

**Metafiction in Latin American Narrative:  
The Case for Brazil  
or  
If Brás Cubas were here today, what would he say  
about Spanish American fiction?**

The argument I'd like to make in this essay is, first, that Brazilian narrative is significantly different, in terms of its development, from its better-known Spanish American cousin and, second, that this difference is largely an issue of a particular kind of self-consciousness, the kind that contemplates not only the process by which a text comes into being but its relationship to reality and to truth. I'd like to suggest, then, that what we know critically as metafiction, the text that is about its own making, has characterized Brazilian narrative much more than is the case in Spanish America, where, though first-person narrative has a prodigious history,<sup>1</sup> it is not practiced in quite the same way as it has been in Brazil, where, I believe, we can think of metafiction as one of the defining characteristics of its narrative tradition. Further, I would like to propose that, since 1880, Brazilian narrative has been characterized by a more or less continuous cultivation of the text that self-consciously discusses its own creation and epistemological status, its own ability to represent, depict or be the truth. What I'll try to show in this study is that while the two traditions are often lumped together under the all too vague rubric of Latin American narrative, they are not the same, and that this metafictional tradition is more pronounced in Brazil than in

Spanish America, where it doesn't really become established until the great "nueva novela" of the 1960s. Finally, I will suggest that this tradition of critically self-conscious narration begins with Machado de Assis, one of the greatest writers ever to emerge from Latin America and a writer whose innovative brilliance has influenced the development of Brazilian narrative down to the present day.

As alluded to in my title, the particular Machadoean text I'd like to concentrate on is *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (or *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, as it's known in English), the 1880 text that is widely thought to mark the beginning of Machado's second, and most famous, phase, the period in which he achieved works of masterpiece status in both the novel form and in the short story.

But as we reread the *Memórias Póstumas* in a larger, more international context, we begin to appreciate it as a most singular work, one that has no counterpart, chronologically speaking, in Spanish America (or in North America, for that matter) and that will not have until the time of Borges, a point that, as I'll try to demonstrate, has tremendous consequences for the development of narrative in Latin America. Of all *Epitaph's* innovative features, however, its most outstanding is almost certainly its deceased but witty narrator/protagonist, Brás Cubas, a cannily self-conscious raconteur who, for my money, ranks as one of the most fascinating characters ever to grace the pages of Latin American literature, indeed, world literature. And, as even a cursory perusal of Machado's extensive bibliography shows, for a long time readers tended to regard Brás as Machado himself. This view has given way, of course, to the still prevailing consensus that the cynical and egoistic Brás Cubas does not speak for the real Machado de Assis, a man whose life seems the antithesis of all that Brás stands for. This is certainly the

current critical view and, as summed up by Prof. Sandra Cypess<sup>2</sup> and others, it is one to which I subscribe as well.

With one exception. What I mean is that although I feel in the main that Brás does not reflect or embody his creator's beliefs, there is one issue about which I believe Brás does speak for Machado. That issue, I feel, is Machado's desire, in 1880, to develop a new kind of writing, to create a new narrative, one that would have a different relationship with reality and that would also require a new kind of reader, someone able to understand that literature, as a function of language, was, as Borges would later demonstrate, pure artifice, a self-referential system of signs; it was not and could not be the reality it seemed to represent. Theoretically speaking, then, it seems clear that in 1880 and the writing of *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, Machado leaves realism behind and, suddenly and dramatically, begins to write what I believe is essentially poststructural narrative, the kind of writing that questions the epistemological nature of language itself as well as its relationship to such fundamental concepts as truth, reality, and verisimilitude. This tendency becomes more pronounced in his later works, especially *Dom Casmurro* (1900), the novel widely judged to be his supreme masterpiece (and one whose plot turns on the problem of verisimilitude), but I believe this same revolutionary decision about the kind of narrative he would write is fully operational as early as 1880 and *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. To sum this up, then, if we can accept a comparative approach to the issue, we can see that the first Latin American "new narrative" really begins in Brazil, with Machado de Assis, in 1880.<sup>3</sup>

When I say this, please understand that I do not wish in any way to denigrate or demean the brilliance of the later occurring and better known Spanish American "Nueva Narrativa;" indeed, as a comparatist

and as a Latin Americanist I take pride in both my traditions and I feel that it only enhances our standing on the stage of world literature to be able to boast of not just one but two "new narratives," each with its own special characteristics. The Spanish American tradition, for example, so brilliantly represented by such masters as Borges, Cortázar and Fuentes, represents what we might think of as the epitome of structuralism, or of structuralist fiction,<sup>4</sup> while the Brazilian narrative tradition, beginning with Machado but running through such other luminaries as Mário de Andrade, Oswald de Andrade, Clarice Lispector, Guimarães Rosa, and Osman Lins, embodies the kind of thinking known as poststructuralism, where the problem of meaning is seen to be fundamental to the self-referential nature of language itself. For the "Nueva Narrativa" of Borges and the Spanish Americans, meaning thus becomes an issue of the structures that give form to their narratives, as exemplified in Borges's famous *Ficciones*, which can be approached as intricate but ultimately solveable semiotic puzzles. For the "Nova Narrativa" of such masters as Machado, Guimarães and Clarice, however, meaning becomes a more fluid and elusive issue, one not so much a function of structures but of the ambiguous play of words within and between them, the inescapable "différance," as Derrida would say, inherent in language. When we think of it in terms of Saussurian linguistics, then, one is tempted to say that the Spanish American new narrative tends to illustrate the power of the "langue," the system or structure, while the Brazilian new narrative tends to accentuate the endless self-referentiality and semantic fecundity of the "parole," the individual act of speech or (picking up on a motif basic, I think, to modern Brazilian narrative) what we might call the self-conscious writing of writing, a tradition that I see as coming straight out of

Machado de Assis and reaching its zenith in the poststructural "textes" of Clarice Lispector.

Through *Brás Cubas*, his "new narrative" advocate, then, Machado subtly but categorically rejects realism, the then prevailing narrative mode in both Brazil and Spanish America, and effects, in the narrative that we know as *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, the emergence of a new kind of writing, one that questions its own operation as a sign system as well as its own veracity.<sup>5</sup> As I suggested above, the sardonic *Brás*, speaking from the hereafter and as manipulative as any self-conscious narrator I can think of, would commence a tradition that has continued more or less unbroken in Brazilian literature up to the present day, linking some of Brazil's most celebrated texts, including *Os Sertões*, *Macunaíma*, *As Memórias Sentimentais de João Miramar* and *Serafim Ponte Grande*, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, *Água Viva*, *Avalovara*, and *As Mulheres de Tijucoapapo*, just to name a few. Differ though they do in other respects, what these works have in common is a keen if disconcerting awareness of how, even in our day to day relations, the language we use to attempt to make sense of our lives ends up being a discourse about language, about how language both affects and effects our various realities, and about how we cannot get outside it; in short, these works, further exploring the basic theoretical problem set out in *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, continue to interrogate not only language's ontological status but its epistemological claims as well. I don't see quite this same philosophical orientation occurring in Spanish American narrative until the 1970s, especially in the works of Cabrera Infante and Severo Sarduy. After this point, however, it seems to me that the two narrative traditions, the Brazilian and the Spanish American, become more similar, with the Brazilian perhaps being distinguished

by a consistently ironic and parodic mode of self-conscious storytelling — features again fully consistent with what we find in *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*.

Parody, of course, is a critical issue long associated with Latin American literature. The late Emir Rodríguez Monegal was perhaps the first critic to point it out, writing about the importance of parody to the development and emancipation of literature in Brazil and Spanish America as early as the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

Another scholar working in this same vein is Alfred Mac Adam, and it is with him that I would like now to enter into a bit of a critical dialogue. In one of Professor Mac Adam's lesser known but, to my mind, most interesting studies, the piece on Latin American literature he and Flora Schiminovich wrote for the collection of essays entitled *The Postmodern Movement*,<sup>7</sup> he and his coauthor attempt to deal comparatively with the narrative traditions of Brazil and Spanish America. Borrowing from Bakhtin the terms parody and stylization, and employing them in the context of Bakhtinian theory, Mac Adam and Schiminovich argue that up until the 1940s, the Spanish American novel was a relatively weak form (at least in comparison to the Spanish American lyric). Further, they feel that this situation came about because Spanish America had gone too far in appropriating the forms and techniques of European, and especially French, realism, a mode of expression that Mac Adam and Schiminovich believe was alien to the Spanish American situation. As they write, "The problem was that the devices of realism and naturalism were not suited to the re-creation of Spanish American reality. The result, with some exceptions, was a mass of well-intentioned but derivative texts, books whose models were all too clear." (256).

Interestingly, however, Mac Adam and Schiminovich recognize that in Brazil, during the same period of time, that is, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, narrative had already begun to change and that the catalyst was none other than Machado de Assis, "... who," they declare, "inaugurated, with the publication of *As Memórias Postumas de Bras Cubas* (1880), the modern Latin American satiric novel." (256). Mac Adam and Schiminovich then go on to say that:

Flying in the face of realism, Machado chose fantasy and has his novel narrated by a dead man. This use of the fantastic together with his decision to reduce character to stereotype and his presentation of society as a madhouse without walls set him apart from his contemporaries, both in Brazil and in Spanish America. (256)

Basically, I have no quarrel with these assertions, though I might quibble with the implication that *Epitaph* could or should be labeled a "satiric novel" for to do so seems to limit it more than is warranted. And while I might also question the argument that in this landmark novel Machado reduces characters to stereotypes and that he presents society as "a madhouse without walls," what I wholeheartedly concur with — and what I wish now to explore further — is the idea that Machado very deftly but very deliberately rejects if not realism per se then most of its basic aesthetic assumptions and that he opts instead to create a new kind of writing, a narrative that, in terms of its aesthetic underpinnings, speaks to itself, to its own reality as art (or artifice) and to its own status as a verbal construct. This, I think, was what Machado had in mind when, according to Afrânio Coutinho, he wrote, "A realidade é boa, o

Realismo é que não presta para nada” / “Reality is good; realism is what isn’t worth anything” (Fitz, *Machado de Assis*, 113).

Now although as Maria Luisa Nunes argues, Machado may have used the term “realismo” to refer to what we normally think of as “naturalism” (Nunes, *The Craft of an Absolute Winner*, 8), the basic concern expressed here, I think, is that the intensely complex nature of human reality (Machado’s “realidade,” which, he says, is “boa,” or “good”) cannot be adequately expressed, or “re-presented,” using the techniques of either “realism” or “naturalism,” which, as artistic modes of expression, Machado derided as being too superficial and limited. The debateable point, however, is how Machado understood human reality to be; how did he define it? I’m of the opinion that Machado understood human reality — that is, the essence of human existence and being — to be essentially psycho-linguistic in nature, that it was a function of language, language spoken, as in social discourse, or unspoken, as in the silent mental flow of the mind, the latter finding brilliant expression in the famous chap. 55 of *Epitaph*, the one entitled “O Velho Diálogo de Adão e Eva” / “The Venerable Dialogue of Adam and Eve” and in which Brás and his lover, Virgília, “converse” literally without words, the reader being guided through their wordless (but not signless) “conversation” only by the punctuation used and by his or her expectations about what might be said by these two particular characters in these particular (and very sexually charged) circumstances. While we would all agree, I am sure, that Machado was keenly aware of the numerous social and political issues that pertain to his work (the question of slavery in Brazil, for one, or female sexuality, to mention another), as an artist — which is how he saw himself (Nunes x) — he understood that the novel was fundamentally a problem of

language, of issues relating to style, structure, characterization (his forte, according to Nunes), imagery, and semantics, and that the defining "realidade" of the human condition — our capacity to create, use, and process language — demanded a new way of writing and reading, both of which he then brings marvelously to life in the text that is *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. So if we wish, as John Gledson, for example, does,<sup>8</sup> to retain Machado in the realist camp, it is possible to do so, either because of what many critics have referred to as his "psychological realism" or because, as Professor Gledson correctly points out, Machado's post-1880 world accurately reflects the numerous social, political and economic conflicts and tensions of the time.

As I see it, however, the danger in reading Machado as a realist is that we will blind ourselves to what I believe is the central impulse of Machado's post-1880 art: his desire to create a new narrative, one that would, aesthetically speaking, answer only to itself as a self-conscious semiotic structure. This desire — one carefully manifested in the *Memórias Póstumas* — to undertake a new kind of writing, one profoundly ironic, metaphoric, and metafictional in nature, is what drives the late Machado and what separates him from everyone else in the Latin American narrative tradition.<sup>9</sup> As I suggested before, not until the time of Borges will we see another Latin American narrativist of a similarly revolutionary vision, and even then it is of a related but (as structuralism relates to poststructuralism) distinct variety.

I say all this because I believe it may provide an answer to the question that lies, tantalizingly unanswered, in the middle of Mac Adam's and Shiminovich's study: "Why Machado should have written in this vein," they write, "is one of the mysteries of literary history . . ." (256). Influenced to a degree by Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*,

but going much farther than the English novelist in terms of what his text has to say about the relationship of language to reality and truth, and not wanting merely to “rewrite *Madame Bovary* in Brazilian terms” (Mac Adam and Shiminovich 256), Machado, I believe, was not only clear about the “extraordinary” nature of the new narrative he wanted to write,<sup>10</sup> he was fully conscious of just how radically new it was — and of how difficult it was going to be for people to appreciate it. This, for me, explains why Machado spends so much time in *Epitaph* having Brás talk to the reader about the nature of what he or she is reading and about how one should respond to it. Although it is very cleverly hidden among the numerous other narrative threads that Brás weaves together in his digressive and funny (though at times also despairing, angry and bitter) telling of his lifestory, his wry divagations on how and why he writes as he does constitute nothing less than a poetics of Machado’s new narrative, a kind of writing we’re only now beginning to fully appreciate.<sup>11</sup> The question thus posed by Mac Adam and Schiminovich — how do you explain what Machado de Assis began to do in 1880 and *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*? — is best answered, I would suggest, by recognizing that Machado was, with this novel, advocating a new theory of narrative, one that, as we shall now see, he took pains to suggest to the careful reader but which he would not elucidate without the covering cloaks of metaphor, ambiguity, and ironic humor.

Although generations of readers have taken *Epitaph* to be primarily about the destructive effects of egoism and cynicism, or about Machado’s alleged pessimism, I would like to suggest that while these issues are most certainly part of it, this very influential novel is, at bottom, both a demonstration of what this new narrative will look like and an imagistically shrouded apology for it. As I suggested earlier, this interpreta-

tion of *Epitaph* offers what I feel is a more compelling explanation of why Machado wrote *Epitaph* as he did. Depending on how one regards certain chapters, there are, by my reckoning, some fifteen separate sections, or chapters, in which Brás Cubas (speaking, I believe, for Machado in these cases) touches, in one way or another, on the unique nature of his "posthumous memoirs." For those interested in reviewing these particular sections on your own, I'll quickly list them; they are the "Ao Leitor" / "To the Reader" introduction, then, in order, chaps. 9, 24, 27, 31, 34, 55, 71, 72, 73, 86, 98, 124, 130, and, in the culmination of this discussion of Machado's new narrative, chapter 138.

After calling, in the "Ao Leitor" section, the reader's attention to the fact that she or he will be reading a text that is "most curious" and even "extraordinary," Brás then moves, only a few pages later, in chap. 9, to offer a more or less complete (if metaphorically veiled and comically rendered) statement of the new narrative that informs this text. Clearly implying, I think, that he is fully cognizant of (1) the demands of the realist tradition and (2) how his narrative will depart from that tradition, Brás (Machado) declares, of the very text that he himself is writing here, that:

. . . o livro fica assim com tôdas as vantagens do método, sem a rigidez do método. . . . Que isto de método, sendo, como é, uma cousa indispensável, todavia é melhor tê-lo sem gravata nem suspensórios, mas um pouco à fresca e à sôlta, como quem não se lhe dá vizinha fronteira, nem do inspetor de quarteirão"  
(*Obra Completa*, tomo I, 523)

. . . the book has all the advantages of system and method

without the rigidity that they generally entail. . . . However, although system is indispensable, one should use it in a spirit of looseness and informality, in one's shirt-sleeves and suspenders, like a person who does not care what the lady who lives across the street, or even the policeman on the block, may think of him. (*Epitaph of a Small Winner*, 23-23)

If we read "system and method" as an acknowledgement of the aesthetics of the realist tradition and Brás's knowingly unorthodox style as exemplifying Machado's new narrative, then it does not take a distortion of the text to interpret the image of "the policeman on the block" as a reference to the hidebound critical establishment of the time, which, we know, was effectively counfounded by *Epitaph* and the new kind of writing (one distinguished by "a eloqüencia, que há uma genuína e vibrante, de uma arte natural e feiticeira" (OC 523)/"a genuine and vibrant eloquence, with a natural, engaging art," ESW 24) that Machado, through Brás Cubas, was advocating.

Not long after this, in chap. 34, in fact, Brás returns to the crucial, if artfully camouflaged, issue of how one is to read this new narrative, indeed, how one is to read literature, period. Questioning the reader's ability to correctly interpret what's going on (by openly challenging the very conclusion that the text itself has led the reader to arrive at, namely, that Brás is a self-serving cynic), Brás then ends this short, enigmatic chapter by striking a metaphor that captures the problematic essence of the interpretive act itself: Is what we read, or think we read, really what's there? Or, perhaps better put: When we read something, how do we know what it really means? As Brás frames the issue:

Retira, pois, a expressão, alma sensível, castiga os nervos,  
limpa os óculos, — que isso às vezes é dos óculos, — . . . (OC  
553)

Withdraw, then, the unfortunate phrase that you used, sensitive soul; discipline your nerves, clean your eyeglasses — for sometimes the trouble is with one's eyeglasses. (ESW 72)

By reading "eyeglasses" as one's critical position, one's response to a text, we sense here that Machado is telling us, via yet another wonderfully droll metaphor (eyeglasses), how to read this text, how to interpret it, for what we think we're reading, he simultaneously implies and demonstrates, is not necessarily what we're really reading. In this text in particular, as for literature in general, the problem is with one's interpretive stance, one's critical perspective, one's "eyeglasses," so to speak. Machado thus seems to be trying to suggest to his reader that something new is indeed afoot here, and that the old interpretive strategies associated with realism simply won't work any longer, that a new kind of critical thinking (new, or "cleaner," "óculos") is required for a new kind of writing. In many ways, the criticism that Machado offers here, like the criticism that Borges offers in the 1932 *Discusión* essays, ". . . belongs to the category Eliot had named criticism of the practicers, that is, the criticism practiced by those who are paving the way for their own creative writing (Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges* 245).

This dialogue with the reader concerning the reader's role in this text continues in chap. 71, ironically entitled, "O Senão do Livro" / "The Defect of This Book." I say ironically because Brás, again speaking for Machado, now declares (at about the halfway point of the novel) that

the real problem with his book has nothing to do with him or his style and that it has everything to do with . . . the reader, who, once again (except now in a more direct manner) , is singled out, albeit comically, as a key player in the actualization of the text being read! As Brás, exasperated, perhaps, by what he suspects is his reader's inability to appreciate what he's doing here, puts it, ". . . o maior defeito dêste livro es tu, leitor, Tu tens pressa de envelhecer, e o livro anda devagar;" (OC 581)/". . . the great defect of this book is you, reader. You want to live fast, to get to the end, and the book ambles along slowly;" (ESW 117). Making reference here, seemingly, to two of the most basic tenets of realist narrative, its linearity and its logically sequential plot structure (both of which are conspicuously missing from his narrative), Brás is making an even stronger, more pointed — yet still humorously oblique — reference to what is new and different in the narrative he's writing. He then extends this critique of the typical reader's response to realist narrative by creating what I think is one of the most memorable metaphors in all of literature: that the style he's employing here is like the way a pair of drunks walk down the street! As Brás blithely puts it, speaking directly to his reader:

...tu amas a narração direita e nutrida, o estilo regular e fluente, e êste livro e o meu estilo são como os ébrios, guinam à direita e à esquerda, andam e param, resmungam, urram, gargalham, ameaçam o céu, escorregam e caem . . . . (OC 581)

...you like straight, solid narrative and a smooth style, but this book and my style are like a pair of drunks: they stagger to the right and to the left, they start and they stop, they mutter, they

roar, they guffaw, they threaten, they slip and fall . . . (ESW 117-18).

Moreover, by ending this last sentence in an ellipsis (Machado cultivates the ellipsis more than any other writer I know), he allows the reader a punctuation-guided opportunity to enter into the construction of the text's meaning,<sup>12</sup> to cogitate on what the preceding passage might have meant and to imbue it with various forms and degrees of significance — all of which constitutes yet another mark of the new narrative, the one in which the reader is forced to abandon his or her formerly passive role and adopt a new, active one. One is also led to argue, therefore, that in addition to having written Latin America's first new narrative, Machado also initiated a new role for the reader, a new aesthetics of reading, one which Brazilian narrativists would continue to develop for generations to come. Borges, I think, would have applauded this move, for its motivation — the freeing of the reader as well as the writer from the critical straightjacket demanded by realism — is very close to what he proposes in his famous 1932 essays, "La postulación de la realidad" (The Postulation of Reality) and "El arte narrativo y la magia" (Narrative Art and Magic). The liberating effect of Machado and Borges on their respective narrative traditions is an area of investigation that warrents further comparative study, I think, and although I do not have speace here to discuss it, I would like to call your attention to it.<sup>13</sup>

As if to offer further proof that this weaning of the reader from the breast of realism was one of his main goals in writing his *Memoirs* as he does, Brás moves, in chap. 124, to actually bring these issues up, though not in a way that makes it at all obvious to the reader exactly what he

means; it is an essential technique of *Epitaph* that, for all Brás chatters to the reader about how unusual his text is, he never quite gets around to telling us what we really need to know, that is, exactly how we're to interpret it. Rather than simply explain things for us — which he never really does — Machado, an exemplar of the “show,” don't “tell” school of narrative, continually draws the reader into an arresting yet always uncertain confrontation with what is new and different about his narrative. The consistency and organization with which he does this, as I've tried to show, is what makes me feel that he was very clear in his own mind about what he wanted to achieve in this novel. But, at the same time, he could not bring himself to simply tell the reader, in straightforward terms, what, precisely, he was doing. Instead, Machado keeps bringing up what is unconventional about the style and structure of *Epitaph* while at the same time draping his self-consciously self-critical discourse in closely interweaving layers of ambiguity, irony, and metaphor. Speaking metafictionally about why he felt it necessary to interpose chap. 124 at this point in his text, Brás avers, for example, “. . . se eu não compusesse êste capítulo, padeceria o leitor um forte abalo” (OC 618)? “. . . if I did not interpose this chapter, the reader might suffer a great shock” (ESW 180), a sentence that seems to portend some great revelation in defense of the reader's delicate sensibilities and critical acumen. What is forthcoming instead, however, is a seemingly idle reference that actually functions as a clue to the alert reader about just how deliberately anti-realistic this narrative really is, a tactic that allows Brás to deftly move his reader in quite another and unexpected direction, one that does not defend the reader as much as it validates what Brás seeks to do here. As he expresses it:

. . . se eu não compusesse êste capítulo, padeceria o leitor um forte abalo, assaz danoso ao efeito do livro. Saltar de um retrato a um epitáfio, pode ser real e comum; o leitor, entretanto, não se refugia no livro, senão para escapar à vida. (OC 618-619)

. . . if I did not interpose this chapter, the reader might suffer a great shock. To hop from a character study to an epitaph may be realistic and even commonplace, but the reader probably would not have taken refuge in this book if he had not wished to escape the realistic and the commonplace. (ESW 180)

Through the mouth of Brás Cubas, his self-conscious narrator/protagonist, the real author, Machado de Assis, is as close here as he will ever get to telling us outright about his intention to move beyond the orthodox "commonplaces" of realism, the old, conventional way of writing — and reading — narrative. And by reminding the reader that, by this point in the narrative (we're virtually at the end here), he or she is still consuming it — that is, still participating in it — Brás, or Machado, is effectively declaring the arrival — the victory, if you will — of a new aesthetics of reading, the birth of a new kind of reader, one who will not hesitate to become involved in the production of the text's meaning and whose active, creative presence in the narrative act will be continued and expanded upon by subsequent generations of Brazilian narrativists, from Mário and Oswald de Andrade to Guimarães Rosa, Clarice Lispector, Osman Lins, and, though in a slightly different sense, even Marilene Felinto.

Machado's culminating statement about the new narrative he and his critically self-conscious alter-ego, Brás Cubas, are writing appears

only a few pages later, in chap. 138, entitled, provocatively enough, “A um Crítico”/“To a Critic”. The apogee of Machado’s carefully embedded discourse on the nature of the new narrative he’s inventing here, chap. 138 also hearkens back to the point made in chap. 9 about how the text that is *Epitaph* itself exemplifies the aesthetics of this new narrative. In the later chapter, however, Brás has set up an imaginary critic and is patiently explaining to him exactly how to interpret a seemingly simple sentence that he’s just written. As Brás humorously lays it out, the issue in question centers on the relationship between style and meaning, specifically, how can a man who is dead be writing in a style that is so gay and spirited? After all, doesn’t death have a depressing effect on one’s outlook? (no, to the contrary, Brás sardonically avers, what could be more liberting than death?). The more significant problem, however, and one only (but artfully) alluded to by Brás, is familiar to all students of literature: How do the style and meaning of a single part of a text relate to the styles, structures, and meanings of the rest of the text? Or, to put it more succinctly, how does one know how to properly read any particular section of a text, a question that, of course, is especially germane to a critically self-referential and seemingly fragmented text like *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. (Actually, the *Memórias Póstumas* only give the appearance of being fragmented; in truth, this text has a very tight and cohesive, if ironically self-referential, structure). As Brás, sounding a bit like an exasperated T. S. Eliot discoursing on the objective correlative, puts it:

Quero dizer, sim, que em cada fase da narração da minha vida experimento a sensação correspondente. Valha-me Deus! é preciso explicar tudo. (OC 625)

The meaning of the sentence rests upon the fact that in writing each phase of the story of my life I feel the corresponding emotion or attitude, which is of course reflected in my style. Good God, do I have to explain everything! (ESW 190)

Comically introducing, in this last line, the specter of the writer who, knowing he's written something so unusual that his public will probably not know what to make of it, much less appreciate it, Brás here seems to vent the kind of frustration that Machado must have felt as he was composing *Epitaph*<sup>14</sup> and thinking about its eventual reception.

And while we cannot, of course, really know what Machado was feeling or thinking late in 1879 as he was finishing *Epitaph*, what we can be sure of is that this chapter effectively concludes the metacritical discourse on the nature of Machado's new narrative that runs through *Epitaph* and that is embodied in it. Even the tone of this final sentence of chap. 138 — "Valha-me Deus! é preciso explicar tudo." / "Good God, do I have to explain everything!" — expresses a strong feeling of closure, of finality, of having said everything that there was to say (or, at least, everything that Machado was willing to say) about the subject. Although there would be several other delightful examples of it, from here until the conclusion of the story there would be no more self-conscious disquisitions by Brás about the new narrative he was writing; if, by chap. 134, "A um Crítico" / "To a Critic", the reader still hasn't picked up on the blueprint that's being offered here about how to read *Epitaph*, then it's not likely to happen in the final few pages, and the poor reader will probably remain be fuddled about the new theory of writing and reading that is being very subtly advanced in this extraordinary book.

Having surveyed the five key chapters that are devoted to a hidden discussion of what Machado's new narrative was to be like, and why, it may be useful now to return to the question posed by Mac Adam and Schiminovich: Why did Machado elect to reject orthodox realism and create ". . . a radically different kind of prose fiction . . .," one which would live on through the generations in Brazilian narrative and one which, as I have argued, would make Brazilian narrative significantly different from Spanish American narrative at least until the time of Borges and the *Ficciones* and possibly until the time of Cabrera Infante and Sarduy in the 1970s, when Brazilian and Spanish American narrative seem to have much more in common than they had previously had. Mac Adam and Schiminovich suggest that an answer to this question, one crucial to any comparative study of Latin American narrative, may be found in literary history, specifically in the fact that Machado seems to have been much more deeply influenced by Sterne's satiric *Tristram Shandy* than by Flaubert's realistic *Madame Bovary*, a novel he also knew well.

This explanation is almost certainly part of the answer, but I wonder if it's entirely adequate. My suggestion, as I hope I've been able to make clear for you, is that Machado, like the Borges of the late 1930s, had come to see that literature, a function of language, is not, in and of itself, connected in any way to three-dimensional reality, that its only reality, in fact, was its own semiotically ambiguous and self-referential field of reference. From this realization it follows logically that Machado would begin to write a narrative that was deliberately at odds with the prevailing tenets of realism, a movement that, as Mac Adam, Monegal, Dixon and a host of other critics have argued, exerted an essentially retardative influence on the development of Latin American narrative.

But it would also be reasonable to assume that Machado, keenly aware of how revolutionary his new narrative was, would feel the need to educate his reader, to give her or him a chance to understand why *Epitaph* was being written as it was. Although there is no doubt whatever that the reader of *Epitaph* can, as Professor Gledson argues in *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis*, extrapolate valid socio-political significance from it, it's still possible to feel that, like the later Borges, Machado understood, already in the late 1870s, that, as René Wellek has said, realism was simply bad aesthetics,<sup>15</sup> that it was built on a naive sense of the relationship between language, reality and truth, and that a new and better form of literary art could be achieved, one more conscious of its status as a system of linguistic signs and structures. This new writing would possess, as Brás Cubas says of his own work in chap. 9 of *Epitaph*, "a genuine and vibrant eloquence" stemming from a realization of itself as a closed though semantically fluid and productive semiotic system, one in which each verbal structure speaks (as Brás's chapters do)<sup>16</sup> to the others that constitute the overall structure and, simultaneously, to the reader, whose job it then becomes to enter into the multiple ironies, tropes, images and metaphors that are involved in the operation of the text, to decipher its various codes, and to impute meaning to them.

I apologize for that last sentence; it's a good example of the kind of writing that Brás Cubas did not engage in, and that he would have ridiculed as being too jargonish, too stilted and too confident it could say exactly what its author intended it to say. Nevertheless, its presence suggests perhaps how even in 1997 the careful reader still feels "interpretively challenged" in the now sympathetic, now derisive presence of Brás Cubas and his deliciously elliptical discourse.

Indeed, as I'm beginning to close my discussion, this would be a good time to return to a reference made in the title of my essay: what would Brás Cubas say, finally, about Spanish American narrative? When I wrote that part of the title, I had wanted to set Brás up as a kind of late nineteenth century super-critic and author, a man who, from his perfect vantage point in the hereafter, could assess the comparative development of Brazilian and Spanish American literature for us. Although I've already let Brás speak for himself quite a bit about his own narrative, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, I'd like to conclude my commentary by imagining what Brás (that is, Machado de Assis) would tell us about the Spanish American novel, which, to distract him from what he would call the tedium of eternity, he most certainly would have read.

In a supremely chatty yet often acerbic style, one highlighted by exclamation points, ironies, sardonic admonitions and ellipses, Brás would, I think, have three basic observations to make about Spanish American narrative.

First, he would agree with Rodríguez Monegal about the historical development of the Brazilian novel, that, owing most likely to Brazil's relatively stable political history and society, it developed, in Monegal's words, ". . . more harmoniously and coherently than the Spanish American . . .," establishing, by the nineteenth century, ". . . a narrative tradition that in the course of its evolution in the next century would continue to produce some of the best Latin American writers" (*Borzoi Anthology*, vol. I, p. 174). With Brás's permission, what I would like to add to Prof. Monegal's comment is that I think this Brazilian narrative tradition tends to be characterized by its metafictional dimension, and especially by its tendency to interrogate identity and being in terms of

language, a concern that, as in Lispector's *Água viva*, Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, and Lins's *Avalovara*, is then reproduced in the narrative structure itself.

Second, Brás would probably concur with Mac Adam and Schiminovich as well that by 1880 realism was a dead star, that it had held Latin American narrativists in thrall for too long and that it needed to be discarded — by readers as well as by writers! Thinking of such seminal Brazilian narratives of the 1920s and 1930s as *Macunaíma* (1928), *As Memórias Sentimentais de João Miramar* (1924), *Serafim Ponte Grande* (1933), and *Vidas Sêcas* (1938), Brás might also feel, however, that Spanish America held on to realism longer than it should have, that it needed earlier to see narrative as a self-referential structure of words, or signs, rather than as a mimetic reflection of society, and that this did not begin to happen until the time of Borges.

And, although he would quite properly rebuke me for my ponderous style, Brás, I think, would finally agree with me that by the late 1870s Machado de Assis had indeed wanted to develop a new kind of writing, a new narrative that would demonstrate the shallowness of realism and naturalism at the same time that it would highlight the absolute centrality of language (and its self-referential nature) to the novel form. By arguing on behalf of a narrative that answers, aesthetically speaking, only to the contingencies of its own status as a verbal structure, a "fiction" as it were, Brás would contend that his "posthumous memoirs" of 1880 anticipate, though with a slightly different spin, the great breakthrough achieved later by Borges, who, with the publication of his *Ficciones* in 1944 (the same year that Lispector's first novel, *Perto do Coração Selvagem/Near to the Wild Heart*, appeared), would finally put Latin American literature on the map. Complaining, un-

doubtedly, that the Brazilian contribution to this landmark event has been egregiously overlooked, Brás would probably also argue that while both he and Borges make use of the fantastic in their narratives, they do so for different reasons and in ways that, ultimately, have very different consequences. While Borges's elegant and intricate texts came, in the 1960s, to epitomize the structuralist worldview, the more ironic and language-sensitive Brazilian variety, stemming from a dead though still archly self-conscious author who is writing his comically metafictional memoirs while astride a hippo flying back through time,<sup>17</sup> would engender an ontologically oriented narrative tradition that tends more toward the kind of semantic and philosophic discourse we associate with poststructural thought. Brás, I think, as a good Latin American bourgeoisie, would be pleased to see how Latin American narrative has come, in the twentieth century, to be graced with numerous masterpieces in both these great twentieth century literary theories, though, with the exceptions of works like *Tres tristes tigres* (1967) and *Cobra* (1972) — works I am sure he would have enjoyed — he would have definitely favored the more “cafajeste”<sup>18</sup> flavored Brazilian variety.

And, finally, Brás would, I think, feel sure that Borges would also agree with him when, in his famous preface, he declared, to all those who would read him:

. . . evito contar o processo extraordinário que empreguei na composição destas *Memórias*, trabalhadas cá no outro mundo. Seria curioso, mas nãmiamente extenso, e aliás desnecessário ao entendimento da obra. A obra em si mesma é tudo; se te agradar, fino leitor, pago-me da tarefa; se te não agradar, pago-te com um piparote, adeus. (OC 511)

I shall not relate the extraordinary method that I used in composition of these memoirs, written here in the world beyond. It is a most curious method, but its relation would require an excessive amount of space and, moreover, is unnecessary to an understanding of the work. The book must suffice in itself: if it please you, excellent reader, I shall be rewarded for my labor; if it please you not, I shall reward you with a snap of my fingers, and good riddance to you. (ESW 3)

In conclusion, I can only say that, taking my cue from Brás Cubas, I hope my labor has pleased you, excellent reader of *Mester*, for I would never dream of snapping my fingers at such a patient audience as you.

—Earl E. Fitz

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Examples of first-person (though not what we would call metafictional) narrative abound in early Spanish American literature. Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Verdadera Historia de la Conquista de la Nueva España* and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios* are prime examples of this type of writing. Later first-person narratives, somewhat more literary in nature (and that must be considered important precursors of the Spanish American novel, which is often said to have begun in 1816 with José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento*), include Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora's *Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez* (1690) and Alonso Carrió de la Vandra's ("*Concolorcorvo's*") *Lazarillo de ciegos caminantes* (1773).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sandra Messinger Cypess, "Machado de Assis vs. Brás Cubas: The Narrative Situation of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1980): 355-70.

<sup>3</sup> Another critic who takes a similar view of this issue is Paul Dixon, who, in "The Modernity of Machado de Assis" (*Hispanic Studies Series*, vol. 4, 1989, pp. 71-80), discusses Machado's work in the context of the pronouncements made by Carlos Fuentes in his *La nueva narrativa hispanoamericana* (1969).

<sup>4</sup> Of this issue, Monegal has written that, ". . . Borges anticipates the structuralists in viewing literature in systemic terms, as an integrated collection of interrelated texts with its own autonomous development" (*Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature*, v. 2, p. 500).

<sup>5</sup> One could argue, moreover, that the issue of veracity itself — in literature and in life — has emerged as another of the defining characteristics of twentieth century Brazilian literature.

<sup>6</sup> See Monegal, *The Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature*, Vol. II. New York: Knopf, 1977: xiv. See also, Alfred Mac Adam who, in *Textual Confrontations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987: 176), advances a similar argument.

<sup>7</sup> *The Postmodern Movement: A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts*, edited and with an introduction by Stanley Trachtenberg. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985: 251-262.

<sup>8</sup> John Gledson, *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis: A Dissenting Interpretation of Dom Casmurro*, Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984. Mac Adam, on the other hand, is critical of Gledson's interpretation of Machado as a realist and argues that Gledson reads him from an overly restrictive ideological perspective (*Textual Confrontations*, pp. 1-18).

<sup>9</sup> It also separates him from such North American masters of the time as Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane and Henry James.

<sup>10</sup> In his "Ao Leitor"/"To The Reader" section of the novel, Brás (that is, Machado) informs the reader that ". . . evito contar o processo extraordinário que empreguei na composição destas *Memórias*, trabalhadas cá no outro mundo" (*Obra Completa*, tomo I, p. 511)/". . . I shall not relate the extraordinary method that I used in the composition of these memoirs, written here in the world beyond" (*Epitaph of a Small Winner*, trans. by William L. Grossman, New York: Noonday Press, 1995: 3).

<sup>11</sup> John Barth, for example, whose first novel, *The Floating Opera*, was directly influenced by Machado's work, has written that, for him, Machado is the ". . . protopost-modernist" (Fitz, *Machado de Assis*, 45; 142).

<sup>12</sup> An even more brilliant example of this same technique is found in chap. 55, "O Velho Diálogo de Adão e Eva"/"The Venerable Dialogue of Adam and Eve," where Brás and Virgília, now lovers, have a "conversation" that contains no words at all. The reader is guided by her or his sense of who and what these two characters are by this point in the narrative and by the punctuation marks

that end the "sentences." Appearing approximately one-third of the way into the novel, this famous chapter is the ultimate text of the ability of Machado's reader to participate actively and creatively in the construction of the text's significance.

<sup>13</sup> As far as I know, Borges never knew of Machado's work, although somewhere he does make reference to the name of Machado's great contemporary, Euclides da Cunha, the author of *Os Sertões* (1902). If it is true, then, as it seems to be, that Borges does not at least mention the name of Machado de Assis, it would only underscore the extraordinary isolation that Brazilian literature exists in, even within the context of Latin American literature (this being a condition that is slowly beginning to change, however). It is fascinating, though, to speculate about what Borges would have to say about a writer like Machado de Assis.

<sup>14</sup> It is said that some six chapters of *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* were dictated to Machado's wife, Carolina.

<sup>15</sup> This is a conclusion that, in relation to realism in general, René Wellek reaches. See his *Concepts of Criticism*, p. 255.

<sup>16</sup> The most important self-referentiality of Machado's novel, I would argue, actually stems from the way his various chapters and images refer continually (and both directly and indirectly) to each other. Although Brás's wryly metafictional voice is the most obvious self-referential quality to the text (and most certainly its most pleasurable), it is not, I believe, the most significant in terms of the new narrative theory that Machado is advancing here.

<sup>17</sup> See chap. 7, "O Delírio"/"The Delirium," which can be read as a microcosm of the entire book.

<sup>18</sup> Claude L. Hulet, *Brazilian Literature*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1974), p. 97.