

Tapia's *Póstumo el Transmigrado*: A Pre-Incarnation of *Brás Cubas*

ABSTRACT: This article argues that Puerto Rican Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's novel *Póstumo el Transmigrado* is an important precursor to Machado de Assis's *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. By placing the two works in dialogue with one another, the article shows that the common influence of Kardecist spiritism appears to be an inspiration for these authors' projects of challenging the mimetic language of their time—particularly that used in science, social Darwinism, and realist aesthetics—which was heavily influenced by the unquestionable truths of positivism.

KEYWORDS: Machado de Assis; spiritism; Tapia y Rivera; inter-American literature

RESUMO: Esse artigo argumenta que o romance *Póstumo el Transmigrado* de Alejandro Tapia y Rivera é um precursor importante das *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* de Machado de Assis. Ao colocar as duas obras em diálogo, o artigo mostra que a influência comum do espiritismo kardecista parece ser uma inspiração para estes dois autores desafiarem a linguagem mimética da sua época—em particular aquela que foi usada na ciência, o darwinismo social e a estética realista—a qual foi influída profundamente pelas verdades inquestionáveis do positivismo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Machado de Assis; espiritismo; Tapia y Rivera; literatura inter-americana

Brás Cubas is undead. This simple but bold choice by the Brazilian author Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis radically altered our understanding of the fluid relationship between an author, a text and a reader. As Earl E. Fitz ("Reception") and Juracy Assmann Saraiva (131) have noted, scholars in the United States and Europe have recently begun to apply new critical approaches to the *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881), one of the foundational literary achievements of modern Latin American literature.

All the same, readers should keep in mind that Machado is not the first Latin American author to resuscitate a dead protagonist and send him on adventures

that challenge the supposed verities of politics, science and language that characterized the progress-obsessed nineteenth century. The prolific author Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, whom José Luis González considers the first Puerto Rican novelist,¹ employed narrative techniques and themes similar to those used by Machado de Assis nine years before the Brazilian did. Tapia's understudied narrative, *Póstumo el Transmigrado* (1872), can, therefore, be read as an important precursor to *Memórias póstumas*. Taking this approach opens a variety of possibilities for scholarly work on both novels and corrects the timelines and histories of Latin American letters, where the Brazilian author is widely considered to be the first to explore the tensions between language and reality and what these tensions mean for literary creativity (Fitz, "Reception" 16; "On-going" 20). My focus on "firsts" and "precursors" allows for revisionist approaches to the canon that highlight understudied authors, similar to what Eduardo de Assis Duarte and Maria Nazareth Soares's *Literatura e Afrodescendência no Brasil* (2011) does with Afro-Brazilian authors and what Ramón Ramos-Perea does with Tapia's Afro-Puerto Rican contemporaries (*Literatura*, 2011). As I will argue, the voices of the undead in Machado and Tapia allow their authors to renovate the novel form by challenging the then prevailing modes of narrative realism.

Some historical context will help clarify how these two landmark novels approach death, language, and narrative in such innovative ways. Both novels, for example, were written during what their authors perceived as declining, anachronistic empires. Long after most of the former Spanish Empire had declared its independence, King Dom Pedro II maintained control of the Empire of Brazil. Perhaps aware that it was behind the times to have a king of European lineage reigning over an American nation, Dom Pedro II presented himself as an enlightened monarch and encouraged scientific discoveries, technology, and high culture in Brazil (Chasteen 171). Nonetheless, he was tenuously holding onto imperial power as various political forces, both progressive and conservative, pressured him to leave (171–73). Machado, a government official and collaborator of several newspapers, was keenly aware of his country's political realities, and he sought to represent these, albeit symbolically, via his fiction.

Another kingdom that was seen as being behind the times was Spain, whose once worldwide empire was, by the mid nineteenth century, reduced to three Caribbean islands (Cuba, Puerto Rico, and, briefly, the Dominican Republic), the Philippines, and some African colonies. In addition, Napoleon's invasion and rule (1808–1812) had thrown the country into internal chaos, which contributed

to a series of revolts that first overthrew and then reinstated a line of rulers (Chasteen 97). Tapia, whose father belonged to the Spanish military, was himself exiled in Madrid from 1850 to 1852 during Isabella II's failed reign (Ramos-Perea, Tapia, 7, 133). So, like Machado, Tapia watched authoritarian imperial political structures crumble even as these regimes fought to maintain their power.

The Enlightenment was also a discourse fighting for pre-eminence in Europe and the New World—and it was winning.² With Napoleon's occupation of Spain came the official end of the Inquisition, which sought to impede Enlightenment ideas of science and technology through censorship and torture. The restoration of the Spanish crown, however, brought it all back. Its opposition to new ideas extended to spiritism, and it organized burnings of books on the topic (Ramos-Perea, Tapia 433). Censorship in Puerto Rico was also unforgiving. Thus, opposition to authoritarian rule often coincided—and conflicted—with an Enlightenment faith in science, which Tapia shared, having studied chemistry, mathematics and physics (Ramos-Perea, Tapia 34). In Brazil, Dom Pedro II, a Freemason, took a drastically different approach to order and progress through science and technology, since these advances gave the impression that he was the leader who would modernize Brazil. Also, Catholicism in Brazil was losing its centrality, as different religious ideas poured in from Europe (Borges 47).

But in both empires, scientific, religious and political discourses were combined and altered by positivism, particularly its Social Darwinist variant, which heavily influenced Brazilian letters (Eakin 152; Saraiva 132). The writings of Lamarck and Spencer and reprints of Malthus were heralded by the elites of Europe and the New World as scientific proof that class differences were based on eugenics (Appelbaum et al. 7). These thinkers contributed to a self-satisfied bourgeoisie that felt these theories justified their good fortune. Religion was not left untouched by positivism, either. Its founder, philosopher Auguste Comte, and his literary counterpart, Émile Zola, decided that the afterlife was not something the scientific method could verify, and so ideas of spirits and resurrection were discarded as archaic. Zola's positivism heavily influenced the Brazilian writers Aluísio Azevedo and Euclides da Cunha and the Puerto Rican writers Manuel Alonso and Manuel Zeno Gandía. However, Tapia and Machado rejected this "naturalistic" view of art as science and used dead characters to highlight the ironies in this discourse.

Tapia and Machado were probably both influenced by authors who delved into the relationship between death and language. Both novels, for instance, include references to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Machado 87; Tapia 37). Also, José

Luís Jobim's study of Machado's library lists two works by François-René de Chateaubriand (81). The French author's obsession with death in his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (1848) inspired the *Memórias póstumas* to employ a literally dead narrator, according to Rouanet, who considers the latter's title a parody of the former (350). Like Chateaubriand's protagonist, Brás meets his end due to an "idéia fixa (sic)," or as Chateaubriand would say, an "idée fixe" (1.201). For Chateaubriand, this idea is his belief that words at once transcend and depend on death (Huet 31). One can see in the English tradition a precursor to Machado's *Memórias póstumas* and Tapia's *Póstumo* in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), an exploration of post-Enlightenment hubris that questions the application of scientific experimentation to the creation, destruction and posthumous continuation of human life—and the chaos that ensues when the dead return to interact with the living. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845) provoked Roland Barthes to contemplate the impossibility of the statement, "I am dead" (286). This enigmatic utterance is echoed throughout *Póstumo* and *Memórias póstumas*. We know that Machado was an avid reader of Poe (Jobim 69), and the aforementioned French, U.S., and British works were widely circulated at the time Tapia and Machado were writing, so it is plausible that our authors had at least some shared literary models. Saraiva discusses other works of Western literature that influenced Machado, allowing him to break with the dominant narrative style of his time (132), and Tapia did the same.

At the time when Tapia and Machado were writing, Latin American literature had inherited what could be termed a positivist theology conceived by the Frenchman Allan Kardec (Carvalho Moneiro; Giumbelli). He was convinced that experiments could be conducted to speak with the spirits of the dead. From these conversations, he assembled *The Spirits' Book* (1857), which sets forth the basic tenets of what became the spiritist faith, which include evolution through reincarnation. Kardec was the talk of the town in Paris, and his texts traveled quickly to eager readers in Spain and Latin America, hungry for the next European discovery to feed their growing, learning, progressing upper classes (Ramos-Perea, Tapia 433). Roberto Ramos-Perea notes a "boom" of spiritist publications in Spain in the 1860s and 1870s (433). Spiritism may have been ardently embraced in Latin America because the region's tragic history of conquest and slavery had already yielded a rich history of religious syncretism (Chasteen 316). Kardecist experiments, initially séances with an empiricist appearance, began to conjure the spirits of African ancestors, both in Brazil and the Caribbean. Tapia no

doubt saw similar rituals in Cuba and New Orleans (Ramos-Perea, Tapia 433). The spiritist machine plugged into the preexisting apparatus of the plantation and the metropolises it fueled, charging the imaginations of artists and thinkers like Machado and Tapia. Séances were popular among the readers of San Juan (Ramos-Perea, Tapia 433) and Rio de Janeiro (Moser 112). Spiritism posits that language can transcend death, mimesis and the ontological constraints of empiricism. The notion of speaking to the dead—but not necessarily seeing them—must have provided for these authors and their audiences a powerful confirmation that the human spirit was embodied in language, that it was systematic (like an experiment), and that it could be misinterpreted. This was exemplified by spiritist charlatans who swindled money from those eager to hear the spirits of the dead. Spiritism was a supplement to Catholicism and absolutism (seen as retrograde), on the one hand, and progressive, Darwinist agnosticism, on the other.

Before arriving in Rio de Janeiro, Kardec's ideas had no doubt influenced Tapia. *Póstumo* and *Transmigrado* and its sequel, *Póstumo* and *Envirginado*, have, in fact, been studied as a parody of spiritism by Ángel Rivera and Carmen Gómez Tájera, and Marcela Saldivia-Berglund studies the intersection of gender and spiritism in the novels. Ramos-Perea considers the debate of whether the novel is a parody of or manifesto for spiritism, which began with the first criticism on it. Ramos-Perea claims Tapia carefully read Kardec and other spiritists, likely including the Spaniard Amalia Domingo Soler, as preparation for the writing of the novel (433). His short story "Un alma en pena" (1862) is based on spiritism, as is the play *Enardo y Rosael* (1874), but I agree with Ramos-Perea that *Póstumo* is the apex of Tapia's spiritist-inspired production, a monument to freedom and cynicism (438).

Machado, too, had a fascination with spiritism, but like Tapia, he was more inclined to laugh at it than to take it seriously in any orthodox sense. One could say the novel is an accounting of its beliefs, though they were not its primary motivation.³ The French writer Victor Hugo went through a spiritist period and wrote about metaphysical conversations with Shakespeare and other writers, and Machado was profoundly influenced by Hugo, as Sérgio Paulo Rouanet explains in his "O bicentenário de Victor Hugo" (2002). Spiritism is only one aspect of the reception of Hugo that Machado shares with Tapia, which may lead to future comparisons (Ramos-Perea 434).

One only need read Machado's crônicas to see that he was fascinated by spiritism, but disdainful of its faddy popularity among the dilettantes of the carioca upper class. In a crônica from September 23, 1884, he writes:

Quanto a mim, não só creio no espiritismo, mas desenvolvo a doutrina. Desconfiai de doutrinas que nascem à maneira de Minerva, completas e armadas. Confiai nas que crescem com o tempo.⁴ (107)

In this text, Machado also describes humorous human reincarnations, including a donkey and a streetcar. Similar to this crônica, *Memórias póstumas* forms part of a greater narrative experiment that uses resurrection and reincarnation as a means of exploring how language can be divorced from the appearances of the present. Saraiva has shown that this narrative experiment also includes *Quincas Borba* (1891), which narrates the adventures of the infamous philosopher who advises Brás; the political satire *Esaú e Jacó* (1904) and its sequel *Memorial de Aires* (1908); as well as less-studied works, such as the short story “*Galeria posthuma (sic)*” (1884), which narrates the humorous reincarnation of a dead man through his diary; and the short story “*Idéias de canario (sic)*” (1895), in which a canary escapes a cemetery-like second-hand store by speaking as humans do. *Esaú e Jacó* has explicitly spiritist characters, Santos and Plácido (44), but Machado’s literary séances begin with *Memórias póstumas*.

Before comparing the works of Tapia and Machado, I will provide an overview of their settings and characters. *Póstumo el Transmigrado* is, in part, a fantastic fable about the importance of death for humanity’s well-being, and its plot is based explicitly on spiritist beliefs. All characters who return to life or who do not forget their previous lives become regretful and cynical. The characters’ names illustrate their role in this lesson, and they are all flat characters except the protagonist Póstumo and his young fiancée Elisa del Doble Anzuelo. Nonetheless, the place names, customs, and political structures of Madrid ground the work in realism, allowing the text to subvert it. Póstumo apparently dies and revives just before his wedding (7–8) to Elisa. That night, during a Carnival masquerade, Elisa replaces Póstumo with his best friend Sisebuto, and the dead man knows it (24). Despondent, he is apprehended by medium-invoked police and buried. In Heaven and Limbo, the two areas of Eternity (spiritism has no Hell), Póstumo begs his guardian angel to let him return (27). To dissuade him, the angel tells of three cases of men who wish to control death and were granted exceptions as lessons from God. Don Cósmico remembers all previous lives. Don Paquidermo Perpetuo cannot die. Don Horóscopo can see the future and when he will die. All live in Madrid. Not heeding the Angel’s advice, Póstumo is reincarnated in the body of his rival, Sisebuto (47). The latter has married Elisa but has died. Póstumo

seeks vengeance. Elisa cannot receive Sisebuto's pension if he appears to be alive, and Póstumo can convince no one but her that he is not Sisebuto. He is arrested and institutionalized (77). Elisa saves him by convincing Don Cósmico, a royal minister, to free him and give him a job (85). Don Cósmico is ousted and becomes a leader in a revolt (107). Póstumo volunteers to fight. Watching the struggle from afar, Don Perpetuo tries to seduce Elisa, and he later rescues Póstumo from the battle (119). Once Don Cósmico is in power, though, he forgets the idealistic soldier (121). Elisa tricks Póstumo into staying alive and marrying her to slight Sisebuto (126). However, the latter's spirit returns as their child, Postumito (130). He torments Póstumo by implying that Don Perpetuo, Póstumo's new employer, visits Elisa while he is at work (132). Enraged, Póstumo plans to kill her (137). When he cannot, he commits suicide (140). In Eternity, he and all other characters regret their exceptions to the rules of death and are relieved to be removed from life's troubles (141). Spiritism is used in this novel to teach a lesson about science, politics, faith and language. Similar to the plot of the first novel of Machado's mature period (Fitz, Machado 109), Póstumo's desultory plot still bears detailed outlines of his Romantic affiliations (Ramos-Perea, Tapia 85).

Spiritism's transcendence of death is implicit in Machado's *Memórias póstumas*, though its undead narrator makes the most sense in its belief system, since the story it tells is otherwise so profane, told from the point of view of an enlightened carioca bourgeois. Compared to Tapia's novel, Machado's work has a fragmentary and experimental style and a more meandering plot, though its story is simpler. In *Memórias*, each of the narrator's amorous links forms the foundation for the narrative. Its tone is more caustic; whereas Tapia's characters must forget their previous lives lest they become jaded, Machado's narrator cannot forget his previous life and is thus condemned to eternal cynicism. With the innovative exception of narrator-protagonist Brás himself, it is more realistic than Tapia's novel, as the character names and main events indicate. Brás Cubas (1805–1869), comes from a wealthy family in Rio de Janeiro. As an adolescent, he falls in love with Marcela, a madrileña courtesan in Rio de Janeiro, but his father splits them up and sends him to college in Portugal (47). There, he half-heartedly starts seeking a philosophy for life (55). Upon his return, Brás's mother dies (54). This is his first experience with death. He later seeks to marry Virgília, whose father, Conselheiro Dutra, might find him a high political position (60). But he hesitates, due, in part, to a fleeting interest in Eugênia, a family friend (61). Meanwhile, his rival, Lobo Neves, beats Brás to Virgília and marries her (74). Brás's father dies

in despair (75). The protagonist, focused on “evolutionary” competition, keeps as much of the inheritance as possible from his well-adjusted sister Sabina, his brother-in-law Cotrim, and their daughter Venância (77). They are foils for the protagonist’s foolish life. Brás and Virgília maintain a secret love affair by meeting at the home of Dona Plácida (99). Virgília has a still-borne child, Sara (126), but her son, Nhônô, lives (119). It is unclear whether the father is Brás or Lobo Neves. Brás considers marrying Dona Eulália/Nhã Loló, though he takes no initiative (125). Lobo Neves learns of the affair between Brás and Virgília and takes the family to the Northeast to help his political career, and later returns to Rio de Janeiro (138). Brás loses his meager political post and starts an opposition newspaper, in which he preaches philosopher Quincas Borba’s Humanitism (162). He later helps the weak for the church, but he sees Dona Plácida, Marcela and Quincas Borba die in despair (175). Brás invents a balm for melancholy, but dies of pneumonia (19). He then recounts his memoirs from beyond the grave, happy that he left no heir to the depressing world above (176). But Brás returns to the world, highly aware and highly critical of the past. He clearly has not lost his memory, as some of Tapia’s characters do. In spiritism, one must revisit and resolve past mistakes in order for the spirit to evolve, and Brás’s text is revisiting a reality that positivism leaves incomplete in science, religion and politics, and naturalism leaves incomplete in literature.

Both Tapia and Machado use the voices of the dead to move beyond the ostensibly scientific language of the realist and naturalist novel, the dominant literary trend of their time. For this reason, novelist João Almino continues to consider Machado a “contemporary writer” and praises his “realism of ambiguity,” which, in Brazil, had no equal in his time (141). Almino considers the sincerity of the dead man Brás to be a psychological and linguistic “bare truth” that is unhindered by the “truths” of his historical context (142). Machado’s essay on the “nova geração” (new generation) warns against literary language that pretends to be transparent, leaving readers passive and unthinking (834). *Memórias póstumas* had no peer in Brazil because it seems everyone was writing in the “scientific” language of the time. It is one of the reasons for which Almino and Fitz hail Machado as an innovator whose works were “before his time” (“Machado” 129). Ironically, this is the same reason that has caused Tapia to receive little critical attention. Naturalist and realist narratives became the critics’ choice at the University of Puerto Rico, where scholars such as Antonio S. Pedreira celebrated realist tales of the *jibaro* who tilled the land and symbolized a unique cultural

identity in opposition to Europe and the United States (José Luis González 43). But Tapiá's novel shows, and Machado's essay states, that neither nationalism nor realism should limit a writer's creative potential. Both novels leave mimesis to explore progress through language, and they do it by saying that which cannot be proven: stories of life after death. Because of this, a mixture of realism and fantasy, non-realistic language and the self-conscious destabilization of previous truth-providing discourses define these novels.

Machado's text presents unquestioned language as a threat to scientific progress because ideas are mediated through language.⁵ If the meanings of words are not altered or challenged, they cannot accommodate new discoveries, nor can new words or ideas be invented. Both novels show that positivism has many blind spots, particularly in relation to humans. The dead Brás Cubas praises Humanitism, an egocentric philosophy that sounds similar to some of the positivist, evolutionary ideas being discussed at the time Machado was writing. Its inventor, Borba, extols it as the "verdadeira religião do futuro" (true religion of the future) (175). Nonetheless, Borba unwittingly reveals the problems inherent in Humanitism through his poor translation of its Latin root, *humanitas*, which he renders as "o princípio das coisas" (the principle of things) (123). Since *humanitas* is rooted in "human" creations like language, not of "objective" things, this satirizing of positivism reveals the dangers of reducing humanity to materialism, scientific or economic (123). In another, even more telling example, Borba creates a functional food chain that leads from the field worked by Angolans to a chicken wing on his lips (145).⁶ This chain clearly did little to advance Brazil beyond a slave-based, agrarian economy or to feed the rest of the species. Another example of science gone awry is when Brás Cubas is killed by his own invention, a salve for melancholy (18). However, it is not the invention itself that leads to his fatal pneumonia, but the "idéia fixa (sic)," the fixed idea of his discovery that he could not look beyond—thus the enigmatic aphorism "descifra-me ou devoro-te" (decipher me or I will devour you), a word of caution to scientists who rest in self-satisfaction (18). Nature/Pandora tells Brás that she has but one law: "egoísmo, conservação. A onça mata o novilho porque o raciocínio da onça é que ela deve viver" (selfishness, conservation. The jaguar kills the calf because its reasoning is that it should live) (27). This "truth" comes not from scientific observation, but from a personified Nature/Pandora speaking to Brás, a delirious man riding a hippopotamus. This is hardly reliable advice if taken literally, as realist texts are meant to be. This autobiography, and the ironic, fantastical

language it uses—at once arrogant and self-deprecating—destabilizes the reader's expectations of realist discourse and opens it to new forms of progress. Fitz considers Pandora's role in the text to be a rejection of phallogocentric master discourses (Machado 110–11). Her role in the text reaffirms Fitz's position that Machado made the philosophical breakthrough that "words (understood as what would later be described as semiotic signs) have no fixed meaning outside of the verbal (semiotic) structure in which they appear" (112).

Brás's "evolution" through life, to use the term he associates with Virgília's role in it (87), is presented as episodes involving four potential mates. Brás wants children and Quincas agrees, based on Humanitism (147), a parody of positivism, but they both die alone and childless (176). Brás has a child, or children, with Virgília but has no meaningful relationship with him. The alternative to biological determinism is creative language. Defying realist logic, he knows Virgília's name before anyone tells it to him. As his father is about to tell him the name of his expected bride-to-be, Brás reads a quote from Virgil, "Arma virumque canto" (I sing of arms and man) (58–59). The words scatter on the page, and "virumque" becomes "Virgílio," which becomes "Virgília," the name of his last love in life. This shows not only Machado's self-conscious prose, but also his satire of his political context: instead of becoming a successful man through military prowess, the path to success at the time was to marry rich. There is a power in language that is greater than scientific truth or political power, though. Before creating her, she "created" him when he segues from his death and delirium to his birth using her name in the chapter "Transição": "Virgília foi o grande pecado da minha juventude; não há juventude sem meninice; meninice supõe nascimento" (Virgília was the great sin of my youth; there is no youth without childhood; childhood supposes birth) (30). She is his "evolução," but he is mistaken in focusing on politics and animal instincts, the stuff of positivism, to pursue happiness.

Brás Cubas's unparalleled voice of experience criticizes "savage capitalism," as Fitz attests (Machado 113). This is evident in Cubas's love for Marcela, a Spanish exile and courtesan. Like Tapia's Póstumo, Brás is reduced to a number: Marcela loves Brás for exactly fifteen months and eleven contos de reis in cold hard cash (44). She becomes ill and dies, working for money she does not even need (69). Fitz sees her as personifying the inhuman free market (Machado 113). Later, Brás falls for Virgília, the woman his father chooses for him, but she chooses not to marry him for reasons similar to Elisa's: Lobo Neves, his friend, has more ambition for money and power. Brás's inability to imagine social orders that do

not put money first is another reason for his dying alone. He even has to pay an acquaintance to cry at his funeral (17). His point of view from death distances him from this reality and allows him to criticize it.

Neither money nor “science” allows him to evolve, but change through the destabilization of words and their meanings does. This is evident in Eugênia, the daughter of a family friend, whom Brás considers as a potential mate. While pursuing her, he “loses” Virgília to Lobo Neves. Brás’s apparently sincere attraction to Eugênia is overcome by her eugenic “flaw”: she has a limp in the era of Spencer’s “survival of the fittest” (64). Brás abandons her to seek Virgília, who is swayed by financial and political motives, to marry Lobo Neves. However, Eugênia survives the novel, poor but dignified, when Brás himself does not. Fitz claims that Eugênia is disfigured on the outside but whole on the “inside” (morally), but Virgília, Brás’s unattainable mate, is rotten on the inside like eugenics and the amoral carioca bourgeoisie of the time (Machado 121). Brás misses out on a wife because of “science,” and he does so again by missing out on poetry, which Dona Eulália (Nhã Loló) personifies (149). She is named for beautiful or poetic speech and lives up to her name. He could be happy with her and look to the future, but she dies of yellow fever before they marry (151). He is condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past as a spirit in order to evolve beyond them.

Similarly, Tapia uses spiritism to satirize and challenge the “truths” of contemporary medical science. Póstumo dies suddenly, though the true cause of death is unclear:

Como Póstumo era póstumo, después de dar la última boqueada, en que se le atragantó el nombre de Elisa, sintióse como vivo. Y no causaba aquel fenómeno la helada catalepsia, puesto que su muerte era positiva. De no serlo, hubieron la hecha tal sus amigos, quienes, por retardar la corrupción, zamparon en el estómago del muerto un par de cuartillos de cloruro . . . El difunto se callaba, porque si no lo era, por tal le daban los demás. . . . era digno de lástima, expuesto como se sentía a morir de indigestión de palabras, si ya no hubiese muerto de calentura.⁷ (7–8)

He is given a “positive” diagnosis, but no doctor is mentioned before, during, or after his death. In physiological terms (those that most interest Positivists), it is not clear whether he dies of fever or whether his friends accidentally kill him. However, the arbitrary nature of language is pivotal to this scene. While Póstumo may still be alive, his friends presume they will see him die because of his name; unquestioned

language makes them “positive” of this fact. They attempt to “freeze” him in place to confirm what they think is the truth. He “swallows” Elisa’s name as he “dies” and then has “word indigestion,” which is his own fear of speaking once he “realizes” he is “dead.” He, too, seems convinced of this because his friends say so, and the cause of his posthumous miseries is not necessarily Elisa, but unquestioned language itself. When he stops speaking, he stops living and takes on another “life.”

His friends summon him in a spiritist séance, which is itself a destabilization of “truths,” since these practices sometimes consist of lies, but at times of truth. Unfettered by the norms of speaking to the living, they mock him for being a rube and for thinking Elisa was devoted to him, when she had abandoned her loyalty to him before he was even in the grave (or, one can infer, dead) (15). He still has a body when they “invoke” him, which means that he may have actually been alive as he beats them until his arms are out of joint (still not a cause of death) and then is voluntarily buried, abandoned and heartbroken. Since this is the first time he goes to Eternity, the possibility remains that, because of mistaking words for “truth,” Póstumo may have been tortured, betrayed and buried alive by those closest to him. As he tells Sisebuto in the séance, “Muérete y verás. . . ¿qué fue de aquella fe jurada, de aquella pasión de todos los días y todas las noches? . . . ¿Y en quién creer?” (Die and you’ll see . . . what became of that sworn faith, of that passion of every day and every night? . . . And who is to be believed?) (15). The reader must decide, just as Póstumo must. This séance foreshadows two others. In both of these, Elisa plays tricks by bumping the table and claiming she is receiving words from beyond to obtain what she wants, be it patronage from Cómico (135) or safety from her vengeful (almost) husband.

When Póstumo is apprehended for public disorder—he is revived naked—, expert testimony is provided by “Don José Matasanos, alópata, Don Roque Globulillos, homeópata, y Don Pedro Quiebrahuesos, burrópata” (Joe Quack, allopath, Roque Cells, homeopath, Peter Bonebreaker, idiot-o-path) (77). The truths of science, law and inchoate mental health are subverted again by neologisms, language opening to new meanings: if every second or third doctor is a fool, then one must question the language of science, if progress is to be sought. They diagnose Póstumo (reincarnated in Sisebuto’s body) as a monomaniacal, demented neurotic and epileptic without speaking to him or carrying out an examination, but their unquestioned language has him institutionalized (77).⁸

In the asylum, an inmate claims to be the reincarnation of King Philip II of Spain (1527–1598) (82). His reappearance probably alludes to the retrograde

policies Tapia associated with contemporary conservatives. The madman longs to create a new Golden Age empire with a new Inquisition (82–83), but he is simply a spirit out of time. Tapia shows that progress must come to Spain, but that it will not come from placing hope in the past or trying to control language, exemplified in his attempt to asphyxiate Póstumo for being an “arriano,” one who does not treat the “Word” (of God) as made flesh, a transcendental, unalterable Truth (83).⁸ The similarities between these locos and the mad philosopher Quincas Borba (176), who also uses science to claim Brás is insane (171), are evident. Death and madness are linked in both works to show that words cannot capture Truth in its entirety, though it can create new truths.

Tapia’s language shows that Póstumo’s “instincts” and “race,” central concerns of positivists, are evoked when Don Cósmico’s revolution breaks out: “Era, como meridional, impresionable, y un tanto artista como individuo de raza latinoarábica: aquello era obra maestro en el efecto, y así vencida su reflexión moribunda, dejóse arrastrar por su carácter romántico, entusiasta” (112).⁹ Póstumo’s supposed “biological” urges are actually spurred on by the ousted former royalist Don Cósmico’s rhetoric, which he first calls “palabras y promesas seductoras” (seductive words and promises) (111). He claims “la antorcha del progreso . . . había de ser su única guía” (the torch of progress was to be his only guide) (111). Don Cósmico’s march into the future is later revealed to be a cynical ploy to regain power and then conveniently forget evolution in Spanish society (122). When Póstumo asks him for a job after the struggle, he does not invoke the names of Elisa or Sisebuto nor does he have an arbitrarily defined “certificado de resucitado” (certificate of resurrection) (122). He is as arbitrary as “Felipe II” in the asylum. Language and power politics give the lie to “truth” and “progress,” so the work’s parodying of unquestioned language reaffirms Roberto Fernández Valledor and Roberto Ramos-Perea’s readings of the novel as political satire (Fernández Valledor, “Póstumo” n.pag.; Ramos-Perea, Tapia 439). Ángel A. Rivera argues that, just as Póstumo’s body decays, so did the Spanish empire (156).

But the novels’ dead narrators represent more than political decadence. Fortunately, when you are dead, nobody can kill you. This removes all power from the state, which allows the novels to criticize authoritarian politics in ways naturalist narratives could not. Machado was no fool—he actually worked as a censor for Dom Pedro II and knew his novel would be controversial (Castro 25). In Regina Zilberman’s nuanced political reading of the text, “Eis porque o herói [Brás] precisa estar morto quando inicia sua narração: é importante que ele se

encontre no mundo subterrâneo, representação de uma sociedade degradada e condenada para sempre. . . . a decadência e reprovação do modelo vigente” (183).¹⁰ The apparent impossibility of posthumous speech allows the text plausible deniability if faced with censorship while simultaneously adding to its satirical bite. Zilberman sees the posthumous Cubas as a corroded copy of patriotic icons, such as José de Alencar’s *Peri* and *Iracema* (184). Tapia’s run-in with the censors, which he says was an accusation of “humanizing” royalty surely taught him that realism was a fast track to temporary exile (Ramos-Perea, Tapia 111).

In Machado’s case, he shows how non-mimetic discourse wittily portrays the violence of slavery that fuels the supposedly enlightened Brazilian Empire (Dixon 39). One of several examples is Chapter LXVIII, “O vergalho,” in which the slave Prudêncio savagely beats another slave (100). Both serve the same master, Cubas, who receives money from them to survive in the capitalist infrastructure held up by authoritarian monarchism and positivism, like the food chain mentioned earlier. But when Cubas tells Prudêncio to stop, he continues, getting a cruel thrill from the violence. This is echoed at the end of the novel when Borba and Cubas gleefully watch dogs rip each other to pieces over a bone that no longer has any meat on it. If this is how the food chain works for man and beast, a top-down economy of violence, exploitation and savage capitalism that doesn’t even result in survival of the species, then literary language, not scientific language, must hold the key to moving beyond the status quo. These truths come from the illogical “lie” that a dead man is speaking to the reader, or as Machado puts it, “a franqueza é a primeira virtude de um defunto. . . não há platéia (sic)” (frankness is the primary virtue of a dead man . . . there is no audience) (55). The irony in this statement reaffirms his initial contention that “a obra em si mesma é tudo” (the work itself is everything): “death” through writing isolates the narrator from his historical present and creates a new audience, a new community, his future readers, the “vermes” that feed on his corpse (15–16). In another moment, Cubas reflects again on writing and death: “. . . gosto dos epitáfios: eles são, entre a gente civilizada, uma expressão daquele pio e secreto egoísmo que induz o homem a arrancar à morte um farrapo ao menos da sombra que passou” (170).¹¹ After death, or leaping from a portrait to an epitaph (150), writing is uninhibited and divorced from its previous reality and pertains to the active interpretation of the new, active readers that follow, guided by his meta-commentary on writing (118).

Not all dead characters die equally, nor do they tell the same tales. In life, Tapia’s *Póstumo* and Machado’s *Brás Cubas* are opposites in terms of age, status

and outlook. Póstumo only loves and loses one woman. He dies as a naïve young man the day before his wedding. He is a dreamer; he seems from birth to belong to another world. He is happy and creative until death turns his life on Earth into a living hell. Brás dies old and alone, having wandered from one love to another. He is a cynical, self-centered capitalist, a philistine almost to the end. But in death, the dreamer and the skeptic are hard to distinguish, because they simultaneously forsake the world as it is and open it to what it could be.

The points of view of the novels are different. In *Brás Cubas*, the narrator can finally tell his life story—it is over. His nostalgic and unreliable first-person memories of the past contribute to the merciless irony of the text. He longs for the past so much and he loves himself so much that his ironic praise of his own failures becomes ever clearer to the reader, the lips that breathe life into the text itself. While Brás's speech limits the reader's perspective through his unreliability, it opens his perspective through irony. Tapia's third-person narrator seems omniscient, but since s/he follows Póstumo's soul, s/he limits the reader's access greatly. But his/her non-mimetic language opens the text to a variety of new and contradictory meanings. This contributes to the sensation in the reader of the strangeness of death—its current status as an unknown continent—and expresses the sublime power of language to constantly generate new ideas. One could say that, denotatively, the text's language seems to be that of God himself, or to have a God-like function.

But this apparent omniscience pales in comparison to that of the reader, who can cross boundaries and see the dramatic irony of a dancing dead man who forgets to wipe the worms from his nose or the police of the dead whom Póstumo must elude so that they do not drag him back to the cemetery. Póstumo is unable to appreciate this irony—he can only experience the panic and confusion at his unexpected situation (Rivera 89). The reader alone can piece together the logic of the text—that there is life after death, life in death, death in life, the self in the rival (Fitz, Machado 110). While Brás looks back on his life, editing each edição as he recreates it, Póstumo's life is going on right now in front of us like that of an actor on a stage. The past tense narration could just as easily be the present, because throughout most of the text, all the reader can see is the "scene" that Póstumo's body or dis-(or re-)embodied soul is acting out, even though he looks upon it from the outside.

Both works demand an active, critical reader, but Tapia's narrator is far more respectful to the reader than Machado's. One example of Brás lashing out is the

chapter "A um crítico," in which he shouts "A morte não envelhece. . . . Valham-me Deus! é preciso explicar tudo" (160). Tapia's text is also fragmentary, interrupted by enigmatic chapter titles and challenges to the reader, such as "Pero no anticipemos" (But let's not get ahead of ourselves) (5). When a spirit policeman appears, the narrator asks "¿Puede darse mayor prodigio?" (Can one imagine something more prodigious?), encouraging the reader to ruminate on what a spiritual policeman might represent, perhaps authoritarian science, politics, or religion—in any case a cop is not just a cop when he is arresting souls (17). Tapia's Chapter XIX, "Póstumo entabla conocimiento con un personaje ya mencionado en esta verdadera narración" (Póstumo gains knowledge of a character that was already mentioned in this true narrative), turns realism on its head, demanding that the reader think about what is being told and how it is being told (100). This purports to be the "true story" of a dead man who comes back to life in his former friend's body, marries his wife and raises this rival as his bastard child, while also pretending to be him at work. The "knowledge" Póstumo "gains" from the "character," not the person, in the story must throw all knowledge into crisis. It is all based on language, and if Don Horóscopo, referred to here, can spring to life in Madrid from a parable told in Heaven by a Guardian Angel to a dead man, as do other characters, then anything is possible, just as diverse interpretations can spring from a single text.

However, these novels present literary allusions differently. The authors shared the influence of classical mythology, historians and philosophers concerned with death and language. Tapia's text allows the reader to follow the plot, even if every word is not understood. For example, Diana and her lover Endymion appear as Carnival costumes (12); the shifty politician, Don Cósmico, weaves and unweaves words like Penelope (31); and the Waters of Lethe (Leteo) make newborns forget their past lives (26). By contrast, Machado is merciless in his recurring references to classical myths and ancient thinkers, as can be seen in unexplained allusions to Suetonius (20), Seneca (21) and Pandora (26), voices from another era. Today's reader of Machado, unless s/he is particularly well versed in classical culture, must resort to footnotes to understand his allusions, but Machado originally employed these allusions as a means of edifying his reading public through continued research into and questioning of the canon, starting with the five readers Brás expects to have, the first "worms" to consume his text (16). These allusions jolt readers, disorient them, and make them want to know more, like his constant meta-commentary.

Cubas interrupts his own story to interrogate and even accuse the reader and shake him or her awake, “expedir alguns magros capítulos para esse mundo sempre é tarefa que distrai um pouco da eternidade. Mas o livro é enfadonho, cheira a sepulcro, traz certa contração cadavérica; vício grave e alias ínfimo, porque o maior defeito deste livro és tu, leitor” (103).¹² Similar to Don Horóscopo, Don Perpetuo, and Don Cósmico’s lives, Brás Cubas finds an unchanging, predictable eternity boring. He chides the reader, whose linear, passive reading of the text for Brás traps it in fixed denotations and the naturalization of a linear plot. His rejection of realism and meta-commentary are designed to empower the reader to question the meanings of words (Saraiva 151; Zilberman 173).

But there is a pivotal clue, one of many such clues in the book, informing us how to read the novel. It comes when the prologue refers to its own language: “Seria curioso, mas mínimamente extenso, e alias desnecessário ao entendimento da obra. A obra em si mesma é tudo. . . .” (It would be curious, but of the least extent, and as a matter of fact unnecessary to the understanding of the work. The work is, in itself, everything. . . .) (16). The prologue encourages the reader to be curious, but it is not intended to kill off the mystery of language and possibilities for what comes next. Nor is the reader to approach the literary text, seeking to nail it in a coffin, by providing an unquestionable explanation through history, religion or science. Fitz posits that this new way of narrating was an attempt to create new, active readers for a republic that did not yet exist (“Machado” 134).

Though Tapia did not advocate political independence from Spain, he did seek to create a more enlightened, critical and autonomous Puerto Rico through education, and his writing embodies this philosophy (Aníbal González 51). Póstumo el Transmigrado ends with an “Epílogo casi necesario” (“An almost necessary epilogue”) that unties the tightly-knitted yarn of the plot and tells the reader that many have died before, many have loved, lost, and been replaced before, and that the great Cervantes himself prefers the afterlife to the first go-round (139). It is not necessary to spell out that Póstumo’s case is in many ways that of everyone, but like everyone he can use signifiers to open the empirical, “real” world to new possibilities, driving home the novel’s last line: “¡Ilusos e inexpertos los que resucitan por gusto!” (Illusory and inexperienced are those who come back to life for the fun of it!) (138). These undead are both the author and the reader, especially the reader who re-reads and ruminates on the text to pry apart new meanings for the denotations of words that repeatedly corrode stable truths. In contrast to Póstumo, who celebrates his own demise and return to language

beyond mimesis, Don Perpetuo remains on earth, unable to be relieved of the merciless instability of the world (137). The reader is reminded of his/her own finitude and is encouraged to rejoice in it, to use language to discover and create new ideas before time runs out. The novel form is key to raising a critical awareness in the reader that things are not always, perhaps never, as simple as they seem. This chaos in language itself, the unstable relationship between words and their possible meanings, is not to be despaired—it is what made these two novels innovative.

As of yet, there is no evidence that Tapia and Machado read one another, nor do I believe there to be. The speaking dead are just as central to critical reinterpretations of positivism and spiritism in Tapia's 1872 novel as in Machado's 1881 text due to their shared influences. I hope this study, as a continuation of Fitz's notion of inter-American Literature ("Brazilian" 2), will contribute to further explorations of Puerto Rican and Brazilian literature. There is much more to be said on death and language. Several contemporary literary and culture critics have elaborated on the spectral and undead in literature since philosopher Jacques Derrida's landmark *Spectres of Marx* (1993). In Latin American literature, these include Michael Lazzara, Vicky Unruh, Daniel Link, and María del Pilar Blanco, to name a few. These two novels would benefit from further illuminations in the vein of spectral criticism.

Finally, what greater significance do the literary séances of Tapia and Machado hold? One answer is that their interrogation of how language itself contributes to the ideas of science and politics is a precursor to contemporary Deleuzian schizo-analysis of language and subjectivity. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that "order-words," the explicit statements used to teach and learn ideas, carry with them the meanings and forces of previous words and social influences in an assemblage that is often unbeknownst to the speaker (76, 84). "To write," they say, "is perhaps to bring this assemblage of the unconscious to the light of day, to select the whispering voices, to gather the tribes and secret idioms from which I extract something I call my Self (Moi)" (84). Since "language in its entirety is indirect discourse," writing reveals how words and political factors create the cogito that positivism made transparent, rigid, un-self-conscious and predictable (84). Literary language's poetic opening of both meaning and, what interests Deleuze and Guattari most, pragmatics,¹³ allows us to create new philosophical assemblages, from speech-acts to subjects. The schizoanalysts claim that writers are fascinated with the séance table because they themselves are "mediumistic,"

self-consciously channeling voices and words from the past (84). This channeling also opens future possibilities, because altering order-words and thus the bodies (human, social) on which they act creates new possibilities for discoveries and creation in science and politics.

notes

1. Tapia's short novel *La palma del cacique* was published in Madrid in 1852 (Ramos-Perea, Tapia 151). *Póstumo el Transmigrado* has not yet been translated into English. Interestingly, its posthumously published sequel was recently translated by Aaron Suko. This reflects the author's recent rebirth among scholars interested in gender studies. This phenomenon is also evident in the few but important studies of Ángel A. Rivera (2001), the Ateneo conference on Tapia (2004), and Aponte Alsina's (1982) and Bernabe Riefkohl's (1993) articles on the work. José Luis González (1980) reappraises his foundational role in Puerto Rican letters.

2. Following Priest (254) and Inwood (253), I here understand "Enlightenment" as a faith in reason over religious doctrines which originated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It placed the scientific method and empiricism at the center of understanding the world. However, the marginal colony of Puerto Rico did not have a printing press until 1806 (González Echevarría 5). The Enlightenment arrived in Brazil from Europe earlier than it did in Puerto Rico. Cosmopolitan Minas Gerais was a center of learning in the late eighteenth century and when the Portuguese royal court transferred to Rio de Janeiro in 1807 it brought texts that would communicate Enlightenment ideals. In other words, many eighteenth century ideas, primarily French, were still "new" to most of nineteenth century Latin America.

3. For a nuanced discussion of Brazilian death culture and the novel, see Robert H. Moser (112).

4. As for me, not only do I believe in spiritism, but I develop the doctrine. Do not trust doctrines that are born like Minerva, assembled and complete. Trust in those that grow with time.

5. By this I mean forgetting that language mediates and even creates reality, as in Julia Kristeva (64).

6. Philosopher Manuel de Landa considers what is perceived to be human flesh, or "biomass," part of a similar web of forces (104). However, like Kristeva (64), Machado is highlighting how nineteenth-century "science," social Darwinism, is dehumanizing and destructive.

7. Since *Póstumo* was posthumous, after giving his last breath, in which he swallowed Elisa's name, he felt as if he were alive. And that phenomenon caused no cold catalepsy, since his death was positive. If that had not been it, his friends, who stuffed the dead man's stomach with blocks of chloride to stop the corruption, would have made it so,

who, to slow down the deterioration, hurled a couple of blocks of chloride. . . . The dead man fell silent, because if he were not, the others thought he was. . . . he was worthy of pity, exposed as he was to death by word indigestion, if he hadn't already died of a fever.

8. There are similarities to Machado's *O alienista* (1882), which also satirizes treatment of the "mad" and which belongs to the experimental subversion of realism that Machado began with *Memórias póstumas* (1881).

9. He was, as a Meridional, impressionable, and a bit of an artist as an individual of Latino-Arabic origin. The former was a master in the effect, and so having his moribund reflection overcome, he allowed himself to be swept away by his romantic, enthusiastic character.

10. Here is why the hero [Brás] needs to be dead when he begins his narration: it is important that he find himself in the underworld, the representation of a society that is degraded and forever condemned. . . . the decadence and criticism of the prevailing model.

11. . . . I like epitaphs: they are, among civilized people, an expression of that pious and secret selfishness that induces man to tear away from death a shred, at least, of the shadow that passed.

12. To expedite some thin chapters for this world is always a task that distracts a bit from eternity. But the book is boring, smells like a tomb and brings with it a certain contraction like a cadaver. This is a serious vice and as a matter of fact an infamous one, because the greatest defect of this book is you, reader.

13. "As long as linguistics confines itself to constants . . . it consigns circumstances to the exterior, closes language in on itself, and makes pragmatics a residue. Pragmatics . . . brings to light variables of expression or of enunciation that are so many internal reasons for language not to close itself off" (82).

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john maddox is Assistant Professor of Spanish at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He has translated Tapia's *La cuarterona* as *Juliet of the Tropics* (Cambria, 2016) and two of Machado's short stories in *Ex Cathedra* (New London Librarium, 2014). His articles on the literature and culture of Brazil and the Hispanic Caribbean have appeared in *Hispania*, *Hispanic Journal*, *Caribe*, and *CR: The New Centennial Review*.