

Irony in Machado de Assis' *Dom Casmurro*: Reflections on Anti-Tragic Cordiality

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Abstract. In *Dom Casmurro*, Machado ironizes the penchant for romanticism, the tragic, and the pathetic in Brazilian culture. He gives a burlesque modulation to Flaubert's narrative tradition, which this study contrasts with some European variants of this deconstruction (Nietzsche, Kafka, and Musil). The detached point of view and the burlesque sarcasm of the enunciation belong to the anti-tragic current in the Portuguese-Brazilian tradition.

Machado de Assis is famous for his pitiless, though very discreet, analysis of the luxuriousness of a form of patriarchalist capitalism based on what he called the "theory of the bigwig." He is also well known for his irreverent portraits of the adulterated (and adulterous) ecstasies of the characters that interact in this sort of sociability. What many of his readers have failed to observe is the subtle analysis of the male phantasms that thrive in the context of patriarchalism. *Dom Casmurro* might be read as a representation of the cordial phantasms and the unmentionables of patriarchal oppression. Such a reading might perhaps bring out the anti-tragic spirit and the comic turn that disguise (even as they covertly expose) a serious reflection on the tragic failures of friendship and love. We propose a rereading of *Dom Casmurro* from the perspective of anti-tragic cordiality.

Unfaithfulness and the moral polarization of conventional readings

In a chapter of his book *Machado: uma revisão*, Antonio Carlos Secchin presents a critical review—in an ironically witty style quite in the Machadian man-

ner—of *Dom Casmurro* criticism. “Em torno da traição” is a truly enlightening essay on the deterministic effects of interpretation (127-134). From 1900 to 1960, the consensus reading was that the crafty Capitu was clearly unfaithful to her husband. It was only sixty years after the novel’s original publication that an American critic, Helen Caldwell, wrote an essay showing that Capitu’s “craftiness” actually rests on a *textual* stratagem, an effect achieved by the author’s literary craftsmanship. Machado inscribes in the name of the protagonist, Bentinho (the diminutive form of “Bento,” Benedict, therefore meaning “small saint”) Santiago, an echo of Shakespeare’s Iago, the character who arouses unjust jealousy and in this way provokes uncontrollable feelings in the lover-husband. Thus Dom Casmurro is a character who contains *two different characters*, antagonistic and hostile to each other: one of them is sincere and passionate; the other is passive and negative. Caldwell shows that two souls coexist in Bentinho’s heart, a duplicity that allows the reader to see Capitu’s alleged unfaithfulness and her rejection by Bentinho from two opposing viewpoints, either as a conflict that takes place (though not necessarily) in objective reality or as a simulacrum enacted in the soul of the passive character who tends to yield to his own weakness, covering it up with inconsistent phantasms.

However, few Brazilian readers are disposed to take on the freedom of a reading made possible by ambiguity and irony—that is, Machado de Assis’ *art*. Secchin reviews the concepts and prejudiced views that characterized the exegesis of the novel throughout the past century. Again and again, Capitu’s “craftiness,” “perfidy,” “hypocrisy,” “unfaithfulness,” and “guilt” are demonstrated. With very few exceptions, even after Helen Caldwell’s analysis of Machado’s artistic craftiness, critics persisted in reaffirming the logic of the obviously likely unfaithfulness. This is the flip side of the equally frequent bourgeois moralism that, though it often shades into hypocrisy pure and simple, will not admit the possibility that the shadow of a doubt might be cast on patriarchal honor, and for this very reason casts suspicion far and wide. From José Veríssimo (1900) to Dalton Trevisan (1994), just about any argument is good enough to prove Capitu’s guilt—even the fact that the author, in his ironical wisdom, refused to comment on critics’ opinions concerning his novel. It is difficult to argue against this solid morality, which seems to know from the outset how things are and should be, and which is so sure of its own certainties that it feels enabled to pass univocal judgments not open to questioning—and, at the same time, destroys any possibility of enjoying *the pleasure of the text*, that is, the artistic pact itself.

For since the crafty plots of Greek tragedies we have known (and since Kant we have had a theoretical proof of this bit of poetic wisdom) that aesthetic truth should be distinguished from both knowledge and moral judgment. A “beautiful” or “aesthetic” idea, according to Kant, “induces much thought”—much more than one or various concepts or judgments could ever capture—and is “a representation of the imagination, annexed to a given concept” (529-30). Let us suppose, then, that there are in Brazil (for all the appearances of rigorous and austere morality in Machadian criticism) readers who love literature for this aesthetic subtlety, who appreciate the slippage of various points of view,¹ a handling of narrative that gives rise to the “aesthetic idea” that joins thought to the unthinkable and the inexpressible. In Machado’s art, the subtle diversification of points of view produces “morality in the gaseous state”—that is, the art of the fiction of Flaubert, Musil, or Guimarães Rosa, who “take off” from positive contents and thoughts. For this kind of reader, although Machado as a person was a pessimist, cynical about the Brazil of his time and slightly misogynous, Machado as an *author* may nevertheless put to use a rich imagination, developing ideas and complicating everyday beliefs to the point that the naïve reader, with his or her readymade and infallible judgments, falls into the poetic trap that discloses precisely his or her own viewpoints and prejudices. There is no record of Machado being a reader of Kant (though Kant was widely read in the late nineteenth century), but it is possible to show that, in the construction of *Dom Casmurro*, he put to wondrous use the craft of the great poets (novelists as well as playwrights), all the way from the Greeks through Shakespeare to Flaubert, whose dense plots capture what lies beyond the law and positive judgments: the paradoxes of unique situations in which we are faced with no less than the limitations of human judgment and the finitude of all human understanding.

Machado, between pessimism and romantic idealization

Machado is a pessimist—this is an opinion shared by practically all critics, though we know that the writer took some exception to this view (see, for instance, his letter to Joaquim Nabuco of 29 August 1903). His objection has to do with the difference between vulgar pessimism and the sort of negative spirit the most dignified expression of which can be found in such biblical characters as Job and Qohelet. These texts provide the model of an ideal—sober and disillusioned acceptance of the evils of the world, resignation without resentment—that does not deny the precious few beauties of this world. Now, it is true that

many of Machado's characters do not conform to this biblical standard. On the contrary, his work is marked by a clear note of resentment, the very embodiment of which is the protagonist Dom Casmurro—a nickname that might be translated as “Lord Gloom.” But this novel is also a struggle against reactive feelings, against acerbic prose, against the nihilism that corrodes all that is noble, great, and pure. The author's refusal of the label “pessimist” is rooted in subtle strategies, in the rich and subtle shading of his effort to keep the nihilistic tone from pervading—and destroying—the narrative balance.

The more we examine Machado's expert narrative technique—a technique that is the result of an intense reflection on romantic ideals and the then new-found parameters of realist faithfulness—the better we understand his reluctance to accept the label. Indeed, the point of departure for Machado's technique is the Romanticism of his earlier work: romantic themes are contrasted with a realist outlook, and pessimism and cynicism are toned down by humor and by discreet touches of the romantic ideal, which he never gave up completely.² Machado has gone beyond the shopworn Romanticism that exacerbates the contrast between good and evil, but he has also transcended realist disillusionment, preserving the tension between reactive melancholy that takes in the evils of his day and the positive sort of mourning that reaffirms the passion for rarefied, lost, and wasted values. Machado does not simply attack, like a run-of-the-mill moralist, the timidity and daring, the dissimulation and distrust, the passive timorousness and calculating craft of his characters. From his very first novel, in a note to the first edition of *Ressurreição*, his aim has been,

to put in action Shakespeare's idea: “Our doubts are traitors, / And make us lose the good we oft might win / By fearing to attempt” [*Measure for Measure* I.iv].

It has not been my intention to produce a novel of manners; I tried to sketch out the situation and the contrast between two characters.

In *Dom Casmurro*, this enactment of Shakespeare's idea—which does not judge but simply shows the action—finds its most perfect form. Bentinho is betrayed neither by his wife nor by the slanders or innuendos of false friends, but by the doubts he himself engenders by “fearing to attempt.” And this fear is not brought about by any external cause: Bentinho himself seems to embody this fear; he is the paradigmatic figure of action determined by such fear. The novel has nothing to do with real betrayals that may or may not have taken place but with that art has no intention of judging or representing.

It is, then, quite clear that Machado took care not to take sides as to the effective causes that trigger the jealousy and the fear and bring the story to its denouement. What is enacted is the living structure, the way of being of this fear, beyond occasional precipitating factors. It would be a mistake to seek guilt in Capitu, to confuse her vivid curiosity with the calculating collusion of her parents, who pinned to their daughter their hopes of gaining social status. Machado did not write a novel of manners to denounce the corruption of human virtues, nor was it his intention to illustrate the betrayal that destroys precious youthful love; instead, he presents clear constellations in which the two antagonistic characters evolve. With a combination of scorn and affection, the narrator sets up a complex relationship with his characters, sometimes drawing close to them, sometimes distancing himself from both. He treats with tender irony Bentinho's timorous weakness by simply contrasting it with Capitu's firmness of purpose: Capitu as *caput*—*femme de tête*—is the challenge with which spontaneous and unyielding desire confronts the timid. With incomparable aptness, the writer uses Bentinho's eyes and mouth to describe his beloved in such a way that she appears to the reader as the riddle of life itself. Capitu is the resilient and throbbing mobility that is desired and feared by all who are lacking in ardent will, whose love cannot endure the wear and tear of time, and whose trustfulness "is extinguished like a lamp that has run out of oil"—the close to the final paragraph of *Ressurreição*. The lamp that has run out of oil is a metaphor both for the voluble worldly person but also for the flipside of the same character—the gloomy, timid man.

In the reminiscences of the old Dom Casmurro we see quite clearly the fear disguised as distraction and doubt, Bentinho's passivity—the very opposite of Capitu's lively curiosity, her "undertow eyes" (63), fearless and free of doubts. The "contrast between two characters" does not lead to a direct face-off between villain and angel, the romantic theme Machado was still concerned with in his early novel *Ressurreição*. *Dom Casmurro* develops a more subtle, delayed conflict, in the course of which the author shows us all the details of a course of action undermined by fear and omission, by doubt and timorousness disguised in ambiguous sentences.

The paradoxical combination of Romanticism and Realism, tragic elevation and prosaic bathos, creates a curious—though only apparent—contradiction in Machado de Assis' work. On the one hand, we find a longing for magnanimous, grandiose actions everywhere; on the other hand, this longing is no more than a rhetorical gesture that can hardly conceal a terrifying paralysis, very

much in the manner of de Maupassant and Flaubert. How should we understand this tension poetically—that is, without reducing it to a reflex of the socio-economic situation? How does the problem of artistic form over-determine and lend meaning to the plot of *Dom Casmurro*? These are the questions to which I would like to address myself from an aesthetic perspective, that is, by attempting to hear and see the nuances that give rise to the elements and themes that Machado combines and interweaves in his own manner.

Machado does not create a novelistic tragedy, but his novel is a tragic simulacrum. Clearly, the plot of *Dom Casmurro* seems to confirm—from the protagonist's viewpoint—the theory of the tragic put forth by Schopenhauer; but it should be kept in mind from the outset that this theory holds true only from Bentinho's doubtful standpoint. Schopenhauer's definition of the tragic, which is Machado's point of departure, is the following:

What gives the tragic its particular *élan*, which elevates us, is the dawning of the recognition that the world and life cannot give us true satisfaction, and that therefore they are not worthy of our attachment; this is what the tragic spirit consists in: consequently, it leads us to resignation. (298)

Schopenhauer's statement is certainly one of Machado's points of departure. However, it functions as a decoy, for at best it corresponds to Bentinho's somewhat vague convictions, from which the narrator (that is, the narrative point of view) distances himself, treating them with irony. In this way, between the cynicism of the prose and the enthusiasm of tragic consciousness, a dialogue takes shape, showing how hollow the structures of tragic action have become. And where there is no great action, no aspiration for the truth, there can be no true resignation; nothing is left save *casmurric*, gloominess.

Indeed, if one reads *Dom Casmurro* between the lines of the plot, one finds that the novel analyzes in rich detail the conditions that make it impossible for the subject matter—the stories of Bentinho and Capitu—to rise to the level of the dramatic or the heroic. The swelling of time in the numerous, fragmented chapters stresses the essence of the novel, which has been reduced to the status of *faits divers*, where contingencies clash against one another, now favoring, now hindering the “action.” The quotation marks are justified because the love story of Bentinho and Capitu is in itself a contingency rather than a real passionate engagement of the sort that gives rise to true affirmations of the will; the entities that Schopenhauer calls “will” and “representa-

tion” shrink to the vanishing point in the universe of Machado’s characters. The Schopenhauerian dialectic of the tragic is hollowed out by a *circumstantial* infatuation, brought about not by unlimited “will” or the forms of social “representation” but rather from the neighboring contingencies, from the lack of virile activities on the part of the shy boy, favored by the interests of the girl’s parents, interrupted by his mother’s fears, once again intensified by the interests of José Dias, the family parasite—in short, by needs that are external to the lovers themselves. Machado puts together with discretion, but with high precision, the minute details that point to this absence of Schopenhauerian will, the absence of a truly tragic will that arises out of the depths of being, leading to actions that go far beyond everyday needs and the limits of reflection (witness the scene in which Bentinho does not want to get on the horse and is assisted and reinforced in his timorousness by his fearful mother—it is just a tiny brushstroke, but it points to a sharp, definitive break between the character and the world of action).

It is Capitu who thinks and acts. We read in chapter 18: “Capitu [...] was thoughtful [...]. Capitu concentrated particularly now on my mother’s tears; she could not convince herself she understood them” (36-7). Bentinho, in contrast, retreats to a larval condition and seeks refuge in regressive gestures: he finds solace in coconut sweets and indulges in moral speculations, sentences and categories that are absolutely irrelevant to his present situation, such as the sophomoric theological question as to whether a given action is “a virtue or a defect” (37)—a question prematurely planted in his youthful brain by the priest who frequents his house and by the repeated statements of his “scholarly” tutor, José Dias. Bentinho is like the larva of a butterfly; his stomach and brain are caught up in vague feelings and speculations that cushion the clash with reality.

Having been from an early age enmeshed in the web of caresses and fears created by his mother, to the point of never developing any initiative that might have the effect of generating friction, Bentinho cannot even quite grasp the meaning of his girlfriend’s question: “I’m asking if you’re afraid?” (84). The constellations of contingencies around him have diluted his spontaneous feelings to such an extent that he is unaware of the narrow limits his passivity has imposed on his imagination. He has lost all imaginative power, which is what gives rise to the major challenges, aspirations, and rash actions that trigger the tragic. The jealous characters in Machado’s fiction, from Félix to Bentinho, are not Othellos who destroy their own good through an excess

of passion but men whose very souls and passions are weak, whose love has “extinguished like a lamp that has run out of oil.”

Machado's romanticism consists in never forgetting the deplorable hollowing of the conflicts that lend tragic greatness to the figure of the hero. Let us briefly recall the two major stages of transformation of the tragic. In ancient tragedy, the hero's action clashes against cosmic powers; the hero's will and life succumb to the disproportionate force of these powers in relation to his own finite strength. But in his *way* of opposing these powers, by challenging absolute danger and facing death, he goes beyond his own finitude and becomes immortal.

Bentinho's line of verse “Though life be lost, the battle still is won” (103) is a repetition (perhaps plagiarism) of the very core of the tragic, yet on the level of empty rhetoric, a weak poetic effort of a seminary student lying on his bed. The line is just words; it does not correspond to any authentic knowledge or experience. There are no cosmic powers to be faced in Machado's stories, nor is there what characterizes modern tragedy: the more subtle powers of historical and social, moral, and psychological needs, which provide the themes of Racine's and Shakespeare's plays. This loss (conspicuous in its absence) is what provides the basis for Machado's irony, since Shakespearean tragedy is a point of departure for both Bentinho the character and the narrator. Obviously, *Othello* has quite different meanings for each of them. It is only Bentinho who believes that he is involved in a tragic plot, whereas the narrator knows, and points out to the reader, that this mistake is no more than a form of self-indulgent hypocrisy with which the weak character attempts to give a certain luster to his own prosaic and pathetic incompetence. For Bentinho's jealousy and suspicion rest on a structure that has nothing to do with that of *Othello*, an anti-tragic structure that the skillful narrator arrives at by inverting the structure of Shakespeare's tragedy.

Let us sketch out the truly tragic structure of Shakespeare's play, which internalizes a real conflict. Othello is a Moor and is therefore excluded from the prerogatives of Venetian citizenship and has no right to love a Venetian woman; nevertheless, he is a Venetian to the extent that, as a military chief-tain, he is responsible for the victorious campaign that has saved the city. He is able to solve this duplicity in real life, but it is planted in his soul by the disbelief of Desdemona's father, who is firmly convinced that his daughter could love a Moor only as a perverse whim that sooner or later must turn against Othello himself. The real conflict is placed by Shakespeare in the

shifty consciousness of each character, so that a random word or objective idea will later return as subjective and inexorable suspicion, fear, and terror.

Machado is quite explicit about this tragic intertext in his novel. He has Bentinho watch a performance of Shakespeare's *Othello*—a tragedy in which the *character* Bentinho thinks he recognizes his own destiny, while the *narrator's* irony denies him the benefit of this greatness, pointing out the abyss that yawns between the structure of Othello's tragic drama and Bentinho's shabby melodrama. The conflict that temporarily delays his marriage to Capitu interchanges the roles, excluding the woman—not the man—from the dignity of the married state. It is finally overcome not by the *character's* energetic action and merit, but by the mere passage of time, the many years in which Bentinho *passively* waits, in the thrall of the ever-changing interests and petty bickering of the members of his household. In the midst of these mediocre calculations, the real reason for José Dias' change of mind stands out: he admires Capitu for her most prosaic virtue, her prudent thriftiness. This theme will reappear, with ferocious irony, in the scene in which Bentinho tries to engage his wife in a daydream about the stars, while she dreams of ten pounds sterling.

There are countless minute circumstances that function as the low motivations of this story shorn of any dramatic tension, which Machado's art presents through the prosaic lens of Baudelaire, fanning—as T. S. Eliot will later do—mediocre velleities above the threshold of aesthetic interest, appealing to the voyeurism of his reader, who lives in the same forlorn prosaic universe. It is this reader that Machado, like Baudelaire, addresses as a brother and an accomplice. In the sea of infinite ponderations there is no longer any room for *action* and *passion*, but only for *reaction* and *resentment*. This is shown, with malice and sarcasm, in the scene in which Bentinho discovers that he is in love, not because he has kissed Capitu and sensed that she has graciously granted him the gift of herself, but because of José Dias' sententious pronouncements. Even if we are inclined to feel moved by Bentinho's love, even if a cultured and well-read reader finds in it echoes of Daphnis and Chloe, Machado makes it clear that the aura of romantic naïveté is no more than a wistful illusion: there is nothing beautiful, spontaneous or impulsive in Bentinho's love. It is, and will always be, no more than a frail velleity, always threatened by the wills and opinions of others. We read in chapter 12: "So I loved Capitu and she me? [...] All of this had now been revealed to me by the mouth of José Dias [...]. That first throbbing of the sap, that revelation of consciousness to itself, is something I have never forgotten, nor have I ever had a comparable sensation" (23-5).

The narrator has the character mention the “sap”—that is, the natural impulse and autonomous creativity that are manifested imperiously in the passions of childhood, in defiance of reason and consciousness—a negation of the Schopenhaurian “will” that rules the world. However, the narrator is always in control, and shows how much illusion and pretentiousness is contained in this shallow affirmation of passion, for Bentinho’s “passion” is supported by a passive “self-consciousness” induced by casual comments made by other people. To acknowledge his own love, as well as to decide to get married, our hero must patiently wait for the family parasite to supply him with the expected commonplace phrases.

One need hardly emphasize the ferocious irony with which Machado underscores the psychological traits of this insuperable passivity, this sloth of the mind and the soul, which makes it impossible for Bentinho to identify either the sources of his mixed feelings or what possible fates his larval will and childish mind might lead him too. An example is the decisive passage in chapter 118 in which, beginning with Sancha’s hand, Bentinho’s daydreams move on to the muscular arms of his friend Escobar, and from there, in an uncontrollable crescendo combining childish and adult passions, to his erotic desire for Sancha and to his friendship, tinged with homoerotic connotations, inferiority feelings, and envy, with Escobar, his big, strong, and fatherly friend. Having indulged in the fantasy that Sancha was in love with him, Bentinho succumbs to his admiration for Escobar’s muscular arms:

I felt his arms, as if they were Sancha’s. This is a painful confession to make, but I cannot suppress it; that would be to avoid the truth. Not only did I feel them with that idea in mind, but I felt something else as well; I thought they were thicker and stronger than mine, and I envied them; what’s more, they knew how to swim. (206)

What is involved here is a subliminal and subordinate rivalry, a paradoxical mixture of filial affection and almost oedipal rejection that agitates Bentinho, up to the moment when his friend’s severe portrait restores his childish docility and soothes him to sleep. Machado ironically shows Bentinho torn not between his friend and his friend’s wife but between “my friend and the attraction I felt” (207). This wording completely subverts the distinction—so important in Pascal and Montaigne—between friendship and love, between love, covetousness, and lust, between the friend and the lover. But beyond this palimpsest of the great moralists that Machado loved, these passages suggest a

psychological constellation quite unusual for Brazilian fiction of the period: an almost Proustian constellation of inverted oedipal love—that is, a timorous withdrawal before the oedipal conflict replaced by the superfetation of male complicity; friendship with (unspoken) homosexual connotations:

In all sincerity, I felt ill at ease, caught between my friend and the attraction I felt. It may be that timidity was another cause of this crisis: it is not only heaven that gives us our virtues, timidity, too, and that's not counting chance—but chance is mere accident; it is best if virtue comes from heaven. However, since timidity comes from heaven, which gives us this disposition, virtue, its daughter, is, genealogically speaking, of the same celestial family. That is what I would have thought if I had been able to; but at first my thoughts simply wandered in confusion. It was not passion or a serious inclination. Was it just a caprice? After twenty minutes it was nothing, nothing at all. Escobar's portrait seemed to speak to me; I saw his frank, open manner, shook my head and went to bed. (207)

Timidity—conceived as heaven-sent—has perhaps blocked Bentinho from the realization that there is in his friendship for Escobar a compromising excess that makes itself felt only when his friend is physically absent. The mixed feelings are the corollary of a terrifying affective and intellectual vagueness, ironized by the counterfactual form “if I had been able to.” Machado often resorts to wordings that express—entirely without moralism, in the cold, almost cynical tradition of de Maupassant and Flaubert—this sort of implosion of intelligence and imagination that medieval authors called *acedia*, and that the great masters of modern ethics, Augustine, Pascal, and Montaigne, feared more than vice itself: inertia of the soul and the spirit, whose sister is melancholy. The narrator takes on the persona of the character and speaks of his alter ego in the conditional: “That is what I would have thought if I had been able to.”

What does Machado show us here—an affective, intellectual, or moral failure? It is impossible to separate these three facets of the soul; aesthetic representation shows how they are interconnected, how they determine one another. Here, novelistic prose acquires analytical and reflexive features.

Larval affections that go unacknowledged and unspoken lead the soul to unknown places when the character leaves his own fate in the hands of father figures, accepting their sentences, advice, decisions. The protagonist is first guided by José Dias, later by Escobar, and is left rudderless after his friend dies; from then

on his feelings, reflections, and acts progressively crumble. It is the absence of his friend that destroys the organization of his soul and leaves his intelligence entirely adrift; his jealousy then sets in as no more than a “secondary formation.”

Machado constructs the entire novel on the basis of doubt perceived as negative spontaneity, reactive timidity. Throughout the story, Bentinho has a number of opportunities in which he might learn how misleading looks, subjective impressions, and feelings can be. Suddenly assaulted by adulterous longings, he sometimes thinks his friend Sancha is making eyes at him, but at other times finds that his conviction is no more than an illusion. The invincible passion he concocts in the evening turns out to be, in the clear light of morning, no more than conventional friendship. But the lessons he is taught by Sancha’s eyes and the instability of his own feelings are never applied to his own wife’s eyes. What in his own experience has proved to be an illusion fed by a subjective disposition is used as decisive evidence in an inquisitorial trial.

The deliberation with which Bentinho attempts to put together the shallow remnants of his life in a grandiose mirror that will reflect—however crookedly and constrainedly—the great dramas of the past is comic rather than tragic. However, Machado traces the techniques of the distortion with which his character attempts to hide from himself the true features of his own story by shuffling and blurring his feelings and rationales into an inextricable nebula. The juxtaposition with Shakespeare’s play only brings out all the more clearly the inadequacy of his suspicions, their incongruity with the facts of the case.

Typically, however, Bentinho makes inferences without any logical nexus, jumping from one non sequitur to the next, “as I often did in matters on which I had no opinion one way or the other” (204). The erratic application of proverbs to inappropriate situations, the confused analogies between living experience and entirely extraneous sentences and constellations, furnish the “motives” for a withdrawal that repeats, ironizing itself, the timid, impotent efforts of the adolescent in search of a path for his own life.

After his friend’s death, Bentinho’s timidity—which from the very beginning has fed his self-deception—takes hold for good. His groundless suspicion legitimates the lack of initiative, of determination, of will, with which he faces, without his friend’s help, the two women of an extended family that until then had lived in harmony and happiness. With a tortured reasoning that exposes his laborious reactive “initiatives,” Bentinho goes to see *Othello*, not to become aware of the delusional nature of his jealousy but in order to see Desdemona’s fate as proof of Capitu’s unfaithfulness. In a magnificent passage, Machado

undermines Bentinho's own discourse by instilling into his observations the narrator's sarcastic comments, which reveal the defensive, deliberately confused and incoherent nature of his completely groundless jealousy:

I saw the moor's rage, because of a handkerchief—a mere handkerchief!—and here I provide material for the consideration of the psychologists of this and other continents, for I could not help observing that a handkerchief was enough to kindle Othello's jealousy and so bring forth the most sublime tragedy ever written. The handkerchiefs have gone, now we need the sheets themselves; sometimes not even the sheets are there, and nightshirts will do. These were the ideas that were passing through my head, vague and confused, as the moor rolled convulsively around, and Iago distilled his calumny. (226)

The looseness of such inept reasoning, the systematic use of non sequiturs, the mixture of irrelevant elements, the nonsensical deductions, all are summarized and emphasized again in Bentinho's reflections during the interval between acts: "Then I asked myself if one of these women [in the audience] might not have loved someone now lying in a cemetery, and other incoherent thoughts came into my head, until the curtain rose and the play went on" (226). With this mindless, absurd procedure, Machado arrives at the moral of his absurd story, a lament for Desdemona's innocence that paradoxically offers him the proof of Capitu's guilt: "'And she was innocent,' I said over and over as I walked down the street, 'what would the public do if she were really guilty, as guilty as Capitu?'" (226).

If one translates the character's question into the language of the narrator, we get something such as: "What would the public of the realist, naturalist novel do, the prosaic reading public that is increasingly hostile to tragic solutions and romantic ideals?" And Machado gives us the answer by describing the actions of Bentinho, who gives vent to his sorrow in "long and diffuse," then "clear and short" letters (227), which he later burns, letting his timidity and his reactive cynicism speak for themselves: the suspicions given by statistical probability. Preserving bourgeois appearances, this timorous public personified by Dom Casmurro suppresses the truth, whatever it may be, by smothering soul and action in the nebulous phantasms of resentment. Is not precisely this petty melancholy that inspires in the reader wistful feelings for Capitu's beautiful liveliness, a breath of life suffocated by the cadaveric contraction of the protagonist's sepulchral existence? Although the narrator

makes us feel Capitu's intense liveliness, this presence of a concrete, distinct being gradually fades as the novel advances. This does not occur by chance, nor should it be seen as an aesthetic flaw on the part of the author. Rather, Capitu becomes increasingly sketchy as her husband comes to see her less sharply, perhaps because he does not want to see her as she is. Capitu, Bentinho observes once, "had half a dozen gestures that were unique on earth" (221), which distinguished and singled her out; yet he is clearly unable to give us the merest hint, the slightest metaphor, the most fleeting image that might capture a spark, a reflection, a distant echo of the secret of Capitu's beauty. Thus the reader is saddled with this task; ironically, the author forces us to imagine and compose her apology.

Bentinho is quite unable to undertake such an effort of recognition. Machado underscores his inability to pick up and hold on to the telltale detail, to identify her lovable individuality, to make her—even if only temporarily—the fulcrum for recognition and the dialectic of identification. Dom Casmurro's poetic limitation is the source of his suspiciousness and his hostile dryness.

A retrospective look might show that this shady underside of the cordial phantasms of the timid, which vary from the resentment of the unloved to the romantic effusions of the loved, finds its equivalent in the history of Brazilian literature. João Cezar de Castro Rocha and Marcos Roberto Flaminio Peres have analyzed this failure in the poetry and life of Gonçalves Dias. The dryness of the poet filled with suppressed resentment finds expression in the abstract nature of his "Canção do exílio," which, instead of finding the right adjectives to capture the unique thing, indulges instead in competitive and universalizing comparisons (Rocha 128-131).

Machado de Assis identifies, analyzes, and ironizes patriarchal misogyny, but he does it with such subtlety that the reader does not necessarily perceive this implicit criticism. Ambiguously, the author subverts cordiality, even as he is complicit with it. For, like him, his contemporaries are perfectly aware of the conflicts but refrain from identifying them. The ironic subversion of conflict, whether tragic or romantic, is the secret of Machado's "elegant" style,³ and may perhaps expose as wishful thinking Roberto Schwarz's emphasis on Machado's critical pact with his public.

Notes

¹ See Secchin, 77-78. Ronalds de Melo e Sousa speaks of “multiperspectivism” and demonstrates Machado’s deliberate strategy of privileging the “Protean skill that makes [the actor and author] differ indefinitely from himself in order to experience and represent the most varied characters.”

² See Machado’s 1878 essay on naturalist realism as well as his *crônica* of 25 December 1892; see also Coutinho, 29.

³ While some critics have found fault with the “poverty” of Machado’s style, which they attribute to his “stammer,” others, such as Sílvio Romero, have seen the elegance of his “slick, manneristic, suave” style as a sign of levity of content.

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