

MACHADO DE ASSIS

The hills above Rio de Janeiro, now covered with shantytowns, were already poor, marginal districts in 1839, when Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, a mulatto orphaned at an early age and raised by his black (or possibly mulatta) stepmother, was born. One of the many enigmas which surrounds Machado de Assis is how a writer whose sensibility is as finely pitched as that of Chekhov, who extended the possibilities of realist fiction through experiments with point-of-view as subtle as those of Henry James, and whose savage disenchantment might have earned him the respect of Jonathan Swift, emerged from an impoverished background in a tropical empire run on a regime of slavery. It is almost as if Tolstoy, rather than having inherited Yasnaya Polyana, had been born a serf.

Machado educated himself by eavesdropping on lessons given at the girls' school where his stepmother worked in the kitchen. He found an apprenticeship with a printer in order to learn about typesetting and books, taught himself to read French, English and German, and by the age of twenty-five had become a literary celebrity. Even though slavery was not abolished in Brazil until the year he turned forty-nine, Machado climbed the social ladder with ruthless efficiency. He made a sensible marriage to a cultured white woman from Portugal five years his senior and obtained a post in the Ministry of Agriculture, where he performed his duties with such diligence that he is held up as a model to modern Brazilian civil servants. Neither his early fiction, which reproduced the Romantic conventions of the day, nor his later works, which excoriated convention with iconoclastic originality, waste much time on social commentary. It is not easy to know what Machado thought about the society in which he had been spared the injustice that was the common lot of people of his race and class. The richness of his fiction depends on the multiple potential interpretations afforded by his nearly bottomless irony.

To some extent Machado's contradictions are those of Rio de Janeiro. He never travelled abroad and lived in a city which, after Napoleon's invasion of Portugal in 1808, became the seat of the Portuguese monarchy and the capital of a global empire. Brazilian independence was declared in 1822 by the prince regent; where Spanish-speaking republics fought brutal wars of independence against the colonial power, Brazil was a self-proclaimed empire ruled by descendants of the Portuguese royal family. Having entered the elite, Machado accepted the dominant positivist ideology, derived from Auguste Comte and Charles Darwin, which in Brazil, as elsewhere in Latin America, acquired a virulent edge of racial determinism. It is likely that he internalized both the positivist tenet that people of colour were innately inferior and the evident truth that he was one of the most talented men of his generation. This intractable contradiction may explain why Machado never wrote a novel dramatizing the unstable position of the educated mulatto in Brazil, such as Bernardo Guimarães's still-popular Romantic novel, *A Escrava Isaura* (1875; *Isaura the Slave-Girl*), about a very light-skinned mulatta born into slavery.

Machado's Romantic novels revolve around the standard themes. *Helena* (1876), for example, opens with the death of Counsellor Vale who, in his will, states that he has an illegitimate daughter and requests that his sister and son accept the girl into the family home. The incestuous overtones of her evolving intimacy with Estácio, the Counsellor's son, are defused by the revelation that Helena is not in fact his biological sibling. She is, rather, the daughter of a young couple whose happy marriage the Counsellor destroyed by seducing the wife and prising her away from her devoted husband. As he relates these events, the wronged husband stumbles

over the contradictions in his wife's character: "Angela nasceu metade freira e metade bailarina" ("Angela was born half nun and half ballet-dancer"). The exploration of the character of the wife, who complicates the Romantic typecasting by being unable to subdue her sex drive in spite of her love for her husband and daughter, foreshadows the far more complex writer Machado was to become. *Helena* is resolved with the hoariest of Romantic plot devices, as the heroine comes down with a fever and dies; yet, read in the light of Machado's later work, this novel shows him straining against the conventions which had made him successful.

In 1879, wracked by epilepsy, Machado retreated to a spa where, too weak to write, he dictated to his wife an entirely new type of novel. This metamorphosis, described repeatedly in accounts of Machado's life, is almost too neat a formulation. Yet there is no doubt that after this crisis Machado began to draw on long-suppressed emotions and insights to nourish his fiction. In literary terms, the problem he confronted was how to evolve beyond Romanticism. The Romantic novel fit well with 19th-century Latin American society, dominated by big estates, an untamed natural world and anxieties about origins. Writers such as Machado's friend José de Alencar or José Mármol in Argentina used Romanticism to express the fledgling search for identity of new nations. However, attempts to adapt the European Realist novel to Latin America were, at best, marginally successful. Balzacian tales of young men struggling to rise in society made little sense in hierarchical Latin America. Ironically, Machado was one of the few writers who could have told such a tale; but to do so would have been to refute the tenets of positivism by unmasking his racial and class origins. Machado preferred to assume the voices of the men with whom he came into contact in his work –politicians and barristers– to express his disillusionment. The tricks of perspective required by these acts of ventriloquism enabled him to forge an innovative form of late Realism. The first major work of his later career, *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1880; *Epitaph of a Small Winner*) is narrated from beyond the tomb. The short chapters –160 of them in a 250-page novel– are almost epigrammatic in their concision. Brás Cubas, born into a privileged Rio de Janeiro family, squanders his opportunities, does nothing worthy, cares about no one but himself, and ruins the lives of those who are close to him. As a narrator, Cubas falls midway between Tristram Shandy, to whom he alludes, and Dostoevsky's underground man. The novel's innovations include a chapter in which the dialogue between two lovers is expressed through the variable arrangement of suspension points. Cubas engages in outrageous metatextual speculations ("The problem with this novel is you, reader"), refers the reader back to earlier chapters and attributes everyone's motives, particularly his own, to vile self-interest. *Epitaph for a Small Winner* decrees that "there is nothing in the world so monstrously vast as our indifference". Cubas decides that the sole blessing of his life is not having had children: "I transmitted to no one the legacy of our misery". The novel's vision is so misanthropic that *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, the cornerstone of Machado's modern reputation, inspired puzzlement in many of his contemporaries.

Cubas's best friend is a mentally unbalanced philosopher. Machado's novel *Quincas Borba* (1892; *Philosopher or Dog?*), published shortly after the author had written an essay in which he called for the death of the omniscient narrator, takes the philosopher as its catalyst. Having inherited a fortune, Quincas names his dog after himself and leaves his money to a small-town simpleton on the condition that he move to Rio to care for the dog, also named Quincas Borba. This initiates a series of confusions between appearance and reality which set the reader in conflict with the third-person narrator. At a point where the reader believes that two characters are having an affair, the narrator breaks in: "Calumny on the part of the reader.... You would have seen that, had you read carefully. Yes, unhappy reader, note that it was unlikely that

a man bent upon an adventure of that sort would stop the tilbury right in front of the house of assignation". Machado's exploration of the confusions between perception and reality culminates in *Dom Casmurro* (1900). This novel –the title is roughly equivalent to “Lord Curmudgeon”– even more than Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, can claim to be the classic exploration of the unreliable first-person narrator. The plot of *Dom Casmurro* almost represents a return to Romanticism: a man woos his childhood sweetheart and finally wins her as his wife. Yet he comes to suspect that the delightful Capitú is deceiving him. By acting on his suspicions he destroys her, ending up the lonely old man who is telling the story, an Othello ruined by petty-mindedness. Less overtly self-referential than its two predecessors, *Dom Casmurro*, which can be read as a simple romantic tragedy, is one of Machado's most popular novels in addition to being one of the most deceptively complex.

Machado's failure to become well known outside Brazil has been attributed to the marginalization of the Portuguese language, to Brazil's cultural distance from both Europe and its Spanish-speaking neighbours, to the fact that, not having practised anything resembling magic realism, Machado cannot be sold as the forerunner of modern Latin American novelists, even to his mixed-raced background. It may seem surprising that university Black Studies courses have not adopted Machado as, for example, Women's Studies –for worse and better– has “rescued” the 20th-century Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector's popularity in English. But Machado's disenchantment is hostile to narratives of liberation. In *Epitaph for a Small Winner*, the young Brás Cubas beats his slave, Prudêncio. When Prudêncio is freed by Brás's father, he immediately buys a slave and beats him savagely in the street. This image of one black man whipping another is not conducive to classroom consumption nor, perhaps, is Machado's crushing view of human nature.

Machado's reputation in English reached its high point in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Susan Sontag wrote an essay praising him, the three major novels appeared in mass-market paperbacks; even Woody Allen mentioned his name. *The Devil's Church*, a collection of Machado's short stories translated by Jack Schmitt and Lorie Ishimatsu, was published in both the U.S. and U.K. at that time. Machado, who died in 1908, wrote over one hundred short stories. Between the 19 stories chosen by Schmitt and Ishimatsu and the 20 stories selected by John Gledson for *A Chapter of Hats*, there are only five repeats. Gledson, who is the editor of a two-volume Brazilian anthology of Machado's stories and the author of a respected academic study of Machado, opens his selection with stories which show the author in transition from Romanticism and “universal” themes. The first story is a clever rewriting of the tale of Noah's Ark. The second, “The Mirror”, brings the scene back to Rio, albeit in an allegorical vein; the third is set in ancient Alexandria. Stories such as these pleased the Rio upper classes by providing material for drawing-room conversation; but, Gledson maintains, it is the later, psychologically acute stories, sometimes both witty and horrifying, which are Machado's best work.

The bulk of the collection revolves around the Rio of the professional and political classes, their loves, inheritances, illnesses and affairs; cumulatively these stories build up a remarkable portrait of a 19th-century city, and it is easy to see why they remain the favourites of Brazilian readers. The sharply evoked setting enables Machado to focus on the contradictions of human behaviour. In “A Singular Occurrence” a pleasant, polite woman cannot help but fall in love with a married man. They become lovers, but in the midst of their “burning, sincere passion” she walks out into the street one night, picks up a stranger and prostitutes herself with him. The act does not, ultimately, destroy the couple's love, yet it remains inexplicable. The

story shows Machado at his most Chekhovian, gesturing towards an unknowable husk of human character. The title story resembles a contemporary short story in its use of indirection. Mariana, a young lawyer's bored wife, criticizes her husband's choice of hat. Her criticism, and her penchant for flirting, could be trivial, or they might be the first steps towards marital discord. A meeting with a former suitor, who is now a politician who makes long-winded speeches, allows her to reassess the value of her marriage. The shifts in Mariana's outlook are conveyed with subtlety and without obtrusive narrative intervention.

Romantic betrayal takes place in many of the stories, but its aftermath is often anticlimactic. The sailor in "Admiral's Night" returns to Rio to find that the woman who swore to be faithful to him has a new lover. Rather than killing himself, as he has vowed, he pretends to his shipmates that he had a rollicking night with her. In "The Fortune-Teller" a romantic triangle does come to a bloody climax, but only after the protagonist has been assured that this won't happen. "The Hidden Cause", which contains a stomach-turning description of casual sadism, plumbs the emotional void experienced by a woman married to a man who is obsessed with images of pain. "The Diplomat", a psychological portrait of a man who cannot make a decision, conveys the paralysis of neurosis and self-delusion with nail-biting persuasiveness.

Machado's ironies make autobiographical readings risky. Even so, "A Famous Man", about a successful composer of popular music with curly dark hair and obscure parentage, "at peace with his fellow men and at war with himself," who longs to be a serious composer, seems to be a critique of the mixed-race artist who advances by pandering to popular taste: a reflection of the mature Machado on his youthful self. "The Cane", written after the abolition of slavery, hinges on a fascinating moment when a boy who has escaped from a seminary feels compassion for an abused slave girl and promises to help her, only to betray her later in order to save himself. Machado believed that slaves could not be morally engaging characters since they lacked the freedom to make choices; but their oppressors were fair game. "Father Against Mother," one of Machado's last stories, published in the more open society of 1906, sees his irony thinning into derision in a caustic account of Candido Neves (roughly "Snow-White Innocent"), a specialist in catching runaway slaves, who captures a mulatta woman, inadvertently killing her child, in order to earn money to retain custody of his son. The almost naturalistic directness and diminished richness of this tale, in spite of its deft parallels between slave and slave-hunter, suggest that restrictions on what could be said played a crucial role in inspiring Machado's greatest fiction. Only a slave-holding 19th-century society, with its enforced silences and blind conformism, could have honed this ambiguous gaze on the human condition. John Gledson's translations are smooth and accomplished. For readers who know Machado, this extension of his English repertory is a gift; for those unfamiliar with this neglected master, *A Chapter of Hats* will be a thrilling introduction to his work.

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