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Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas
(J. M. Machado de Assis, Brazil, 1880)

Between 1880 and 1908, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis wrote four or five novels and several dozen stories of world-class caliber, masterpieces much above what Brazilian literature—inclusive of Machado’s own earlier production—had offered up to that time. These are works that distance themselves from the romantic mixture of local color, the romanesque, and patriotism, or rather, from the facile and infallible formula in which the reading public of this young nation reveled. The difference, which is not merely one of degree, has a great reach and deserves reflection.

In this case, the change did not exclude necessary continuities, but transfigured them. As one critic astutely observed, Machado de Assis “meticulously steeped himself in the work of his predecessors,” acutely conscious of their adroit description of social customs and accurate analytic effort.¹ The limitations and inconsistencies of those same models, similarly, did not escape Machado. With a spirit notably aimed at overcoming those limitations, he sought to correct and—discreetly—ironize, by reprising in a less innocent key, the thematic and formal framework developed by his predecessors, and for that matter, in his own previous works. The justness of his rectifications stems from his malicious sensitivity to social functions and to the specificity of the country, suited to satirical study.

Thus, a localized and recent tradition, permeated with European models and bearing the signs of recent decolonialization, culminated in an unanticipated series of masterpieces. Machado’s rearrangement of material and form elevated a modest, secondhand fictional universe to the level of complexity of the most advanced contemporary art. In order to underscore the particular interest of that transformation, one could say that Machado’s action on the literary plane incorporates an overcoming of the sorts of alienation proper to colonial heritage.

Machado’s daring was timid at first, limited to the sphere of family life, within which he analyzed the perspectives and inequities of paternalism Brazilian-style, supported by slavery and vexed by liberal ideas. Without being disrespectful, he subjected to examination the unacceptable deprecation

¹ Antonio Candido, *Formação da literatura brasileira* (1959) (São Paulo: Martins, 1969), 117.

of dependents and, at the opposite pole, the arbitrariness of proprietors, equally unacceptable, though under the guise of civilization. As far as genre, his fiction represented a decorous realism, whose reading public was the Brazilian family. As far as content, Machado set his sights on and incisively investigated a characteristic complex of relationships resulting from the renewal of colonial inequalities in the newly independent nation, committed to the new concepts of freedom and progress.

Subsequently, from 1880 onward, Machado's daring becomes more encompassing and spectacular, *affronting the presuppositions of realist fiction*, that is, the nineteenth-century scaffolding of the bourgeois status quo. The novelty of his work lies in the narrator, humorous and aggressively arbitrary, functioning like a *formal principle*, subjecting characters, literary convention, and even the reader, not to mention the authority of the narrative form, to periodic feints. The narrator's intrusions range from light impertinence to unbridled aggression. Very deliberate, his infractions neither ignore nor cancel the norms they affront; but, at the same time, these are derided and rendered inactive, relegated to a status of half-valence that aptly encapsulates the ambivalent position of modern culture in peripheral countries. Necessary to that *rule of composition*, transgressions of every kind repeat themselves with the regularity of a universal law. The devastating sense of a Nothingness that forms in the wake of this composition deserves a capital letter, insofar as it is the final sum of an experience, in anticipation of other rules remaining to be trampled. As for the artistic climate of the epoch, this ending in a Nothingness is a replica, under a different sky, of what was being done by the French postromantics, described by Sartre as "knights of nonbeing."²

At first glance, Machado was trading an awkward and provincial sphere for another that was emphatically universal and philosophical, which lent itself to interpolations, digressions, and doubts of the kind that haunted Hamlet. This was a sphere that, incidentally, did not lack the note of cheap metaphysics, rediscovering a provincial tone on a more literate level (a splendid and *modern* finding). We might note that in this second mode, that of his great works, the first universe remains present, as anecdotal material—but not only that.

In their most conspicuous aspects, Machado's provocations recycled an erudite and refined range of prerealist conventions, in open defiance of the nineteenth-century sense of reality and of its objectivity. According to the

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 3:147.

Author's own warnings, he now adopted "the free form of a Sterne, or of a Xavier de Maistre," referring, above all, to the *digressive arbitrariness* of the eighteenth-century European novel.³ Nevertheless, and contrary to what a breaking of rules might make one suppose, the spirit of Machado's work was incisively realist, propelled as much by an implacable social logic as by the task of capturing its peculiarly Brazilian character. And it was also postrealist, interested in reflecting in a poor light the verisimilitude of the bourgeois order, opening up to visitation its unconfessed aspects, unmasking it in the modern manner that would prevail at the end of the century. The degree of historical paradox in this mode of composition is high, but functional in its own way, as we will see. Be that as it may, it presupposed a new kind of literary and intellectual culture in the country.

Ironic dealings with the Bible, the classics, philosophy, and science; continual formal experimentation, fed by advanced ideas on the dynamics of the unconscious, by a disabused perspicacity with regard to material interests and by personal social reflection cognizant of national particularities and of the dubious sides of nationalism; independence also in the adoption of foreign inspiration, sought outside the contemporary French and Portuguese *mainstream* and, moreover, adapted to Brazilian circumstance with memorable ingenuity; competition with naturalism, whose simple determinisms (so convincing and wrong in the context of the tropical ex-colony) Machado countered with complex causations no less powerful (but clear of racism): confidence in the potency of "free form," whose effects his narrator does not comment on in their most essential aspects or who does so only with the intent of confounding, compelling the reader to establish and reexamine them for himself—all of these were more or less unscripted innovations. If we add to this the cosmopolitan mien of his prose and the superior intelligence of his formulations in a country in which even today intelligence does not seem to be counted among artistic faculties, we have a basis to imagine that there is no common denominator between this universe and that of the fiction that preceded it.

Until the *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1880)—the work that marked Machado's turnabout—the Brazilian novel was narrated by a compatriot worthy of applause, whose speech was set loose by the beauty of the country's beaches and forests, the grace of its young maidens and its popular customs, not to mention the stupendous achievements of Rio de Janeiro. Beyond being an artist, the person who directly or indirectly extolled the country was an ally in the civic campaign for a national identity and culture. The

³ J. M. Machado de Assis, *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1880), in *Obras completas* (Rio de Janeiro: Aguilar, 1959), 1:413.

narrator of *Posthumous Memoirs* is of another type: deprived of credibility (insofar as he presents himself in the impossible position of being defunct), Brás Cubas is spiteful, partial, intrusive, absurdly inconsistent, given to mystification and indignant insinuation, capable of baseness in relation to other characters and the reader, and, at the same time, notably cultivated—setting a sort of standard of elegance—and capable of composing the best prose on the market. The internal disparity is disconcerting and highly problematic, resulting in a figure unequal to the previous national standard.

In principle, the obligation to respect the reader, verisimilitude, temporal and spatial continuities, coherence, and so forth, transcends geographical and linguistic borders. The same thing goes for the transgressions against common sense, in which the Machadian narrator revels: these are also situated in the abstract and transnational sphere of social standards, in which *universal* (as opposed to Brazilian) questions concerning civilized humankind are at play. Whether deeming Machado's narrator correct or incorrect, arguing against him or in favor, this was the common view among the critics of the day. The literary pirouettes performed by Brás Cubas, who does not lend himself to being respected, are plotted by these critics in terms of coordinates related to metaphysical and cosmopolitan lines, unattached to *local* material, on which they lean, nevertheless. According to one adversary, Machado took refuge in philosophical and formalist affectations, and peculiarly English ones, in order to avert the battles of the Brazilian writer. Others, fed up with the picturesque and provincial, and desirous of civilization proper (that is, European and unashamed of the backwardness around them), greeted Machado as the country's first writer in the full sense of the term.

In sum, the arguments were more or less the following. In changing the rules of the game in the very face of the reader, only to change them again immediately, the narrator engages in a kind of dissolute jesting, in poor taste, unworthy of a serious Brazilian, and poorly disguising both an intellectual incapacity and a lack of narrative stamina. In the other camp, the same affronts indicated a formally adept artist, a skeptical and civilized spirit, for whom the world lent itself to doubt and was not reduced to narrow national limits. Thus, sympathizers and opponents were both of the opinion that Machado retreated from Brazilian particularity, whether to interrogate the human condition or to devote himself to "the comedy of the almanac, the pessimism of ephemeral hack writing, which manages to delude those few simpletons who find it marvelous."⁴ The idea that Brazilian reality did not pose universal problems, and vice versa, was common to both sides, *reflecting*

⁴ Silvio Romero, *Machado de Assis* (1897) (Campinas: Unicamp, 1992), 160.

the persistence of colonial segregation. “The instability to which I refer stems from the fact that in America the landscape, life, the horizon, architecture, everything that surrounds us lacks a historical basis, a human perspective; and from the fact that in Europe we lack our homeland, that is, the form in which each of us was cast at birth. On one side of the sea we feel the absence of the world; on the other, the absence of the country.”⁵

The dissonance between the local note and ostensible universalism was discomfiting, but not uncharacteristic. For whomever had ears to hear, the mutual estrangement comprised a necessary and representative accord that formalized, in microcosmic terms, an alienation of world-historical proportions as much as a dissonance. Machado comprehended the comic impasse inherent in this tonal disparity and, instead of avoiding it, made of it a central element in his literary art. Thus, the erudite, highly experienced narrator, the humanist disdainful of the idiocies and inconsequentialities in which our humanity is wrapped up, and intimately familiar with the Bible, Homer, Lucian, Erasmus, Shakespeare, the French moralists, Pascal—is just half of the picture, and a less absolute part than it might seem. The other half emerges when we consider him as one character among others, defined by characteristics typical in their manifestation of local malformation, the very characteristics that the narrative playfulness and the corresponding climate of metaphysical farce make us overlook as irrelevant details. One need only put together these two halves for the picture to change. We then observe

⁵ Joaquim Nabuco, *Minha formação* (1900) (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1976), 26. To have an idea of the extent of the problem, it suffices to note how José Veríssimo, a critic who insisted on the great superiority of Machado, nevertheless stated that his works had little to do with Brazil: “Machado’s literary work cannot be measured against criteria which, if you allow me the expression, one might call nationalistic. These criteria, which constitute the main tenet of the *História da Literatura Brasileira*, as well as of the whole of Sílvio Romero’s critical work, consist of, when reduced to their simplest expression, looking into the ways in which a writer contributes to the shaping of the national character, or, in other words, to what extent his works aid the development of a literature which, due to its particular nature, one might call Brazilian. These criteria, when applied by our critic, as well as by others, to the works of Machado de Assis, would certainly place them in an inferior position in our literature.” Later, Veríssimo would change his mind: “Albeit not explicitly, it was Machado who provided us with the deepest and most perceptive explanation of the Brazilian soul . . . representing Brazilian society with a talent for synthesis and generalization which raised his works to the category of great universal masterpieces.” The romantic and dialectical scheme, according to which, the more universal, the more local a writer is, integrated Brazil with civilization. By offering a different evaluation on a superior level, Veríssimo somewhat agreed with Sílvio Romero’s criteria. For the quotations, see, respectively, *Estudos brasileiros, segunda série (1889–1893)* (Rio de Janeiro: Laemmert, 1894), 198; and *Estudos de literatura brasileira*, 6th ed. (Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia, 1977), 106.

that in *real life* (within the fiction) the virtuoso of literary-philosophical feints is a proprietor Brazilian-style, master of slaves, versed in relations of clientelism, adherent to European conceptions of progress, and partner in the postcolonial joint venture of domination.

The montage is slightly unforeseen, but transforms the terms that integrate it, bringing into focus a remarkable social type, with similarly remarkable social repercussions and a profound historical reach. The infractions against narrative equity take on different dimensions: through the narrator, they are assimilated to a *sui generis* group of proprietary prerogatives, proper to the *national* picture of class distinctions, differing significantly from the universalist terrain of rhetorical art and at odds with civilized social standards. From the liberal and European standpoint, from whose authority there was no means of escape, these prerogatives were insulting—which did not keep them from taking part in the *douceur de vivre* passed on by the colony and, on the other hand, from echoing the new moral carelessness cultivated by imperialism. In its own way, creating a rhythm with its own rules, the affront to literary *fair play* metaphorically stood for the admixture of regal privilege and illegitimacy that the nineteenth century linked to direct personal domination. Inserted in the field of international inequities, the capacity for coinage began to be exercised at a pole that until then had not exercised its power, a *peripheral pole*, that inverts perspectives and forces the recalibration of standards of measurements: the Western literary tradition is solicited and deformed in such a way as to manifest the delights and moral contortions, or simply the differences, linked with that historically reprobated form of class domination, and it imprints on that tradition, together with its vitality, its contravening stamp. One substantial critical consequence of the flexibility with which high culture lends itself to this role is that high culture itself is then seen in a less estimable, or more sarcastic, light. At the same time, this social type, which might be considered exotic and remote, and more of an operetta-like cliché than a problem, is developed in terms of the magnitude of its effects in contemporary world culture, within which it comes to be a discrete pivot.⁶

⁶ For the historical reach and expansive impulse of that order of digressions, cf. an observation by Marx on the U.S. Civil War: “Already in the years between 1856 and 1860, that which the political spokesmen, jurists, moralists and theologians for the side of slavery sought to prove was not so much the justice of black slavery, but rather that the color in play is irrelevant, and that it is the working class, everywhere, that is made for slavery” (Karl Marx, “Der Bürgerkrieg inden Vereinigten Staaten” (1861), in Marx Engels Werke [Berlin: Dietz, 1985], 15:344). I am grateful to Luis Felipe de Alencastro for the reference.

In other terms, the liberties taken with formal convention represent, beyond rhetorical caper, what had been a dimly lit sector of the contemporary scene. They extend to the plane of culture and to the presuppositions of nineteenth-century civility—the uncivilized power enjoyed by Brazilian proprietors in relation to poor or enslaved dependents. The literary accent falls back on aspects of irresponsibility and arbitrariness, as well as on the ins and outs of intra-elite connivance, which is its complement. In this case, there is an affinity between imaginative license and irresponsible power, or, along a parallel line, between disregarded literary forms and abused dependents, setting up an extraordinary play of mirrors. It is as if Brás Cubas were saying that the culture and civility that he esteems and of which he considers himself a part could continue to function in its own way without impeding him from taking advantage of his privileges—or even as if he were demonstrating, through the operation of scandal and everyday practice on the consecrated body of universal culture, the consequences of those same privileges. Thus, far from exchanging a small, irrelevant world (nevertheless, ours) for the prestigious (but falsified) universality of the being-or-not-being of forms, Machado linked the two planes, in order to open up, *in the spirit of critical exposure*, the sequestered universe that had been his point of departure. This is a heterodox example of the universalization of the particular and of the particularization of the universal, or of dialectic.

The narrator's intellectual range and ease, incommensurate with the backward world of his characters, compensates for their historical isolation. Situations that might appear picturesque or peculiarly colonial are interwoven with anecdotes in the classical tradition, philosophical arguments, religious dogma, paradoxical or cynical maxims of a bourgeois order, recent European fashions, scientific innovations, and news of imperialist conflicts, *composing a peculiarly mixed narrative structure and speech* that then came to be the trademark of the Author. Always a little forced (but the humor lies in this), these approximations achieve a release from the confinements of the local reality. It is a matter of deprovincialization and universalization in the literal sense of these terms. The resulting hit, precisely on target, includes a factitious and laughable note, insofar as the detachment from the surroundings exposes the incompatibility of the two spheres. Be that as it may, we witness the insertion of the country within the modern human perimeter, an insertion achieved through insolent narrative devices, now strident, now subtle. As far as models go, beyond digressive eighteenth-century prose, another closer one exists in the fluttering style of the weekly French *feuilleton*, whose Parisian frivolity Machado

wanted to infuse with “American color,” or rather, with the poison of local class relations.⁷

The abrupt step taken—let us suppose—from Catumbi [the elegant outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, where Brás Cubas lives comfortably] to metaphysics, from the latter to the punishment of a slave, moving on to the cosmos or to parliamentary Europe, to the crooked dealings of war or to the beginning of time, is indebted to Brás Cubas’s intellectual outbursts and resources. While great, the latter are at the same time ambivalent in every respect, tending toward baseness, exhibitionism, and class impertinence. Thus, the country’s incorporation by the contemporary world is operated by a dubious character, who makes a mockery of the credibility that the reader invests in him. Gone is the somewhat careless and hypocritical supposition that narrators are men of worth, not to mention worthy of posts of national leadership, or, by extension, the supposition that national leaders and the readers themselves are worthy. In this sardonic constellation, progress and victory over colonial isolation acquire an unanticipated perverse coloration: the former do not cease to exist, but their usefulness to a modernized reproduction of colonial inequalities, with which they show themselves compatible, does not provide any sense of having overcome the latter. This has nothing to do with denying advances, but with acknowledging that these constitute inglorious achievements—depending on one’s point of view—in the scope of the most precious national aspirations. The critical and counterideological daring of this anticlimax, or of this second-rate regionalism that incorporated the degradation of cosmopolitanism, is disconcerting even today. In my opinion, it is this that determines the eminence of Machado’s great works.

But let us return to the contrast with the awkwardness of Machado’s first novels.⁸ These earlier works also were engaged in a search for modernity, albeit from a different perspective. The aspirations for progress and freedom had to do with the discomfiting state of the *dependents*, in particular of the most talented among them, whom only “an error of nature” had caused to be born into inferior circumstances.⁹ The narrative represents these dependents

⁷ In one of his first critical essays, Machado discussed the “acclimatization” of the *feuilleton* in the country “To write a *folhetim* and remain Brazilian in truth is difficult. Meanwhile, as all difficulties level off, it could well take on more local color, more of an American character. Thus, it would do less wrong to the independence of the national spirit, so captive to those imitations, to that mimicry, to that suicide on the part of originality and initiative” (Machado de Assis, “O folhetonista” (1859), in *Obras completas*, 3:968–69).

⁸ *Ressureição* (1872), *A mão e a luva* (1874), *Helena* (1876) and *Iaiá Garcia* (1878).

⁹ *A mão e a luva*, in *Obras completas*, 1:142.

in their fight for personal dignity, enmeshed in the sphere of proprietary families, to whose number, in this case, civilization seemed reduced. At the center of intrigue, poor heroines, intelligent and lovely—not to mention susceptible—confronted the injustices to which they fell victim; or rather, they maneuvered in order to be adopted by a well-situated clan. They neither lacked sincerity, nor allowed themselves to be disrespected, within the bounds of a prickly situation. Rebelliousness and criticism, inspired from abroad by romanticism and the Rights of Man, found their practical limits in the destitution of these young girls. On the other hand, the loyalty that they owed their patrons and protectors, tinged with filial piety and Catholic obligation, marked a moral boundary that it would be indecent to cross. Woven into everything was the lordly suspicion, derisive and debasing, that the heroines might be motivated by pecuniary interests—which obligated the poor things to endless demonstrations of disinterested abnegation. The ambiguities of this rearguard combat raised unsavory questions, exasperating in their conformity, and always fell short of the modern emancipation of the individual. How to confront without humiliation the inevitable despotism of patriarchs (or matriarchs) and their close relatives? Why would the girl without means, who insinuates herself and instigates an adoption by well-situated neighbors, without whom she would have no access to the world, not be respectable; or better, why would she be calculating, in the bad sense of the word? Does a poor man's taste for Sevres vases and cashmere curtains constitute an index of insolence or, worse, place his honor in doubt? Could a preference for luxury, by chance, not be spontaneous and natural, in the good sense, clear of the baser aspects of money? What is the dose of insolence that gratitude requires one to accept without scandal? In sum, how to disarm the preconceptions of the well-off against those who have nothing? Although these were glaring questions, the social scheme made any direct confrontation taboo for the protagonists and narrators of Machado's early fiction.

By and large, the main adventures belong to the repertoire of the more trivial romantic novel, in which love is put to the test by chance social happenings and distances, with marriage always in view. Nevertheless, if we attend to the motivations woven into the fabric of the text, we will note that it is not really this that is at stake, but rather the relation between *dependent* and the *family of means*, the former's status burdened by the oppressive sign of protection that at any moment can be revoked. In this case, love matters less than dignity, always at risk of not being recognized (but why?). In order to understand the latent issues here, we need to distance ourselves. Let us say that Machado was rearranging the paraphernalia of romantic fiction in

order to render it consonant with a real historical question, embedded in the characteristic lines of Brazilian society, which gave them their peculiar tone. Bourgeois and slaveholding at the same time, Brazil gave mercantile form to material wealth but did not develop salaried labor, resulting in the special problem of *class* alluded to in these novels. Supported by an agricultural economy dependent on a slaveholding system, whose structures extended into urban life, the country required that men who were free but poor—neither proprietary, nor proletarian—live in a peculiar state of privation or semiexclusion. They had no means to renounce the shelter of patronage, under whose protection they continually returned, despite the fact that the liberal-romantic fashion of the century, the depository of contemporary sentiment, designated that kind of dependence as a degrading sign of backwardness. To carry this point further, let us say that, in the absence of proprietorship, only patronage could save somebody from being nobody, but without making him an equal. Thus, *relationships based on favors*, incompatible with the impersonality of law, or, seen from the other side, inseparable from an exaggeration of the personal sphere, mediated the material reproduction of one of the largest social classes as well as its access to the sphere of modern civilization. A different standard of modernity was being developed, *falling short of general legal guarantees*, with outlets and impasses that were likewise *sui generis*. The sense of discrepancy that resulted from this would outlive the abolition of slavery and last into the present era, expressed sometimes as inferiority, sometimes as originality, depending on the circumstances. In this case, the loss of dignity would be less of an indignity than the falling back into the condition of a marginalized people.

In other words, the conventions of the romantic novel served Machado as tools with which to study and recast, within a restricted terrain, a problem of national life. In fact, in spite of the conventional genre and its moralizing attitude, seemingly impermeable to actual social complexity, Machado's analytical acuity makes these books serious and representative, engaged on their own terms. They suggest replacing traditional authoritarian paternalism, according to which the proprietor disposes of his dependents without consulting them in a way that naturally mutilates and humiliates, with enlightened paternalism, in which mutual respect civilizes the relationship, although without questioning the systemic inequality and especially the slave labor that sustain it. It is a matter of the modernization of paternalism, echoing at a distance, that is, from within the country's anomalous position, the formal equalities that have emerged in the course of development in model European countries. More specifically, Machado rehearsed case by case the pros and cons of an alliance between proprietors and the educated, talented poor,

achieved through co-optation based on the well-understood interests of the involved parties. He suggested to those involved a more intelligent and somewhat less barbarous society.

The conservatism of that idea of progress speaks for itself. Intrigue and analysis must be congruent with the structural circumstances of the dependents, whose aspirations to co-optation impose the narrow perspective of personal affiliation as well as a low tolerance for signs of disagreement. The aesthetic price is fixed by the corresponding rule of decorum, sugary and anachronistic, according to which the familial structure in which slave ownership is vested is essentially pure, with no room for dispute. To be sure, there is egoism and materialism (modern defects), as well as traditionalism and authoritarianism (defects resulting from backwardness), but these are no more than individual deviations. They represent blemishes on the social canvas that well-intentioned observation ought to correct, without, in the meantime, engaging in dangerous generalizations, or rather, without pointing out the discretionary and antiquated nucleus of power of the patriarch. Artistically, despite the evident talent of the writer, the policed expression of dissatisfaction is a disaster that paralyzes spirited thrusts and weakens the whole of Machado's first attempts at the novel. On the other hand, the restrictions on criticism are themselves instructive, imbued with mimetic accuracy, since they give literary form to the pressure exerted on the intellect by the real social scheme, which left no room for the exercise of modern freedoms.

The respectful prose, with its elevated and antimaterialist tone, always silencing the essential, expresses in various guises the historical dead end in which the dependents find themselves. A mediating term between Catholic discretion and aesthetic norm, accentuated decorum seeks to pare down the cruelties connected with proprietorship in its colonial aspect. Without attenuating the disequilibria between the diverse aspects of proprietorship, decorum functions as living reproof to the disregard of personhood and to the crude primacy of money, fatal to those who live in a weak position in the shadow of favor. As for the dependents, decorum helps them to maintain their stature and not slide back into the "Gogolian" indignities of resentment, compensatory fantasy, and abject personal subjection, more or less implicated in the condition of incomplete equality. Beyond this, decorous composure postulates a dubious common cause, casting the dependents' adherence to the demands of the protector-oppressor as a contribution to the smooth working of things, which ennobles everyone and, at its limit, manages to benefit the fatherland. On those terms, progress would consist of self-reform on the part of proprietors who had been converted to an enlightened attitude under the civilizing pressure of a relationship with dependents full

of merit, albeit lacking anything they might call their own. There would be, in sum, a possible path for overcoming social infelicities, or for *Aufklärung* by half. Modernization would be of a spiritual nature, linked to the distinguished effort of the poor and the receptive disposition of the well-situated, or in other words, to a moment of comprehension between classes, far from the fight for any rights, as well as from any frank formulation. The deliberate grading of the conflicts, in its turn, sugars the pill in terms of dramatic composition. The coarseness and material calculations of the proprietors are restricted to the margins, where they resound like heavy threats but represent the exception. In contrast, at the center of intrigue, as a rule, the encounter of souls who elected each other under the sign of reciprocal obligation constitutes an idealized version of cooption. Romanesque and poignant, bordering on the domain of melodrama, this mutual understanding remains superior to clearly condemnable considerations of self-interest. Naturally, the victory of exemplary manners is not convincing and confers on the narratives the aura of lost causes, giving them some pungency.

In order to strengthen this line of argument, let us say that the lovely little Rio estate, “semiurban and semiforested,” represents the general scene.¹⁰ In the background, we see slaves and poor dependents, together with a few flickers of life among the godforsaken poor; in the parlor and the garden, conversing politely, are the proprietors and their satellites: baronesses, counselors, well-furnished widows, factotums, numerous supporters and hangers-on, self-seeking neighbors, and functionaries of various sorts, plus the marriageable youth and the heroine with a “soul above her destiny,” that is, without a birthright.¹¹ The conventional weaving of the plot and the buttoned-up writing muffle the contentious texture of the material, or better, leave unexplored the internal connection between the civility of the parlor and the ancien régime outside, which would give the intrigue denser Brazilian dimensions. Even so, more or less by its very absence, the connection makes itself felt and constitutes the objective complexity of a novelistic universe, making the books almost good. From another perspective, this substantial unity constitutes the very blind spot of the composition, since the emphatic dignity of both the central figures and the narrator could not possibly survive, had the necessary connections been made explicit. Imprisoned in the idealizing vision of cooption necessary to those who seek to be co-opted, the narrative point of view cannot latitudinally

¹⁰ *Ressureição*, in *Obras completas*, 1:33.

¹¹ *Iaiá Garcia*, in *Obras completas*, 1:315.

expound the antisocial interests of proprietorship—or the rather unromantic calculations of the candidate for adoption—whose diffuse presence nevertheless is the center of the prose. Such calculations would offend the edifying idea that both people of means and candidates hoping to become people of means have of themselves and of their alliance. We might note, moreover, that the veto extends to irreverence in general, and, with it, to the crucial operations of freedom of spirit and of humor in an ex-colony: the meritorious and civilized character of the elite should not be subjected to open scrutiny, or rather, should not be compared to the semicolonial relations that sustain it, nor be confronted in detail with the metropolitan models that give it a passport of modern stamp. *However, the intellect neither reaches the height of its era, nor escapes a position of colonial subservience without that order of sensitive and relativizing comparisons, always double-faced, that were and are the genius of the critical spirit in peripheral societies.*

Halfway between idealization and criticism, the touchstone of progress would lie in respect on the part of proprietors for dependents, differing from the mere importation of the innovations of bourgeois civilization. Improvement of morals would help paternalism to play the sanitizing roles expected from free labor and a law equal for all—a pious hope, attuned to the lack of a material base of the poor, while at the same time inconsonant with those liberal evaluations aligned with the commodities and ideas from abroad. That said, Machado's insistence on dignity in these early fictions manifested not only the social vacuum in which those who had no means of earning a salary lived in destitution, but also the suspicions about a copied modernity, or rather, a fear that, despite progress, or even with the help of progress, everything would remain as before. This apprehension had a real basis, insofar as the Europeanization of society peacefully coexisted with the colonial disqualification of a part of the country's inhabitants. Let us say that the moralist wrinkle of these first novels countered the local course of the world with a thesis that was simultaneously on the cutting edge and conformist. It maintained that there would only be progress in the event that a rigid *internal* dialectic reformed the relation between proprietors and dependents (but without getting to the base of everything, slavery), or, alternatively, that any changes occurring without this kind of reform, even if imported from advanced countries, would not be sufficient to overcome the nation's backwardness.

In the preface to his first novel, Machado announced that he wanted to *contrast characters* rather than narrate customs.¹² Perhaps in keeping with the

¹² *Ressurreição*, 32.

self-love of dependents who found themselves in less precarious situations, he took the artistic-moral position of giving greater value to personal disposition than to external conditioning. In order to imbue that perspective with realism, he would dissect all possible options in every corresponding circumstance, thus establishing a set of offensive complementarities. Armed with intelligence and valor, the heroine could not remain in the no-man's land of poverty. She must make herself accepted "in society" but also defend herself against the fantasies of her benefactors, which ranged from offers of good counsel to offers of marriage and attempts to deflower her, whereas the proprietor chose, depending on the occasion, to treat her civilly, as an equal, or barbarously, as an inferior to whom nothing is owed ("Who was she to affront him that way?").¹³ It was up to him to decide whether he was standing before a subaltern without greater rights, equivalent to the rest of the colonial rabble, or before a modern young woman, whom he might even marry. The absurd distance between the alternative terms indicates the degree of social insecurity of the poor, as well as the degree of social irresponsibility permitted to their protectors, maddening in its own manner. The burlesque and indecorous substance of the country would find its way back into the fiction through the back door, diverging from the well-behaved narrative form, conceived according to the *contrast of characters*, with which it would produce an involuntary irony.

The sentimental plot ought to humanize this uncivil society. The heroines' confrontations with their patrons' abuses of authority, whether those patrons, often godparents, are male or female, offers itself under a different sign in each of the four novels, which also illustrates the experimental and systematic spirit of Machadian literature. The attempt to moralize patriarchal power through the worth of young women of low birth depended, successively, on trusting frankness, on calculating but civilizing ambition, on Christian purity, and on severity without illusions. Despite the disparity between the plots, in all four cases the presumption of equality, sustained above all by love, coexists with humiliating, panic-inducing deviance from that ideal, leaving the social destiny of the dependent to the discretion of the proprietor. The proprietor's decision may be made indifferently, "between two cups of tea," or in a state of agitation, in the midst of a moral confusion, in which the imperatives of patronage mix with the appetites of the lover or with aspirations to greatness.¹⁴ There are odd passages, undeniable high

¹³ *Iaiá Garcia*, 316.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 402.

points, altogether surprising in books so chained to decency. Separated from the conventional mold, the dissociations between self-consciousness and social rationality might well figure in a Russian novel or amid the daring of modern literature, on its way to discovering the unconscious. Under the pretext of chronicling the ins and outs of sentiments of distinguished people, the writer tried his hand at the psychological drifts and ideological rationalizations that would later lie at the center of his great novels, where they would oil the day-to-day workings of a fractured society. Be that as it may, the romantic adventure in the European tradition occupied the preeminent position in the plot without, for that matter, avoiding the clichés of second-class conformist fiction. Meanwhile, the complementary side, restricted to dimly lit margins by the very law of the genre, gained ground for disabused observation and analysis, in which the unjustifiable and antiheroic realities of local privilege were faced head on, in an adult spirit, with an evident heightening of literary quality.

At the end of *Iaiá Garcia*, the final novel of the first block, the heroine breaks with the advantages and humiliations of dependency: “for her cup of gratitude was full.”¹⁵ She seeks an outlet in a teaching post that permits her to move to another part of the country, far from the influence of her benefactors. She asks that her father accompany her and leaves “the life . . . of servility that he had lived until then.”¹⁶ The decision reflects the reconfiguring of the horizon afforded by salaried labor, which represented an alternative to clientelism, casting light on the connection, always overlooked, between the humiliations of dependency and the slave system. This is the future, arriving with exasperating delay. From another perspective, regarding the coherence of the plot, the decision also has retrospective reach. It seems as though in the end the heroine considers deluded and pointless her fight (comprising hundreds of pages) in which she has fought to redeem the contentiousness characterizing the relationship between protected and protector, which turned out to have no remedy after all. There is a reflux of the lesson with respect to the earlier novels, where the just objectives and mental clarity of the female protagonists also tried to correct the disorientation of proprietors, excellent folk by definition, but drowning in a viscous world of familial prejudices, retrograde suspicions, satisfied indolence, and unconfessed appetites.

In the abstract, the confrontation between reason and obscurantism, with the connotations of class peculiar to each case, promised to end well.

¹⁵ Ibid., 315.

¹⁶ Ibid., 406.

The young women's longing for dignity suited everyone, resulting in any case from the education that they had been able to acquire thanks to their proximity to the wealthy, whereas the half-tyrannical aspect of the latter seemed part of the general backwardness of Brazilian society rather than a manifestation of conservatism incarnated—in other words, nothing that tolerance and good counsel could not overcome. In *Iaiá Garcia* the conflict becomes both deeper and more complex. The whims of the authorities, as well as the equally arbitrary favors are still there. Both are portrayed realistically, for routine insult is part of the situation of clientelism, inevitable until the arrival of free labor. The novelty, which halts the course of paternalist relations and points in a more radical direction, although it appears a retreat, is that now the heroine thinks it inadmissible to marry above her situation. This is not because she considers herself inferior—very much the contrary: the problem is that her pride will not permit her to accept this “kind of favor,” since she cannot recognize the professed qualities of her erstwhile benefactors, who, as notorious representatives of dignity and reason, do not know what these may be.¹⁷

On the one side, with its antiromantic aspect, there is nothing more romantic than that objection to unequal marriage. It is a matter of not consenting to the degradation of love, which must be preserved against the system of favoritism and brute force that determines Brazilian backwardness. In this respect, the heroine presents that which elsewhere the modern individual owes herself. As for everything else, she makes concessions fitting to the local lifestyle, as long as these do not compromise her at the core. In the form of the divided self, which opposed the just but impossible to the backward but possible, some of the great international lines of difference and hierarchy were being internalized, transforming what seems a picturesque condition into a contemporary moral impasse, proper to the peripheral world.

On the other side, the objection is the result of a class experience. There is a ravine between the situation of the dependent, one step from the excluded populace, and the situation of the established lady, enjoying the guarantees and benefits of modern civilization. Although not impossible, the passage from one side to the other depended on the good graces of a superior. But how to owe such a change of state—no less than an insertion in the present world—to the hazards of personal sympathy? By dint of the excessiveness of the debt, the corresponding hope must harm the self-esteem

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 402.

of the dependent. Pricked by illusion, the dependent forgets what she owes herself and is capable of submitting herself, bound hand and foot, to the whim of her patron, *who in his turn may, but need not, keep the promise that he made in a moment of caprice*. Even in the favorable case, in which—let us suppose—the eldest son of the family does not go back on his word and marries the obscure young maiden, the ghost of class humiliation remains. The most legitimate of impulses, that is, the dependent's aspiration to dignity, always runs the risk of being disdainfully treated, increasing the feeling of indignity, which needs to be avoided at all cost. In other words, the object of intellectual-ideological aversion in these novels is the moment in which the mirage of individual emancipation, or of liberal and romantic values, raised by the daydreams of personal favor, functions to the contrary, as the instrument of paternalist domination, leading the dependent to lower her guard and become usufructuary. Out of self-respect, the latter ought not to respect the liberal promise on the lips of her patrons.

The historical conclusion reached in *Iaiá Garcia* sums up an apprenticeship of class, while depersonalizing the issue. We may note that the source of humiliation has changed place, no longer following from this or that exorbitance in which the protector falls short of fulfilling his duty. Now it is linked to an irreconcilable duality of functions, with a structural basis: the patriarch, to whom the protected owes loyalty, is also a proprietor in the modern meaning of the term, for whom that order of obligations is relative. The dynamic of paternalist involvement shows itself to be only one side of the situation, whose other aspect, dictated by the ownership of property, belongs to a discrete orbit to which the reasons of the dependent do not correspond and to which the dependent, furthermore, has no independent access, *which consubstantiates the social fragmentation*. The systematization of the point of view of those underneath, taken to its extreme by the novelist, qualifies negatively the promise in the relationship, whose seductions, made up of degrading class mechanisms, it is better to flee. The moral debt does not have the same value on both sides of the equation. The breast of Brazilian proprietors lodges two souls.

In *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* this fund of frustration and backwardness is transformed into great literature through the recombination of its elements. The strike of genius consists—if I am not mistaken—in delegating the narrative function to the old class adversary, the very one who does not know, according to his enlightened dependents, what dignity and reason may be. After having been one *subject* among others, or a collection of anecdotes concerning local anachronisms, always with some reflection on the existence of those without rights, the oscillations of the Janus-faced man of

property, civilized in European fashion and uncivilized in Brazilian, or sentimental in a Brazilian manner and objective in a European—enlightened and arbitrary, distant and intrusive, Victorian and given to cronyism—define the very *form* of the prose, conditioning the world to their regular tic-tock. The elegant or ignoble alternation of the models no longer determines only the relation with dependents in circumscribed moments of crisis, well located in the unfolding of the plot. Now it is ubiquitous and comes to be the general ambience of life in all of its moments, on an incredible scale, whose rhetorical achievement is a technical feat. Vertiginously, encyclopedically, it is applied to the foundations of literary representation, to the gullibility of the trusting reader, to contemporary norms of decency, to minisyntheses of Western tradition, as well as to the trivial day-to-day existence of the ex-colony. At its extreme, nothing is left untouched. It is true that the inconstant narrator, lacking credibility, constantly engaged in skirmishes with the reader, is part of an illustrious comic tradition, independent of Brazil. Yet Machado polarized that tradition's repertoire of maneuvers by making it a function of the class ambivalence of the Brazilian elite, giving those maneuvers a realist imprint and, above all, limning a process of social formation, locked into a lagging destiny, but modern nevertheless.

From an evolutionary perspective, or that of the fight against backwardness with its stages following in foreseen sequence, the solution was unexpected. Free labor, which at the conclusion of *Iaiá Garcia* reconfigured the canvas, promised dependents the independence that they needed for a revision, without subterfuge, of a *passé* society. After slavery and disenfranchised poverty, the grievances were ending and true freedom was coming, married with progress. However, Machado did not write the conclusive book that seemed the order of the day—but neither did the country take the higher path. Contrary to the expectations of abolitionist optimism, the end of captivity did not deliver the blacks and the poor to citizenship, a national duty that would be delayed indefinitely. What prevailed, with the aid of immigration, were forms of semiforced and precarious salaried labor, which gave new life to the preceding patterns of authority. With some rearrangement, the dissonant combinations of liberalism and exclusion, of bourgeois property and fondness for clientelism (“I didn’t think very highly of that alliance of manager of a bank and father to a dog”), of elegance and raw power (“because I want it and can have it that way”) entered into the new times unchecked, reacquiring trust for the future.¹⁸ Let us say that in the

¹⁸ Machado de Assis, *Memorial de Aires* (1908), in *Obras completas*, 1:1,068 and 1,047.

brief period between *Iaiá Garcia* (1878) and *Posthumous Memoirs* (1880), almost ten years before the abolition of slavery (1888), the writer took notice of the disappointing course of things, which was not going to be shaped by the secular providentiality of doctrines of progress, nor by the good counsel that dependents might have given to their patrons. In that sense, the delegation of the narrative role to the satisfied classes signaled a turnabout as well as a desire not to insist on exhausted perspectives.

Of course, there would be no extraordinary artistic invention if everything could be summed up by the exchange of (moderated) criticism for apologetics or of the perspective of the oppressed for that of the oppressors. The passage to an opposing class viewpoint, which in its way represented an adherence to the stronger side, a turncoat operation, or a slap at justice, in fact played a role—scandalous or discreet—in the new formal apparatus, within which it also combined a disconcerting dose of socioliterary perfidy. Handled with absolute virtuosity, the latter reequilibrated the mix by means of the indirect truths that it allowed to escape, to the detriment of the well-situated and their society, through an organized and impressive, not to mention humorous, leakage. In negative fashion, the narrator, now positioned at the top of the local system of inequalities, functions (with respect to his condition and the consequences of these inequities as well as through his adherence to both new and old theories that might be brought to bear) as an all-embracing conscience, who incites a reading against the grain and the formation of a contrary superconscience, if it is possible to say that. Under the guise of conformity, the part played by provocation is great.

Let us say that the Machadian narrator realizes to a superlative degree the aspirations to elegance and culture characteristic of the Brazilian elite, but only in order to compromise that society and let it make a poor show of itself. In the exercise of his refinements, he mingles with a representative gallery of national types, or rather, a scarcely presentable set of class relations, outside the norm (if the criteria applied to it are *exigent* and *imported*, or Anglo-French), yet at the same time familiar and normal—if the standard is quotidian Brazilian life. The catalog of ambiguities that distance the country's own well-off from the modern model—but not from that modernity devoid of evens model—is exemplified in action. Bordering on didacticism and also sarcasm, the character-narrator's thoughts and deeds are illustrations designed to authenticate the worst suppositions held about him by diverse categories of dependents, including slaves as well as his consorts in paracolonial domination—relatives or not, liberals or supporters of slavery who were not fooled by civility, and also by the sincere or hypocritical foreigner, to whom all this seemed barbarous—this ensemble constituting the

network of viewpoints relevant in this circumstance. Thus, the new artistic equation did not forget the humiliations suffered by dependents, for which it functioned as an oblique spokesman. Contrary to appearances, these dictated the hidden staff of the narrator's histrionic performance, who had as his function the role of representing them in their full gravity, with the accompaniment of the egoistic, niggardly, or abject reflections that the victims, hopeful of cooption, could not bring themselves to articulate or even to imagine.

The maliciousness of this procedure, which unites subtle irony and gross farce, class travesty and treason, intimacy and hostility, is more salient in those novels written in the first-person singular (*Posthumous Memoirs* and *Dom Casmurro* [1899]). Albeit less ostentatious, the method equally serves impersonal, third-person narrative, often called objective, but as capable of partiality and baseness as the other.¹⁹ However that may be, the accelerated verve of the prose ought to satisfy objectives of an opposing order, whose stitching is a miracle of dexterity. From a *spontaneous* point of view, the narrator revels at whim, on many planes and remorselessly, in the advantages and facilities apportioned to him by local injustice and by his power to speak with impunity, without letting go of anything—from peccadillo to atrocity—and, moreover, without being incognizant of the fact that in the eyes of the European superego, he is playing a parodied part, which only accentuates the piquancy of his position. The extreme cultivation of his speech does not diminish the injustices but confers on them an urbanity and a special type of poetry, which, according to the preference of the critic, betters or worsens the picture. From the point of view of composition, highly manipulated by an Author who maintains an epic distance, the anecdotal and reflexive frame of these erratic feints ought to sketch out a social totality. It also ought to inspire the ill will of the disaffected, among them the reader, drawing toward the narrator and his form of elegance a lukewarm version of universal dislike. This is owing to complacency in the historical slough, a peripheral variant of the Baudelarian conscience in evil. That said, the narrator's elegance does not disintegrate into sheer caprice, since beyond semicolonial affectation it is the valid demonstration that civilized qualities are compatible with the transgressions to which they give cover. The implacable visibility that

¹⁹ *Quincas Borba* (1891), the second of Machado's great novels, is written in the third person. *Esau e Jacó* (1904) constitutes a complex halfway construct: the narrative is in the third person, but was found among the diaries of Conselheiro Aires, its main character. *Memorial de Aires* has the form of a diary but is better understood if read against the grain of its pseudo-author's elegant opinions.

this elegance confers on these transgressions—a considerable demonstration and also a contribution to truth—has no parallel in Brazilian literature and may be rare even in other literatures.

In abandoning the well-behaved, moralizing narrator of his first novels, connected to the cause of dependents, Machado anticipated the scarcely edifying lessons of abolition, which would not have as its objective the social integration of the country. The accuracy of his prognosis, which in and of itself constitutes no guarantee of literary quality, in this circumstance would lead to intellectual verification of forms then in effect and to the invention of new ones, equal to the times. Delineated by the Author at a critical distance, the highly refined narrator, who represents the flower of civilization but who is indulgent not only with himself but also with the screaming injustices within his society, is one of these actualizing inventions. There one can see, with a superior verisimilitude, a different version of the enlightened and generous guardianship that the country's landed gentlemen believed they exercised.

The deepening of the likeness and of historical judgment is notable, albeit little understood. In relation to the Brazilian referent, there is a clear *progress of mimesis*, sustained by a daring ensemble of formal operations, which in turn presupposes a high conjugation of artistic and social criticism. This chain, if it is exact, has the merit of indicating the reflexive and constructive component of the mimetic effort, unknown to literary theory of the last decades, which has confronted imitation from the banalizing angle of photographic fidelity. That said, it is clear that the artistic value and the truth of the work do not reside in the similarity of the portrait but in its new perspectives and in the reconfigurations occasioned by the search for verisimilitude. In this case, these perspectives and reconfigurations belong to several orders.

As far as focus and proportions, the inversion is general: the new procedure brings to the forefront the elusive oppression that in the earlier novels had remained in the background and that constituted their best part, while it mocked the illusions—"dry your glasses, sensitive soul!"—of the romantic impulse that occupied the first plane.²⁰ Along the same line, the emphasis on the costs of injustice suffered by dependents is replaced by the testimony to its *utility*, made in the first-person singular by its *enlightened* beneficiary, whose objectives lie in another sphere, but also in this. The novelistic fantasies of personal amends give way to the somewhat cynical experience of a

²⁰ *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, 456.

dissociated social mechanism. The insult did not cease to exist but gained a solid foundation. As far as the desegregation of the country itself, the limited universe of the semiexcluded, deprived of a public existence, was not propitious ground for civilization's new developments. Recent philosophies, railway projects, historical studies, financial operations, mathematical sciences, and parliamentary politics figured only in the margin, as conventional indices of modernity and social class, in the same way as did fashion magazines, the tail-coat, and the cigar. With the new narrator, these and other innovations of the epoch acquire a reality and invade the scene in a spectacular way, always framed by his own caprice, or better, to function according to the regime of a heterodox class, creating a special atmosphere of ostensible and lowered actualization, which is an extraordinary mimetic and artistic accomplishment. The proprietors participate intensely in contemporary progress, but this is *thanks* to the antiquated relationships on which they lean, and not *despite* them, and even less *in opposition to them*, as common sense might dictate. With this last rectification, we arrive at the modern perplexity and truth of the new Machadian configuration. The narrator who is integrally sophisticated and free, in possession of his means and of tradition (one could almost call him emancipated), reiterates in thought and conduct the *backwardness* of the social formation, rather than overcoming it—in part out of spite, in order that these delays be present as lamentable facts, accentuating the sensation of foolishness; in part out of nostalgia (another form of spite?), in order not to distance himself from them, even though they have been surpassed; and in part because heightened consciousness is essential to this ensemble, which has a direction, but no purpose. Rather than deceiving ourselves about the progress of a backward society, we witness the reproduction of backwardness in a sphere of the greatest clairvoyance available.

A schematic recapitulation would say the following. In a foundational moment, romantic fiction discerned the peculiarities of Brazilian family life under the sign of the picturesque and of national identity, over which it superimposed more or less *folhetinesque* confabulations. The success of the combination, well adapted to the necessities of the young country, was great. Even with an irreverent cast, the reflection and its somewhat regressive complicities conferred a positive sign on the traces that differentiated the society. One generation later, Machado recovered that thematic, ideological, and aesthetic complex in new terms, without the protective fog of local color and patriotic self-congratulation. The extended Brazilian family began to be confronted according to the prism of the instructed dependent, who was part of it and transformed it into a *problem*. In this there was a special system of relations, with its own structure, outlets, and impasses, demanding

analysis. Its difference indicated backwardness, insofar as the tacit values of the dependent were determined by the Rights of Man, which, at least in principle, had currency elsewhere. The narrator's sympathy was devoted to the wronged heroine's struggles, which were partly formed according to the mold of the *folhetim*. Meanwhile, in the opposing field, it was inevitable that the configuration of the conflict, according to its progress from book to book, should look into the negative aspects of the figure of the proprietor. These negative aspects internalized and reflected with precision, in the form of *defect*, the absurd disequilibrium between the classes. By analyzing the consequences of this very disequilibrium, which showed no signs of internal regeneration, Machado invented the formula that would characterize his mature work and make a great writer out of him. Just as he had not accommodated himself to the facile enchantment of the romantic picturesque, he now renounced the unanimous deference due the moderate narrator who was the friend of good causes.

The new artistic apparatus gave an indirect account of the frustration of dependents and a direct account of their abandonment by the proprietors, with resonating allusion to a peripheral society incapable of integrating itself. The reach of the formal arrangement, which affronted the superstitions of the secular spirit, particularly the trust in progress and its benevolence, is disconcerting even today. The cunning personification of an elite narrator, enviably civilized and very involved in the relations of oppression that he himself configures and judges, is a move that upsets the narrative board, making the game more real. The artifice challenges readers along every line: it teaches them to think for themselves; to debate not only the subject matter but also its mode of representation; to consider at a critical distance both narrators and authorities, who are always interested parties, even when well-spoken; to doubt the civilizing national engagement of the privileged, in particular in new countries, where this pretension plays a great part; and to develop an aversion for the imaginary consolations of the novel, manipulated by narrative authority out of self-interest. The artifice teaches, above all, that the combination of the cosmopolitan sphere and that of the excluded can be stable. It also shows that there is no prospect of overcoming this combination in view. The demonstration is particularly succulent because it illustrates and investigates the national mechanisms—"delicious" ones, to use Machado's term—of nonbourgeois reproduction of the bourgeois order; and these are not only national but also universal mechanisms, since on a world scale, contrary to what seems self-evident, this reproduction is the rule, not the exception.

The heroines of the first novels are not very interesting, insofar as their

precarious social position is disfigured by romantic cliché. Their vicissitudes, nevertheless, make evident the class characteristics of the antagonist, whose figure has literary originality. In the novels of the second phase, in which the perspective is inverted, it is the turn of the poor to figure in the subjective mirror of the proprietors, in which the prisms of bourgeois individualism and paternalist domination take turns according to the shamelessness of egoistic convenience. In that light the figure of the dependent acquires extraordinary relief. These are portraits of a kind of destitution that does not count on the recognition of the value of work, on the protection of rights, or on the compensations of divine providence. It is a matter of the social vacuum set up by modern slavery for a freedom without means, another theme that, *mutatis mutandis*, has not been exhausted. Along the same line of strangely advanced resonances of backwardness, we might note how the extrabourgeois aspect of local affairs and of the narrative relation itself functions: now it may seem merely a deviation from the rule, but then it has a movement with its own slant, which escapes dominant definitions and discovers unknown ground. To get an idea of this, see the role played by authority in the definition and dissolution of the person, one's own or that of another; the relation between the experience of time and personal disintegration, often of the authority issuing the mandate; the extrascientific dimensions of science, with its authoritarian and sadistic functions; and the radical difference constituted by the point of view. In this respect, Machado's fiction converges with the advanced literature of his time, which also applied itself to laying bare other realities underlying bourgeois reality. We might simply notice, a little haphazardly, affinities in the field of innovations with Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, Henry James, Chekhov, Proust, Kafka, and Borges. Machado's classical borrowings are endless and have led critics to seek his merit in that domain, to our loss in comprehending the contemporary and advanced character of his experimentation.

The manifestation of intelligence, technical refinement, and general culture of the Machadian narrator is discomfiting at first contact, though it later imposes itself as a great finding. On a somewhat laughable plane, it was a demonstration of literary proficiency that served his country's patriotic effort toward accelerated cultural formation. Here was an educated narrator among the educated, who shamed no one and who contributed to the elevation of national culture to a new level, above the sympathetic modesty that had come to be the rule. Above all in his first, most spectacular moment, in *Posthumous Memoirs*, this finally provincial aspect, which captures the aspiration of a young country, plays a significant part in inciting and sustaining our interest. Meanwhile, the most substantial aspect of the work was another.

The universalizing program, which in its way represented an ideal standard, presupposed the encyclopedic assimilation of all that had to do with the *generally human*. The Bible, philosophy, humanist rhetoric, the eighteenth-century analysis of egoism, scientific materialism, ancient and recent historiography, and the philosophy of the unconscious—all these, coupled with disabused commentary on actuality and with local notation, entered into the package. The result could not be more socially flattering. But then, in a daring thrust of his art, Machado would not confer a positive sign on this great accumulation. Despite all that it might have cost, he made it an integral part of the prestige and arbitrary action of his narrator. Linked to local class domination, the very process of enlightenment changed its sign, beginning to resound in accord with an underlying stave, which is left to the reader to decipher and that even today leaves us without response.

Translated by Sharon Lubkemann Allen