

Círculo vicioso incompleto: Misplaced ideas and the non-circulation of the poetry of Machado de Assis

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ABSTRACT: The poetry of nineteenth-century Brazilian writer Machado de Assis offers a fascinating case study of literary and cultural circulation between Latin America and Europe. While all nine of his novels and many short stories have now been translated into English, more than a century after his death only a handful of his roughly 200 poems have been translated into English. Through Roberto Schwarz’s framework of “misplaced ideas,” this paper examines the role Machado played in importing external cultural elements into Brazil through his poetry, criticism, translations, and novels, and interrogates the conditions that have contributed to the failure of his poetry to reach the Anglophone world. Using Machado’s own essay on the Brazilian literary instinct, as well as José Luís Jobim’s work on both circulation and Machado’s development as a writer, this paper also helps place Machado’s poetry within the scheme of his larger literary project, encompassing his novels, short stories, poetry, and literary and cultural criticism.

KEYWORDS: Machado de Assis, poetry, Roberto Schwarz, Misplaced Ideas, Brazilian

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I. INTRODUCTION

The international reputation of the nineteenth century Brazilian writer Machado de Assis rests largely upon the novels and short stories of his “mature” phase. Machado, though, was also a prolific poet. His first creative publication was a work of poetry in 1855,¹ and by the time his debut novel, *Ressurreição*, was published in 1872, he had already published two volumes of poetry: *Crisálidas* in 1864, and *Falenas* in 1870. He would go on to publish another two volumes of poetry in his lifetime: *Americanas* in 1875, and *Ocidentais*, which was first published as part of his *Poesias completas* in 1901. However, while all nine of his novels have been translated into English, and his complete short stories have recently been published in a single English-language volume, not one of his four volumes of poetry has ever been made commercially available to the Anglophone world. As such, a highly significant portion of the works of one of Latin America’s greatest writers remains effectively off-limits to English language readers even today, more than a century after his death. Other than the handful of individual poems that were translated in journals through the twentieth century, the best resource for English-language readers interested in Machado’s poetry has been Lorie Ishimatsu’s 1984 book, *The Poetry of Machado de Assis*, which provides a detailed critical overview of his poetry. Now, though, more than thirty years after its publication, Ishimatsu’s work is itself exceptionally difficult to find.

In his native Brazil, Machado’s poetry occupies a somewhat awkward position. As Earl E. Fitz explains in *Machado de Assis*, critics in Brazil “have tended to view him as a very correct if somewhat ‘cold’ poet, one who lacked a vivid imagination, suffered from a limited vocabulary, was indifferent to nature ... and deficient in descriptive powers.”² That is not to say, however, that his poetry was unappreciated in his lifetime. In “O princípio da crítica à poesia machadiana,” Fabiana Gonçalves describes how “contemporary critics welcomed the publication of *Crisálidas*, *Falenas*, *Americanas*, and *Ocidentais* positively, albeit with some caveats.”³ Regardless, for a writer of Machado’s remarkable stature in his homeland, it beggars belief that a mixed critical opinion could in itself suffice to explain the effective absence of Machado’s poetry in English translation. As Fitz goes on to explain, while Machado was “perhaps not a great poet, he was at least in certain instances a very good poet [and] through his stature as Brazil’s foremost writer and critic, must be

credited with having played a major role in the advent of parnassianism in Brazil.”⁴ Furthermore, an appreciation of Machado’s development as a poet also serves to illuminate the conditions of his development as a writer of prose.

In this study, we do not seek to redeem Machado’s reputation as a poet, nor do we set out to critically examine individual poems or volumes of poetry. Instead, we interrogate the conditions surrounding the circulation of Machado’s work in general, and consider how those conditions have shaped the circulation—or non-circulation—of his poetry. Starting with the framework of *idéias fora do lugar*—or, “misplaced ideas”—established by renowned Brazilian Marxist critic Roberto Schwarz, we examine the issue of cultural and literary circulation as it confronted Machado, and how Machado’s role as both an importer and exporter of ideas functioned in a Brazilian context. We also look to Machado’s own creative and critical works to understand how his interactions with ideas of a non-Brazilian origin shaped the different forms of his work in different ways. Through this method, it is possible to gain new perspectives on the forces that have influenced the circulation of Machado’s work since his death more than a century ago, and to gain a better understanding of the place of his poetry in his overall literary project.

II. IDEAS OUT OF PLACE

In his 1972 essay “Misplaced Ideas”—originally published as a stand-alone essay in French before appearing in Portuguese as the first chapter to his 1977 book *Ao vencedor as batatas*—Roberto Schwarz outlines the unique interaction between liberal European ideas and Brazilian reality throughout the nineteenth century. By analysing how ideas that developed in an essentially European socio-cultural and political context conflicted with—and evolved in response to—the realities of Brazilian class and economic structures, and how those Brazilian structures in turn reacted in response to the introduction of the new ideas from Europe, Schwarz proposes a framework for approaching and understanding the circulation of ideas between core and periphery cultures.

Focusing specifically on the case of Brazil, Schwarz describes how liberal European capitalist ideas failed to undermine the system of slavery that defined the socio-cultural and economic realities in nineteenth-century Brazil. Those European

ideas were instead, according to Schwarz, adorned almost like jewellery to “confer distinction upon those who wear it” and, as such, contributed to the perpetuation of the existing social structure that they should, by logic, have negated.⁵ The grounds for this situation were prepared by the all-pervasive system of “favor”⁶ that Schwarz locates at the heart of the Brazilian socio-cultural and economic system in the nineteenth century.

“Favor,” for Schwarz, refers to a system of survival and advancement based on the acceptance of some people being immanently more powerful than others, and the ability of those powerful people to bestow privilege upon others as they see fit. Through the normalisation of *favor*, nineteenth-century Brazilian society was primed to accept the inherent value of external ideas over its own prevailing ideologies, especially among the large cross-section of intermediate classes (that is, those people who, neither landowners nor slaves, relied on the system of *favor* to survive or further themselves). The power of this structure was so great that, despite the fact that those liberal European capitalist ideas that were being adopted as symbols of intelligence and prestige should ostensibly have served to undermine the system of slavery that still existed in Brazil, those very ideas were able to effectively prop up the system they should have turned on its head. This was due, in part, to the immediately problematic fact that “[Brazilian] colonization was the deed of commercial capital.”⁷ As such, “the ‘uncultivated and abominable’ slaveowners who sought profit were in fact more thoroughly capitalistic than [Brazilian] defenders of Adam Smith, as capitalism for the latter meant only freedom.”⁸ In this way, the European ideas took on a completely different meaning and power when inserted into the nineteenth-century Brazilian context. As Schwarz explains:

*Once the European ideas and motives took hold, they could serve, and very often did, as a justification, nominally “objective,” for what was unavoidably arbitrary in the practice of favor ... The effects of this displacement of function were many, and deeply touched our literature.*⁹

In “Misplaced Ideas,” as well as in his later work such as *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, Schwarz examines plot situations and imagery in Machado’s novels and the unique poetics and narratological elements of his writing. He discusses how this situation impacted and was in turn revealed by Machado’s fiction. According to

Schwarz, Machado laid bare the complicity of the “bourgeois vocabulary of equality, merit, labor and reason” to the perpetuation of the conditions of slavery and *favor* in nineteenth-century Brazil.

In his 1990 work, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (first published in English in 1995), the Mexican theorist Néstor García Canclini refers to Schwarz when establishing a critical framework for analysing the “contradictions between modernism and modernisation [that] condition the works and the sociocultural function of artists” in Latin America.¹⁰ Such a framework, says García Canclini, must be “freed from the ideology of reflection and from any supposition about a direct mechanical correspondence between the material base and symbolic representations.”¹¹ To this end, García Canclini identifies Schwarz’s “Misplaced Ideas” as the “inaugural text for this rupture.”¹² García Canclini goes on to outline the significance of Schwarz’s formulation, whereby inherently contradictory positions can function simultaneously within a discourse, and the relationship of this phenomenon to Latin American culture: “This manner of adopting foreign ideas with an inappropriate meaning is at the basis of the majority of our [Latin American] literature and our art.”¹³ While Schwarz’s work focuses specifically on the situation of late-nineteenth century Brazil, García Canclini identifies this dynamic as typical of the colonial experience and consequent notions of development and modernity that arise from the cultural interactions between Europe and Latin America more broadly. For García Canclini, this dynamic can also be part of a new aesthetic strategy:

It would seem, then, that unlike stubborn readings in taking the side of traditional culture or of the vanguards, it is necessary to understand the sinuous Latin American modernity by rethinking modernisms as attempts to intervene in the intersection of a semi-oligarchic dominant order, a semi-industrialized capitalist economy, and semitransformative social movements. The problem lies not in our countries having badly and belatedly fulfilled a model of modernization that was impeccably achieved in Europe; nor does it consist in reactively seeking how to invent some alternative and independent paradigm with traditions that have already been transformed by the worldwide expansion of capitalism. ... [Choosing] exclusively between

dependency or nationalism, between modernization or local traditionalism, is an untenable simplification.¹⁴

García Canclini traces the cultural transformations that took place in Latin America throughout the twentieth century, offering a strategy that allows for “the analysis of intercultural hybridization [caused by] the breakup and mixing of the collections that used to organize cultural systems, the deterritorialization of symbolic processes, and the expansion of impure genres.”¹⁵

Through Machado de Assis, we are able to glimpse this process at play throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. By then taking an additional step back from his creative texts, it is possible to gain further insights into Machado’s work, the socio-political discourse from which it emerged, and the global context in which Machado’s work now circulates. This can be achieved, firstly, by looking more broadly across Machado’s entire oeuvre rather than focusing on his novels; secondly, it can be achieved by examining the place, the role, and the influence of form in that oeuvre, and what circulates in Machado’s work through those differing forms.

III. MACHADO’S POETRY—MISPLACED AND MISPLACING

In the timeline of Machado’s career, there exists a striking correlation between his emergence as a major novelist and his near-abandonment of poetry as a form. While his first three volumes of poetry were published only years apart (1864, 1870, and 1875), more than a quarter of a century elapsed before he published his fourth and final volume in 1901. The intervening years witnessed the publication of the trinity of novels on which his reputation largely rests today—*Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881), *Quincas Borba* (1891), and *Dom Casmurro* (1900)—as well as another two novels, two collections of short stories, a number of plays, and two collections of his assorted essays, journalism and newspaper columns.

Poetry, however, was not the only form Machado effectively turned his back on during this phase of his career. Within the same extended period in which he published no volumes of poetry, Machado also ceased publishing literary criticism for almost two decades. In his 2010 essay “Machado de Assis: O crítico como romancista,” José Luís Jobim refers to Mário de Alencar’s early twentieth-century study of Machado’s oeuvre and outlines the temporal division between Machado’s

career as a literary critic and his subsequent career as a novelist: “between 1865 and 1866, Machado was a prolific critic. ... Between 1866 and 1879, he produced only five articles, but was in high demand; between 1880 and 1898, he produced no critical articles.”¹⁶

After those eighteen years of critical silence, Machado did return to the field of literary criticism, but for Jobim—and likewise for Alencar—that return was characterised by short pieces of praise for the works of his friends and other writers within his circle.¹⁷ His return to the arena of literary criticism was followed, roughly two years later, by his return to poetry. Even if only on the basis of temporality alone, it is not unreasonable to conflate Machado’s poetry with his criticism and to understand both endeavours as part of the same literary project: the early years of a project that culminated in his later mastery of the novel form.

Bearing in mind this issue of Machado’s developmental arc as a writer, even the titles of Machado’s poetry collections become striking. His first volume, *Crisálidas* or “chrysalises,” hatches six years later into *Falenas* (or *Moths*). Five years after that, in 1875, he turns his attention to his nation’s interior with his third volume of poetry, *Americanas*, the title of which is an allusion to the “Indianismo” stylings of Gonçalves Dias.¹⁸ The significance of this volume becomes especially clear when read in conjunction with Machado’s 1873 article “Notícia da atual literatura brasileira—Instinto de nacionalidade,” in which he critically examines the notion of “Brazilian-ness” in nineteenth-century Brazilian literature. Two years after *Americanas*, the publication of his fifth novel, *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, marks the start of his mature phase and his effective disengagement from poetry until, 26 years after *Americanas*, he finally releases his fourth volume of poetry, *Ocidentais*—literally, *Western*—as part of his *Poesias Completas*. In this (admittedly superficial) sense, Machado’s early poetry collections can be understood as characterising his emergence as a writer, before turning his gaze to his nation’s interior and finally turning back to the West. Significantly, it is also that final volume that has had the highest number of poems translated into English.

Generally considered his most important volume of poetry, *Ocidentais* contains the majority of Machado’s most highly-regarded poems, including “Círculo vicioso,” “A môsca azul,” and “*Suave mari magno*.”¹⁹ Among the 26 original poems in

Ocidentais, no less than seventeen are easily recognisable as taking the traditional Western sonnet form: in the entirety of his previous three volumes, only one other sonnet is to be found, that being “Luz entre sombras” in *Falenas* (*Americanas*, in contrast, relies heavily on blank verse, although “Última jornada” does utilise Dante’s *terza rima*.)

Ocidentais also contains some of Machado’s best-known translations of major European and North American works into Portuguese, including his rendering of the “To be or not to be” soliloquy from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, along with translations of Dante and La Fontaine. However, from the perspective of global literary and cultural circulation, the most fascinating of all the translations Machado included in *Ocidentais* is his interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”—“O corvo”—which, as Sérgio Luiz Prado Bellei shows, can be better understood as an appropriation rather than a translation.²⁰

Bellei’s 1988 article, “‘The Raven’ by Machado de Assis,” opens with a detailed comparison of Machado’s translation of Poe’s poem against the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa’s later translation (from English into Portuguese) of the same work. As Bellei’s analysis of Machado’s and Pessoa’s translations from the aspects of both poetic form and nuance of language demonstrates, Pessoa’s rendering maintains far greater fidelity to Poe’s original than Machado’s version. For Bellei, though, Pessoa’s fidelity to Poe does not necessarily equate to a more positive assessment of the Portuguese poet’s translation; rather, Bellei uses this as a starting point to examine the implications and effects of Machado’s version within its own nineteenth-century Brazilian discourse. Bellei ultimately describes Machado’s translation as a conscious misreading of Poe’s poem and part of “Machado’s program for literary nationalism in Brazil.”²¹ This program had deep roots in Machado’s lifelong interest in translation:

But it would be misleading to believe that Machado was only translating foreign works in order to make them accessible to the Brazilian public. To do this would mean only to achieve part of his literary project, that is, to be a man of his time. He translates also in order to be a man of his own country, that is, he misreads, distorts and adapts foreign texts so that, by means of this act of appropriation, what is foreign becomes part of an alternative context.²²

For the purposes of Bellei's article (that is, to offer a comparison between Machado's and Pessoa's translations and to provide a deeper appreciation of Machado's version) the term "misreading" is perfectly apt. However, in order to approach Machado's translation within a broader context of literary and cultural circulation, understanding Machado's act of translation as, instead, an act of Schwarzian *misplacement* immediately shifts the analysis beyond the textual and into the cultural and formal.

In Schwarz's framework of misplacement, the original idea of "The Raven"—produced in an essentially European "gothic" style by a quintessentially North American writer—is misplaced (that is, removed from its place of origin) and inserted into a new context. In its original form, though, it cannot serve any meaningful purpose in that new context. This is most obviously demonstrated by the immediate issue of language. The poem must be translated from the language in which it was originally composed into the language most widely understood in its new context. For Bellei, Machado does not simply substitute one language for another in his translation, but "changes Poe's rhythm very significantly."²³ Of even greater interest from the perspective of misplaced ideas, Bellei then shows how, whereas Poe wrote a poem about a bereaved lover, utilising the symbol of a raven to represent "undying remembrance," Machado, by shifting agency and emphasis in key passages throughout the poem, rewrites it "as the story of a raven and its dark secret message to be conveyed to man."²⁴

Machado's "rewriting" of the original poem must be read alongside Schwarz's description of the Brazilian context as altering the liberal European ideas that were (mis)placed into it in the nineteenth century. As such, Machado's "O corvo" is another incidence of core ideas being reframed and reconfigured when imported into a non-core context. The fact that the symptom of this misplacement—that is, not only "O corvo" but, by extension, Machado's entire body of poetry—has not only failed to continue its circulation back into the core/Western context through English translation but has also been, in general, overlooked by critics even in his homeland, highlights the fundamentally unbalanced and insidious nature of the structure Schwarz exposes through his notion of *idéias fora do lugar* (misplaced ideas). In addition to the very superficial, almost literal way in which the nature of Poe's poem

was altered by its misplacement into the nineteenth-century Brazilian context, Schwarz's approach to the circulation of ideas also reveals the effects of circulation intrinsic to Machado's poetry, his socio-political context, and the subsequent reception of his work.

IV. "LIKE THE STORKS AN ILLUSTRIOUS TRAVELLER SAW TAKING FLIGHT FROM ILLISUS"²⁵

When approaching circulation and translation from within this framework, even the simple fact that Machado translated the works of major European and North American writers into Portuguese cannot be overlooked. Rather, it is necessary to interrogate, firstly, the reasons that a writer like Machado—with his clearly-stated interest in Brazilian-ness—might be compelled to translate the works of other writers in the first place, and secondly, the possible reasons why he chose to translate the particular works that he did.

Richard A. Mazzara, in his 1984 essay "Machado de Assis (1839–1908): Francophile and Francophone," offers an excellent departure point for such an analysis:

To appreciate the importance of the French language and culture in the life and works of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, one must understand the degree to which they had penetrated the elite of Rio de Janeiro. During the colonial period, it was natural enough for the capital to be influenced variously by European culture. After independence in 1822 it continued to be so, both to create a civilisation that was distinctive with respect to Portugal and to continue Portuguese traditions of long standing. The synthesis forming the Luso-Brazilian culture to which Machado was a major contributor counted heavily on the French from among those elements proceeding from Europe.²⁶

For Mazzara, Machado's life-long infatuation with French culture was in keeping with the nation's—or at least the nation's elite's—infatuation with all things European, a point underscored by Schwarz's observation that "it was the role of cultural life to give witness of the elite's modern, European links, rather than reflecting their relationships with other classes."²⁷ Mazzara refers to the numerous French-language newspapers

that circulated in Rio in the middle of the nineteenth century, as well as to the prevalence of French theatre and opera, and to the influence of “Musset and Hugo, among other French writers, [who] were the passion of Brazilian youth.”²⁸ In this light, Machado’s early interest in translating and parodying the works of French writers—as well as his own efforts at composing original poetry in French—is entirely understandable as an effect of a favourable national disposition toward European ideas: the exact locus from which, for Schwarz, the system of *favor* in Brazilian society springs forth.

Illustrating the depth of this cultural connection to French and how it flowed into the lives of individuals, Mazzara describes how, by the age of twenty, Machado’s everyday speech “had become sprinkled with stylish words and phrases from French, as well as other languages.”²⁹ Of even greater significance to the issue of Machado’s poetry, its circulation, and the power of the Europe–Brazil system of circulation at the heart of the matter, is that, as Mazzara explains, “Before Machado began to write his poems in French, he had studied the French poets in vogue in order to formulate his views on poetry in Portuguese.”³⁰ There were also certain ideas Machado took from French poets early in his career and to which he returned on a number of occasions.³¹ The differing ways in which he deploys a number of those images in different forms as his career develops paints a fascinating picture of an idea circulating through Machado’s work.

Perhaps the most pertinent example of this is the image Machado lifts from Chateaubriand of storks flying from Greece back to Africa, which itself circulates through Machado’s various forms of writing. The first time Machado uses that image is in a newspaper column in 1863 “as an illustration of the immutability of things in nature ... in contrast to the constant change of things human,” and in the column, he clearly attributes the image to Chateaubriand.³² Later, Machado places the image into the first chapter his novel *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, before recalling the image again in the fifth chapter. In the novel, Chateaubriand is only referred to as “an illustrious traveller.”³³ In another newspaper column, this time in 1895, Machado uses the image yet again—this time with no attribution to its French origin—in reference to a prominent widow who has died “and is now able to take the storks’ flight ... to rejoin her mate.”³⁴ The image then appears in a third newspaper column, before

finally surfacing in his poetry in the eight-canto cycle “O Almada” (itself published after Machado had taken the storks’ flight, appearing in print posthumously in 1910 following his death two years earlier), both times with attribution to Chateaubriand.

As the freedom with which Machado deploys the image demonstrates, the various meanings he extracts from it are not necessarily required to reflect—or correspond to—any sense of meaning or intent inherent in Chateaubriand’s original. Likewise, the French-informed views on poetry that Machado developed in his youth were in no way required to reflect or correspond to any literary or cultural reality in Europe. Nor was the superiority of those European ideas, implicitly imported through Machado’s poetry and criticism, necessarily a reflection of any actual situation in Europe. As Jobim explains in his essay, “Literary and Cultural Circulation: Machado de Assis and Théodule-Armand Ribot”—which also examines the influence of a French writer on Machado’s fiction—the perception of the culturally dominant European nations held by the people in former colonies was in fact far more important than any reality in the core countries themselves:

We know that the real Portugal, France or Europe do not correspond fully to the imaginary created in relation to them in the colonies and former colonies. ... It is consequently not a question of the “real” Portugal, Spain, France or Europe, but of the meanings attributed to these places within the reception contexts, at different historical moments in which the circulation of cultural elements has occurred.³⁵

For Jobim, as for Schwarz, the political, social, cultural, economic or intellectual realities in an idea’s nation of origin bears little relation to how that idea functions in its new situation. While building primarily on the work of the Brazilian theorist Silviano Santiago and French historian Michel Espagne, Jobim also cites Schwarz’s notion of misplaced ideas, and the framework he develops for the circulation of a work between its place of origin and its new context serves to reinforce Schwarz’s earlier model, helping to enhance the understanding of the place of the “dominant” culture in circulation between colonial powers and (former) colonies.

Jobim points to the power of the coloniser’s language and grammar in the situation of colonies and former colonies, describing how “language has at its very core a memory of meanings, such that its dissemination also represents the

dissemination of this memory.”³⁶ His key observation, though, resonates with Schwarz’s argument: “Although European post-Enlightenment and Universalist ideas have had an impact on national projects (not only in Brazil), in the Americas these ‘imported’ conceptions did not have the same meaning as in their place of origin.”³⁷ In Jobim’s paradigm of circulation, “It is this [new] context that will explain not only why this (and not another) element was ‘imported’ but also what meaning it will have in its new setting.”³⁸ As such, the questions of greatest relevance to the issue of the place of Machado’s poetry in literary and cultural circulation do not pertain to *what* he imported, but rather *why* and *how* he imported what he did, what happened to those imported elements after he brought them into their new context, and what implications this circulation had for the context from which those imported elements originally arose.

Timothy Brennan, in his 1997 work *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, identifies the serious threat posed to the “original” discourse that sees elements of its ideology in circulation, and offers a fascinating framework to consider the non-circulation of ideas back from the periphery to the core:

The most famous intellectual contributions from Brazil in the era of decolonization have both had dangerous connotations for Western sensibilities: the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire’s adult literacy writings and the birth of what would later be called liberation theology in the poor urban parishes of the Rio and São Paulo ghettos.

In Brazil’s case, I am primarily talking about a division of labor. Perhaps because Portugal within the European context has for various reasons not produced literary figures of influence within the European family (being particularly distant from the Anglo-American tradition), the Portuguese literature of Brazil has no special advantages in the United States for its being a European language. While Brazil plays a decisive role culturally in recent decades in helping to form the latter’s notion of the “third world” ... it artistically has not done so in literature but in music.³⁹

Brennan describes how, in the twentieth century, music styles such as bossa nova and samba gained prominence in the West, with already-popular Western artists such as

Frank Sinatra facilitating its circulation. He also points to the place of the Rio carnival in the Western imagination, “and, of course, lambada as the public demonstration of third-world sexual license.”⁴⁰ As Brennan laments, “All of this has unfolded in spite of such candidates as Machado de Assis [*sic*]⁴¹ as potential literary icons to carry the flag of Brazilian culture abroad.

V. THE INSTINCT OUT OF PLACE

It would be disingenuous to suggest that this inter-cultural, inter-system exchange occurred unbeknownst to Machado himself. On a superficial level, Machado wore his influences proudly. In addition to his translations, the works of other—predominantly European—writers provided the inspiration for a large selection of his original poems: *Crisálidas* contains poems with epigrams from Dante, Camões, Mickiewicz, and Musset; in *Falenas*, quotes from Shakespeare, Marot, Camões, and a Spanish proverb are among the external sources that preface his own poems; *Americanas* looks toward the Brazilian Romantic poet Gonçalves Dias and includes a poem titled after him; and *Ocidentais* includes, in addition to “O corvo,” “To be or not to be,” and translations of Dante and La Fontaine, a sonnet inspired by a scene taken from Lucretius (“*Suave mari magno*”) and other poems entitled “Espinosa,” “Alencar,” “Camões,” and “Gonçalves Crêspo.” (Crêspo being a Brazilian poet whose work Machado characterised as being marked by defects.)⁴²

Likewise, Machado drew heavily on the European literary, cultural and political tradition in his fiction, especially in the novels of his mature phase. In the opening pages of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* he includes:

the names of more than thirty illustrious men, literary characters, important dates. Biblical, Homeric, and Roman times are mentioned, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Reformation, the French classical century, the English Commonwealth, and Italian and German unification.⁴³

Within the pages of *Dom Casmurro* are overt literary and historical references ranging from Shakespeare, the Greek myths, Faust, Caesar, and the Crimean War, to Plutarch. Furthermore, as Helen Caldwell argues in *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis* (1960), the entire novel is built on a matrix taken from Shakespeare’s play. On the second page of his next novel, *Quincas Borba*, the protagonist, Rubião, is seen wearing

slippers from Tunis between bronze busts of Mephistopheles and Faust; by the second-to-last page, he is raving madly that he has captured the king of Prussia. Machado's eighth novel, *Esau e Jacó*, opens with a quote from Dante and "an image that comically evokes a memory of Dante's mountain of repentance and that ... symbolically summarizes all the conflicts that follow."⁴⁴ The novel follows the lives of a pair of twins, one of whom slept as a child beneath a portrait of Louis XVI, the other beneath a portrait of Robespierre. Machado's last novel, *Memorial de Aires*, again opens with quotations, this time from the Galician court minstrel Joham Zorro and from the thirteenth century poet-monarch of Portugal, Dom Denis, before the novel proper starts: "Well, it is a year today since I returned from Europe for good."⁴⁵

This persistent gaze in the direction of Europe is also to be found in the poetics of his novels, operating there at a formal level. Nowhere is this more obvious than in *Memórias póstumas*, where the narrator, Brás Cubas, shouts, belittles, digresses, and mumbles with an accent remarkably similar to Laurence Sterne's. As Schwarz observes:

it can be seen that Brás Cubas's volubility borrows its solutions in terms of technique from *Tristram Shandy*, one of the high points of eighteenth-century *sentimentalism*. However, it avails itself of them in 1880, after Romanticism, realism, and naturalism, when they can no longer have the same meaning. ... In fact, the magnification of caprice in the *Memoirs*⁴⁶ has something of a clowning elitism about it, of a self-congratulatory, exclusive irresponsibility.⁴⁷

This same tone resonates through the vast majority of his later fiction. In this manner, almost every word in the novels of Machado's mature phase—that is, the string of major novels produced after he had effectively abandoned poetry and criticism—is double-edged and imbued with an ironic distance. This irony is the defining trait of Machado's best-known fiction; its absence is a defining trait of the bulk of his poetry.

On the other hand, a sense of earnestness and sincerity pervades the poems in his first three collections. From the passionately political "Epitáfio do México" ("Epitaph for Mexico") and "Polónia" ("Poland") in *Crisálidas*, to "Hino patriótico" ("Patriotic Hymn"), manifest in Machado's early poetry is an unabashed didacticism that simply does not surface in his greatest works of fiction. "Hino patriótico" in particular was originally published anonymously as a reaction to the Christie Affair

—an 1862–63 diplomatic crisis between Brazil and Britain—declaring “This American land, / Briton, does not kiss your feet.”⁴⁸ And while this sharp political edge might have dulled by the time of the publication of *Ocidentais*, there is still an overt philosophical earnestness and a moral certitude that contrasts sharply with the overarching levity and ambiguity of his mature fiction. As playful as some later poems such as “A môsca azul” (“The Blue Fly”) and “Círculo vicioso” (“Vicious Circle”) may appear, they are still marked by a didacticism and metaphysical weight, which even their anthropomorphised insects, stars, and moons fail to lift. In fact, the fable-like quality that emerges from the images of talking animals and sighing stars only serves to emphasise the moral aspects of such poems. Compare, for example, two similar images from “A môsca azul” and *Memórias póstumas*. In the poem, a workman watches a blue fly and, “Between the insect’s wings, as it flew in space / something appeared to rise / with all the splendour of a palace. / And he saw his own face.”⁴⁹ Enraptured by the vision, in which the poor man sees himself as king of Kashmir, the workman captures the beautiful insect and takes it home, where “He dissected it so much, with such skill, that the fly, / broken, dull, disgusting, vile / succumbed; and it faded away from him / that fantastic, subtle vision.”⁵⁰ From that day on, the workman walks around town with the airs of a king, and the townsfolk consider him crazy.

Meanwhile, in chapters 30 and 31 of *Memórias póstumas*, the narrator, Brás, describes the eyes of the lame girl, Eugênia, “glowing, as though inside her brain there was a little butterfly with wings of gold and diamonds for eyes.”⁵¹ Next, a black butterfly flutters into the room where Brás is talking with Eugênia and her mother, Dona Eusébia, and the ladies panic at the sight of it, until Brás chases it away with a handkerchief. In the following chapter, a black butterfly flies into Brás’s bedroom, perches upon a portrait of his father, and proceeds to mock the narrator. (The similarities between this scene and “The Raven”/“O corvo” are also striking and underline how interconnected Machado’s fiction is with the Western tradition, while the deviation from Poe’s original demonstrates Machado’s deliberate reframing of those ideas.) Rather than chase it away, this time Brás strikes it with a towel, stunning it. Recalling his earlier poem, “A môsca azul”—in English, “The Blue Fly”—Brás picks up the butterfly, examines it, and, like the workman in the poem, gives himself

over to delusions of grandeur—only, this is a very different, double-voiced, ironic form of grandeur:

“Why in the devil’s name couldn’t it be blue?” I said to myself.

And this reflection—one of the most profound ever made since the invention of butterflies—consoled me for the harm I’d caused and reconciled me with myself.⁵²

Brás then considers the prospect that the butterfly considers him to be a god before killing it and flicking it out the window, meditating all the while on how much better everything would have been were the butterfly to have been born blue instead of black.

The contrast between the image as it appears in the poem and as it appears in the novel is stark. The poem’s straightforward narrative and binary conflict between reality and illusion—complete with its cautionary twist at the end to warn against submitting to a world of illusions—leaves little room for ironic distance or ambiguity. In the novel, though, every idea and every word spills beyond itself, questioning every idea before it and drawing other images in; the narrator is satirised by his own words, and the reader is left with no easy truth to cling to. An image that could easily appear hackneyed and shallow is spun around and questioned at every turn. For Schwarz, this becomes a hallmark of Machado’s fiction. No image or idea is left untainted by his ironic touch. Rather, “with malice and intelligence, Machado made sure he provided an abundance of clichés, always placed in compromising positions.”⁵³ In doing so, his work is still profoundly humorous, and humorously profound.

By embedding his profundity in a poetics defined by narratorial unreliability, capriciousness, irony, playfulness, and volubility, Machado was able to explore a host of issues of vital importance to his late-nineteenth century readership that still resonate today. Proof of this abounds in the diverse cross-section of scholarly and critical approaches to his work published in the past century, ranging from Afrânio Coutinho’s *A filosofia de Machado de Assis e outros ensaios* in 1940, which explores Machado’s personal philosophies through his fiction and its relationship to Brazilian reality, to Robert H. Moser’s 2008 book *The Carnavalesque Defunto: Death and the Dead in Modern Brazilian Literature*, which includes an entire chapter on *Memórias*

póstumas and the place of the dead in Brazilian culture. As Moser explains, despite all the humour of Machado's fiction, there is a deep seriousness beneath it: "Perhaps more so than any author of his era, Machado de Assis delved deeply into the underlying incongruences of a Brazilian elite in the limited state of a developing modern nation with an unresolved colonial past."⁵⁴ In this way, despite his constant insertion and misplacement of European and North American literary, cultural, political, and historical ideas, Machado's fiction remains vitally relevant to both Brazil and the wider world today. While the prose works of his mature phase may appear to have erupted fully-formed into the Brazilian literary discourse, an examination and appreciation of his development as a poet illuminates the journey his writing—and his cultural interactions with the wider world—undertook prior to his emergence as a major novelist.

VI. "I'D GIVE ANYTHING TO BE THAT BLONDE STAR BURNING"⁵⁵

Machado himself made no secret of his motivation for looking beyond Brazil's borders for his literary inspiration. In his 1873 essay "Reflections on Brazilian Literature at the Present Moment: The National Instinct," Machado makes explicit his thoughts on the Brazilian literary context confronting him, and critiques his contemporaries' "general desire to create a more independent literature."⁵⁶

Machado rails against the prevailing trend toward a national Brazilian literature based on the arbitrary inclusion of tokenistic "local colour," explaining how "a poet is not a national poet just because they insert in their verses the names of many flowers or native birds: this can give a nationhood of vocabulary and nothing more."⁵⁷ Machado encourages writers to turn their backs on the popular "Indianismo" movement, which looked to the nation's interior for its inspiration. For Machado, there is no reason that a Brazilian writer should limit themselves to Brazilian subjects and settings, just as there is no reason why dealing with non-Brazilian-specific subjects should preclude a writer being regarded as a Brazilian writer:

I ask simply whether the author of the *Song of Hiawatha* [American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow] is not the same author who wrote the *Golden Legend*, which has nothing to do with the land that witnessed its birth, nor its admirable author. And I also ask whether *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, and

Romeo and Juliet have anything to do with English history or have English settings, and whether Shakespeare is not, in addition to being a universal genius, an essentially English poet.⁵⁸

The significance of Machado's essay on the "national instinct" is frequently overlooked by—or simply unknown to—many literary and cultural critics who have dominated the field of post-colonial literary studies that emerged after Schwarz's pioneering work. For example, Mariano Siskind, in *Cosmopolitan Desires* (2014), makes no mention of Machado when he talks of

the first Latin American world literary discourse, the first articulation of a concern, regarding not this or that individual *foreign* literature, text, or author ... but rather the universality of literature and the possible emancipatory effects of this inscription of universality in America's literary body.⁵⁹

He instead refers to the Cuban writer José Martí's newspaper piece reflecting on Oscar Wilde's 1882 lecture in New York City—nine years after Machado's "national instinct" essay. Siskind also cites Borges's well-known and oft-cited 1953 essay, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," as well as the 1900 memoirs of Machado's countryman, Joaquim Nabuco, when tracing the development of universal sentiment among Latin American writers, but once again overlooks Machado's contribution to the field.⁶⁰

Machado's arguments and sentiments in "The National Instinct" might appear generally straightforward and agreeable, but upon closer inspection they are revealed to be just as complex and ambiguous as the issues that circulate in the formal aspects of his poetry. His desire for a national literature expressing an inner Brazilian-ness "different and better than if it were only superficial"⁶¹ has the immediately troubling ring of essentialism, and likewise his notion that such a literature would develop in metropolitan centres rather than the interior recalls Angel Rama's analysis that:

the modernizing cities transfer to the interior of each nation a system of domination learned from their own dependence on international cultural systems. In this way, apparent change, unrelated to local developments, merely accentuates real submission ... Whichever way one looks at it, the

capital cities present the highly varied rural societies and cultures of the interior with a fatal choice: retreat and perish, or perish now.⁶²

Machado was very much a writer of the capital city. At the same time as other writers were concentrating “on Indians or on life in the wild interior of the country ... Machado’s novels hardly move outside of Rio, then the largest city in Latin America.”⁶³ However, from within the framework provided by Schwarz’s “Misplaced Ideas,” Machado’s implicit advocacy of the cultural supremacy of the metropolis over the interior is easily understood as simply another manifestation of the intrinsic nineteenth-century Brazilian phenomenon of *favor*.

It is an irony worthy of Machado’s greatest fiction that a writer who played such an important part in the circulation of European and North American ideas in Latin America has had so little of his own work circulate back into those core cultures. Of that handful of poems that have appeared in English translation, “Círculo vicioso”—“The Vicious Circle”—is among the most popular, having been translated three times by three different translators by the mid-1960s.⁶⁴ The poem opens with the image of a firefly looking to the night-time sky, wishing he were a star; the star he gazes upon, however, is itself gazing upon the moon with envy, while the moon in turn wishes it were the sun. Finally, the sun, finding the weight of its corona too much to bear, longs to be a simple firefly dancing on the air.

For Fitz, the poem is a meditation “on our eternal dissatisfaction, our insatiable thirst for possessing what we do not possess, for wanting to be something other than what we are.”⁶⁵ It is also a perfect condensation of the yearning for something better and the ingrained belief—regardless of its relationship to reality—in the superiority of others: the very conditions that Schwarz diagnoses as providing the social and cultural basis for the system of *favor* in nineteenth-century Brazil. By approaching Machado’s poetry through the framework of circulation provided by Schwarz and Jobim, one can appreciate the role that literary and cultural forces played in shaping Machado’s entire literary project, and also to glimpse the role that Machado himself played in the circulation of ideas from Europe and North America to Brazil. The fact that such a significant portion of Machado’s oeuvre has still not been translated into English and, as such, has been denied the opportunity to circulate back into the international literary and cultural systems from which he drew so deeply

shows just how vicious that circle can be. So long as his poetry remains largely untranslated, that circle remains incomplete.

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NOTES

¹ The poem, “Ela,” is generally considered to have been his first creative publication, although a number have critics have argued it may have been one or two other poems. The fact that his first creative publication was a poem, though, is not disputed.

² Earl E. Fitz, *Machado de Assis* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 72.

³ Fabiana Gonçalves, “O princípio da crítica à poesia machadiana,” *Revista Iluminart IFSP* 1, no. 4 (2010): 4; all English translations of works cited by their Portuguese titles are our own translations. Likewise, unless stated otherwise, all citations of Machado’s poetry, fiction, and criticism are our translations, based on his works as they appear in the three-volume *Obra Completa* from Editôra José Aguilar.

⁴ Fitz, *Machado de Assis*, 86.

⁵ Roberto Schwarz, “Misplaced Ideas: Literature and Society in Late Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” trans. Edmund Leites and Roberto Schwarz, *Comparative Civilisations Review* 5 (1980): 40.

⁶ The Portuguese/American spelling of the term “*favor*” has been retained throughout this essay in order to differentiate between the very specific meaning of the word as Schwarz deploys it, and the everyday British spelling and usage of the word “favour.”

⁷ Schwarz, “Misplaced Ideas,” 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38; Schwarz’s emphasis.

¹⁰ Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 48.

- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 48.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.
- ¹⁶ José Luís Jobim, “Machado de Assis: O crítico como romancista,” *Machado de Assis em linha* 3, no. 5 (2010): 93–94. Our translation.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ¹⁹ Fitz, *Machado de Assis*, 78.
- ²⁰ Sérgio Luiz Prado Bellei, “‘The Raven’ by Machado de Assis,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 25, no. 2 (1988): 1.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 11.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ²⁵ From *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, Ch. 1.
- ²⁶ Richard A. Mazzara, “Machado de Assis (1839–1908): Francophile and Francophone,” *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1984): 97, doi:10.1080/03648664.1984.9928252.
- ²⁷ Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, trans. John Gledson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 116–17.
- ²⁸ Mazzara, “Machado de Assis (1839–1908),” 98.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 98–99.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 101.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 101.
- ³³ Machado de Assis, *Obra Completa*, vol. 1 (Rio de Janeiro: Editôra José Aguilar, 1962), 512.
- ³⁴ Mazzara, “Machado de Assis (1839–1908),” 101.
- ³⁵ José Luís Jobim, “Literary and Cultural Circulation: Machado de Assis and Théodule-Armand Ribot,” trans. Lisa Shaw, *European Review* 23, no. 3 (2015): 414, doi:10.1017/S1062798715000083.

³⁶ Ibid., 413.

³⁷ Ibid., 414.

³⁸ Ibid., 414.

³⁹ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 43–44.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁴¹ Ibid., 44.

⁴² Machado de Assis, *Obra Completa*, vol. 3 (Rio de Janeiro: Editôra José Aguilar, 1962), 806.

⁴³ Schwarz, *Master*, 19.

⁴⁴ Fitz, *Machado de Assis*, 59.

⁴⁵ Assis, *Obra Completa*, vol. 1, 1096.

⁴⁶ In *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, Schwarz translates the title of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* as *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*.

⁴⁷ Schwarz, *Master*, 118. Schwarz's emphasis.

⁴⁸ Assis, *Obra Completa*, vol. 3, 299.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 161.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 161.

⁵¹ Assis, *Obra Completa*, vol. 1, 549.

⁵² Ibid., 550.

⁵³ Schwarz, *Master*, 117.

⁵⁴ Robert H. Moser, *The Carnavalesque Defunto: Death and the Dead in Modern Brazilian Literature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 98.

⁵⁵ From Machado's poem, "Círculo vicioso."

⁵⁶ Assis, *Obra Completa*, vol. 3, 802.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 807.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 803–04.

⁵⁹ Mariano Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 109.

⁶⁰ First delivered as a lecture in 1951.

⁶¹ Assis, *Obra Completa*, vol. 3, 804.

⁶² Angel Rama, "Processes of Transculturation in Latin American Narrative," trans. Melisa

Moore, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 157,
doi:10.1080/13569329709361909.

⁶³ John Gledson, *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis: A Dissenting Interpretation of Dom Casmurro* (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984), 4.

⁶⁴ Claude L. Hulet, *Latin American Poetry in English Translation: A bibliography* (Washington DC: Pan American Union, 1965), 17–18.

⁶⁵ Fitz, *Machado de Assis*, 83.