies of authors used to situate Machado de Assis critically may be found in Rego.

⁷ William Wordsworth wrote: "I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind" (26).

⁸ In chapter 63, "Let's Run Away," morality disappears in an imaginary Nietzschean world ("um mundo nosso") "in which there wasn't any Lobo Neves or any marriage or any morality or any other bond that impeded the expansion of our will" (my italics).

⁹ In Portuguese, "consciência" has the double meaning of "conscience" and "consciousness."

¹⁰ There are not many cypresses in Machado de Assis' works. In his 1874 novel *A Mão e a Luva*, a cypress tree appears as a term of comparison: "Estêvão murmurou algumas palavras, a que tentou dar um ar de gracejo, mas que eram fúnebres como um cipreste" (Assis, *Obra Completa* (1:198).

¹¹ The disappointing reception of *Posthumous Memoirs* at the time of the novel's publication in 1881 is a problem staged in the book itself, in the relationship between the narrator and the readers. Hélio Seixas Guimarães comments on this relationship and on the novel's reception by the press (175-93).

¹² Maia Neto states that the cognitive gain of Brás' second life is the philosophical perspective. "His final assessment of his relationship with Virgília well exemplifies the distance that lies between the naive life-view he had at the time he met her and the philosophical one exhibited by the deceased writer" (84).

¹³ Antonio Cândido suggests, in his highly influential essay "Esquema de Machado de Assis," that in the author's other works further extraordinary *fictions of the second time* may be found, namely in the short stories "O Espelho" and "O Alienista" (27-30).

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant states clearly in the "Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement": "The delight which determines the judgement of taste is independent of all interest" (42).

¹⁵ Machado de Assis is an heir of the strategy of "entrapment," developed in eighteenth-century English drama, which reappears in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and in Almeida Garrett's *Travels in My Homeland*. The traps he sets for the reader are surely the opposite of the attitude of sincerity proclaimed by the narrator of *Posthumous Memoirs*.

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