

# The Shandean Form: Laurence Sterne and Machado de Assis

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**Abstract.** Many critics have pointed to material similarities between *Tristram Shandy* and *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. No doubt such similarities exist; however, in this paper it is suggested that the main affinities are of a formal nature in the sense that both novels can be seen as realizations of the same literary form. The study and characterization of such form is the aim of this essay.

## The Shandean form

Many critics have pointed to material similarities between *Tristram Shandy* and *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*.<sup>1</sup> No doubt such similarities exist, yet I suggest that the main affinities are of a formal nature in the sense that both novels can be seen as realizations of the same literary form.

Some authors have remarked that this form is related to the so-called Menippean satire, with its typical mixture of literary genres and of comical and serious elements.<sup>2</sup> I have myself hinted at the possibility that this form has some characteristics of the Baroque, with which Sterne had become acquainted through his reading of Montaigne, Burton, and Cervantes. These characteristics would include the sovereignty of the subject, corresponding to the political absolutism of the age; fragmentation, as an expression of the anatomical dismemberment of the corpse; a non-linear view of time, reflecting the conception of history as natural history; and a blending of melancholy, as a reaction to the carnages of war, and of laughter, as an antidote against mourning.<sup>3</sup> But in general, writers belonging both to the Menippean and to the baroque traditions have concentrated on satirical poems, come-

dies, tragedies, philosophical dialogues, and not on the novel, as it arose in the eighteenth century. This is precisely what Sterne did. Whatever his relationship to his predecessors, there is no doubt that in this sense he was the creator of a new literary form.

But he did not define it. Curiously enough, this was done by Machado de Assis, in the very first lines of a book published 132 years after *Tristram Shandy*—*The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. In Brás Cubas' foreword, we read:

It is, in truth, a diffuse work, in which I, Brás Cubas, if I have indeed adopted the free form of a Sterne or of a Xavier de Maistre, have possibly added a certain peevish optimism of my own. Quite possibly. The work of a man already dead. I wrote it with the pen of Mirth and the ink of melancholy, and one can readily foresee what may come of such a union. ("To the Reader" 3)

In the prologue to the third edition, not included in William Grossman's translation, Machado de Assis adds a third name to that of Sterne and Xavier de Maistre, that of Almeida Garrett, and explains: "All these people have traveled, Xavier de Maistre around his room, Garrett in his country and Sterne in somebody else's country. As to Brás Cubas, we can say that he traveled around life." Finally, in the first chapter Cubas draws attention to the liberties he had taken with chronology: instead of beginning his narrative with his birth, he had begun it with his death (1.3-5).<sup>4</sup>

These quotations make it clear that we are dealing with a *form*, and that this form has at least four characteristics: 1) the emphatic presence of the narrator, underlined in the text by the words "I, Brás Cubas"; 2) a "free" technique of composition that gives the text a "diffuse" aspect—that is, digressive, fragmentary, non-discursive; 3) the central place assigned to time (the paradoxes of chronology) and space (travels); and 4) the interpenetration of laughter and melancholy.

Machado de Assis defined the form, but he did not name it. I propose to call it the "Shandean form." In this article I would like to re-examine the question of the affinities between Sterne and Machado in the light of the new perspectives opened by the concept of the Shandean form.

### **Hypertrophism of subjectivity**

The Shandean narrative, always in the first person, is characterized by the

extreme volubility of the narrator, and by his arrogance, sometimes direct, sometimes masked by an apparent deference.

Tristram Shandy is the prototype of all voluble narrators. He dissertates on everything, without forgetting studs and buttons. He is as full of opinions as his father, Walter, who has ideas about Locke's psychology, about the influence of names on the destiny of individuals (but for a sad mistake, Tristram would have been named Trismegistus), about the shape of noses, and about education (he decides to write a Tristapœdia for the education of his son). He is a *nouveau riche* of world literature. He parades his knowledge of all centuries and all countries in an extravagant display of scholarship, which goes from Cicero and Quintilian to Rabelais, Montaigne, Cervantes, Montesquieu, and Voltaire.

He obeys no rules—neither those of plausibility nor those of aesthetics. He disposes of all narrative conventions: “I should beg Mr. Horace's pardon, for in writing I shall confine myself neither to his rules nor to any man's rules that ever lived” (I.4.7). He is sadistic in his relationship with the reader. Tristram plays with the reader, insulting him, humiliating him, pretending he is establishing a dialogue with him, but interrupting the conversation all the time, arbitrarily. The tone starts respectfully—the reader is “dear friend and companion” (I.6.10)—but immediately afterwards he is “a great dunce and a blockhead” (I.11.26). Sometimes the narrator gives to his unhappy victims the illusion that they are free: “I can give you no better advice than that they skip over the remaining of the chapter” (I.4.7). But who would dare follow this advice, if a few lines afterwards he will be scolded by his ruthless tormentor? “How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter?” (I.20.58). The narrator leaves us no illusions: he has us in his power, and even when he spares us it just another form of whim. “‘Tis enough to have thee in my power—but to make use of the advantage which the fortune of pen has now gained over thee, would be too much” (VII.6.503). The expression “fortune of the pen” lays bare the master-slave relationship: it is a parody of the term “fortune of arms,” the right of the conqueror to reduce the defeated enemy to serfdom. In short, the narrator is neither a constitutional king, because he respects no Magna Carta, nor a despot of the *ancien régime*, because even Louis XIV was bound by custom and by tradition. He is rather an Eastern Sultan, *omne lege soluto*.

As for Brás Cubas, volubility is his most obvious attribute, as Roberto Schwarz has observed.<sup>5</sup> He is the voluble narrator par excellence. Brás shifts from one position to another, from one philosophical system to another. He

expresses his opinion on everything. He thinks jewelers are indispensable to love. And don't you believe that he has not read Pascal. Not only has he read him but he also disagrees with him, because man is not a thinking reed but a thinking errata, since each station of life is an edition that corrects the previous ones. From Pascal he goes to boots: is there any pleasure that can compare to taking off a tight pair of boots? Naturally there is only one step from boots to Aristotle, who has not discovered an important truth found out by Brás, the solidarity of human boredom. Moral conscience? A system of windows that open, while others are closed. But let us come to the more sensational subject of feminine indiscretion. Sensational, yes, but vulgar. Let everybody know that he, Brás, is capable of profound thoughts that could have been conceived by Solomon or Schopenhauer.

The narrator's relationship with the reader goes through all the variations of sadism, from seeming deference to open aggression. The ironic regard appears in expressions such as "beloved reader" (49.88) or in passages in which he seems to treat the reader as a grown-up, deferring to his judgment: "I am going to explain the matter to him briefly. Let him judge for himself" (1.7). He goes to the extreme of attributing to the reader clever comments, which he has not made, and of inviting him to collaborate in the book. For instance, chapter 52 has no title, chapter 55 has no text: be so good, dear reader, as to provide the title and the text. But, as in the case of Sterne, it is a deceptive respect. The reader is infantilized. "There is no need for him to curl his lip at me merely because we have not yet come to the narrative part of these memoirs" (4.10). He is even more repressive with a sensitive reader who dares to disapprove of Brás' behavior: "Withdraw, then, the unfortunate phrase that you used, sensitive soul; discipline your nerves, clean your eye-glasses" (34.72). The narrator doesn't leave us any choice but that of sulking in a corner, sucking our thumb. When dropping his pretences, Brás has the undisguised brutality of a bully. He may punish his readers with just "a snap of the fingers" ("To the Reader" 3) or threaten them with death, with a sneer that does not conceal a homicidal intention: "Such an insult would have to be washed away with blood" (34.72). Brás' abuses are vociferous. The reader is obtuse and ignorant (49.89). With such incompetent readers, how can one expect his book to be a good one? Brás washes his hands, transferring to the reader all responsibility for the shortcomings of his work: "the great defect of this book is you, reader" (71.117). He scorns all narrative conventions. He intervenes constantly in the narrative, interrupting its flow according to his

caprice. He is almighty and can perform miracles, such as that of writing a book after his death. He identifies himself with Moses, the founder of a people, for, like Moses, he has described his own death. He is even slightly superior to Moses, at least from a literary point of view, since in relating his death at the beginning Brás' work gained "in merriment and novelty" (1.5). On the secular level, he is a caliph, an absolute sovereign, endowed with the power of disobeying all logical and aesthetic canons.

### Digressivity and fragmentation

The most obvious manner for studying the digressions in *Tristram Shandy* would be to isolate the main narrative—the life and opinions of the narrator—and to decide that everything else would be digression. The problem with this procedure is that the main narrative is quite laconic. We finish the book without knowing practically anything about Tristram, except some episodes of his pre-natal life, the flattening of his nose as a result of the incompetence of a doctor, the unfortunate fact of his being christened Tristram, his accidental circumcision, his premature breeching, the two trips he made to France, and the fact that he had a mysterious lady-friend he calls "dear Jenny" and a no less obscure male-friend named Eugenius. As to his opinions, they take a modest second place in the book, as compared to the opinions of his father, Walter Shandy. All this fits in a few pages, and as the book has 674 pages in the Everyman's edition, we must conclude that the digressive matter is much richer than the narrative matter.

We find many types of digression, according to the nature of interpolated material.

Most digressions are on "opinions," as can be expected from the title. They cover an astounding variety of subjects, including whiskers and button-holes. We have already dealt with these opinions as illustrations of the narrator's subjectivity.

There are digressions composed of ready-made material, such as a text by Sorbonne theologians, in old French, about the legitimacy of the baptism of unborn babies; a sermon read by corporal Trim, attributed to one of the characters of the book, the parson Yorick, and actually written by Sterne himself as part of his duties as clergyman; and the Latin text of a curse written by bishop Ernulphus, the best and most comprehensive of curses, according to Walter.

A third type of digression is formed by parallel stories. They can be called narrative digressions. There are isolated narratives, such as a short story attrib-



uted to the scholarly Dr. Slawkenbergius, partly written in Latin, designed to illustrate the importance of large noses—whatever meaning we choose to give to the word “nose.” There is also a *historiette* taking place at the court of the Queen of Navarre, dealing with moustaches, and full of bawdy innuendos. And there is the story of the abbess and the nun, in France, who faced with the need to use obscene language in order to persuade a pair of mules to go forward, decide to dilute their sin by each of them pronouncing one syllable of the forbidden word. But in addition to these isolated stories, we can distinguish two narrative cycles, one on the life of uncle Toby and another centering on the stories told by uncle Toby’s servant, Trim.

The cycle of Toby contains first of all the story of his life from the moment he was wounded in the Netherlands until his decision of reproducing all the episodes of the war in miniature models. Second, there is the narrative of Le Fever, an officer who falls ill as he tries to join his regiment, and who is nursed by Toby until Le Fever’s death. Third, there is the most famous episode of the book, the story of Toby’s courtship of the widow Wadman, which comes to an abrupt end when Mrs. Wadman shocks Toby with her suspicion that his groin injury might have affected more delicate organs.

Trim’s cycle includes the story of his relationship with a nun, who nurses him when he is wounded at the knee, and massages him at the knee and even above it. It includes also the story of Trim’s brother, jailed by the Lisbon Inquisition after marrying the widow of a Jewish sausage-maker. It includes even a tale that was never told, the story of the King of Bohemia and his seven castles, which Trim tries to tell again and again—in vain.

But the most characteristic digressions are of a self-reflexive nature. They are digressions about the book itself, including digressions about digressions. Sterne disdains to efface himself from the book in order to create an illusion of objectivity. We are far from *le moi haïssable* and from the naturalistic program of transforming the author into a neutral medium through which reality represents itself. On the contrary, Sterne makes a point of saying that his work is a subjective construction, a beautiful machine, the gears and cogwheels of which he is proud to show to the reader. Among the self-reflexive digressions, the most typical ones are the digressions about digressions. From the first pages, he asks the reader’s indulgence for his digressive method: “If I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road [...] don’t fly off” (I.6.10-11). For how can anyone with a minimum of imagination travel in a straight line, instead of exploring all possible detours? How can one ride from Rome

to Loreto, for instance, without inserting stories, deciphering inscriptions, and convening people? At every state of the journey “there are archives [...] to be looked upon, and rolls, records, documents, and endless genealogies [...] in short, there is no end of it” (I.14.37). The digressions with which Tristram tries to justify his digressions are sometimes so full of digressions that the narrator gets hopelessly confused. “And now you see, I am lost myself” (VI.33.482-483). Giving up all hope of explaining himself through language, he draws diagrams and geometrical figures. No sooner has he promised that he will from now on try to avoid digressions, he relapses and again digresses on digressions: “a good quantity of heterogeneous matter could be inserted to keep up that just balance between wisdom and folly without which a book would not hold together a single year.” And since a digression is necessary, it should be “a good frisky one, and upon a frisky subject too” (IX.12.640). But Tristram decides to insert this frisky digression only three chapters later, and takes advantage of the intermediate chapters to pave the way for it. He does so by writing new digressions, including one on his habit of shaving when he feels particularly stupid. But alas, “what a strange creature is mortal man!” When he arrives at the chapter in which he had planned to make his frisky digression, he remarks sadly that he had already made it (IX.12-14.640-644). The canonical digression in which Tristram explains his method is a text in which he says that just as the earth has a movement of rotation and of translation, his work has a movement of progression and of digression: “Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine—they are the life, the soul of reading. Take them out of this book, for instance—you might as well take the books along with them. [...] For which reason, from the beginning of this, you see, I have constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with intersections, and have so complicated and involved the digressive and progressive movements, one wheel within the other, that the whole machinery, in general, has been kept a-going” (I.22.73-74).

We can now understand the diabolical complexity of the work. The main narrative is cut whenever a digression occurs. In turn, the digressions are cut by the main narrative and by other digressions. Each cut generates two fragments, and as the cuts are multiple, the segmentation process is virtually endless.

As a loyal Shandeist, Machado de Assis constructs his *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* as an assemblage of fragments, almost as a *montage*, in the cinematic sense. He uses and recycles alien fragments, extracted from the classical works of universal literature, which he plunders without any inhibition.

In addition, he produces his own fragments by breaking sentences and narratives into pieces. This is the job of digressions. We find in the book all the kinds of digressions created or used by Sterne.

First of all come the opinions. Like Tristram, Brás has opinions on everything, and in the spirit of true Shandean volubility he offers the reader digressions on tight boots, on the tip of the nose and on the equivalence of windows.

Digressions made up of ready-made materials appear in the aphorisms of chapter 119 and in the epitaph of chapter 125, which replaces the description of the death of Brás' would-be bride, Nhã-Loló.

As to the narrative digressions, the main one is the parallel story of Quincas Borba. Each episode of this parallel narration is a fragment splitting the main narration into other fragments. But in addition to the story of Quincas Borba there are small narratives, short stories of an edifying nature, brief *vignettes* in the form of apologues, or *contes moraux*. They are self-contained fragments of their own. Such are the episodes of the captain who writes verses while his wife is dying, of a muleteer who helps the narrator and is rewarded in a miserly way, of the black Prudencio, who is beaten by the young Brás and afterwards beats slaves of his own, and, linked to this story, the fragment of a fragment, the tale of a madman, Romualdo, who ingests so much tartar that he believes he is Tamerlan, king of Tartars.

But it is in the self-reflexive digressions that Brás is most Shandean. There he is in his real element. His book is a glass workshop, within which the craftsman keeps hammering, smoothing with a file, forging junctions, choosing and discarding materials, correcting the work, starting anew. If the glass is not transparent enough, the narrator does not hesitate to clear up compositional details, by writing letters to the critics, for instance: "Good God, do I have to explain everything?" (138.190). The book is an artifact, with a production process of its own, which Brás invites the reader to inspect, stage by stage. The tone is given from the prologue, in which the narrator explains the diffuse and free manner of the work and in which he makes reflections on prologues in general, asserting that the best format is the one he has chosen. He amuses himself with self-congratulatory remarks. The book, composed with an "extraordinary method" ("To the Reader" 3) was "supinely philosophical" (4.10). And what an artistic talent! "Observe now with what skill, with what art, I make the biggest transition in this book. [...] Did you note carefully? No apparent seams or joints. [...] Thus the book has all the advantages of system and method without the rigidity that they generally entail" (9.23). But



Brás is not incapable of self-criticism. “The book is tedious, it smells of the tomb, it has a *rigor mortis* about it” (71.117). Self-praise and self-criticism alternate from chapter to chapter. One chapter contains a wisdom that had escaped Aristotle (chap. 81). Another one has a splendid ending: “Blessed be the Lord, what an impressive close for a chapter!” (99.153). One chapter he says is sad (23.56), another not profound (132.185), another useless (136.188), and another repetitive (145.196). He continuously explains his preferences as a writer. He tries to control himself to avoid prolixity, though now and then he fails. “Sometimes I forget that I am writing and the pen moves along, eating up paper, with grave detriment to me as author” (22.55). He hates emphasis, he loves simplicity. “Hold on! There goes my pen slipping to the emphatic” (25.58). He does not like to say anything that is morally unbecoming, because after all his book is chaste, at least in intention (14.36). He hints at the several love affairs he had had before Virgília, but he only allows his pen to enter his house after a process of moral purification. “Badly bred pen, put a fashionable tie to your style, and clothe it with a less drab waistcoat; and then yes, come with me to this house, stretch yourself in this hammock” (47.86). The narrator never tires to explain the order and content of the chapters. At times their title is enough to make clear their digressive character. One of them is called “Parenthetical” (119.173), another “Interposition” (124.180), and another “To insert in chapter 129” (130.184).

Among the self-reflexive digressions, the most fascinating ones are the digressions about digressions, in which the narrator reflects on digression as a constructive process. The many allusions to “method” belong to this category. Brás is proud of having the style of a drunkard, walking in zigzag fashion, going back and forth. “This book and my style are like a pair of drunks; they stagger to the right and to the left, they start and they mutter, they roar, they guffaw, they threaten the sky, they slip and fall” (71.117-118). But what kind of style is this? We are reminded of Roland Barthes when Brás compares his style to amorous discourse:<sup>6</sup> “I have already compared my style to the progress of a drunk. If this analogy seems indecorous to you, let me offer another: my style is like the afternoon snacks I had in the little house in Gamboa. Wine, fruit, compotes. We would eat, to be sure, but the meal was always punctuated with sweet nothings, with tender glances, with childish whims, with an infinitude of these asides of the heart that constitute the true, uninterrupted discourse of love” (73.119). Admirable metaphor: the meal has its normal flow, codified by tradition—wine, fruit, sweets. But the flow is

punctuated by erotic commas, which in their intermittent manifestation are the real straight line of the heart: disruptive discourse, itself made of interruptions, the transgressive and digressive speech of Eros severing the connections established by Logos.

### Time and space

In *Tristram Shandy*, chronological time is refracted by the narrator's subjectivity. In this respect, the narrator can be as Shandean as he likes, because he has on his side the best authority Europe could provide: John Locke. For Locke, quoted by Sterne in his reply to an imaginary critic (II.2.85), time is an idea, the idea of duration, which is obtained through a reflection on the sequence of our ideas. The concept of succession arises when we reflect on the appearance of several consecutive ideas, and the distance between two such ideas in our mind is what we call duration. Duration is therefore purely subjective, and therefore time may pass very fast or very slowly, according to our states of mind. As a narrator, Tristram operates in the medium of duration and not in that of quantitative time. It is the succession of ideas of the narrator that determines the temporal articulations of the book. He deals with time as he had dealt with the reader, in a completely arbitrary manner. He creates a narrative time that distorts the time of action—the objective time within which the story unfolds—through a number of techniques. These somewhat cinematic techniques include those of immobilization, inversion, delay, and acceleration.

Immobilization achieves what we might call the “Sleeping Beauty effect,” an allusion to the fairy-tale in which everybody in the castle falls asleep for one hundred years. The classical example is the sequence between chapter 21 of Book I and chapter 6 of Book II. Hearing a noise in the room in which his sister-in-law was about to give birth, uncle Toby says “I think [...]” and makes the gesture of throwing away the ashes of his pipe. He remains frozen in that position for forty pages of digressions and only then does he empty his pipe and complete his sentence: what he thought was that it was time to call the doctor (I.21.64; II.6.100). When his father receives the news that the baby's nose was crushed by the doctor, Walter is so afflicted that in sheer despair he remains petrified in bed for fourteen chapters and sixty pages (III.30.224). Tristram decides to let Mrs. Shandy remain frozen in the attitude of listening at a door for five minutes, but it is much later and after many digressions that he finally decides to unfreeze her. “I am a Turk if I had not as much as forgot my mother, as if Nature had plaistered me up, and set

me down naked upon the bank of the river Nile, without one" (V.11.382).

Through inversion, the narrator acts upon the arrow of time, making it reversible. In the usual cinematic procedure, there are flashbacks and flash-forwards. The book starts before the beginning and finishes before the end. The beginning, which should be the story of Walter and Toby, turns out to be the story of the pre-natal calamities that befall the hero, such as Mrs. Shandy's untimely interruption of her husband when he was engaged in the delicate task of begetting his son. The end, which should be the hero's maturity and when he begins to write his memoirs, is the final episode of uncle Toby's infatuation with the widow, that is, four years before Tristram's birth. Through inversion, the past can be recaptured, *retrouvé*, in the best Proustian sense, and even be subject to the author's intervention, such as the passage in which he warns his long-dead uncle of Mrs. Wadman's matrimonial schemes. Similarly, the future can be embedded in the past: in the midst of his uncle's imaginary "campaigns," Tristram transports Toby and Trim into a far-distant future, in which master and servant are already dead.

Slowness and rapidity are the two extremes of the narrator's rhythm. Sometimes he feels the need to tell everything, to capture all objects, all actions, all reflections of the external world in the consciousness of the writer, which means that he must turn right and left, go back and forward, describing everything, excluding nothing. From the very beginning, Tristram begs to tell the story in his own manner, even if this manner involves "trifling upon the road" (I.6.10-11). This "trifling," filmed by a very slow camera, can mean endless delay. But at other moments, the narrator becomes impatient, and moves forward at such speed that we can scarcely follow the film. The best example is the biography of Tristram, of whom we know very little, apart from two or three episodes, such as the fact that he was breeched before time and that he traveled twice to the continent. The reason is that here the narrator prefers the rapid movement. At one extreme, everything is important, and nothing should be lost, and the consequence is delay; at the other extreme, details are insignificant, which requires a highly selective camera, with which pictures and events follow each other with the speed of lightning. In the slow movement, small episodes and events drag on interminably, with tedious thoroughness (see the German word for boredom, *Langeweile*, long duration); in the rapid movement, years and even decades are telescoped into a few lines.

The various attitudes toward time reappear in the graphic eccentricities of the book. The idea of temporal immobility, the empty time during which

nothing happens, which in the text appears in the form of the freezing technique, is expressed graphically in the form of blank chapters, such as chapter 18 and most of chapter 19 of Book IX. The idea of reversible time, which in the text takes the form of an inversion in the order of events, now appears as an inversion in the internal organization of the text: instead of appearing at the beginning, the dedication appears in chapter 8 of Book I, and the preface in chapter 20 of Book III. The idea of duration as a subjective experience, brief or long irrespective of the actual lapse of time, is reflected, as we have seen, in the alternation between rapid and slow storytelling; but it is reflected also in the alternation between abnormally short chapters—chapter 5 of Book IV has only two lines—and abnormally long ones—chapter 17 of Book II, containing the full text of a sermon, has more than twenty pages.

Shandean space is not the usual space of travelers of the Grand Tour, young sprigs of the British aristocracy who went to France and Italy in order to improve their minds. This is made clear by Tristram, who scoffs at the mania of writing about famous cities and monuments: “Now I think it very much amiss that a man cannot go quietly through a town and leave it alone, when it does not meddle with him, but that he must be turning about and drawing his pen at every kennel he crosses over” (VII.4.499). It is made even clearer by the prototype of all Shandean travelers, Yorick, the *alter ego* of Sterne: “I have not seen the Palais Royal—nor the Luxembourg—nor the façade of the Louvre, nor have attempted to swell the catalogues we have of pictures, statues and churches.”<sup>7</sup> What is this space? Is it, perhaps, the baroque space of the labyrinth, full of mysteries and unexpected delights, or that of the picaresque novel, where each day holds an adventure with bandits or an encounter with ladies in distress? It is certainly true that such encounters are not rare either in Tristram’s or Yorick’s travels—after all, they are “sentimental travelers.” But I would say that it is rather the non-rectilinear space of the Shandean narrator, where there are no straight lines, because the road is always zigzag. In a way, it is an anticipation of the space of early modernity, the space of the *flâneur*,<sup>8</sup> for whom the *flânerie* is a kind of urban digression, a lazy stroll away from the main road. Who else feels so much at home in digressions as a Shandean traveler-narrator? “If he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make this or that party as he goes along” (I.14.37). But even when he is not strolling, but galloping, the traveler has no pre-determined destination. He may stop at the banks of the Garonne, but he may also “scamper away to mount Vesuvius, from thence to

Joppa, and from Joppa to the world's end" (VII.1.496-497). Whatever its nature, space becomes as subjective as time. Just as he had done with clock-time, Sterne de-materializes geometric space. The characters travel, but in a space reconstructed by the writer's evocations and fantasies; this remembered space corresponds as little to objective space as remembered time corresponds to objective time.

Machado de Assis is second to none in the Shandean skill of transforming objective into subjective time. This is coherent with the law of caprice, the essence of Shandean subjectivity: a despot in everything, Brás Cubas wants also to be the master of time. But he is also a melancholic, haunted by the idea of the ephemeral character of all things. As a tyrant or as a melancholic, he wants to control time. This is what he does as a narrator, subordinating entirely the time of action to narrative time. In so doing, he uses all the strategies of temporal disorganization applied by Tristram: immobilization, inversion, delay, and acceleration.

By creating a dead narrator, Machado de Assis goes beyond anything Sterne had imagined in trying to achieve immobilization. Tristram freezes his characters, but does not freeze himself. When he began writing his memoirs, he was alive, and therefore subject to change, like all living authors. The proof is that after this, his health had deteriorates—after writing four volumes, his head “ached dismally”—and might deteriorate even further, preventing him from telling the story of uncle Toby's amours: “I take my leave of you till this time twelve-month, when (unless this vile cough kills me in the mean time) I'll have another pluck at your beards and lay open a story to the world you little dream of” (IV.32.350). In contrast, Brás is changeless. He is installed from the very beginning in a time beyond time, the time of eternity. He cannot speak about death in the future tense, like Tristram but, being a posthumous author, only in the past tense. Being dead, he cannot die. He cannot get thinner, because “bones never grow thin” (23.56). He cannot get older, because “death does not age” (138.190). After having put himself beyond time, Brás proceeds to do the same throughout the book. He does so by creating zones of timelessness by means of the usual Shandean mannerisms: chapters without a title, titles without a text. Chapter 53, about the first kiss of Brás and Virgília, has no title. The reason is that it is not a real chapter, but a prologue, the prologue of the adulterous love that will be recounted later. As a prologue, placed before the beginning, it corresponds to a zero time, an immovable time of perfect bliss. “This single kiss united us, this kiss,



ardent and brief." But after this time-free prologue comes the story itself, subject to all the vicissitudes of time: "a life of nervousness, of anger, of despair, of jealousy, all of them paid for in full by one hour, but another hour would come and would swallow up the first and everything that went with it, leaving only the nervousness and the dregs, and the dregs of the dregs, which are satiety and disgust—such was to be the book of which this kiss was the prologue" (53.94-95). Chapter 55 has a title ("The Venerable Dialogue of Adam and Eve") and the names of Virgília and Brás Cubas as dialogue-partners, but the text is replaced by dots and punctuation marks. The words are unnecessary, because the script is everywhere the same. It is the universal comedy of the sexes, beyond all variations of history, and in this sense the absence of words alludes to the absence of change. Chapter 139, "How I Did Not Become a Minister of State," signifies the zero time of a non-event.

Machado de Assis uses with great virtuosity another Shandean strategy, inversion, which, again, allows the narrator to make time reversible. Thus, Brás goes back to chapters already written, as when he decides to intercalate chapter 130 in chapter 129. But the best example of temporal inversion is the central device of the book, Brás' decision to start his memoirs with his death, and not his birth. This inversion is more radical than anything attempted in *Tristram Shandy*, which finishes before the hero's birth, but has not the audacity to start with the hero's death.

Delay and acceleration are also common in the book. Delay is mainly obtained through the countless digressions, which we have already examined. Acceleration, drastically shortening entire years and decades of the hero's life, is frankly acknowledged by the narrator. When he comes to his school years, he says: "Let's all get set and jump over the school, the tiresome school, where I learned to read, to write, to count, to hit my schoolmates, to be hit by them, and to raise the devil on the hills" (13.34). He starts to talk about his schoolmate, Quincas Borba, but then decides to jump again: "Instead, let us jump to 1822, the date of Brasil's political independence and of my own first captivity" (13.35). Sometimes he checks himself when he notices he is becoming prolix. "No, let us not prolong the chapter" (22.55).

According to the Shandean tradition, Brás Cubas crosses space at random, without any pre-conceived plan. This is what happens when he walks mechanically towards the Pharoux Hotel. "While I was thinking about these people, my legs were carrying me along, street after street, until, to my surprise, I found myself at the door of the Pharoux Hotel. I was in the habit of

dining there; but, as on this occasion I had not gone there deliberately, credit for my arrival belongs not to me, but to my legs” (66.112). But in general, Shandean authors and characters relate to space through travels, and not through automatic perambulations. Traveling as a common denominator of Shandeism was discovered, as we have seen, by Machado de Assis himself. But we may travel in two ways, either following a Baedeker guidebook or obeying subjective impulses. Shandean travelers belong to the second group. We have seen that speaking through Yorick, Sterne made it clear that he would not describe anything that usual travelers write about, such as the Louvre, the Luxembourg, and the Palais-Royal, but only what was of interest to him. Brás Cubas follows this example to the letter. He boasts of his sentimental involvements in Europe, but refuses with great energy to say anything about serious matters, such as the dawn of Romanticism. This should be left to other authors. “Of these matters, I say nothing. I should have to write a travel diary and not memoirs, such as these, in which only the substance of my life is set forth” (22.54). Brás is unambiguous: space is interesting only when it is evoked, and should enter the narrative only in an impressionistic manner, determined by the narrator’s associative processes.

Such is the space that appears in the book. Like time, space is de-constructed, internalized. Narrated space is purely subjective. It is distorted in memory and fantasy. The urban space of Rio de Janeiro shrinks to a few streets and neighborhoods. It is reduced to the Rocio, where Brás met Marcela, Tijuca, where he flirted with Eugenia, to Ourives Street, where he re-encounters Marcela, Gamboa, where he used to see Virgília, and Catumbi, where he died. The distance between two points—the trip from Rio to Lisbon, where he met the captain-poet, from Coimbra do Lisbon, where he met the muleteer, from Venice to Rio, where he thought about his mother’s death—loses all topographical meaning and becomes only an abstract frame of reference for the illustration of states of mind.

But what did Machado de Assis mean when he said that Brás Cubas had traveled around life? Obviously, that Cubas, blinded by the vain glitter of vanity and prestige, had not managed to plunge into life itself, but was condemned to turn around it, like a moth around the flame. At the same time, this expression reminds us of the astronomical metaphor in chapter 150: “In the wheel of the great mystery, man both rotates and revolves; he has his days—unequal, like Jupiter’s—and of these he makes up his year of uncertain length” (150.202). The translational movement of Cubas around life resulted

in a “year” of about sixty years, with “days” entirely devoted to frivolity. The astronomical comparison suggests a circular movement, with a return to the starting point. In fact, Brás’ travels led him nowhere. He gesticulated a great deal but stayed in the same place. Thus the Shandean characteristic of motionless time tends to coincide with that of spatial immobility. This immobility is the basic vocation of all Shandean authors, no matter how much they travel, and this reinforces the self-classification of Machado de Assis, a man who never traveled, as a scion of the Shandean lineage.

### Laughter and melancholy

Tristram is a melancholic, haunted by the ghosts of transiency, of fleeting time, of death. No wonder that one of the books most quoted (and plagiarized) by Sterne is *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, by Robert Burton. But invariably Sterne inserts his melancholic reflections in a context in which they become comical. In so doing, he goes back to the tradition of Antiquity, according to which the philosopher Democritus is alleged to have said to Hippocrates that laughing was the best antidote against melancholy. There is no doubt too that he absorbed the lesson of Rabelais, who wrote in the prologue to *Gargantua* that “*Voyant le dueil qui vous mine et consommé / Mieux est de ris que de larmes escrire / Pour ce que rire est le propre de l’homme.*”

Sterne agrees entirely. For him laughter is in general the supreme medicine against disease. In the book’s dedication to Mr. Pitt, he says that he is constantly fighting “the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth: being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles, but much more so, when he laughs, it adds something to this fragment of life” (v). But laughter acts in particular on disorders of the mind. It produces ideal readers—“As we jog on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do anything, only keep your temper” (I.6.11)—and ideal subjects:

Was I left, like Sancho Panza, to choose my kingdom, it should not be maritime—or a kingdom of blacks to make a penny of; no, it should be a kingdom of hearty laughing subjects. And as the bilious and more saturnine passions, by creating disorders in the blood and humors, have as bad an influence, I see, upon the body politic as upon the body natural, [...] I should add to my prayer that God would give my subjects grace to be as wise as they are merry; and then should I be the happiest monarch, and they the happiest people under heaven. (IV.32.350)

The book as a whole can be seen as a panacea against melancholy: “If (this book) is wrote against anything—‘tis wrote, an’please your worships, against the spleen! in order, by a more frequent and more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostal and abdominal muscles in laughter, to drive the gall and other bitter juices from the gall-bladder, liver and sweetbread of his majesty’s subjects, with all the inimicitious passions which belong to them, down into their duodenum” (IV.22.311).

*Tristram Shandy* translates this theory into practice. Every time the theme of decay or death turns up, laughter makes it harmless. Thus, addressing himself to his “dear Jenny,” Tristram utters grave reflections that could have come out of Ecclesiastes: “Time wastes too fast; every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity life follows my pen; the days and hours of it, more precious, my dear Jenny, than the rubies about thy neck, are flying over our heads like light clouds of a windy day, never to return more [...]. Heaven have mercy upon us both!” (IX.8.636). But this elegiac note is interrupted in the following chapter, which consists of only fifteen words, well calculated to provoke a bittersweet fit of *fou rire*: “Now, for what the world thinks of that ejaculation—I would not give a groat” (IX.9.636).

Death is always turned into a joke. A good example is the chapter in which Walter Shandy comments upon the death of Bobby, Tristram’s brother. Philosophy offers many consolations for such tragedies, remarks Tristram, but the problem was that when Walter received the sad news he used all of those consolations at the same time—“he took them as they came” (V.3.367)—and the result was a terrible confusion. Walter dissertated interminably about death, but in such a disorderly way that even the Magna Carta entered into his discourse. When Walter managed to say something intelligible, such as “to die is the great debt and tribute due unto nature” (V.3.367), uncle Toby interrupted with eccentric remarks. For the philosopher, says Walter, death is liberation, because it helps him get rid of his melancholy: “Is it not better to be freed from cares and agues, from love and melancholy, and the other hot and cold fits of life, than like a galled traveler, who comes weary to his inn, to be bound to begin his journey afresh?” (V.3.370). Yes, but, as Tristram duly notes, in saying these noble words Walter had completely forgotten his departed son. The great object of melancholic meditation, the theme *ubi sunt*, through which philosophers from Antiquity have deplored human mortality and the decline of empires, was conscientiously included in

Walter's reflections: "Where is Troy and Mycenae, and Thebes and Delos, and Persepolis and Agrigentum?" (V.3.367). But the beautiful effect of this tirade was somewhat marred by the fact that in referring to a certain voyage made in Greece, Walter forgot to inform his brother Toby that he was quoting from a contemporary of Cicero. Thus, not unnaturally, Toby thought that the trip had been made by Walter, and asked him in which year of our Lord it had taken place. In no year of our Lord, said Walter. How so? Well, because it took place forty years before Christ was born (V.3.369).

The horror of death is similarly neutralized in Book VII. Death knocks at Tristram's door, but is received "in so gay a tone of careless indifference" that he doubted his commission. The reason was that Tristram, who hated to be interrupted, was at that moment telling Eugenius a tawdry story "of a nun who fancied herself a shell-fish, and of a monk damned for eating a mussel" (VII.1.496).

Like Tristram, Brás is melancholic, which should come as no surprise, considering that he behaves like a tyrant and that tyrants are especially vulnerable to melancholy (if we are to believe Walter Benjamin, for whom melancholy is the illness of the Prince, more exposed than anyone else to the frailty of the human condition).<sup>9</sup> Melancholy appears in the morbidity that permeates the whole book, and even in its rhythm, which the digressive method condemns to slowness. According to ancient authors, the slow and cadenced pace is characteristic of melancholy.

The fundamental theme of the melancholic author, the flight of time, is present everywhere. Consider, among many other examples, the metaphor of the clock, whose gloomy tick tock seemed to say at each stroke that Brás would have one less second to live: "I would imagine an old devil sitting between two bags, one labeled life and the other death, taking coins from the former and dropping them into the latter, and saying: 'Another gone [...] another gone [...]' (54.95).

But in the authentic Shandean manner, there is laughter too. Of what kind? Classical authors recognized two kinds of laughter: pathological laughter, a symptom of insanity, and medicinal laughter, which could purge the body and the mind of melancholic humors. There is very little of the first kind in Sterne. In contrast, it plays an important role in Machado. This type is illustrated by Pandora's laugh, the delirium of the narrator: "The figure loosed a fierce laugh, which produced about us the effect of a whirlwind; the plants were contorted, and a long wail broke the silence of the surroundings" (7.18). It is illustrated, in the same episode, by the dying man himself,



already half-demented: “It was I who began to laugh, with a laughter immoderate and idiotic” (7.21). The other kind of laughter is medicinal—the laughter of Democritus, Rabelais, and Sterne. Like his predecessors, Machado duly provides his reader with comedy in order to make him laugh. But unlike them, he has no illusions about the medicinal effect of this laughter. On the contrary, its function seems to be to discredit the very idea that melancholy can be cured at all. This humor is a “plaster” that might have been able to cure him. But it failed, and had to fail, because Brás was not serious enough to produce a real invention. He was a tyrant, but he was also a clown, like Tristram, whose *alter ego* was the king of buffoons, Yorick. The true vocation of this tyrannical clown was the circus. This is how he describes the birth of his fixed idea: “One morning, as I was strolling through the grounds of my suburban home, an idea took hold of the trapeze that I used to carry about in my head. Once it had taken hold, it flexed its arms and legs and began to do the most daring acrobatic feats one can possibly imagine [...]. This idea was nothing less than the invention of a great cure, an anti-melancholy plaster, designed to relieve the despondency of mankind” (2.7). The description leaves no doubt. The invention was not sublime, but ludicrous, a juggler’s fancy, an idea so comical that it finished by killing the inventor with a ridiculous death—pneumonia caused by a draught—a fate worthy of a jester but not of a tyrant whose exalted rank requires no less than assassination by poison or by a dagger.

This tyrannical and clownish man is a saturnine, ruled by the planet of melancholy but also of antitheses, which accounts for his contradictory attributes. Saturn appears twice in the book. The first time, Brás begins to get tired of Virgília and watches a fly and an ant grappling with each other. What is the importance of this scene from the point of view of Saturn? The second time, he comments on the spectacle of love affairs succeeding each other, all ephemeral, all condemned to oblivion, and decides that the whole show has been staged to entertain Saturn, to relieve him of his boredom. We are almost tempted to interpret these remarks as classical instances of melancholic meditation—the theme of life’s transience, *de brevitae vitae*—when we become aware at the last minute that this theme is being introduced in a derisive manner. The end of Brás’ liaison with Virgília is illustrated by the struggle of two insects, and life’s fugacity is a spectacle to amuse a planet—to make it laugh.

The last word stays with melancholy. This is not because Brás’ death prevented the production of the anti-melancholic plaster, but because the idea as such was ludicrous, an acrobat’s gambol, a pirouette that would never threaten

the rule of melancholy. This, however, does not prevent Brás from covering it with Yorick's foolscap, for if man's destiny is melancholy, man's dignity is to laugh, even in the face of death, until the final somersault.

Machado's Shandean mixture of laughter and melancholy appears at the very beginning. At first sight, the two elements seem to be well-balanced. After all, the book had been written "with the pen of Mirth and the ink of Melancholy" ("To the Reader" 3). But in his foreword to the third edition Machado makes it clear that the book was more pessimistic than its Shandean models. The workmanship of the cups was the same, but the wine was different. It had a "bitter and sharp taste" not to be found in the other authors.<sup>10</sup>

Not only is joy unable to conquer melancholy, but melancholy itself becomes an indirect source of joy. Of course melancholy can be for Brás what it was for Dürer, a source of sorrow, provoked by the contemplation of a skeleton: the face of his dying mother "was less a face than a skull. Its beauty, like a bright day, had passed; nothing remained but the bones, and bones never grow thin" (23.56). The period of mourning was his first experience of melancholy: "I believe that it was then that the flower of melancholy in me began to open, this yellow, lonely, morbid flower with its subtle and inebriating perfume" (25.58). But at the same time Brás discovers that melancholy could be pleasurable. The perfume of the yellow flower was "subtle and inebriating," and so Brás hugged to his breast his "silent pain, a peculiar sensation, one that might be called the voluptuousness of misery" (25.58). This, incidentally, was what Pandora would promise one day to the dying Brás: the voluptuousness of death.

Laughter is never far from death in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. It is in the very title of the book, though in a jesting mood. For the book is not posthumous because it was published after the author's death, like Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre tombe*, the title of which is parodied in the original Brazilian title. It is posthumous because it was written by a dead man, a reversal of the natural order of things that might have been terrifying if the book were a ghost story, but becomes comical because of the objectivity with which it is announced. "Hence I shall not relate the extraordinary method that I used in the composition of these memoirs" ("To the Reader" 3). The comical effect arises from the disproportion between the enormity of the fact and the soberness of the description.

Death has a clownish aspect, beginning with the dedication: "To the first worm that gnawed my flesh I dedicate, with fond remembrance, these posthumous memoirs."<sup>11</sup> It is Baudelaire's necrophilic tone, with the difference that

not even Baudelaire dared desecrate death to such an extent. It is not to a worm that he dedicates his “*fleurs malades*” but to Théophile Gautier, “*poète impeccable, parfait magicien des lettres françaises*.” The reference to “morbid flowers” may make us shudder, but not laugh. On the contrary, in Machado de Assis the dedication elicits from the very beginning the two reactions that the book as a whole wants to provoke: melancholy and laughter.

All references to death are made with a sneer. They are associated with laughter, like Hamlet holding the skull of a fool. The book has an odor of the tomb, says Brás, but he adds immediately a preposterous afterthought that makes us laugh: yes, reader, but you are its main defect. He makes a plaintive allusion to the fleeting character of human happiness—“unhappy leaves of my cypress tree, you had to fall, like everything else that is lovely and beautiful” (71.118)—but warns us that there is an absurdity in this sentence. After some reflection, we guess that the absurdity comes from the tree chosen for the comparison, for cypresses do not lose their leaves in winter, but this is not the point. The point is that Brás wants to divert the reader’s attention, making him abandon the churchyard, where cypresses grow, so that he may laugh himself to death after solving the riddle.

It should be repeated, however, that the characteristically Shandean blend of mirth and melancholy works differently in Sterne and in Machado. Sterne uses laughter to escape melancholy and Machado to ridicule all attempts to escape melancholy. Tristram’s defining words are the ones he utters in Gascon dialect when dancing with Nanette, the lovely peasant girl: “Viva la joia! Fidon la tristessa! (VII.43.558). Brás Cubas’ defining words are the last ones of the book: “I had no progeny, I transmitted to no one the legacy of our misery” (160.209).

### A different wine

I have managed, I think, to isolate a literary form, and compare two writers that have followed this form—Laurence Sterne, its creator, and Machado de Assis. But much work is still needed to complete these reflections.

First, a comprehensive study is necessary of all the members of the Shandean “family,” including, besides Sterne and Machado de Assis, the two other authors mentioned in *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*—Xavier de Maistre and Almeida Garrett—and even others that Machado de Assis knew well but did not include in his list, such as Diderot—*Jacques le fataliste*.

Second, it would be indispensable to go from form to content, studying the different realizations of the form in accordance with objective circum-

stances, whether of a personal, local, or historical nature. Machado de Assis pointed to these differences when he said that even if there are formal similarities between all these authors, the spirit and content vary—the workmanship of the cup might be the same, but the wine is different.

For Machado, the difference lay in the pessimism and bitterness that prevailed in the Brazilian novel as compared to its European counterparts. A cursory glance at the different realization of the form in Sterne and Machado confirms the accuracy of Machado's assessment. Two examples will suffice. On the issue of the blending of laughter and melancholy, we have seen that Tristram believes that mirth can expel despondency, while Brás Cubas thinks that any attempt to do so is laughable and that the main function of laughter is to mock all efforts to cure melancholy. On the issue of the fugacity of time, both authors share the classical attitude of deploring the transience of all things and of trying to stop time. It is Goethe's "*Verweile doch, du bist so schön*," and Lamartine's "*O temps, suspends ton vol*." But their respective immobilization strategies are very different. Tristram does so by temporarily "freezing" time, whereas Brás Cubas does so by removing himself for good from the sphere of change. In contrast with his more sanguine "ancestor," he believed that only death could deliver man from the flux of time.

Roberto Schwarz agrees that the wines are different, yet for him the reason is that the grapes had been grown in different social and historical soils. It is the difference between the optimistic subjectivity of a modernizing European bourgeoisie and the "voluble" and cynical subjectivity of a Brazilian ruling class that idealized modernity but owed its existence to slave labor (Schwarz 200-201).

Whatever the nature of the difference—psychological, sociological, or both at the same time, as I believe to be the case—it seems plausible to assume that the concept of the Shandean form will be helpful in reaching a better understanding of both Machado de Assis and the intellectual lineage from which he claimed descent in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Gomes, Caldwell, and Senna.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Merquior, quoted by Sá Rego, who discusses the origins and nature of the Menippean satire.

<sup>3</sup> See Rouanet, "Machado de Assis."

<sup>4</sup> References to quotations from Grossman's translation of Machado's *Memórias póstumas de*

*Brás Cubas* will be given parenthetically, listing chapter and page numbers. Quotations from *Tristram Shandy* will be cited with volume, chapter, and page numbers.

<sup>5</sup> See Schwarz, *Um mestre*.

<sup>6</sup> See Barthes, *Le plaisir* and *Fragments*.

<sup>7</sup> Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* 89.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk*.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiel*.

<sup>10</sup> Assis, “Memórias póstumas” 514.

<sup>11</sup> The English translation inexplicably omits the words “com saudosa lembrança.”

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