

### **Wry modernist of Brazil's past**

Often considered the father of his country's literature, Machado de Assis created humorous and dark works of implicit social criticism, free of the conventions of his nineteenth-century Rio.

David A. Taylor  
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Last year the Brazilian film *Memorias Postumas*, directed by Andre Klotzel, collected honors at film festivals everywhere from Berlin to Kerala, in southwestern India. This faithful incarnation of the 1881 novel by Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis showed how lively his work remains nearly a century after his death. His writing lays bare human venality with dark humor and a hint of compassion.

"I am a deceased writer not in the sense of one who has written and is now deceased, but in the sense of one who has died and is now writing," says the narrator, Bras Cubas, adding that for him, "the grave was really a new cradle." With this opening, he sweeps aside most story conventions and any air of supernatural authority; saying he simply hopes that his unusual method might add to his tale's entertainment value.

In a sustained burst of short chapters, *Memorias postumas de Bras Cubas* [*The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*] tells the story of the narrator's life as a devilish, wealthy bachelor and his affairs. In the casual conversation of a dead man, the tale does become surprisingly amusing. Cubas dedicates a short chapter as a paean to his own legs. It waxes Shakespearean, with a wry twist:

"Blessed legs! And yet some people treat you with indifference. Yes, loyal legs, you left to my head the task of thinking about Virgilia, and you said to one another, 'He has a problem on his mind, it's dinner time, so let's take him to the Pharoux. Let's split his consciousness; we'll let the lady take one part of it, but we'll take the other, so that he

will go straight there, will not bump into pedestrians and carts, will tip his hat to acquaintances, and will finally arrive safe and sound at the hotel.' And you carried out your project to the letter, beloved legs; in appreciation of which kindness I have now immortalized you."

Machado's sensibility still walks abroad in the world today. Susan Sontag pronounced herself retroactively influenced by Machado after her editor lent her a copy of *Posthumous Memoirs* (in a translation entitled *Epitaph for a Small Winner*). Kevin Spacey's opening voice-over in the Oscar-winning film *American Beauty* sounds suspiciously Machadian. And Woody Allen has called Machado "a brilliant and modern writer whose books could have been written this year."

Machado de Assis was born in June 1839 to a father who was a mulatto house painter and a mother variously described as Spanish, Portuguese, and mixed race. Machado's grandparents were freed slaves. If Machado were describing his life as one of his characters, he might sum it up by saying he was plagued by poor health and a stutter from his youth, his parents died while he was still young, and as an adult he contracted epilepsy. But that would not be a full picture. Indeed, Machado has frustrated biographers who tried to fill in the blanks from his unpromising start to his later life as father of Brazilian literature.

Rio de Janeiro would be Machado's world all his life. After his parents died, the boy had the good fortune to be raised by a godmother who was both wealthy and educated. He grew up on the city's outskirts and attended public school, but probably didn't finish eighth grade. By age sixteen he was writing poems for publication, and a year later he took a job as a printer's apprentice. By eighteen he had written an opera libretto.

Very quickly he began writing stories, articles, and plays, and in 1872 he published his first novel, *Ressurreicao* [Resurrection], in the romantic style then popular.

Although sickly, he had infectious energy. His biographer Helen Caldwell writes that in his first fifteen years as a writer, Machado penned about six thousand lines of poetry, nineteen plays and opera libretti, twenty-four short stories, 182 articles, and seventeen translations. He met with other writers in literary salons and collaborated with poets and musicians on musical extravaganzas.

A glimpse at his schedule of public appearances over a six-month

period reveals his energy and involvement. On September 15, 1865, Machado recited his poems at the founding of the poetry society Arcadia Fluminense, and again at the society's first soiree a month later. He wrote the lyrics for the society's new hymn, and at its third meeting in December he read his translation of Longfellow's "The Old Clock on the Stairs" and presented his new comedy. In February, he published the poem "Os Polacos Exilados," to raise money for Polish refugees, victims of a failed nationalist uprising.

In 1868, he met Carolina de Novais, the sister of a friend, poet Faustino Xavier de Novais, when she came from Portugal to care for her brother after his nervous breakdown. By March 1869, Machado and Carolina were exchanging love letters, often two a day. The next month they were married. By all accounts, their marriage was devoted and happy for thirty-five years. When he was ill, Carolina read letters and papers to her husband and assisted him as his secretary.

Machado took a series of government posts, including one in the agriculture department. He continued to write constantly, but his early writing did not stand out markedly from the other fiction of the time.

In 1879, Machado suffered a severe breakdown in his already-fragile health. The illness, sometimes described as the onset of epilepsy, forced him to spend months recuperating in a health resort. During that time, he appears to have reassessed himself and his writing. As a result, he began to strip away literary conventions that struck him as false. By now he had read and absorbed works like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. He started writing in a new style, and when he grew tired he dictated chapters to Carolina.

Machado's next novel revealed a new voice--more conversational, a kind of psychological realism. *Posthumous Memoirs* burst upon the literary scene with an idiosyncratic combination of humor and bleakness. Bras, the narrator's first name, suggests Brazil itself, and his last name (*cuba* in Portuguese means barrel or vat) recalls the barrels a hardworking ancestor made before he became a rich planter. The combination evokes a spirit of brash confidence and commerce. Cubas confesses that while he lived, he dreamt of inventing a great cure: all anti-melancholy plaster. The idea fascinated him for its promise of high-minded public benefits, and for the international fame it would bring him. It became an obsession.

"My idea was really fixed, as fixed as--I cannot think of anything so fixed in this world: perhaps the moon, perhaps the Egyptian pyramids,

perhaps the late Germanic Diet. Let the reader make whatever analogy pleases him most, let him make it and be content; there is no need for him to curl his lip at me merely because we have not yet come to the narrative part of these memoirs. We shall get to it. The reader, like his fellows, doubtless prefers action to reflection, and doubtless he is wholly in the right. So we shall get to it."

After that outburst, the narrator begs yet more space to consider the plaster and the modest, worldly efforts that "not infrequently survive" longer than bolder public gestures. He offers the example of "the common people, who used to seek protection in the shadow of the feudal castle," the castle fell, but the common people have grown in strength, he says. As if sensing a censor's rebuke, he adds, "I think I shall withdraw the analogy." Even here, in putting forth democratic idealism, Machado manages to wink at the reader and the emperor. (The empire ended a few years after *Posthumous Memoirs* was published.)

Machado responded to the contrasts of the churning city of Rio de Janeiro around him. His Rio contained an elite that modeled itself on European culture with salons and outdoor concerts, as well as a market city where poverty and commerce roiled together. The city quadrupled in population during his lifetime, and neighborhoods shifted territory between slums and expensive villas, with middle-class suburbs emerging between the two extremes. Rio installed the modern wonders of the telephone in 1877 and electric trolley cars fifteen years later, but many neighborhoods lacked basic sanitation, and outbreaks of yellow fever, smallpox, cholera, and the plague flared throughout Machado's lifetime, especially in the summer months. Slavery wasn't abolished until 1888.

All of this found its way into Machado's unromanticized fiction. Like his Russian contemporary Chekhov, Machado stormed Rio's literary scene from outside, bringing an eye more attuned to broader Brazilian society and the ways that people responded to its social and financial strains. He was fascinated by the way that beauty and ugliness coexisted cheek to jowl. In his later novel *Dom Casmurro*, an anxious lover is stopped in the Rua de Matacavallos by the need to mourn an acquaintance who suffered from leprosy. In *Posthumous Memoirs*, Bras Cubas is shocked to find his former lover, the beautiful courtesan Marcela, scarred by smallpox and standing behind the counter of a shop along the Rua dos Ourives that he enters by chance. The moment conveys the sadness of a former lover's lost bloom, but also the last flicker of her vanity and her resignation to life; her poise as a rare

female entrepreneur ("A man who had once loved her and had died in her arms had left her this goldsmith's shop; but, to cap her misfortunes, it was now little patronized, perhaps because people found it strange to see a woman in charge"); the shrewd narrator's cold reassessment of her; and a warm greeting Marcela gets from a little girl.

Machado follows this richly naturalistic scene with a chapter of metaphysical whimsy entitled "What Aristotle Overlooked." It suggests invisible connections among Rio's residents in terms of a physics theory, like energy moving from one body to the next. For example, Cubas carries his sad thoughts about Marcela to his rendezvous with Virgilia, a wealthy young mistress. His inattention causes Virgilia to become confused and snappish. Hence:

"Start, a ball rolling; it rolls along, comes in contact with another ball, transmits its motion to the other, and the second ball rolls along. Let us call the first ball Marcela; the second, Bras Cubas; and a third, Virgilia. Let us assume that Marcela, having received a fillip from the past, rolled along until it came in contact with Bras Cubas, which, in turn, bumped into Virgilia, which had been wholly alien to the first ball; and thus, by the simple transmission of a force, opposite extremes of society come into relationship with each other, and there is established something that we may call the Unity of Human Misery."

We shouldn't presume that the author agreed with all of his character's ideas, of course. Clearly Cubas is in many ways a shallow, spoiled upstart. Machado's letters show that unlike Cubas, he believed in hard work. Like him, the author did not have children, but it doesn't appear he was glad of that. And while Cubas calls himself pessimistic, Machado insisted to a friend that pessimism was more complex, and "did not connote impenetrable gloom and despair, and that Schopenhauer was a jolly old man."

I first encountered a story, by Machado de Assis a dozen years ago in a place he might have invented: a little shop called Tantric Books in an alley of Kathmandu, where an anthology of Latin American short stories contained his "Midnight Mass." I was haunted by the subtlety of the narrator's youthful impressions, both innocent and sensuous, and the way that the story conveyed an older woman's attempt to seduce the narrator, without his understanding until much later.

Machado's novels are bolder performances. He loved opera. He went to performances often, and wrote libretti for many. (In *Dom Casmurro*,

a retired Italian tenor explores in detail his theory that life is like a grand opera.) He also read his poetry at public events. The narrator of *Posthumous Memoirs* invites theatricality by constantly goading his reader, chiding him (and her), and posing questions. Cubas's pert asides subvert the conventions of fiction and threaten to turn it into a performance art. In one scene two-thirds through the novel, he snaps: "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; you like straight, solid narrative and a smooth style, but this book and my style are like a pair of drunks: they stagger--they mutter, they roar, they guffaw, they threaten the sky, they slip and fall."

As Gary Amdahl wrote in a 1997 review in *The Nation*, "If you are the sort of reader who takes offense when called a defect, the book is not for you." On the other hand, he added, "if you actually find it a little thrilling to be so important, you will find the *Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas* a very great novel indeed."

In energy and innovation, Machado shares certain qualities with Tom Ze, the composer who tops international lists of Brazilian musicians today. Ze, born in Bahia and a longtime resident of Sao Paulo, was the prankish cofounder of the tropicalia movement in the 1960s. In their fantastic wordplay, in their dark and whimsical wit, and in their freedom from convention, the two artists stir a comparable excitement. A few months ago, Ze was deeply moved by Machado's story "Conto de Escola" [A School Tale], an initiation story.

"It is better that you read it," Ze says by e-mail, "because a reader who tells what a story is, is not a good reader." Ze did not always appreciate the father of Brazilian literature. "I admit that when I was younger I preferred [Machado's contemporary] Euclides da Cunha--that dense and wonderful writing, that implicit strength and comprehension" of the man from Brazil's Northeast. But recently Ze came around to "the deep and clear writing of Machado de Assis, his like-clean-water, sometimes humorous, transparency when he looks at evil."

After *Posthumous Memoirs*, Machado de Assis continued to write novels, and his reputation steadily rose. In 1897 he became the founding president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, a group whose members are still greeted as "immortals" by their compatriots. Several years before his death Machado's fellow writers presented him with a branch from an oak that grew on the poet Tasso's grave in Rome, as homage to Brazil's greatest representative and poet. When Machado

died in 1908, thousands mourned. "Up to the last moment," a friend observed, "he kept the liveness of spirit and mind that was his dominant quality and of which his style was the image."

A hundred years on, there are signs that Machado has a promising career ahead. Besides the film *Memorias Postumas*, Susan Sontag hailed him with a chapter in a recent book of essays. A recent issue of *Review: Latin American Literature and Arts* contained a previously untranslated novella, entitled "The Immortal." Will the world soon have a cinematic version of Machado's other masterpiece--*Dom Casmurro*, which Helen Caldwell called "probably the finest American novel of either continent"?

*Dom Casmurro's* theme is condensed in its odd title, which translates literally but awkwardly as "Lord Cranky." The wealthy old narrator, who has built an exact duplicate of his childhood home, attempts to tell the story of his first love and how his love betrayed him, but the book's real subject is the strange conjunction of contrasts that we find in life. The beautiful coexists with the ugly, the just with the unjust, the rich with the poor, feelings of love with betrayal. "Nature is so divine that she amuses herself with such contrasts," observes the narrator, "and beckons to the most loathsome and wretched with a flower. And perhaps thus the flower takes on beauty. My gardener claims that violets, in order to have a superior fragrance, require hog manure."

Beneath that theme, Machado has embedded a more profound message: that in viewing our lives, we can choose to see both the beautiful and the ugly, not just one or the other. In the novel's bitter and jealous conclusion, the author hints at a happier ending that could have been, if the narrator had only chosen it. Earlier in the book, Lord Cranky himself unwittingly nudges readers toward that insight, and even suggests how we might help him to improve his book after the fact:

"No, no, my memory is not good.... How I envy those who have not forgotten the color of their first trousers! I am not sure of the color of those I put on yesterday. I can only swear they were not yellow, because I detest that color.... There is no way of emending a confused book, but everything may be supplied in the case of books with omissions. For my part, when I read one of the latter type I am not bothered a bit. What I do, on arriving at the end, is to shut my eyes and evoke all the things which I did not find in it. How many fine ideas come to me then! What profound reflections! The rivers, mountains,

churches, which I did not find on the written page, all now appear to me with their waters, their trees, their altars; and the generals draw swords that never left, their scabbards, and the clarion releases notes that slept in the metal, and everything marches with sudden soul. The fact is, everything is to be found outside a book that has gaps, gentle reader. That is the way I fill in other men's lacunae; in the same way you may fill in mine."

*David A. Taylor is a freelance writer based in New Haven, Connecticut, and a previous contributor to Americas.*

Addendum in the Jan./Feb. 2003 issue:

**Machado's mark on a leading musician**

Letter to the Editor

David Taylor's feature, "Wry Modernist of Brazil's Past," [November-December, 2002] is brilliant; thank you. There is a European touch in Machado's work that I noticed much better after David wrote me. This and the Brazilian environment of de Assis's time produced a result that the text detected in a very intelligent way.

*Américas* is very cleanly designed, and the pages are attractive. Would you allow me to put the feature on my homepage, please?  
Best regards and congratulations.

Tom Ze  
Sao Paulo, Brazil