

## Machado de Assis, Critic of Eça de Queirós— A Symptomatic Misunderstanding<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Writing about Eça de Queirós' novels *O Crime do Padre Amaro* and *O Primo Basílio* in 1878, Machado de Assis showed little sympathy for the Portuguese author. In his essay *Eça, discípulo de Machado?*, published in 1963, Machado da Rosa expressed his admiration towards Machado de Assis' review of both of Eça's novels but also called the attention to the misunderstanding that led Machado to condemn Eça: for the great Brazilian novelist, Eça was but a disciple of Zola, for whose "Naturalism" he, Machado, had little sympathy. However, Machado's novels, in particular *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) and *Dom Casmurro* (1890), published later, make it difficult, given the "amorality" or "immorality" of the events they depict, to understand Machado's previous severity towards Eça. For a modern reader it seems unquestionable that Machado as a literary critic was by far more conservative than Machado as a novelist. Indeed, both Eça and Machado show in their works an understanding of the relationships between men and women that in its cynicism and disenchantment seems very close, both to one another and to a modern view of the same reality.

### 1.

The episode is well-known, and not a little ink has been spilled over it: on 16 and 30 April 1878, Machado de Assis published in Rio de Janeiro's *O Cruzeiro* two quite unsympathetic critiques of Eça de Queirós' first two novels. The first of the novels in question was the 1876 version of *O Crime do Padre Amaro*, the first full-length edition of the text—Batalha Reis' Lisbon-based *Revista*

*Ocidental* had published an earlier version in 1875, without consulting the author; the definitive version would not be published until 1880. The second novel was *O Primo Basílio*, published the same year as Machado's critiques.

Machado's criticism of Eça was severe, but was it fair? In addressing this question, Machado da Rosa speaks of the "sugestivo e profundo ensaio de Machado" (22) and of the "originalidade da crítica machadiana" (140). However, he notes that "os excessos dessa crítica profunda, mas estreita, provêm de um preconceito [...]. Para Machado o autor do *Crime* é aluno, fiel e aspérrimo de Zola" (140).

What defects, what errors did Machado de Assis discover in Eça de Queirós' first two novels? As can be perceived from Machado da Rosa's comments, Machado de Assis wholeheartedly and unceremoniously identifies Eça in his criticism with the realist-naturalist school (though he uses the term "Realism," he clearly understands this as "Realism-Naturalism"), seeing the Portuguese writer as a talented imitator of the French. Forced to acknowledge the success Eça had achieved with the publication of his first two novels, Machado de Assis writes, in a language that may seem malevolent, that Eça's success "não é somente devido ao trabalho real do autor," but moreover is a function of "a escola a que abertamente se filiava" (915). Machado notes certain similarities between *O Crime do Padre Amaro* and Zola's *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, and this leads him to accuse Eça of imitating the French novelist—a point on which Machado seems to have been correct.<sup>2</sup> While he cites the "bons e vivazes talentos da actual geração portuguesa" and affirms that if Eça were a "simples copista, o dever da crítica era deixá-lo, em defesa, nas mãos do entusiasmo cego, que acabaria por matá-lo" (913), it is evident that for Machado de Assis, Eça's success was due to foreign literary tendencies that the Portuguese writer had latched onto (and which Machado considered as defects), as well as to scandal: having partaken of the "pomo defeso," and having applied his talent to inelegant themes in a highly descriptive, direct, and even crude language, Eça, with *O Crime do Padre Amaro*, succeeded in writing a successful novel, and now, "reincidindo no género," he would have even greater success with *O Primo Basílio* (914).

This brief characterization should bring to light the key features of Machado's criticism of Eça. The argument advanced by the future author of *Dom Casmurro* is organized around two fundamental, symptomatic ideas or obsessions: 1) Eça, though talented, is nonetheless an imitator of the realist-naturalist school; 2) Realism-Naturalism, as a school or doctrine, is objectionable in terms of aesthetics, morality, methodology, and philosophy.

## 2.

If we focus carefully on Machado's argument, it becomes apparent that for him, Eça's success is due to two factors, both negative: on the one hand, Eça *imitates*, albeit skillfully, (or perhaps he displays other, compensatory talents; we cannot be sure) a literary school that condones vulgarity and owes its success to the crudeness and shamelessness with which it treats taboo subjects.

Machado was not ashamed to belong to the Portuguese literary tradition—far from it. Garrett, Herculano, Júlio Dinis, and Camilo, among others, are, in a certain sense, Machado's closest literary relatives, serving him as references. It is in the name of this tradition, to which he considered himself an heir, that Machado attempted to give a morality lesson to Eça. In proposing that Eça adhere to Almeida Garrett and the Portuguese literary tradition as models, Machado unabashedly assumed the public role of "advising" a younger Portuguese-language writer (who was, in reality only six years younger than Machado, though with far fewer books published), warning him of the risks he ran in beginning his career by submitting to the principles, influences, and rules of a dubious foreign school. This explains the paternalistic tone of his criticism.

How, then, can the harsh, unsympathetic language and arguments Machado used in critiquing Eça be justified? Might Machado have been jealous of the talent he recognized in Eça? This is not out of the question and is, in fact, a plausible explanation for Machado's harshness.

As is well-known, Machado da Rosa titled his study, *Eça, Discípulo de Machado? Formação de Eça de Queirós (1875-1880)*. However, the Portuguese critic forgot that the most important part of Machado de Assis' work, the part that would gain him the domestic and even international prestige he still enjoys, was written beginning in 1881, with the publication that year of *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. Recall that *Quincas Borba* was published in 1891, *Dom Casmurro* in 1900, *Esau e Jacó* in 1904, and *Memorial de Aires* in 1908. As for Eça, he continued to publish after releasing the two novels that inspired Machado's criticism: *O Mandarim* was published in 1880, *A Relíquia* in 1887, *Os Maias* in 1888, and *A Ilustre Casa de Ramires* and *Correspondência de Fradique Mendes* in 1900, the year of his death; *A Cidade e as Serras* was published in 1901. Eça may have learned something from Machado and made productive use of his criticism in revising *O Crime do Padre Amaro*, but it seems excessive and illogical to imagine Eça as a disciple of works like Machado's *Crisálidas* (1864), *Ressurreição* (1872), or *Helena*

(1876). Or the other hand, how can we so easily discard the possibility that Machado may have learned something from Eça?

We know that the two writers admired each other (Machado said as much, with unquestionable sincerity, when he learned of Eça's death),<sup>9</sup> and, as such, any influence that existed between the two must have been mutual. After all, Machado and Eça were active during the same period, were both aware of important intellectual developments taking place abroad, and both represented the best of what was produced in the nineteenth century. If the similarities and differences between the writers' works deserve to be pointed out, analyzed, and dissected, this is because they reveal the ways in which each writer saw, felt, and interpreted the reality of his time. But before analyzing and commenting on some of these, I would like to continue the line of argumentation I took up in identifying the principle themes of Machado's criticism of Eça; first, his identification of the Portuguese writer with the French realist-naturalist school; and second, Machado's repudiation of Realism-Naturalism.

Machado may have confused the forest for the trees in identifying the young Eça as a realist-naturalist, though he had his reasons for doing so—as we will soon see. It is Machado's vehemence that may be surprising. He seems afraid here, but of what? Of seeing literature contribute to the corruption of morals? Of seeing literature lower itself, lose its vocation for the sublime, lose its role as a site for sober, discrete, and dignified language? Or, approached from a more commercial perspective, could Machado have been worried that Eça might come to occupy a place of prestige in the literary market, in the public's minds and hearts, to which he himself aspired and which he had partially achieved? There is probably truth in all of these explanations. It is also understandable that an author like Machado, already quite aware of his abilities and objectives, might have been worried at the appearance of another literary voice, who represented another way of writing that, on the one hand, might point in directions toward which Machado had not looked, and, on the other, might explore aspects of the real whose importance he may have already sensed and thought of exploring, but had not as of yet. This, combined with the fact of their attraction to the same themes (and ethical problems), is enough to make competition between Machado and Eça inevitable. This may partially explain Machado's irritation with Eça's success. However, moral and aesthetic reasons are not entirely as important in defining Machado's opinion as his vehemence and paternalism may imply.

## 3.

As it proceeds, Machado's criticism of Eça symptomatically betrays the reason for the former's preoccupation with and dismissal of the latter: for Machado, Realism-Naturalism puts too great an emphasis on "sensação física" and on "perversão física," proving itself incapable of creating "figuras morais"; Realism-Naturalism goes to the extreme of "correr o reposteiro conjugal"; it molds "as suas mulheres pelos trajectos e trejeitos da concupiscência"; it does not give its subjects "sentimentos superiores" but "somente os cálculos da sensualidade" and the "ímpetos da concubina." According to Machado's interpretation, it is in the pernicious influence of Realism-Naturalism that Eça finds his inspiration for the "cenas repugnantes do Paraíso" in *O Primo Basílio*. In short, for Machado, Realism-Naturalism neglects or does not know how to locate the essential, and as such substitutes the accessory for the essential, with grave aesthetic consequences (917-918).

A bit further on in his detailed criticism of Eça, Machado writes: "essa pintura, esse aroma de alcova, essa descrição minuciosa, quase técnica, das relações adúlteras, eis o mal" (922). Adopting the paternalistic and in a certain sense contradictory position of simultaneously defending moral values and literature (or rather, a literature that does not offend morality), Machado, in an elegant expression that proves his awareness of Portuguese and Brazilian writers' shared cultural tradition, counsels "aos jovens talentos de ambas as terras da nossa língua que não se deixem seduzir por uma doutrina caduca, embora no verdor dos anos." This because "esse messianismo literário não tem a força da universalidade nem da vitalidade; traz consigo a decrepitude." As such, writers should return "os olhos para a realidade," and simultaneously "excluir o Realismo" so that "assim não sacrificaremos a verdade estética" (922).

Explaining what he expects of Eça, Machado opposes his own idea of the novel to that of the Portuguese writer: "Para que Luísa me atraia e me prenda, é preciso que as tribulações que a afligem venham da mesma; seja uma rebelde ou uma arrependida; tenha remorsos ou imprecações; mas, por Deus! dê-me a sua pessoa moral" (916).

O Sr. Eça de Queirós não quer ser realista mitigado, mas intenso e completo; e daí vem que o tom carregado das tintas, que nos assusta, para ele é simplesmente o tom próprio. Dado, porém, que a doutrina do Sr. Eça de Queirós fosse verdadeira, ainda assim cumpria não acumular tanto as cores, nem acentuar tanto as linhas; e quem o diz é o próprio chefe da escola, de quem li, há pouco, e não sem pismo,



que o perigo do movimento realista é haver quem suponha que o traço grosso é o traço exacto. Digo isto no interesse do talento do Sr. Eça de Queirós, não da doutrina que lhe é adversa; porque o que a esta importa é que o Sr. Eça de Queirós escreva outros livros como *O Primo Basílio*. Se tal suceder, o Realismo na nossa língua será estrangulado no berço; e a arte pura, apropriando-se do que ele contiver aproveitável (porque o há, quando se não despenha no excessivo, no tedioso, no obsceno, e até no ridículo), a arte pura, digo eu, voltará a beber aquelas águas sadias do *Monge de Cister*, do *Arco de Sant' Ana* e do *Guarani*. (918)

Keep in mind that Machado does not advise his readers to categorically reject all "Realism." As has been mentioned, the object of his criticism is French Naturalism. Machado believed that it was possible to practice literary realism without falling prey to the "excesses" of the naturalists. He himself proved in his novels and short stories that it was possible to create original literature of extraordinary intensity while adhering to methods and strategies other than those utilized by Naturalism. Further, Machado was profoundly suspicious of doctrines, theories, and philosophical systems, as well as of political power—*O Alienista* is a good example of this. All that represented or sought to represent authority, all explanations or sciences that sought to impose themselves as absolute or self-sufficient truths, not only earned Machado's suspicion but moreover inspired his corrosive irony (Santos 41-56).

Machado's reaction to Eça's naturalism is likely just one more symptom, albeit one that merits reflection, of the Brazilian writer's rebellion against any and all of the assumed truths of language, science, and systems of thought. For Machado, doctrines and theories, in seeking to define what is real, end up influencing, limiting, and distorting our vision of it, negatively contributing to our direct experience of reality. Machado's short stories, and not just his novels, constitute an enduring and continually surprising inquiry into the bases of reality and of the way we perceive this reality. As such, it is understandable that Machado may have been irritated at Eça for presenting as simple, self-evident, and unquestionable certain aspects of reality that Machado treated as extremely complex and contradictory. Taking this perspective, we might say that Eça saw reality panoramically, where Machado saw it microscopically. But let us not forget the many similarities between the perspectives from which Machado and Eça observed and presented reality.

Furthermore, we should note that Machado has moments of admiration and sympathy for Eça in his criticism, although this admiration is more

clearly expressed in his second piece, published after certain readers had come to Eça's defense.

#### 4.

What Machado de Assis condemns in Eça's first two novels has already been made clear, along with his criticism of the naturalists' use of crude language and the pleasure they seemed to derive from detailed descriptions of the uglier aspects of human reality. It is understandable that the Realism of Robbe-Grillet and of the French *nouveau-roman*, in elevating the "acessório" to the status of "essencial," would have elicited Machado's disgust. But is the detailed description of reality, whatever its motive, obscene in itself—or simply by virtue of being detailed?

Machado believed that Eça and the naturalists were unable to penetrate the profound moral rationale for human action; in confusing the accessory with the essential, they provide us with numerous depictions of physical sensations and perversions but are incapable of presenting us with true "figuras morais." The inexperienced reader may be surprised by Machado's attitude: after all, what values are at stake here, aesthetic or moral? Machado does not seem to distinguish between the two.

The British critic Terry Eagleton calls our attention to the ambiguity and contradictions that characterize the aesthetic. On the one hand, the aesthetic is a liberating force in that it gives the middle class a flexible model for achieving its political aspirations. And in providing the middle class with examples of autonomy and self-determination the aesthetic shows itself capable of transforming the relations between law and desire, between morality and knowledge. On the other hand, the aesthetic is also an enormously powerful form of "internalized repression" that, when it effectively subjugates the individual, functions as an extremely effective form of political hegemony (Eagleton 28).

While it might be tempting to condemn Machado for having confused the aesthetic with the moral, and above all for having given more importance in his criticism to moral rather than to strictly aesthetic factors, the ideas on which his argument is structured are understandable and perfectly coherent.

Does this mean that we should understand Machado to be a moralistic, puritanical, pious, and perhaps even devout writer? While there are elements in Machado's writing to support such an understanding, we would run the risk of distorting or even disfiguring the position of this innovative Brazilian writer were we to accept this interpretation. Machado does not critique the

fact that Eça and the naturalists deal with adultery or the shocking relationship of a priest with an innocent girl; rather, he objects to the fact that they “correr o reposteiro” and force the reader to witness scenes and episodes that should be suggested, or perhaps evoked or mentioned discretely, but never described in detail, or with crude language. It is this damning characteristic of Eça’s novels, a fundamental defect of naturalistic writing, that allows an indignant Machado to speak in terms of vulgarity, immorality, and obscenity.

It should be noted that Eça wrote in all his work subsequent to *O Crime do Padre Amaro* and *O Primo Basílio* of the impossibility of men and women forming socially recognized relationships based on mutual trust. (While there are rare exceptions, like Jacinto from *A Cidade e as Serras*, the main characters of Eça’s novels tend to be bachelors who take the wives of politicians and bourgeois men for lovers.) But Machado too was seduced by the theme of fidelity and by the question of truth in love and in human relations; he authored two extraordinary and unsettling novels in which the theme of adultery plays a central role: *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881), which begins the second and more important phase of his career, and *Dom Casmurro* (1900).

## 5.

The difference between the novels of Machado de Assis’ second phase and those of the naturalist school lies in the idea of “arte pura,” which Machado proposed in 1878 as a goal to which writers should aspire. “Arte pura” can create “figuras morais” and in this way give a certain clarity to the logical, coherent connections that exist between a character’s personality and the events or episodes in which this character is or will be involved. In contrast, Eça and the naturalists are guilty of presenting the reader with situations that lack logic or moral coherence. They neither understand why events occur, nor what occurs to their characters. Machado well understood that without a moral dimension—that is, without psychological coherence—the naturalist novel’s characters, which are without character or personality, are in reality subjects without subjectivity, or subjects with an idle or powerless subjectivity. They are, according to the Brazilian writer, mere puppets in the hands of an author who does not know how to establish the causal relationships between behavior and action, or between events and the individual character.

This mode of critical thought (in Machado’s fiction, things are fortunately not so simple) links the Brazilian author to a nineteenth-century thinking and aesthetic and distances him from Eça and Fernando Pessoa’s lucidity in



this area. To be sure, Machado's unassailable genius is not in question. The works he left us, particularly the many sublime short stories and novels of his second phase, are marked by a fascinating and disquieting subtlety. What is in question here is the incapacity Machado demonstrates when he attempts to theorize, when he tries to step outside the limits of his own vision of the world, of his own logic, and attempts to understand Eça and to see Naturalism as more than it appears to be on the surface: a school of vulgarity, of obscenity, of excessively detailed realism, of the physical perversities of characters without morals or character. To be fair, Machado is in excellent company here. Critical interpretations of Eça's first two novels (and not only the first two, and not just of Eça's novels) continue even today to be distorted and limited by the naïve view that novelists and poets use their work to illustrate philosophers' or sociologists' doctrines and theories.

Put another way, Eça, like the rest of Portugal's nineteenth-century writers (this is probably even more the case with its best writers) need to be reread and reinterpreted without recourse to certain commonplace, though apparently very erudite and advanced, notions that are popular in literary studies. Literary works are not simple illustrations or examples of philosophical doctrines or currents of thought. Literary works are original products. Therefore, they should be read as such and should not be reduced to (supposedly more accessible) sub-products of philosophy, ideology, or political thought.

Less importance should be given to studying the fidelity or lack of fidelity with which our nineteenth-century authors adhered to the dominant doctrines of the time—doctrines that, however, did serve these writers to a certain degree as reference points for elaborating coherent plots for their novels. Rather, the study of the works themselves should be privileged. Only a "naïve" kind of reading, without prejudice, and without being unfounded or ignorant, will allow us to eventually discover what in these works supercedes the theories that these texts may pretentiously seek to showcase, and that may coincide with the whole.<sup>4</sup>

## 6.

Granted, Machado de Assis has excuses in this area. Eça himself seems to have accepted the Brazilian writer's criticism to a certain degree. There are some that believe that he corrected his subsequent writing due to Machado's benevolent influence, though serious doubt can be cast on this idea. Eça did in fact distant himself from Naturalism, and, as is well known, he later wrote criti-

cally of this period of his career. In *A Cidade e as Serras*, he mounted a fairly direct parody of the young student Jacinto's naïve enthusiasm for science—at another point, he parodied the literary ambitions of the provincial Artur Corvelo in *A Capital*. Here Eça approximates the Machado who wrote *O Alienista* (1881), a work that parodied Naturalism, science, and politics (as symbols and instruments of power, order, and the law) with a disquieting humor and cruelty.

French Realism, with its aspirations to scientific rigor, clearly came to bore Eça. The 1884 introductory letter to *O Mandarim* (first edition: 1880) speaks quite clearly of Eça's evolving opinion on this subject. Given this change, did Eça understand just what his first two attempts at novel-writing had achieved, and the complexity of the plots they depicted, all while apparently obeying the codes of Naturalism? This can be doubted. In any case, in order for a writer to publicly acknowledge all of his work's possible meanings and its most courageous, daring interpretations, he requires the collaboration of an informed public and criticism.

It would be interesting to get Machado's opinion of Eça's short story "José Matias" (1897; in *Contos*, 1902), and Eça's opinion of Machado's "A Missa do Galo" (in *Páginas Recolhidas*, 1899). This would allow us to initiate a fundamental inquiry with the two authors concerning the questions of spirit vs. matter and of accessory vs. principal. In "A Missa do Galo," only the accessory, the accumulation of apparently insignificant details, is presented and serves to justify the narrative. It is suggested at both the beginning and conclusion of the story that "nothing" has happened. Machado skillfully plays with the fact that there cannot be meaning or signification without a subject to interpret those signals by which events manifest themselves. But if nothing has occurred, then why does the story exist, and why does the narrator feel compelled to "tell" us something?

In "José Matias," Eça presents us with a character who, through his own decision or due to some surprising, strange deficiency, renounces marriage and physical love. The story's unforgettable protagonist prefers to consume himself, until death, in a mysterious spiritual passion that is contrary to all that we claim to know about love.

What fails to occur in either "A Missa do Galo" or "José Matias" is an event of great enough significance to disturb the reader on its own. Here Machado and Eça appear much closer to each other than the episode of April 1878 would suggest.

7.

Machado de Assis as a critic was significantly inferior and more conservative than he was as a writer of short stories or novels. While he acts as a guard dog for the established order and for liberal bourgeois morality in his essays on Eça, Machado presents us in *Brás Cubas* with the most cynical story event written on love and success, as well as on false success and adultery. Here Machado, not differing appreciably from Eça's position, betrays a lack of confidence in the possibility of social success, as well as a series of doubts concerning love.

Like the Machado who wrote *Brás Cubas*, Eça questioned the value of success, making dilettantes driven by dreams of grandiose achievement his principal characters. He consigned the successful and politicians, categories of people he did not greatly respect, to positions of secondary importance. At the end of the novel *A Ilustre Casa de Ramires*, Gonçalo Ramires, in abandoning his political career after making a series of humiliating compromises to what remained of his moral scruples, passionately praises art and the spirit as the only ideals worthy of our dedication.<sup>5</sup>

Brás Cubas is a sympathetic cynic of a character—probably because he is dead. But we see that he was happy, in the *aurea mediocritas* in which he chose to live, or which his personality did not allow him to escape. He did not achieve happiness by marrying the daughter of an influential man who could have opened the doors to a brilliant political career, nor by achieving great professional or public success (in politics or in literature, activities on which he focused what remained of his ambition). Rather, he was happy precisely because all these projects (partially his own inspiration, but largely his father's) failed and because he lacked all the qualities necessary for them to succeed. Brás had Virgília for a lover rather than having her love as his wife—or *not* having her love as his wife, or only partially having it, depending on one's perspective. He was not subject as was Virgília's husband to the innumerable obligations of a mundane life that would have foreshadowed the requirements of an inevitable entry into politics. In this highly moralistic story, the character who is a loser according to bourgeois codes of success is in truth a winner: he lives and he loves, a feat other supposed winners do not appear able to achieve. In theory, husbands have their wives full-time while their lovers only have them part-time. But if we adopt Brás Cubas' logic, the opposite holds true: lovers experience pleasure and an intensity of love refused to husbands.

Dom Casmurro is a different character, and it is through him that Machado shows us the other side of the coin—that is, adultery not from the

lover's but from the husband's perspective. What makes this story the more tragic is the fact that no one knows—neither Dom Casmurro nor the readers—if adultery has occurred or not, if Capitu has betrayed her husband, or if she is the victim of his pathological jealousy. We witness the ruin of marital happiness, or of a love that could have been perfect. It is evident that Machado was as little a believer as Eça de Queirós in this utopian idea of happiness, or in a coherent and meaningful universe.

### 8.

Certain fundamental differences between the two authors, however, do exist in this area: real or imagined adultery produces the atmosphere and conditions of Greek tragedy in *Dom Casmurro*, with none of the characters involved able to escape the unbearable situation the narrative lays out for them. The lives of Bentinho, Capitu, and Ezequiel are, as is well known, clearly altered by this tragic episode. In contrast, adultery does not reach this level of tragic intensity in Eça's work, because, at least at the level of appearances, it does not have the same importance for them. Likewise, Eça does not describe an internal suffering as profound and insoluble as seen in *Dom Casmurro*.

Eça's characters are spared this kind of unhappiness because they do not place the same hope (of salvation) in love as do Machado's characters. Eça's characters are too experienced to make this mistake. Luísa's death, like the suffering and anguish that precede it, is more the result of her incapacity to understand and control her destiny than a direct consequence of adultery. Basílio, an insignificant character that does not merit a great amount of Eça's attention (we never witness events from his perspective, and as such all we see of him is the caricatured and disreputable figure of the unapologetic conqueror), is only partly successful in taking control of Luísa's destiny and spirit. She never stops loving her husband, as the novel clearly suggests on a number of occasions—Machado saw this continued suggestion as a plot defect.<sup>6</sup>

However, it should be noted that as in Eça's novels, adultery fails to result in tragedy in *Brás Cubas*. In this novel there is still heroism (a vain and dandified heroism, regardless of the irony with which the protagonist tries to attenuate these qualities) in the narrator's attitude, a heroism that exists apart from his effort to "arrive" from the other world, where he should be resting peacefully, in order to tell the story, with a forthrightness verging on indiscretion, of his secret relationship with Virgília. It may appear strange that, even though Brás was able to achieve a questionable kind of happiness in life,

he must still posthumously revenge himself on those who humiliated him and on those frustrations he experienced while alive. Since the story of adultery is told here from the lover's rather than the husband's perspective, it is logical that the tone and atmosphere of *Brás Cubas* are much closer to those found in Eça's novels than is the case with the rest of Machado's oeuvre.

Recall that Eça, possibly more perceptive than Machado with regard to male-female relations as they were presented in the day-to-day interactions of his time, more skeptical of institutions and sentiments, and more cynical and disillusioned than the Brazilian author, stretched the human capacity for acceptance to the point of presenting us in *Alves e C.<sup>a</sup>* (1925) with a reconciliation of husband and wife that effectively reduces adultery to a relatively insignificant episode.

The kind of situation that causes Dom Casmurro to suffer might prove uncomfortable for Eça's characters, but it would not prevent them from adapting or from living relatively happy lives (the topic of what constitutes happiness for Eça and Machado's characters must wait for another study).

Eça's work is repeatedly marked by the theme of a lost ideal of perfect, fulfilling love, whereas in Machado, this remains a vital presence capable of producing profound pain for his characters, as well as situations of narrative-worthy tragedy. The solution offered in *Alves e C.<sup>a</sup>* is unthinkable in Machado's work. If tragedy is not consummated in *Brás Cubas*, this is evidently due to the husband, who, despite some suspicions, remains unaware of what is occurring between Virgília and Brás. In *Alves e C.<sup>a</sup>* the husband "knows," the lover knows the husband knows, and there are numerous ambiguities that are reproduced ironically. For the husband, this knowledge, along with economic factors, material comfort, a certain common sense—isn't it true that love, according to Erasmus and Plato, is a delusion or a sickness?—and a certain weakness of character outweigh the blow to his self-respect as well as the public humiliation caused by the adultery. The husband's weakness of character does not properly facilitate adultery, but is rather an indicator, operating on the individual level, of the profound moral transformation and the diminished scale of moral expectation (or repression) occurring in society at that time. What was beginning to take effect was a somewhat resigned acceptance of a limited, human kind of love, in line with the general tendency of life at the time: away from the illusion of a utopian, divine existence, and toward contenting oneself with a "democratic" banality (or humanity, or mediocrity). Seen from Eça's perspective, great romantic tragedies



like *Dom Casmurro* belong to an ancient Greek tragic tradition and to a solemn French classical one; but these would run the risk of appearing ridiculous in liberal, bourgeois society, where they effectively have no place.

Confronted with the possibility of tragedy, a saving irony and skepticism allow Eça's characters, who do not take themselves too seriously nor believe in the purifying power of unhappiness—or in unhappiness as the precursor to some as yet unseen, unknown, hypothetical, future, and compensatory happiness—to distance themselves from the doom that threatens them, and to laugh at themselves, escape the scene, and console themselves in noisy, loquacious masculine camaraderie, with good dinners, and with good wine.

Machado's characters, on the other hand, in representative cases like that of the protagonist of *Dom Casmurro*, continue to believe religiously, or at least want to continue believing, in the bourgeois order and in marriage—and consequently they remain exposed to a tragedy caused by the frustration of this hope. Since love for these characters serves as a possible source of profound happiness and as a privileged mode of serious self-realization, it is natural that it also serves for them as a potential cause of great suffering, with the power to ruin their lives.

Eça's characters, in being disillusioned, are enlightened in terms of their relationship to the reality that surrounds them. They do not want the sort of profound understanding of situations and ideals that might put them in tragic situations; they prefer to get by on a happiness that is relative—and mediocre—but such is life in liberal democracy. Can the individual expect to get more from life than the adult, disillusioned characters of Eça's novels expect from it? This may be the case for some, but Eça tells us that for most, it is not. Amaro, for example, who fails at self-understanding, love, and in fulfilling his destiny, survives, apparently happy, in a squalid, stupid, and repugnant state of mediocrity.

## 9.

In this way, Eça and Machado present us with two distinct accounts of the failure of marriage and love and of the consequences of this catastrophe for the lives of their characters. Marriage and love during this period, as we have seen, had already taken on, or were in the process of taking on for the authors and for their characters, what we might call a more human, more imperfect dimension, distinct from the old divine aura that in the past rendered mythic all that related to affective relations. In Eça, there are no Romeos and Juliets

as in Shakespeare, no Lauras as in Petrarch, no Beatrices as in Dante; instead, they are common people who love each other or sleep together, frequently in secret and in violation of the laws of morality.

Machado did not completely ignore Eça's account of amorous relations. As I have already argued, *Brás Cubas* is a comedy whose implicit tragedy is never acknowledged or explored, and which approximates the ironic vision of and attitude toward the world that dominate Eça's universe. *Brás Cubas* forces us to admit that one can be happy immorally, though the novel itself can also be seen as expressing an awareness of the imperfection (new? eternal?) of love and of human relationships. In this sense the novel does not amount to an explicit condemnation of immorality and adultery. Machado may observe the tragicomedy of human life from a distance, with irony and in the manner of Shakespeare, but in his fiction, he is never a pamphleteering moralist.

As an aside, a curious detail: Virgília, who maintains a long-lasting adulterous affair without a great sense of guilt, may appear, and may very well be, more potentially emancipated and modern than Eça's Luísa. On the other hand, it may be that through Virgília, Machado presents us with another possible vision of adultery, one unaccompanied by a destructive sense of guilt. Do not forget that Virgília is loved and Luísa is not, and that the physical relationship between Basílio and Luísa is, from the former's perspective, cynically carnal. On Basílio's part, this amounts to pure, calculated sexual exploitation, whereas Brás has a genuinely loving relationship with Virgília, quite like a marriage. Basílio does not have Brás Cubas' human dimension. Keep in mind that Eça narrates Basílio from the outside, not granting him enough depth of character to hold our attention long enough to see what he feels and thinks below the surface. Perhaps it is here that we can find the explanation for the differences in behavior between Luísa and Virgília, as two women who in many other respects are similar—namely in terms of their shared experience of a previous, unconsummated romance with their respective partners in adultery.

Perhaps these circumstances make Machado's criticism of Eça clearer, when the former accuses the Portuguese writer of not creating "figuras morais," that is, characters that act according to their personality. However, Machado provides us with the following, surprising instance in *Brás Cubas*. Machado, who thought Luísa's decision to bring a portrait of her husband along when she decided to run away with her cousin to be illogical, immoral, and hypocritical, shows Virgília defending her husband against her lover when Brás belittles either him or the relationship Virgília has with him.<sup>7</sup>

Had Machado learned from Eça that adultery is a more psychologically complex situation than he believed when he so severely criticized the Portuguese novelist's inability to construct moral characters, who would act in accord with their supposed personality? This is not impossible. The *I*, the individual character, is not a fixed, rigid, or monolithic entity, as Machado understood and described in his writing better than anyone. Rather, it is a flexible concept, impossible to define or fix, permanently moving or shifting, always in search of itself. Neither morally solid nor coherent, it is instead volatile and contradictory.

#### 10.

When Machado criticizes Eça for not presenting us with moral characters, he is basically criticizing him for not knowing how or wanting to create characters in the mold of Dom Casmurro. This is why Machado is surprised by the lack of acceptably convincing causal relations between the characters' actions and is taken aback by the personalities of these characters. Machado's interpretation may be the product of a learned but outmoded vision of the world that would have been considered old-fashioned by Eça's time. This view of the world and of human nature has obvious links to an ultimately mythical idea of psychological coherence that was still partially observed in nineteenth-century literature—and that has always had and will probably continue to have the useful function of protecting us from the danger of chaos. Machado believed in the unified, coherent subject who acts in strict accordance with his character and personality—though this belief took on a different form in his criticism than in his fiction. This mythical, ingenuous, though perhaps also comfortable and necessary, conception of a monolithic subject, structured according to a reliable and inflexible logic, continues to characterize literary, political, criminal, and legal thought, though it has been called into question by theories that proclaim the death or nonexistence of the subject, by Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms, and by a vision of the world that considers the subject to be an invented fiction of the West.

Because Machado de Assis believes in the theoretical coherence of the subject, he looks for meaningful relationships between Luísa or Father Amaro and the actions and events that surround them. He does not find these, and consequently accuses Eça of not knowing how to create moral characters. As Auerbach explains in *Mimesis*, in the same way that working-class persons were late to enter into literature as serious characters (and not merely as bur-

lesque, picaresque, or comic), banal, peripheral, and apparently or truly unimportant events took time in gaining a right to literary representation—a right that in the past was only conceded to events that were considered important, in the sense that these events affected the lives of characters in a spectacular or profound way, through tragedy or moral conflict:

[T]he great exterior turning points and blows of fate are granted less importance [by modern literature]; they are credited with less power of yielding decisive information concerning the subject; on the other hand there is confidence that in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can be portrayed. There is greater confidence in syntheses gained through full exploitation of an everyday occurrence than in a chronologically well-ordered total treatment which accompanies the subject from beginning to end, attempts not to omit anything externally important, and emphasizes the great turning points of destiny. (Auerbach 547-548)

It seems more difficult for the modern writer to determine what is important and what is insignificant in the lives of their characters than it was in the past. At a certain point, the idea of what is “important” changed. In a victory for the modern spirit, the “objectively important” (defined as such for ideological reasons, and in periods during which it is possible to judge events, morally or otherwise, according to a solid sense of the world and of values) clearly gave way to the “subjectively important.” Accordingly, tragedy or great happiness could now be caused by objectively insignificant, though subjectively catastrophic or joyful, events. The leveling of the importance attributed to events has been accompanied in modern literature by an inability to determine with certainty why events occur, and why literary characters and even real people act the way they do. This may be characteristic of periods of transition, although I see it, correctly or not, as an achievement, as progress. We can sense ourselves getting closer to the truth in admitting that “we don’t really know” or “we don’t know anything” and in looking skeptically at definite, fixed explanations that can only colonize and give false hope to the reader.

# 11.

It would be naïve, however, to suppose that Machado de Assis, a subtle, ironic specialist in portraying the human soul—its functioning, its secrets, and its apparent or real lack of coherence—was ignorant of what I have suggested.

One night, Brás Cubas finds a gold coin, ends up turning it over to the authorities, and is publicly praised for his gesture. Later on, he discovers a larger sum of money and decides, perfectly aware of what he is doing, to keep the money for himself.<sup>8</sup> Here it seems unquestionable that Machado is acting in accord with Eça and the naturalists, regardless of the fact that he criticized them elsewhere for being unable to distinguish the essential from the accessory. However, in his work, Machado uses this type of narration to reveal the depth and internal contradictions of his characters. This means that Machado applies in his own, unique way the awareness he shared with Eça of human contradiction and of the frequent lack of logic or coherence in human behavior.

In another of Machado's texts, love is frustrated and the lives of various characters ruined by a kiss stolen from a young woman of exemplary morality—a morality so exemplary that it ends up appearing maniacal or obsessive.<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, the character's personality and her idea of honor accord with this strict behavior. But is there any more logic or depth in this exemplary, artificial, "figura moral" than in Eça's characters? This is doubtful.

Returning to the famous Brás Cubas, he dies stupidly, in banal fashion (he suggests as much) because he catches cold while working on the "poultice" he hopes will bring him fame and renown.<sup>10</sup> This is a double irony: first, the episode functions as a negation of science and of a character's misplaced faith in science, a characteristically machadian theme or obsession; and second, an accessory, insignificant, humor-provoking event causes Brás' death. This is likewise characteristic of Machado and of his vision of the absurdity that marks our lives.

Machado seems to understand that our lives have no more meaning than do our obsessions. In his work, the banal, the superficial, the chance occurrence make our heroic pretension to a meaningful destiny, and to a dignity we inappropriately term "human," seem laughable. But in his criticism, Machado forgets this and tries to teach Eça exactly the opposite lesson, that inevitable, profound, and tragic relations exist between events and characters that can be identified, and therefore apprehended and characterized, and that our destinies are serious and logical in the manner of classical or neo-classical tragedies.

As a short story writer and novelist, Machado was clearly more daring and more modern, more subtle, and more aware of the mundane tragedies and of the emptiness and nothingness hidden in the guise of order and life-structuring meaning, than he was as a paternalistic, humorless critic. The first Machado did not really believe what the second wrote in his criticism. This



is why Machado was such a formidable writer, and why as a citizen, Machado may well have been a timid, reserved, and prudent conservative.

## 12.

Machado commits another error in judgment when he accuses Eça of not presenting the reader with “figuras morais.” Machado does not understand that characters like Father Amaro and Luísa fail to achieve their own destinies and that they are, in their own individual ways, defeated by it (though the same cannot be said of Amélia, who dies with dignity after having acknowledged both her love and her mistake, and having in this way come to understand life and herself). Father Amaro and Luísa are confronted by exceptional situations of conflict with institutions, with what we understand as law or order, and with dominant values—and, by extension, with their own consciences. But neither one takes away from these circumstances the lesson he or she should, even in those moments when they appear to move in this direction (for example, when Amaro meditates in the melancholic solitude of his home and protests against the law that prevents him from loving others, and when Luísa angrily slaps the man to whom she, in need of money, had considered selling herself). They both succumb—the one descending to ignorant, demeaning mediocrity, and the other dying of her own failure to understand and take control of her insecurities, to perceive and accept her internal contradictions.

But we cannot blame Amaro or Luísa for what happens to them. Nor should Eça be considered a lesser writer for not creating exceptional characters. Instead of creating tragic heroes like Dom Casmurro or ironic heroes like Brás Cubas, Eça opts for banal characters who inspire our sympathy. Not content to obey, respect, and imitate the forms of behavior they have learned, most of these characters fail to achieve their destiny, modestly and with mediocrity (not gloriously, as with Bentinho, or happily, as with Brás Cubas), after courting failure with their daring conduct and opinions that do not respect prevailing forms of conduct. Newspapers, probably now more than ever, report unexceptional failures, which are seemingly unworthy of further mention, on a daily basis. But the type of novels Machado aspired to write either did not deal with these, or dealt with them to a lesser degree. If we are to believe novels written after the nineteenth century, no one is really “crushed” to death by the consequences of adultery. But in the nineteenth century the situation was quite different, or, put another way, what we speak of and view

today could not have been said or investigated then with the same level of clarity. Of course, various authors of the time denounced adultery and its consequences in their work—Garrett, Júlio Dinis, and Camilo, aside from Eça. This serves as proof that our present, presumably enlightened state is not fundamentally distinct from that in which nineteenth-century writers operated.

In presenting us with completely unremarkable characters (unremarkable even in their mediocrity or mistakes), seemingly devoid of a moral dimension, Eça is revealing a new kind of worldly disharmony to us, along with the confusions imposed by the new liberal system on his characters and their difficult lives. In the manner of Garrett's character Carlos, a divided individual, incapable of understanding his various, seemingly immoral loves, Eça presents us with Luísa and forces us to watch her personal shipwreck. Not merely the product of inconsistency, her disaster is moreover the product of a desire that Luísa does not perceive—although she intuitively feels that this desire has the right to exist. The great, rapid changes that would occur between men and women after Luísa's time, the gradual emancipation of women and a new way of understanding and accepting love and desire, show that Luísa was truly modern in her inability to predict the indifference that would come to enslave her. She loved Basílio and, in a certain sense, she loved who she was in her adulterous relationship—Machado would understand this as enigmatic, although we can view it as necessary for a woman like Luísa, who did not identify blindly and unthinkingly with the role of wife that she is expected to play. It is in her affair, an event that took her by surprise (albeit available), that Luísa displays what her education taught her, along with her seemingly, and in fact largely indestructible love for Jorge. It was largely through action that Luísa learned who she was as a person, as a woman, and as a married woman (she certainly learned this to a far lesser extent in theory, which partially justifies her having succumbed to adultery, unlike Leopoldina). It is through adultery that Luísa learns of love and marriage, mysteries that Leopoldina, a cynical, free woman, encouraged her to investigate.

In reality, the possibility that Luísa is led to adultery through her reading, her idleness, Leopoldina's influence, and by chance—which Eça, adhering to the naturalist model, suggests is the case—is only of relative importance. Machado, chained to the idea that Eça had written a novel designed to prove naturalist theories, grants a great deal of importance to elements of the novel that, if they are significant, are the more so for what we see in them, rather than what Machado projects onto them. As it is for us today, it would have

been difficult for Machado to accept the trivialization of sexual relations, the demystification of love, and the destruction of the sacred character of interpersonal (and particularly conjugal) relations. Deluding himself, at least in theory, with a fantastical, elevating idea of love and of sexual relations, Machado naturally protests against Luísa, who he sees as superficial and reckless, and her behavior, which he considers capricious. Machado does not believe that Luísa could possibly love her husband because he considers her irresponsible and superficial. As such, he considers it absurd and cynical of Luísa that she would think of bringing a portrait of Jorge in the suitcase she plans on taking with her when she runs away with Basílio. In reality, Luísa understood the situation better than Machado. The only thing she failed to comprehend was that Basílio was for her merely a manifestation of her desire to feel the love she thought she had yet to experience—and in fact had not experienced, even in terms of love's shortcomings.

Could it be that human error and the insane attraction of erotic love are incompatible with sincerely experiencing other emotions? Not necessarily. On this point, Machado reveals himself in his criticism and own fiction to be much more conservative and cautious than Eça. Without suffering, one cannot learn that love is never what we first imagine it to be (Luísa, Jorge, Machado, various other characters, and the reader, learn this in reading *O Primo Basílio*).

### 13.

Luisa reveals herself to be an interesting, thoroughly modern character—much more tragic than she appears—in her contradictions and in her recklessness, apparently the result of stupidity. While these aspects of her personality are convincing to us now, they were not so for Machado. It is through Luísa that Eça is able to identify and present us with a new order, which appears to be a state of disorder if evaluated in terms of the values we desperately claim as our own and which we want to continue believing in so that life and death retain some meaning. As I have suggested earlier, it is in this way that Eça proposes and confronts us with the new “desconcerto do mundo”—it is impossible not to see affinities between Eça and Camões on this point. A perplexity accompanies and marks Eça's understanding, that of his characters, and our own. In discovering all that we are capable of doing, in audaciously violating (or perhaps irresponsibly violating, but never without reason or without a sense of guilt) the rules and codes of behavior that

mark our education and personal formation, we learn—at our own peril—the true value and logic of emotions and institutions.

If Machado's characters retain an apparent understanding of causal relationships, and are much better able to negotiate their relationships with order, with the law, and with morality than are Eça's characters, this is probably due to the fact that Brazilian society, largely protected from the disturbances that were occurring on the Old Continent, sought to retain the illusions that were coming undone in Europe. This desire to hold to older ideas is absent from Eça's novels, who in this respect anticipates Fernando Pessoa. But Machado, far removed from that context, could not understand the vehemence and the reasons for his own revulsion, nor could he understand his own naiveté in judging Eça's characters incoherent and unconvincing. The tragedies Machado saw unfolding in Eça's first two novels, which he rejected because they lacked the grandness that accompanies the coherence of destiny and of character, were a prophecy of what our lives would become; as texts they required and require a difficult lucidity that we cannot now forsake.

It seems to me that it is here that we can find the deeper reason for the disagreement between Machado (both as a critic and fiction writer, though in different ways) and Eça. Eça could not shout his response back to Machado because of the reverence he, as a writer at the beginning of his career, owed his better-known Brazilian counterpart. Machado, who was unable to respond to Eça's unpublished preface to the 1880 edition of *O Crime*, perhaps understood better than we that which separated him from the Portuguese writer, as well as the prophetic power attached to the work of the latter.

Eça and Machado dealt with the same fundamental themes in their work, though from different perspectives and applying different abilities to the task. These themes include love and its illusions, as well as the errors and disillusion, and the loyalties and disloyalties it inspires; truth and lies; the desire for greatness or fulfillment; and the inevitable human frustration engendered by the tragicomedy of existence. Both writers described the circumstances in which these feelings and desires are manifested in people's lives. The meaning of the real, the reality of the real, or, if one prefers (it is a question of perspective), the meaninglessness and unreality of our ideas of the real—this is essentially what preoccupied the two writers. It is petty and futile to oppose the two as if they were enemies, to pretend that one is superior to the other, since both writers produced some of the nineteenth-century's truest, most lucid writing. At times it seems that all has already been said regarding what

they have left to us, though at other times, it seems that there is much that remains to be understood. I hope that this study serves as a modest contribution toward the reevaluation of Eça de Queirós' work, and as an impetus towards a reading of Eça that is not so tied to the idea of literary currents like Naturalism. Machado seems to have fared better than Eça in this regard, given the greater level of development of studies on his work in Brazil, Portugal, France, and the United States.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally presented at the Congresso de Literatura Brasileira, held in 1997 at the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto.

<sup>2</sup> See Rosa 19-26.

<sup>3</sup> See Assis 943.

<sup>4</sup> On Eça and Naturalism, see Saraiva and Lopes; see also Lima 164-89.

<sup>5</sup> See, on page 344 of the Livros do Brasil edition, the passage that begins with, "Ah! Que peca, desinteressante vida, em comparação de outras cheias e soberbas vidas," and concludes with "Apenas o claro entendimento das realidades humanas—e depois o forte querer."

<sup>6</sup> "Luísa resolve fugir com o primo; prepara um saco de viagem, mete dentro alguns objectos, entre eles um retrato do marido. Ignoro inteiramente a razão fisiológica ou psicológica desta precaução de ternura conjugal: deve haver alguma; em todo o caso, não é aparente" (Assis 916).

<sup>7</sup> See the chapters LXII, "Fujamos," and CII "Distração."

<sup>8</sup> See *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, chapters LI, "É minha," and LII, "O embrulho misterioso."

<sup>9</sup> *Iaiá Garcia* (1878). See chapter III, in which the stolen kiss is described.

<sup>10</sup> See chapter II, "O emplastro."

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