

## Fictionalizations of the Reader in Machado de Assis' Novels<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The reader, a constant and central figure in Machado de Assis' writings, undergoes several transformations throughout Machado's work, from the end of the 1850s to 1908. This article draws parallels between these transformations of the fictional reader in his work and the changes in the writer's expectations of his empirical readership, in a country that in the 1870s had to face both its high level of illiteracy and a widespread resistance to books.

What does it mean to produce literature in a country where the vast majority of people do not know how to read and therefore do not, even indirectly, have access to books and their content? How can one classify, in these conditions, a literary production credited with co-founding notions of nationality and which on the whole represents and is representative of a nation?

These are dilemmas that nineteenth-century Brazilian writers had to face, more or less consciously. For the Brazilian romantic writers—dedicated to creating the images, myths and legends of an emerging nation—the discrepancy between a writer's ambitions and true literary potential, made clear by the imperceptible impact of their work, would generally be explained by the same two or three reasons. First, by what they perceived to be the population's general indifference to all things Brazilian and its predilection for all things French, as well as the impossible competition that they faced from already established foreign books, especially Portuguese books. All the same, the romantics still believed that readership numbers could be large enough to justify and support their activity, but blamed eventual shortcomings on the local reading public's alienated stance in terms of Brazilian literary production.

This was the established view of Brazilian writers throughout the nineteenth century, until the decade of the 1870s, when Machado de Assis' novels were to change things for good. Machado made the reader a central concern because he or she was problematic to the development of the novel in the panorama of Brazilian nineteenth-century fiction writing. Throughout the century, long before and long after Machado, most nineteenth-century writers conceived of the reader as being outside the novel itself, as a notion that had direct correspondence in the empirical world, and regularly complained of the contempt, disdain, indifference, and lack of refinement of Brazilian readers. For the likes of José de Alencar and Aluísio Azevedo, this problematic reader was shaped by fanciful notions of what a real and potential reader might be like, whereas in Machado's work, especially in the novels of his second phase, the reader was shaped by the novel's narrator, thus becoming a central nerve in a fictional universe in which the reader is constantly summoned, questioned, and, more often than not, insulted by the narrator, who even finds the opportunity to call the reader the "book's only defect," as happens in a famous passage of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. This prompted one astute critic to observe, "the core of Machado de Assis' books is about finding a way to strike at the reader's nerve."<sup>2</sup>

A constant and central figure, the image of the reader undergoes several transformations throughout the course of Machado's work, from the end of the 1850s to 1908, the year of his death. It seems possible to establish relations—or draw parallels—between these transformations of the fictional reader in his work and the changes in the writer's expectations of his empirical readership.

Indeed, there is a huge gap between the journalist and critic Machado de Assis' perception, in the 1850s and 1860s, of the redeeming and educational effects of newspapers and theatre on the Brazilian public and the negative views he has of the same public and its reading habits as outlined in his novels from the 1870s onwards. In his later writings, one can easily identify the oscillations between attempts at drawing the readers close to his narrators and attempts at insulting and ridiculing his or her expectations. Specifically, in his novels there are marked differences in the way narrators appeal to readers and in the expectations and hopes they nourish in relation to chances for a dialogue.

In the body of the nine novels that contain direct references to the reader, it is noteworthy that, parallel to the increasing aggressiveness shown to the reader (which clouds and stirs up the surface of the narration in novels as early as *Memórias Póstumas*), there is a deep undercurrent that presumes—

and almost demands—that the reader is more and more prepared, demanding, critical, thoughtful, and to an extent even rarer than before. And this must be so, given the increasing complexity of his fiction.

In Machado de Assis' novels there is a disassociation between the sprightly, superficial assertions his obstinate narrators make about their readers and the dense movement of the prose, which requires that the reader both master a vast domain of references—very often misleading references—and cope with complex narrative events. The crisp prose demands a reflexive posture in light of the way the narrators deal with this repertory and these procedures, as well as a critical, if not disillusioned, posture concerning the novel and the world. This disassociation seems to take into consideration at least two types of reader—or at least two expectations of reading built in the body of the novels. On the surface, on the right hand as it were, it is as if the narrator were attempting to strike a nerve with the contemporary, empirical reader, addressing the reader's tastes and expectations in order to, at times, satisfy them, but mostly to cause them affront. This is done by referring to books, people, and events of the period, creating a common ground between the reader and the narrator. Yet beneath the elegant prose and beneath the scintillation produced by the profusion of references and citations that, quoting Antonio Candido, seem to have made the writer's contemporaries—and not only them—feel, for such a small price, intelligent, beneath all this there lies the expectation of a much more demanding reader and reading experience.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is perceived that readers are no longer content with a layer of sparkling prose and are now capable of grinding and re-grinding the slick surface until it is reduced to dust, nothing more than dust, the very same raw material that comprises *Brás Cubas*', *Quincas Borba*'s, *Dom Casmurro*'s, and *Conselheiro Aires*'s misery.

The constant mentions of instances of reception are executed with subtlety, and are used to help and guide the reader through the fictional space; these, it is my contention, can be interpreted as a commentary on the difficult, if not precarious, conditions surrounding the circulation and reception of the novel in the cultural environment of nineteenth-century Brazil. This provides a dramatic commentary that builds bridges to an understanding of the predicament of the modern novelist who does not know for whom, exactly, he should write, whether to write for the happy few or for no one other than himself. This is so because in Machado de Assis' novels, the reader is conceived of as a figure that will appear only after the author's death, or that will appear by accident and have access to the novel only if the author dies before being able to destroy his novel himself.

Readers familiar with Machado de Assis' work will remember that this is the situation the author places the reader in throughout *Brás Cubas*, in which the reader outlives the dead author. This also happens in *Memorial de Aires*, written in diary form by a retired diplomat who expects nothing of his readers and who states that he does not write for any specific cause beyond that of the written word (this occurs in other novels as well) but instead writes solely for the piece of paper that lies in front of him.

Thus, far from being monolithic and never-changing, the reader that inhabits in so many different ways Machado's novels is a polisemic, ambiguous figure that glides in and out of the second and third person, of being a character of the novel and someone who takes part in a conversation with the narrator or with the fictionalized author. In this way, the reader becomes as important a fictional element as the narrator, before becoming indistinguishable from him, until the two merge, as in *Memorial de Aires*, where author, narrator, and reader are blended into the character of privy councilor Aires, the author, narrator, and only guaranteed reader of his own diaries.

There is, therefore, a growing internalization of the reader in Machado's text. The novels gradually cease to appeal to or represent, in the reading scenes that populate most of the nineteenth-century novels, a reader made—positively or negatively—in the mold of the empirical reader; instead, they create their own readers as fictional entities. In other words, readers become less a reflection of an external, empirical expectation and more decisive players in the fictional game itself.

The integration of the reader into the text is produced by strategies of identification and misidentification between the moments of elocution and interlocution. The identification that takes place between the narrator and the interlocutor projected by him is not made possible by an idealized similarity between mirrored individuals; on the contrary, identification is built upon split entities who share a world of labile references and ever-increasing unstable meanings. The empirical reader, the one who holds the book in his or her hands and who is invited to oscillate between identifying with, or misidentifying with, the reader evoked by the narrator, who is presented dubiously and is destabilized by the constant uncertainty that surrounds his role as a reader, is disarmed and sucked into the book's fictional universe.

This process becomes more radical with *Brás Cubas*, wherein the empirical interlocutor is invited to occupy the role of second person in the narration and to receive the narrator's compliments, even though at any moment this person

may be humiliated and forced to hand over the role of reader to a third person, in order to be better protected against the barrage of insults that the narrator may launch into at any given time. In an attempt to maintain personal integrity and preserve self-esteem, the reader is forced to pretend that someone else, a third person, is actually the target of the attack. With this, a disorienting, to say the least, process of identification and misidentification is set into place between the empirical reader and the interlocutor explicitly evoked by the text, calling into question the very integrity of the reader.

The awkwardness caused by these sudden changes of angle is more evident in the novels written in the first person, where a game of distorted mirrors is played out between narrative and reading instances. It is expected of some readers (the most adept?) that they see through the traps set by the author's tendentious narrators—traps that may have contributed to *Brás Cubas* and *Dom Casmurro* being read both as studies on the behavior of nineteenth-century Brazil's "educated few," which is how the writer's contemporaries perceived the books, and as two of the most corrosive critiques of Brazil's elite, which has been the dominant interpretation over the last few decades.

These split opinions, and the variety of interpretations about these, probably the most studied texts of Brazilian literature, seem to be a good indication that the image of readers ostensibly formulated in these texts is more than just a guide for some "correct" and desirable reception. On the contrary, they are ambiguous, contradictory, lacunary, and disorienting figures that presuppose varied—albeit not infinite—readings that are indicative of another novelty represented by Machado's novels, which introduced this new figure of the reader—malicious, lazy, impatient, unaccountable—of dubious intent and numerically exiguous, into the prose of nineteenth-century Brazilian fiction.

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These changes in the interlocutionary expectations in Machado de Assis' novels, expressed in the formulation of the readers inscribed in those texts, can be understood in light of the profound changes affecting the circulation and production of literature during the period. From the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, in England, France, and the United States, and to a lesser extent in the peripheral countries that held European and North American literary production as a point of reference,

the role of the writer as a visionary and master was being set aside in order to cater to—and to mock—the demands of a literary consumer market. The tension between writer and public increased with the professionalization of the writer and the commercialization of literature, and the battle between the writer's idealized and desired readership and the one actually available was waged in the text itself by making the act of reading and the bringing of the reader himself into the fiction a main theme. Diderot, Thackeray, and Sterne are among the first novelists who made a paroxysm of bringing the reader into the fictional space. At the same time, the editorial process between writer and public was growing in complexity, and the literary text, especially the novel, was becoming increasingly linked to the book as merchandise.

These modifications had profound consequences on literature in general, and especially on the novel—a genre directly tied to the brutal modifications that took place in literary texts in terms of production, distribution, and promotion. Although the genre could be practiced under the same name from north to south, its scale differed, prompting peculiarities that would affect in different ways the potentiality of the literary text in different places. Brazilian writers were slow to assimilate this difference in scale, partly due to a lack of knowledge of Brazilian reality, partly because of the real potential regarding the reception of literary texts in Brazil.

The perceived notion, already felt at the time, that the problem lay with the readership was to become all the more acute in the 1870s, when two decisive factors would put Brazilian writers face to face with the modest possibilities of literature in their own country. The first fact is the completion of the country's first census in 1872. The figures, released four years later, in August 1876, hit Brazil's educated elite like a bomb, prompting newspapers from north to south to blast the high levels of illiteracy in the country with the inexorable whimper: "We're a bunch of illiterates!"

The eloquent numbers laid out in the census caused irreparable damage to formulations made about the country and about the role of literature (and publications in general) in building the nation. An article that Machado de Assis wrote on 15 August 1876 expresses the perplexities that arose from witnessing a political (and literary) process in the Brazil of the Second Reign, based on low representativeness and high levels of exclusion:

[W]hile we're talking about this animal [the ass], the Empire's census, published a few days ago, states that 70% of our population cannot read.

I like algorithms, because they don't measure half-truths or metaphors. They call a thing by its name, sometimes by an ugly name, and if there's no choice, so be it. They are sincere, frank, and naive. Letters were made for phrases; algorithms don't make up phrases, or rhetoric.

Therefore, a man, a reader like me, for example, wishing to speak about our country, would say:

— When the free Constitution placed destiny in the hands of the people, the expectation was that they would ride into the future with the flags of progress unfurled. National sovereignty lies in the hands of the Chambers; the Chambers are the national representation. Public opinion in this country is the last magistrate, the Supreme Court of men and of things. I ask that the country decide between Mr. Fidélis Teles de Meireles Queles and me; the country holds in its hands laws superior to all laws.

To this the algorithm would reply with the utmost simplicity:

— The nation cannot read. Only 30% of the residents of this country can read; of which 9% cannot read handwriting, 70% are buried in profound ignorance. They can't read and ignore Mr. Meireles Queles; it's a matter of not knowing what he is worth, what he thinks, what he wants; or if he can really want or think. 70% of our citizens vote the same way they breathe: without knowing why or what. They vote the same way they go to the Penha festival—for fun. They are completely unaware of the Constitution. They are ready for everything; a revolution or a coup.

I rebut:

— But, Mr. Algorithm, I think the institutions...

— The institutions exist, but by and for 30% of the citizens. I suggest a reform in the political manner. One should not say: "consult the nation, represent the nation, the powers that be of the nation"; rather — "consult the 30%, representatives of the 30%, the powers that be of the 30%." Public opinion is a metaphor without a base: there is only the opinion of the 30%. A member of the legislative assembly who turns to the House and says: "Mr. President, I bring these points to light because 30% of the people are listening to us..." will be saying something extremely sensible.

And I don't know what we can say to the algorithm, if he speaks in this way, because we don't have a solid ground for our speeches, and yet he has the census.

(Assis, "História" 344-45)

It's hard to say where the writer found his 70%, seeing that the total percentage listed in the census for illiteracy amounted to 84% of a population of

9,930,478 people, including free men and slaves. Nor is it true that the entire population had the right to vote, as the text seems to suggest, because there were restrictions based on age, profession, and income. By concentrating on the signification and political consequences of illiteracy on voters and readers, politics and letters are drawn together by means of words, speeches, and rhetoric, as well as by their common ability to formulate half-truths and forge false totalities. All of this is placed in opposition to the algorithm, not given to half-truths or metaphors. In spite of what is today a questionable notion—that illiteracy is tantamount to political incapacity—there remains the questioning of notions of representativeness placed in a more comprehensive category, both in the political process and in terms of intellectual activity, as well as the suggestion that the reader, associated with the voter, has a sociopolitical profile.<sup>4</sup>

By 1876 Machado had already published *Ressurreição* and *A Mão e a Luva*, the latter serialized before appearing as a book. At the same time as this chronicle was published, *Helena* also went public, serialized in the pages of *O Globo*. The writer who in previous years had declared his belief in the role of the newspaper as “the social Host of public communion,” whose “primary property is the easy communion with the members of the social body” (Assis, “Reforma” 963-65), now became aware of the excess of rhetoric and the unfounded expectations formulated between the 1850s and the 1880s with regards to the transforming powers of the written word. This awakening, for which the article produced above is perhaps the strongest example, took place slowly, as inferred by an analysis of Machado’s critical writings, which, from the end of the 1850s, frequently focused on the difficulties of communicating with the public and on the social representativeness of artistic production.

Machado perceived the precariousness of the intellectual milieu, a frequent source of outrage for artists who placed themselves in a different sphere—as victims of their surroundings—beyond its negative aspects, seeing it not as an external barrier to literature but rather as a factor inherent to literary activity in Brazil. General indifference, a lack of audience, constant and consistent critical activity, and the feeling of always shouting into the void are no longer treated by him as unfortunate accidents or as the fruit of conspiracies but instead are accepted as core facts of a society founded on powerful mechanisms of exclusion upon which literary production must reflect.

By placing the reader at the center of his work and making clear that the relationship between narrator and reader is mediated by a product called “book,” Machado de Assis produced a powerful metaphor for the new mean-



ings acquired by literature with the regularization of editorial production in Brazil (of which Garnier is an emblem) and with the consolidation of the book as a product, where spin-offs were ornamental object, status symbol, etc.

Herein lies the second decisive factor responsible for the acute perception of the concrete conditions for the production and circulation of literature in the Brazil of the nineteenth century. The publishing house Garnier was fundamental in defining a real market for Brazilian publications and for being the first to systematically publish national writers, launching 655 works by Brazilian authors from 1860 to 1890, as well as for translating Dumas, Hugo, Montepin, Feuillet, etc. Editorial activity gained unprecedented regularity and systematization. This made possible the first long-term contracts between publishers and writers—and Machado was one of the first to benefit from this new situation—but it also made explicit the limitations to the circulation of literary texts in Brazil. Print runs of a thousand copies, even when penned by the “big-wigs,” took twenty or thirty years to sell out, and only a handful proved to be the exception, winning second editions while still in the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, the theme of the book as object proves to be of fundamental importance to Machado de Assis’ second phase as a novelist. The narrators of Machado’s later books are impregnated with this vision of literature as being something that takes place through a book, whose matter is approached from a variety of angles—its size, type of binding, paper quality, illustrations, price, etc. The book as concrete object generates considerations even about the worms that eat the books, completely indifferent to what they process—or “read”—and reaches a peak in terms of the narrators’ obsession with paper and ink, the minimal material elements needed to produce literature, or at least written literature.

The results of the census, the slow turnaround of books, and their minimal repercussions revealed to Brazilian intellectuals the absurd discrepancy between their hopes for a novel and the real possibilities of communication with the public. This dilemma had to be unraveled by the writers themselves, for fear of ending up talking to themselves or of being accused of insensitivity to their immediate surroundings, something certainly not wished for by novelists who saw the creation of literary works for their country as a patriotic duty, and who thought of themselves as co-founders of the Brazilian nation.

Machado de Assis’ departure was to place the question of the communicability of the literary text at the very core of his novels, making its precarious and fragmented nature a central theme. From *Brás Cubas* to *Memorial de*

*Aires*, one senses a deepening solitude and isolation of the narrators and/or protagonists, always at odds with the (vilest) possibilities of sharing the text. Through narrators who are increasingly insular and disbelieving of the possibilities of framing a dialogue that is not based on leading the reader up the proverbial garden path, or of misplacing the reader's trust, the writer in Machado de Assis seems to increasingly address the public as if the public failed to understand him, as if his readers were incapable of understanding and giving meaning to the story—a state of mind that is shared with the novels' own protagonists who, as early on as *Dom Casmurro*, become the mistaken readers/interpreters of their own stories.

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John Gledson believes that Machado de Assis' unique part in the novel of the 1800s is based on the fact that all of the other writers of the period, "as much as they manifest their horror about their reality, [...] still write, in the last instance, with a sense of community and nationality," while Machado "never so much as admitted the existence of either" (Gledson 255). Neither Dostoyevsky nor Stendhal hesitate to call their protagonists "our hero," an expression that presupposes a common ground with the reader, a presupposition that Machado rarely attempts in his work except for when he, jokingly, calls Rubião "our hero" in *Quincas Borba*, when Rubião is, in fact, a lunatic. This sense of community, and nationality, betrayed by the use of the first person plural, occurs in the first novels up until *Helena*, yet it is undermined as early on as *Iaiá Garcia*. It is completely eradicated by the time of the arrival of *Memórias Póstumas*, a book written by a deceased author, in which narrator and interlocutor seem to inhabit incommunicable planes; from the afterlife, Brás Cubas addresses the reader, calling him a man of posterity—"Crê-lo-eis, *pósteros?* essa mulher era Marcela" (557).

The conception of absent interlocution reaches its peek in *Memorial de Aires*, a book aimed at no one, where the narrator talks to the philosophical dog lodged in his own brain, pointing to the very precariousness of communication related to the human condition. But the precariousness also seems to refer to the state of a country—to which Aires returns after decades in exile—that lacks the common ground and common goals necessary for establishing a consequential conversation.

Paradoxically, it could be that it is the fictional construction of the narrator's isolation in terms of his chances for reception and in terms of himself,

affirming the precariousness and instability of all communication as well as of any type of knowledge, that has allowed Machado de Assis' last five novels to reach their centenary while maintaining both a strong capacity to communicate and the ability to produce a little strangeness when compared with other novels produced in the same period.

Roberto Schwarz has written already that Machado's work stands the test of time, "because the circumstances it silences and from which it draws its voice and its character continue to this day," and because, "despite all the change, a substantial part of those terms of domination remain in place one hundred and ten years later, with the sense of normality correlated, which could explain the readers' collective obnubilation, which Machado's novels, more current and indirect than ever, continue to defeat" (11-12). Beyond a complex rendition of the social universe "in third person," it seems that the survival and validity of these texts may also come from the precariousness that they solicit for the relationship given by the possible instances for interlocution. The contemporary reader—not just the Brazilian—has no problem in recognizing himself in the lacerated, desolate subject, impotent to face great projects and agreements, subjugated by arrangements carried out in the interest of the moment.

These apparently insurmountable abysses of the country's social structure, where public and collective interests seem to undergo constant dissolution, both lay the groundwork for the formation of the readers projected by the text as well as command the relationship between the narrators and their interlocutors, based on something like a coarse individualism, to follow in Roberto Schwarz's critical wake. In my point of view, Machado's work bears witness to this corrosion, capturing and revealing it through readers who are ever smaller, more mangled and more fragmentary.

Machado de Assis was able to capture this somewhat "advanced" facade of Brazilian civilization in order to proclaim, while still ensconced in the nineteenth century, an unredeeming future bent on iniquity, on the hold of the image, and on the crisis of common and shared values, which would set the tone for twentieth-century artistic production. It could be that this *sui generis* realism, more disenchanting and individualistic than European classical realism, is responsible for the survival of Machado's work as well as its modern appeal in a world interested in the pulverization of the human experience to the detriment of the national and collective priorities announced in the nineteenth century.

The creation of a short circuit in the reading process that folds in upon itself, is yet another facet of the originality of Machado's prose in relation to

conventional prose, be it romantic, realist, or naturalist. Machado's perceived notion that the reader who is made up of "new stuff, metaphorical and original" ("Bons Dias!" 499) must undergo the process of interlocution harks back to Émile Benveniste's assertion that, "one's self-awareness is only made possible when faced with contrast" (287). The emergence of an original voice can only take place through the establishment of a new process of interlocution, which, throughout Machado's work, is made possible by making a central theme out of non-interlocution or the difficulty of interlocution, in which the communicability of the text becomes a fundamental question.

Unlike his romantic precursors, who set themselves against a milieu they deemed ungrateful, adverse, and indifferent, Machado de Assis used his novels to dislocate this conflict to the relationship between the "I" and the "other," radicalizing the fundamental situation of the written word, the "mutual relationship" between the "I" that wants to define itself, at one and the same time, and wants to communicate with the other, in order to further define itself (Benveniste 287).

Machado de Assis' originality is linked to questions of readers and readership, and deals with the way in which he includes the problematic circumstances of literary production and circulation in the body of his text, formalizing this very problem through his fiction. While his contemporaries took a pedagogical stand and became increasingly irritated with the precarious conditions under which books were circulated and received, Machado turned the very same negative conditions into great fiction. This is one of the boldest aspects of his work, which questioned the possibilities and limits of literary communication—questions leveled at the dramatic circumstances of literary production in Brazil during the 1800s, but also questions that apply to the impasses of other historical moments.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> On this subject see Meyer.

<sup>3</sup> See Candido, "Esquema."

<sup>4</sup> In the 1876 chronicle, the change in the reader's conditions and in the representative potential of literature has a political effect, suggested by the approximation between voter and reader. The changes that took place in the country between the 1850s and 1880s are exemplified by

Raymundo Faoro in his reading of Machado de Assis' short story *O Caso do Romualdo* (1884), in which the protagonist, a candidate for the legislative assembly, leaves the Court, in Rio de Janeiro, for the province of Ceará in search of votes. Faoro refers to this in order to illustrate changes in the treatment of candidates and voters, showing that the old impositions of influence were followed by dealing directly with voters, prompting the candidate to visit his district in order to come face to face with his voter: "This policy [of distributing nobiliarquical titles], though effective in the 50s, wouldn't have had much point in the 80s. Circumstances had changed—a new society was emerging that was fuelled by the class system and defined by the haves and have-nots and market forces. [...] Perspectives changed when money was placed on a throne. [...] Other times: many are the meanings of the institutions and their functions" (Faoro 43-44). Literature certainly featured among the institutions that acquired diverse meaning with the changes in the country, and Machado de Assis' work contains some of the most sophisticated records of this transition. Recalling the parallel drawn by Machado between readers and voters in his 1876 text, one can presume that the change in posture of the politicians has its equivalent in the change of posture of writers, so that the contrast between Romualdo and the politician of the 1850s can be compared to the contrast between Machado and Alencar in relation to their readers.

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