

THE ENIGMA OF THE LOOK

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Abstract: This essay explores the complex and multifaceted nature of Machado de Assis' narrative perspective. Bosi argues that understanding Machado's "look" is crucial to interpreting his fiction, as it encompasses both intelligence and feeling, shifting between comprehensive and incisive modes. He examines how Machado's perspective evolves from satirical depictions of social types to nuanced portrayals of complex characters, particularly women. He highlights Machado's use of metaphor and tautology to capture the individuality of his most memorable figures. Thus, the essay critiques overly simplistic sociological readings that reduce Machado's characters to mere social types, advocating for a more flexible approach that considers both the typical and the unique. Ultimately, Bosi argues that Machado's "look" resists simple categorization, blending skepticism with empathy, realism with idealism.

Keywords: Machado de Assis, Narrative Perspective, Social Types, Character Individuation

SOCRATES: Yes, my good friend, just as color is like color; — in so far as colors are colors, there is no difference between them; and yet we all know that black is not only unlike, but even absolutely opposed to white. or again, as figure is like figure, for all figures are comprehended under one class; and yet particular figures may be absolutely opposed to one another, and there is an infinite diversity of them. And we might find similar examples in many other things.

Plato, *Philebus*, 12e

L'imagination ne saurait inventer tant de diverses contrariétés qu'il y en a naturellement dans le coeur de chaque personne.

La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, 478

Why should we still write about the meaning of Machado de Assis' fiction? Has not a century of reading already descended to the bottom of the question, examining it from the biographical, psychological, sociological, philosophical, and aesthetic angles? Would it not be the case to revisit this vast and disparate bibliography that already has interpreters notable

for their astuteness and erudition, instead of trying, once more, to decipher riddles that would have already been solved after all?

The enterprise, I confess, also seemed to me bold at times; but if I write this essay, aware of the risks that involve it, it is because, having read the best studies on Machado, I still warn, given the central problem of perspective, a residue of cognitive dissatisfaction and moral discomfort. And returning for the umpteenth time to his novels and short stories, a gap always appears to me between the concepts of criticism and the figures of the source-text. Perhaps this interval is indeed impassable, if *individuum est ineffabile*. However, it is all about reducing it to the limits of what is possible and trying to answer the crucial question of meaning, which is on the horizon of every literary interpretation.

It is said that the correct formulation of a problem is already halfway to solving it. In this case, it is about understanding the Machadian look, which is an existential way of dealing with the perspective, the narrator's vision, the point of view or, more technically, with the narrative focus.

The *look* has the advantage of being mobile, which is not the case, for example, in terms of *point of view*. The look is comprehensive one moment, incisive the next. The look is sometimes cognitive and, at the limit, defining; sometimes it is emotional or passionate. The eye that peers out and objectively wants to know things can also be the eye that laughs or cries, loves or hates, admires or despises. The one who says look says implicitly both intelligence and feeling¹.

What has been agreed to date is the qualification of Machado de Assis' perspective through negative epithets: skeptical, relativistic, ironic, sardonic, sarcastic, pessimistic, demonic. Readers sensitive to the decorous patina of his writing compensate for the negativity of the general impression with attenuating attributes that, after all, always refer to the dark background being nuanced: diplomatic, restrained, measured, civilized, mediating style. A look that bites and caresses. First, it bites: the common clay of humanity (the expression is in *A mão e a luva*), although common, it is always clay. Then it caresses: the clay, being clay, is after all common to everyone.

Denial and attenuation. Critical gesture and concessive tone. The balance between the two ways of looking seems to be that of a terrorist who needs to pretend to be a diplomat; or the one of the diplomat that does not forget his other half, hidden, of a terrorist. It is the

¹ I expanded on the topic in "Fenomenologia do olhar" [Phenomenology of the look], in A. Novais (org.). *O olhar*. São Paulo, Cia. das Letras, 1988.

Machado who comes out of the reading of his moral and literary testament, *Memorial de Aires* [Aires' Memorial].

But the description does not yet contain the interpretation, although it is its honesty, as Delacroix said of the drawing in relation to the painting. The description recognizes and maps the distinct aims of a look that did not want to lose any essential dimension of its object; but, like any analysis, it requires the moment of understanding.

Machado de Assis' main object is human behavior. This horizon is reached through the perception of words, thoughts, works and silences of men and women who lived in Rio de Janeiro during the Second Empire. The local and historical reference is no less important; and for the sociological criticism it is almost everything. In any case, in this *almost* a universalizing force pulsates, which makes Machado intelligible in languages, cultures and times very different from his Carioca Portuguese vernacular and from his repertoire of people and situations of our restricted bourgeois Rio de Janeiro in the 1800s. If today we can incorporate the Machadian look of a century ago into our perception of the social, it is because this look was permeated with values and ideals whose dynamism was not exhausted in the spatiotemporal framework in which it was exercised. Wide and deep is, therefore, the field of "almost" in that almost-everything.

Moreover, why could Machado only have value judgments and ideals derived *immediately* from the paternalistic regime of the mid-19th century in the city of Rio de Janeiro? Does — by any chance — the light come from the objects illuminated by it? The historicity that penetrates symbolic processes is more open and complex than clock time, which only measures the situation relative to the author's biographical contingency. The historicity in which a work of fiction is inscribed brings with it dimensions of imagination, memory and critical judgment. Cultural values and styles of thinking shape the novelist's view of the world, which may sometimes coincide with the dominant ideology in his milieu, sometimes distance from it and judge it. *Object of the look* and *the way of seeing* are phenomena of different quality; it is the latter that gives form and meaning to the former.

The dissatisfaction, which I mentioned a few lines ago, comes from the very limits of the simplifying tendencies (as synchronizing) with which we so often read the ways in which the narrator qualifies his characters.

I believe that a flexible approach is needed here, interested not only in the same and the typical, but also in the difference and the uniqueness. Because the objects of the narrative look are discontinuous, and there are different ways of facing them: the author's intention shifts, and it is necessary to accompany each of his views.

I start with the lowest step, longer and wider than the others. Machado delights in the incisive mimesis of certain types representing a society such as that of the Second Empire, *roughly* divided into owners, employees, dependants [“agregados”, in Portuguese], and slaves. It is the measure of his realism, in the strict sense, pointed out and praised as materialist by one of the pioneers of Marxist criticism among us, the militant Astrojildo Pereira. His estimable collection of Machado’s studies, which stands out for its ideological coherence, focuses entirely on the idea of the characters’ *typicality*. One of his theoretical supports, the orthodox Plekhanov, is cited in support of the thesis of art as a reflection of society:

The psychology of characters acquires enormous importance in our eyes, precisely because it is the psychology of entire social classes, or at least of certain social layers; and thus, we can see that the processes that develop in the soul of different characters are the consequent reflection of the historical movement to which they belong (our translation).²

Astrojildo Pereira comments: “Here is a good key to understanding the intimate connections that exist between the work of Machado de Assis and the social history of the time that he reflects” (our translation)³.

The typicality is re-proposed with another specialist in Machado, the essayist Raymundo Faoro. Here, however, instead of a faithful herald of the historic left, we have a liberal democrat covered with Weberian sociology. *Machado de Assis: a pirâmide e o trapézio* [The Pyramid and the Trapezium] is a long census of the novelist’s characters. And like any census carried out with individuals, the survey does not do without the backbone of demographic research: classification. Social classes, *status groups*, estates of the realm, military, masonic or religious corporations; farmers, merchants, bankers, politicians, officials and employees; commanders and advisers of the Empire..., these would be the parts of the system, the identity marks that would explain, by the dynamics of their interests, the public behaviors and the secret intentions of the vast population observed by the Cosme Velho’s wizard.

Raymundo Faoro, composing his large functional panel, fulfilled, without this being his ideological aim, Astrojildo Pereira’s proposal: to situate each character in their respective

² Georges Plekhanov. *L’art et la vie sociale*. Paris, Ed. Sociales, 1953, p. 216.

³ Astrojildo Pereira. *Machado de Assis. Ensaios e apontamentos avulsos*. 2^a ed., Belo Horizonte, Oficina de Livros, 1991, p. 93.

social niche. The theory of the reflex did not find a more systematic application among us. Literature is a mirror. The sign is transparent. The novelist's eyes reflect the objects of his observation. As for the stylization, it is a work on the typical in the literary plane: "The stylization fixes some constant behaviors, repetitions of social relations and translates them into models"⁴.

But at the end of this vast example of parts and subparts of a historically given set — that the narrative would be a document —, our attention is attracted to Faoro's sensibility to the presence of a different vein, which he calls "cultural", and that would correct the dominant focus throughout the essay. The late entry of this new factor, which would have given it an equally new dimension, by which consciousness and object would not mirror but face each other, did not act, however, as an operating method in the making of interpretation. If an open and free culturalism had presided over the composition of the study, much could be expected from a topic entitled "O moralismo em conflito com a história e a sociologia" [Moralism in conflict with history and sociology]. Let the promise contained in this dialectical formulation at least remain, to which it would be worth returning.

Equally systematic, but close to the modulations of each speech, each narrated situation and each narrator's intervention, is the remarkable critical work of Roberto Schwarz, the most attentive inspection of Machado's novel made from the perspective of the sociology of literary text. The concept of type, of Lukacsian nature, is also imposed on her, but it is refined and complicated. The bases of interpretation and their horizon are ideological macrosystems: paternalism, or regime of favor, which allegorizes backwardness in relation to Europe; and liberalism, or regime of individual self-determination, which refers to modernity. The reversion and the progress would become embedded in the minds and hearts of the characters, guide the plots and illustrate the narrator's discursive entries. The measurement of values is recurrent. Traditionalism, close familialism, superstition, hypocrisy (or its opposite, cynicism), abjection, in short, would weigh on one side. Progressivism, autonomy of the subject, rationalism, abused irreverence, liberating modernity, would redeem the other side. The opposition, analyzed in *To the Victor, the Potatoes!*, a work devoted to the novels of the first phase, he would show his most ductile face in the analysis of the *The Posthumous memoirs of Brás Cubas* (in *A master on the periphery of capitalism*) to, finally, become more acute in the reading of Bento and Capitu that constitutes the core of "Capitu, the Bride of Dom Casmurro", leading the critic to the condemnation of the jealous one, as retrograde

⁴ Raymundo Faoro. *Machado de Assis: a pirâmide e o trapézio*. São Paulo, Cia. Ed. Nacional, 1974, p. 505.

and proprietor, and to the praise of the accused, emblem of modernity⁵. This summary does not account for the richness of psychological and moral observations that punctuate Roberto Schwarz's dense texts: it only confirms the validity of the typological conception of the fictional character, which is common to sociological readings, either Weberian or Lukacsian, alone or variously combined.

What the deterministic sociology of literature does is a somewhat simple operation of generalizing reasoning. The assumption is known: social types exist, absolutely, outside and inside the text. They are key pieces in the process of reproduction of the social system. If the author transposed to the symbolic plane some behavior schemes that are previously found in society (synonymous here with "reality"), why not conceive the entire sphere of the fictional work as a vast typological network? The reflex theory asks for nothing else from literature: the external that becomes internal is considered by Lukács to be the cornerstone of materialist thought.

It so happens that, in Machado de Assis' novel, only that first step, since it is long and wide, fits like a glove to this reduction. It is the step on which sit, among others, Viana, Batista, Antunes, Camargo, Procópio Dias, Lobo Neves, Cotrim, Palha and Nóbrega, that is, the parasite, the avowed sycophant, the professional hypocrite, the calculating one, the cynical person, anyone who wants to enjoy, here and now, the fruit of their maneuvers. Altogether, it is the family crucible, duly enlarged, of the boy Brás Cubas who, now adult and dead, evokes under the label of "vulgarity of characters". And vulgar is, by definition, the absolute majority. These are men and women found in the Brazilian Empire, which has literary avatars in comedy and satire, not by chance included by Hegel among the figurations of prosaism. Machado found them, in pieces or whole, in his coexistence with men and women who fought — as they could — tooth and nail for their own social survival. There is something Darwinian in all this conception of human existence: it is the animalistic universal that would be inside each one of us; hence the continuous clash for the preservation molded on the biological struggle: if you cannot be a lion, be a fox. Machiavelli, founder of the modern political science (the attribute is elastic, dating back to the fifteenth century...), had already sculpted in an exemplary way both sides of the nature-society conjunction: the

⁵ Roberto Schwarz. *To the Victor, the Potatoes! Literary Form and Social Process in the Beginnings of the Brazilian Novel*. Edited and translated, with an introduction, by Ronald W. Sousa. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2020; *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*. Translated by John Gledson, Durham / London, Duke UP, 2001; "Capitu, the Bride of Dom Casmurro", *Two Girls and Other Essays*. Edited by Francis Mulhern, translated by Nicholas Brown et. al., London / New York, Verso, 2012.

leonine of the strong and the vulpine of the cunning. Outside of them, the risk of failure and obscurity surrounds all those who do not adapt to the social jungle. And it is necessary to escape from obscurity, all of Machado's advisors remember. The cynical types (when they are at the top of their game) and the hypocrites (when they are at the rock bottom) only want to remain on the step they have already reached or that was granted to them by fortune. The important thing is to make sure and, since the animal metaphor suits them, I would add that, in addition to a lion and a fox, the image of a chameleon fits them. And who will accuse the chameleon of changing its skin color to survive? Thus, the naturalization of the society that, in the satire, serves as a critique of the ferocity of human relations, brings in itself a limit to the denunciation, since what is natural and fatal is beyond ethical judgment.

Machado's originality lies in seeing from the inside what naturalism would see from the outside. Their types are and are not similar to those of their contemporaries, Eça de Queirós and Aluísio Azevedo, brilliant caricature tracers. I see in this difference the potential of fictional discourses that, even if placed under the sign of historical realism, do not allow themselves to be rigidified into categories. The cynical and the hypocrite, recurrent figures in asymmetric social structures, end up deserving, when evaluated from the inside, at least the complacency of an ambivalent look. Clay, yes, but clay common to humanity and of which we are all made, they waver a little (just a little) before surrendering to pure interest, and then rationalize, giving some socially acceptable form to the soft clay of consciousness. This is, in the end, Machado's reflection when justifying Guiomar's hypocrisy in dealing with her protector, in *A Mão e a Luva* [The hand and the glove].

The condemnation that the pure romantic *ethos* had placed on the similar social types (as in the case of the villains of Herculano and Alencar) is alleviated, although not entirely, when Machado grants them the excuse of necessity. Here is the alibi that should silence indignant hearts. Evil is explainable, therefore subject to mitigating judgments whenever it is considered a *necessary evil*, a formula that has already become commonplace in the jargon of illustrated conformism. What to do, if things are like that and if men have to act like that to survive? A lucid look can also be a concessive look, as long as it accepts the game where destiny and the circumstances have greater strength. This skepticism that purports to be realistic attenuates, at its root, the vehemence of moral satire.

The most convincing reading, in this order of reasons, is still that of Lúcia Miguel Pereira⁶ which shows how the young Machado elaborated, in the cut of his female characters,

⁶ Lúcia Miguel Pereira. *Machado de Assis. Estudo crítico e biográfico*. 3^a ed., Rio de Janeiro, J. Olympio, 1955, p. 173-85.

the justification for calculation, the recognition that “the second nature is as legitimate and imperative as the first”. The perceptive and determined young woman, who is striving to carry out her matrimonial project and, as such, her heritage, is seen with singular complacency in *A Mão e a Luva* and *Iaiá Garcia*. The young woman who knew at the unlucky moment to hide her plans is raised and promoted to a higher degree in the scale of characters and is not to be confused with the extras on the first step, since, dealing with Guiomar or Iaiá, the narrator will make the consciousness of need penetrate into the darkroom of the subject where the ray of self-determination shines. In this process, the internal dialectic of type and person begins to take shape, and with it the assent judgment of the fictional demiurge who made Adam and all his descendants out of common clay.

Guiomar, although living under the tutelage of her godmother, the Baroness, will not choose the man she prefers as her husband: she will look up to another suitor, ambitious like her and therefore more promising and desirable. The tactic and its practical correctness will be the object of a discreet apology by the narrator, who sees in them the validity of second nature, the instance of the social, later stylized in the *outer soul* of the tale “O espelho” [The mirror].

Iaiá Garcia, initially moved by the desire to save her father from the shadow of adultery, which her stepmother’s old passion for Jorge could favor, sets out to conquer the latter and uses all her feminine arts to win. In fact, Iaiá triumphs and marries Valéria’s rich heir, who, by the way, had already endowed her: she will be very happy and will name the novel, as if she was, *par droit de conquête*, the protagonist of the plot.

The fact that these obstinate and self-centered figures were women — and not Stendhalian or Balzacian social climbers — was interpreted as a work of disguise, with autobiographical roots, by which the young Machado of the 1870s in full ascent converted and sublimated his own existential choice. The fear of obscurity would have led him to repress his family origins and to take advantage, without any blemish of dishonor, of opportunities to rise appropriate to his merit, and to live, finally, assured and secure, in the intermediate steps of the social hierarchy. This psychosocial reading by Lúcia Miguel Pereira has solid persuasive power. From the point of view in which the hypotheses of this essay are articulated, it would still be convenient to weigh the difference between Machado’s treatment of his lesser types of satire, low flatterers (“the vulgarity of characters”) and his way of portraying these young women engaged in the struggle for a less modest place inside Rio de Janeiro’s bourgeoisie. The absorption of the natural (the graces of sex) by the social (the

calculation of the person who plays to win) gives them the irresistible power to knock out the opponent with the traditional kid gloves.

Jorge, at a certain point in the novel, felt Iaiá's fingers on his arm: they were iron fingers, a sign that the body and the mind of the girl were united in the same leonine and vulpine combat. Unlike Pascal, who, yet Cartesian and classical, tended to believe in the supremacy of the mental *habitus*, stating that "the custom, second nature, destroys the first" (*Pensées*, 120), Machado prefers the idea of fusion: "the two natures do not contradict each other, they complete each other, they are the two halves of man". Desire and interest are dissociated. Natural candor and perfect dissimulation appear together, when necessary and more than once, in the analyst's laboratory.

The strength of passion is a core element in the construction of these characters. Deprived of their drive and stamina, they would fall into the one-sided status of self-serving types. For they do not just have interests: they have desires, or better yet, they have the interests of their desires; and just as the narrator will not fall into the grotesque naturalism of Aluísio's caricatures, neither will he return to the ultra-romantic stereotype of the fragile and sexless damsel peculiar to the literary generation that preceded his debut as a novelist. Iaiá, in the last book of the first phase, and Sofia and Capitu, in the masterpieces of his maturity, attract to Machado's text the unmistakable metaphors of *eros* and the equally powerful reactions of spite and anger that come to a thwarted desire. Their eyes will be the wave-eyes engulfing living and dead men, and along with the eyes will come shoulders and bare arms, magnificent necks, full breasts, well-made bodies, well aware of their power of seduction, and even knees, a limit caressed by lewd Palha, half husband, half pimp, at *Quincas Borba's* sad masquerade.

In the figuration of these women, the narrator admires their spontaneous and indomitable vigor, a feeling that is in tune with certain long-lasting cultural strands in the Western literary complex. Strands that are recognized since the Renaissance descriptions that emerged from the experience of the flesh and nerves, free recreations of Greek and Roman eroticism, and certainly much earlier than any ideological norm, so-called advanced liberal, strictly speaking neither internalized nor, much less, generalized during the Brazilian Empire. Strands that flourished pleasantly in Boccaccio, but not in Petrarch; in Ariosto, in Rabelais and Montaigne, and in Machiavelli, but not in Tasso or in the petrarchizing lyricists of his time; in Molière, but not in Corneille, and only tragically in Racine; in Diderot and Goethe, but not in Schiller nor Novalis; more in Musset than in Lamartine or Vigny. And no pretenses on the next models, Stendhal and Baudelaire, Flaubert and Eça. Machado leaned, discreetly

and firmly, towards the non-sublimating literary aspects of the representation of women, which in Brazil had already been rehearsed in one or another daring of Álvares de Azevedo and Alencar in *Luciola* and *Senhora*. Discreetly, but always seeing the ego drive and the playful pleasure of overcoming the driving forces of more than one female character⁷.

Returning to the source texts: Iaiá's passion for Jorge makes her "ductile and interested"; and "in that frail and tender body there was a soul capable of pinning the wheel of fate." The girl, answering a question about her wedding day (she, who did not even have a boyfriend yet), says vigorously: "The day I do not know. And after a pause: — But it is right it will be done. Or I am not who I am."

Sofia and Capitu have strong inclinations of the senses, they gallantly exercise their gifts, they get irritated and rematch very naturally when they run into obstacles, and remain completely coherent, body and soul, with their respective life projects. Both, each in her own way, aspire to full insertion into the conservative society where they live; a society in which capital comfortably uses slave labor, and which, from the angle of pendency relations, can be described as paternalistic. In both, the first nature reveals itself in the force of instincts and in ready irascibility. The second nature, which completes the first and is deeply grafted onto it, makes them, in difficult moments, refocused, reflexive, sharp, capable of quick disguises, accurate in the invention of expedients. I do not see, strictly speaking, examples of modernity or historical advance in this fusion of instinct and wit, because the collimated ends, the values that guide their expressions or silences, are, as can be seen from the narrative vector, survival and, even more, *the ascension within the expectations of the same system* where everyone interacts, conquerors and conquered, those who have not yet reached their goal and those who are already installed.

Capitu, on her honeymoon, is impatient and wants to go down from Tijuca to the city. Only seven days were spent alone together, and she was already eager to publish her married status:

The joy with which she put on her married hat, and the married air with which she gave me her hand to come in and out from the car, and the arm to walk in the street, everything showed me that the cause of Capitu's impatience were the exterior signals of her new

⁷ See, in this respect, the fine observations of Augusto Meyer in the article "Da sensualidade na obra de Machado" [On sensuality in Machado's work], a text that gains relevance when read in connection with the portrait that the artist-critic made of Capitu (*Textos críticos*. São Paulo, Perspectiva, 1986, pp. 213-224).

status. It was not enough for her to be married between four walls and a few trees; she needed the rest of the world too.

The insignia of *status*, “the exterior signals of her new status,” are the outer soul: here it is Bento who describes it. In the “Mirror”, it will be the ensign. In both texts, it is Machado de Assis.

On this second step, the common type of the beautiful and lively girl, whose “mistake of fortune” had caused her to be born in a modest family, is enriched and personalized by the action of a powerful will. The character’s density comes precisely from the emphasis that the narrator gives to the strength of her instincts and her will, that is, to the full expression of the first nature, half of the human being. And it is in the heart of fictional writing, in the use of image and metaphor, that the writer explores this truth of blood and nerves, the driving force of the plot.

Metaphor and tautology in the individuation process

For the construction of the type, with all the “vulgarity of the characters” that it implies, the narrator sufficed to draw the repeated gestures. The scheme that abstracts from empiricism certain defining traits was enough for him, as Iaiá’s hand drawing with the cruelty of a talented teenager the caricature of Procópio Dias, the villain of the novel. But in the image, says Goethe, the idea is inexhaustible. As the character overcomes the typification, through the excavation of her peculiarities, images and metaphors are the ones that best serve the process of representation, freeing it from the risk of an allegorizing form.

Images and metaphors reveal aspects and shades of feeling not only graduated but opposites. Iaiá, the girl and the young woman, is, in the same period, evoked as “dawn without clouds, light, agile, sudden” and “sometimes rough”, an attribute that would be surprising if it were not subsequently modified by the notation of her “waving, slender spirit”; all of which, however, does not prevent her from showing herself “not incapable of reflection and tenacity.” The images that, trapped between the bars of a closed concept, would contradict one another, here are succeeded and marry in the rhythm of free intuition, attentive only to the changes of an individuation that strays from the stereotype.

This beautiful variety of features in the composition of this and other profiles of women is due to the internalized experience of the two mines of every character, the first and the second nature, from which the narrator’s look was able to extract the minerals of his creation. Thus, Iaiá’s eyes,

if they were clear like those of Eve before the sin, if they were dove-like as those of Shulamithes, they had, like hers, something hidden inside, which was certainly not the same thing. When she looked in a certain way, she threatened or penetrated the depths of other people's consciences.

Just as that airy lightness of dawn would suggest neither harshness nor pertinence, here the hyaline and innocent eyes hardly match their faculty of concealment or the menacing incisiveness that, later on, will be compared to the cut of the stiletto.

The focus of intuition leads the narrator to position himself in an angle that adheres to the subjective spectrum; from this focus, he sees deeper than if he were only entitled to the overhead gaze for which Iaiá is always the type of girl of modest origin placed in an equally typical situation of class asymmetry. In terms of complexity, Iaiá, with her impetuosity and anger at a cost appeased, prepares, better than the "stirred and paused" Guiomar, the strong and slinky figures of Virgília, Sofia and Capitu. All aimed, as is said about the first one, in the *The Posthumous Memoirs*, to combine "love and public consideration". Separating both instances is always a thankless operation, but in case of danger the public consideration, the outer soul, will have the primacy. Hence, half adultery, never fully assumed, appears as a recurrent way out. To confess it would be to lose everything that has already been obtained, often with a lot of ingenuity and art: marriage and patrimony. This mixture, utilitarian to the core, repelled the romantic look, but not the murky realism that succeeds it. The nineteenth-century bourgeois novel multiplied stories of adultery. Sometimes consummated (Virgília), sometimes denied or fantasized (Sofia), but rarely or never introjected as self-determination, choice, a change of axis that would jeopardize the character's social integration.

Capitu, blamed by Bentinho, and realizing that Bentinho's conviction was unshakeable, denies and asks for the divorce, which will be done without scandal or any economic loss for her. Capitu will live in Switzerland until her last day and will raise her son as a wealthy South American lady, giving him a refined education to the point of turning him into an orientalist archaeologist. Bento does not abandon her and takes care to save face by traveling regularly to Europe. For the *mores* of a sexist and patriarchal society, we have to admit that the final arrangement earned the accused a public attestation of respectability with all the ensuing benefits. I am just afraid that this reading seems too economic, something

that the author of these lines professes not to be, an open realism that does not decree *a priori* the exclusion of any aspect of the real.

In any case, it is up to the metaphorical imagination to illuminate the intricacies of individual differences. Capitu is a denser character than Virgília or Sofia. It is true that the Paduas daughter struggled to obtain a better place in the paternalistic regime of the time, whose keys were marriage and patrimony; however, the first nature in it overflows from the bed dug by interests, as life overflows, when it can, from the social composure that limits and dams it.

The girl and the young woman pulse with “strength” and “freshness”, intrinsic qualities of Nature that had already been shown to Brás Cubas in delirium. In it, there is also the “explosion” of “fury”, literal expressions of the narrator when he recalls the sudden violence of his girlfriend who sees her desire to marry him negated. “She clenched her teeth, shook her head [...]” The fact that this reaction of a frustrated woman immediately yields to a serious, attentive, “unaffected” manner only confirms one of the movements of that same Nature, which was to “enclose in the heart” her angers, when she had them.

Capitu, with the shy connivance of a flexible, naïve Bentinho, devises tactics to entice some, dribble others, co-opting the strong and constraining the weak. This was her advice to Bento in relation to José Dias, in the chapter “A plan”: “Show that you will become the owner of the house, show that you want and you can. Make him understand that it is not a favor” — a recommendation that will be anything but an index of democratic sentiments. Capitu gave the still inexperienced Bentinho lessons on how to be the perfect owner and future *paterfamilias*.

All this art of disguising and manipulating will be modern only in the sense given to the word by the honest Jacob, Brás Cubas’ acquaintance, to whom he taught that “absolute veracity was incompatible with an advanced social state.” Sentence that, if not a sharp denunciation of the lie-modernity pair, it is not a compliment either. Let us say: it will be the acceptance that the social masquerade becomes more and more necessary, therefore excusable; but in order to represent it well, it will not be necessary to leave the circle of our extended bourgeois family, master in the tricks of cheating with or without charm. This was the stage that Machado knew⁸.

⁸ Machado de Assis has lived intimately since his formative years with this mentality, which would only be contrasted in some strong moments of the abolitionist campaign by men of the temper of Joaquim Nabuco (who coined the expression *New Liberalism*), Rui Barbosa, José do Patrocínio, Luís Gama, André Rebouças and Raul Pompéia. On the foundations of the Second Empire’s bourgeois-slavery ideology and its apparent paradox, I made some

From the European illustration Machado drew less the belief in the progress of reason than the very Voltairian suspicion that men of all times were complacent victims of their illusions and all sorts of passions crystallized in a concept that is, at the same time, natural and social: the *interest*. “If the physical universe is subject to the laws of motion, the moral universe is subject to the *laws of interest*. Interest is, on Earth, the mighty mage who changes in the eyes of all creatures the shape of all objects.”⁹

But the type of neighbor of medium strata is deepened and humanized, seen in the various aspects of the differentiated and singular person. It is this unique person that the novelist speaks of; the social historians would speak of this person if they could draw the square of the circle which is to solve the problem of individual discourse.

considerations in the essays “A escravidão entre dois liberalismos” [Slavery between two liberalisms] (*Dialética da Colonização*. São Paulo, Cia. das Letras, 1992) and “Formações ideológicas na cultura brasileira” [Ideological formations in Brazilian culture] (*Estudos Avançados*, n° 25, 1995).

Being, above all, a *moralist* without illusions, Machado did not believe either in the network of values he knew closely throughout his life, nor in the revolutionary or just republican agendas whose hopes he did not share. From the politics of the Second Empire, Machado’s look filtered out the psychological nuances of actors caught up in their sometimes fulfilled and sometimes frustrated ambitions. It was not the political practice itself that Machado picked up in his fiction, but sparse attitudes born of the desire to appear and shine, simulacra of power that the political theater engenders. Each and every regime seemed to him to be a combination of passions and interests, an exercise of strength or cunning, a collective extension of the relationships between self-preserving individuals. This distanced him from both nostalgia and utopianism and gave his skeptical look a universalizing (but not ahistorical) perception of human sociability. The affinity of this view of the social with that of the moralists of the 17th and 18th centuries, sometimes read through a Schopenhauerian prism. Pertinent approximations were made, in this sense, by Eugênio Gomes in “Schopenhauer e Machado de Assis” and “O testamento estético de Machado de Assis” [The aesthetic testament of Machado de Assis], in *Machado de Assis*. Rio de Janeiro, Livraria São José, 1958.

“History,” said Fontenelle, “has for its object the effects of the passions and whims of men” (*Oeuvres*, II, p. 484). Mandeville founded civilization on the seven deadly sins, which was an observation and not a value judgment. “Private vices, public benefits” is the subtitle of his ingenious *Fable of the Bees*, an allegory of the close relationship between vanity, interest and material progress. Voltaire, in turn, recognized the universal force of self-love and the need to mask it: “This self-love is the instrument of our conservation; it is necessary, it is dear to us, it gives us pleasure, it is necessary to hide it.” Machado would be close to this realistic, but sociable and mediating attitude, which is prior to and, in the context of Brazilian Empire, still oblivious to the explosion of advanced capitalism, for which selfishness should not be moderated, but rather excited without limits for the seductions of the merchandise.

⁹ Helvétius. *De l'esprit*, II, 2. Paris, Durand, 1758. Machado titled “O princípio de Helvétius” [The Principle of Helvetius] his chapter 133 of *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. It is a passage in which the narrator reflects on different forms of *interest*.

Even in terms of modes of knowledge, it is significant that, in the figuration of Capitu, the narrator uses the tautology, quit giving his girlfriend a narrow, square definition: “Capitu was Capitu, that is, a very particular creature, more of a woman than I was of a man.”

The singular in its pure state — Capitu was Capitu — meets the feminine universal (woman), and hence this “most particular”, intensive, which takes to the possible extreme, the refusal to classification. Literary criticism, as Croce thought, cannot inhabit this unique and unmistakable place of poetic figuration: it is content with weaving a nuanced characterization, as contiguous as possible to the artist’ intuition, but always asymptotic when confronted with this¹⁰.

Capitu was Capitu. And, alongside tautology, there is the important role that metaphor plays in the construction of the singular character. The narrator admits this and instructs us when, for example, he catches the true feeling of Padua (father of Capitu), humiliated in the procession because it was only his job to carry a torch, not the pallium cover, thus he expresses: “Palha gnawed the torch bitterly.” And he explained it to us using a metalinguistic twist: “It is a metaphor, I cannot find another more vivid way of expressing my neighbor’s pain and humiliation”. *Gnawing the torch* is metaphor, and *bitterly* qualifies it closely. The living form, which welds the intuition to the word, is shaped in the figure. It is an arcane aesthetic procedure, but always open to surprises in people’s knowledge work; and it differs from the mere categorization that tends to stagnate the dynamism of meaning, as did the allegory fixed on exemplarity. The circumspect narrator knows the moment when he should just mimic the type that the convention has already given him (it is time to look down or from beneath) and the moment when he encounters original beings: it is time to take the eyes away from the ground.

¹⁰ In Benedetto Croce. *La poesia*. Bari, Laterza, 1953, p. 130. In the prehistory of Croce’s aesthetics, there is Vico’s concept of the “fantastic universal”, which is peculiar to the intuitive moment of knowledge. Literary criticism, proceeding through categories, would try, when discussing fictional or poetic entities, to square the circle.

Croce also recognizes in Kant an antecedent of his thesis of the validity of an intuitive knowledge, that is, the aesthetic judgment, without concept or interest. From the theologian Schleiermacher he picks up the idea of producing “individual internal images”, comparable to oneiric ghosts, which would be to the poem as the terms are to the logical discourse. Finally, Croce depends directly on the greatest Italian literary critic of the 19th century, Francesco de Sanctis, for whom the artistic form, the *living form*, is an active principle, a power to express feelings and values that cannot be confused with the reduction of experience to general ideas or allegories: “Content is necessary to produce the concrete form; but the abstract quality of the content does not determine the quality of the artistic form” (Benedetto Croce. *Estetica*. 10^a ed., Bari, Laterza, 1958, p. 409).

Pursuing the imaginary that shapes a character like Capitu is to retrace the path that stylistic reading has already taken in its fertile period between the 40s and 50s. Precise studies by Augusto Meyer and Eugênio Gomes valued the role of metaphorical language in Machado. Our narrator's imagination has produced singularizing profiles and no longer merely remissive, which he would have done had he obeyed the rule whereby narrative form is nothing more than a stratified form of social convention¹¹. Imagination, even when it seems mimetic, is heuristic: it discovers in the fictional character the virtualities and modes of being that the empirical thing does not deliver to the supposedly realistic look and, which is in fact only a label.

Let up attention, once again, to the movement of the Machadian look, which sometimes distances itself from the characters, sometimes penetrates them. The dependants of the household, seen from a distance, as beings reducible to the scale of hierarchical relationships, tend to resemble each other. But Machado knows that dependants also look. And this look from the bottom up, which the author delegates to them, can denounce, in the characters who are climbing or wanting to climb, traits that the narrator prefers to discard, since, being posted on a higher observatory than that of the dependants of the household, he knows how to discern the riches of individual difference, which is precisely what the type denies to the other. I notice that these dependants (but never the credulous Dona Glória or the good-natured uncle Cosme) who despise Capitu implying that she is false. Cousin Justina said that she looked from below, a defect also noticed in Escobar, from whose "police eyes" nothing escaped; and from José Dias comes the description, which became anthological, of the eyes of an oblique and dissimulated gypsy. Cousin Justina and José Dias see her as a rival and want to disqualify her to Bento; but for the lover, Capitu was Capitu, unclassifiable.

Bento does not see eyes slanted sideways or down in his beloved; he sees undertow eyes, disturbing intuition, suggestive metaphor that he transfers to the sea waves, the sea that will return swallowing Escobar, the flow and backflow of the gaze, figure of the will to live and power, a single latent energy in that woman, "more of a woman than I was of a man", as Bentinho admits in his confession of weakness that inverts the position of class and makes it forgotten or inoperative.

The artist's fantasy explores areas of existence that go unnoticed by the wide meshes of the typological network. But they do not escape the mobile eye of the novelist. The

¹¹ Gramsci observes with a true dialectical sense: "wanting to be ultra-materialist, we fall into a baroque form of abstract idealism" (*Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*. Turim, Einaudi, 1972, p. 161).

undertow eyes episode has ramifications. Bento tries to run away from the “mysterious and energetic fluid” that emanates from the girl’s pupil. It was hard to resist: “as I was looking so quickly for the pupils, the wave that came out of them came growing, hollow and dark, threatening to envelop me, pull me in and swallow me up.” Clock time, as Bento suggests, could not mark what only “the clocks in heaven” could measure, that time that the lover feels infinite and brief. The present in its urgency dominates the whole scene and suspends or moves away to other places and times the small and heavy history of a society where the rich usually look at the poor only with disdain, and the poor look at the rich only with envy or humiliation. But this petty story, made up of asymmetries, is reproduced again when José Dias enters the scene, a rival of the people of Padua, who he believes is interested in the union of his daughter with the young master of the neighbor house; or else Cousin Justina, who suspected Capitu’s extreme care with this epigram of suspicion and poison: “You do not need to run so far; whatever has to be yours will come to your hands.”

While José Dias only sees sloppiness, and Cousin Justina only sees eagerness, attributes of marginal and greedy, *gypsy people*, Bentinho gazes into the same eyes at the irresistible movement of Nature, the sea with its waves that come and go.

The type always tends to classify the other as a type; but whoever loves creates new, unique, incomparable images for the loved one.

The intuition of the unique character of the loved person resists even the conversion of love into hate that suspicion of betrayal has instilled in the partner who believes to have been deceived. Bento, in the dramatic climax of the novel (chapter “Enter Capitu”), harbors within himself, at the same time, *the character* seized by fierce jealousy, which had already led him to the brink of murder, and the phenomenological *narrator* sensitive to Capitu’s minimal expressions.

Let us follow closely the directions of this look in its internal dialectic of blind passion and observation that wants to be comprehensive. The look and attitude of the beloved-hated woman are seized by the narrator-character with a contemplative attention that is surprising, given the accusing mood that permeates the entire passage.

We come to the moment that follows the word, for so long muffled, from Bento to Ezequiel: “No, no, I’m not your father!” When Bento raised his head, he saw that Capitu was in front of him. “This time, when I saw her, I do not know if it was from my eyes, but Capitu seemed livid to me.”

The narrator remembers that, although possessed by the commotion of the scene experienced a minute before, he had noticed the paleness of the woman’s face. But time has

passed and the control that present writing has over memory requires a certain cognitive caution; that is why it is with attenuation of doubt that Bento describes Capitu's reaction: "I do not know if it was from my eyes", "seemed livid to me". Henceforth, the implacable judge, for whom Capitu would have been just another example of the female type who rose in life by seducing and deceiving, will live with the man who still loves and whose look remains perplexed on that which will always be different from all women, unique, undeciphered riddle.

Livid though, and thrown into the heart of the crisis, "Capitu recovered herself". The verb connotes self-control, remembers with social posture, an attribute that suits the image of a woman capable of masking her feelings. This is what the narrator's comment will underline when he questions the assertion from Capitu that she had not heard Bento Ezequiel's words well. "Capitu replied that she had heard weeping and murmuring words. I believe I had heard it all clearly, but it would have been to lose hope of silence and reconciliation". Still calculating, therefore, in this denial? Bento repeats the terrible denunciation. Capitu's reaction is interpreted by the narrator in terms of *necessary bivalence*: the "naturalness" of the accused brings that spontaneous character of the defensive instinct that is, after all, one of the pillars of life in society, which reaffirms the very Machadian hypothesis of the union of the two instances of human existence, first and second nature, desire and *persona*. Thus, the veracity of Capitu's expressions remains a challenge to our speculation: "Great was Capitu's astonishment, and no lesser was the indignation that followed it, both so natural that would make the first witnesses of our forum doubtful."

It is significant that the lawyer Bento Santiago uses here, in his favor, the language of the law and the courts, a cooled form of ethical life. The following sentences allude to lost warrants and rented witnesses. However, one should not miss the look that Bentinho gave Capitu's astonishment and indignation, describing them as "both so natural", which is always a glimmer of both cognitive and moral contemplation: the prosecutor's harsh opacity seems suspended, although for very brief moments, when traversed by a sensation of transparency.

Capitu, the narrator also notes, "could be a little confused, the behavior was not of accused" — an observation made up of nuances and which refers to the secret desire to probe in the loved-hated person a "natural" background of integrity. Touching the outcome, the frustrated desire struggles in vain to shake the betrayed husband's convictions, which need to be unshakable. And it is to reinforce within himself these same bitter certainties that Bento, "without heeding Capitu's language, her gestures, the pain that writhed her, nothing", repeats "the words spoken twice with such resolution that made her slack".

In this inglorious duel, the eye that, for a moment still open to the other, had been able *to pay attention* to the woman's livid, astonished, indignant, confused and suffering face, preferred to close itself by an act of jealous will, *without attending to any matter*, hiding in his reasons of honor or (as those who have already decided the election will say) in his morbid Brazilian Othello jealousy. The open eyes contemplate; the eyes closed, not attending to anything, typify, judge, decree.

The text sequence is no less complex. Bento discerns melancholy in Capitu's face, who does not show, however, that she has surrendered to her husband's judgment. On the contrary, her tone is one of irony and her look shows disdain. Calculation, again, or contained response to an injury? Transparent face or second nature? "She sighed, I think she did, while I, who asked for nothing but her full justification, told her I do not know which words are suitable for that purpose."

Before the definitive separation, a last breath of repressed feeling of the lover can be foreseen, who still awaits an *in extremis* reversal of the drama: *her full justification*. What would re-emerge that ineffable Capitu "with an air I have never found in any woman" and that we readers only learned to know through the bifocal lenses of the narrator, because others Machado de Assis did not allow us to see.

The author who, in turn, is solely responsible for the narrator's discourse has the quality of circumspection, in the etymological sense of the term: he looks everywhere, circularly, covering the different levels of his own or others' experience. *Dom Casmurro's* text shows copiously that the narrator Bento Santiago does not spare himself in the eyes of the reader, confessing himself whole in his weaknesses and temptations, with his pitifully rationalized downfalls, his fears and superstitions, his cowardices and unfulfilled promises, his perverse impulses, if not criminal, his self-indulgence in matters of clandestine meetings, making, in short, a portrait of himself that is far from the referential medallion of dignity or of the undefiled gentleman. But his voice does not have the same timbre as that of the cynical enjoyer who recounted his posthumous memories one day out of distaste and enacted his own impudence. Bento's memories retain the tone of failure and emptying that does not hide the memoirist's existential fragility: "I'm missing myself, and this gap is everything". As Antonio Candido sensibly observed, "within the Machadian universe, it does not matter much whether Bento's conviction is false or true, because the consequence is exactly the

same in both cases: imaginary or real, it because others Machado de Assis did not allow us to see”¹².

The hypothesis of author-narrator dissociation

To understand the novels in the first person, the *The Posthumous Memoirs* and particularly *Dom Casmurro*, a strand of Machado’s criticism formulated a controversial but crucial hypothesis: there would be in these novels a dissociation of perspective in two dimensions: on the one hand, the explicit narrative focus; on the other, the authorial conscience. The explicit focus would not correspond to the author’s true look and would assume the role of cheating narrator capable of confusing the reader, saying or suggesting what the author would not say, thinking what the author would not think and omitting the real intentions of his creator¹³.

The hypothesis is ingenious, but if it is not put into perspective, it runs the risk of arbitrary and overinterpreting uses. For the reader who believes in it, the dilemma arises at every moment. In the face of a particular step in the novel, are the narrator’s stated perceptions and feelings reliable and consistent with those of the author? Or, on the contrary, would the malicious author here engender a narrative voice that would give false clues from which the novelist, in the secret of his conscience, would ethically diverge? Does the narrator lie on purpose, and only the author and a few more informed readers know the true and historically irrefutable truth? But where is this duality undisputed? And where would it not fit? How and what to choose inside the novel? Whoever makes a mistake does not do it systematically, in which case it would be enough to think the inverse of what is said to know what is right.

It is likely that the solution to these dilemmas is not advanced in general terms: it will be necessary to examine each work and each episode without any interpretative *a priori*.

Starting with Brás Cubas, suppose that his speech represents a self-satire, that is, the development of an opposing point of view or, in some way, alien to Machado de Assis’s perception of Brazilian society or of humanity in general, it engenders more difficulties than

¹² In “Esquema de Machado de Assis” (Antonio Candido. *Vários escritos*. São Paulo, Duas Cidades, 1970, p. 25).

¹³ The hypothesis derives basically from Helen Caldwell’s *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960). From different angles, they took up the dual character of the fictional perspective: Silviano Santiago, in “Retórica da verossimilhança” [Rhetoric of verisimilitude] (*Uma literatura nos trópicos*. São Paulo, Perspectiva, 1978); John Gledson. *The deceptive realism of Machado de Assis*. Liverpool, Francis Caim, 1984 (Brazilian translation: *Machado de Assis — Impostura e realismo*. São Paulo, Cia. das Letras, 1991); and Roberto Schwarz, *Dois meninas*. São Paulo, Cia. das Letras, 1997.

it solves. It seems more reasonable *to see in the deceased author a stylized limit of the writer's skepticism*, a only seemingly chaotic mosaic of the abused certainties the novelist had reached at that point in his analysis of the perverse but ubiquitous indifference that separates and hurts men: that cruel attitude, disseminated everywhere, and that Brás Cubas' class position allowed to lead to "recklessness", as well characterized by Roberto Schwarz, who, moreover, leans towards the thesis of the lying narrator. But the narrator, in the last analysis, did not hide or even blur the implacable gaze with which Machado observes and enacts the mask of life in society; he just fantasized and universalized, in his own way and as much as he could, its unfair, arbitrary or apparently random character.

In other words: *the ideological place* from which the author saw and judged the interpersonal relationships of his context in the state of Rio de Janeiro was broad enough to house and place the exhibitionist changes of Brás Cubas. It was not a game of exclusions, of black and white, of lie and truth, of narrator vs. author, but of a movement of inclusion of Brás Cubas in Machado de Assis. It is as if the skeptical author was passing on this message to the reader:

The world is like that, dear reader, and it deserves to be confronted; that is why my narrator and protagonist thinks, acts and speaks without smirks, showing himself just like the he consents to his unique death condition, already 'unattached from the brevity of the century'. In life, he was free, rich and did everything or almost everything he wanted, because the world belongs to the free, strong and rich. Woe to the poor, weak and dependent! Now, I will make him say whatever he thinks.

Do not see, therefore, an idealist author who decided to fabricate a realistic narrator in order to better condemn him in the light of an exemplary moral vision by which the wicked must and will be mocked for their conduct. For the rest, impunity is a permanent feature of young Brás' mischief and his adult cunning. In the text and in life, this is the author's disillusioned lesson, which Brás Cubas expresses in a thousand ways with his petulant resourcefulness. The narrator may as well be the demonic side of the author, and this is one of the meanings of the expression "the underground man" that Augusto Meyer took from Dostoevsky to probe the deep relationship between Machado and his narrator and deceased author Brás Cubas. The latter, while an idle rich man, can widen to extremes of cynicism the

margins of freedom of that “detestable self” which the moralist’s eye had discovered in himself and in the heart of his fellow man. I build the other that is in me.

In *Dom Casmurro*’s case, the idea of author-narrator division involves another order of difficulties. The novel has its own logic: Bentinho is not a replica of Brás Cubas, it is necessary to reflect on the difference so as not to judge the narrator attending only to his class character.

Machado decided to reconstruct, deepen and nuance the internal story of the narrative voice, which renders a vacillating Bentinho, vulnerable, fearful, if not shy, since the beginning of his family relationships, impressionable to the extreme and, for a long time, in love with the girl of modest origin with whom he desires to get married and actually gets married enjoying a few years of marital bliss. It is a story of love, suspicion, jealousy, and desire for revenge, and not a chronicle of sensual affairs and satiety interspersed with cynical comments, like that of Brás Cubas. To ignore or disqualify the tone in which the drama is narrated, and to suppose that the author has all along forged a contemptibly cavalier narrator to whom all credit must be refused, is to push the dissociation hypothesis to problematic extremes.

As for the *Memorial de Aires*, I do not see that the author-narrator folding has been proposed; rather, criticism has enhanced the possibility that the Counselor is a variant very close to what is usually called Machado’s humor in the last phase.

*

Tone governs the inner melody of the fictional text. To apprehend it can be a good start, if the aim is comprehensive in the sense that the hermeneutic circle gives it. In *Dom Casmurro*, the tone is one of melancholy, which has a lot to do with frustrated *eros* as understood by the medieval and baroque moralists tying sensuality to sadness. Bento believes that he has been betrayed and, as such, he cannot tell the story of his passion as a teenager and young man without a hint of bitterness. In *Memórias Póstumas*, the tone of sarcasm prevails, a mental variant of the death instinct that lurks in every new passage. In *Memorial de Aires*, a minor tone of ironic complacency refines the counselor’s word, a figure in which the ideal *self* of the last Machado seems to be glimpsed.

The tone reveals the dominant feeling of a poem or novel¹⁴. We have seen how the narrator's look, which verges on satirical when it stops at the portrait that the convention has already formed, lights up with spicy curiosity when it captures the female image in its alliance of impetus and calculus, first and second nature converging on the social scene. On this scale, in which the lowest grade is the type, the grade that surpasses it (and presupposes it) is of the woman taken at the same time by desire and interest. Here mockery finds no place, since everything is a matter for the analyst's intellectual voluptuousness.

When the look discovers the person

Reality itself is vast, varied, full of contradictions; history creates and
rejects models.
Brecht

I wonder if that is all, if there is no other object for our indefatigable observer that is worthy of his contemplation. The search is not in vain. There are characters who would better be called people and who resist both their passions and the common temptation to climb the hierarchy of the environment in which they were given to live. The narrator's look also rises to these, and it is on them that his values are projected, soberly and firmly, hypothetically less precarious and friable. It is in them that a rare sense of dignity and a severe *ethos* of stoicism find ways to express themselves.

Before moving on to the necessarily scarce example of these exceptional figures, it is worth reflecting on the condition of their existence in Machado's work. They are possible insofar as the narrator's perspective is not *a priori* limited by the visor of an unconditionally destructive theory of the human being. For the rest, the absolute denial of values in the behavior of a similar would imply the existence of an equally absolute moral sense that would judge and condemn everything in the light of an extra-human ideal whose perfection would deny it even the attribute of existence in this sublunary world. This is clearly not the case with Machado de Assis, who only relativizes what commonly appears under the guise of

¹⁴ In a rare moment of Hegelian inspiration, Lukács gives the necessary emphasis to the *meaning of tone*: "Remember, for example, the intonation in music. It is nothing more than a concentrated compendium of the spiritual-sensitive content of the entire work, an enunciation that suggestively arouses that state of mind that allows access to the spiritual content of art — the affirmation of that attitude towards life, of that distance from life that is reflected by the work, whose sensitive and spiritual endurance constitutes in it the essence of the unity of the multiple, and thus reveals the only way to reach its ultimate meaning" (*Introdução a uma estética marxista*. Trans. by Carlos Nelson Coutinho and Leandro Konder, Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 1968, p. 279).

good or evil, true or false; in doing so, he neither affirms nor denies, with the peremptory air of dogmatists or nihilists. Because of this sense of the relative, which, in the history of Western culture, marks the crisis (but not the death) of romantic idealism, Machado was able to freely turn his eyes to the most varied forms of conduct. The novel is the reign of the possible: it includes not only the historically witnessable real but what could have happened or come to happen.

In the exercise of those who observe finely, but cautiously interpret, the narrator knows how to differentiate from within even the most homogeneous constellation of types, such as *agregados*. Let us read what he says about Cousin Justina; like José Dias, she lives in Dona Glória's house out of charity, but, unlike the flattering superlative, she had a dry and reserved nature: "I do not think she aspired to any legacy, people like that exceed natural services, they are more smiling, more assiduous, they multiply the care come before the servants. All this was contrary to Cousin Justina's nature, made up of bitterness and pettiness." Here the perception of peculiarity corrects, once again, the prejudice of the psychological uniformity of the social group. That is, for the narrator there are different types of *agregados*.

The final color of the page was not always the result of gray brush strokes spread over the gray and black. The dominant tone does not exclude nuances, indeed it assumes them. In this movement of attention to what is not the scheme of the ossified social, Machado ended up inventing figures of resistance.

It is instructive to note what Lúcia Miguel Pereira has already done with precision — the still romantic forge of the first of Machado's "heroines": she sacrifices herself for the sake of moral conscience in an environment where only prudent self-preservation would have a future. It is Helena, protagonist of the homonymous novel. Helena would rather die than be judged as an adventurer, that is, capable of concealing her affiliation and accepting the mistake of pretending to be the legitimate heiress of a wealthy counselor to the Empire. Helena will effectively die "from pride", such is the embarrassment that the situation, finally clarified, caused in her naive soul. And "naive faith" is the expression that Machado de Assis would use in the warning that he would precede the novel to recall the spirit with which he composed it "in that year of 1876".

But if we remember that *Helena* was written after *A Mão e a Luva*, a novel in which there is no place for romantic sacrifices, we will say that the alternative of the sassy and dignified creature in their modesty was still possible in Machado's imagination, even after

showing to be complacent with “the calculation and cold election of the spirit” of the other young protagonist.

In other words: the look of the first Machado was already mobile, rising from interest to disinterest and, afterwards, in *Iaiá Garcia*'s complex construction, it contemplates the opposing organizations of Iaiá and Estela, savvy competition and stoic exemption, both operating in the same family environment. Thus, within the same web of social relations, the bourgeois-paternalist context in Rio de Janeiro, is the difference that moves history.

In *Helena*, it is the being of exception that matters. In *The Hand and the Glove* the rule prevails. In *Iaiá Garcia* the exception and the rule interact.

Helena's outcome reaches the border that separates the possible from the unlikely. To say it is a romantic ending will be half true. The bottom line is to know what would mean, in the universe of Machado's fiction, a character who dies due to a moral crisis. A viable answer is one that grants the narrator some leeway in his invention; freedom that the grid of conventional common sense would deny him: the faculty of conceiving characters that are not reduced to the statistical average of men and women representing a certain type — for example, that of the poor girl who joins a rich family. Now, this resistance to the average social form is possible, in the process of fictional creation, insofar as ideal models of behavior act in the artist's memory, feeling and fantasy.

Ideal models insert values that took shape in both the immediate and distant past in situations of the present. The facts are urgent before the observer, but the values with which he penetrates and judges them persist and resist as long as they can, because they are not an automatic result of those same facts.

Telling things that happen here-and-now and evaluating them with ancient predicates or saying them with vivid images in the memory of culture is a common procedure in great literature. It is in Dante, Machiavelli, Rabelais, Montaigne, Swift, Sterne, Leopardi, Poe, Hugo, Baudelaire, Melville, Dostoevsky... and it would certainly not be new to the consummate man of letters that was Machado de Assis, as familiar to the classics as to the illustrated and the romantics.

Helena died of *shame* at the moment when, having revealed her origins, it would finally be possible for her to declare her love for Estácio, until then considered incestuous, and to receive the same confession from him. It would be a credible ending: pure affection and legitimate interest could be reconciled in the best style of nineteenth-century Brazilian paternalism. Some opposition could come from the most retrograde zeal for convenience; if these prevailed, it would be the triumph of the obscurantist side of that same society. But

that was not where the narrator guided its pathetic outcome. Helena denies “normal” expectations, that is, expectations of what would constitute the average of expected behaviors in her context. She does not have Guiomar or *láiá* Garcia’s stuff, who use the system to ascend in the system. Machado attributes to Helena an ideal of intimate nobility, atypical, therefore unpredictable, considering her “origin” and the equivocal situation in which she entered Councilor Vale’s family. Although an exceptional figure within that musty world, Helena will not be modern for this reason. The values that constitute her as a person do not place her at the front of her narrow circle, but above and, ideally, behind. At the top, because the narrator’s look here detaches itself from both the pure caricature and the profile of the energetic and calculating woman; and undertakes a gesture of sublimation whereby the person responds to the voice of the most demanding conscience instead of rushing to the satisfaction of their most grateful desires.

Now, the moral conscience, as Machado’s reader knows it, tends to immediately give in to the pressures of utility and promptly rationalizes its concessions. Its salient feature is precariousness. It is short-lived, changes quickly, and the narrator is fertile in inventing ingenious theories to explain such lability. However, Helena literally dies of a crisis of conscience, and whatever the ideal genesis of the narrator’s option (still Christian? stoic? Illuminist? romantic? illuminist-romantic?), the fact is that the girl’s detachment and her extreme scruples do not imitate the routine of the environment where her story takes place.

In Machado, the perception of the average social leads, in general, to level the behavior of his creatures, and in this he always retains some family air with the “realistic” vision of the human being, which is that of his time, where evolutionism is rooted in a radical pessimism about the moving of evolution itself. What can be inferred from the novel is that this social medium had within itself germs of violence that could, at the limit, lead to death, the individual who did not fully conform to its standard. But to lucidly see this secret nexus, it was necessary to have the claw of nonconformism, which marked the negativity of the Illuminist-Romantic *self* in the face of the hegemony of the utilitarian bourgeois. For the latter, the subject’s dignity is an empty rhetorical expression, an impertinent residue of obsolete values.

The critical eye of the writer penetrates his object and transcends it. The local configuration — in this case, the narrow sphere of the Rio de Janeiro bourgeoisie — would not have been represented as it was, with its limits and ailments, if the look that intuited it had not been worked by values that differed, in more than one aspect, from those reigning in that little observed world. The eye that only reflects is a mirror, but the look that probes

and scrutinizes is a focus of light. The look does not passively trace, but chooses, cuts and judges the figures of the social scene using criteria that are cultural and moral, and therefore saturated with memory and thought. The difference between the look-mirror and the look-focus is vital in shaping the perspective. In the first, we would have the narrative as a reflection of a reality already formed and outside consciousness. In the second, we have the narrative as an expressive process, a living form of intuitions and memories that apprehend states of soul provoked in the narrator by the experience of the real. For the reader of Machado de Assis, the problem is to assess the degree of detachment that the critical narrator (although, apparently, concessive) maintains in relation to each character and each situation. A narrator who, even when he seems to blame, seems to apologize, because he knows how imperative the sting of instinct or interest is. In any case, what confirms the generality of the rule are the exceptions; we will see how they behave.

In the process of sublimation the subject tenses up completely and rises above circumstances, not just reciting the ordinary roles, but forging their own destiny. Luís Garcia and, even more resolutely, Estela, are sober, stoic expressions of what the narrator calls *moral virility*, a model that implies an interior struggle and refusal to give in either to the empire of emotions or to the attraction of interest. “Apathy”, “immobile mask”, is how the narrator describes Luís Garcia’s impassive face. Nor is the inherence of an advanced capitalist norm that would engender (by hypothesis) the autonomy of the individual and the free choice of their future to be consummated in these rare figures. It would be problematic to place Luís and Estela ahead of the Brazilian coordinates of the mid-nineteenth century.

It seems more appropriate to recognize in their conduct the introjection of the value of *nobility*, dear to a central aspect of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Enlightenment (already proto-Romantic in Rousseau), which began to extend to the Third Estate certain millennia-long qualities attributed to the aristocracy, such as feeling of personal honor and the dignity of the subject.

This extension, in itself humanizing, did not mean, however, an open generalization of the so-called noble ethical values; and, in fact, it was done paying tribute to a stylization of customs and language that imitated, throughout the nineteenth century, some traits considered distinct from the Ancien Régime. The nineteenth-century European and Brazilian bourgeoisie reified everything that seemed to them a sign of *status*. Machado was no less sensitive than Alencar to the public form of these values, moreover not so discreet that they were not the object of general approval; on the contrary, he ennobled many of his characters with the refinement, the elegance, the straightness, the care, the grace and the composure of

the gesture, the donaire and the “lady look”, “an agreement of domestic virtues and elegant manners”, “in short, the politeness that obeyed the law of personal decorum, even in the smallest parts of it”... Dona Carmo, daughter of a watchmaker and married to a bookkeeper, “would have invented, if necessary, elegant poverty.”

Being noble would not depend, therefore, on the blood or status in which one is born (a manifestly progressive hypothesis), but on intimate qualities and very rare ethical dispositions in any time and place, which is, in turn, a presupposition of classical moralism when it attributes to human clay a universal selfishness. The apparent paradox of this pessimistic progressivism was already brewing in the critical discourse of the eighteenth century, when the rising illustrated bourgeoisie tempered their iconoclastic ardors with the indulgent skepticism of the most lucid nobility, who declined, conscious of the crisis that would forever shake their coats of blood and dirt. From this cultured bourgeois, anxious for the conquest of their own autonomy and the extinction of old prejudices, and from this nobleman, to whom only the cult of personal dignity was left, derived one of the ideal models of the romantic-liberal individual of the nineteenth century, noble and bourgeois together, despiser of the vulgar and potentates, ironic analyst of social masquerade, but a believer in the wisdom of their instincts and in the rationality of their interests.

Machado de Assis, born and raised amid Brazilian social asymmetries, so acute and persistent, and looking from the inside at the perversions that supported them, deepened the negative, skeptical, and critical vein of the Enlightenment and classical moral analysis rather than the confident vein of bourgeois individualism, which would find its better expression in the Spencerism of the last quarter of the century among us, as in a good part of the liberal culture of the West.

For the Machadian narrator, the values of purity and dignity still subsist and are part of what is noble in humankind, not maintaining a mechanical relationship with the economic condition of those who practice them (illustrative-romantic thesis, potentially democratic), but their achievement is exceptional, making use of individual differences at random and against the tide of the “vulgarity of the characters” (moralistic pessimism).

Note that, in the examples cited of noble attitudes, it is the conviction of one’s worth that shapes the posture. The opposite happens when the social look (opinion) takes precedence over the “inner soul”, subdues it and makes man disappear, as happens in the story of ensign Jacobina in “The Mirror”. This subtle but decisive opposition between the feeling of true honor and the interest in appearing as honorable is evident in the episode of the procession of the Blessed Sacrament in *Dom Casmurro*: Padua, who aspired to carry the

pallium cover, bitterly gnawed at the simple torch that they gave him, because he felt diminished in the eyes of others, while the confreres, who likewise only carried torches, “did not go gaudy, but neither did they go sad. *It was seen that they walked with honor?*” (emphasis added). If the latter were content with the intrinsic honor of accompanying the procession while dispensing with ostentatious honors, Capitu’s father and José Dias, on the contrary, absolutely wanted to display them as signs of primacy that would announce to everyone their position in the hierarchy of the ceremony. Machado brilliantly distinguishes the sense of honor, which ignores tinsel, and the “honorable” public appearance, which uses social asymmetries to reinforce them in terms of privilege. I am inclined to assume that this feeling of honor, which the Third Estate claimed for itself (contesting that it was the prerogative of the nobility of blood), does not, in Machado’s view, maintain relations of cause and effect with the economic class to which the subjects who experience it; hence its ethical value and the rarity of its occurrence, sparingly and randomly distributed among rich and poor, agregados and lords. Moralist parsimony that rhymes with the old Portuguese adage: “Honor and profit do not fit in a bag”.

A really new, democratic *ethos*, averse to old and new prejudices, bordering on anarchism, would only prevail in a few sectors (usually the most engaged and intellectualized) of rebellious ideological contexts — in post-Victorian England, in interwar France, in the Weimar Republic or in Russia on the eve of the October Revolution... This will not, of course, be the contrastive reference point that it is worth making when dealing with internal differences in behavior in our conservative environment, *the only one that Machado always kept under his aim*¹⁵.

¹⁵ In this environment, and from the middle of the century, speculators and bankers only represented the financial links of our agrocommercial complex. The ideology of this reduced urban fauna was not structurally opposed to that of the farmers with which it interacted. And what the narrator allows us to glimpse when he makes Cristiano Palha, “the drone of the square”, future banker and aspiring to the barony, curse the initiative of D. Pedro II who, in 1867, “introduced in the speech of the throne a word related to servile property” (*Quincas Borba*). Raymundo Faoro analyzed in detail this mixture of financial scams, stock exchange games, maintenance of the slave regime and petty cleverness in the family and professional spheres. Let us read the study by the essayist of the characters Procópio Dias, Cotrim, Palha, Santos and Nóbrega, in an arc that goes from *Yaya Garcia* to *Esau and Jacob*. In all, money is a fertilizer of conservatism, sometimes hypocritical, sometimes cynical: which reinforces the hypothesis of the locked correlation that agrocommercial capitalism, slavery and paternalism maintained among themselves, formations all stitched together by a class that needed economic liberalism (for its integration in the international market) and, in a restricted way, constitutional liberalism to guarantee its representation in the Chambers and the Ministry. In other words: our imperial bourgeoisie could not exercise its power outside the framework of the old utilitarian liberalism. Money and progressivism are not synonymous.

In any case, the inner face, the subjective side of that extra-patrimonial and non-hereditary ennoblement, was still an achievement that the progressive romantics had inherited from the eighteenth century; and it is likely that these long-lasting ideal models operated in the consciousness of the Machadian narrator, especially when it came to separating the wheat from the chaff, the person from the type.

Incorporating, with due sobriety, the ideals of detachment and purity of conscience to the immanence of our shy bourgeois relations, certainly prior to the invention of the steam engine, Machado made a model resistant to the conformism of the utilitarian ideology penetrate into the fabric of his novel. And here Bertolt Brecht's frank word is valid, replying to Lukács' dogmatism: "It is not the idea of narrowness, but of amplitude that befits realism. Reality itself is vast, varied, full of contradictions; history creates and rejects models"¹⁶.

If we go from Helena to Estela, we come across an equally dignified and stoic character, but without a tragic aura. Helena dies "of pride", which makes one suspect that, for her creator, the paternalistic family had in itself vexatious components, as it forced dependents sometimes to pretend, sometimes to hide; otherwise, they would perish. This is one of the most elusive and disquieting features of Machado's physiognomy: his look shifts from apparently conformist, or conventional, to critical, without letting the concessive tone show any impulse of indignation. Corrosive humor, a feeling of contrasts (according to Pirandello's definition), would explore this ambivalence of value judgments in mature works, giving it a certain tonal unity; in any case, as a stylistic register, the humor would not be perfectly composed before *Memórias Póstumas*. Only from these will the first-person narrator wear, undress, re-dress and undress with ease the very masks of virtue and reason, with such lability that the reader will be able to see sometimes the mask, sometimes the crack through which the humorist's eyes shine with malice. But an underground unit of tone, that "bitter and harsh feeling" to which the author refers in the prologue, will shape and mediate the mobility of his look: that is why the final balance will be negative. Lability is not synonymous with atonality.

In our author, condescending irony and melancholy humor are tonal mediations of an alert mind that does not surrender; when he seems to do so, it is only conceivably, insofar as he recognizes the rule of interests and the related urge to save face.

¹⁶ Bertolt Brecht, "Amplitude and variety of the realistic way of writing" first published in *Das Wort*, Moscow, 1938. Brecht's text exposes the unilateral content of the concept of realism proposed, at that time, by Lukács. There is a Brazilian translation made by Marcus Vinicius Mazzari (*Estudos Avançados*, n. 34, dec. 1998)

The mobility, which reveals and hides, accuses and attenuates, was evidently smaller and tended to zero when the narrator still preferred to weld together appearance and feeling, public attitude and conscience. In *laiá Garcia*, Estela's virtue is cohesive and unshakable, dictated by a confessed sense of pride that will not yield to any lure of cooptation. Her dignity not only exempts her from any self-serving slip but also makes her refractory to the slightest act of contempt committed against those below her on the social scale. Significant of her nobility (which does not come from her blood or wealth, but from her conscience) is the episode in which the rich young man Jorge whispers in her ear, mocking words of a worker's pronunciation: Estela "meanwhile closed her gesture to the epigrams". It is worth remembering that Estela's father, agregado of Jorge's family, is described as the opposite of her daughter's nature, which renders one of the most typical and cloying flatterers in Machado's work: "Estela was the vivid contrast of her father, she had the soul above destiny".

The differentiation occurs within *the scope of the same regime of dependencies* and reveals the narrator's ability to shift his attention from one to another level of the moral scale. The important thing is to note not only the disparity of observable objects (one is typical, the other is atypical) as that contiguity of conformism and refusal, concession and negativity that makes Machado's perspective a seesaw: the observation of typical and predictable behavior descends to the side of social gravity; the ethical judgment rises to the side of resistance. This judgment is explicit, for example, in Estela's haughtiness, to whom the "network idea" was repugnant, or in Eugenia's firmness, the bush flower, "upright, cold and silent"¹⁷.

The Old House recreates, in a superior way, the figure of the poor girl, aware of her condition as "agregadinha" [little dependant], but jealous of her moral independence. The construction of the character Lalau is complex. Although stuck in *Helena's* somewhat feuilleton-like scheme (the union with the beloved man is impeded by the revelation of an incest which, in the end, proves to be false), the young woman has Estela's energetic and stoic fiber. Instead of succumbing to a fate of humiliation, Lalau brings with her a haughty feeling of shame that will make her refuse marriage to her protector's son and, reversing Guiomar's self-serving solution, will lead her to prefer a modest union with the son of a servant from the Old House. The girl's pride, which she herself calls "shame", is the driving force responsible for the original outcome of the novel¹⁸.

¹⁷ "The perfectly asymmetrical economic and social condition never alters the dignity of Eugenia, who works as a counterpoint to the narrator" (Gilberto Pinheiro Passos. *A poética do legado*. São Paulo, Annablume, 1996, p. 56).

¹⁸ The narrative focus of *Casa Velha* is also original. The one telling the story is a priest who

Would Lalau's attitude announce the objective passage from the patriarchal regime, old as the house that shelters it, to another economy of interpersonal relationships? We have no historical evidence to support this. The novel takes place in 1839, the year in which, under the regency of Araújo Lima, the conservatives held the reins of economic power, which they would not let go of so soon. The majority of Pedro II would be reached in the next year by a coup of conjuncture of some liberals put on the sidelines by Regression; which certainly did not alter the nation's social structure. On the contrary, Father Feijó's republican ideals would no longer prevail. The Second Empire, based on slavery and on the trade of primary goods, would maintain for many years the base structure inherited from the colony, with the eventual corrections required by English imperialism. As for the political game, the middle of the century saw the pact of conciliation between the two parties, the Liberal and the Conservative.

frequents the house in order to research documents from the First Brazilian Empire kept in the library. Unwillingly getting involved in the family's drama, the priest sublimates his fondness for the young dependant by trying to help her marry the house owner's son, Félix. Committing himself in favor of the couple, the priest contradicts the prejudices of the boy's mother, Dona Antônia. It is curious to see how Machado, who, in general, paints conventional portraits of the clergy of the time (made up of conciliatory priests and adjusted to the patriarchal routine), engendered, in this narrator from *Casa Velha*, a lucid Christian conscience, capable of opposing the odious pride of Dona Antônia to the evangelical morality of fraternity. I transcribe some steps of the dialogue between the stiff and wannabe-noble matron (how different, as a personality, from Bentinho's mother!) and our liberal canon:

(Dona Antônia) — “Really, I don't know what ideas have taken hold since '31. Father Feijó is responsible. It's a conspiracy of priests. Do you want to know why they can't marry? Because they can't. I do not deny what you say about her; she is a very good girl, I gave her the best education I could, perhaps better than I should have, but anyway, she has been well brought up and is ready to make a man happy. What else does her future hold? We do not live in a fairy-tale world, Your Reverence. My son is my son, and in addition to that, that is reason enough, he needs a connection with a good family. This is not a tale of princess who marry peasant girls, or of princesses who are bewitched. Be kind enough to tell me how I would give the news of such a marriage to our relatives in Minas and in São Paulo?”

(The priest-narrator) — “You may well be right, ma'am. It is a conspiracy of priests; a conspiracy of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born in a stable...”

A little later, when he sees Dona Antônia passing by an image of Our Lady crowned with gold, the priest reflects on the difference in feelings that separates him from the owner of the Old House: “The Virgin queen, crowned and triumphant, was for her the legitimate catholic deity, not the Virgin in flight, collapsed on the floor of a stable.

An unprejudiced study has yet to be made of the diverse images with which the agnostic Machado represents the multiple faces of the religious man; a careful eye will certainly not allow the narrator canon of *Casa Velha* to get caught up in the thick meshes of the ideological reduction that hinders the fair perception of the singular figures.

The relationships of social asymmetry and the tricks of prejudice that Machado captured in this 1839 story reappear in novels and short stories that take place twenty, thirty or forty years later. What could vary, and which the writer's sensibility would be able to record precisely, were *the moral reactions to asymmetry*; reactions arranged on a scale ranging from typical, heavily typical, to differentiated; from the human play that reproduces the mechanisms of the system to the personal conscience that refuses to do so. From Guimar to laiá Garcia and from these to Helena, Estela, Lalau.

But, the novel is the place where the two narrative models intersect, the conventional realist and the resistant or stoic realist. The intersection thickens up to the limit of the enigma, the author's sense of look, which is always a problem and always requires an interpretation. Pascal, a Jansenist, and the skeptical moralists of the seventeenth century, such as La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère, also admitted, when elaborating their ethical phenomenology, the existence of rare souls that resist themselves and the "world" (by grace or by intimate pride), alongside the absolute majority that sags under the weight of the common condition of mortals made up of selfishness with all its sequel of trickery and villainy.

The fact that the former interact with the latter in the same society and even in the same family circle gives Machado's realism a breadth and a diversity of psychological modulations that any unitary and sharp definition of his perspective becomes problematic. Perhaps it is feasible to say that Machado's universalizing aim, so acute in the exercise of laying bare the "moi haïssable", manages to dialectically overcome (while preserving the outdated matter at another level) the great typological schemes by which there would only be two characters on stage: Brazilian paternalism and European liberalism. These abstract and necessary figures of understanding are insufficient to capture the concrete richness of fictional individuals.

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A digression: the liberalism of the rich and the *caiporismo* of the poor

For the philosophy of praxis, ideologies are by no means arbitrary; ideologies are real historical facts that must be fought and unveiled in their nature as instruments of domination.
Gramsci, *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*

The ideology of open capitalist competition and the *self-made man* would, in fact, be so foreign to the world of poverty observed by the first Machado, which on being alleged by the young and wealthy Estácio (in *Helena*), is promptly disqualified by his interlocutor, who appears as a valid, sagacious, but almost indigent man:

(Estácio) — [...] I believe that a strong, young and intelligent man does not have the right to fall into penury.

(Salvador) — Your observation, said the house owner smiling, brings the taste of the chocolate that you drank naturally this morning before leaving the house. I assume you're rich. In affluence it is impossible to understand the struggles of misery, and the maxim that every man can, with effort, reach the same brilliant result, will always seem a great truth to the person carving a turkey [...].

In other words: liberalism that rewards merit is a rich man's argument. It was invented by him and for him, serving fully as his defense and self-praise. But just for him. The poor man is not going to rely on this philosophy which, in the end, belittles him while it presumes to explain the logic of his situation.

"In the things of this world," continues Salvador, "a man is not as free as he supposes, and something they call fate, which we christen with the genuine Brazilian name of *caiporismo*, prevents some people from seeing the fruits of their Herculean efforts".

Economic liberalism worked very well, thickly and compactly, as an ideology and a good conscience, for the heirs of the oligarchies victorious with Independence and consolidated by the preservation of slavery. Its lasting success had created in conservative elites the certainty of its necessity and the pretense of its moral validity. But, for others, there would remain the resource to the popular and traditional notion of destiny, bad fate or "caiporismo": a notion that removes the very cause of poverty from the immanence of capital and labor. This is still a pained, and only apparently irrational, response to the pseudo-rationality (that is, to the *partiality*) of liberal discourse.

Salvador's speech suggests that liberalism, as a doctrine of the enterprising man and therefore successful, had its place sanctioned in the stomach and mouth of the *beati possidentes*: it was their morning chocolate, their turkey, their maxims of great truth. But, although we believe that the current ideology is the ideology of the ruling classes, we find that the unilateral character, thus tending to be unfair, of its "explanation" of the social whole ends up, sooner or later, facing evidence that wears it down and provokes protesting discourses, well or poorly articulated, but, in any case, wholesomely inconvenient.

The rich liberal's interlocutor is Salvador, Helena's father, who hides his own identity. He wants his daughter to have a better "fate" than his own at Counselor Vale's house and, to that end, sacrifices his paternity rights. All of his pride is in persevering in this option of renunciation.

In the novel, which has traces of Rousseauist paleo-romanticism, Helena's dignity, denying the shame of being judged by the owners of the favor, receives the positive name of *pride*. The dignity of Salvador, her father, is called *moral necessity*. Both expressions refer directly to the feeling and idea of *personal honor*, whose internal dynamism refuses to the maneuvers of utilitarian reason.

Note that the patrimonial convention had been initially maintained by the Counselor's will, recognizing Helena as a legitimate daughter, with the full connivance of the natural father and the acceptance, albeit reluctant, of the girl; but all this paternalistic framework ends up being relativized as a source of authentic value: "Gold is what gold is worth", says Salvador. "She inherited her father's pride!" — murmured Estacio when he saw Helena preferring to give up everything to the shame of appearing calculating precisely at the moment when circumstances would favor her.

Pride, dignity, stoic disinterest: other names to say the painful nobility of the poor. But still nothing to do with the liberalism peculiar to the future industrial society.

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"There is something superior to opportunity in them"

Helena inherited her father's pride. Estela was her father's stark contrast, for "she had her soul above destiny." Dona Carmo and her husband evoked in Counselor Aires this judgment: "There is something superior to opportunity in them."

Above destiny, superior to opportunity: here we have a new movement of eyes that lift themselves away from the "vulgarity of characters" that formed the cultural broth of Brás

Cubas and would surround poor Rubião in his brief passage through fortune. These are rare expressions, which, through the force of contrast, illuminate an angle of the possible reality, leaving in shadow the typical areas of the convention, lower areas that Machado knew well, long and wide.

In the chapter on moral opposites I have always loved the episode of *Quincas Borba* in which Sofia and her friend Dona Fernanda pay a visit to the little house on Rua do Príncipe, abandoned by Rubião and only inhabited by a servant and the dog Quincas Borba covered with fleas and missing the owner.

Sofia, we already know her, is far from being a noble character, but she belongs to that interesting gallery of strong and seductive women that Machado described with sensual admiration. As for Dona Fernanda, a secondary character, a rich lady like Palha's wife, "she possessed, on a large scale, the quality of sympathy; she loved the weak and the sad, because of the need to make them bold and brave. Many acts of piety and dedication were told of her" (ch. 118). Of these acts, one deserves reflection, because it is unusual in the barren soil of humanity seen by Machado.

The fact is that Rubião had been taken to a sanatorium at Dona Fernanda's insistence. Palha, who had already explored the naïve yokel a lot, considered "a nuisance of all the devils" to provide treatment to the ex-partner who had gone crazy. Sofia would think the same, but "Dona Fernanda's compassion had impressed her a lot; she found her something distinguished and noble, and warned that if the other woman, without close or old relations with Rubião, showed interest in this way, it was not good manners to be less generous".

The narrator here gives us a clue to illuminate the labyrinth of his value patterns. Helping the fallen Rubião was, as Palha said, a "nuisance". The man's near indigence had been the work of the trickery of the very Palha who had had him as a partner for as long as it suited him. Sofia, in turn, had practiced an ambiguous relationship, full of compliments and ruses with the rich man of Barbacena who had brought her words of adoration and high-priced jewels; but Rubião's inconveniences frightened her enough that she wanted to see him gone and as soon as possible.

A situation was set, in which the Palha couple's dishonesty, on the verge of climbing to the top of the bourgeois scale, had all the strength to remove that witness from their home and their lives, all the more disturbing the more he had served as a deceived partner in their excused ascent. But it so happens that Dona Fernanda, in her sympathy for the weak, became interested in the fate of the poor devil. So, what to do? Hypocrisy, said La Rochefoucauld, is

the tribute vice pays to virtue. Historicizing: the bourgeoisie cannot be completely cynical, as long as some components of an ideal model of conduct — that have been attributed for centuries to a Estate too high to use base expedients — prevail on the scene of public morality. But at that time (we are around 1870), the native nobility was disappearing everywhere, or almost, from the expanding capitalist scene. What remained were the “noble attitudes”, the “noble gestures” and the “*noblesse oblige*”, which the upstart and conservative bourgeois supposed were exclusive to those on top, who would be “superior” to the vulgar, because, after all, they can be so.

We see, however, that this is not the narrator’s conviction when dealing with Dona Fernanda, who acted benevolently towards Rubião because “she possessed, on a large scale, the qualities of sympathy”; which is a notation that pays attention to the character’s uniqueness and not to her class position.

Sofia, in turn, needs to appear “good manners” with her prestigious friend, wife of a deputy, almost-minister and future president of the province. As a nouveau riche, Sofia cannot publicly discard certain forms of behavior, even for herself, she considers them “romantic” and “affected”, therefore belonging to an already obsolete culture.

Machado’s look sees here the social action of the noble ethical model being exercised only at the time when it is opportune for the new rich to put on the mask of distinction. In the case of Helena and Estela, on the contrary, the author’s gaze recognized the inner dignity, the introjection of an ideal model that was demanding even to the point of Puritanism, and which operated at the same time within and against the expectations of the paternalistic milieu. In Estela’s judgement, there is a notable discrepancy between the narrative focus, which asserts the girl’s real haughtiness (“the very idea of network disgusts her”) and the degrading (typological) appreciation of her by her frustrated gallant, Jorge: seeing that his advances were not reciprocated by the *agregada*, the young man does not contain himself and insults her: “You sly!” Here speaks the type that only sees the type in the other: Estela’s virtue, as a dependent person, could not be, for him, a sign of true and intimate nobility; it would be just a mask, a typical form of hypocrisy. Once again it can be seen that the procedure of social classification covers an area of broad but partial cognitive validity: it holds insofar as the narrator looks at the other from *below*. When a character does it, the narrator knows how to find (if this is his project) ways and means to compensate for the degraded vision with one that does justice to the complexity of the individual who has been prejudged: then from the type emerges the person.

Let us go back to *Quincas Borba*. Rubião, hospitalized for treatment, had expressed the desire to have his dog, Quincas Borba, with him, who had been under the care of a servant at the little house on Rua do Príncipe. Dona Fernanda was willing to comply with the patient's request and sought out Sofia so that they could take some action together. From there, the narrator begins to draw the differences in behavior of the two rich ladies of our imperial bourgeoisie:

"I'm going to ask someone to take care of it," says Sofia.

"Let's go ourselves. What's the matter?" proposes Dona Fernanda.

Sofia, who owed so much to Barbacena's former rich now wants to dodge the work of fulfilling that modest wish in person: "I'm going to ask someone to take care of it." Dona Fernanda, who has seen him a few times, makes an effort to go and invites her friend ("Let's go ourselves"), putting a stop to any eventual reluctance on the part of Sofia with the question: "What's the matter?"

They went on foot. The house smelled musty; the dust of sloppiness permeated everything, the floor and the furniture. Sofia's reactions range from annoyance ("Nonsense!" she thought, and "to herself she found her companion singularly romantic or affected") to disgust: "she was dying to escape 'that filth', she told herself".

Machado deeply analyzes the feeling of total exteriority that the house and its rubbish caused in Sofia: "The triviality of it all meant nothing to her mind or heart, and the memory of the alienated person did not help her withstand the time." They had gone there to find out about the dog, and it would have been natural for Sofia to ask the servant about him, "but did not want to show interest in him or the rest".

Sofia would like to act with Rubião and his dog in the same way that she had been systematically doing with her poor relatives and old childhood friends: treating them with enough coldness to push them away for once and for all from her life. But Dona Fernanda was there, close to her, and Sofia could not "disturb the approving smile with which she responded to all the observations" of that so annoyingly human lady.

Now, let us pay attention to the narrator's view of Dona Fernanda's feelings:

Without any personal memory coming to her from that miserable stay, she felt trapped in a particular and profound commotion, not the one that brings about the ruin of things. That spectacle did not bring her a theme of general reflections, it did not teach her the fragility of the times, nor the sadness of the world, it only told her

the illness of a man, a man she barely knew, to whom she had spoken a few times. And she would stay and look, without thinking, without deducing, stuck in herself, pained and dumb.

The contiguity of physical space (both are in the same dusty room) and social spaces (both are society ladies who met in a charity committee) does not bring them together, from the inside. And, on the contrary, the discontinuity, the distance, the existential antagonism that the narrator intends to mark incisively. Dona Fernanda is moved to the bottom of her soul as if the image of the poor man, absent from that house where everything speaks of lack and abandonment, hurt her. Sofia feels bored, all of it is the opacity of the body, irritated by the discomfort of the dust, the mustiness, the fleas, the ugly and annoying poverty. Sofia's outer soul, which was bourgeois luxury and the splendor of the mansion she and her husband were building in Botafogo (who knows with how many *contos de réis* taken from the naive Rubião), the outer soul of the beautiful Sofia had been as if subtracted, grudgingly, from her sight and her reach, and all was reduced to a dark and dingy room, "that filth" from which she "was dying to run away." But Sofia was not alone. At her side, she saw Dona Fernanda, who was also part of that outer soul of hers, as she was a lady of enviable *status*; therefore, "Sofia dared not say anything, for fear of being displeasing to such a conspicuous lady".

In this physical and social coexistence of women who are so opposed to each other, the force of opinion, that the *external soul* is the recurrent image in Machado, demands that the bourgeois type publicly repress the extreme degree of its reification; but repression only, out of fear and not out of sublimation; for fear of not seeming to live up to the standard of ideal behavior that is considered noble, as long as it is practiced by someone endowed with possessions and high position, like this Dona Fernanda, "such a conspicuous lady". Everything from the rich is imitated, even the eccentricity of virtue.

Let us see and admire the breadth of Machado's look. Sofia's gestures of impatience and disgust, only contained by the weight of convenience, are, in any case, predictable. Less trivial, but no less realistic, is the insistence with which our narrator turns his eyes to Dona Fernanda's eyes and contemplates them for a long time in the brief moment when the lady and the dog look at each other. The beauty of the passage calls for transcription:

Dona Fernanda scratched the animal's head. It was the first caress after long days of loneliness and contempt. When Dona Fernanda stopped caressing him, and lifted her body, he stood looking at her,

and she at him, so fixed and so deep that they seemed to penetrate each other's intimacy. The universal sympathy, which was the soul of this lady, forgot all human consideration in the face of that obscuring and prosaic misery, and extended to the animal a part of herself, which enveloped him, which fascinated him, which tied him at her feet. So, the pity that the master's delirium gave her now the dog himself gave her, as if they both represented the same species. And feeling that her presence made the animal feel good, she did not want to deprive him of the benefit.

— You're getting full of fleas, Sofia observed.

D. Fernanda did not listen to her. She continued to stare at the animal's sweet and sad eyes, until he dropped his head and began to sniff the room.

Here, the narrator seems willing to guide the reader to the threshold of meaning, offering them the key to interpretation. The compassionate woman and the abandoned dog look at each other; and this reciprocity was made possible because the suffering of the animal, of the "same species" as that of his master, Rubião (taken over by dementia as his first owner, Quincas Borba), aroused in Dona Fernanda a movement of universal sympathy. I remember that the existence of pain in all beings in this world appeared in the delirium of Brás Cubas as a fatality without consolation or remission, since the brute indifference of Nature was prolonged in the rawness of the history of men in society. In the same harsh allegorical regime, *Humanitas*, object of Quincas Borba's philosophy, only wants to survive and reproduce, killing and devouring for food, blindly ignoring the vanquished and finally distributing potatoes to the winners of an eternal *struggle for life*. But in this rare scene, the despondency of the defeated, man or dog, is not lost in the emptiness of the absurd and nothing: it engenders a look of compassion, a word that literally translates *sympatheia*. It is possible that the author has drunk the source of this intuition of existence from Schopenhauer's doctrine, according to which the essence of life consists of pain, and the only ethical response to the universality of suffering will be pity¹⁹.

¹⁹ See Schopenhauer's *On the Basis of Morality*, originally published in 1841. The topic of animal compassion, which is central to the thinker's "foundation of ethics" is found in §7 of the 3rd part of the work. There is a Brazilian edition translated by Maria Lúcia Cacciola (São Paulo, Martins Fontes, 1995).

When the episode is over, the narrator lowers his eyes again and follows the waving of Sofia who gives Dona Fernanda her arm and continues to act out, as naturally as ever, her necessary comedy, a second nature that we already know as legitimate and imperious as the first, and which so often forms with this a solid unity:

They left. Sofia, before stepping out onto the street, looked from one side to the other, looking to see if anyone was coming; luckily, the street was deserted. When she got rid of the pigsty, Sofia regained the use of good words, the tender and delicate art of capturing others, and lovingly linked her arm through Dona Fernanda's. She told her about Rubião and the great disgrace of madness; as well as the mansion in Botafogo. Why didn't she go with her to see the works? It was just a little snack, and they would leave immediately.

Rereading this and other steps in the novel, one understands why Machado refused the advice, which an "illustrious confrere" gave him, to continue the pair *Memórias Póstumas-Quincas Borba* and compose a volume that would deepen the study of Sofia's character: "Sofia is all here", explained the author in the prologue to the third edition of *Quincas Borba*.

It really was not necessary. There are characters that seem to exhaust themselves in reiterating their words and attitudes; it is enough to watch them carefully for a while, and you have the key to their behavior. Hence, the temptation to classify them as types, which will be all or almost all of their truth. And there are characters who, under the inescapable appearance of their social physiognomy, can surprise us with their own movements of an interior freedom that contradicts the expectations of their environment. Machado's look, contemplating both, is not Manichean: it neither condemns the former nor exalts the latter as the passionate idealism of the Romantics had done. It admits the difference and relativizes value judgments. "I like the mouse, I do not dislike the cat", says the narrator of *Dom Casmurro*.

But this constant exercise of attenuating and compensating does not take him to the zero degree of moral indifference, as a programmed nihilistic reading, more Machadian than Machado himself, might suppose. Helena is the antithesis of Guiomar; Lalau turns her back on the favor; Estela is the opposite of her father, she resists Jorge, herself, and differs from laiá Garcia. Eugenia, the bush flower, has a haughty character that Brás Cubas' lovers, rich

or poor, lack. Sofia is the opposite of Dona Fernanda. Capitu was Capitu... Pedro and Paulo, twins, fight for opposing ideas and were already fighting in their mother's womb. Flora, dream figure and airy enigma, looks like no one, indecisive and inexplicable in Aires' words. And in a context of maximum attenuation of the contrasts, Dona Carmo and Aguiar bring in their hearts a pure and delicate affection and an unwrinkled sincerity that subtly separates them from the rising young people, the "political" godson Tristão and the widow Fidelia, more faithful in the name than in mourning. The loneliness of the old couple, reversal orphans of their foster children, will not, however, be absolute: they had each other and "the longing for themselves consoled them".

In *Memorial*, differences tend to lose their edges, as it is the look of Counselor Aires that observes and judges them, making up for some moral repair with the proper diplomatic concession. This final look comes from *Esau and Jacob*, a novel in which dualities coexist, and a stable ambivalence that neutralizes tensions prevails. In any case, tensions exist and arise from the interaction of different characters that dance, sometimes together, sometimes not, the same dance where it is up to the reader to discern in each extra character what is a mask and what is the true face.

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