

Master among the Ruins*

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Abstract. This essay explores two “mysteries” in Machado de Assis’ work and reputation: the sudden shift of tone and manner from his early “romantic” novels to those of his middle and late career; and his recurring appearances and disappearances on the scene of world literature. The argument, illustrated through the gap between proverbs and lived life in the later novels, is that Machado’s elusiveness is his mastery and his identity. He is historicist in his very irony.

1.

The works of Machado de Assis are full of melancholy wisdom, or what looks like melancholy wisdom: slightly weary, slightly bitter, highly amused. Jokes, fables, epigrams, and analogies flourish so profusely in these pages that they certainly add up to a signature. But do they add up to a voice? And if so, whose voice? Antonio Candido, the great Brazilian critic, suggested long ago that, in Machado, “the most disconcerting surprises” appear “in inverse ratio to the elegance and discretion of his prose” (106). Thus in the novel *Quincas Borba*, a poor woman is sitting, weeping, by her still-burning cottage. A drunken man comes along and asks if it’s all right if he lights his cigar from the flames. We draw the moral readily enough—about indifference to distress that is not ours, about exploiting the misery of others—and we think we know where we are. Machado draws this moral too, although he scarcely pauses over it before he is on to another, far more unexpected one. The drunkard, he says, shows true respect for “the principle of property—to the point of not lighting his cigar without first asking permission of the owner of the ruins” (*Quincas Borba* 168). Is this a joke about property or about the worship of the principle?

Machado was undoubtedly a “master,” as the titles of the two critical books under scrutiny suggest, one of the world’s great writers. But there is a mystery about his work. Or rather there are two mysteries: one Brazilian, one international. The Brazilian mystery has to do with the development of his longer fiction. Machado wrote nine novels, the first four in a vein that he himself called “romantic”—Roberto Schwarz, a leading Brazilian critic, calls them “somewhat colorless [...] middling, provincial narratives” (149, 150). These novels are *Ressurreição* (*Resurrection*, 1872), *A Mão e a Luva* (*The Hand and the Glove*, 1874), *Helena* (1876), and *Iaiá Garcia* (1878). Then come five unmistakably major works, and the mystery is in the difference between the two sets. The five later novels are *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (*The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, 1891), *Dom Casmurro* (1900), *Esau e Jacó* (1904), and *Memorial de Aires* (*Counselor Ayres’ Memorial*, 1908). I think the rift between the sets can be exaggerated, and Machado’s last novel, subtle and elegiac as it is, is probably too faint and too slow to be a masterpiece, and indeed is not all that far from the early work in mood and style. But obviously there is something to be explained.

Machado de Assis was born in 1839 in Rio de Janeiro, and died there in 1908. His mother was Portuguese, his father a Brazilian mulatto. The family was poor, and the child received only an elementary education. As a young man, Machado became a typesetter, then a journalist. He wrote poems, plays, essays, stories, and novels, and came to be highly regarded as a writer in his lifetime. He was president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, and was reputed to be extremely mild-mannered, although the prose of his novels shows again and again that his compassion for individuals in distress did not exclude a continuing, firmly focused anger about the blindness and privilege rampant in his society. This is true even of the beautifully balanced sentences of an early novel like *Helena*: “He never found a need to test his own mentality. If he had he would have discovered that it was mediocre” (15); “Colonel Macedo had the distinguishing characteristic of not being colonel. He was a major” (29).

Older explanations of the Brazilian mystery, John Gledson says in his introduction to Schwarz’s book, concentrated on events in Machado’s life (a severe illness, a threat to his sight), on a supposed turn to pessimism in his views, or on literary influences like *Tristram Shandy*. But the real question is, initially at least, a formal one, internal to the books. What do we make of the sudden change in method, the move from graceful, third-person storytelling to extravagant modernist antics, including tangled time lines, reflexive commentary, digressions, deeply unreliable first-person narrators, proliferating

allusions, canceled or incomplete stories, pages filled with dots, idiosyncratic chapter titles, constant references to the bookishness of the books, and teasing addresses to a variety of imaginary readers, as in Nabokov's *Lolita*? Schwarz, whose book *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism* was first published in Portuguese in 1990, doesn't want to exclude a biographical explanation of the change, and reasonably says, "Perhaps [...] Machado had completed his social ascent but had no illusions about it, and did not forget the troubles of the previous situation" (154). But Schwarz focuses on the formal properties of the later novels, and asks not why the change came about but what it means.

Form, however, for Schwarz as for the Lukács of *The Theory of the Novel*, is not an abstraction and it doesn't elude time and history. It means: "(a) a rule for the composition of the narrative and (b) the stylization of a kind of conduct characteristic of the Brazilian ruling class" (Schwarz 7-8). On this model, literature not only represents history as a set of discrete or accumulating events, it inhabits and articulates history, speaks the language that any given age talks to itself. Machado's breakthrough is simultaneously aesthetic and political, an understanding of how to eavesdrop on the upper classes without seeming to be different from who are doing it. This, we might say, is what unreliable narrators are for: there is always an indictment, although not always an indictment of a class.

Schwarz's *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism* is devoted exclusively to Machado's breakthrough novel, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, and not everything it says goes for the works that come after. But everything it says about the book in question is persuasive. The memoirs, within their fictive context, are literally posthumous. Brás Cubas, as he himself announces in a wonderful play on words, is not a writer who died (*um autor defunto*) but a dead man who took to writing (*um defunto autor*). He wants us to believe that this position lifts him above the trivialities of the merely, "as petty and pursued by social vanities as the most deplorable of his characters [...]. The comedy is to be found precisely in the earthly passions of this dead man, who is very much alive" (Schwarz 38). The dead Brás Cubas plans to do what he likes with his words, as he imagines he did what he liked with his life. He recounts his spoiled childhood, his adult philandering, and his complete failure to leave any kind of mark on his time as if this were a narrative of superlative success.

But of course extreme caprice is itself a kind of captivity, and this is a novel founded on what Schwarz calls "the calculated inadequacy of the narrator's attitudes toward the material he himself represents" (54)—it's hard to

imagine a better characterization of some of the most haunting of modern texts, from Mann's *Dr. Faustus* to, again, Nabokov's *Lolita*. Inadequacy here doesn't mean always falling short, it means never getting things quite right, or always letting too many cats out of the moral or psychological bag. The perfection of the writing is in the complexity of the mimed errors. Schwarz cites Walter Benjamin's description of Baudelaire as "a secret agent—an agent of the secret dissatisfaction felt by a class at its own dominance" (126). If Machado is the agent, Brás Cubas is his unwitting, complacent front.

A fine example, which brings out some of Schwarz's most lucid and passionate critical writing, is Brás Cubas' cynical defense of his brother-in-law Cotrim—a defense that damns the accused and his defender. There are those who say that Cotrim is a barbarian:

The only fact alleged in that particular was his frequent sending of slaves to the dungeon, from where they would emerge dripping blood. But, alongside the fact that he only sent recalcitrants and runaways, it so happens that, having been long involved in the smuggling of slaves, he'd become accustomed to a certain way of dealing that was a bit harsher than the business required, and one can't honestly attribute to the original nature of a man what is simply the effect of his social relations. (*Posthumous* 170)

The "only fact" seems more than enough, and the slight excess of harshness ("*o trato um pouco mais duro*") is flatly contradicted by the dripping blood. The mention of smuggling—the legal slave trade to Brazil ended in 1850—seeks to make a crime into an excuse, and the argument about social relations turns liberal thought upside down. Schwarz points out that shameful truths are not avoided here, only reinterpreted. This is "politeness within the elite, making ostentatious use of the best of contemporary culture" (Schwarz 79).

2.

What Schwarz's book doesn't tell us is why the novel is so funny as well as so bleak. Of course Brás Cubas is not always Machado's front; he is often critical and ironic in his own right. Schwarz himself is clearly alert to the fun, and writes repeatedly of the work's comical and farcical effects. But his thesis is a little grim and unrelieved, even when the subject is not slavery. What if we are not captivated by the "Brazilian ideological comedy" on display, or if the secret dissatisfaction of a class, historically fascinating as it is, seems too

monotonous a topic for a whole masterpiece? Is the only alternative to fall for Brás Cubas' narrative charms, and make ourselves his class accomplices at a distance? Schwarz worries a little about this. Perhaps Machado's disguise was too perfect. "Machado uses with absolute mastery the ideological and literary resources most prized by his victim," generating "a similarity between ferocious criticism and an apologia, which can lead to confusion" (Schwarz 125).

With this we arrive at the second mystery, the international one. Machado's novels have been available in English and in other languages apart from Portuguese for some fifty years now. Everyone who reads him thinks he is a master, but who reads him, and who has heard of him? When I talk to people about Borges, I often have to say the name carefully, but I don't always have to say who he is. In 1990, introducing a reissue of William L. Grossman's 1952 translation of *Posthumous Memoirs* (called *Epitaph of a Small Winner*), Susan Sontag was "astonished that a writer of such greatness does not yet occupy the place he deserves" (39). She concluded eloquently that "to love this book is to become a little less provincial about literature, about literature's possibilities" (40). Have we become less provincial in these last twelve years? Several of the older translations are still in print, there have been other translations of at least two of the novels in the meantime, and now we have four new translations: *The Posthumous Memoirs*, *Quincas Borba*, *Dom Casmurro*, and *Esau and Jacob*. The new translations are fluent and sound, but so, mostly, were the old ones. The Oxford series is a little cluttered with commentary, since each book has a general introduction, an introduction, and an afterword—the format itself is no doubt a sign of nervousness. Some shrewd things get said, but you do feel you have to open too many doors to get at each novel.

John Gledson, in Richard Graham's collection of essays on Machado, asks the hard question. He is referring to *Dom Casmurro*, but we can broaden the scope to the work at large. "Could it be," Gledson asks, "that we have been selling the wrong novel?" (4). He means we have been too keen to claim it as an international masterpiece, and not willing enough to talk about its Brazilian context. There is something in this, I think, and we can certainly agree that Machado is a master not in spite of his Brazilian background and themes but because of them. But we still need to know what Machado's mastery and modernity consist of, and why his novels are more than historical documents—even documents of the oblique and sophisticated kind that Schwarz identifies for us. There is the beginning of an answer, I think, in João Adolfo Hansen's suggestion, in Graham's collection, that Machado constructed his style out of

“ruins of a dead time,” “the ruined remains of a pre-modern world” (Hansen 28). This is not a search for lost time but a memorial of how lost it is, and even the memorial may be a fiction. Walter Benjamin, in his essay on the storyteller, wrote that a proverb “is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story” (108), and Machado, we might say, wrote ironic narrative proverbs that know their own helplessness. Nothing more modern than a ruin in this sense.

The situation is clearest in *Dom Casmurro*, where the narrator, Bento Santiago, is trying to reconstruct his life and achieves only what he himself recognizes as a simulacrum. He lives in a house that is a replica of the house of his childhood, complete with garden, trees, and interior decoration, including medallions of Caesar, Augustus, Nero, and Massinissa. Caesar and Augustus fit well enough with the imperialist fantasies of the Brazilian nineteenth century, but Nero seems a little more questionable, and Massinissa was a king of Numidia who gave his wife poison to spare her dishonor.

Bento doesn't give anyone poison, but he thinks of poisoning his young son, and he broods obsessively on his wife's honor, or more precisely his own. He recounts his childhood love for Capitu, the girl next door, and his success in marrying her, in spite of his mother's long-laid plans for him to become a priest. The young couple is set to live happily ever after until Bento decides his wife is having an affair with his best friend, and indeed that his supposed child is not his own. The friend dies; Bento begins to hate the child and exiles Capitu to Europe, where she too dies. Bento has love affairs, lives comfortably, but is finally all alone with his uncertain memories in his replica dwelling.

Bento is an even more unreliable narrator than Brás Cubas, because although he too can be very funny, he is more anxious and more ignorant. But the text he writes is not strictly ambiguous, it is indeterminate. Bento is certainly blinkered and foolish enough to be easily cuckolded, vain and suspicious enough to have invented his wife's adultery out of nothing. He is convinced by his own tale. “One thing is left, and is the sum total, or the total residue, to wit, that my first love and my best friend, both so affectionate and so beloved—destiny willed it that they ended up joining together and deceiving me” (*Casmurro* 244).

But is this destiny or paranoia, or even just storytelling? We can accept Bento's story, as early critics did, or we can reject it, as later critics have tended to, but we can't do both, and Machado is not inviting us to settle into an easy skepticism about the availability of truth. He is reminding us that we have to make decisions on the basis of what we know, which is rarely enough.

“Appearance is often the whole of the truth” (“*a verossimilhança [...] é muita vez toda a verdade*”) (*Casmurro* 21), Bento says near the beginning of his tale. He means both that appearance is often all we’ve got and that things sometimes just are what they seem—two proverbs that occupy the sites of many stories. But since this proposition comes from a man who has wrecked several lives, including his own, on the basis of his reading of the looks in people’s eyes, notably those of Capitu, and of little more than what seemed to him an undeniable resemblance between his child and his friend, we may reach a different conclusion. We may want to say you can do what you like with appearances, as long as they are all you have. Appearances will never contradict fear or desire, only fulfill them—in appearance.

In *Quincas Borba* the recurring proverb is the deceptively simple phrase “To the victor, the potatoes” (“*Ao vencedor, as batatas*”), which Roberto Schwarz borrowed for the title of his 1977 book on Machado—a study of the early novels. The phrase is clearly a burlesque version of idioms like “To the victor the spoils,” and “Winner takes all,” and in context also suggest “The survival of the fittest”: the fittest gets the spuds. The phrase is coined by Machado’s eccentric philosopher Joaquim Borba dos Santos, familiarly known as Quincas Borba, who appears both in the novel of that name and in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Quincas is the founder of a doctrine he calls Humanitism, which teaches, among other things, that “there’s no such thing as death,” only perpetual change and the struggle for life. Quincas offers a fable:

Imagine a field of potatoes and two starving tribes. There are only enough potatoes to feed one of the tribes, who in that way will get the strength to cross the mountain and reach the other slope, where there are potatoes in abundance. But, if the two tribes peacefully divide up the potatoes from the field, they won’t derive sufficient nourishment and will die of starvation. Peace, in this case, is destruction; war is preservation [...]. To the conquered, hate or compassion; to the victor, the potatoes. (*Quincas* 13)

This is social Darwinism without pain, Machado’s travesty of modern ideas reworked by underdevelopment. Everything is for the best, and Quincas repeatedly claims that Pangloss was not such a fool as Voltaire thought he was.

Quincas dies and leaves his considerable fortune to his friend Rubião, who now understands Humanitism in a way he didn’t at all before. “To the victor, the potatoes,” he says to himself repeatedly, and adopts the line as his

mental motto. Not because he has battled for his money or indeed done anything to get it except a few acts of kindness directly in contradiction to Quincas's militant theory, but just because he now has the money. It's not that the victor gets the potatoes, it's that the one with the potatoes is the victor, however he got them. "It's so true," Machado comments laconically, "that the landscape depends on the point of view and the best way to appreciate a whip is to have its handle in your hand" (*Quincas* 27).

By the end of the book Rubião has spent all the money left him by Quincas, or lent it, or been swindled out of it, and he is alone with Quincas Borba's dog, also called Quincas Borba. Rubião has no potatoes, so to speak, but he still loves the formula, and it affords him an obscure consolation. "He didn't remember the allegory completely, but the words gave him a vague feeling of struggle and victory." Rubião and the dog wander the rainy streets of a provincial Brazilian town, both soaked but the dog lacking the comfort of a slogan. "To the victor, the potatoes" (*Quincas* 269, 270), Rubião keeps shouting. Soon after this he dies, a victim not of society or nature but of a generalized failure to focus, a sense that proverbs and the world are not on speaking terms.

In *Esau and Jacob* we find perhaps the most interesting of these ruins, an allegory so transparent that the one interpretation that seems excluded is the allegorical one. Pedro and Paulo are twins, in love with the same young woman, Flora. She loves them both, or rather she loves them as a pair. Whenever one is absent, she feels her love is incomplete. The twins are said to have fought even in their mother's womb, like Esau and Jacob, and they have certainly kept up the tradition since. Pedro is a doctor and Paulo is a lawyer; Pedro is a monarchist, Paulo is a republican—since childhood they have had pictures of, respectively, Louis XVI and Robespierre in their bedrooms. Their mother longs for them to make peace, Flora only wants to see them together.

These women are, if you like, in the single native country that cannot be both right and left, cannot both have an emperor and not have one. The Emperor Pedro II abdicated in 1889, and a Brazilian Republic was declared. These events occur in the novel, and Pedro and Paulo go on quarreling, both of them now elected to the House of Deputies. Flora can't choose between them, and dies like a Victorian heroine of an illness that can be nothing other than her intractable dilemma. "Flora ended like one of those sudden afternoons" (*Esau* 228), the narrator says. The twins promise her on her deathbed that they will quarrel no more, but they break their promise. They promise their mother the same thing just before she dies but don't keep that promise

either. What did we expect? That Esau and Jacob would rewrite their story and divide their inheritance, amicably sharing their messes of pottage?

The narration is less flighty in this novel, although the chapters are still short and wittily titled, and there are plenty of jokes. But an elusive irony remains. The book is full of instances of prophecy and destiny, all lightly mocked but not actually disavowed. We know that Bento Santiago has made up the story of his destiny, even if it is true. But why can't Pedro and Paulo ever stop quarreling? The narrator thinks of their "mutual aversion" as "persistent in their blood, like a virtual necessity" (252). He means their need to quarrel is deeper than any reason they might have for agreement—or indeed for quarreling. But what would be the nature of that need? On one level, of course, the question is spurious. Necessity is just another name for Machado, since he is the one who set up the schematic, insoluble plot. He could have made the young men change, or Flora choose, by a couple of simple strokes of the pen. But then remembering this, we can return to a slightly revised sense of what he did do.

He set up an allegory too obvious to be taken at face value; too rigid not to include within itself a mockery of the idea of simple allegory, and a hint at all it fails to encompass of sprawling political and psychological reality. But the allegory is not false. Countries, like people, do have to choose and often fail to choose, merely muddling the alternatives and imagining they have found the center. This is what Flora doesn't do, preferring to die instead. And political parties and social groups, like individuals, do prolong their quarrels beyond any reason for quarreling, because in many cases the quarrel has become their life, their definition of who they are. In *Counselor Ayres' Memorial* (1908), Machado offers the wry thought that "eternal reconciliation between political enemies would [...] be an everlasting torment" (76). By setting up his allegorical structure simultaneously as a destiny—for the characters themselves—and an alterable fiction—for writer and reader—Machado invites us to think not only about the choices we make, but also about the possibility of choice itself, about all those moments when we do not know, in spite of all the appearances of freedom, exactly how free we are.

Schwarz quotes Walter Benjamin as saying Baudelaire is still our contemporary (or was Benjamin's contemporary) because the conditions he explores and dramatized have not gone away. I would say Machado is our contemporary because his preoccupations recur in all kinds of places, like cloud formations or political protest, and because we are not entirely sure who he is. His are the "books with omissions" that Bento Santiago recommends to us (*Cas-*

murro 111). The proverbs and ruins I have just evoked—the interplay of appearance and desire, the world of unfocused contingency, the necessity and impossibility of choice—have their home in Machado's Brazil, but we certainly find them in other locations too, and are not likely to stop finding them. It's not that the world hasn't changed or that countries are not different from one another. It's that change and difference themselves have recognizable historical shapes, and Machado managed to catch them in movement, because he was both their friend and their enemy. "Time is an invisible fabric," his narrator tells us is *Esau and Jacob*, "on which one can embroider everything: a flower, a bird, a lady, a castle, a tomb. One can also embroider nothing. Nothing, on top of the invisible; that is the most subtle work of this world, and for that matter, of the other" (52). Machado's nothing was really something.

Notes

* An earlier version of this essay was originally published in *The New York Review of Books*, 18 July 2002.

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