

# "Rosebud" and the Holy Grail: A Hypothesis for Re-Reading Machado de Assis' Short Stories<sup>1</sup>

João Cezar de Castro Rocha

**Abstract.** This essay argues that the analysis of Machado de Assis' novels published after *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* should include a comparative reading of the short stories, *crônicas*, and literary criticism he produced prior to 1880.

## A Hypothesis

A powerful scene from Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* provides one of the most trenchant critiques of the idea of interpretation as the art of (literally) unveiling the truth—be it the exact definition of a character or the ultimate reading of a text. In a subtle movement the camera slowly backs away from the actors, revealing an excessive quantity of pieces collected by the millionaire, and the screen becomes an image of a useless museum that exists only for its own sake. Perhaps the key to Charles Foster Kane can be found in a detailed analysis of the innumerable pieces of art and many rare objects; perhaps the enigma resides in the myriad artifacts accumulated over the years of his life. Who knows, maybe the accumulation of information allows for the unlocking of the mystery that gives life to the narrative: the meaning of the word "Rosebud," spoken by the tycoon at the moment of his death. However, in a final movement, the camera becomes the viewer's accomplice, letting her approach the fireplace where supposedly worthless objects are being destroyed. Among the objects consumed by the flames is a souvenir of Kane's childhood: a simple toy sled that would appear to hold no importance had it not appeared at the outset of the film when the young Kane is taken from his parents in order to receive an education suitable to someone whose mother

has recently acquired a fortune. Amid the flames that devour the sled, a predictable name stands out: "Rosebud." Like the purloined letter of Edgar Allen Poe's story, the solution to the problem is right before the spectator's eyes—if only briefly, of course.

Nonetheless, the film's final scene goes a step further, doing away with the possibility of a mechanical interpretation. If the reporter who is responsible for the documentary on the eccentric millionaire had sought the correct "clues," then the meaning of the word "Rosebud" would have been obvious, and thus the connecting thread of Charles Foster Kane's life would have been apparent. It is like the demanding literary critic who is determined to find the hidden phrase—that secret word that activates the hermeneutic circle in whose center all questions are answered, even those not yet proposed. On the contrary, in the final scene the reporter recognizes the mirage that has propelled him throughout the entire film: no life is ever fully explained or, to put it more precisely, explicable. Even if the reporter had discovered the meaning of "Rosebud," his reconstruction of Kane's life would only be partial; after all, a total reconstruction could never exist, not even for the millionaire himself.

In this context, it is useful to recall what Kafka pondered in his diary: in the year 2000, we will be reading the literature of the year 2000. In other words, the gaze is always anachronistic; therefore it imposes contemporary concerns onto objects from any era, even if the era is that of "posterity." Such an unlikely reversal of the chronological time takes place in Machado de Assis' short story "Uma visita de Alcibíades," which tells of the unexpected encounter between the "Judge X ..."—a nineteenth-century Brazilian reader of Greek classics—and the famed orator Alcibiades. In the course of the story, the orator dies "for the second time" as a result of being unable to free himself from the values of his day upon being presented with the fashion of the nineteenth century ("Uma visita" 240). When he is confronted with values radically different from his Athenian beliefs, he simply collapses. At the same time, the story's narrator, despite his authentic "devotion to all things Greek" (232), limits himself to defending the fashion of his day upon meeting the illustrious Athenian. Instead of engaging in a lively dialogue with one of his intellectual heroes, the narrator condemns the orator's intolerance: "Even yourself, if you get used to seeing us, you will end up liking us" (239).<sup>2</sup> It seems as if the dialogue between different eras comes across as a dialogue of talkative yet unhearing people. Thus, a less optimistic reading of Kafka's observation would stress the denial of the hermeneutic principle itself

because everything becomes a pretext for the obsessions of the interpreter. Like a narcissistic Midas, everything the interpreter touches becomes a mirror of his own unchanging face; it is as if the possibility of a reading is denied from the moment of opening the book. In this failed alchemy—paradoxical because it is always successful—there is, however, an alternative: to become anachronistic in relation to one's own beliefs; to recognize the fallacy in searching for one definitive answer, just like the reporter from Welles' film. After all, anachronism is not merely a solipsistic feature. It is also the basis for any human action; no historical era was (or can be) contemporary to itself because self-consciousness usually requires the distance between an action and its comprehension. Such a distance is greatly enhanced by narrative framing, which implies that the course of an action has already been concluded.

There is nothing new in pointing out that the dilemma presented by Welles proposed a relentless critique of both the life of William Randolph Hearst (and his well-known affair with the actress Marion Davies) and of the traditional structure of the Hollywood narrative, in which the "happy end" always ties together the film's narrative strands. In this way, any object that "casually" appears in a scene should fit like a piece of a puzzle whose solution never disappoints the viewer. Therefore, perhaps Welles' paradox is of particular interest to scholars of Machado de Assis. Actually, if we adopt the "free-form" of Machado's corrosive humor,<sup>3</sup> we can compare the emblematic scene from *Citizen Kane* with a recurring idea of Machadian criticism. Let us follow this reasoning: with the publication of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* in 1880 and *Papéis Avulsos*, two years later, Machado inaugurated an unprecedented transformation in Brazilian literature. The point is to understand the internal motivation that led to such a radical experiment—an experiment that has subsequently been regarded as very successful. How can this be explained? Perhaps by amassing the pieces of evidence and reiterating endlessly the same conclusions. Machadian criticism had dedicated itself, body and soul, to the proposal of hypotheses that are all the more disquieting due to their diverse and at times contradictory nature. However, they all deliberately adopt the same point of departure: with the publication of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* in 1880 and *Papéis Avulsos*, two years later, Machado inaugurated an unprecedented transformation in Brazilian literature. As John Gledson humorously suggests, it is "the Holy Grail of Machadian studies—the explanation for the 'mid-life crisis' and for the emerging satirical tone and experimentalism of *Brás Cubas*" ("Apresentação" 20).

This eternal return invites the following question: to what extent is this not a *petitio principii*? According to the Aristotelian definition, this is a logical problem that takes place whenever an argument that must be proven by an argumentative process is placed instead as its point of departure. In the case in question, the *petitio principii* is supposedly justified by the procedure motivating the investigation. In fact, the concentration of Machadian criticism around the novels favors the above-mentioned eternal return, since among the first four and last five titles, a new horizon is certainly unveiled. However, this groundbreaking moment was often achieved through the amalgamation of procedures that had been previously attempted; of particular note is the diversity of types of narrator, which was tested to the point of exhaustion in the short stories and chronicles. It is true, though, that some constants can be identified, beginning with the 1872 publication of *Ressurreição* (*Resurrection*), Machado's first novel, and even in his first short stories of the 1850s and his first *crônicas* ("chronicles") of the 1860s. Certain themes are consistently present, such as the condition of the dependent person (*agregado*); the pathology of jealousy; character types, especially strong and intriguing female characters; metaphorical sequences about the field of vision as a form of reflection on the act of interpretation; and certain textual procedures, above all the insightful use of the act of reading as an act of authorship (that is, as a primary form of writing with the eyes before ink touches paper). All in all, it cannot be denied that with the publication of *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, Machado de Assis entered a new stage as an author. The very presence of consistent traits serves as a counterpoint, because if there are undeniably common elements, their treatment imposes a difference that stands out.<sup>4</sup>

Such an assumption has allowed Machadian critics to apply the innovations in the plan of the novels to the plan of the short stories, thereby establishing the above-mentioned parallel between *Posthumous Memoirs* and *Papéis Avulsos*. This is not an unproblematic critical decision. Some of the short stories in the collection were published prior to the last novel of the so-called first phase, *Iaiá Garcia*, which was released in 1878. "A chinela turca" dates from 1875; "Uma visita de Alcibíades," from 1876; and "Na arca—Três capítulos inéditos do *Gênesis*," dates from 1878. Meanwhile, "Miss Dollar," which was published in 1870 for the collection *Contos Fluminenses* already had an extremely rich thematization of the role of the reader. The text is a fertile discussion of the act of reading and its several forms; this explains the continual and provocative use of adjectives such as "superficial reader" ("Miss

Dollar” 126) and even “serious reader” (131),<sup>5</sup> which would later be consecrated in the note “To the reader” of *The Posthumous Memoirs*.<sup>6</sup> This theme was already present in the 1865 short story “Confissões de uma viúva moça” (“Confessions of a Young Widow”), published in the *Jornal das Famílias*. The narrator believes she can judge the potential threat of a seducer by classifying his intellectual habits: “This man [...] is no more than a bad reader of realist novels” (“Confissões” 107). However, as the young widow ultimately allows herself to be seduced, the reader of the short story concludes that the narrator is an even less competent reader of romantic novels than the seducer is. Moreover, the story frames the situation by placing it within the context of the act of reading serial publications. The narrator of the story clarifies: “My letters will be sent every eight days, so that the narrative will create the effect of a weekly journal for you” (95). Instead of a conventional pattern of reading, which focuses on the “moralistic” tone of the text,<sup>7</sup> a new reading should explore this framing, privileging the structure of the dialogue between the narrator and the reader.

Nonetheless, let me be the first to acknowledge that “The Psychiatrist,” “Education of a Stuffed Shirt,” and “The Looking Glass,” among other of the more celebrated of Machado’s stories, would appear beginning in 1881, a fact that helps to demonstrate the parallel between *Posthumous Memoirs* and *Papéis Avulsos*.

In any case, this complexity brings a hypothesis to light: could we refresh the reading of the novels of the so-called second phase through a re-reading of the short stories, chronicles, and criticism produced prior to *Posthumous Memoirs*? Hélio de Seixas Guimarães has made an illuminating association between the various genres of Machado’s literary production: “I believe it is possible to draw out relations between Machado’s view of the public, as expressed in his criticism, correspondence, and, to a certain extent, in his chronicles and his expression of the relation between narrator and reader in his novels” (27). In this context it is useful to recall Silviano Santiago’s keen observation: “It is about time that Machado de Assis’ works began to be understood as a coherently organized whole by perceiving that certain primary and principal structures are disarticulated and rearticulated in the form of different, more complex, and more sophisticated structures, in accordance with the chronological order of his texts” (64).

Accordingly, it is the time for a re-reading of a fundamental yet unfortunately little-discussed book: José Aderaldo Castello’s *Realidade e ilusão em*



*Machado de Assis*.<sup>8</sup> This book should occupy a privileged place in the future of Machadian studies, above all for those who are interested in understanding the whole of Machado's work. Castello identifies the pattern of dissemination of elements that would converge in the novels of Machado's second phase. These elements first show up in Machado's criticism and chronicles,<sup>9</sup> as well as in his short stories and his correspondence.<sup>10</sup> In his analysis of *Helena*, Castello employs a precise formula that may prove useful in guiding a renewal of Machadian studies: "Once again, the seeds of the works of maturity are spread out" (109).<sup>11</sup>

With this suggestion in mind, I am led to think of the short story, "Três tesouros perdidos," published in *A Marmota* on 5 January 1858, and never reprinted by the author. The text is a brief, conventional tale, which begins with a tense situation that obscures an obvious misunderstanding that the reader soon perceives: the deceived husband's wife runs away with his best friend, and although the husband is the last to know, he should have been the first to suspect; after all, everything happens under his very eyes. Finally, when he finds out the truth, he simply goes insane. However, this tension is released in a comical resolution, making this short story almost a chronicle. The first paragraph presents a sentence that a more mature Machado would certainly have changed: "One afternoon, at four o'clock, Mr. X... returned to his home to have dinner. The hunger he felt caused him not to notice the carriage that was stopped at his door" (63; my emphasis).

In this sentence, the use of the possessive pronoun establishes the "undisputed" relationship; in both cases, Mr. X...s house is being referred to, although another possibility would be difficult for the reader to imagine. It is an interesting question to ponder how Machado progressively abandoned the use of these pronouns in order to increase the sentence's potential for ambiguity. The specification of "at four o'clock" and "to have dinner" fulfills the same objective, revealing a nascent author—like an ambitious student who wants to graduate with honors. An especially inspired critical mind is not necessary to imagine the Machadian rewriting of the sentence: "One afternoon, Mr. X... returned home. The hunger he felt caused him not to notice the carriage stopped at the door."<sup>12</sup> However, in this short story there are already themes that will frequently reappear in Machado's prose, including in the story I will analyze in the second section of this essay.

In this early short story, nonetheless, the intersection of insanity and lucidity is outlined by the presence of a "raving lunatic" who becomes a "rea-

soned madman”—and this paradoxical constellation is one of the keys to the Machadian understanding of the world. This plotline achieves its full potential in the author's most successful novella, “The Psychiatrist.” The same figure of the deceived husband who becomes insane upon learning of his wife's infidelity returns in “O Machete,” a much better constructed tale from 1878 that was published in *Jornal das Famílias* and also never reprinted.

At the same time, the theme of jealousy is only lightly traced. Later it will not only return in the “posthumous doubts”<sup>13</sup> of Félix—a character in Machado's first novel—but also reveal the full potential of Bento Santiago's boundless imagination, who admits: “I came to be jealous of everything and everyone. A neighbor, a waltz partner, any man, young or old, filled me with terror or mistrust” (*Dom Casmurro* 196). I am not suggesting that “Três Tesouros Perdidos” is more than a sketch; however, it is crucial to note that even in a rather uninspired sketch like this certain themes and structures are already present.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, we must ask why we should not explore José Aderaldo Castello's suggestion and proceed in a deductive fashion to investigate the possibility of a cross-fertilization between different genres? The model for such an investigation can be found in José Raimundo de Maia Neto's *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. While he does not entirely abandon the traditional distinction between two phases in Machado's work, Maia Neto considers his work to be a lengthy and coherent exploration of the very same question, in this case the limits of skepticism, which increasingly came to dominate the content and the form of the narrative in Machado's work. For this reason, Maia Neto begins his study with an analysis of Machado's short stories in order to expose the recurring structures and themes that return in more complex forms in his novels, above all in those published after 1880.

Why should we not extend this methodological procedure further? After all, the hypothesis of a possible cross-fertilization between literary genres would allow us to bring together questions that, on their own, have already been proposed by other researchers. In this way, instead of putting studies of the novels (and especially those of the second phase) on a pedestal, we can perceive thematic units and structural procedures that are present across the many genres practiced by Machado. Is it not true that Machado as a chronicler, long before the “snap of the finger”—given by Brás Cubas to the reader who is not pleased with his work<sup>15</sup>—used irreverence as a tool for dealing with the harried reader of the daily newspapers? How could it be that the nearly eighty short stories published before 1880 did not serve as a testing

ground for ideas and procedures that would later be recaptured by the "deceased author"? In fact, in the history of literature there is no lack of consecrated names who have traveled similar paths. As José Aderaldo Castello writes, "Within the constraints that initially limit the career of a short story writer [*contista*] (and thus the writer in general), Machado de Assis proceeds to conduct his research and experimentation with language, structure, situations and character sketches" (75). Paul Dixon, in a similar vein, says that Machado's short stories can be read as an acute supplement to his critical essays.<sup>16</sup> Naturally, his criticism incorporates some reflection on his understanding of prose. There can be no doubt that Machado's criticism determines his work in all genres, insofar as in it we find his peculiar way of examining the world and understanding the relations between men. However, I am referring to the possibility of rereading Machado's criticism in order to see if his criteria for evaluating other authors might bring to the surface the ideas and obsessions that carved out his place in the family of authors who know they are above all readers. In his appreciation of an author, how much weight is given to the rejection of the romantic notion of originality? How much does he value the act of reading as a creative gesture? What weight does he give to the role of the self-reflexive narrator? Could it be that in his criticism such criteria were already clearly defined as part of the Machadian hermeneutic that he would later incorporate into his own fiction? To cite José Aderaldo Castello once again, "Thus, it is surprising to find in Machado de Assis' criticism some fundamental observations for the interpretation of his work: reflections on literary styles, on fiction, on language, among so many others" (29).<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps these questions allow us to formulate new hypotheses for the rereading of Machado de Assis' short stories. After all, "the truth is that, despite his popularity, Machado de Assis' short stories are not taken as seriously as they deserve to be" (Gledson, "Os contos" 149).<sup>18</sup> I do not wish to be misunderstood: it is not a matter of denying the obvious difference between the pre-1880 texts and *Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*. I am not trying to reinvent the wheel! Of course, I agree with Roberto Schwarz that, "The discontinuity between the *Posthumous Memoirs* and the somewhat colorless fiction of Machado's first phase is undeniable, unless we wish to ignore the facts of quality, which are after all the very reason for the existence of literary criticism. However, there is also a strict continuity, which is, moreover, difficult to establish" (*Master* 149). For this very reason, if it is possible to verify the relevance of the characteristic procedures and themes in the author's second



phase in his pre-*Posthumous Memoirs* production, then a new question emerges. Instead of simply investigating the *cause* of the 1880 rupture, we can speculate on the reason why various elements that already coexisted in Machado's texts *take so long to surface in the composite Brás Cubas*. If I do not intend to reinvent the wheel, I do want to ask why it did not spin before. Put another way, if the hypothesis of cross-pollination between literary genres shows itself to be productive, perhaps we could go further with José Aderaldo Castello's reflections and use it as the base from which to redirect our study of Machado. This is, after all, the driving force behind literary criticism.

### "Frei Simão"

As this essay represents the first step in the development of this hypothesis, I will limit myself to one short story, although I will make brief mention of other stories and novels. Indeed, the hypothesis requires the transition from one genre to another. The axis of my analysis will be a reading of "Frei Simão," which was first published in 1864 in the *Jornal das Famílias* and later republished in the debut collection of *Contos Fluminenses*, in 1870.

This short story contains many of the elements that would become the trademarks of Machado's second phase. In a metaphor borrowed from the plastic arts, it is a study later recast in more complex forms. This sketch is contained, as would be expected, within a rather unexciting plot: Simão is a young romantic and idealist who falls in love with his cousin, an orphan who has been adopted by the family. The beautiful and virtuous orphan is named Helena, the same name that the heroine of Machado's third novel, released twelve years later, will have. The two characters also share a position of social inferiority: both are dependents who are unable to ascend socially through marriage. In Machado's texts, marriage is not exactly a problem-free solution, as the ups and downs of *Capitu* so eloquently demonstrate, showing that the price paid for social ascension can turn out to be too high. Perhaps the eternal mistrust of the narrator of *Dom Casmurro* begins with the suspicion of the girl's true feelings—is it love for Bentinho or attachment to Bento Santiago's inheritance?<sup>19</sup> Guiomar, a character in *A Mão e a Luva*, is wiser, as she ingeniously escapes her fated marriage to the nephew of her protector; had it not been so, she would remain forever in the family's circle never evading the shadow of her former condition as a dependent. Estela, a character in *Iaiá Garcia*, is even prouder, as she passes up a true love precisely because of the memory of past social inferiority. In other words, Machado's first novels

present the study of the limits of the condition of the dependent, yet this had already been predicted in the author's first short stories.<sup>20</sup> A perverse version of this motif takes place in the story "Mariana," in which a slave's love for her master is treated by her owner with such apparently involuntary cruelty and in such a natural way that even today's reader is shocked. While this story deserves an essay of its own, here I want to make a brief digression in order to point out some elements that require more careful analysis.

On the one hand, there is the narrator's treatment of the unsuccessful heroine of the story: "a house servant," "a little mulatta gentile." On the other, there are references to sexual abuse as a characteristic of patriarchal societies that are anything but subtle. These references are implicit in the malicious comments of João Luís, the uncle of Coutinho, both the owner of Mariana and the narrator of the slave's misfortunes.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the naturalness that Coutinho displays in reifying the "little mulatta" Mariana in this story announces the coming cynicism of narration in the following works of the future "deceased author" of *Brás Cubas*. It begins with the daily torture the young Brás imposes on the boy Prudêncio.<sup>22</sup> Similar violence is used by the narrator Casmurro in referring ostensibly to José Dias as a "dependent," although this cruelty is shadowed by Dias' status as a free man in a society where slavery was the economic system. Let us look at the description of José Dias at the novel's start: "He had lived with us as a dependent for many years" [*Era nosso agregado desde muitos anos*] (*Dom Casmurro* 11; my emphasis). The initially harmless use of the possessive pronoun takes on increasing cruelty, as throughout the novel the narrator seems to immensely enjoy this type of treatment: "the dependent;" "*my* dependent." The formula is far from innocent since it reduces a man to his social function. Consider the uniform of the second lieutenant Jacobina in "The Looking Glass," a story collected in *Papéis Avulsos*. Quite literally accustomed to being recognized by his commission, Jacobina finds himself alone, or more accurately, surrounded by slaves—possibly the most severe form of solitude in a slave-based society. Thus he begins to doubt his own (social) existence; after all, without being acknowledged in his official position, how could Jacobina be sure of his own identity? In Machado's incisive formula: "the second lieutenant eliminated the man" ("O espelho" 405). Mariana tries to refuse to wear the outfit that is imposed on her, but as "such feelings contrasted with the fatality of her social condition" ("Mariana" 159), she, like the second lieutenant, is unable to solve her problems simply by donning the proper uniform.

In “Mariana,” Machado also articulates two levels of narration in an experiment that he would repeat in later texts. The story begins and ends with the voice of Macedo; however, the tale is truly the story of Mariana, as recalled by Coutinho. It must be pointed out, however, that, after the description of Mariana’s suicide at the story’s close, Macedo retakes the narrative voice with an indifference that cannot but be read as fairly aggressive.<sup>23</sup> Machado employs the same trick of a narrative that seems to drift between omnipresence and a subjective perspective in “The Looking Glass” and, in a far more complex way, in *Esau e Jacó*. In fact, he also does this, albeit in a significantly different way, in “Frei Simão.”

Predictably, Simão is deceived by his parents, who want to keep him away from dangerous relations with a dependent, even though she is not only his cousin but also a model of virtue. In this short story, virtue is not rewarded. In despair after hearing false news of his cousin’s death in a letter from his father, the young man, a Jansenist lost in the tropics, abandons social life to convert to a religious order. However, the eccentric behavior and misanthropy of the new monk catches the attention of friars and novices alike: is he completely devoted to divine service and destined to be a saint, or does he merely hide his insanity under the guise of religious zeal? The story then becomes more interesting, which is to say, it becomes Machadian.

As mentioned above, two levels of narration are suggested, as one of them can only be imagined by the reader and is the very “source” of the story. After his burial, Frei Simão’s peers discover that he had written “some fragments of a memoir” (66). Wishing to understand the monk’s withdrawn attitude, the other friars decide against respecting their deceased brother’s privacy and opt to read his writing—turning him into an involuntary (deceased) author. Impious curiosity becomes the narrative’s engine through a curious voyeurism that drives the very reading of novels. Finally, the story offered to the reader is the result of a selection of the “author of this narrative that disregards that part of the Memoir that is without importance” (68). This is not only the well-known act of an editor who, in a supposedly uninterested way, discovers and distributes a manuscript. Naturally, as such, this is a standard device for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. However, I am stressing the fact that, if the late Machado will explicitly give pride of place to the act of reading in the very writing of his works, the early Machado was already concerned with the topic. After all, in Machado’s short story the reader only knows Frei Simão’s text via a reconstruction mediated by the narrator’s reading. In other words, the reader must

be satisfied with the memory the narrator has of his reading of the "Memoir written by Frei Simão Águeda, the Benedictine Friar" (67). Since the monk never completed his memoir, why not give them a posthumous form via the eyes and hands of a *reader*? First and foremost, the author figures as a reader<sup>24</sup>—a decisive factor in the definition of Machado's style.

Let us now turn to the nature of Frei Simão's memoir. In the words of the narrator-reader: "They were, for the most part, incomplete fragments, truncated and insufficient notes; but in their entirety, it can be gathered that Frei Simão was really crazy for a certain time" (67). Once more, the boundaries between coherence and insanity can be imperceptibly crisscrossed. At the same time, the incomplete nature of the story directs the reader to the prose of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*,<sup>25</sup> suggesting a structural connection between the late prose and the early short stories. This association between the early and late Machado can also be brought about by another comment on Frei Simão's manuscript. The context of the quotation is important: in his visit with his parents, the name "Helena" is strategically ignored. However, in carrying out his evangelical duties, the monk visits a small rural town. Although the reader easily anticipates the outcome, Frei Simão to his surprise sees "a couple, husband and wife, enter the church: he was a respected landowner, [...] and she was a lady, respected for her virtue but dominated by an implacable melancholy" (74). Obviously, the lady is Helena. When she recognizes the monk she screams and faints. The sermon is momentarily interrupted. The monk then recognizes Helena and realizes the misconception under which he has been laboring, as well as his parents' role in keeping him away from his cousin. The narrator continues: "In the friar's manuscript there is *a series of ellipses in eight lines*. He himself did not know what happened" (74; my emphasis). From this point on, the monk's delirium only serves to worsen things. It is worth recalling the typographical devices—which provides an extra layer of meaning—that will reappear in *Posthumous Memoirs* but were already present in 1864. However, these devices are only suggested to the reader (*a series of ellipses in eight lines*) and do not make it to the page's surface, so to speak. In the same way, the "diagnosis" of Frei Simão's insanity is achieved linguistically. The introverted and withdrawn behavior of Frei Simão, in the special sense of Bentinho, might suggest misanthropy, but it does not authoritatively determine insanity. However, the porous nature of his memoir and his verbal delirium in the sermon become the basis of an accusation: Frei Simão has gone crazy. Here is the passage in its entirety:

In the friar's manuscript there is a series of ellipses in eight lines. He himself did not know what happened. But what happened was that as soon as he recognized Helena, the friar continued his discourse. There was then another thing: the sermon had no common thread running through it, no subject; it was true delirium. The embarrassment was general. (74)

However, after reading the reading the memoir, the narrator proceeds to investigate Frei Simão's past. From this point the conclusive proof of his insanity as being of a linguistic nature appears: the monk isolates himself from men, and he slowly renounces language as well. His memoir and the memory of his failed sermon confirm the diagnosis: "a discourse with no common thread," "incomplete fragments"—and the pleonasm establishes the link between insanity and the loss of language. It is as if the true problem is not insanity but rather the inability to hide it by using language in a socially acceptable way. Similarly, in "The Psychiatrist," the narrator drops hints throughout the text (often using the protagonist's own words) about the progressive alienation of Simão Bacamarte. An apparently irrefutable definition, for example, is offered: "Reason is the perfect equilibrium of all faculties; beyond that—insanity, insanity, and nothing but insanity."<sup>26</sup> The very repetition of the word "insanity" suggests the true imbalance that comes to dominate the alienist. As early as this 1864 story, the inscription of insanity on the linguistic level—the belief in the linguistic nature of (the perception of) reality—is present. Developing this idea will prove to be an important part in the mature Machado's literary production.

Perhaps for this reason, the story would have been more biting if it had ended at this point: "And there was another thing: his discourse had no common thread running through it, no subject; it was true delirium. The embarrassment was general." Machado, however, felt obliged to close the story by suturing the gaps—we are not yet before a writer who can trust the reader to fill in the story's silences.<sup>27</sup> Two months after the unexpected meeting, "the poor lady could not take the commotion" and dies (74). The monk's delirium takes its toll, eventually causing his demise. In the end, showing that what goes around comes around, Simão's father enters the very same religious order after his own wife's death. Naturally he is given his son's old room, and... goes crazy! In the narrator's words, "It was believed that in his last years, this old man was no less crazy than Frei Simão de Águeda" (75).



### Coda

While the plot resolution of "Frei Simão" is not particularly creative, on the formal level, the story is much more interesting. Actually, this circumstance seems to appear quite frequently in the pre-1880 stories, especially with *Iaiá Garcia*, the novel preceding *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. In other words, we find daring formal moves stymied by conventional plot development. The reader's role is still relatively undeveloped, essentially limited to an observation that is quite unnecessary: "The reader surely understands that Helena's marriage was forced on her aunt and uncle" (74). But, of course, that goes without saying.

In fact, six years after the publication of "Frei Simão," Machado offered a more systematic exploration of the role of the reader in "Miss Dollar," which engages in an ironic dialogue with traditional readerly expectations. Similarly, the 1875 short story "A Chinela Turca," which was republished in *Papéis Avulsos*, employs a witty double-parody of "a play in the genre of ultra-romance" ("A chinela" 221). In this work, Duarte, a young bachelor about to enjoy an evening dance, is stopped by Major Lopo Alves, who has decided to honor the young man with the opportunity to hear him read in its entirety a work he has just finished. "The drama was composed of seven parts" (222). Moreover, he is not allowed to take any breaks, as the Major is determined that he finish the reading this very night. The bachelor has no choice: he accepts his bad luck and takes his space in a comfortable armchair. He quickly finds himself involved in the rumored case of an improbable stolen "Turkish slipper." Soon he is taken to a mysterious place, where he almost loses his life in a combination of adventures and unexpected situations. Of course, as the reader anticipates, the bachelor has slept through much of the reading. However, the thrust of the story is the ultra-romantic nature of the dream itself, as a parody of the (involuntary) parody of Major Lopo Alves. Thus, when the unwanted guest bids farewell and thereby ends his suffering, the bachelor gives thanks to his own "fertile and disquieting daydream"; after all, "it has proven to me once again that the best drama takes place in the viewer, and not on the stage" (231). At its center, this statement shows us one of the principal elements of Machadian writing.

Machado had tested this theme in the 1872 short story "A Parasita Azul," which was originally published in the *Jornal das Famílias* and reissued a year later in the collection *Histórias da Meia-Noite*. As Gledson notes, Machado parodies "even the nascent national literary tradition itself, of which he was a part" (Gledson, "Os contos" 25). In this parody, Machado alludes to texts by Joaquim

Manuel de Macedo, José de Alencar, and Manuel Antônio de Almeida. The story's heroine, Isabel, refuses to take part in an advantageous marriage, despite loving her prospective husband. Indeed, there are no obstacles to the proposed union: both are of the same social group, their parents approve of the match, and they are in love—a rare combination of circumstances in Brazil in the 1800s. Why, then, would the heroine reject her suitor? Here is what the narrator says:

A less demanding reader would find Isabel's choice strange, especially knowing of their love for one another. *I share your way of thinking*; but I do not wish to alter the heroine's personality, because it was just as I present it in these pages. [...] *It may be absurd*, but that is how it was. ("A parasita" 211; my emphasis)

It is likely that the narrator predicts the ironic smirk of the reader, who would have recognized the artificial nature of the ultra-romantic character in this good-humored description. Thus Machado seems to be suggesting that "the best fiction prose is to be found in the reader and not in the book itself." However, once again the text ends in a conventional manner: the lovers are married and live happily ever after; Camilo Seabra manages to forget Paris, finding himself in the peace and quiet of Santa Luzia, in rural Goiás. In fact, the boy who formerly disdained Brazilian high society, who even thought of the Rua do Ouvidor as "merely a long and well-lit alleyway" (177), discovers the enchantment of the *pátria* in the embrace of "a morena—but not any morena—a silk-skinned one" (190; my emphasis). Despite this neat conclusion, this short story presents complex elements at the level of form, especially through the critique of certain conventions of the romantic novel and theater.

As to "Frei Simão," I hope I have shown that Machado had already developed a similar pattern. In other words, Machado began to experiment with the author-reader function through his use of the narrator-reader of the memoir—an element that would be a fundamental figure in his poetics. The short story's narrator, moreover, makes comments on passages that were not transcribed in the "incomplete fragments." In his words, "It would have been better to provide here some of the pages written by Simão regarding his suffering after receiving the letter; but there is so much missing, and I do not wish to correct the friar's naïve and sincere expression" (74). The narrator admits that his transcription of the "source" material is partial, leading the reader himself to question the narrative's "sincerity," since it is explicitly mediated by an obviously interested narrator-reader.

The reader is also aware that the letters exchanged between the future monk and Helena “would end up in the hands of the old man, who, after appreciating his son’s way with women, would make him set fire to the steamy letters” (71). Burning the correspondence means his son is unable to “take solace in their absence with the presence of paper and letters” (71). The story begins with the narrator relating the abbot’s fright at hearing the monk’s final words: “—I die filled with hatred for humanity!” For the abbot, however, the most disturbing element is not the words themselves but “the tone in which the words were spoken” (67).<sup>28</sup> In these passages, what stands out is the Machadian sensitivity to the material conditions of printed texts, which reveals another structural recurrence in the pre-1880 works. Therefore, “Frei Simão” can be read as a short story that goes beyond the predictable tale of social hierarchy as represented by the impossibility of Simão’s marriage to a dependent. The short story develops a more complex narrative structure than criticism has previously recognized, above all because it presents elements that would assure Machado de Assis a special place in Brazilian literature. Could it be that the same can be said of Machado’s other pre-*Posthumous Memoirs* short stories, chronicles and criticist

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I thank Alexandra Viera de Almeida, Hélio de Seixas Guimarães, Leonardo Vieira de Almeida, Pedro Armando de Almeida Magalhães, and Thomaz Pereira de Amorim Neto for their critiques and suggestions of the first version of this text. I especially thank Andrew Jager, Ross Forman, and Jobst Welge for the present version in English. This text was written thanks to a Research Fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. I thank also Professor Joachim Küpper for his support and encouragement at the Freie Universität, Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> For future development, I wish to point out the response, which differentiates between “the domain of ideal, uninterested art” and the “art of dressing. This, which seems absurd or graceless, is perfectly relative and beautiful—beautiful in our way” (“Uma visita” 239). This reflection is very close to the famous definition proposed by Baudelaire for the concept of “modernity.”

<sup>3</sup> I am alluding to the famous note “To the Reader” from *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. The narrator compares his style to “the free-form of a Sterne or a Xavier de Maistre” (*Posthumous* 5).

<sup>4</sup> Although a full exploration of the topic is not possible here, I would like to briefly allude to the conjuncture of metaphors of the gaze, which is responsible for the analogy that eyes are the “windows of the soul.” This is undoubtedly a banal formulation, as like Machado’s use of it in the 1878 edition of *Iaiá Garcia* suggests. In the novels after *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* the metaphor is used differently and progressively modified, suggesting the impossibility of grasping the final meaning of actions. For now, it is sufficient to recall the figure of

Bentinho, who condemns himself in the face of the enigma of Capitu's gaze. I first presented this idea at the 2005 meeting of ABRALIC, "Machado de Assis: um seminário," which was published in the proceedings of the meeting. Alfredo Bosi also presented an important essay on the richness of the Machadian narrator's gaze (Bosi 9-72).

<sup>5</sup> For an insightful analysis of this short story, see Lajolo 77-85.

<sup>6</sup> In this well-known passage, Machado creates an opposition between the serious [*gente grave*] and the frivolous [*gente frívola*], identifying two types of readers (*Posthumous* ["To The Reader"] 5).

<sup>7</sup> The young widow justifies her misfortune in the following way: "the lesson should be of use to me, just as it should be to you and to our girlfriends. Show them these letters; they are the pages of a script that, had I had it earlier, may have saved me from losing a dream and two years of my life" ("Confissões" 95).

<sup>8</sup> I thank Bluma Waddington Vilar for pointing this book out to me.

<sup>9</sup> "There is little difference between Machado de Assis' criticism and his chronicles. Both are dominated by the same preoccupation with understanding and interpreting human reactions" (Castello 49).

<sup>10</sup> "Regarding Machado de Assis' intentions and creative processes, it is interesting to recall his well-known letter to Quintino Bocaiúva" (Castello 39). To be more systematic: "In Machado de Assis' correspondence there are curious confessions that illustrate the independent length of his temporal synchronism, i.e., the existence of the objective configuration of the myth" (Castello 61).

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Candido pointed out the importance of this passage in the book's "presentation": "Actually, *articulation* could be considered the fundamental work in the critical attitude taken by José Aderaldo Castello, showing the straight lines between works, genres, phases, and above all between the elements that are arranged to provide structure in all his writings." Later, Candido wrote a deservedly celebrated essay on Machado's work, entitled "Esquema de Machado de Assis," in which he called attention to the same approach that I am trying to unfold here in this text.

<sup>12</sup> In the 1878 short story "Folha rota," for example, which came out in the *Jornal das Famílias* and was never reprinted, explanatory facts already appear more as suggestion than as pure information: "Both hands met one another and became stuck together. A few minutes passed, maybe *three or four*" (265; my emphasis). The reader will readily notice that it is not a question of chronological precision. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the psychological duration of the episode, besides alluding to the erotic potential of the scene.

<sup>13</sup> This expression comes at the novel's end: "The doctor's love was doubted posthumously" (*Ressurreição* 104).

<sup>14</sup> Helen Caldwell provides an insightful remark concerning this issue: "Jealousy never ceased to fascinate Machado de Assis. [...] Jealousy has a fat part in seven of his nine novels; the plots of ten short stories turn upon the ugly passion—though in seven of the latter, to be sure, it receives an ironic if not rudely comic treatment" (1). Silviano Santiago has also stressed this factor in Machado's fiction, explaining "how the problem of jealousy arose in the Machadian universe. It comes [...] from the character's conception of the nature of love and marriage, as well as, on the other hand, the delicate games of *marivaudage* that man and woman have to represent to be able to arrive at union" (66). See also Param 198-206.

<sup>15</sup> Once more I am alluding to the note "To the Reader" of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*: "The work itself is everything; if it pleases you, dear reader, I shall be well paid for the task; if it doesn't please you, I'll pay you with a snap of the finger and goodbye" (7).

<sup>16</sup> The passage reads: "Here, after examining some of the primary critical statements about characterization, I wish to demonstrate that the short stories offer an excellent exhibit on Machado's theory of the literary character. His brief fiction, in spite of its enormous variety, also presents a consistency in many areas. Perhaps the short stories are the best complement to the suggestive critical essays of the author." On this subject, see Dixon.



<sup>17</sup> At a later point, Castello further develops this line of thought: "For our purposes, Machado de Assis' first reflections on the novel, in which he expressed appreciation for romantic or realist works, already demonstrate the seed of a new understanding of the genre that would later be applied to and evolve with his works of fiction" (35).

<sup>18</sup> In a note on the same page, Gledson continues: "There are few works dedicated to the short stories. Of the most useful ones, we could notably cite Alfredo Bosi ('A máscara e a fenda') and Paul Dixon (*Os contos de Machado de Assis: mais do que sonha a filosofia*). Raymundo Faoro's seminal text, *Machado de Assis: a pirâmide e o trapézio*, reserves much space to the short stories and chronicles. Perhaps the best essay on Machado is Antonio Candido's 'Esquema de Machado de Assis,' which gives the short stories their rightful importance."

<sup>19</sup> In the first detailed description of Capitu, the narrator cruelly points out the marks of social inferiority: "I couldn't keep my eyes off this fourteen-year-old girl, strong and well built, in a tight fitting, somewhat faded cotton frock. [...] Her hands, although used to hard household work, were well cared for; they were not scented with fine soaps or toilet water, but she kept them spotless with water from the well and ordinary soap. She wore strong cloth shoes, flat and old, which she herself kept mended" (*Dom Casmurro* 26-27; my emphasis). In "A poesia envenada de *Dom Casmurro*," Roberto Schwarz developed an important analysis for this question (7-41).

<sup>20</sup> Here is Roberto Schwarz's apt formulation: "We say that Machado tried to analyze the arbitrary paternalist from the perspective of the dependents in order to free them from this condition, which caused him to exclude it from a positive tone. Differently, at a later time he would assume it in its entirety, as he did here with the dependent Antunes to accompany the movement and bring him to the first plane instead of hiding him" (*Ao vencedor* 161).

<sup>21</sup> "Why in the world is your mother waiting here at home for this wandering flower? The girl needs some fresh air." It is not difficult to imagine the "literal" translation of this sentence ("Mariana" 155).

<sup>22</sup> One cannot fail to recall the emblematic passage: "Prudêncio, a black houseboy, was my horse every day" (25). We know what follows: in the future, now freed, Prudêncio will reproduce the violence he has suffered in childhood as a slave—see the chapter "The Whipping" (108-109).

<sup>23</sup> "Coutinho then finished the narration, which we all listened to with such sadness. But shortly thereafter we went outside onto Ouvidor Street, looking at the feet of the ladies that got out of the cars and making more or less funny and well-timed reflections. Two hours of conversation had brought back our youth" (170).

<sup>24</sup> Bluma Waddington Vilar proposed an insightful reading of this problem in her PhD dissertation: "Escrita e leitura: citação e autobiografia em Murilo Mendes e Machado de Assis." See especially the chapter, "Citação e autobiografia: *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*" (118-151). Vilar combines Machado's undermining of traditional notions of authorship with a careful study of what she calls "Machado de Assis' system of citation."

<sup>25</sup> See Gledson, "The creative use of fragmentation had to wait for *Brás Cubas*" ("Os contos" 23).

<sup>26</sup> The original reads: "A razão é o perfeito equilíbrio de todas as faculdades; fora daí *insânia*, *insânia*, e só *insânia*" ("O alienista" 286; my emphasis). Compare with William L. Grossman's translation: "But what is reason if not the equilibrium of the mental faculties? An individual, therefore, who lacks this equilibrium in any particular is, to that extent, insane" ("The Psychiatrist" 11).

<sup>27</sup> I am reminded of the following well-known passage: "There is no way of emending a confused book, but everything can be put into books with omissions. [...] For everything can be found outside a book with gaps in it, dear reader. Thus I fill in others' lacunae: in this way too you can fill in mine" (*Dom Casmurro* 111-112).

<sup>28</sup> Among numerous others, I select one example: "[Capitu] asked me for a few more



things, among them the exact words and the *spoken tone* of certain people” (*Dom Casmurro* 93; my emphasis).

## Works Cited

- Assis, Machado. “O alienista.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . “A chinela turca.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . “Confissões de uma viúva moça.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . *Dom Casmurro*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira/MEC, 1977.
- . *Dom Casmurro*. Trans. John Gledson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- . “Education of a Stuffed Shirt.” Trans. Helen Caldwell. *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1963. 113-122.
- . “O espelho.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . “Folha rota.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . “Frei Simão.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . “The Looking Glass.” Trans. Helen Caldwell. *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1963. 56-65.
- . “Mariana.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . “Miss Dollar.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . “A parasita azul.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- . “The Psychiatrist.” Trans. William L. Grossman. *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1963. 1-45.
- . *Ressurreição*. [1872]. São Paulo: Ática, 1998.
- . “Três tesouros perdidos.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- . “Uma visita de Alcibiades.” *Contos/Uma antologia*. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- Bosi, Alfredo. “O enigma do olhar.” *Machado de Assis. O enigma do olhar*. São Paulo: Ática, 1999. 9-72.
- Caldwell, Helen. *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1960.
- Candido, Antonio. “Esquema de Machado de Assis.” *Vários Escritos*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1995.
- Castello, José Aderaldo. *Realidade e ilusão em Machado de Assis*. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional/Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1969.

- Dixon, Paul. "Paradigms at Play: The Short Stories of Machado de Assis." In this volume.
- Gledson, John. "Apresentação." *Os leitores de Machado de Assis. O romance machadiano e o público de literatura no século 19*. By Hélió de Seixas Guimarães. São Paulo: Nankin/EdUSP, 2004.
- . "Os contos de Machado de Assis: o machete e o violoncelo." *Contos! Uma antologia*. By Machado de Assis. Ed. John Gledson. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998.
- Guimarães, Hélió de Seixas. *Os leitores de Machado de Assis. O romance machadiano e o público de literatura no século 19*. São Paulo: Nankin/EdUSP, 2004.
- Lajolo, Marisa. *Do mundo da leitura para a leitura do mundo*. São Paulo: Ática, 1994.
- Maia Neto, José Raimundo. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1994.
- Param, Charles. "Jealousy in the Novels of Machado de Assis." *Hispania* 53.2 (1970): 198-206.
- Santiago, Silviano. "The Rhetoric of Verisimilitude." *The Space In-Between. Essays on Latin American Culture*. Ed. Ana Lúcia Gazzola. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- Schwarz, Roberto. *Duas meninas*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997.
- . *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*. Trans. and intro. John Gledson. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- . *Ao vencedor as batatas – forma literária e processo social nos inícios do romance brasileiro*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1988.
- Vilar, Bluma Waddington. "Escrita e leitura: citação e autobiografia em Murilo Mendes e Machado de Assis." Diss. Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2001.

**João Cezar de Castro Rocha** is Professor of Comparative Literature at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and Researcher at the Conselho Nacional de Pesquisa Científica (CNPq). He is the author of *Literatura e cordialidade. O público e o privado na cultura brasileira* (EdUERJ, 1998), and *O exílio do homem cordial. Ensaio e revisões* (Museu da República, 2004). E-mail: jccr1@uol.com.br