

Literary Abodes: Machado de Assis on Interiors

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Abstract. This article looks at how the arrangement of domestic interiors and interior decorating become increasingly important topics of cultural inquiry at the end of the nineteenth century. This cultural and social phenomenon is specifically intertwined with the development of narrative and has an important influence on the work of Machado de Assis.

This essay examines important biographical information and some of the author's personal correspondence in order to analyze Machado's relation to houses, furnishings, and interiors. Machado develops in his narrative a discourse concerning interior settings and their contents that interrogates what it means to inhabit space and to have space inhabit the novel.

The author's experience with rooms, furnishings, and objects suggests that dwelling revealed something to him about the problematic mode of both existence and poetics.

It is hard to find a late nineteenth-century novel that is not fascinated with dwellings and with their interiors in particular. One has only to recall Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton* to be reminded of the ubiquitous trend of many of these narratives to turn not only homes into protagonists, but also the contents of houses into major characters of a story. Mrs. Gereth, who is introduced to us as a woman "who had been kept awake for hours by the wallpaper in her room" (2), epitomizes the furniture- and object-crazed characters of this period, who ultimately convince readers that there is indeed a lot at stake in

their tables and chairs. No more than a cursory look at the cultural and literary studies of this time reveals that domesticity and interior decoration were widespread topics of inquiry. Generally speaking, however, studies on the interiors of dwellings immediately focus on the rising exchange economy, the growing capitalist and mass production of commodities, and the increasing fascination with material culture and fetishism, concluding that the cultural obsession with interiors is simply a byproduct of these characteristically bourgeois phenomena. My study of interiors in the work of Machado de Assis, Eça de Queirós, and Leopoldo Alas¹ has led me to discover that the intricate private settings that turn up in fiction time and again do a lot more than mirror or satirize social norms. Beyond serving the novel thematically the interior is a fundamental formal component indicating larger ontological and cultural changes. This *topos* reveals that specific philosophical and social transformations, which take place at this time and rely on our sense of inhabiting space, are intertwined with the development of narrative.

In other words, interiors have meta-fictional and metaphysical qualities. Furnishing, designing, and inhabiting an interior setting become activities akin to the writing of narrative. It is only since the nineteenth century, when important developments in the culture of the interior took place, that such an analogy between novelistic endeavors and the arrangement of interiors begins to emerge. To give two emblematic examples: Edgar Allan Poe writes an essay in 1840 entitled "The Philosophy of Furniture" in which it becomes clear that Poe is not only, as Walter Benjamin observes, the first physiognomist of the domestic interior, but also one of the earliest writers to give furnishings and the enclosed setting a narrative life of their own. Edith Wharton's 1897 *The Decoration of Houses* is widely accepted as one of the initial and most influential doctrines on interior design as we conceive of it today. This groundbreaking architectural treatise, however, can also be read as a narrative poetics in the sense that Wharton connects the writer's task to that of the decorator's. Both Poe and Wharton imply that in rooms as in fiction ornament is not independent of structure. While these nineteenth-century writers begin to reassess the qualities of space, twentieth-century philosophical thought questions how interior dwelling enlightens our understanding of the workings of the imagination and how our ontological situation relates to inhabiting space. In his phenomenology of the domestic shelter, Gaston Bachelard shows how a philosophy of the imagination or of the poetic is necessarily also a poetics of space. As Diana Fuss explains in *The Sense of an Interior*, if Bachelard sees in

a house a poem, Martin Heidegger reads poetry as a special kind of building (4). Heidegger, in his essay “Poetically Man Dwells,” and to a certain degree in his major work, *Being and Time*, reads human dwelling as a primordial testament to human existence and to the nature of the poetic imagination. In other words, to be is also to inhabit, and to inhabit is to narrate or to imagine. As Walter Benjamin famously explains in *The Arcades Project*, the “phantasmagorias of the interior” become the condition of nineteenth-century existence and this illusory interior begins to define modernity (9). The attention nineteenth-century fiction pays to interiors anticipates in important ways the fascination with interior life so prevalent in twentieth-century philosophical thought and modernist narrative.

Most critics agree that Machado de Assis is a transitional figure who, while writing primarily in the nineteenth century, anticipates twentieth-century modernity on the levels of both content and form. So it is not surprising to discover that he too cultivates a sense of interior space throughout his life that affects his philosophical views of the world and his understanding of writing. Machado develops in his narrative a discourse of interior settings and their content that inquires about what it means to inhabit space and to have space inhabit the novel. But Machado’s own experience with rooms, furnishings, and objects also seem to suggest that dwelling revealed something to him about the problematic mode of both existence and poetics. Thus, in this essay I would like to take a brief look at the importance Machado attributes to interior space in his own relation to private life, and highlight what importance this has in his writing.²

Rio de Janeiro is the predominant setting for Machado de Assis’s (1839–1908) fiction and life, although he moved a significant amount within the capital of the Brazilian empire.³ Machado’s father, a mulatto artisan, and his working-class Azorean-born mother were dependents or *agregados* of a wealthy family that owned most of Livramento Hill. The property’s owner, Maria José de Mendonça Barroso Pereira, was also Machado’s godmother, and between his family’s poorer dwellings and the wealth and refinement of his protector’s home, the writer probably experienced vastly contrasting interior settings as a young boy.⁴ An early and successful career in the printing, publishing, and journalistic worlds led to his constantly relocating as his social status improved. In the 1860s, already a respected journalist, critic, and poet, Machado lived with his Portuguese colleague Francisco Ramos Paz, of whose extensive library he partook.⁵ He married the sister of a Portuguese

friend and poet in 1869, and with Carolina Augusta Xavier de Novais lived in various middle-class homes in the center of town until finally settling in a chalet on Rua Cosme Velho, number 18.⁶ Most critics and biographers consider Cosme Velho the main domestic space that encompasses Machado's private life, habits, and thoughts, and although the building itself has not survived, the house remains part of Brazil's cultural patrimony since many of its significant contents are today museum pieces.

A 1997 protocol enlarged the Brazilian Academy of Letters' original collection of Machado's belongings, books, and writing desk with other furniture and objects that originally belonged to Machado and Carolina. The exhibition, entitled "Cosme Velho, 18," displays a large part of the interior contents of the couple's former home; it houses furniture, books, and decorative objects, and attempts to recreate the author's interior ambience, drawing one closer to Machado's material surroundings. The study *Rua Cosme Velho, 18* provides historical background for the various furnishings and details the efforts involved in their restoration. According to this study, most of Machado's furniture adheres to the tendency of the time to reproduce French styles in national factories, to adopt what the authors call "uma conduta sobretudo imitativa, e não criadora" (40). Curiously, Machado expresses much more confidence in the national production of furniture than do the authors of this study. They quote an August 16, 1895 chronicle where Machado is clearly enthusiastic:

As nossas grandes marcenarias estão cheias de móveis ricos, vários de gosto; não há só cadeiras, mesas, camas, mas toda sorte de trastes de adorno, fielmente copiados dos móveis franceses, alguns de nome original, o *bijou de salon*, por exemplo, outros em língua híbrida, como o porta-*bibelots*. Entra-se nos grandes depósitos, fica-se deslumbrado pela perfeição da obra, pela riqueza da matéria, pela beleza da forma. (39)

Machado is impressed by the formal beauty of the national furniture production, and by its ability to inspire new linguistic modes. Another striking detail in this study concerns the fact that the couple's matrimonial bed is an exception to the imitative norm since it is an original piece imported from England. Choosing such a high-quality intimate furnishing seems not only to reinforce the closeness of the couple but also to highlight certain qualities that Machado and Carolina gave precedence to when it came to their interior.

The way Machado relates to things and places explains how homes become such dominant leitmotifs in his fiction, and why he calls a house a symbol

of his life experience and turns it into a kind of fictional theater.⁷ Luciano Trigo claims that Machado and his wife “iam mudando de casa à medida que Machado avançava na carreira burocrática” (21) and, on one level, the frequent relocating suggests how social class is inevitably implied in dwelling. But Machado always understood the association between interiors and social status ironically. One of his wry journalistic chronicles begins, “Fui ontem visitar um amigo velho, Fulano Público, e achei-o acabando de almoçar.... A casa em que mora, é um resumo de tôdas as habitações, desde o palácio até o cortiço, para exprimir—creio eu—que êle é o complexo de tôdas as classes sociais” (3: 449). Despite the sarcasm, it becomes clear that for Machado, the home reflects an individual’s values and contradictions, including his own. Although Francisca de Basto Cordeiro’s personal account of her experience with the couple lacks accuracy and is at times biased, the testimonial does include two important portraits of the couple’s interiors. The first describes an apparently barren and modest home on the Rua do Catete and seems to contrast the more luxurious setting at Cosme Velho. Despite Cordeiro’s efforts to draw distinctions, the details actually reveal that the furniture mostly stayed the same.⁸ Lúcia Miguel Pereira gives a more modest description of Cosme Velho:

A casa seria mais confortável do que a dos primeiros anos do casamento, com duas criadas, móveis simples e cômodos, um ou outro quadro, bons livros, algumas edições de luxo, mas o ambiente era o mesmo, de aconchego e de simplicidade digna. Tudo tranqüilo, decente e fino. (183)

Machado valued above all the emotional protection that his home and wife provided, for the two were intertwined for him. And in fact Carolina devoted herself extensively to the enrichment of their interior space. Cordeiro refers to Carolina’s “personalidade artística” and “espírito engenhoso” in describing her commitment to interior *décor*, and from Cordeiro’s descriptions and details, it is probable that Carolina would have designed her own patterns and some furniture pieces (31). Carolina developed an interest in the arts and crafts and Machado in acquiring and collecting meaningful objects and artworks. This combines with the couple’s carefully considered design of the floor plan with which they sought to create a conscientious sense of their space, so that—more than their social progression—consistent aesthetic concerns impacted their interior improvements. Machado’s study was purposely isolated from the rest of the house and from the exterior world. Cordeiro explains that in it “A porta,

para a varanda, fôra inutilizada por um armário envidraçado” (33). The brightly lit and cheerfully adorned sleeping quarters, on the other hand, opened up on the garden, and the fabrics and upholstery are full of representations of nature. The modern individual dwells and fashions his or her subjectivity in a designed space that at the same time both wards off and opens onto the world. Machado is able to bring the world inside his private spaces, transforming them into the protected center of his identity and imagination.

With Carolina's death, Machado's sense of the space they inhabited together intensifies. Cordeiro tells us that toward the end of his life, Machado preferred to sleep in Carolina's sewing room, where he would have felt closer to her creative environment. The creative fictional process, which is present in both Carolina's crafts and in Machado's writings, thus stands for Machado as a synecdoche for the way in which the modern world is inhabited. Furthermore, Machado shared with his closest friends some of his melancholy and ideas about the connection between his interior and the memory of his wife. In a letter thanking Joaquim Nabuco for his condolences, Machado writes: “Aqui me fico, por ora na mesma casa, no mesmo aposento, com os mesmos adornos seus. Tudo me lembra a minha meiga Carolina” (3: 1071). In a response to José Veríssimo's positive reviews of *Esau e Jacó* (1904) he explains: “Cá vai o volume para o pequeno móvel onde guardo uma parte das lembranças dela” (3: 1073). According to Pereira, this small piece of furniture, located by Machado's bedside, contained the couple's personal correspondence (later burned) and Carolina's jewelry and other personal items worn on her wedding day. Just as many of his characters showcased mementos, relics, and symbolic objects, Machado also collected and displayed certain meaningful pieces. The famous gift from Joaquim Nabuco, “o galho do carvalho de Tasso,” is clearly a prized possession. He writes to Nabuco: “O próprio galho, com a sua carta ao Graça, já os tenho na minha sala, em caixa” (3: 1075).

Machado's involvement with the Academy of Letters also demonstrates how important the inhabiting of an interior is for the development of a meaningful ideal. The first president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, Machado had the difficult task of finding a house for the institution. He wanted to create an organization to advance a national literature but also to build a meeting space for the Brazilian intelligentsia. The first chapter of Josué Montello's study of Machado's work in the Academy is very appropriately titled “A casa de Machado de Assis.” Machado is evidently enthusiastic and good-humored with respect to this undertaking: he writes to Joaquim Nabuco, “A Academia vai continuar os seus trabalhos, agora mais assídua, desde que tem casa e

móveis" (3: 1075). The first temporary setting that Machado finds for the Academy is a shared space with the Academy of Medicine:

Temos enfim uma sala no Pedagogium [...]. Fui ver a sala, é vasta, tem mobília e serve bem aos nossos trabalhos. Naturalmente, os retratos e bustos que lá estão são de médicos, mas nós ainda os não temos de nossa gente, e aqueles, até porque são defuntos, não nos porão fora. Entendi-me também para obtermos um lugar em que possamos ter mesa e armário para guarda dos nossos papéis e livros. (3: 1050)

Like his own characters, Machado also reads and transforms the space around him, bringing to life inanimate portraits and busts of dead illustrious men.

These penetrating ideas about objects and spaces resurface in Machado's evolving concept of narrative creation and its connection to national identity. What Machado called a "certo sentimento íntimo" in his infamous 1873 essay is represented in his concept of interior space (3: 804).⁹ Anticipating the thoughts of Walter Benjamin, who wrote that the private individual brings together "remote locales and memories of the past" (19) and "the far away and the long ago" (9), Machado too claimed that the author can speak of "assuntos remotos no tempo e no espaço" and be Brazilian in one's inner self (3: 804). Roberto Schwarz argues convincingly that Machado was able to observe and represent the complexities of Brazilian society once he achieved a certain social status.¹⁰ In other words, once he had his own private space, or his own fictional theater, he could in his writing more effectively compose, destroy, and build up again different social and fictional spaces.

Machado interiorizes a sense of nationality while developing an aesthetic sensibility of his private self. The interior world provides the intellectual freedom that motivates him to experiment technically and allows his philosophical audacity. By enclosing himself in his study behind the glass armoire full of books, Machado ironically feels freer to reach his inner mind and sense of what to him defines his nation. This turning inward is already evident in his early writing. Many of his first-person-narrated chronicles begin by describing the comfort, silence, and particularities of a private salon or study, which then inspires philosophical reflection or debate with a similarly comfortably seated interlocutor. In his novels it becomes increasingly evident how Machado relies on the house, the drawing room, and the private quarters as a rhetorical tool not only to explore the interior lives of his characters but also to frame many of his narratives' thematic concerns.

The interior is also an important *topos* in a number of short stories. To conclude I would like to take as an example, D. Conceição from “Missa do Galo.” Her relation to her interior space brings out important conflicts that she faces with herself and others. Often in Machado interiors reveal the frustration of the female character, yet they also demonstrate the challenges of the writer. Not unlike the novels, Machado’s short stories focus on the writing of fiction and become meta-literary constructions that depend formally on interior spaces. For example, the nocturnal domestic setting that structures “Missa do Galo” functions to seduce both the narrator and the reader. The whole narrative consists of a conversation the first-person narrator remembers having had years ago with his hostess, D. Conceição, in her *sala de visitas*. In a middle-class home such as this one on the Rua do Senado, the *sala da frente* is typically the best situated and most elaborately decorated room. Here is where the narrator waits for midnight mass, reading at a table in the center of the room until he is interrupted by D. Conceição. The reader supposes that D. Conceição is attempting to seduce Sr. Nogueira because of the way she sensually interacts with the room’s furnishings. Trying to get closer to the narrator, D. Conceição moves from one piece of furniture to another, using her body to touch different objects.

It is also from this interior movement that the reader probes the mind of D. Conceição. Once she sits in the chair where the narrator originally sat her thoughts take a turn. The narrator is forced to confer center stage to the female protagonist. From her position, D. Conceição looks into a mirror that stands above the narrator. Therefore, she sees the narrator and herself as one. The true narrator of the story, then, D. Conceição begins to reflect on how her life with an unfaithful husband is symbolically represented by what surrounds and faces her. She attempts to indirectly communicate her feelings to Sr. Nogueira and the reader by discussing the two paintings that hang over the *canapé* and then deliberating on whether or not to get new wallpaper. D. Conceição’s impatience and anxieties surface in her engagement with her interior, prompting her not only to seduce the apparently unaware and unresponsive narrator but also to self-reflect. The narrator seems blind to this metaphoric interior and exercise that clearly stands for both D. Conceição’s desires and the story itself. The short story, like D. Conceição, is also self reflective, finding its real source in the woman and her story. This highly complex text, whose vocabulary reinforces a sense of confinement, constructs a dreamy atmosphere, and mixes erotic symbols with religion and the imagination, is an excellent example of how Machado

begins to develop narrators that inevitably lose control of their narration and misread the intentions of other characters. The narrator unwittingly gives prominence to D. Conceição and her interior setting.

Machado understood, as contemporary readers should as well, that tracing the thresholds and configurations of the novelistic abode equates to the reading of our time. His works invent and shape complex relations between an inner and an outer dimension of space that constitutes the core of their narrative world-making. What gains visibility in his writing is the existential shift of modern subjects towards the cultivation of the interior. The interior realm inspires the development of his fictional worlds and serves the author as a point of departure for his imaginative spaces, while also drawing him closer to his inner self, and inspiring the critical questions that governed his view of reality and his sense of history and cultural identity.

Notes

¹ See *Interiors and Narrative*, my forthcoming book on these three figures from Bucknell University Press.

² For more on this topic, see the introduction to my forthcoming book.

³ Machado claims frequently in his correspondence and writings that he was destined to live and die in, and never travel far from, Rio de Janeiro. In 1897 he writes to José Veríssimo: “Eu sou um pêco fruto da capital, onde nasci, vivo e creio que hei de morrer, não indo ao interior senão por acaso e de relâmpago” (3: 1042).

⁴ See Jean-Michel Massa’s biography for Machado’s early years.

⁵ According to Lúcia Miguel Pereira’s biographical study, *Machado de Assis. Estudo crítico e biográfico*, Machado most likely lived with Ramos Paz between 1860 and 1869.

⁶ The couple first lives in Rua dos Andradas 119 in the center of town until 1873. Then for shorter periods from 1873 to 1874 on Rua Santa Luzia 54, on a second floor of Rua da Lapa 96 from 1874 to 1875, and from 1875 to 1878 at the Rua das Laranjeiras 4. They move to Rua do Catete 206 in 1878, the year during which they spend three months in Nova Friburgo, and live there until 1883 before moving to Cosme Velho.

⁷ See Beatriz Berrini’s “A casa: uma em Machado, outra em Eça.”

⁸ Cordeiro’s brief description begins: “Na sala da frente, havia apenas uma modesta mobília de palhinha (sofá, 2 cadeiras de braço e outras comuns), estantes de ferro com livros e uma escrivaninha onde papéis e jornais se amontoavam. As paredes, nuas. Nada embelezava o modesto ambiente onde a instável felicidade elegera domicílio” (20). It is important to note that when the couple moved to the Catete they were already married nine years, which would seem to contradict Cordeiro’s reference to an “instável felicidade.” Cordeiro provides a lengthy description of the interior of Cosme Velho (31–33).

⁹ The essay is entitled “Notícia da atual literatura brasileira: instinto de nacionalidade.”

¹⁰ Roberto Schwarz develops these ideas in his essay “Duas notas sobre Machado de Assis.”

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