

A BRAZILIAN BREAKTHROUGH

AT THE AGE of forty, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis invented a narrative device that transformed him from a provincial, rather conventional writer into a world-class novelist. This leap is usually explained biographically, and psychologically. Critics like to say that Machado, who nearly went blind, lost his illusions and passed from romanticism to realism—and so on. Explanations of this sort, however, are beside the point, since anyone can contract an illness, shed illusions or accept a new literary doctrine without becoming a great writer. But if we consider the change as one of literary form, the terms of the argument alter. Machado's innovation then appears as an aesthetic solution to objective problems, lodged not simply within his own earlier fiction, but in the development of the Brazilian novel and indeed of Brazilian culture at large: perhaps even of ex-colonial societies in general.

Textbooks usually classify Machado de Assis as a realist writer, situated after the romantics, whose illusions he methodically undoes, and before the naturalists, whose unspiritual materialism he rejects as an artistic error. Yet such a classification is open to obvious objections, for not everything that stands between romanticism and naturalism is realistic. Machado's narrative style was in fact slightly old-fashioned for its time, owing much to a strand of digressiveness and comic rhetoric to be found in English and French writing of the eighteenth century. Nothing could be farther from the realist ideal of an unobtrusive prose, strictly dictated by the subject. Machado's unconventional sense of motive, on the other hand, was not behind but ahead of the times. Anticipating the philosophy of the unconscious, it explored a kind of materialism that outdid both realism and naturalism, prefiguring Freud and twentieth-century experiments. Machado ostensibly shied away from the naturalist preference for the lower sides of life, but in fact only plunged further

down, substituting for the servitudes of physiology and climate, temper and heredity the much more debasing servitudes of the mind in society. There was a definite element of rivalry between Machado and the naturalists that left their bravado, with its penchant for scabrous subject-matter, looking rather naïve and even quite wholesome.

By most conventional criteria, then, it would seem more reasonable to call Machado an anti-realist. Yet if we think of the distinctive spirit of realism as the ambition to capture contemporary society in motion, he can indeed be considered a great realist. But it would be truer to his complexity to call him a realist who works with apparently anti-realist devices. Of course, we need to ask why. My argument will be that this paradox, in effect a deliberate mismatch between a set of aesthetic devices and the stuff of life they depict, raises the question of what happens to realism in a peripheral country where the sequences of European social and literary history do not strictly apply, losing their inner necessity—or to put it more generally, how modern forms fare in regions that do not exhibit the social conditions in which they originated and in some sense presume.

For literary forms may not mean the same in the core and at the periphery of our world. Time can become so uneven, when it is stretched far across space, that artistic forms which are already dead in the first may still be alive in the second. Such contrasts can be viewed with regret or satisfaction. Progress may be lamented in the name of older forms of life, richer in colour and meaning; or backwardness be deplored as a refusal to cast off outworn garments, and catch the air of the times; or both can be dismissed as two sides of the same coin. Brecht, who did not want to lag behind his epoch, said it was futile for a realist to stare at workers trudging through the gates of Krupp in the morning. Once reality has migrated into abstract economic functions, it can no longer be read in human faces. Observation of life in a former colony, where social divisions remain stark, might then seem more rewarding. But such concreteness too is suspect, since the abstractions of the world market are never far away, and belie the fullness of spontaneous perception at every moment.

Be that as it may, the aesthetic and social field I want to consider is at once international and unbalanced, bending literary forms to circumstances that are often far from aesthetic, although rarely in any predictable way. We may well think that questions to do with literary realism cannot

be answered by looking simply at formal labels as such, without reference to individual works or their quality. Today, after all, superficial features of realism are omnipresent in rich and poor countries alike—in soap operas, second-rate novels, movies, advertisements. Yet these are debased versions of the original, reducing the credibility and complexity of classic realism to the repetitions and moral simplicities of melodrama and commercial inducement. What seems to have disappeared, as modernist writers and critics pointed out a century ago, is what was once realism's capacity to grasp what is new, and be true to it. Or, conversely, what has vanished is the kind of society and social dynamics that realism in its heyday captured. It is part of this change that later critics denied any such grasp ever existed, or was even an artistic ambition.

Some decisive moments

One particular side of this situation is less well known. In Brazil, literary historians outside the mainstream have shown that when this former colony became an independent nation, its peculiar and in many ways untenable morphology—invalidated by a progress which remains out of reach—imposed new tasks on European literary schools, that involuntarily altered them. Some of these changes have been carefully studied in Antonio Candido's classic work *Formação da literatura brasileira—momentos decisivos*.

The first of these formative moments, neo-classical in style, occurred in the last fifty years of the colonial period. It was followed by romanticism in the fifty years after independence in 1822. Mainstream historiography, nationalist from the cradle, has it that neoclassicism, with its stylized imagery of shepherds and nymphs and its universalist spirit, represented the alienation imposed by the metropolis on its colony, while romanticism, with its motifs of chivalrous Indians and lively depictions of local contexts, stood for the attitudes of independence. Candido, who wrote not as a nationalist, but as a socialist studying the formation of a national literature, took a different view. The thesis he develops in *Formação da literatura brasileira* is that, notwithstanding the sharp artistic and intellectual contrasts between them, these two long literary moments were both under the spell of Independence-in-the-making, which put them to its own uses, and, in doing so, unified them to some degree. This offers us a much more interesting picture, one that allows us to sense, if we will, the pull of world history and the variations it generates. Here

the shepherds and nymphs of the neoclassical school articulate the Enlightenment, with its principles of reason and public duty, its sense of educational and administrative responsibilities, self-interest and self-government, which take on an anti-colonial coloration and inform the first conspiracies for national independence. Even Arcadian conventions acquire new meaning, as they blend with the local environment to produce tangled loyalties: poets attached at once to the bare and anonymous backwardness of their native surroundings and to the illustrious landscapes of classical mythology, a strange combination of period rusticities that often tears them asunder. Thus one of the most universalist, timeless and theatrical conventions could convey a quite specific, concrete historical situation in a way that was poetic in its own fashion, and free of the restrictions of an exotic localism.

Romanticism too underwent a kind of inversion. As members of the country's small educated minority, romantics tended to occupy positions close to power, finding themselves forced by tasks of national construction into adopting a rather responsible, managerial air and idiom, with strong neoclassical continuities. At the same time, the effusive displays of localism—romantic par excellence—that accompanied independence could be said to have reflected a degree of submission to European expectations of tropical countries; the very opposite of what they were supposed to signify. There is an irony and unintentional originality in these reversals that is characteristic of the Brazilian experience, and deserves further consideration.

Another literary system

The discovery—and it was a discovery—of the unifying and modifying twist that national independence gave two successive and opposite literary schools established a historical object in its own right: the formation of a national literary system, as a constituent of decolonization. For Candido this was a relatively compressed and willed process, with its own logic, its own aims and its own comedy, which defy any simple chronological sequence and conventional literary-historical narrative. The formative stage comes to an end when the main contemporary schools of the West have been mastered and the whole of society, as well as all the country's regions, have been transposed into literature. This made it possible for an organic Brazilian imagination to develop, capable of self-reference and a certain degree of autonomy. The value of such an

internally grounded and less passive way of confronting contemporary experience, which went beyond literature, is self-evident.

All this may sound rather formalistic and programmatic, yet it has proved to be a remarkably accurate representation of the development of our cultural life, giving intellectual visibility to some of its hitherto unacknowledged realities. Two examples will suffice. We have seen that the sequence of neoclassical universalism and romantic localism, a familiar pattern of European cultural history, turned out to be functional to the requirements of the newborn nation and former colony. Yet these requirements belonged to a field of forces of quite another order, which could not be subsumed into this sequence of cultural styles. Instead, in an unexpected way, universalism and localism corresponded to the need of our small cultured minority to participate as equal and capable citizens in the general civilization of the West, escaping colonial seclusion, and at the same time to play a distinctive part in the concert of nations, with an identity of our own. This has meant that alternation between the universal and the local is a permanent law of motion of the country's cultural life, quite independent of its first appearance under the sign of the struggle between neoclassicism and romanticism. Another previously unacknowledged and original feature of our cultural reality is that this newly independent country summoned its educated men and women to perform the national duty of providing it as promptly as possible with the equipment of civilization that it lacked, from museums to philosophical theories, new fashions to the latest literary forms. What this amounted to, as Candido put it, was a peculiar kind of *engagement* on the part of intellectuals who were required to participate in the building—rather than in the critique—of the national culture. This special bond would allow, for example, a student writing a Parnassian sonnet to feel like a hero on a patriotic mission.

When it was published in 1959, *Formação da literatura brasileira* was a materialist retort to *A literatura no Brasil*, a collective project begun three years earlier and organized by the critic Afrânio Coutinho, who found his inspiration in Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*. Coutinho prided himself on being scientific, by which he meant that his categories of periodization were exclusively literary, that is, relating only to questions of style, as if these were universal forms with no admixture of historical circumstance. The baroque was baroque no matter where, the neoclassical, neoclassical, the romantic, romantic and so on, in that order and

under all conditions. The general weaknesses of this approach should be obvious enough, but they become especially pronounced when we consider former colonies, where the difficulty or impossibility of repeating the development of the core countries is the primary social, economic and cultural experience. Discerning the silver lining in our relations with these core forms, a Brazilian wit once referred to 'our creative inability to copy'.¹ Today, rigid periodization of styles is coming into fashion once more, in the name of Foucault's sequence of self-enclosed epistemes.

But *Formação* was also an alternative to vulgar Marxism. The patriotic task of assimilating the basic elements of European civilization, of catching up with new developments abroad, of making up for what the country lacked, in awareness of its grave shortcomings as a modern nation, amounted to a powerful ideology. The pressure was real, and exerted its own authority and attraction. It also lent a certain legitimacy to the elites, who felt themselves to be a civilizing force, invested with a national mission. The imperatives were objective enough, yet when Candido was writing there were no terms for them in the contemporary Marxist lexicon, which spoke only of imperialism and internal class relations. The desire in Brazil to share in what was new in the world, a substantial historical appetite, went unnoticed or was viewed with suspicion by Marxists, remaining a conceptual blind spot for them.

In effect, there was no way either to escape from the terms that European developments imposed on Brazil, or to live up to them. The result was a culture continually off balance. But this did not mean only local gauche-ness. It could lead to insight into the fatal, often grotesque imbalances of the entire historical process, once core and periphery were seen as correlative realities.

Misfiring realism

How, then, does realism fare in such conditions? Matter-of-factness and critical awareness of circumstance are of its essence. Yet to Brazilians, and perhaps to all peoples of the periphery in the mid-nineteenth century, the realist novel was also something else. It was one of those new and prestigious European developments that had to be taken over if the nation was to catch up with modernity. Let us suppose, then, that in

¹ Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes, *Cinema: trajetória no subdesenvolvimento*, Rio de Janeiro 1980, p. 77.

peripheral countries realism was both a critical commitment to modern reality and a flattering token of belonging to its most fashionable—advanced and enlightened—expressions. The two aspects were separable, and did not carry equal weight. Indeed, for realism to operate as a sign of up-to-dateness, which at first may have been the principal reason for its adoption, it was sufficient for a critical commitment merely to posture as such, in underlying indifference to the actual circumstances at hand. But in any case, matter-of-factness and attention to circumstance are less straightforward notions than one might think, since which facts and circumstances are the ones that matter is not given in advance and can vary from society to society. The opposition between the core and the periphery of capitalism would have no substance were this not so. Literary history can be instructive on this point.

The first Brazilian writer to make a serious attempt at realism was José de Alencar, a reader of Balzac. His best achievement in this vein was a novel called *Senhora* (1872). The main characters, the atmosphere, the type of plot and conflict are all direct or indirect borrowings from Balzac. The cast of secondary characters and motives derives from romantic chronicles of everyday urban life, revelling in local colours, tones and usages—as much a foreign import as Balzac, although an earlier one, which time and habit had rendered native. Schematically, what does the novel tell us?

The story revolves around a young beauty, born poor, who inherits a fortune. Once rich, she becomes outraged at the servility her wealth creates around her, especially in the fashionable young men who hope to marry her. Among these is a penniless dandy who jilted her when she was poor, but whom she nevertheless continues to love. He needs to provide a dowry for his little sister, but is up to his neck in debt. To punish him, herself and the whole of society for the immorality of money, the heroine devises a plot to lure her dandy into a marriage, celebrated in the dark, in exchange for the sum he desperately needs. He walks straight into her trap. The nuptial hour arrives and he discovers that not only has he got the cash he needed, but also the woman he loves. Then his new wife presents him with a contract, explaining the terms on which he has sold himself. The humiliation is complete. He decides to retaliate by behaving strictly as her property, with no will of his own, until the inhumanity of the situation becomes unbearable for her too, and she is forced to invite him back into love and a happy conjugal life. The novel is divided into four

parts, entitled 'Price', 'Quittance', 'Possession' and 'Ransom', to underline the pitiless priority of mercenary calculations over human feelings. The whole thing is rather childish, but Alencar carries it off with ingenuity and vivacity. For our purposes, the main points are the following.

A contemporary tension—love-match vs. marriage of convenience, or, more simply, love vs. money—is taken to dramatic extremes by characters who turn it, at no matter what cost, into the abstract issue on which they stake their lives. This kind of device, halfway between content and form, comes from Balzac, and depends on a blueprint of modern society in which individualism knows no bounds, such as only the French Revolution could have brought about. It has major literary consequences. What happens when it is applied in a peripheral country and topped up with local subject matter, without which realism would not be realism?

The fashionable young people who occupy centre stage in the novel behave according to this shrill Balzacian formula, with its extreme social choices. But the secondary characters, drawn from nature or adapted from the topical press, in a style at once comic and local, live with a much more relaxed tone, in which abstract principles do not count. They belong to the world of patron–client relationships, of paternalism—a less dynamic domain—where love is no absolute, money is not meretricious, though it may be scarce, and the individual is supposed to respect, if not obey, the many ties that bind him. In other words, the substance and the form of the central conflict are alien to the crowd of lesser characters, who are nevertheless in charge of assuring a local feel to the book and of conveying the tenor of the society. One of the great effects of Balzac's novels—the substantial unity between the principal conflict and secondary anecdotes—does not come off.

How is one to understand this relative failure of *Senhora*? Why is it that modern conflict à la Balzac is at odds with characters who carry the local tone? What is the content of this dissonance? The answer can only be historical. Brazilian independence was a conservative process that did not bring about a restructuring of society. The colonial heritage of landownership, slavery, traffic in human beings, extended family and generalized clientelism went almost untouched. Brazil's insertion in the modern world proceeded by way of a social *confirmation* of the colonial Ancien Régime, not its supersession. This made for a disconcerting kind of progress, in which pre-modern inequalities were simply replicated in

newer and newer contexts, rather than being eradicated. This pattern may be a key to the peculiarities of Brazilian culture, with its penchant for both radical modernism and unending compromise. What is one to think of the strange lack of tension between the ultra-modern and the indefensibly pre-modern? The terms make for a harsh contrast, yet they keep good company, and together make for a colourful and rather amiable national emblem of uneven development. The inner motor of modernization appears to falter.

Alencar's novel shows us just how half-hearted such oppositions may be. Evocations of local society and its paternalist relations, though secondary to the main plot, nevertheless have a feel of reality powerful enough to give the lie to the high-minded individualism of the main characters, which is supposed to strike a truly realist and modern note in the novel. This reversal is not the outcome of antagonism between the old and new ways, which do not compete with each other at all in the book, but rather to the fact that the antagonism itself is phony and the realist boldness of the heroes and the narrator something of a juvenile sham, even a fashion statement; more self-congratulation than social criticism. Such discrepancies of register and proportion are characteristic of Brazilian novels of this period; expressions of the desire to be up-to-date without renouncing the basic relations of local society, which are less than modern. With a little artistic twist, which became the specialty of Machado de Assis, this deep-rooted ambivalence could become the stuff of great literature, capable of that awareness of circumstances realism demands.

Reversing proportions

Ten years younger than Alencar, Machado understood what was weak and unreal in his realism. His own early novels reversed the priorities and proportions established by his predecessor. Patron–client relations, with their peculiar set of intricacies and issues linked to personal fidelity, moral indebtedness and humiliation, came to the fore; while fashionable debates of individualism were reduced to a minimum, functioning merely as conventional signs of modernity, along with cigars, waistcoats, canes, speaking French and playing the piano. What had been local colour now became the core theme, and what had been the core theme became an outward sign of the times.

The oddities of the national situation that Machado sought to capture came from the unexpected, meandering ways in which clientelism, slavery, and modernity concatenated in Brazil. The massive presence of slaves created a precarious labour market, forcing poor free men to seek the protection of landowners and the well-to-do, on whose favours their livelihood depended—naturally, in exchange for all kinds of personal services. Hence the ubiquity of a very diversified layer of social dependents, ranging from rural bullies and tame voters to *agregados*—men or women attached to a family as permanent adjuncts, who could be put to any and every task to hand. In these dislocated conditions, the typical position of the poor remained below the water-line of modern liberties. As for the wealthy, who renounced neither the colonial privileges they inherited, nor the liberal image to which they felt entitled as the country's civilizing elite, they entertained, inevitably, an extravagant idea of themselves.

Once Machado had sensed some of this, the way was open to a searching analysis of paternalist authority and personal dependence, and the deadlocks they produced. In Machado's early novels, like *Helena* (1876) or *Yayá Garcia* (1878), a poor but worthy young woman—a kind of *agregada*—is a victim of these: each time, she tries to circumvent the narrow demands of people of property, and at some crucial moment the grotesque arbitrariness of the possessors is devastatingly exposed. The struggle of the dependent party for acceptance and dignity, or against humiliation, is fought in a spirit that differs from novel to novel. The heroine is by turns artless, cynical, disillusioned, pious or severe; each representing a different possible response to the whimsical authority of the powerful.

The conclusion Machado drew from his quite systematic exploration of the field was that the nub of the problem was not psychological. It was not to be found in the personal caprice of the patriarchs and matriarchs of propertied families, but in their dual and ever-shifting social role. They were men or women of property; but they were also the heads or heirs of Brazilian extended families, to whom their social dependents—and actual slaves—owed obedience and fidelity. Since these roles would alternate according to the momentary convenience of the rich, their dependents were continually at a loss to know with whom they were dealing. There was no way for them to foresee whether they were paying respect to a godfather and sponsor who would reciprocate; to a figure of authority

who would brutalize them; or to a modern person of property, to whom inferiors were perfectly indifferent, to be treated like strangers.

In other words, paternalism could be humane and enlightened, or it could be vicious and backward, treating the poor as a colonial rabble little better than slaves; or it might choose to be modern, forgetting its paternal role altogether, and treating its dependents as free, autonomous persons to whom nothing was due. The degree of uncertainty was extreme. The social molecule composed of property and slavery, and poor dependents without rights, had a logic of its own that did not match the liberal coordinates to which the country officially aspired. The literary achievement in capturing some of this was far more substantial than Alencar's frivolous seriousness about liberal catchwords. Yet nobody would say that these first novels by Machado are great literature. For in focusing on the universe of paternalism as the more real world, they paid a high price: they did not belong to the present of the world at large. They undeniably represented an advance in the development of a local realism. Yet were it not for Machado's later work, which offered a completely different solution to the problems posed by their subject matter, they would barely deserve to be read today.

A turncoat narrative

In 1880 Machado published *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, the first world-class Brazilian novel.² The 'memoirs' are written by a dead man, with the candour that only death allows. All the grand concepts of life are debunked, from Love, Poetry and Philosophy to Politics, Science and Enterprise. His cadaverous jokes about them furnish a metaphysical stage-set for allegories of human frailty. But on closer inspection, the aloofness of the deceased turns out to be a facetious device for allowing the narrator a spectacularly shameless display of the meaner motives of the living—at the reader's expense. The narrator is less a disinterested wraith than a distinct social and national type: his memories show him to be a wealthy *fainéant*, steeped in slavery and clientelism, and full of claims to modernity. Once these dimensions of the character emerge and command due attention, they expose his chatter from beyond the grave as the language of the casually brutal upper classes. Thus, the resounding nothingness in which the novel ends has more to do with Brazilian

² Published in English in 1952 as *Epitaph of a Small Winner*.

circumstances than with metaphysics. Behind a travesty of the human condition there lies the nothingness of a ruling-class experience.

What had changed with this novel? Its stroke of genius was to move the narrative point of view to the upper-class position. Hitherto, the narrators in Machado's novels had always sympathized with those in a precarious, socially dependent situation, fretting over the arbitrary and unreliable behaviour of those who called the shots, as if to ask how such dependents could persuade their overlords to behave in a civilized manner, to make society more just and liveable for all. At some point, however, Machado must have decided the task was hopeless—an important historical judgement—and dropped this formula. The replacement he hit upon was unexpected and extraordinary. Instead of a narrator siding with the weak, whose pleas led nowhere, he contrived one who not only sides with social injustice and its beneficiaries, but brazenly relishes being of their party.

This turning of the coat might seem odious, but it is more duplicitous than at first appears. For what, with high artistry, it achieved was a complete, intimate exposure of the very viewpoint it ostensibly adopted. Instead of bewailing the fickleness of our liberal, slave-owning and paternalistic propertied class, Machado took to imitating it in the first person singular, so as to provide plentiful and compelling natural illustrations of all the misdeeds of which its social dependents would accuse it, were they in a position to do so. For his narrator, Brás Cubas, is programmed to enact, at their most vicious and opportunistic, the continual lurches from paternalist concern to bourgeois indifference, from a cultivated, well-intentioned liberalism to the unfettered authority of godfather/slave-owner and back again, that the rich made the dependent classes endure. What had hitherto been the central problem of his fiction as content, the amazing class-substance of the shifts, becomes in the *Posthumous Memoirs* its form, the inner rhythm of the narrative. To enlarge the scope of this to-and-fro, and render it universal, Machado endowed his narrator with an encyclopaedic stock of knowledge and rhetorical tropes, and in so doing held up a kind of mock-synthesis of the Western tradition to the mirror of Brazilian class relations. Not only the poor, but also the West—if I may put it like this—is made to get the feel of this kind of rule. If we were to extract an artistic maxim from these moves, we might say that the procedure consisted in joining the upper

class at its most self-satisfied, as if in order to praise it, but in fact to lay it open at its most unguarded.³

The young Machado had been right to give priority to the old, familiar issue of paternalism over the brand-new, burning questions of liberal romanticism that so engaged Alencar, and to reduce these last to the role of scenery. Yet his great move came now, as he reintroduced this atmosphere of individualism and modern civilization on a grand scale—recent philosophical theories, newly invented gadgets, parliamentary debates, financial ventures and so on—through the words and deeds of an upper-class narrator unafraid to subordinate the whole world to the immediate convenience, or inconvenience, of the indefensible class to which he belongs.

The disconnexion between the spheres of paternalism and of individual self-interest, which had unbalanced *Senhora* and Machado's first novels, is overcome. Machado's new narrator shuttles nonchalantly from one to the other, without choosing between them, taking it for granted that they complement each other. The least edifying combination of these worlds possible is thus staged: paternalist authority is retained, its responsibilities refused; private interest is pursued with due diligence—we are all rational individuals in the end—while one's fellows are treated according to the rights of those who own property over those who have none. Some would say the upshot is not modern, since it is infected by a patriarchal personalism; others, that it is an effective figure of progress.

Rhetorical manoeuvres

This narrator is an invention that breaks new ground. Technically, we have a pastiche of whimsical narratives of the eighteenth century—in his preface to the *Memoirs*, Machado famously refers to Sterne and de Maistre as his rhetorical models. He might have mentioned Diderot as well, especially *Jacques le fataliste*. But, of course, imitation of excellent writers of a former century rarely produces good literature. Machado, however, adapted with outstanding artistic intelligence eighteenth-century explorations of human spontaneity to his nineteenth-century exploration of the irresponsibility and self-indulgence granted to Brazilian elites by

³ The strategy has affinities with the anti-bourgeois aesthetic of Heine, Flaubert and Baudelaire. See the notable work by Dolf Oehler, *Ein Höllensturz der Alten Welt*, Frankfurt am Main 1988.

their ownership of slaves, and its attendant set of more or less enforced relations of personal subjection. In effect, he redirected the rather playful effronteries of the unreliable narrator of the eighteenth century to the grim realities of class relations in a former colony of the nineteenth. The dissonance of the combination points to the inadequacy not only of a *national* history that falls so short of contemporary ideals of progress, but at a deeper level of the very ideals themselves, which lend themselves so easily to this sort of arrangement.

The literary trappings of the novel are antiquarian—an eccentric, even snobbish display of bookish learning, ostensibly alien to modern reality; and yet they relate to the harsh form of contemporary class society, much like those dealt with by nineteenth-century realism. There is a similar mixture of century and temper in the narrator, when we consider him a character among other characters. At first sight, he is a poetaster, an enlightened gentleman of old-fashioned tastes who always has a fine quote to hand from Augustine, Shakespeare, the Bible, Erasmus, Pascal or other classics. Yet once we see through him the world of semi-colonial oppression, of which he is a prosperous and remorseless beneficiary, the innermost meaning of this display of civility is altered. Enlightened talk becomes uncivil, and a perpetuator of unenlightened forms of society. This reversal is more modern than the moderns, and is just the kind of effect that realism should aim to achieve.

In other words, Machado's unreliable narrator has a distinctly nineteenth-century class substance, and as a device this is its secret. Brás Cubas is a social type, as partial and as situated as his characters, whose world he inhabits. His rhetorical manoeuvres do not belong primarily to the general repertoire of humanism, where they were nevertheless picked up. They answer, and owe their depth, to his well-to-do position in a specific society; a morally indicted part of the contemporary world. The narrative somersaults of a highly 'civilized' slave-owning gentleman of the nineteenth century are not the same as those of anyone else. They are not variations on a classic tradition of authors teasing their readers, but the indirect rendering of a real, unavowed aspect of modern history.

In the *Posthumous Memoirs*, Machado strips narrative procedures of their innocent neutrality and authority, giving the lie to the very idea of an abstract narrative function capable of floating above historical time. What we get is not only an awareness of narrative in the making, but

something more radical and unprecedented: a narrative that performs at a highly cultivated and artistic level, yet fashions the world according to a particular and indefensible interest, into which we must look if we are to understand what is going on. I cannot think of a writer who accomplishes this decisive exposure with greater daring and thoroughness. By the same token, the reader of the *Posthumous Memoirs* is obliged to read against the grain, refusing the narrator's support, since it is self-serving, and if he is up to the task, proceeding against it, with the help of all the scepticism and critical spirit he can muster. Rather than looking for the author's intention, he needs to decipher the meaning of the whole form, of which intentions are but an element. Once the authority of the narrator is questioned, it is up to us to interpret what we hear and see when we read. We must become self-reliant readers, secluded, active and judicious, such as a truly modern literature seeks to create as a sort of historical threshold.

The adaptability of civilization

To conclude, let us recapitulate some of the steps that led from the provincial fiction of a former colony to the very advanced writing of Machado. What were the obstacles that had to be overcome? First there were peculiarities and anomalies of a newly independent nation, inheriting from its colonial past international marginality and a rightlessness of the poor. Under such conditions, the import of modern ideas and cultural forms to close the gap with the advanced world was a patriotic task of sorts. Yet since the world of local relations was of a differing order, such importation created special difficulties in its turn, as contemporary ideas and forms were put to unforeseen uses and tests. We have seen for example that Alencar's attempt at a realist novel was not realist in its motives. It had more to do with displaying a familiarity with metropolitan fashions, with catching up with the societies that were our models, than with a critical revision of present or former social relations. On the other hand, of course, straight imitation would cause realism to lose its clear sight and critical edge, blinding the artist to what was decisive in Brazilian society.

Machado, who was younger and sharper than Alencar, would try to repair the damage. He dropped the standard themes of realism, issues derived from significant moments in recent European history, and focused instead on the unfashionable subject of the social relations

dominant in Brazil. An unintended consequence of his effort to get closer to local reality was that his writing in this period lost touch with the contemporary world at large. It was less naïve and more complex than Alencar's, but not less provincial, and even more remote from a wider idea of the present.

Four novels and eight years later, Machado would achieve synthesis. He kept to the social discoveries of his youth, but took a less charitable view of them. He now considered that good counsel given by friendly novelists would not improve the ways of our privileged classes. Their way of handling the unprivileged would determine the country's lot for a long time to come. No less disturbing, this way extended beyond its immediate, practical ends to the field of culture as well, indeed to the whole of the Western tradition, which lost its binding power and was forced to accommodate itself to Brazilian-style class bullying. By this point, Machado had given up trying to change what ought to be, but would not be changed. He would try instead to draw out as fully as he could the consequences of his society's failure to change. In the early novels, the arbitrary authority of the propertied was capable of reform, featuring as a regrettable and occasional flaw that furnished the dramatic pivot of the plot. In the *Memoirs*, Machado moves it to a much more significant position, making it the governing law of the narrator's conduct. There he has the narrator mimic and stylize it throughout, rendering it into the perpetual, all-pervading negative ambiance of national life.

This volatile and unreliable narrator, with his endless Shandean somersaults, is vehemently modern. Brás Cubas is a literary device that turns the crucial content of the Brazilian novel before the *Memoirs* into form. As such, it was a truly dialectical supersession—a breakthrough that put the conception of literature in Brazil on a par with its advanced counterparts elsewhere. Machado was a contemporary of Henry James, to whom he should be compared. Like James, he did not believe in a reality that was not mediated by a point of view. In his writing, such mediation has a conflictual class character, beyond questions of individual psychology. The unreliable voice is undoubtedly a social one, part and parcel of a social question, falling into line with realism in unexpected ways. The same overly cultured narrator also mediates between civilization at large and this limited and semi-segregated sphere with its colonial imprint, a sort of backyard of the modern world.

Inevitably, given its class character, this mediation is not benign. To put it another way, the narrator is quite content with the abyss that separates the cultivated from the benighted characters he tells us about, and who form his world. The manifest comedy stages an elite that betrays its dependents and is not unhappy at their dejection. The novel's less obvious and more modern effect is to force us to acknowledge the adaptability of civilization to purposes that are contrary to its very idea. If we consider that these were the great days of imperialism, we may find that Machado's satire on the shameless use of civilization's finest resources strikes a chord that reverberates beyond its local setting. Whether because there was no visible means of overcoming such conditions locally, or because the global drift of the time remained obscure, with this novel Brazilian literature had built a vantage point from which to think about the present of the world.