THE MASK AND THE BREACH

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Abstract This article examines narrative techniques and thematic concerns in Machado de Assis's short stories, focusing on his portrayal of human behavior and social dynamics in 19th-century Brazil. It analyzes Machado's use of masks, deception, and social conventions as central motifs, highlighting the tension between individual desires and societal expectations. The author explores key stories such as "The Mirror," "Admiral's Night," and "Father Against Mother," demonstrating how Machado's characters navigate asymmetrical relationships and moral dilemmas. He argues that Machado's work combines fatalistic ideology with counter-ideological critique, employing humor and irony to expose the contradictions of bourgeois society. It reveals Machado's nuanced perspective on human nature and social institutions, presenting him as a writer who illuminates the complexities of the human condition through his enigmatic narrative style.
Keywords Machado de Assis, Mask, Appearance, Social relationships, Short stories

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Originally written as an introduction to a collection of short stories by Machado de Assis published in Caracas in 1978, the following essay proposes a rather chronological reading of Machado de Assis' short stories. Alfredo Bosi's analyses capture basic elements and evolutionary lines of Machado's short stories, from *Contos Fluminenses* [Rio Tales, 1870] to *Relíquias da Casa Velha* [Reliques from an Old House, 1906]. Furthermore, Bosi establishes productive connections between the short narratives and the novels that the author published throughout his career, from *A Mão e a Luva* [*The Hand and the Glove*, 1874] to *Aire's Memorial* [*Counselor Ayres' Memorial*, 1908]. English speaking readers, who may be less familiar with Machado's literary work, will significantly benefit from the comprehensive and

illuminating study by the Brazilian professor and literary critic. In his studies on Machado de Assis, Alfredo Bosi sought a compromise between a philosophical, universalist perspective and the nineteenth-century Brazil's local and historical realities.

Within this framework, Bosi understands that Machado's fictional prose, initially meeting many of the stylistic and ideological conventions of Romanticism, reveals from early on, beginning in the 1870s, tones, shades and ideological perspectives that announce —and transcend— an orthodox realistic aesthetic.

"The Mask and the Breach" is organized around the literary treatment given to certain key notions that, changing over the years, progressively free themselves from a moralizing bias and reveal the author's disillusioned gaze and gradually impregnate his work with "the pen of mirth and the ink of melancholy," according to the narrator in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. The critic begins with social considerations —bourgeois reason, utilitarian morality— to understand the set of individual aspirations and collective values that govern the interactions between the characters. One of the fundamental notions of the essay is the *asymmetry* of human and social relations in Brazil in the second half of the nineteenth century. The *mask,* another guiding concept of the study, is the tool that allows the individual to navigate the social landscape. They try to reverse situations of unevenness and impotence through the dissimulation of their intentions and interests and their adherence, frank or cynical, to societal expectations. Bosi demonstrates that asymmetrical relationships permeate Machado's short stories and novels and bring to light the postures and tactics that, on the one hand, favor survival and allow the triumph of material aspirations and, on the other hand, usually charge a high price on the existential realm: the connivance with perversity and the instability that stems from collective hypocrisy and self-centered, calculating attitude. Ultimately, the annihilation of subjectivity may occur, as demonstrated by the analyzes of *O alienista* [The Alienist, 1882] and the short story "O espelho" [The Mirror], in which the attachment to conventions taken to extremes deconstructs the personality and shatters the self.

Bosi proposes that in Machado's first narratives, the plots' driving force is *material deprivation* and the corresponding desire for social ascension. According to his formulation, in these texts, "the shell is idyllic, the core is bourgeois-realist." Relationships of love and patronage between characters from different social classes would be articulated to economic needs and interests, opening a gap for betrayal and ingratitude to infiltrate social exchanges. In the first collections of short stories and novels like *The Hand and the Glove* the narrator

adopts a conventional perspective, in which the calculating and selfish characters are somehow censored and demoted. However, as stated by Bosi, Machado's narrators gradually begin to insinuate that cynicism and dissimulation are expressions of a society that requires everyone, but especially the most vulnerable, to conform to bourgeois customs and conventions.

Hence, Bosi unpacks the metaphor of the *mask* which, used in the title of the essay, translates both social expectations and individual desires, being at the same time imposed and voluntarily incorporated.

At a certain point in the essay, even if presented with reservations, Bosi proposes a genesis of the topic of *masking* in Machado. He subscribes to literary studies based on biographical elements —such as that by Lúcia Miguel Pereira. Pereira would have detected the "existential wound of the Machado man," writes our essayist. He underlines that Machado de Assis went through the experience of ascending socially from a situation of poverty and later engaged himself with prestigious institutions and with the literary and intellectual life of Rio de Janeiro —quite elitist, lest we forget. Bosi concludes that Machado probably understood too well both the social utility of the mask and the subject's deference to the conventions that allowed non-white and underprivileged people like himself to pass through the *breach* between social classes.

In this passage through the social breach, the desire or fantasy of success requires the admiration of others: the essay reveals, through incisive comments about several Machadean tales, how the use of social masks only works well for the individual when it fulfills the desire for recognition or "a thirst for fame," to quote another brilliant formulation by Machado in *The Posthumous Memoirs*.

Persona, which in Latin means *mask*, is also the root of the word *person*. The double meaning of this Latin term, which suggests the ambiguity between *seeming* and *being*, coincides with Bosi's conclusions about indeterminacy, especially in Machado de Assis' mature work, between the fake and the authentic, between what responds to the demands from outside and what, simultaneously, emanates from the subject. Continuously interacting and self-feeding, those poles converge despite their contradictions, to the point that the mask, while still being a strategy, becomes inseparable from the self. Bosi explains the idea through a figure: "[The] terrorist who pretends to be a diplomat. One has to look at the mask and the deep in the eyes that the cut on the mask sometimes allows us to see." The metaphor of the diplomat-terrorist or terrorist-diplomat reappears in another of his essays, "The Enigma of

the Look," in which the critic also takes up the idea proposed in "The Mask and the Breach" that the conventions of the social arena would function as second nature to the body: interests and competition promoted by bourgeois capitalist society are understood as a manifestation of instincts. For Bosi, Machado's originality compared to other writers of his time lies in merging the two natures to compose his characters, failing to believe, in his later writings, that there is a clear hierarchy between essence and appearance.

"The Mask and the Breach" clearly exposes the approach that Alfredo Bosi, dealing with Machado de Assis and other authors and themes, developed and defended throughout his career as a literary critic. Establishing in his essays a dialogue with literary studies and ideological points of view that diverge from what he proposed, Bosi formulated an analytical practice committed to, on the one hand, a sociological understanding of a universalist nature (the human society) and, on the other, the interest in the philosophical and moral configuration of the characters.

THE MASK AND THE BREACH[1]

In memory of Lúcia Miguel-Pereira[2]

Machado de Assis wrote some two hundred short stories. Among them, I believe, some of the best written in Portuguese, along with more than a few bogged down in the urban Romanticism of the 19th century.

Those who put together anthologies[3] prefer to exclude much of the latter, stories that undoubtedly carry less aesthetic impact. That said, the critic cannot gloss over the fact that Machado was also a writer given to the stylings of the popular periodicals of the time—particularly in the 1860s and 70s. As a young writer of short stories, he operated within the

[1] Translator's note: This is a section of Alfredo Bosi's book, *Machado de Assis: o enigma do olhar* (*Machado de Assis: The Enigma of Gaze*). 4th. ed., São Paulo, Martins Fontes, 2007, pp. 75-125. For other versions of this essay, see *Machado de Assis:* o *enigma do olhar*. São Paulo, Ática, 2000 and *Machado de Assis: o enigma do olhar*. São Paulo, Ática, 1999.

[2] TN: Literary scholar, fiction writer, and author of *Machado de Assis: estudo crítico e biográfico* (*Machado de Assis: A Critical and Biographical Study*), initially published in 1936. Most recently reprinted by Edusp and Editora Itatiaia in 1988.

[3] I refer to the selection I prepared for Biblioteca Ayacucho de Caracas, from which I extracted the present article with a few tweaks.

stylistic conventions that readers expected of serials, conventions in which idealistic language was at work to mask truly utilitarian class conduct.

The Pre-History of the Mask: Stories of Suspicion and Deception

How does a convergence of worn-out forms and new values present itself in early Machado de Assis? In *Rio Stories* (*Contos fluminenses*) and *Midnight Stories* (*Histórias da meia-noite*)[4], the greatest distress (hidden or apparent) of certain characters is determined by a horizon of obtainable *status*—a horizon that at one moment draws nearer and in the next flees the ken of the subject, who lives in a state of fundamental lacking. It is necessary, even imperative, for the subject to overcome this state: through the inheritance of an estate, source *par excellence* of material wealth; by independently securing said material wealth; or by entering into marriage with a wealthier partner. "Where am I going to find an heiress who'll want me as a husband?"[5] sums up a concerned Gomes, the dowry hunter of "The Secret of Augusta" ("O segredo de Augusta").

In the first situation, the inheritance must come from rich relatives—favorites among aunts and uncles or godparents—who might choose to include the subject in their will. This relationship mixes an undeniable economic interest on the part of the would-be heir with the tactic of rapprochement and active involvement in the life of the potential benefactor. It is an evidently asymmetrical relationship. While the benefactor may openly display affection, the heir can only do so through calculated gestures—it is only the potential beneficiary that is calculating.

A similar asymmetry of interest and sentiment is imposed when the end goal is marriage. When the suitor, man or woman, appears to be in a situation of inferior or fragile *status*, this is the cue for a potential bride or groom to enter as a saving figure.

Obviously, the genesis here is always a situation of social imbalance—a disparity of class or social stratum—that only an inheritance or marriage will remedy.

Subjectively, the narrator accentuates the necessary construction of a mask for the suitor. As a likely consequence, the benefactor is left with the feeling of having been deceived when that mask is no longer necessary for the one who has benefited. The benefactor perceives, behind the mask, ingratitude or even betrayal.

[4] TN: Selections from the two volumes are available in English translation collections.
[5] Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, New York, Liveright Publishing, 2018, p. 102.

This ingratitude and betrayal reveal themselves as structural consequences of certain asymmetrical social relationships. Hence, there arises an air of necessity in many Machadian plots, almost as if following a law of nature. As Vauvenargues would say, "The most bitter people are those sweet out of personal interest."

In the stories built around it, this process, in its entirety, is not fully revised from beginning to end. The narrator can shift focus from one moment to the next, or dwell on one alone, allowing the story to become primarily the relating of an *episode* (the anecdote of a frustrated wedding, for example), or, instead, the *moral portrait* of one of the affected parties, as the peculiar ambiguities of imbalance between characters reemerge.

In any event, the *I* who narrates the earlier short stories still seems to have a low degree of awareness of this ambiguity. That *I* is still concerned, in many cases, with the dividing up of souls between the cynical and pure. The young man who feigns feelings of love is still romantically punished [as in "Luis Soares" and "Augusta's Secret" ("O segredo de Augusta")] or there is an attempt to negate any suspicion of self-interest in the conduct of the future beneficiary ("Miss Dollar"). This emphasis on appropriate feeling makes it difficult to gauge the degree of unreliability arising from point of view as it takes on the driving factors of intrigue. In short, on first reading, there is evidence of either bad faith or honesty. Some of the *Rio Stories* hardly cease to be stories of suspicion and deception.

In "Miss Dollar" there is a beautiful and rich widow, Margarida—the first in a long line of enjoyable widows created by Machado. In the story, Mendonça, a suitor, soon appears. Through good fortune, he has found Miss Dollar, the lady's pet greyhound. Margarida has already turned down various proposals to remarry because she has sensed in all of them the driving force of greed, something she, in fact, discovered in her late husband. In spite of this, she winds up marrying Mendonça, who, aware of Margarida's suspicions, rejects physical intimacy with her as long as doubts remain about his motivations. In the end, everything works out, as her suspicion fades with time. Mendonça has found Margarida's true wealth, the dog Miss Dollar, and found out how to nobly restore her, in this way, winning over her owner forever.

"The Woman in Black" ("A mulher de preto") tells a story of betrayal, *albeit* inadvertent betrayal. Estevão loves the wife of a friend, unaware of her real marital status. On finding out, he withdraws, but not before reuniting the couple. Betrayal appears as a loophole that the story opens and closes twice: first, by showing that the woman in black, once cast off by her husband, was innocent of adultery; second, by igniting Estevão's passion,

but making it clear that he immediately withdraws on discovering the lady's true situation. It seems here that Machado needed to simultaneously introduce and exorcize the possibility of deception.

The same specter haunts "Confessions of a Young Widow"[6] ("Confissões de uma viúva moça") in which a married woman allows herself to be wooed by her husband's best friend, though she resists his insistence on consummating the adultery. As she herself says: "I do love you, but I want to remain the same woman in your eyes, loving, yes, but also, up to a point, pure."[7] With the husband dead, nothing should preclude the two lovers from being together. Newly widowed, she waits for him, but in vain. Despite his pledges of love, he turns his back on her, proclaiming himself a man of habits that are incompatible with marriage. "He was a vulgar seducer." The half carried out sham, winds up being a total sham.

In this way, *Rio Stories* seems to be written around an obsession with lying—though its lies are either punished or proven false suspicions. Could it be the case that their author is still a Romantic moralizer given to the sermonizing of exemplary cases? Yes and no. No, because of what he will shortly become. Machado never was, in all truth, a Romantic (Romanticism is behind him). That said, yes, given his taste for the wisdom of fables, which carry, in their codas, and between their lines, lessons awaiting extraction.

In *Midnight Stories* (1873), for the first time the deceiver triumphs. The novella is called "The Blue Parasite" ("A parasita azul"). What happens in the story, despite the generally pleasant tone, which is almost bucolic, is simply this: the hero dissembles, he lies, and he deceives both his beloved and her father. And the context makes it clear. He would not triumph if he had not lied. Camilo Seabra begins life in Paris, milking the faith of his "old man," a rancher from Goiás that supports him, believing his son a zealous student, while Camilo spends his time as a bohemian and parasite. From this con, Camilo moves on to others when he returns to Brazil. He steals Isabel, the love interest of one of the first friends he reencounters. She, for her part, rejects all suitors and seems an enigma, but it is just a false naivete that masks the desire to marry the best of possible suitors. And who then, if not Camilo himself: a doctor, ranching heir, and future legislator, in addition to an infatuation of her youth? Isabel already knows that it is paramount to pretend to be cold and distant to excite the pleasure of conquest in her Goiano Casanova, former *habitué* of the *Boulevard des Italiens*. Her speech as a lady, Machado tells us, is "oblique and disguised." And the storyteller,

[6] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 103.
[7] Ibid., p. 123.

in a similarly oblique and disguised fashion, downplays the calculations circulating in the heads of the protagonists with Romantic interjections. Isabel's resistance is a plan that the suitor outsmarts with another. Camilo fakes suicide, which provokes a *yes* from Isabel, who has been quite ready to offer it. The story, fairly long and conventional in its style, has its moral: those in love are mutual deceivers. The further they figure out how to manipulate each other, the nearer they come to the goal of their desires. The rind is idyllic, and the fruit is Realist-bourgeois. But why separate rind from fruit?

The narrator of *Midnight Stories* is in transition toward a moral "period," one in which what might be deemed cold calculation or cynicism (as conceived by Alencar, for example) starts to represent daily behavior, even at the heart of principal relationships.

The necessity of the mask as a constant was a relatively new phenomenon in the history of Brazilian fiction. Missing in these short stories is that something which is almost nothing and almost everything—that is, the frank rendition of consciousness—which will be brought to life in the extremely honest character of *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (*Memórias postumas de Brás Cubas*), Jacó Tavares, for whom "absolute veracity was incompatible with an advanced social state."[8]

Young Machado assimilates a new economy of human relationships, which begins to regulate, more and more consciously, the driving factors of private life. It is in the treatment of the characters that this novelty becomes more apparent. In other aspects of the narrative, Machado remains faithful, soberly faithful, to the literary institution of the Romantic Brazilian novel, which always wanted to be *Realist:* the description of landscapes and interiors, the sequence of events, the sense of time, and, even, metalinguistic preludes were already present in Macedo, Manuel Antônio, and Alencar. Machado will perhaps be more neutral, drier, more schematic with the narrative composition that he learned—if not imitated—from other contexts. He would never underestimate the foundation of convention as a writer, the only Brazilian that our purist grammarians of the early 20th century would think worthy of standing side by side with the classics of the 1600s.

At its core, this was not only about respect for linguistic convention. Deference for the institutional face of letters and society is the norm in Machado and represents the recognition of the strong by the weak. The institution is, in the end, a staked-out historic space where the basic needs of human groups are presented and satisfied. It is, in every sense

[8] Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas: A Novel.* Trans. Gregory Rabassa, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 131.

of the term, their *common place*. The commonplace does not need to be beautiful or sublime; a utility similar to paper currency is enough.

While consciousness of the mask and the instituted game does not show itself markedly in the early short stories, it surely grows from *Rio Stories* to *Midnight Stories*. Likewise, it grew in the decade of the 1870s, in novels like *The Hand & the Glove* (*A mão e a luva)* and *Iaiá Garcia.* There are works in which two ideas of the commonplace intersect: that of old, idealistic Romanticism and that of new utilitarian Realism, on which female characters lean, capable of suffocating feelings of biological bond in favor of the "free choice of her mind"[9] and a "second nature, as imperious as the first."[10] This second nature of the body is *status*, society which has embedded itself in life.

Lúcia Miguel-Pereira's[11] interpretation is overtly psychosocial. It strikes me as a good reading, not just of the genesis of plots and Machadian characters, but, principally, of the ideological foundation that sustains and legitimizes them in the name of the "calculations of life." Despite the risk of biographizing, the author finds the existential wound of Machado, the man, who moved from one class to the next, cutting the connections that tied him to a poor childhood. The transition, the break, and the consciousness of that break make up the moral history of his most ambitious female characters: Guiomar, in *The Hand and the Glove,* and Iaiá Garcia, in the novel of the same name.

I find in the fifth chapter of *The Hand and the Glove,* titled "Childhood," a compelling confirmation of Lúcia Miguel-Pereira's hypothesis. Guiomar, a poor child, without a father, lives with her mother, whose greatest sadness is to see her daughter suffer from strange fainting spells followed by periods of quiet concentration. At a certain point, the narrator introduces an episode that reveals a destiny. Through a crack in the wall that separates Guiomar's house from the neighboring estate, the girl sees, as if in a dream, an image of wealth that will never leave her. There is a wall between the poor home and the rich home, but the opening is sufficient to allow a person through:

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[9] Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. *The Hand & the Glove.* Trans. Albert I Bagby Jr., Lexington, U. of Kentucky, 1970, p. 91.

[10] TN: This text follows Bosi's rendition of the quote. It is worth noting that he traces the idea of "second nature" ("segunda natureza") to Blaise Pascal in his essay on Raymundo Faoro. (See "Raymundo Faoro: leitor de Machado de Assis." *Estudos Avançados*, v. 18, n. 51, pp. 355-376, 2004.) In his translation of the novel *Iaiá Garcia*, Bagby translates Machado's text as follows: "There are two natures in society, and the social nature is as genuine and imperious as the other" (Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. *Iaiá Garcia.* Trans. Albert I Bagby Jr., Lexington, U. of Kentucky, 1977, p. 37).

[11] Lúcia Miguel Pereira. *Machado de Assis*, São Paulo, Nacional, 1936. Her interpretation of Machado de Assis's career was resumed with better results in *Prosa de ficção*, 2nd ed., Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio, 1957, pp. 59-107.

> The first time this disposition became pronounced was one afternoon when she had been playing in the yard at home. The wall in the back had a large opening through which part of the yard of one of the neighborhood houses was visible. The hole had recently appeared and Guiomar had become accustomed to going there to peek through, already serious and pensive. That afternoon, as she was gazing at the mango trees, perhaps coveting the sweet yellow fruit which hung from the branches, she suddenly saw before her, about five or six steps from the spot where she was standing, a group of girls, all of them pretty, trailing their long dresses behind them through the trees and letting their jewels sparkle under the last rays of the setting sun. They went by happily, carefree and contented; one or another might have extended some gesture of courtesy; but they went on, and with them the eyes of the interested little girl, who remained there a long time, enthralled, unaware of herself, still seeing in her mind's eye the scene that had gone by.
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> Night came; the girl went back inside, pensive and melancholy, without explaining anything to her mother's solicitous curiosity. What could she explain, if she could barely comprehend the impression which these things left upon her?[12]

A few lines later, we see Guiomar, now in the care of her godmother, a baroness, through whom Guiomar will become rich, inheriting her estate. Later, she will marry an ambitious man, and they will fit together like a hand in a glove. First, the inheritance. Next, marriage.

Society erected a wall between classes, but that wall has its openings. It is possible to pass from one side to the other, not exactly through work, but by cultivating and exploiting *natural* relationships. Who does not remember the scene [from *Dom Casmurro*] in which Capitu writes her name and Bentinho's on the wall that separates their houses, giving a clear beginning to the prohibited idyll? Capitu managed to "perforate the wall." In this way, long after having surpassed the schematic of his early novels, Machado continued writing stories of suspense and deception.

[12] *The Hand & the Glove*. Trans. Albert I Bagby Jr., p. 31.

Short Stories Based on Theories

Everyone recognizes in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* the watershed of Machado's work. Otto-Maria Carpeaux came to speak of Machado as one of those great writers twice born, like the converts Saint Augustine or Pascal. But anyone who has made their way through the short stories and novels of the 1870s is prepared to see a disequilibrium resolve itself. New wine will eventually break old wineskins. As Machado's suspicions that deception is a necessity grow, and that appearance universally functions as essence—not just in public life, but in the secret of the soul—his narration assumes a more distanced perspective and, at the same time, becomes more contentious, more enamored of contrast. The oscillating point of view from the early stories is broken up from within. The ambiguity of the participatory *I* imposes itself as an objective and insurmountable framework.

From *Posthumous Memoirs* and the stories in *Miscellaneous Papers*[13] (*Papéis avulsos*) onward, he becomes concerned with mapping out the circuitous formula that hides (though not completely) the contradiction between seeming and being, between mask and desire, between clear, public rite and the dismissed current of inner life. And, while recognizing this antagonism, his gaze lingers less on a possible Romantic residual of difference than on gray conformity, on a fatal capitulation of the subject to dominant *appearance.*

Machado plays out, in depth, the post-Romantic certainty (still bourgeois, "late bourgeois," as an Italian sociologist would say) that it is an illusion to suppose the autonomy of the subject. And, because it is an illusion, it is a grave risk for the subject themself to seem different from the widespread, sanctioned median. However intriguing our flights of thought or strange our fantasies of desire, there is no other way to survive day-in and day-out other than by holding firmly to institutions. These, and only these, insure the fragile individual full right to material life, and, as a consequence, the right to the gratifying leisure that will permit one to swing into those fantasies.

I see in Machado's mature short stories—with forty years now behind him—the risky arabesques of "theories," bizarre and paradoxical theories, that, in the end, reveal the meaning of the most common social relationships and touch on something like the deep organization of social institutions.

[13] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. ii.

(In the great novels, *Posthumous Memoirs, Quincas Borba* and *Dom Casmurro*, the core institutions are and will always be *matrimony* and *inheritance*, and respectively, *adultery* and *deception*.[14])

The tone which pervades the theory-based short story is not the open sarcasm of the satirist, or indignation, the holy wrath of the moralist, nor is it the impatience of the utopian. I would say, first and foremost, that it is the humor of one who observes the force of an objective necessity that shackles the soul, listless and fickle, to the manifest, solid, and unified body of institutional forms. Machado, in the end, eats away at the substance of the *I* and the moral herd themselves. However, he leaves alive and standing, as founding truth, the dynamic of dependency the interior world exhibits in the face of stronger convention. It is this dynamic with which he occupies himself as narrator. As the wisest of the bonzes says:

> If you were to put the most sublime virtues and the most profound knowledge in a solitary individual, removed from all contact with other men, it would be as if such things did not exist. If no one tastes the fruits of an orange tree, it is worth no more than wild gorse and scrub, and if nobody sees such fruits, they are worth nothing at all. Or, to put it more succinctly, there is no spectacle without a spectator. ("The Bonze's Secret")[15]

An ever-changing combination of desire, self-interest, and social value give shape to the strange theories of behavior that are called "The Alienist" ("O alienista"), "Education of a Stuffed Shirt"[16] ("Teoria do medalhão"), "The Bonze's Secret" ("O segredo do bonzo"), "The Most Serene Republic"[17] ("A Sereníssima República"), "The Mirror" ("O espelho"), "Alexandrian Tale" ("Conto alexandrino"), and "The Devil's Church" ("A igreja do diabo")…

Examining the texts more closely one sees that as life in society, the body's second nature, progressively requires masks, it demands, as well, an irreversibly universal mask[18]. Its

[14] TN: As Bosi explains, the Portuguese *logro* comes from the Latin *lucrum*, a synonym of *interest*.
[15] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 413.
[16] TN: This is the title Helen Caldwell uses in her 1963 translation of the story (Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories.* Trans. William L. Grossman and Helen Caldwell, Berkeley, University of California, 1963, p. 113).
[17] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 436.
[18] La Rouchefoucauld: "In all professions and in all arts, everyone creates an appearance or exterior for themselves that stands in for the thing whose merit they wish to obtain; in this way, that whole world is nothing

law, unable to be that of the repressed subjective truth, will be that of the displayed and widespread common mask. It is the triumph of the public sign. The crown is awarded to conventional form. Laurels are bestowed on those heads best styled according to fashion. All interior stirrings are stilled, they degrade to indecision, or they reharmonize themselves to reach an accord with sober convention. Beyond this appropriateness there is only foolishness, imprudence, and madness.

The necessity to protect oneself and to succeed in life—a universal driving force—is only satisfied by the ostensive union of the subject with dominant *appearance*. Would it then be reasonable to blame a poor and vulnerable subject because they rose with the tide of their time so as not to drown in poverty, obscurity, and humiliation? Machado does not want to make the trial of the *adapted* merciless (and here Lúcia Miguel-Pereira astutely raises the point of the autobiographical veil). He does not want to accuse the subject of having been incapable of acting as a hero.[19] The half-grotesque portrait of their fragile and corruptible conscience is merely the shadow cast by the design of the characters. This silent criticism has a bigger target: the process of the Process. The announcement of the *fatum* will function as a universal denunciation.

It is along these lines that I interpret the delirium of Brás Cubas. Nature, primary source of all human history, appears as a cold, selfish being, deaf to the anguish of those that she herself produced. "Yes, selfishness, I have no other law. Selfishness, preservation."[20] The mask is, then, an essential defense, which comes from far away, from very far away, like the bear pelt and the wood cabin created by the savage to protect themselves from the sun, wind, and rain. If all of civilization is an act of self-defense against Mother Nature ("I am your mother and your enemy"), why deny the socially disinherited the right to shelter themselves in the shade of money and power? Why demand that they live outside the "universal statute" preached by Nature herself: "Who does not devour is devoured"? Brás Cubas' trip across the centuries, toward primal origins, reaches Eden, but what a strange lost paradise is that place dreamed of in so many mythologies! Here, there is nothing of the inviting meadows or gardens warmed by the glorious sun of the Orient. The *topos* is inverted:

more than a composite of masks, and it is in vain that we struggle to find something real in it." (*Maxim* 270, 1665 edition).

[19] La Rouchefoucauld: "Weak people cannot be sincere."

[20] *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas: A Novel.* Trans. Gregory Rabassa, p. 19.

> I can only remember that a feeling of cold grew stronger as the journey went on and that a time came when it seemed to me that we were entering the region of perpetual cold. In fact, I opened my eyes and saw that my animal was galloping across a white plain of snow, here and there a mountain of snow, vegetation of snow, and several large animals of snow. Everything snow. A sun of snow was coming out to freeze us.[21]

In the beginning there was *necessity*. But it is imperative to overcome it. The means to obtain the warmth of safety are legitimized. The mask is justified by the march of civilization. Traditional morality, vainly idealistic, can twist and invert itself, and subvert, with all the sophisms that human cunning might invent—as long as the individual manages to free themself from those cold, wanting, and disturbing origins.

Underneath a universal perspective of agony and fatalism, Machado was the most "Realist" of the Brazilian narrators of his time, the one who most bravely understood and explored the spirit of the new society and who most distinctly represented it in exemplary figures and plots. And (is it necessary to say it?) the tone of that Realism cannot be joyful or echo the euphoric ideology of contemporaries mesmerized by the progress of the Republic—an Olavo Bilac and a Coelho Neto, for example. What there is in Machado is not conformity, but the knowledge that people defend themselves.

As regards "The Alienist," the first novella of a mature Machado, it is not enough to say that he satirizes scientism as it is applied to the study of madness. It is true that, with the divide between rationality and irrationality as the focal point of the plot, the story takes the enjoyable air of a *comédie d'erreurs,* above which always looms the suggestion that the alienist is, in fact, the only alienated figure. That is the surface effect, the paradox that the narrator maintains from beginning to end of the novella. The illustrative material, the *exemplum* that generates the comic effect, seems, on first reading to only come from Dr. Simão Bacamarte, man of science to his marrow, logical to a ridiculous extreme. Dr. Bacamarte, like the prima donna of opera, steals away the reader's attention.

But this story of the insane seems to me an indicator of another dimension, one which includes and goes beyond the caricature of the perfect alienist because there is in it the clear design of a *power schematic*. Bacamarte is not, strictly speaking, a kind of mad scientist,

[21] *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas: A Novel.* Trans. Gregory Rabassa, Chap. VII, p. 16.

marginal, fodder for the derision of clear thinkers. Son of local nobility, he brings to the colony the accolade of best doctor in Portugal and the Spanish Territories. Favored by the King, he was invited to oversee the University of Coimbra as rector or, if he preferred, manage the business of the Crown. He has the freedom to put into action the scientific projects that obsess him. His status as noble and bearer of royal approval transforms him into the dictator of the poor town of Itaguaí. The population suffers the effects of a terrorism of prestige, of which the relationships between doctor and the sick, psychiatrist and the mad, are but particular cases. The lynchpin of the novella, therefore, will be the discretion of power over the caprice of a scientist with a mechanical eye. It is clear that the two go hand in hand. It is only one character that wields the power of both *status* and science, to whom, almost by chance, rivers of money have flowed. But at the decisive moment of peril, when a mob rises up against the tyranny of the doctor, marching to the city hall, demanding an end to the terror, the council members respond that "the Casa Verde was a public institution and that science could not be amended by administrative vote, still less by the mob."[22]

The asylum is the House of Power, and Machado knew this well before an anti-psychiatry movement would denounce it.

In all its developments, in the tug-of-war of the rebellion, the alienist relies on a triumphant force. First, the police come to his aid, the body of dragoons. With their defection and the victory of the barber, Porfírio, Bacamarte's situation seems desperate, but it is victorious Porfírio himself that seeks out the doctor, now interested in recruiting the power that moments earlier had answered to armed force. In the end, the military intervention ordered by the viceroy restores Bacamarte to all the splendor of his prestige, committing all the rebels to the asylum, but not those council members that had not known how to resist them. Later, with his theory altered (the mad must be those that cultivate rare virtue), the alienist does not equivocate before the leaders of the town and deposits the town priest and judge in the Casa Verde.

There is, then, a preceding schematic of authority that ties the tongues and bends the backs of those that surround Simão Bacamarte. That authority is exercised in the name of an activity that is considered neutral, "above vulgar appetites": science, the love of truth that inspires the psychiatrist.

[22] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 336.

Where did Machado want to go, creating a portrait of a doctor of the mind vested with complete power? Bacamarte intends to separate the realm of madness from the realm of perfect sanity. The confusion in which both are mixed together bores him. It is necessary to delineate, with the sharp blade of science, that thin line of discrimination—with the mad on one side and the sane on the other. To carry out his dualist criteria he has to know what *normality* is. Every time that he commits somebody, would it not be, perhaps, believing that he knows what the normal state is from which the newly interned has deviated? In the beginning, the symptoms leave no room for doubt. The boy that believes he is the morning star does not seem normal, nor do the poor devils that name themselves count, majordomo of the king, and even the god João… But apart from these cases, clearly ridiculous to people's common sense, what might there be that is abnormal in the attitude of others committed to the Casa Verde? Merely an excess of any subjectivity, a strong affirmation of character, a gesture of the *I* that distances itself from the median, that median whose conduct Bacamarte supposes known and regulated by routine, without even a trace of differentiation. Normal would be something repeated ad infinitum. Normal is the pure form of public appearance, the shaped form, form beyond any interior movement. The "institutional" without surprises, this is the essence of the reasoning that establishes itself as the criteria of sanity in the head of the alienist. Costa is a prodigious boy that wound up losing his wealth through ill-advised loans? He will be interned for stupidity. His cousin,[23] a simple woman, intercedes on his behalf and attributes his liberality to a curse. The alienist sees excess in the woman's speech and puts her under lock and key as well. The poet Martim Brito loves bold metaphors, saying, in an ode to the fall of the Marquis of Pombal, that the minister was the "harsh dragon of Nothingness" overcome by the "vindictive claws of Everything".[24] It is enough for Simão to intern him in the Casa Verde. The other cases touch the same note: the juvenile vanity of a homeowner that ecstatically admires his own house; Dona Evarista's vacillation between going to a party with a garnet or sapphire necklace; the cowardly doubt of the apothecary; or the perfect innocuousness of cultivators of puzzles, the creators of charades and anagrams. "All was madness."

Later, the criteria of statistics, so dear to new science, reminds the doctor that the *norm* resides in the majority, and that this, in the end, is correct. Bacamarte, fearless, upright scientist, reworks his theory, releases the committed and moves on to cracking down on

[23] TN: The original essay refers to her as an "aunt." In Machado's novella, she appears as a cousin.
[24] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 334.

those few who, either through abnegation or moral coherence, form a minority and act against the system: the wife of the apothecary, the priest, the judge. In the end, the logic of his method does not stop. The purest coherence is in the alienist himself, faithful, from beginning to end, to the mirage of truth. As such, he is the perfect outlier, wholly sane, and the only resident of Itagauí worthy of being locked up in the Casa Verde.

From one extreme to another, from the delirious to the wise, the criteria remain the same, methodically the same: it is necessary to separate from public living those who prove themselves different in some way from the instituted norm, from the dominant appearance. It is the only science, leveling and effective, to which the king, the viceroy, the town council, and all the people of the city succumb. But not even the town council, the viceroy, or the king can prevent the violent logic of this rule from turning against those who follow it, as they wind up punishing themselves and negating themselves up to their very extinction. Bacamarte, blunderbuss.

Sometimes Machado enjoys showing the cares and woes that a family, a group, and even an entire people self-inflict, sheltering themselves in a port safe from the external order. Perhaps the work of education resides in leading people to belief in popular opinion, which is nothing, but a guaranteed nothing, free from the setbacks of contradiction. From this perspective, the "Education of a Stuffed Shirt" forms, along with "The Most Serene Republic" and "The Bonze's Secret," a trilogy of dominant Appearance. In the three, access to public truth requires attention and determined vigilance to prevent some subjective hindering of adherence to the teachings of the majority.

First, the initiation into public life that, "all things considered,"[25] the father and teacher of "Education of a Stuffed Shirt" likens to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. To be a stuffed shirt[26] is to attain that plenitude of interior emptiness that hides in the folds of the late Dr. Bacamarte's theory of normality. Nothing of the future stuffed shirt should flow from the deep waters of the soul: an effigy of institution, and only institution, he needs to "enter frankly and openly into the practice of correctness and the measured tread."[27] The danger, imminent in the youngest, would be to disturb that noble composure with some reflection or emanation of spirit that makes others suppose there is a face behind the mask. Those who

[25] *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories*. Trans. Helen Caldwell, p. 122.
[26] TN: This term is taken from Caldwell's translation. In Portuguese, "medalhão," derived from the word *medal* suggests a figure of high social standing and little actual worth, often involved in politics. Jull Costa and Patterson use the term "bigwig."
[27] *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories*. Trans. Helen Caldwell, p. 114.

worry about expressing personal ideas might run a similar risk. To avert it, however, there are sure means: "read textbooks of rhetoric, listen to certain speeches, et cetera. Gin rummy, dominoes, and whist are approved remedies. Whist also possesses the rare advantage of schooling one to silence, and silence is circumspection in its most marked form."[28]

More than once, the father preaches the goal of perfect weakness, of a vacuity without limits. The absence of ideas will find its cover in silence, or limited vocabulary, or in an extreme case, the commonplace, "the stock phrases, the conventional expressions, the formulas consecrated by the years, incrusted on individual and public memory. Such phrases have the advantage of not obligating others to a needless effort."[29] The final phase situates the future stuffed shirt in his habitual environs, with the listeners that he hopes to equal, those who have already conquered that perfect essential emptiness that will preserve their *status*.

With the reduction and, if possible, the death of differences, the external and public face of the stuffed-shirt-in-training grows. The theory behind the "Education of a Stuffed Shirt" recognizes the precise value of the propaganda whose role it is to flaunt the triumphant form, the only form of interest to the *social persona*. "In politics, what seems is"—a phrase attributed to the late Portuguese dictator, Dr. Antônio de Oliveira Salazar—could serve as a good epigraph to this short story: "I haven't yet mentioned the advantages of publicity. Publicity is an imperious and demanding mistress."[30]

If the use of the term *stuffed shirt* and the paradoxical content of the speech assume a mocking tone, it is necessary, once again, not to focus the reading solely on the effects of laughter and parody. Like the alienist, the stuffed shirt brings with him charismatic authority. It is the voice always equal to standing and those who possess it. If the candidate for an elevated, highly visible post should repress and oppress spontaneous feelings or ideas, it is because median social life, likewise, does not tolerate revealing one's face for even a minute. The masquerade is serious.

"The Most Serene Republic" surprises with the moment in which an institution is born. The short story is, according to the author himself, a parody of the Brazilian electoral pact.

[28] Ibid., p. 115.
[29] Ibid., p. 117.
[30] Ibid., p. 118.

The narrator bizarrely constructs the focalization of the piece: the person speaking is a cleric, expert in spiders and an attentive reader of Büchner and Darwin, whom he considers sages of the first order, apart from their "excessive and erroneous errors of materialism." The surface layer of the narrative is delivered through the discourse of the cleric and specialist Vargas, who relays to his listeners the results of a discovery he has made in the world of spiders. He has found a species gifted with the ability to speak. Machado's resource here is the *philosophique,* in the manner of the fabulists and satirists of Classic literature: speaking of animals, or of exotic peoples, to lend the narrative the distanced point of view of pure observer. In this way, the text can produce a defamiliarization effect as it places writers and readers (not animals) in situations commonly experienced by animals in fables. And that is the hidden, half-revealed layer of the story. *De te fabula narratur.*[31] When the reader perceives the game, defamiliarization gives way to the laughter of unmasking. It was Swift's way of working in *Gulliver's Travels* for example.

The cleric, with the trappings of a scientist, first learns the arachnid language, then sets the oldest arachnids to the art of governing. The Positivistic science of the century is not satisfied with knowledge; it wants to organize and control the lives of observed beings from the outside, adding priestly power its coercion.

The scientist reflects:

> The two main factors involved in collecting them were: using their language as soon as I began to discern something of it, together with the sheer terror I instilled in them. My height, my flowing vestments, and my mastery of their language all made them believe that I was the god of spiders, and, from that point on, they worshipped me. And behold the benefits of their delusion. I followed their every action with great attention and detail, jotting down all my observations in a notebook, which they believed to be a record of their sins, thus reinforcing still further their virtuous behavior.[32]

He installs himself, monitoring the small world of the spiders with a spirit of terror. And in this environment, a political pact is not created spontaneously, or by internal

[31] TN: "Of you the tale is told."
[32] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 438.

necessity. The system of government arrives, imposed from the outside, in the context of armed bullying, through the manipulative science of this pre-behaviorist cleric.

As fear, and only fear, of disappointing an external power, acts as the genesis of the political life of the spiders, the electoral process is going to construct itself as a fraudulent game—democratic in form and oligarchical in substance. Machado accentuates the aspects of legal organization (the important thing is that the government presents a clean face) but lets the reader make out that the façade is a disguise. The spiders, obligated to select candidates by extracting balls from sacks, find a thousand ways of manipulating the process, from corrupting officials to skewing the outcomes. Even philology is called upon to settle doubts in favor of the defeated. The fact is that the installed regime goes on reproducing and perpetuating itself not only because of the force that drives it forward (the sacred terror instilled by the clergyman-scientist), but through the trust that the circumspect citizens of the republic have in it. "And behold the benefits of their delusion."[33]

The stages were as follows. In the first, fear and the public pact were treated as cause and effect. In the second, with a government of representation already instituted, fraud, which returned each election, and the idealistic legal conscience, forever awaiting the perfection of the democratic system, were put in competition with one another. It is the latter that speaks to the weaving female spiders:

"You, ladies, are the Penelopes of our republic… Aim to be as chaste, patient, and talented as she. Weave the bag again, ladies, weave it again, until Ulysses, weary of wandering, comes back to take his rightful place among us. Ulysses is Wisdom."[34]

Progressiveness believes in the evolution of the electoral tendencies of spiders and people, who, having overcome periods of theocratical and oligarchical terror, will one day arrive at wisdom. But it should be noted that the model of positive political morality is curiously embodied in the most cunning figure of the Greeks, Ulysses. When Ulysses comes, will the slyness of reason be forever consecrated? The spiders will have passed, once and for all, to their second nature, to the social pact, previously imposed, and in the end internalized; and Penelope, faithful guardian of democracy, will at last be able to rest.

Tension exists as long as the two natures do not find their ideal point of fusion. This only happens when the individual transforms into their social role. The political norm, represented in the conduct and consciousness of each person, is the only guarantee of

[33] Ibid., p. 438.
[34] Ibid., p. 443.

peaceful self-preservation. The norm: without failure or excess. Wisdom: what was in its origins compulsory will one day be consensus.

"The Secret of the Bonze" is another variant of the philosophical short story of the 18th century. It presents itself as an "unedited chapter of Fernão Mendes Pinto," the Portuguese chronicler who wrote, in his fabulous *Pilgrimage,* about his visit to China during the Age of Discovery. The narrator is an observer, curious and perplexed with a strange world, the kingdom of Bungo. It is a strange place owing to the subject matter of the speeches its monks make in public—and stranger still because of the reverence and enthusiasm with which its natives receive such speeches.

A monk, by the name of Patimau, says that grasshoppers come into being out of coconut fronds and thin air during a full moon. Another, called Languru, teaches that life after death is hidden in a drop of cow's blood. They are, one after another, exalted, as the people of Bungo hear what they have to say.

The two cases serve as prologue and driving force for what the third and wisest of the monks, Pomada, will say, as he deigns to the reveal the essence of truth to the story's narrator. *Essence is appearance.* In the words of the master:

> You will never guess what gave me the idea of this new doctrine: it was neither more nor less than the moonstone, that famous stone so luminous that, when placed on a mountaintop or on the pinnacle of a tower, it gives light to the whole countryside around, no matter how extensive. Such a stone, so rich in light, has never existed and no one has ever seen it, but many people believe it exists, and more than one will tell you that he has seen it with his own eyes. I considered the matter and realized that if a thing can exist in someone's opinion without existing in reality, or exist in reality without existing in someone's opinion, the conclusion must be that of the two parallel existences, the only one necessary is that of opinion, not of reality, which is merely an additional convenience.[35]

Such is the wisdom of Pomada; and a difficult thing it will be, in the current times, for me to avoid the innocent temptation of pointing out the isomorphism that links the name of the monk to the doctrine that he preaches: pomade (*pomada*) is what is applied

[35] Ibid., p. 414.

to the skin just as appearance covers the real. Machado, in fact, explains in a note: "The monk of my writing is called Pomada, and Pomadists his sectarians. Pomada and Pomadist are familiar terms in our land: they are local names for charlatan and charlatanism."[36]

But the story still has not ended. The listeners, turned devoted Pomadists, resolve to put the new teaching to the test, now additionally motivated by profit and fame. The theory-based short story illustrates itself here through example. There are three experiments, and all are successful. By means of a well-orchestrated newspaper ad, the Pomadists lead the citizens of Bungo to first buy, in droves, sandals of poor quality that one of them makes, and later deliriously acclaim a musical performance, merely mediocre, on a shawm [a reeded instrument] by another. These two cases already say enough about the cause taken up by the narrator against the consumption of illusion. But one must still wait for the third—the consummate illustration of the doctrine. It is the story of diseased noses and metaphysical noses. With his authority as doctor, a friend of the chronicler manages to prove that it is not only possible but highly advantageous for those who suffer a horrible nasal deformation to cut off the sick organ, substituting it for another that, though no one can see it, exists in a transcendental condition, specific to the individual. Popular opinion here reaches the height of its magical powers. It creates from nothing not just the essence of the nose but its appearance as well. The mutilated sick continue blowing their metaphysical noses. There is no place for a fickle "subjective truth." The subjects, at least, do not know any truth that is not in pure harmony with those in power.

"The Mirror," perhaps the most celebrated of the theory-based short stories of Machado de Assis, confronts the certainties of the Romantic *I*. What does the narrative say? That there is no previous integrity to the soul. The consciousness of each person comes from outside, but this *outside* is discontinuous and oscillating, because the physical presence of others is discontinuous and oscillating, and their support is discontinuous and oscillating. Jacobina will only conquer his soul, that is, the lost self, when he creates a unified whole with the lieutenant's uniform that constitutes him as a character. The uniform is a symbol and the material of *status*. The *I*, vested in the role, can survive; stripped, it loses its footing, disperses, frays, fades away. It does not have a form, and thus no unity. To have *status* is to exist in the world in a solid state.

[36] TN: My translation.

But the story says more. It says that it is not enough to wear the uniform. It is necessary that others see it and recognize it as a uniform—that there are eyes to see it and admire it. *The gaze of others: the first mirror.* When Jacobina lacks that gaze, when he finds himself alone on his aunt's ranch, which even the slaves desert, he turns to his own gaze. The gaze that does not feel the sweet aura of the gaze of like kind goes in search of a mirror. The mirror will say that the *I seems* to be. But Jacobina does not have a uniform; he lacks the appearance of *status;* merely the appearance, the Romantics would say. Yes, but, as Machado shows us, it is because of this that he lacks a reality, lacks being. The mirror, filling in for the gaze of the other, faithfully reproduces the feeling of that gaze. Without the uniform, you are not a lieutenant; not being a lieutenant, you do not exist. "The lieutenant eliminated the man."[37] The solid state of *status* dissipates, evaporates. What is it that Jacobina wants to see when he looks at himself in the mirror? The image of himself such as it is seen by the eye of the other, the other that recognizes him as lieutenant, the other that appreciates him as someone who rose up the ranks of life. Popular opinion is the only faithful mirror. Without it, the mirror is broken, the image that remains is a subject left in silhouette, indiscernible. But Jacobina puts on the uniform again and looks at himself in the mirror. The mirror restores his lieutenancy, and Jacobina exists again for himself.

Reencountered, the "exterior soul" absorbs the internal one, just like the candles of the house in Santa Teresa, at the beginning of the story, "whose brilliance lost itself mysteriously in the moonlight that came from outside."[38]

He could not have descended more deeply into the theory of social role as the shaper of perception and consciousness. "The Mirror" would have delighted a contemporary of Machado, Émile Durkheim, and all that identify the *I* with its function. The internal soul has no other outlet but integration with the dominant form at any cost. Jacobina, who, at the moment of telling his "strange" experience, is a "shrewd" and "caustic" forty-something capitalist, is no longer "a poor kid." "I was twenty-five at the time, I was poor, and had just been made a second lieutenant in the national guard."[39] What separates the latter state from the former, the narrator from the narrated story, is, simply and brutally, a transition of class, the learning of appearances. The rise from the first to the second rung was a decisive one,

[37] *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories.* Trans. Helen Caldwell, p. 60.
[38] Ibid., p. 56.
[39] Ibid., p. 58.

the moment in which Jacobina permanently put on the exterior soul, the uniform. "From then on I was another man."[40]

Machado builds the narrative in such a way that handing over interior life to the civil state becomes an act of survival. The process of composition in "The Mirror" is the opposite of that in Pirandello's novel, *The Late Mattia Pascal,* a novel in which the protagonist searches for salvation circumventing the civil state. He pretends to be dead and wipes out any traces of his family name, profession, *status*—in short, all the social relationships surrounding him from childhood. But the sense of both texts converges on the same point: it is impossible to live beyond social determinations. The tone diverges: Pirandello pathetically laments the dead end on which the anarchical project of Mattia Pascal has wound up. Machado merely confirms, one more time, the necessity of the mask.

Historically, Machado and Pirandello expressed the recognition of ruling power exercised through the bourgeois social mode—that is, the post-Romantic acceptance of the impotency of the subject when no longer sheltered by the affirming gaze of others. A sad mirror-like conception of personal life is consolidated at the end of this century precisely when that very bourgeois culture, in the distressing process of dividing itself up wants to penetrate the labyrinths of the Unconscious and the dream. But the narrative realism of Machado is attentive to the law of the mask, the law of second nature, "as imperious as the first." The dream, when it arises, does nothing more than follow the dynamics of the waking world and, instead of liberation, brings from social life the image of sought-after *status*:

> In my dreams, I wore my uniform, proudly, in the midst of family and friends, who praised my gallant bearing and called me lieutenant. And there came a family friend and promised me the rank of first lieutenant, another the rank of captain or of major. All this breathed life into me.[41]

With the same sensibility, though much more dramatic, the delirium of Rubião in *Quincas Borba*, is made of those sweet promises of pleasure that the masks of his waking hours have denied him.

In its construction, "The Mirror" delegates the primary narrative voice to the first person. With the help of this technique, the theme of surrendering to the dominant

[40] Ibid., p. 64.
[41] Ibid., p. 62.

Appearance is created, not as a curious fact, worthy of a tantalizing *conte philosophique*, but as the lived, central experience of a destiny. In front of the mirror, Jacinto consecrates himself, as in a rite, to the regime of popular opinion in a moment that pawns the interior future of the *I* narrator. That moment that seems, in itself, so mysterious, is the uncanny way Machado finds to speak of the rite of passage that the majority of men must complete, from inexperience or naïve frankness to the adult mask.

The Side of the Subject: The Enigma

"The Mirror" is the blueprint of a Machadian certainty that could be formulated in this way: there is only consistency in the undertaking of the social role; in the public arena, the human soul is dubious and fleeting.

Now, if the intimate side of behavior does not offer congruency, its description becomes a fatal problem. The narrator can no longer count on the solid ballast of *characters*. These remain behind, in the moralistic painting of characters, portraits, stuffed shirts. Or in the old comedy of misers, hypocrites, and the naïve…

The radical lived experience in "The Mirror" only allows safe fixation on the mask, on the victorious uniform, on the role that perfectly absorbs the man. The other face, that which departs and disappears before the looking glass, remains speculation. It is the opaque body of fear, of vanity, jealously, and envy. In a word, it is the enigma of desire that refuses to show itself naked to the gaze of the other. At times, the narrator, discretely but firmly, takes up the role of this gaze. Whoever partly sees what happens behind the mask of the third person has already been the first person, has already seen themselves in the mirror.[42]

Indecision toward showing profound feelings of love or friendship ensconces Dona Benedita [from the short story of the same name] in a back-and-forth of delights and intrigue, which, in the end, simply peter out. In truth, such *feelings* are not indispensable to the social survival of Dona Benedita, and so they burn and die like a flash in the pan. The portrait of this lady in the time of the Second Empire is one of the most imponderable that has ever been written in the Portuguese language. It captures the effervescent froth of a soul that does not know any dimension beyond the superficial. The story, thanks to its almost allegorical finale, in which the Fairy of Indecision appears, could be said to approach the genre of the "portrait of a character." The subtitle is, indeed, "A Portrait." Paradoxically, her character

[42] Revisiting this reading of "The Mirror," it seems to me that it deserves an addendum: a highlighting of the *personal consciousness* of the narrator that evokes and analyzes his fixation on social type.

does not wind up assuming the contours necessary for the construction of character, like the figure that appears at the close of the story to haunt her, vague, "wreathed in mist and veiled in shimmering reflections, its shape disappearing into thin air."[43]

How is the interior life of Dona Benedita constructed, as it falls apart at the same time? The narrator's process is analytic; the psychology is Sensualism. The behavior of this fascinating woman lines up sensations that are rapid and finite, and only for this reason seem intense. They are psychic atoms spinning in a capricious dance that seems unable to stop itself through evocation or design. Dona Benedita's words express no remorse or longing, and, rather than inform the reader, the analyst leaves the reader in suspense as to whether she has desires or not. In the end, the plot shows that desire stops with volition, and it does not know the real feeling of the future, which is hope. Everything about her clings to a present that quickly falls into oblivion while other sensations survive, erratic by nature, bringing with them the taste of another new and ephemeral present. Is the portrait of Dona Benedita not the conception of a person as an immediate response to the oscillation between temperament and circumstance? The Romantic mystery of the subject and the secrets of the soul remain in this way, dependent on a game of chance, that, from the outside, comes to produce gestures, words, and whims. The "inside" will always be that image, which has departed and disappeared, lacking self-determination, that Jacobina sees in the mirror, always awaiting a stimulus that would finally give him substance. Differences between people, while detectible to the naked eye, find root in the common ground of instinct, which seeks pleasure, and the common ground of society that seeks out self-interest. And pleasure and self-interest would answer the question: What is behind the mask? That said, the degrees and moments of masking are so nuanced, and the combinations woven by chance so varied and infinite, that each person's very way of being will seem, now and always, an enigma.

This observation facilitates an appreciation for the richness and flexibility of the portrait short stories. In them, there is a convergence of the singular being, with its true name impervious to explanation (*individuum ineffabile*) through the universals of instinct and self-interest. What is inherent in the individual of the human race tends to learn and carve itself out in the sphere of the particular, of character. In the story "Dona Benedita," it is Caprice that serves as qualifying mediator, but the delicate flavor of a personal mixture remains

[43] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 410.

unaltered, perhaps unique, unrepeatable, as her name suggests. Dona Benedita will be indecisive, yes, but it is also, more or less, that *indecision* is Dona Benedita.

Other short stories will assemble objective situations in which reality itself, the inconsistency of the subject, will be presented in diverse ways.

Maestro Romão, the main character of "Nuptial Song" ("Cantiga de esponsais"), wants to compose beautiful melodies. He is a good conductor, knows how to play the harpsichord, but he cannot seem to translate the passion of his music into new notes. And the nuptial song, pursued many years after his marriage, which he left as a mere outline, will reach Maestro Romão' ears, five minutes before his death, [overheard] in singing of a bride on her honeymoon. Beauty is not the work of will, but a gift, grace by chance that awards anyone, and not those who want it most. The subject here is not indecisive like Dona Benedita, but impotent. And the narrator warns that anything that does not assume the appearance of form does not exist:

> It seems that there are two types of vocation: those that can speak and those that cannot. The former find fulfillment; the latter are nothing but a continual, sterile struggle between one's internal impulse and one's inability to communicate with the outside world. Romão's vocation belonged in that second category.[44]

Nature seems to be neither more just nor more egalitarian than society, and Machado moves the random distribution of wealth from one sphere to another.

One of his most unsettling short stories, "Testamentary Disposition"[45] ("Verba testamentária"), has at its center the wound inflicted by the inequality of gifts and endowments that people receive. And what seems merely the vivid emblem of a morbid character (Nicolau, the envious) touches, on a deep level, the mechanics of social life as a space of gratuitous differences—fatal, given to a person the moment they arrive in this world. Machado brings to life envy as a perception of and antipathy toward disparity and, at the same time, the livid desire to compensate for it by the destruction of everything that might confer to the envied an intolerable superiority. Nicolau detests the richest, the most beautiful, elegant, graceful, talented, and famous.

[44] Ibid., p. 501.
[45] Ibid., p. 460.

The story develops in such a way as not to allow one to speak of a simple greed of this or that possession as the motive for Nicolau's hate. Would his case then be pure envy, ontological aversion to superiority? That is what it seems, with the story organizing itself as the portrait of a character: "Yes, dear reader, we will be entering the realms of pathology […] That little boy is not a healthy vessel; he is not a perfect organism, from his tenderest years on, he showed through repeated actions that there was in him some inner defect, some flaw of nature."[46] And Nicolau's brother-in-law makes a truly precise diagnosis: he has a worm in his spleen. However, we already know that Machadian theories are full of anomalies that hide the basest experience of the quotidian. Nicolau's envy is less visceral than it seems. It has its beginning in his life story, in the series of destructive acts committed by the boy, the first of which is turned against the best and most difficult to obtain toys of his friends. The motivation, the modest economic standing of his parents, is discretely posted parenthetically as a biographical entry:

"His father was a respected trader or dealer (as the Marquis of Lavradio used to say, most of those in this city who call themselves 'merchants' are nothing more than dealers on commission) […]"[47]

As in other cases, poor origins are quickly overcome. The family will live at leisure, with even "a certain magnificence," and Nicolau himself will be able to stand for representative to the first Brazilian Constitutional Assembly of 1823, although it pains him not to share in the high calling of "an illustrious exile," as so many other politicians of the First Empire.

The juvenile episode of the broken toys is followed by another more meaningful act in that Nicolau's envy manifests itself as a reaction to a uniform, a gallant uniform of a… second lieutenant, donned by a classmate. From toys, his envy moves on to clothing, and from clothing to the faces of the handsomest children, and to the books of the most advanced in their studies. The short story develops, first stringing together episodes that illustrate Nicolau's progressively more irritable and violent behavior, later counter-pointed by his friendly, and even sweet, conduct toward the inferior, vulgar, and subordinate, to whom he doles out tenderness and opens his soul.

Now, it seems that in this other face of Nicolau, which shows kindness to the unkind, that the portrait of the classic envious figure suffers another alteration: envy as the desire to

[46] Ibid., p. 461.
[47] Ibid., p. 461.

compensate for the random difference that nature produces and society consecrates. There is a terrible and paradoxical restorative "justice" in Nicolau's aversion to those beings recognized as superior, coupled with his attraction to those held publicly inferior. Nicolau inverts the chance order. He punishes those favored by fortune and awards those it has forgotten. To articulate this, the narrator begins the story with the last clause of Nicolau's will, which specifies the coffin in which he would like to be buried. The coffin should be made by the most marginal and disregarded carpenter of the city:

> […] ITEM: it is my final wish that the coffin in which my body is to be buried shall be made at the workshop of Joaquim Soares, in Rua da Alfândega. I wish him to be informed of this disposition, which shall also be made public. Joaquim Soares does not know me, but he merits this distinction on account of being one of our finest craftsmen, and one of the most highly esteemed men in all of Brazil […][48]

Nicolau, envious like Lucifer in the short story, "The Devil's Church" ("A igreja do diabo"), is rebellious toward the popular opinion of the world and wants to rearrange the order of its parts. The lowly must be praised, the noble attacked; virtues will be seen as vices, and vices will be seen as virtues. The envious figure and the devil want to invert the *signs of convention*, not the law itself, only the criteria of rule and recompense. As damned alternatives, his actions take on grotesque forms. All reduce themselves to the resentment of the inferior that, going by the name *Lucifer* or *Nicolau*, wants to destroy what it did not inherit. But it remains presupposed that inequality is a universal fact and, at the same time, a source of pain and humiliation.

If the transition to the safe realm of consensus is the route of normality, there falls a shadow of guilt or clemency or lunacy on those who do not know it or do not want to follow it. But, if divergence with the dominant Form is ruinous, neither does one arrive at peace and happiness through pure identification. At each extreme, identity forms cynics, deplorables, and traitors not infrequently concerned with their own self-preservation, while difference produces the mad and marginalized. Machado, historian, insists that the first is the real road, gray but sheltered; the latter is an alley of illusions that leads to defeat and derision.

[48] Ibid., p. 460.

His work, as a whole, bears the ambiguity of seeing the world at one moment from one side and in the next, from another; and what is more, seeing one side from the other. All as someone who had already crossed the bridge that leads to the shores of safety, but still carries with him, in some neglected corner of his memory, the ghosts of the other shore.

The portrait of characters composes zones of light and shadow; and the process naturally simplifies as it nears one of the extremes. A seamless and clear short story like "Pecuniary Anecdote" ("Anedota pecuniária") sketches out, in a few strokes, the figure of a worshiper of gold, a type from Old Comedy, that runs from Plautus to, by way of Molière, Balzac. The game between the ethics of the acceptable feelings of our miser Falcão and his interest in money goes fast, serving merely as a stimulus to better display the maneuvers of the bourgeois sensibility before reliably surrendering itself to the temptation of possession. Machado enjoys himself undermining the fetishism of money by reworking the signs of idolatry.

The hero, stuck in "pecuniary eroticism," visits the strongbox in his bedroom many times, "with the sole purpose of feasting his eyes on the neat stacks of gold coins and the bundles of stocks and shares."[49] The portrait of character here uses colors so strong that what lies ahead seems the updating of a myth. The myth of Midas. The miser Falcão, from a certain moment on, turns everything he touches to gold, even the nieces whom he has chosen as adopted daughters, and whom he winds up giving away, one after another, for ten million *réis* or a collection of foreign coins, "stacks of money, of silver, bronze, and copper."

There is a phase of capitalism in which the act of accumulation gives way to investment: one of the driving factors in the story is the rise of stocks on the market. Thus, Midas re-exhumes himself so perfectly that it is superfluous to have archaeological scruples. For Machado's symbolic system, the new Midas, the Brazilian tycoon, is part of those who populate, by inner calling, the realm of power and its glories, the *world,* exorcized by primitive priests and now consecrated as a place of salvation. Falcão is the archetype of an illustrious family of gold worshipers, the deplorables of great novels: Lobo Neves of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, Palha in *Quincas Borba*, Escobar in *Dom Casmurro*.

Reduction to myth is, however, a procedure that is only applied to Machado's characters by exception. More common is that mixture of light and shadow in the interior of consciences, divided up among the morality of feelings, principal relationships, and the new

[49] Ibid., p. 563.

triumphant morality that one could perhaps call "Realist" or utilitarian, in that "bourgeois" does not exactly seem a false term, but too generic. The transition from one morality to another, with the whole process of adaptations of consciousness that it implies, will be in large part the focus of Machado's stories beginning with *Miscellaneous Papers*.

From today's perspective, one could suppose that the change was due to a dateable expansion of new economic and social relationships in the Brazil of the middle to late 19th century. We are aided now by terms like "modernization," "secularization," and the idea of an imposition of "bourgeois values." Machado, like the urban Alencar of *Senhora* (but with ideological symbolism inverted), perceived situations that were new in part, but already sufficiently dense and representative of the socialization of principal relationships.

Everything indicates that Machado the writer did not enjoy the ideal conditions to interpret his Brazilian time and space, with criteria, say, of historicist rigor. He could observe with acuity, but without the clarity offered by social tensions to explain the object of his observation. For Machado, what we fundamentally attribute to the internal logic of advancing capitalism and to its morality of competition would be, first, a way of acting, shifting between the defensive and offensive—*according to Nature*, that same selfish and Darwinist Nature, amoral and innocent, that appears in Brás Cubas' delirium. The struggle for money and *status* appears as an extension of instincts—what is summarized so well in the expression *second nature*. The principle is always the selection of the strongest or the most cunning. Presenting society as nature, Machado saw the ferocious race to power as a process common to both situations. In this way, the mechanics of immediate interests that guide the larger part of human actions became, in a certain way, understood, if not justified. An archaic (and tantalizingly "atemporal") aspect of this determinism resides in it not being supported in Naturalist or scientific discourses of the time. It molds itself into an old fatalistic language, which comes from Ecclesiastes, the Cynics, Machiavelli, and the French Moralists. It is classic materialism. Or a political and moral Naturalism that tends to approximate the order of self-interest and the order of instinct. I find, for example, in Vauvenargues' *Reflections and Maxims*, one of his more evocative statements:

> With kings, nations, and private individuals, the strongest assume to themselves rights over the weakest, and the same rule is followed by animals, by matter, by the elements, so that everything is performed in the universe by violence. And that order which we blame with

> some appearance of justice is the most universal, most absolute, most unchangeable, and most ancient law of nature.[50]

This mode of thinking, which has returned innumerable times to constitute the dominant ideology in Western culture, and which we have even seen incorporated into common sense, cannot be judged en bloc, as, in its radical, fatalistic and pessimistic formulation it seems to readily align with expressions of reactionary defeatism. If, as Positivist philosophy, its tendency is to reinforce the unfair idea that humans are what they are and things are as they should be because of the force of Nature, as a critical position, anti-idealist, and, in the context of Machado, anti-Romantic, it offers a healthy function for concrete analysis of behaviors and their motivating factors in each social situation. The point of view of the author may be extremely perceptive as to the operations of describing and narrating, while, at the same time, doctrinally heavy and abstract in the moment of a totalizing interpretation of the "world," in which move not only its creatures, but all people. The reader of Machado de Assis can keep their Realist psychology of the unmasking without adhering to the metaphysics of negativity present in more than one moment of his mature work.

In the short stories that front couples it is frequent to see the subjects arrange themselves in asymmetrical relationships around the object of desire. In this showdown, it always ends badly for the figure, who, proving themself weaker, acts openly and vulnerably in their relationship with the other. The winner, on the contrary, is the one who has run firmly toward individual interest, toward *status,* and who, in situations of risk, has never let the mask fall.

In "Admiral's Night" ("Noite de almirante") the duo is one of lovers, Genoveva and Deolindo. The young man, a sailor, needs to travel for some time, but before leaving he pledges his fidelity and hopes for the same from the woman he loves. Up to this point, there is a symmetry of mutual love, sacred because of the solemn words of the farewell: "I swear by God in heaven; may the light fail me at the hour of my death."[51] The narrator comments: "The contract was sealed."[52] The seaman returns months later, having resisted all temptation, trusting in only that oath of love. And he finds Geoveva living with a peddler.

[50] Jean de La Bruyère and Vauvenargues. *La Bruyère and Vauvenargues: Selections from the Characters, Reflexions and Maxims*. Trans. Elizabeth Lee, London, A. Constable, 1903, p. 176.
[51] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 587.
[52] Ibid.

The interesting part of the story is not in the common situation of the betrayed lover. It is in the reaction of Genoveva when challenged by Deolindo. It is in her "mixture of candor and cynicism, insolence and simplicity, which I shall refrain from trying to define any better."[53] Genoveva is not regretful. First, she openly admits that she had sworn her fidelity, it is true, "but then other things came along…," and that is all. There appears to be no consciousness of guilt, and it is the very narrator that, in the end, intervenes to explain Genoveva to readers who are perhaps stunned at the lack of conscientiousness: "Note that here that we are very close to unvarnished nature."[54]

The dynamic of the oath brusquely becomes asymmetric. The verbal agreement was broken by one of the sides, and the asset that he secured, the love of Genoveva, she herself transferred to a third party, one perhaps more attractive and certainly less poor. This was reality. Why deny it? "Once the peddler had supplanted the sailor, then reason was on the peddler's side, and it was only right to say so."[55] That "simplicity," that "candor," maintained beyond betrayal, seems very close to nature to the narrator, a nature that does not know sin, guilt, remorse, but only necessity.

It remains to be seen if the *explicit* point of view of the author acknowledges the complexity of the narration. Is it worth asking about the sailor Deolindo? His faithful love, his belief in the oath of love, his following it? Would it be, perhaps, less natural than Genoveva's behavior? What is natural and what is social in the scheme of emotions? Both swore, and the narrator guarantees us that both did so sincerely. What is the difference? The narrator, assuming (or simulating) Genoveva's point of view, looks to suppress this difference, suggesting that Deolindo did not always fulfill his word either. The sailor, desperate, says at a certain point that he will kill himself because of her, but he does not kill himself. And the young woman, at the time, skeptical, says, "Don't worry, he won't really. That's how Deolindo is: he says things but he doesn't do them. You'll see, he won't kill himself. Poor thing, he's jealous."[56]

The word—symbol of the interpersonal relationship—is one thing. Another, quite another, is the weight of self-preservation, the eternal return of selfishness. This would be the Naturalist and fatalist sensibility that Machado shares with the better part of the ideology

[53] Ibid., p. 589.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories.* Trans. William Grossman, p. 137.

of his time.[57] One sees this sensibility enter as a powerful organizing force in "Admiral's Night." Ideology makes itself plot and character.

But today's reader is not forced to assume the philosophical perspective of the narrator. That would be to duplicate, at the moment of interpretation, ideas of the interpreted text. Capitu may also seem more instinctive, more natural than Bentinho. But as he gazes at the stars, she counts money. Returning to the short story, its lynchpin is the lie, the deception, the breaking of one's given word, the oath betrayed. Now, no theme is less "natural," to the extent that nature cannot swear. It neither makes pacts nor dissolves them. The *lie* (like the *shame* that Deolindo felt when he did not share the situation with his shipmates) is a sign; it is not an epiphenomenon of the body. The latter only appears when the "natural"—the gaze, the voice, the gesture—penetrates into the interpersonal sphere and the regime of communication. Genoveva told the truth of the facts when confronted by Deolindo, not because she was candid, not because she was naturally incapable of lying, but simply because she had lied enough in betraying sworn faith, when she had to choose a more economically secure alternative in the form of the peddler. In this new protected position in which she finds herself receiving her old sweetheart, Genoveva feels safe and, as victor, confronts Deolindo's disappointment. She is fine now. She does not need the sailor. She has a new and better lover. The sailor, for his part, did not lie taking the oath of love, but neither will he carry out his insistence on killing himself, conceived in a moment of bitterness. In the end, returning ingloriously to the ship, he "preferred to lie" to his shipmates, hiding the betrayal of his love from them: "It would seem he was ashamed of the truth […]"[58]

In Genoveva, the sequence is: lie and truth. In Deolindo it is: truth and lie. After the initial symmetry, when the lovers swear mutual fidelity, an asymmetry arises in which one betrays while the other remains faithful. At the end of everything, the symmetry inverts itself, because the liar flatly supports her betrayal (that is her truth), and the one who told the truth is embarrassed by his good faith, and prefers to hide it from the eyes of the other, lying.

In these actions and reactions we are not, as the narrator suggests, or seems to suggest, so close to nature. To the contrary, the story plainly situates itself in the realm of

[57] It is necessary at this point to make a relevant distinction: "Ideology of his time" should be understood in the passage as the acceptance of the law of the strongest and the most cunning, one of the interpretations given, in the 19th century, to Darwinist competition. Moralist pessimism found further support in this reading. The other reading, optimistic, that subordinated everything to the demands of evolution and progress, is owed to Spencer. It was predominant starting with the Brazilian "Generation of 1870" and certainly did not convince the skeptical Machado de Assis.

[58] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 592.

symbolic rebellion among people: the world of oath and perjury, the tricky world of a sign changed or feeling hidden by a word or gesture: "He answered everything with a discreet, satisfied smile, the smile of a man who'd had a wonderful night. It would seem he was ashamed of the truth and preferred to lie."[59]

If the author does not manage to impose on us the fatalism of instincts in which he seems to believe, he allows for, in any event, the strong suspicion that society is an encounter of signs, one moment transparent, when a word expresses the lived reality, and in the next, opaque, when a word dissimulates it—which is a way of saying that people mix sincerity and deception together in their relationships with others and themselves.

Take for example the story of "A Woman's Arms"[60] ("Uns braços"). It is the adolescent passion of a youth for the wife of the lawyer he works for and the fleeting delight he inspires in her. It is an attraction that reaches its climax in a kiss, when she sees him sleeping. However, it ends shortly thereafter, when he is clearly dismissed at her suggestion to her husband. She has come to regret or fear her reckless gesture. Although the plot strings together moments of passion, the theme of the story is not passion, but its necessary concealment. The young Inácio cannot let his fascination for Dona Severina, for her arms, become evident. Neither she nor her husband can find out. Dona Severina, for her part, cannot reveal what she suspects—not to Inácio, and, naturally, not to her husband. The dynamic of disorientation is perfect because it winds up enveloping the love interests themselves. The scene of the kiss, which would give both the revelation of mutual feeling, occurs at the same time—in Inácio's dream (he dreams that he kisses her) and outside the dream (she kisses him while he sleeps). However, as she flees right away and he keeps sleeping, neither one of them will know that they were kissed. The passion will never go beyond the secret life of the impossible lovers: "To this day he often exclaims, without knowing that he is mistaken, 'And it was a dream! Just a dream!'" Fear glued the mask of innocence to both of them; it protected them from her husband and also protected them from each other.[61]

Once more, the narration explores disparity in pairings and the necessary divergence of their destinies. In "Admiral's Night," Genoveva does not want to return to the initial stage of the story. Well-installed with her second man, she dispatches the first without delay or

[59] Ibid.
[60] *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories.* Trans. Helen Caldwell, p. 47.
[61] Ibid., p. 55.

expectation. The duo of Inácio and Dona Severina is also off key. The subordinate will be unfailingly dismissed. There is a primacy of economic hierarchy over the caprices of affection, as well as over the ephemeral pacts to which the fire of passion gives rise.

In these short stories of encountering and not encountering one another, the interaction of the duos or trios further reveals more of the power of the resulting situation, more of Machiavelli's *effectual truth*, than a hypothetical moral depth or the substantive character of the figures in the story. I continue to find that it does not much matter for us today knowing whether the conditioning factors were explained by the narrator in terms of a natural human state. In truth, if today we opt for the other side of the process, seeing in social competition the driving force of asymmetries, perhaps we can one day combine both interpretations remembering that Marx wanted to dedicate *Das Kapital* to Darwin. It was Darwin who did not accept. Machado de Assis seems to have united nature and society in the same image and in the same being, even in the very expression that speaks of the "calculations of Life."

Along these lines, what an audacious short story "Evolution" ("Evolução") is, one of the last he wrote! The stuffed shirt that, in another story, a zealous father wanted to make of his son, teaching him the pertinent theory, appears now realized, at roughly the age of 45, ready to repeat all the commonplace language of the world and to make a solid career as a representative without any ideas. Or better yet, with just one idea, not his, that he has stolen from a completely casual conversation with the narrator of the story. If I were a Structuralist, I would say that the system of this story moves around an axis of pronouns: *you-we-I*. Let us take a look:

Benedito, the stuffed shirt, travels with the narrator on the stagecoach from Rio to [the city of] Vassouras. In the chat, full of "grave, solid banalities,"[62] Benedito hears the following words from his fellow traveller, praising the progress of the railroads: "I always compare Brazil to a child who is only at the crawling stage, and who will only begin to walk when we have a whole network of railroads."[63] In the following scene, the two get together for lunch.[64] The narrator's opinion comes up again and is cited by Benedito with the emphatic phrase: "…as you were saying."

[62] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 905.
[63] Ibid.
[64] TN: In the original essay it appears as "dinner." In Machado's text, "lunch."

The second time. They run into each other in Paris, where Benedito has gone to endure the disappointment of an unsuccessful political candidacy. The parties, he laments, were not interested in his platform of developing the lifeblood of the nation. And the idea of a crawling Brazil, awaiting the salvation of railroad lines returns to Benedito's mouth, now preceded by the broad and collective label of "what we were saying." The journey from *you* to *we* brings the luminous idea to the generous space of the plural.

The third encounter: Benedito, finally a representative, prepares his debut speech in Parliament. Its opening shines with the same bright idea: "and I will repeat here what I said to a friend of mine a few years ago, on a journey into the interior of the country…"[65] The name of the story becomes clear: from *you* to *we*, from *we* to *I*—this was Benedito's "Evolution." Evolution is successful appropriation. The final result is called possession. It is in History as it is in Nature. The fact that the object of appropriation is an idea, a phrase, a simple metaphor merely refines the project of self-conservation.

Appropriation does not tend, however, to content itself with ideas or phrases pilfered from some intelligent interlocutor. Its current forms are more vampiric—be it flesh and blood, women, or goods. The mild Machado knows how to be cruel in very bitter short stories like "The Secret Cause" ("A causa secreta"), "The Gentleman's Companion"[66] ("O enfermeiro"), "Pylades and Orestes" ("Pílades e Orestes"), "The Cane"[67] ("O caso da vara") and "Father against Mother" ("Pai contra mãe"). I find in these stories the extreme edges of nature and society sewn together by the black thread of evil. In "The Secret Cause" that evil seems congenital: Fortunato possesses, like the Fortune[68] that he bears in his name, a malignant character; and we have to accept without reservation that Machado here gazes, tellingly, into the face of the instinct of death. Fortunato, who finds pleasure in the convulsions of agony, is a particular case of universal perversion that already appears in the poem "Suavi mari magno"[69]:

> I am reminded that, on a certain day,
> In the street, under the summer sun,

[65] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 909.
[66] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 700.
[67] Ibid., p. 765.
[68] TN: "Fortune" seemingly in the continued Machiavellian vein.
[69] TN: The title is a reference to the opening of Book II of Lucretius' *De rerum natura.* A. E. Stallings translates the Latin as follows: "How sweet it is to watch from dry land when the storm-winds roil / A mighty ocean's waters, and see another's bitter toil" (Titus Lucretius Carus. *The Nature of Things.* Translated by A. E. Stallings, London, Penguin, 2007, p. 36).

A poor dog,
Was dying poisoned.

It panted, foamed at the mouth, laughed,
A fake and clownish laugh,
Its belly and legs shook
In convulsions.

None, not one curious person,
Passed without stopping,
Silent,

Next to the dog that was going to die,
As if it gave them pleasure
To see it suffer.

(From *Ocidentais*)[70]

Human society, the "syntax of nature," as the sage of "Alexandrian Tale" ("Conto alexandrino") insists, employs a kind of combinatory power over instincts that alone, remains mysterious and indestructible.

In "The Cane" and in "Father against Mother," evil erupts at the confluences of the slavocratic system of Imperial Brazil. It is born and grows within a structure of oppression. The schematics of the early novels are reproduced with more subtlety but no less subtle violence. To survive, a poor person must be cold, they must obey the laws of second nature, "as genuine and imperious as the first." Carried out by its implacable actors, this "total harmony of instinct with society" is commended in *The Hand and the Glove.*

"The Cane" and "Father against Mother" give testimony as much to the villainy of their protagonists as they do the logic that rules those figures' actions. The "tendencies of the soul" and the "calculations of life" disappear in the struggle for self-preservation. They have in common the human who is legally free, but poor and dependent—that is, one rung, but only one rung, above slavery. This position still takes advantage of the slave, not directly,

[70] TN: My translation of Machado's poem, as it appears in *Ocidentais* (1901).

as the poor cannot buy one, but obliquely, delivering the slave to the fury of the master, reporting them or capturing them when they rebel or flee. The power of the master unfolds on two fronts: they are not only the owner of the captive, but also owner of the free poor, to the extent that they reduce the latter to policing the slave.

"Slavery," writes Joaquim Nabuco, in condemnation, "took from us the habit of working to feed ourselves."[71]

As Machado writes in "Father against Mother": "Now, pursuing fugitive slaves was one of the trades of the time."[72]

Cândido Neves, poor but very white, down to his name[73], marries Clara and, in order to survive, "gives in to poverty," becoming a capturer of blacks that he returns to their owners for a sizable reward. Nabuco:

> Slavery does not admit in any part, the working classes as such, nor is it compatible with the regimen of a salary and the personal dignity of craftsmanship. This [second] group, so as not to remain under the social stigma placed on workers, looks to point out the gap that separates it from the slave, and imbue itself with a sense of superiority that is merely baseness of the soul, in one who has left a servile situation, or who has been in it because of their parents.[74]

Candinho is poor, but he does not subject himself to this work because everyone has something of that servile condition of which Nabuco speaks, and that the narrator of the story lists specifies: printer (the first profession of a poor Machado…), clerk at a haberdashery, office branch messenger, postman… "The obligation to attend to and serve all and sundry wounded his self-esteem."[75] In the exercise of pursuing slaves, his pride will come out unscathed. First, it stirs up in him the instinct of a hunter that finds in the hunt a demonstrable means of reaffirming his condition of being white, free, and strong.

"Catching runaway slaves had a certain charm."[76]

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[71] Joaquim Nabuco. *O abolicionismo*. 4th ed., Petrópolis, Vozes, 1977, p. 195. My translation. The first edition was printed in 1883.
[72] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 842.
[73] TN: "Neves" translates as *snow(s)*.
[74] Joaquim Nabuco. *O abolicionismo*, p. 160. My translation.
[75] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, p. 842.
[76] Ibid., p. 845.

But, with the hunt becoming scarce and increasing competition, Candinho sees himself in trouble, and, fearing economic misery, he resolves to leave his newborn son at the foundling wheel of a church. In the meantime, however, he surprises the fugitive slave Armida on a corner, who has been searched for extensively. This woman of mixed race is pregnant and appeals to Candinho's mercy—if not for her, at least for her unborn child. The hunter, however, does not vacillate. He drags her prisoner to the house of the master, where she immediately miscarries. Father against mother. After receiving the reward, Candinho returns home with his son, saved from the foundling wheel.

A first attempt at analysis suggests a correlation between two levels: one natural, the other social. The natural appears in relationships of paternity and maternity. Candinho is a father; Arminda is a mother. These are parallel facts that, on the plain of the natural, coexist without any conflict. As far as the social relationships that preside over the encounter of Candinho and Armida, they are, in contrast to the former, openly antagonistic. Armida is a fugitive slave, Candinho is a pursuer of captives.

The levels then are not found juxtaposed. The survival of natural relationships (father-son, mother-daughter) will depend on resolving the impasse created by Candinho's vocation as slave catcher. If he lets Armida go free, he will lose the reward and his son. If he captures her, the one endangered will be Armida's child. The conflict, that does not limit itself to a system of mere kinship, becomes a blood drama assumed by second nature, "as genuine and imposing as the first."

We might be led to believe that the final impasse is, entirely, what the title has declared: father against mother. But that dilemma is just one moment of the story. A minute before seeing the fugitive slave, Candinho had already accepted separating himself from his own son, once and for all, sending him away from the destitute family. Between a more viable economic situation and his own blood, between the social and the natural, he had already chosen the first. But, on seeing the slave, he perceived that the dilemma could be undone, and that, serving her master, he could reintegrate himself into the role of loving father. Yet, in this Age of Iron in which we live, few can enjoy such conciliation. The well-being of a few seems founded in the misfortune of others. Access to essential and economic goods, no matter how minimal in quantitative terms (in the end Candinho is poor), requires the exploitation of others. The law is always: *mors tua vita mea*.[77] The poor person, if they are free,

[77] TN: "Your death, my life."

returns the slave fleeing for freedom to irons, competing with them in a showdown of interests. The antagonism does not merely fix itself at extremes; this is a war of all against all, running each link of the chain from end to end, and, here, we see it express itself in the second-to-last and the very last links.

Now, if someone wanted to find out if Machado de Assis was *conscious of the critical process* that he represented with so much acumen, the answer, in a Machadian way, would have to vary between *yes* and *no*—as if his work were produced on two levels of consciousness.

The first is of ideological extraction, through which it is insinuated that all behavior is rooted in instincts of self-preservation—what comes to present itself as fatalism or ethical and political cynicism. Some revelatory reflections of the Counselor of *Counselor Ayre's Memorial* [78](*Memorial de Aires*), [Machado's] final novel, can be considered the zenith of this world vision. It deals with the flipside of the coin of bourgeois progressiveness, the "mature" side, a twilight moment in which Time and History cease to be a place of linear evolution to prove their own eternal return. And the voices come from the most disparate inspirations: Schopenhauer and Flaubert, Darwin and Nietzsche, Maupassant, and Machado de Assis. I insist on seeing in the Brás Cubas' delirium, with its Leopardi-like treatment of Nature and History, the originating model of this ideology. It is a ride through time periods in which, symptomatically, chronological direction goes from the present to the past and dizzyingly returns from the past to the present, without revealing, at any moment, the dimensions of the future. There is no apocalypse other than that of the present instant, when the delirium ends and Brás Cubas wakes up to die shortly thereafter. History as a nightmare.

The second level, of a counter-ideological extraction, goes against the grain of the moral reality where the plots and character take shape. Counter ideology is only accessed, in Machado's text, when he tries to hide it. His principal mode is one of a pseudo conformist tone, in truth, mildly mocking, with which he addresses, at length, bourgeois normality. Speaking on the trade of pursuing slaves, he explains it as follows:

"Now, pursuing fugitive slaves was one of the trades of the time.[79] It was not itself noble, but because it was an instrument of force with which law and property were maintained, it carried with it the implicit nobleness of vindicated action."[80]

[78] Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. *Counselor Ayres' Memorial.* Trans. Helen Caldwell, Berkeley, University of California, 1972.
[79] *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis.* Trans. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, 842.
[80] TN: My translation.

The confluence of *force* (here, brute force) and *implicit nobleness* contribute to the sarcasm.

The tone is subterranean, and, because of this, its violence contains itself, suppresses itself. But that is not the only indicator. Machado knows another mode, more apparent, of unmasking an ideology that justifies everything. For the work of the victorious to run smoothly, without hindrance or remorse, their stories tell us how many deceptions and self-deceptions, how many crimes have been made necessary. Stretching the quotidian to its fringe situations, Machado tests conformist thought, according to which the social order is a natural or providential order, with both forming the best of possible orders in this world. The analysis of the theory-based short story revealed the opposite: *convention* is often a product of fraud that power exerted to install and perpetuate itself. The public truth is a well-achieved artifice. And the savage dichotomy of weakness and strength reproduces itself in the civilized contrast of the powerful and the lacking, the astute and the ingenuous.

How does one judge the point of view of the author if in it the ideology of fatalism and the counter ideology of derision meet? Machado is certainly neither utopic or revolutionary (to the extent that the latter approaches a utopian ideal). He proposes nothing, expects nothing, believes nothing. But neither is he a conformist, as he so often seems to be. The narrator does not shy away from the inhuman rawness with which the system perpetuates itself or the suffering that it imparts on the defeated. We cannot let the final pages of *Quincas Borba* escape our memory.

Neither utopian nor conformist, the Machadian sensibility escapes proffered delineations of *yes* or *no*. It illuminates and darkens at the same time, it reflects as it disappears, and constructs fanciful theories that poorly hide real fractures.

Machado's perspective is that of a contradiction that disorients, the terrorist that pretends to be a diplomat. It is essential to look at the mask and into the depths of the eyes that the cutouts in the mask sometimes allow one to discern. This game has a well-known name: it is called humor.

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