Machado de Assis and the Novel
Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos

Beyond Boundaries

There is in the works of novelist Machado de Assis1 ‘everything for those who know how to read’.2 The set of nine novels3 he published between 1872 and 1908 constitute a true compendium of the genre which, having risen to prominence in the early eighteenth century in Great Britain and France, had already become the hegemonic literary form in Europe by the time Machado came to adopt it. One can thus read in Machado’s works the condensed lines of force that, from the genre’s beginnings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had come together through the accumulated contributions of a formidable line of novelists. His wide-ranging reading made him familiar with the many different novelistic traditions and with writers stretching from founders of the genre, like Miguel de Cervantes, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Alain-René Lesage and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, through to his own contemporaries, such as Eça de Queirós and Émile Zola. If we add to his private library the holdings of the Portuguese Circulating Library, of which he was an honorary member from at least June 1881,4 we can say that Machado had at his disposal most of the fictional output of two centuries, which he drew from and absorbed in his own work.5

It is through the double movement between this ‘external influx’, to use a phrase which he himself coined,6 and his acknowledgement of his predecessors in the genre – especially Joaquim Manuel de Macedo and José de Alencar7 – that his oeuvre came into existence. Even when Machado navigates the more secure waters of convention, as in his first four novels, he treads his own paths and challenges deep-seated canons in search of a personal voice that, without ignoring local material,
transcends national borders by acknowledging and incorporating the repertoire of the European novel. On a smaller scale, this movement reproduces a process analogous to that of the genre’s own history and development, for many of its features combine national and local content with transnational circulation thanks to the global dissemination of the novel, itself a phenomenon directly linked to the context of European industrialization, capitalism and imperialism. To deal with Machado, concepts such as ‘romantic’, ‘realist’ and the like, taken here to be descriptive of aesthetic movements, need to be abandoned and categories such as ‘English novel’ or ‘French novel’ renounced. Instead, the novel should be embraced as a transnational genre, especially since the contaminations, borrowings and exchanges that took place between the two shores of the English Channel make very clear that the formation of the novel involved more than one tradition. Moreover, Machado’s constant references and allusions to the realm of the European novel make it impossible to consider him within a context defined strictly by national borders.

Even if the nation is Machado’s subject, as scholars such as Roberto Schwarz, John Gledson and Sidney Chalhoub have brilliantly demonstrated, from the point of view of genre the Machadian novel does not respect frontiers. In order to deal with Fluminense life, he mobilizes all the potential and possibilities suggested and made famous by his peers. In one of his latest essays about Machado, Roberto Schwarz explores precisely the tension and the complexity of the dialectic between the local and the universal in Machado’s oeuvre. One can apprehend a similar complexity in the way Machado deals with novelistic form and its conventions by submitting the genre that rose and got consolidated in the European context to local conditions and themes. Having only once left the confines of his hometown, Machado nonetheless had at his disposal a rich repertoire of techniques and procedures amassed over time and made available to him in the bookshops and reading rooms he frequented in the imperial capital. His recurring references to novels that were not in his private library, like *St. Clair of the Isles* in *Helena* (1876), and to novelists, like Walter Scott in *A mão e a luva* [*The Hand & the Glove*] (1874), provide evidence of his acquaintance with European novels and novelists.

Thus, each novel, from the publication of *Ressurreição* [*Resurrection*] (1872) onwards, appropriates certain novelistic traditions in order to shape what Antonio Candido has described as the ‘outline of Machado de Assis’. The relatively small-scale extent of Machado’s ‘compendium’, nevertheless, contains a synthesis of the developments of the genre since
its origins, with Cervantes, to its point of inflection in the late 1900s, when the first symptoms of the genre crisis that would come more visibly to the fore in the first decades of the twentieth century were anticipated by this ‘master on the periphery of capitalism’. In these novels an ‘enigmatic and Janus-headed’ Machado de Assis is discernible, ‘looking to the past and to the future’, as Antonio Candido suggests in an essay where he draws attention to the writer’s ‘heedlessness of the dominant styles and the apparent archaism of his technique’. On the other hand, it makes no sense to argue, as some have, for the existence of an unbridgeable gulf between Machado’s first four novels and those of his maturity. Just as Bento Santiago wonders whether ‘the Capitu of Glória beach was already in the girl of Matacavalos’, traits of the late novels can be identified in the early ones. Even so, as a realization of a very different conception of the novel, Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas [The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas] (1881) seems to be a watershed in that it represents a decisive change of course and a reshaping of technical issues and narrative procedures. Although in all of his books the novelist explores the ‘undercurrents of the human psyche’, from the 1881 novel onwards a deepening of the self-reflexive dimensions of the act of writing is observable, thereby flaunting the element of construction this involves. This – breaking with realistic conventions by means of a narrator who suspends the narrative to introduce his comments and analyses – lays bare the composition of the novel and its carpentry.

Ideas on the Novel

A more well-behaved vision of the genre, which does not take advantage of all its potential, seems to be conveyed both in Machado’s critical ideas on the novel, all of which he expressed between the 1850s and the 1870s, and in his early work. This enables us to read the former in the light of the latter, and vice versa. Parallels are not difficult to draw. In 1858, in a very brief reference to the ‘three essential literary forms’ (the novel, drama and poetry), Machado commented on the dearth of novels and studies of this ‘very important form’, an omission he himself undertook to remedy a few years later by examining O culto do dever [The Cult of Duty] (1865) by Joaquim Manuel de Macedo and Iracema (1865) by José de Alencar.

In his analysis of Macedo’s work he criticizes the novelist’s close adherence to facts and his want of imagination and spirit – that is, his deficiency in transfiguring common events with ‘the magic wand of Art’. Short of characters with clear contours and incapable of making readers feel
anything, Macedo’s book is far from being a ‘literary novel, the novel that combines the analysis of human passions with the delicate and original touches of poetry’, a characterization that suggests an ideal that ought to be attained. Iracema, conversely, wins the young critic’s admiration because of its ‘interesting action’ and ‘original episodes’, being described as a ‘prose poem’ full of ‘life, interest, and truth’. Machado also appreciates, from the perspective of narrative structure, the close articulation between those episodes and the main theme, laying emphasis on the action that involves characters drawn by sentiment. Thus, Alencar had achieved what was lacking in Macedo.

Years later, Machado would throw Alencar’s ‘fertile imagination and magic style’ into relief, this time against the ‘slavish and photographic reproduction of the miniscule and ignoble’ which he had criticized almost a decade before in Eça de Queirós’s O primo Basílio [Cousin Bazilio] (1878). Leaving aside Machado’s disagreement about ‘Zola’s realism’, with which he associated the Portuguese novelist, what is prominent in these reviews is his disapproval of the composition of the characters, whom he compares to puppets and deems to be devoid of an intrinsic and necessary articulation with the episodes and the action of the novel. Machado stresses the more compositional aspects that made him object to Eça’s concept, and points to the lack of a connection between the characters and the action, to improbability and to the disconnection between the events and the characters’ motivations. This results in a series of structural problems which, according to Machado, justifies his critique of the novel: ‘the substitution of the accessory for the principal, the shifting of the action from the nature and feelings of characters to the incidental and fortuitous’. As a counter-example he chooses Shakespeare, in whose work ‘drama exists because it is in the characters, in the passions, and in the moral situation of the characters’. João Cezar de Castro Rocha has discussed in detail the moral principles and conservative values that informed Machado’s reading, the discomfort and shock that the publication of O primo Basílio caused, and the implications for the true revolution that would take place in the Brazilian writer’s novelistic project. Castro Rocha astutely argues that the Machado who read Eça was not yet the author of Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas. Rather, he was the conventional and moralistic writer of the early novels, in which he dodged the pitfalls of vulgarity and bad taste that he identified in the Portuguese writer’s realism.

Having just published Resurrection (1872), Machado would go on in his essay ‘Instinto de nacionalidade’ [National Instinct] to point out ‘the moral tendencies of the Brazilian novel’ as positive and to praise the
‘depiction of customs, and the conflict of passions, the pictures of nature, and occasionally the study of sentiments and characters’. The guidelines are already provided that would later shape not only Machado’s criticism, but in particular his early novelistic output. When he regrets the scarcity of ‘novels of analysis’, he draws attention to the prevalence of the ‘domain of the imagination’ and to the general disinterest in contemporary problems, and consequently the lack of interest in ‘social and philosophical crises’ which, in his view, could be observed in the Brazilian novel.

Here, it seems, was a programme that he would go on to realize in the novels that are contemporaneous with the critical essays mentioned above. When the former are read in the light of the latter, the “philosophizing” and classic’ bias that Antonio Candido notes in Machado’s early novels becomes evident; likewise, from the point of view of narrative construction, a kind of leitmotif can be apprehended that runs through his criticism and takes shape in the novels, namely, a relation of necessity between action and character. Thus the 1870s, during which Machado published these critical essays and his first four novels, make visible a writer concerned with the definition of points of reference that will guide his own framework and narrative method. What he identifies as missing in the work of his contemporaries is the programme he will carry out in this initial phase, as the preface to Ressurreição indicates. To counter the novel of manners, which according to him has hitherto been a favourite among Brazilian novelists, he asserts he has ‘tried to sketch a situation and to contrast two characters’, which immediately suggests that his narrative will revolve around a central conflict, in the wake of one of the most fruitful traditions of the novel since its rise to popularity in the eighteenth century.

**Novelistic Paradigms**

Samuel Richardson springs to mind as one of the novelists who started this novelistic trend. In *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), he centres his narrative around the clash between two characters who embody conflicting views of the world in which they live, and thereby constructs a highly dramatic plot and intricate psychological characterization. These two novels deal with inner life, exploring their protagonists’ subjectivity and sensibility as they are torn between their personal inclinations and social conventions. Their inner conflicts are enacted through the discourse of a first-person narrator to which the epistolary form gives
visibility and a voice. The external world as setting for the action thus moves to the background and the domestic space stands out as the privileged site for the exercise of individuality and subjectivity. Social obstacles and the weight of moral judgement on the lives of these individuals are key elements that function as propellers of the characters’ destinies while lending the novel the density that results from the detailed scrutiny of their states of mind and their ambivalences of the heart.

This is the tradition with which Machado’s early novels can be associated, for the omniscient narrator examines his characters, acts as the judge of their moral actions and probes their intimate motivations in order to disclose their inner truth. In these novels Machado moves with ease around themes that were dear to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, like ambition, self-interest, convenience, doubt, usurpation, deception, love and jealousy.

The narrator’s attention is turned to this ‘miserable human society’, of which he cuts out a little fragment and peoples with a small gallery of figures to enhance the dramatic nature of his plots. Scenes are structured in which two subjectivities meet, oppose and confront each other, mediated and moderated by the forceful presence of an intrusive narrator at ease in his role as demiurge and commentator – all of this organized around a central situation that connects the several episodes. The clash between two personalities, like Félix and Livia or Guiomar and Estêvão, which involves the conflict between the dilemmas of the heart on the one hand and social convention on the other, is the guideline of these novels. As the narrator of A mão e a luva (1874) asserts, ‘the author is more concerned with painting one or two characters and exposing a few human feelings than he is with doing anything else’.

In the foreword of the first edition of his second novel, Machado states his main purpose to have been ‘the drawing of such characters – that of Guiomar, especially’, the action serving only as a canvas upon which is cast the contour of the profiles, ‘incomplete’ but with some luck, ‘natural and true’. The emphasis on probing the inner motivations of these figures, which the narrator then undertakes with the resources of omniscience in order to explore their moral and psychological impasses, lessens the role of action in the plot, although still succeeding in maintaining a close relationship between these two dimensions of the narrative structure. The early novels effect minor alterations in the circumstances of their protagonists, who are affected by some extraordinary event or crisis and returned to their initial condition without any significant change in their experience or existence.
Thus, the plot in *Ressurreição* relies less on its protagonists’ intervention in the world and more on the narrator’s analysis of their states of mind and on the triviality of everyday life, devoid of shock or great distress. The intentions of the narrative voice are declared at the very beginning of the novel:

His [Félix’s] character and spirit will become better known through reading these pages, and by following our hero throughout the incidents of the quite artless story I am going to tell. We are not dealing here with a constant character, nor a logical and true spirit; this is a complex man, incoherent and capricious, in whom opposing elements meet, exceptional qualities as well as irreconcilable defects.  

If there are no incidents worthy of note – in that they might contain something unexpected, surprising or adventurous – nevertheless, the artlessness of the action, always circumscribed and mitigated in comparison with the narrator’s interest in ‘character’, stands out as one of the novel’s most important features. Conflict, therefore, is internal and is rendered in the dialogues in which the characters’ ways of being and thinking are clearly and firmly delineated. The 10-year interval the narrator interposes between the events and his account, between the past events and the narrative present, returns Félix to the reader practically unchanged; it seems that the action of time and experience have had no effect on this ‘cowardly’ and ‘essentially unhappy’ man. Unhappiness and cowardice are conditions from which this character does not strive to extricate himself. That trait which is one of the defining characteristics of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel – the trust in man’s capacity to intervene in the world to change it or to alter his own destiny, even if this may be an undertaking bound to fail – does not arise as a distinctive feature in Machado’s novels, where disenchantment is the predominant tone among narrators and protagonists.

The happy end of *A mão e a luva*, a novel in which self-interest and personal and social convenience are the driving force of the choices and decisions of both Guiomar and Luís Alves, does not represent a real departure from the narrative scheme Machado devised in his first novel. Once more, there revolves around a conflict, involving Guiomar and her three suitors, a plot that has marriage and ambition as its main themes. Each of the male characters embodies a different and contrasting profile in his relationship with the Baroness’s dependant (Guiomar), so as to build up suspense and tension for the denouement. Wholly enclosed in a domestic
and familial milieu, the narrative centres on the affairs of the heart and on acting according to one’s interest, opening to scenes in which the characters present themselves through dialogue that is fairly elliptical, since not all their feelings and expectations can be revealed. Moreover, the selective omniscient narrator follows the comings and goings of his creatures, exposes their thoughts and begins to explore the possibilities of free indirect discourse to grant readers access to their private life. In his omniscience, the narrator does not shy away from interspersing his narrative with comments, reflections and digressions, something that is also detectable in Ressurreição and will become increasingly frequent and emphatic in the later novels. Likewise, the biting remarks that will later become a kind of trademark can already be observed in passages like this one, about Viana, in the same novel: ‘Viana was a consummate parasite … He was born a parasite as others are born dwarves. A parasite by divine right.’ Or in the irony of the last paragraph of A mão e a luva when the narrator says of Guiomar and Luís Alves that ‘the two ambitions exchanged an affectionate kiss’, and concludes that ‘both settled down as if that glove had been made for that hand’.

Helena (1876) adds a component of romance to this narrative pattern, as Machado openly acknowledges in the foreword. This translates into a melodramatic plot riddled with feuilleton moves: the suspense and mystery of Helena’s birth, the reversals, the suggestion of usurpation and incest, renunciation and revelations. If Machado’s method is similar to that in the two previous novels, and the clash between feeling and social conventions is still at the heart of the events, the action seems to be hampered by a degree of moralism and idealism, though even now a tone of the late Machado is discernible, for instance in the presentation of Counsellor Vale, in the opening paragraphs, and in Dr Camargo’s characterization. From both a formal and a thematic perspective, Machado goes on experimenting with the techniques, procedures and topics that had become the staples of the European novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That would explain what Roberto Schwarz considers to be a more poorly structured, more precarious conception of this novel. For, according to the Brazilian critic, the novelist combines ‘an ultra-romantic plot, social analysis, a deep psychology, Christian edification, and the repetition of the most unfortunate phraseology’, all of which form the core to which the three kisses Dr Camargo applies to his daughter Eugênia’s forehead are the frame, typical of the European novel. For Schwarz, if it were handled with derision, this eclecticism would no longer be a flaw but would instead become a literary strength.
With *Iaiá Garcia* (1878), we are still in the sphere of the sentimental and domestic novel. It may seem, at first sight, that the conflict will revolve around one of the story’s dramatic cores – that involving Jorge, his mother and Estela. Although it has the Paraguayan War as backdrop – the war Jorge will join in the first part of the narrative – and depicts the everyday life of the civil servant Luís Garcia and his daughter Lina, the plot is once more organized around the contrast between two characters – Estela, the haughty and proud dependant, and Iaiá, whose chess-player sagacity and patience will win her Jorge’s heart. In this narrowly delimited circle, in which social differences are the problem that creates the central conflict, tension does not mount considerably and arises almost exclusively at the personal level. The historical context of the war and the individual dramas are not organically articulated, resulting in a ‘discontinuous and fuzzy plot’. The subject matter seems quite slender and the choice to psychologically probe what each character is experiencing in their solitude divests the narrative of much dramatic tension, since neither Jorge nor Estela externalize their feelings and disagreements. Between the ‘secret springs of [the characters’] action’ and the ‘bondage of social conventions’, the narrator is compelled to take upon himself the responsibility to explore their motivations. Schwarz argues that the ‘three crucial moments in the story’ – Estela’s decision, the kiss scene and Jorge’s change of heart – are ‘anti-dramatic’ precisely because in them there is no ‘confluence of conscious intention, deep impulse, and objective circumstances, by means of which the individual seeks to affirm himself’. Thus, the reader is not granted access to the characters’ inner movements, the action loses its strength and the narrator takes on a more conventional role, reducing his interventions and undertaking more systematically the narration proper.

To sum up what I have tried to argue so far, the early Machado adopted a narrative paradigm that, with few exceptions, was predominant during the novel’s consolidation as a hegemonic genre into the late nineteenth century, and his first four novels were a laboratory in which he experimented with techniques and procedures from the novelistic repertoire up to at least the 1870s, when he took up this form. Decorum and a moralistic and mainly conventional stance on human and social relations obtain. At the same time, features that will become prominent in the late novels can be found, still in embryonic form. Some traits herald them: the attenuation of the action in favour of reflection; irony; the intrusive and opinionated narrator given to comments, thoughts and judgements; the (as yet few) digressions.
Machado’s Turnaround: New Paths

There have been several attempts to explain the major change of direction in *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881). I will risk a daring hypothesis here. It considers not only the explicit statement, in the prologue to the third edition of the novel, about the adoption of ‘the free-form of a Sterne or of a Xavier de Maistre’, but also the evidence from perusing Machado’s library and his allusions and references in his nine novels. From his 1881 novel onwards, it is undeniable that Machado is turning to a different tradition of the European novel which has Miguel de Cervantes, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne and William M. Thackeray as central figures. This tradition was less hegemonic than that of the sentimental novel throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and represented a kind of counterpoint or undercurrent that would resurge vigorously in the twentieth century by means of one of its constitutive elements – self-reflexivity and the consequent flaunting of fictionality, of the constructed nature of all literary works.

If the editions of novels that are associated with this tradition and belonged to Machado’s library are examined, it can be seen that a significant number of them date from the 1880s and 1890s. The collation of these particulars with the quotations and references that are found in the later novels reveals an interesting confluence that deserves mention. The novelistic repertoire alluded to in Machado’s early novels, which includes novelists like Walter Scott (in *A mão e a luva*) and novels like *Werther* (in *A mão e a luva*), *St. Clair of the Isles*, *Paul et Virginie* and *Manon Lescaut* (in *Helena*), retraces a romantic trend. However, less than giving material form to set aesthetic values, this repertoire is representative of a certain conception of the novel, which I have tried to delineate in the previous section and of which the first four novels are clear examples. On the other hand, given the other tradition just referred to above, a suggestive coincidence stands out: Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, Charles Dickens and William M. Thackeray are all listed in the catalogue compiled by Jean-Michel Massa and revised by Glória Vianna in editions that Machado kept in his library and date precisely to those decades in which the novelist undertook his change of path. This could be sheer accident, and the data may not be worth much, for nothing can ascertain that his readings followed any rigid chronological scheme. Machado may well have been familiar with these authors and novels earlier, once they could be found in the bookshops and circulating libraries in Rio de Janeiro. The presence of these editions in his library provides, nonetheless, information about the writer’s interests and the period in which
they were available to him, whether at home or in a public institution. The cases of Cervantes, Rabelais and Sterne are harder to pinpoint, either because his editions of their works bear no date (as with Cervantes and Rabelais) or because they are dated 1849 (Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*) and 1861 (Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey*) and therefore prior to Machado’s adoption of the novel genre.\(^{48}\)

What is undeniable is that the repertoire of allusions and references from *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* onwards is of a different calibre and belongs to a tradition associated with wit and humour, mobilizing techniques that Antonio Candido describes as apparently more archaic when he points to ‘the capricious tone of Sterne’ and ‘Sterne’s temporal jumps’\(^{49}\) and provocations to the reader. Such a move backwards to the past, whence Machado retrieves this other paradigm, is duly indicated by the narrator of *Quincas Borba*:

> Here’s where I would have liked to have followed the method used in so many other books – all of them old – where the subject matter of the chapter is summed up: ‘How this came about and more to that effect.’ There’s Bernardim Ribeiro, there are other wonderful books. Of those foreign tongues, without going back to Rabelais, we have enough with Fielding and Smollett, many of whose chapters get read only through their summaries. Pick up *Tom Jones*, Book IV, Chapter I, and read this title: *Containing five pages of paper*. It’s clear, it’s simple, it deceives no one. They’re five sheets of paper, that’s all. Anyone who doesn’t want to read it doesn’t, and for the one who does read it, the author concludes obsequiously: ‘And now, without any further preface, I proceed to our next chapter.’\(^{50}\)

Though put forward in this 1891 novel, these are suggestions that had already been taken up in *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*. Even though they are conveyed by the narrator, the affiliation seems clear. The self-mockery contained in the idea that the method comes from old books does not obliterate the significance of the literary heritage referenced in the quote, which explores the metafictional nature of writing and implies that another conception of the novel is at work here. For this tradition, the critical function that the self-reflexive narrator takes upon himself is of paramount relevance. This allows him to interrupt the narrative to make comments and analytical remarks and also to muse on the very act of writing, making observations about the realm of the book and reading, and the formal structure of the novel itself. He thus resorts to a new/old array of devices, which include prologues, frequent breaks
in the narrative thread in order to address the reader, the discussion of
impasses in the fictional construction, remarks about material aspects of
the book or about the literary tradition. All of these are procedures that
expose the cogs of the narrative machinery, creating an ironic effect and
intensifying our awareness of writing as an artefact. That Machado was
beginning to take a path that went against the grain of the contemporary
novel is evinced in Capistrano de Abreu’s doubt and astonishment when
he asks himself whether Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas is a novel (see
the prologue to the third edition). The direct, unequivocal answer is
yes, it is a novel. But certainly not of the kind that was predominant then.

In the early novels, Machado seemed to hesitate between which
course to follow, hence a certain eclectic admixture on the level of com-
position – psychological analysis, interventions of the narrative voice,
vestiges of the epistolary novel (in Helena, for example), dramatic plots,
melodramatic moves, ‘philosophizing’, realistic scenes, a stilted style
– as if he were inventorying possibilities and alternatives. From Memórias
póstumas de Brás Cubas onwards, however, he appears to have discovered
a vein more congenial to his sceptical and disenchanted worldview. Local
matters will find a different form, definitive and confident, in which to be
configured, and romantic clichés and melodramatic scenes become the
target of parody. Thus, Machado subjects his initial output to a thorough
and far-reaching critique. Besides the change of tone, owing to the reit-
erated use of irony, derision and sarcasm, in the late novels there is also
an inversion of emphasis, from the angle of narrative structure. The truly
meaningful change, in this respect, lies in the fact that the action and
the plot recede to the background and the figure of the narrator takes
centre stage, boosting the role he generally plays in the organization of
the narrative. This takes the form either of memorialist (autobiograph-
ical) discourse, wherein the voice of self looms large, or of the adoption
of a narrative voice that takes precedence over the story and its events.
Although in some of the novels the love intrigue still represents a kind of
guideline, the action thins out and the novels give way to the essay, the
philosophizing, the digressions that open cracks in the cohesive building
of the narrative.

Novels in Crisis

In Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas, Dom Casmurro (1899) and Memo-
rial de Aires [Counselor Aires’ Memorial] (1908), there is nothing to
dramatize, that is, to galvanize into action, to set in motion. Cubas tells
his story from the afterlife and no longer has anything to do with the sublunary world. Between the past events of his life and the narrative Bento Santiago devotes himself to writing in the present there is a gap of 40 years; he has now settled into ‘a quiet, undisturbed sleep’. The retired and disillusioned Counselor Aires, the author of a personal diary that contains his memories, is, in the apt description of José Paulo Paes, ‘an apprentice of death’ and, therefore, somebody who can ‘already dispense with the tough social game’. It is as if they are, all three of them, out of reach of the action of time and of the vicissitudes of life. They are all ‘architect[s] of ruins’, with no legacy to leave behind or experience to share.

The autobiography and memoirs, traditional forms of the novel since the eighteenth century, are systematically subverted, since in Machado’s late novels there is less of life and more of the opinions of their ‘authors’ than one might expect. In Dom Casmurro, where Machado thematizes marriage and adultery, Bento Santiago takes 100 chapters to recount what will trigger the conflict and what would be the foremost event in a conventional sentimental novel. His marriage to Capitu, the birth of Ezequiel and the denouement, with his wife and son’s departure for Europe and their deaths, take up precisely 48 out of a total of 148 chapters and appear to be less important than the construction of an argument and the presentation of a body of evidence intended to arouse suspicion and place the blame on the woman. The last chapters of the narrative retrieve the first two and the reader finally understands the reasons for the nickname ‘Casmurro’ (‘a quiet person who keeps himself to himself’) and for the man’s loneliness as the wheel comes full circle. The house in Engenho Novo reproduces the Matacavalos one, but the man who inhabits it now lives all by himself and seldom goes out. Lack of purpose and a prevailing sense of vacuity are not filled by the visits of his female friends, whom he describes as ‘passing caprices’. He is left only with his recollections and the plan to write a ‘History of the Suburbs’.

The love triangles, adultery, madness and moral and financial bankruptcy – themes dear to the great nineteenth-century realistic novel – are tenuous threads that barely sustain a plot whose action can only be defined as passive. Quincas Borba (1891) is shaped in the manner of Honoré de Balzac and Charles Dickens, staging the rise and fall of a man from the provinces who comes to live in the capital, only to be plundered by the Palha couple. However, in place of the lost illusions of the provincial after a failed struggle for upward mobility, as in the paradigmatic cases of Lucien de Rubempré (Illusions perdues, 1837) and Pip (Great Expectations, 1861), Rubião not only sees his fantasies and dreams, like
his fortune, vanish into thin air but sinks into a universe of folly, entertaining increasingly delirious illusions, fantasies and dreams until he dies, poor and alone, in Barbacena. Whereas, in the best tradition of the novel of apprenticeship, the young Lucien and Pip embody the clash between the poetry of the heart and the prose of the world and thereby are reconciled with their destiny, Rubião, already a mature man and heir to a fortune, has nothing to fight for. As in Machado’s other novels, the protagonist is fundamentally passive. In a dialogue between Teófilo and a deputy, to the question ‘what did he [Rubião] do, or what does he do now?’ the former’s answer is, ‘Nothing, neither now nor before. He was rich – but a spendthrift.

The rivalry between the twins – unmotivated and banal – in Esaú e Jacó (1904) [Esau and Jacob] is a meaningless conflict, resulting in a slender and fragmentary plot, which John Gledson describes as ‘tedious and insipid’. With apparently purposeless episodes, like that of Evaristo’s inkwell (Chapter 50) or Custódio’s teashop sign (Chapter 63), with imprecise character portraits, with the double point of view, Machado seems to implode, one by one, the foundations of the novel since its beginnings. In a coup de théâtre that hints at a certain feuilleton-like resolution, Flora’s death puts an end to the split, the doubling, the division that at first sight seems, somehow, to inject some dramatic tension into the story of her love for Pedro and Paulo. The twins, in their turn, ‘haven’t changed at all; they are the same’ at the end of the novel, reasserting the negative action of time on these characters. All of these elements are pieces in a game of chess devised by Machado, a metaphor that describes quite precisely the composition of this novel. The very complexity of point of view, which presumes an Aires as proto-narrator and an Aires as character, also involves another voice that organizes, edits or takes up the narration – and adds the note to the reader which precedes the novel and later identifies itself as M. de A. in the foreword that prefaces Memorial de Aires (1908). An alternative possibility is that there is an Aires who is at one and the same time narrator and character and, thus, steps in and out of the narrative, depending on whether he is playing the role of witness or participating in the events. Be that as it may, this interplay demonstrates yet another aspect of Machado’s subversion of the traditional schemes of narration.

Without ever abandoning the novel of character, which he had chosen as his pathway in Ressurreição, Machado devised a memorable gallery of characters – Brás Cubas, Rubião, Bento Santiago, Counselor Aires, Virgília, Capitu and Sofia – and, by means of point of view, in the first or the third person, he combines his extraordinary mastery of psychological
analysis with the creation of remarkable narrators. Written in the style of ‘a drunkard’s gait’ and as ‘a swirl of somersaults’, the narrative of their lives is fragmentary and lacunary and exposes the little or almost nothing that actually happens in these novels, pervaded as they are by irony and disenchantment. In Machado’s works, interpretations are unstable, carry us far from the firm ground of the canonical novel of his time and introduce a regime of radical ambiguity, for which the ‘pair of spectacles’ offered to the reader is mere disguise and deceit.

This thinning out reaches a climax in his last work, in which the figure of Aires takes centre stage as character and narrator, the diplomat who ‘did not play an important role in this world … pursued a diplomatic career and retired’; whose ‘diary of remembrances’, trimmed of ‘the dead or dark pages, would only do (or still might suffice) to kill time on the launch to Petrópolis’. The diary form, the foreword warns, was ‘pruned of certain incidents, descriptions, and reflections’ and leaves Aires’ desk to roam the world, ‘trimmed and spare’. If the old artifice of the manuscript is a strategy used to ensure reliability – Aires has left seven notebooks ‘firmly bound in cardboard’ and ‘penned in red ink’, of which the diary is the last – the first-person narrative does not reduce the ambiguity that arises with the impression of intrusion through the ‘editor’ – either because the reader suspects that he is responsible for including the epigraph and cutting out the excesses (a gesture implicit in the idea of ‘pruning’) or because he has taken decisions about ‘keeping only what ties together a single theme’ and therefore has intervened in the selection. The composition, which juxtaposes the recording of duly dated events, looks like a puzzle whose pieces were carefully chosen and combined, but still leaves gaps and implies omissions amid scenes, summaries, and comments by the narrative voice. An oblique and sly narrator with an avowed ‘skill at uncovering and covering up’, Aires does not live up to the expectations of the diary form, which in his case has very little of the private and confessional and would seem to be far from constituting a space for the expression of subjectivity. At one point, tired of his loneliness and thirsty for ‘living people’, he decides ‘to see other people, to hear them, smell them, taste them, touch them, and apply all his senses to a world that could kill time, immortal time’. His ‘idle pen’ comes, then, to record the trifles of a daily existence without disquietudes, whose background is nevertheless, no more, no less, the abolition of slavery (1888) and the proclamation of the Republic (1889). In the interstices of his observation of other people’s existence and of political turning points, in the intervals, the figure of the narrator stands out and, in a low tone, leaves us the diary of an individual who relinquished action in favour of reflection and internalized the movement of life.
Aires, the man of quiet habits who abhors emphasis, puts an end to this cycle of nine novels in a minor key, in an atmosphere of melancholy and awareness of *tempus fugit*. Desire without action, old age and death prevail in this novel in which the protagonist ‘is no longer of this world’ and turns away ‘from shore with our eyes on those who remain’. In his reading of *Memorial de Aires*, John Gledson considers this novel by Machado to be ‘the most implacably pessimistic and a lament for the country whose existence, as a nation, he could barely believe in’. Therein, it seems, lie the historical reasons that explain why these are novels ‘in crisis’, which in turn announce the symptoms of and anticipate the crisis of the novel genre that will deepen in the first decades of the twentieth century and produce certain developments in both the Brazilian and the European contexts. Within the theory and history of the novel, Machado’s nine novels represent not only the production of a compendium but the execution of a programme that he had previously devised in his critical work. Comparing the dramatic production of Antonio José da Silva with this Portuguese playwright’s models, Machado had suggested that the writer ‘may go search for borrowed spice, but only in order to season it with the sauce of his own making’. This is a most apt description of the novelist Machado de Assis himself.

Notes

1. ‘Machado’, as he is usually referred to among academics.
2. I borrow here Antonio Candido’s phrase about João Guimarães Rosa’s novel *Grande sertão: veredas* (see Antonio Candido 1971, 121). Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations are my own.
3. In the so-called ‘first phase’: Ressurreição [Resurrection] (1872); *A mão e a luva* [The Hand & the Glove] (1874); Helena [Helena: A Novel] (1876); Iaíá Garcia [Iaíá Garcia] (1878). In the ‘second phase’: Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas [The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas] (1881); Quincas Borba [Philosoher or Dog?] (1891); Dom Casmurro [Dom Casmurro: A Novel] (1899); *Esau e Jacó* [Esau and Jacob] (1904); *Memorial de Aires* [Counselor Aires’ Memorial] (1908).
4. The writer’s membership card can still be consulted in the files of the Rio de Janeiro Portuguese Circulating Library.
5. See Vianna 2001; Senna 2008.
7. I mention these two novelists because their work was reviewed in Machado’s critical essays.
8. In the nineteenth century the demonym for the city of Rio de Janeiro was ‘Fluminense’, from the Latin *flumen*, meaning ‘river’. Nowadays, the term used is ‘Carioca’, from the indigenous Tupi language, meaning ‘white man’s house’. ‘Fluminense’ is more often used today as the demonym for the whole state of Rio de Janeiro.
11. Helme 1837.
13. The phrase is Roberto Schwarz's (Schwarz 2001).
15. Assis 1998a, 244.
18. Assis 1992c, 844
20. Assis 1992d, 849, 851 and 852, respectively.
21. Assis 1992e, 924; preface written in 1887 for an edition of O guarani, of which only the first instalments were published (English translation: Alencar 1893).
22. Assis 1992b. Eça de Queirós's novel has been translated into English by Margaret Jull Costa (Queirós 2003).
30. Richardson 1740; Richardson 1748.
34. Assis 2013, 28.
35. Assis 2013, 161. One should note Machado's irony in naming his protagonist Félix.
39. It is worth noting that, like Clarissa Harlowe, Helena lets herself die because of the moral abyss she is pushed into.
40. Schwarz 1977, 104.
41. 'Of the qualities necessary for playing chess laiá possessed the two essential ones: a quick eye and benedictine patience – qualities precious in life itself, which is also a game of chess, with its problems and games, some won, some lost, others neither' (Assis 1977, 102).
42. Schwarz 1977, 143.
43. Assis 1977, 14 and 38, respectively. Translation slightly changed because the translator's choice ('the secret explanation') is inaccurate.
44. Schwarz 1977, 146.
45. Assis 1998b, 5. I will also refer to the other translation: Assis 2008.
46. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, The Sorrows of Young Werther (1787); Elizabeth Helme, St. Clair of the Isles: or, The Outlaws of Barra. A Scottish Tradition (1803); Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Paul et Virginie (1788); Antoine-François Prévost, Manon Lescaut (1731).
47. See Vianna 2001.
48. There is no information, however, about when they were purchased or incorporated into the library.
52. Note this excerpt: 'Like a blessing from the stars, her tears, hitherto restrained by the presence of strangers, began to flow freely. No one saw them because the night was so dark and her retreat so enclosed, but the summer breeze, which began rustling the dry leaves, perchance heard her sobbing, perchance carried it to the bosom of God. And there came, by divine intervention, sweet consolation to her solitary tears' (Assis 2013, 116).
53. Assis 1998a, 121.
54. Paes 2008, 43. In one of his dialogues with the Baroness, Aires says, 'Now the world starts here on the docks of Glória or the Rua do Ouvidor and ends at the Cemetery of São João Batista.' See Assis 2000, 83.
56. A phrase with which Freitas, one of Rubião’s guests, refers to himself in *Quincas Borba* (Assis 1998c, 39).
59. Hegel 2002, Vol. 4, 138. In English: ‘Consequently one of the commonest, and, for romance, most appropriate, collisions is the conflict between the poetry of the heart and the opposing prose of circumstances and the accidents of external situations’ (https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ae/part3-section3-chapter3.htm).
60. Assis 1998c, 220.
61. Gledson 1986, 162.
64. Assis 1998b, 113. Also: ‘You [reader] love direct and continuous narration, a regular and fluid style, and this book and my style are like drunks, they stagger left and right, they walk and stop, mumble, yell, cackle, shake their fists at the sky, stumble, and fall’ (Assis 1998b, 111).
66. ‘A Note to the Reader’ (Assis 2000).
68. ‘A Note to the Reader’ (Assis 2000).
70. Assis 2000, 212.
72. At one point, Aires refers to the ‘gloomy smudges of time, which consumes all things’ (Assis 1972, 10).
73. Assis 1972, 43.
74. Assis 1972, 184.
75. Gledson 1986, 255.
76. Gledson 2011.
77. Assis 1992a, 731.

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