

THE HIDEOUS GAZE

Paul Dixon
Purdue University

Abstract Scholars recognize the gaze as a significant motif in the fiction of Machado de Assis, which is understandable because it underscores the author's intense interest in subjectivity. An important subdivision of this motif is the instance in which a character becomes captivated by the sight of profound suffering or putrefaction. *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, *Quincas Borba*, *Dom Casmurro* and the story "A causa secreta" provide noteworthy examples of the phenomenon. The poem "Suave mari magno" (*Ocidentais*) suggests a key for understanding this morbid fascination. We take pleasure in seeing the agony of others because it reminds us that, at least for now, we are exempt from the same experience.

Keywords Machado de Assis, gaze, subjectivity, cruelty

One of the insistent themes of Machadian criticism, especially in the last few decades, has been "o olhar" (see, for example, Bosi, Mariconi and Varela). As I see it, this fascination with the gaze is a way of pointing out the intense subjectivity of Machado de Assis' approach to reality. The Brazilian author's representation of the world is usually mediated by the perception of one or more of his characters. A non-participatory narrator who does not adopt the perspective of a character could give the impression of stable, objective narrative facts, but this seldom occurs in Machado. He gives us not a world as it is, but rather a world as it seems to someone.

Examining the gaze is therefore a propitious way of getting at this essential "according to" that lies at the heart of Machado's fiction. It helps us appreciate that Dona Severina's arms ("Uns braços" 2: 490-97) are not remarkable in their own right, but only as the locus of Inácio's shy obsession. It guides us in an awareness that the dog in *Quincas Borba* is not just a dog, but to Rubião a vague reincarnation of the animal's namesake, the protagonist's teacher and benefactor. The gaze

obliges us to understand that Capitu's "undertow eyes" in *Dom Casmurro* are packed with suggestions from Bento Santiago's hidden agenda. And it shows us that the story "Missa do galo" is more about Nogueira's state of mind than it is about the words, gestures and dress of Dona Conceição, whom he so intently watches (2: 605-11).

Here I propose examining a particular subset of the phenomenon of the gaze. I will direct my own gaze at those moments when a character looks upon a scene characterized by putrefaction, violence or cruelty. Such scenes are notable as exceptions to the rule. In general, we know that Machado tends to avoid such unpleasant imagery. So, when as readers we occasionally come upon one of these more disturbing moments, we tend to take special notice. The first thing I say is that this imagery in no way suggests an adherence by Machado to the naturalist movement, which was so influential during the author's time. For the "feísmo" of the naturalists, scenes of suffering are usually direct and immediate: A short scene, where the protagonist in Adolfo Caminha's *Bom crioulo* receives a whipping for breaking rules, illustrates:

. . . Bom-Crioulo emudeceu profundamente sob os golpes da chibata. Apanhou calado, retorcendo-se a cada golpe na dor imensa que o cortava d'alto a baixo, como se todo ele fosse uma grande chaga aberta, viva e cruenta..... Morria-lhe na garganta um grunhido estertoroso e imperceptível, cheio de angústia, comprimido e seco; dilatavam-se-lhe os músculos da face em contrações galvânicas; o sangue, convulsionado, rugia dentro, nas artérias, no coração, no íntimo da sua natureza física, palpitante, caudaloso, numa pletora descomunal! (73)

The representation here is not complicated by any intervening perspective. The open wound is revealed directly by the outside narrator. The character's suffering, seen as a penetration into the consciousness of the protagonist, also has a direct and unmitigated quality.

This objective and immediate depiction of suffering is not the normal way for Machado de Assis.

The first example I want to mention is the dedication in *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, to the worm who first fed upon the narrator's dead body:

AO VERME
QUE
PRIMEIRO ROEU AS FRIAS CARNES
DO MEU CADÁVER

DEDICO COM SAUDOSA LEMBRANÇA
ESTAS MEMÓRIAS PÓSTUMAS

It could not be clearer that there is an intense subjectivity in this morbid depiction. Another example is in the same novel. Seeking to repair his watch, Cubas has a chance encounter with his first lover, Marcela, who after several years has fallen victim to smallpox and premature aging. The passage is all about the narrator's perception of his former flame. Where in her first appearance, years before, she had only been described as "linda" (chap. xiv), she is now pictured in intricate detail: "As bexigas tinham sido terríveis; os sinais, grandes e muitos, faziam saliências e encarnas, declives e aclives, e davam uma sensação de lixa grossa, enormemente grossa. Eram os olhos a melhor parte do vulto, e aliás tinham uma expressão singular e repugnante" (chap. xxxviii). This unusual attention to the repugnant details seems to be a sign of Cubas' fascination. He cannot take his eyes from her shocking transformation.

A third example from *Memórias póstumas* involves a random encounter with the narrator's former "moleque" Prudêncio, who is now free and who is publicly whipping his own slave. As the victim moans from pain, Cubas has a personal reaction, touching on the irony of the situation given the fact that it was he who abused Prudêncio in an earlier time: Now Cubas sees it as a "A modo que o Prudêncio tinha de se desfazer das pancadas recebidas, transmitindo-as a outro" (chap. lxviii).

In *Quincas Borba*, we find a remarkable moment in which Rubião watches a public hanging. He repeatedly tells himself that he doesn't want to see it but keeps following the proceedings despite himself. He shuts his eyes, but can't help opening them later, "devagarinho e curioso" (chap. lxvii). Rubião is transfixed by what he sees:

Todos os olhos fixaram-se no mesmo ponto, como os dele. Rubião não podia entender que bicho era que lhe mordida as entranhas, nem que mãos de ferro lhe pegavam da alma e retinham ali. O instante fatal foi realmente um instante; o réu esperneou, contraiu-se, o algoz cavalgou-o de um modo airoso e destro; passou pela multidão um rumor grande, Rubião deu um grito, e não viu mais nada. (chap. xlvii)

In *Dom Casmurro*, I am of course reminded of an episode where a pet cat catches a mouse. The rodent is still alive, "esperneando" (chap. cx). What is most remarkable about the scene is the rapture it causes in a child: "Ezequiel não disse nada, deteve-se, acocorou-se, e ficou olhando. Ao vê-lo assim atento, perguntamos-lhe de longe o que era; fez-nos sinal que nos calássemos" (chap. cx). The narrator suggests something sacred about this silent gaze, comparing it to a religious ritual.

When it comes to Machado's short stories, "A causa secreta" automatically comes to mind. The scene where Fortunato tortures a mouse would be an emphatic example of the naturalist esthetic were it not for the way that the story treats the incident. The story is more about sadistic observation than it is about the suffering of the injured. Fortunato's gaze is fixed, with a "vasto prazer, quieto e profundo, como daria a outro a audição de uma bela sonata ou a vista de uma estátua divina, alguma coisa parecida com a pura sensação estética" (2: 516-17). The richness of the story resides in the fact that Fortunato is not the only one with an obsessive gaze. Most of the story is filtered through the perspective of the young doctor, Garcia. It opens with the words "Garcia, em pé, mirava e estalava as unhas" (2: 511). He had first encountered Fortunato at a low-class theater, offering a "dramalhão, cosido a facadas" (2: 512). The narrator reveals that Fortunato is intensely involved in the violent moments of the play, but it is through the perspective of Garcia that the reader discovers this predilection (2:512). After the melodrama, Garcia follows the other on his way home, noting that he beats dogs with his cane on the way (2: 512). Weeks later, when the doctor in training treats a man who has been assaulted on the streets, "Garcia olhou" (2:512) and learns that the man who has come to the aid of the injured party is none other than the same Fortunato. The narrator reveals that there is a "comunhão de interesses" (2: 515) between the two. Fortunato adores observing suffering. Garcia adores observing Fortunato in those observations.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Fortunato marries a woman who is dying from tuberculosis. Garcia cannot help secretly falling in love with her, and at her wake, while Fortunato is out of the room, he weeps over her open casket. But now it is Fortunato who is observing, having silently returned to the room, and rather than taking offense at the newly discovered adulterous affection, he feels intense pleasure: "... saboreou tranqüilo essa explosão de dor moral que foi longa, deliciosamente longa" (2: 519). With its reference to violence in a theater, the story also adds a metaliterary dimension and implicitly prompts us as readers to ponder to what degree we are complicit with Fortunato and Garcia, virtually seated in the same cheap theater, likewise taking pleasure in viewing suffering.

In the realm of poetry, "Suave mari magno," from *Ocidentais* (1901), is an obvious example of this interest in the spellbound observation of pain. In view of the fascination on the part of Machado, and of Brazilian writers in general, for the often-morbid esthetic of Charles Baudelaire (see Amaral, Palmeira, Phillipov), it is reasonable to find a correspondence with the French writer's "Une charogne" from *Les fleurs du mal* (63-64), a poem contemplating an animal carcass. Machado's text is very short, and plain in its message:

Lembra-me que, em certo dia,
Na rua, ao sol de verão,
Envenenado morria
Um pobre cão.
Arfava, espumava e ria,
De um riso espúrio e bufão,
Ventre e pernas sacudia
Na convulsão.
Nenhum, nenhum curioso
Passava, sem se deter,
Silencioso,
Junto ao cão que ia morrer,
Como se lhe desse gozo
Ver padecer. (3: 161)

The fascination with agony is obvious. What is not so obvious is the poem's title, "Suave mari magno."

The phrase is an allusion to an excerpt from Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*:

We all know the smug feeling we get when, during a storm at sea, we look out from the shore and watch other people getting into difficulties. It is not that we actually enjoy the sight of someone else suffering; the pleasure comes from knowing that we are not suffering ourselves. And it is similarly comforting to observe opposing armies drawn up on a plain just before a battle, when we are well aware that we ourselves will not be running any risk at all. (45)

According to Lucretius, then, the observer's enjoyment comes not so much from seeing the pain itself, but rather from appreciating that we are exempt from that suffering.

So, is there an overriding idea that guides Machado's interest in the subjective perception of pain? I think that the poem just cited, along with an understanding of the allusion to Lucretius, suggests our answer. Perhaps as humans, when we happen upon the dire misfortunes of another, we cannot help to some degree to feel a relative sense of relief or even pleasure at the fact that, at least for now, we are excluded from the experience.

I now want to return to *Dom Casmurro*, because I think this last episode confirms that idea. Out of a half-hearted, reluctant sense of charity, Bentinho has been paying visits to a bedridden boy, a neighbor named Manduca, who is in the advanced stages of leprosy. Now, as he returns from having visited Capitu, he is called out by the boy's father who informs him that Manduca has just died. He invites Bentinho to step inside to view the corpse. He is reluctant because he doesn't want to spoil the effervescent feeling of his meeting with a girlfriend, but cannot say no. As he tells it,

Vivo era feio; morto pareceu-me horrível. Quando eu vi, estendido na cama, o triste corpo daquele meu vizinho, fiquei apavorado e desviei os olhos. Não sei que mão oculta me compeliu a olhar outra vez, ainda que de fugida; cedi, olhei, tornei a olhar, até que recuei de todo e saí do quarto. (chap. lxxxv)

He is horrified but cannot resist looking twice. When at home he finds a way to recover from the repugnant aftertaste:

Tudo arredei da vista, em poucos segundos; bastou-me pensar na outra casa, e mais na vida e na cara fresca e lépida de Capitu... Amai, rapazes! e, principalmente, amai moças lindas e graciosas; elas dão remédio ao mal, aroma ao infecto, trocam a morte pela vida... Amai, rapazes! (chap. lxxxvi)

As in the poem, we find that an appreciation for the pleasures of life has a sort of sympathetic interchange with the specter of death. In Machado, certain characters show a morbid fascination with mortal blight and agony. At least some of this fixated gaze, however, seems paradoxically to be related to a passion for life. These subjects “trocam a morte pela vida” in their ocular obsession.

Here we are not talking about Schadenfreude, about mere enjoyment of another’s misfortunes *per se*. Rather, it seems to involve, in those characters, the acknowledgment of and relief or even gratitude for their current enjoyment of a better state. At some future time, they will share the fate of those agonized souls enclosed in their fascinated gaze, but at least for the time being they are free; they are alive.

Paul Dixon (PhD, University of North Carolina, 1981) taught Latin American Literature at Purdue University for 45 years and has had visiting appointments at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, Brigham Young University, and Universidade Feevale (Novo Hamburgo, RS). He is the author of numerous articles and five books about Machado de Assis, the most recent being *Por linhas tortas: análise de Quincas Borba de Machado de Assis* (Nankin, 2020). Another book, his second about Machado’s short stories, is currently under consideration for publication in Brazil. Email: tudobem@purdue.edu

Works Cited

Amaral, Gloria Carneiro do. *Aclimatando Baudelaire*. Annablume, 1996.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Les fleurs du mal*. Gallimard, 1996.

Bosi, Alfredo. *Machado de Assis: o enigma do olhar*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2007.

Caminha, Adolfo. *Bom Crioulo*. Ática, 1998.

Lucretius. *The Nature of the Universe: A Translation of De Rerum Natura by Titus Lucretius Carus*. Translated by G. B. Cobbold. Bolchazy-Carducci, 2016.

Mariconi, Ítalo. “Dom Casmurro: o claro enigma.” *Matraga* 15.23 (2008); 74-95.

Palmeira, Natasha Belfort. *A forma livre: Baudelaire e Machado de Assis*. Editora 34, 2024.

Philippov, Renata. “Blurring Borders: The Self, the Wanderer and the Observer in Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Machado de Assis.” *AmeriQuests* 12.1 (2015): 1-9.

Varela, Fernando. “Machado de Assis, Houses and the Gaze.” *Hispania* 101.1 (2020): 87-95.