

THE ON-GOING RECEPTION OF MACHADO DE ASSIS IN THE UNITED STATES: IS THE THIRD TIME THE CHARM?

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Resumo: Este ensaio examina a recepção crítica da obra de Machado de Assis nos Estados Unidos em três fases distintas: (I) a dos anos cinquenta, período em que foram publicados, em boas traduções inglesas, os celebres romances *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, *Dom Casmurro*, e *Philosopher or Dog?*; (II) a dos anos sessenta, época em que o “Boom” da literatura latino-americana ganha reconhecimento nos Estados Unidos; e (III) a do momento atual, quando o mestre brasileiro está prestes a receber a aclamação que merece. Na sequência, o ensaio comenta a importância de estudos recentes como os de Susan Sontag, Harold Bloom e Michael Wood, por meio dos quais Machado está se tornando um autor conhecido e respeitado em nossa comunidade intelectual e artística. Por fim, o ensaio argumenta que obra machadiana ainda possui muitos aspectos a ser explorados pela crítica norte-americana e que esta obra desempenhará um papel importante no desenvolvimento de uma nova disciplina acadêmica: os Inter-American Studies.

Palavras-chave: Machado de Assis; recepção crítica; Estados Unidos; Inter-American Studies

A perusal of Machado de Assis’s reception in the United States shows three distinct periods of activity: the 1950s, when his trio of great novels, *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (William L. Grossman, translator), *Dom Casmurro* (Helen Caldwell, translator), and *Philosopher or Dog?* (Clotilde Wilson, translator), first began to appear in English; the 1960s, when,

although known and admired by such writers and critics as John Barth, John Updike, and Helen Caldwell, he was overlooked during “Boom” period; and the present moment, when, by all indications, Machado is once again being “discovered” by an American audience (as well as by an international one). My goal in this essay is to summarize the nature of Machado’s earlier two receptions (the 1950s and the 1960s)¹ and then to comment on what is different about what is happening now and what this might mean for his on-going reception here in the United States of the early twenty-first century.

In the early 1950s, the United States, having just gained a bloody stalemate in the Korean War, was locked in what it took to be mortal combat with the Soviet Union. By the mid-1950s, the Cold War was raging, American Studies (founded in 1951) had become a new and distinctly nationalistic discipline on college campuses, and America was turning inward, secure in what it took to be its inherent “exceptionalism” and its privileged status in the post-war era. Between 1952 and 1954, the years Machado’s novels made their *estreia* here, the United States was not a culture much interested in having its weaknesses and foibles pointed out, even indirectly, by anyone, but especially not by a virtually unknown and witheringly skeptical writer from a culture more associated with Carmen Miranda than with great writing. Latin America, enduring what was essentially an American economic abandonment after the war and suffering from the political turmoil that resulted from it, was no longer judged to be as important to the interests of the United States as was Europe. On the cultural front, Spanish America and Brazil barely registered at all in the America of the 1950s, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and *Mexico City Blues* (1959) being two notable exceptions, along with the Beat poets, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Ferlinghetti, especially, became interested in the unconventional theories about the nature of poetry being

promulgated at the time by the Chilean poet, Nicanor Parra, and eventually participated in the translations of some of Parra's "anti-poems" for his City Lights bookstore and press. Although Machado's three translated novels garnered more or less positive reviews, their critical reception did not inspire any kind of wide-spread or long lasting appeal. Only the then neophyte novelist, John Barth, appears to have been significantly influenced by them, his first published novel, *The Floating Opera* (1956), coming to fruition in direct response to them and what Barth felt was their irresistible "post-modernism" (Barth, 1995, 44; Fitz, 1986; Barbosa).

The Barth/Machado connection is an important one, however, for an additional reason, and it deserves special attention. A few years later, during the 1960s, when the "Boom" was all the rage and Americans were shocked to discover high quality literature emanating from Latin America, Barth's famous 1967 essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," validated (for Americans, at least) the work of such "South of the Border" authors as Jorge Luis Borges and argued that his work could effectively reinvigorate American literature by offering it an antidote for what Barth believed was the sense of "used-upness," or "exhaustion," afflicting it at the time. Barth's argument here was noteworthy because it marked the first time a major American writer and critic had not only publically lauded a Latin American writer but gone so far as to suggest that Latin American writing could actually help the literature of the United States regain its vitality, its inventiveness, and, to employ one of the key terms of the time, its relevance. A similar point had been made, though in a less pointed fashion, two years earlier, in 1965, by John Updike, who, like Barth, saw in the work of Borges, a kind of antidote to what he deplored as the "dead-end narcissism and downright trashiness of present American fiction" (223). After Barth's landmark essay, however, Latin American literature (or what Americans thought was Latin American literature) began to be

regarded in a more positive light in the United States. It was, in short, a watershed moment in inter-American literary relations, with Latin American literature now, at least for some people, exerting a salubrious and regenerative influence on writers and critics from the United States.

The problem in all this, however, is that Machado de Assis, ardently admired by Mr. Barth since the early 1950s, was not among the Latin American writers praised by him in his very influential essay.² As a result, Machado de Assis, and Brazil generally, fell off the American cultural radar screen during the tumultuous “Boom” period when a plethora of Spanish American writers dazzled the American public with their intellectual breadth, their cosmopolitan outlook, and their formal fireworks. It is interesting to speculate about how Machado’s reception in the United States of the 1960s might have gone had Barth also celebrated him in the “Exhaustion” essay. But that did not happen. Just as Mr. Barth had moved on, as a fiction writer, from the themes and techniques of *The Floating Opera* (1956) to those of *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), and the motif of the labyrinth, so, too, had he left the influence of Machado for that of Borges. Though available in good to excellent English translations, and though still acknowledged in the mid to late 1960s by both Updike³ and Barth, Machado de Assis, a more than worthy member of the “Boom” contingent, was shunted aside, passed over in favor of his Spanish American counterparts.

Now, however, in the early years of the twenty-first century, it appears that Machado is once again catching the eye of American writers, critics, and literary scholars. Is this third reception that Machado is now being afforded here in the United States the one we’ve been waiting for so long? Is Machado de Assis about to receive the critical attention here in the States that we’ve long thought was overdue? It’s possible to think so, though Brazilianists, long accustomed to being disappointed with respect to this issue, can be forgiven for being skeptical.

If, however, Machado is on the cusp of a new and more enthusiastic reception, it might be useful to consider some basic questions: Why now, for example? What has changed, culturally, intellectually, and, perhaps, even politically, in the United States that would allow us, finally, to begin to take seriously this great writer from one of our long neglected hemispheric neighbors? Does reading Machado really make us “a little less provincial” than we used to be, as Susan Sontag believes (108)? And, finally, what might the consequences of this new reception of Machado de Assis be? What might a new appreciation of Machado’s genius mean for us, here in the United States, a culture long decried for its insularity and “chauvinism,”⁴ its suspiciousness of anything foreign, and its disdain for Latin America? These are questions that deserve discussion, especially as they relate to the exciting new field of inter-American literary relations, a field in which Brazil is destined to play a major role.

A turning-point essay, I believe, and one quite comparable to the impact Barth’s article had in 1967 but now focusing on Machado de Assis alone, is Susan Sontag’s often cited paean to the Brazilian writer, entitled “Afterlives: The Case of Machado de Assis,” published in the May 7, 1990, issue of the *New Yorker* magazine. The essay is of particular importance to this latest reception of Machado de Assis in the United States because it makes several important points about what Sontag calls his “afterlife,” those years and even decades after a “great writer” passes on when the “filter of time” justly discards “the merely successful,” rescues “the forgotten,” and promotes “the underestimated.” Clearly, this is the case of our writer, Machado de Assis, particularly as his reception in the United States is concerned. But, as Sontag rightly notes, Machado’s “afterlife” has, surprisingly enough, “not brought his work the recognition that it merits” (102), and so an attempt to explain this conundrum becomes the justification of the article.

But while Sontag labors nobly to do this, I feel that she does not quite succeed, though she does get the discussion going in the right direction. What's missing is a discussion of Machado as an "American" author, as someone who has a great deal to say to readers in the United States about their values, their attitudes, and their place in the larger New World experience. After noting how "Eurocentric notions of world literature" continue to marginalize great writers from other, non-European traditions, and after declaring how Machado would surely be better known "if he hadn't been Brazilian," Sontag goes on to note that he is still "little known and read in the rest of Latin America," where, she opines, he is superior, as a fiction writer, to the much better known Borges, whom she declares "the second-greatest writer produced" on the South American continent (107). Although translated into Spanish as early as 1902, Machado does indeed seem not to have generated much of a following in the world of Spanish American literature (Borges, for example, makes no known reference to him, though some later writers do; see n. 5). What Sontag implies here is that Machado has been marginalized twice, once for not being European and once for being Brazilian. She is correct, however, in also observing that within the context of what Americans rather vaguely call "Latin America," Brazil "has always been the outside country, regarded by the rest of South America – Hispanophone South America – with a good deal of condescension and even racism" (107).

Very well, we might say, but why is the Sontag essay so important to our most current reception of Machado de Assis here in the United States? As Brazilianists and Latin Americanists, we are already aware of what Sontag is saying here.

The answer, I believe, is that Machado's current, and more promising, reception here in the States is not so much a matter of how we, the specialists, feel about it as it is about how contemporary English-

speaking American writers and scholars are now going to read him, how these people, our colleagues in other departments, are going respond to him, and how they're going to relate Machado to our current situation. In the twenty-first century, issues of influence and reception are less a matter of the nature of the "source text" (as they used to be) than of the nature of the receiving culture, including its literary or artistic needs, its prejudices and its blind spots. Given the complexities caused by the many and often radical differences in the cultures and time periods that are involved, the Machado de Assis that American readers encounter as they read him in English translation today will vary considerably, I think, from the one we know and admire. While we may wish to offer guidance and advice (including counsel on the different English translations of Machado that are now available), we must allow Machado to relate to our colleagues as he will, sometimes in ways we might not regard as being as productive or as revealing of his greatness as they might be. This is why issues of influence and reception, particularly between cultures that are vastly different and separated by large swatches of time, are so complicated and, not infrequently, frustrating.

Daphne Patai, for example, has speculated that Machado's reception in the United States could easily become a function of volatile American concerns over race, gender, and sexual identity (88), all issues that have active and engaged constituencies here in the United States of the early twenty-first century and issues that will most certainly affect how the racially mixed Machado is interpreted here in the America of 2009. In his controversial 2002 book, *Genius*, for instance, Harold Bloom, apparently thinking of his American audience, speaks of Machado as "the supreme black literary artist to date" (673), though he does not elaborate on this provocative comment. How would we, as specialists in Brazilian literature, feel if an American reader or critic were to categorize Machado

de Assis as a Black Writer? Clearly, the question has what we might regard as both positive and negative aspects (positive because the emergence of the black voice worldwide is a worthy achievement but negative because Machado may well have not wanted to be understood only, or even primarily, in such limiting terms), and for that reason might well be troubling to us. Will we feel distressed if Machado becomes pigeonholed as a particular kind of writer rather than celebrated as a great writer, one whose art reveals a plethora of different, and engaging, qualities and aspects? While the latest reception afforded Machado de Assis here in the United States, then, may not turn out to be exactly the one we might wish to see, we will, at long last, be seeing our great writer finally receiving at least some of the international recognition he so richly deserves.

Nevertheless, the importance of Sontag's 1990 essay is that in it a celebrated and influential American critic has unambiguously declared Machado to be a great, and egregiously neglected, modern master, the kind of writer every educated person needs to know about. Further, in declaring herself to be "astonished that a writer of such greatness does not yet occupy" the prominence and international celebrity "he deserves," Sontag also does for Machado what, in the 1960s, John Barth (inadvertently, I believe) did not do; that is, she uses her status and position to promote Machado de Assis to other writers and critics in the vast English language literary tradition.

Applying the Law of Unexpected Consequences, however, we may also anticipate a positive response to Sontag's encomium from our friends and colleagues working in Spanish, all of whom, as teachers, writers, and scholars working in both Spanish and English, experience a sort of a double reception of Machado, first as Latin Americanists (something Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Juan Rulfo, Roberto González Echevarría and Carlos Fuentes have generously acknowledged the past few years)⁵ and as

participants in the larger, hemispheric context of American culture and American literature. Indeed, the fast-developing new field of inter-American literature will reach its full potential only if Brazil plays a more central role in it, and Machado de Assis is the perfect author to promote in this endeavor. Sontag's piece has importance, then, not only because her comments will influence her English department cohorts but also because they will similarly encourage our Spanish and English-speaking colleagues in departments of Spanish and Portuguese, with both these groups constituting great numbers of students in our colleges and universities and great numbers of readers generally. To put this another way, Susan Sontag has opened not one but two doors for Machado de Assis, one into English and American literature departments and the other into the Spanish side of our departments of Spanish and Portuguese, and so her endorsement is of unusual importance to Machado's current reception here in the United States.

A more contemporary example of this same kind of Machadoean reception, and, in some ways, a response to Sontag's piece, is a 2006 essay we now have by the eminent scholar and critic, James Wood. Wood, a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Princeton University, writes that "Machado was, undoubtedly, a 'master,'" but, he then observes, there are two mysteries surrounding his work, "one Brazilian, one international" (294). The first, and better known, mystery, the Brazilian one, has to do with how the Machado of *Iaiá Garcia* (1878) and his competent earlier novels got to be the Machado of *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1880/1881) and his extraordinary later novels and stories. This, we know, is an issue that has occupied Machado scholars for generations and it remains a topic of compelling interest.

But it is the latter mystery, the international one, that I want to examine here. Wood's point, with respect to this second mystery, is to

speculate about why it is that Machado is so little known by people outside of the ken of Luso-Brazilian letters. “Machado’s novels have been available in English and in other languages apart from Portuguese for some fifty years now,” Wood writes. “Everyone who reads him thinks he is a master, but who reads him, and who has heard of him? When I talk to people about Borges, I often have to say the name carefully, but I don’t always have to say who he is” (297), as, presumably, Professor Wood feels he must do in the case of our Brazilian author. We’re all familiar with this scenario.

But why is this the case? Wood begins his answer to this question, which gets at the heart of the question of Machado’s current reception here in the United States, by making reference to Sontag’s article and, in particular, to the “astonishment” she says she felt at discovering that “a writer of such greatness does not yet occupy the place he deserves.” Wood continues on, citing the work of our colleague, John Gledson, as well as that of Roberto Schwarz and João Adolfo Hansen. Noting that “we still need to know what Machado’s mastery and modernity consist of, and why his novels are more than historical documents” (297) and pursuing a line of thought opened by Gledson and Hansen, Wood wonders if Machado doesn’t construct his style, and his modernity, out of the “ruins of a dead time,” “the ruined remains of a pre-modern world” (Hansen 28). If he does, indeed, do this, Wood suggests, then Machado’s post-1880 narratives do not involve, as Proust’s did, “a search for lost time but a memorial of how lost it is, and even the memorial may be a fiction” (298), which, because it begins to confront the inescapably fictive, and therefore non-realistic, nature of literary language use, is a more radical contention. As a consequence, Wood speculates, the later Machado, in a way that recalls Walter Benjamin, was writing “ironic narrative proverbs that know their own helplessness.” There is “Nothing more modern,” Professor Wood concludes, “than a ruin in this sense” (298).

Although I heartily concur with the points made by Professor Wood, I suggest we relate them to a vision of Machado's later novels as constituent parts of a grand experiment centering on the questions of imitation and representation, specifically, on the unstable, and therefore unreliable, relationship between language and reality and the problems a writer has in trying to reconcile them. A writer, after all, tries to represent reality through language. It seems to me that this relationship, between language, reality, and the goals of a writer, connects Machado's fictions about the "ruins of a dead time," (the concerns of History) to what, after 1880, I feel he was rapidly coming to see as the arbitrary relation that language has with reality. For me, this helps explain Machado's ever more evident concern, in these "deceptive" (see Gledson, 1984) later novels especially (but also, from time to time, in his earlier ones as well), with the issues of *mimesis*, *verisimilitude*, *veracity*, and *appearances*, and with the interpretive role of the reader in the game of fiction, where decisions about what are really only artistically (linguistically) rendered *appearances* (and their *meanings*) have to be constantly made. In *Dom Casmurro*, for example, the plot turns on a fateful decision Bento makes about a portrait (Art) and its (allegedly) verisimilar relationship to a particular human being (Reality). Fiction, Machado seems to suggest, is not all that different from History in that they are both functions of language and they both require decisions from their reader as to the "truth" of their recreations (what History demands) or mere representations (the nature of Art; *mimesis*, and *verisimilitude*; the appearance of truth, as opposed to truth itself). In short, Machado calls for a clear distinction to be made between at least two kinds of representational "truth," one historical and one aesthetic. The historian, as per the demands of the discipline, has a certain "confiança" in language and so seeks to re-create that which she or he believes has already existed or happened; the fiction writer, who knows she's not

constrained by issues of historical veracity, can only seek to present a verbal simulacrum of reality, to offer up yet another re-presentation, or version, of it, one based, as Machado makes clear, on aesthetic criteria. Recognizing that this question about how language was used to portray reality dealt with a critical and very fundamental epistemological concern (how can we know the truth?), and that it had a great deal to do with how and why we created the institutions and value systems that control our lives, it's little wonder that Plato enshrined the truth-telling Historian and banned the meretricious Poet from the Ideal Republic!⁶

If we accept this proposition (that as early as 1880, Machado was beginning to concern himself less and less with Flaubert's, and therefore Realism's, sense of the *mot juste* and, recalling Baudelaire's cultivation of the *image juste*, more and more on the slippery, polysemous, and inherently metaphoric nature of language itself), it significantly radicalizes our Brazilian writer as a narrative theoretician of great import to the Western tradition and arguably as narrative fiction's most important precursor to Saussure and his linguistics. Reading them from this perspective, Machado's post-1880 novels and stories can easily be taken as an integrated whole, as a series of separate yet inter-related experiments on the nature of narrative, its relationship to what we think of as "reality," and the peculiar, or "ambiguous," nature of the "truth" narrative tells, encapsulates, or exemplifies. Rethinking the old tensions between history and fiction, and harnessing the semantically refractive power of poetry to enrich his narratives, Machado's later novels and stories demand attention as some of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's most challenging, innovative, and elusive texts. In considering these works, it is interesting to speculate, in fact, that Machado may have achieved his greatest success as a poet, and as a dramatist, in his post-1880 narratives, many of which can be thought of as hybrid creations

that combine the best features of all three genres, and, indeed, of four genres, if one includes Machado's many "crônicas" and the ways these relate to his fictions.

In referring to the "magical" quality of Machado's language, to its ability to link together in logical, coherent fashion things that, in "real life," could never happen so seamlessly, Wood has also touched (2009) on another crucial aspect of Machado's evocative, elliptical style, one that suggests to us that Machado was moving away from realistic types of narrative to experiments involving a new kind of writing and a new kind of thinking about language. Machado's "new narrative," for which he deserves more credit, not only in Latin America and the United States but in the Western tradition generally, keyed on what he seems to have been coming to see as language's self-referential and semantically generative nature, a quality that, as Machado sensed, separated it from the reality it purported to describe and that undercut the traditional assumptions and techniques of Realism with which he had been working. In adopting this position during the penultimate decade of the nineteenth-century, Machado anticipates the point of contention in a 1963 debate, appearing in the second issue of the journal, *Location*, between the American writers, Saul Bellow and Donald Barthelme. Bellow, upholding the integrity of Realism, argued that "the modern novel was 'predominantly realistic' because 'realism is based on our common life.'" Barthelme begged to differ, arguing that a "'mysterious shift . . . takes place as soon as one says that art is not about something but *is* something,'" "when the literary text 'becomes an object in the world rather than a commentary upon the world'" (Toibin 8; Barthelme qtd. by Toibin, 8), which is precisely what Machado's late texts had become.

We can see, then, that Machado's theoretical breakthrough occurred in 1880 when, in a very deliberate fashion, he began to use language in his fiction not to clarify and explain reality but to bring out its complexities,

contradictions, and illusory nature – and to show that our sense of it was largely a matter of its being a verbal construct, to which the reader reacts via other verbal constructs, that is, through the process of interpretation. After 1880, and the publication of the *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, Machado appears to have determined that literary art (and perhaps art in general) is less a representation of something else (reality) than it is a matter of what we might term its own aesthetic ontology, its status, its “being” or existence, as a creative structure of words less tied to the object of its representation than to its own inescapable nature as a self-contained linguistic object, one that speaks, first and foremost (though not exclusively), to itself and that is subject, therefore, to its own rules and criteria. In coming to this decision, Machado was beginning to comprehend the representation of reality, and especially human reality (both private and social), in new and hitherto unseen ways and to eschew the orthodox norms and modes of Realism in its depiction. As David Haberly puts it, “The alien quality of Machado’s fiction [...] extends beyond [...] differences in setting and social context into the nature of the text itself, as the novelist alters or ignores the ground rules of nineteenth-century European Realism,” and, in the process, denies “the validity of the text as a version of reality” (xiii; xxv). “A realidade é boa,” Machado famously, and revealingly, wrote, “é o Realismo que não presta para nada” (qtd. by Coutinho, 1: 56). In making this trenchant observation, Machado antedates by some eighty years a similar point made in 1963 by René Wellek to the effect that “The theory of realism is ultimately bad aesthetics because all art is ‘making’ and is a world in itself of illusion and symbolic forms” (255).

The point Wood and Wellek make here also links Machado to Borges and his famous dictum, appearing some fifty years later in 1932,⁷ that “magic,” understood in the anthropological sense, was superior to the constricting tenets of Realism because it allowed a writer to create

internally logical, self-referential, and “fantastic” (that is, non-realistic) narrative structures that did not depend, for their veracity, or verisimilitude, on any relationships to an external world for their frames of reference. Reflecting the basic assumptions of the original structuralist theoreticians, the elements of Borges’s “magical” narratives referenced, first, the other elements of their common structure and only later any “meanings” that might be extrapolated from them, if the reader chose to make such extrapolations. Like the later Borges (and the even later Wellek and Barthelme), Machado seems to have been concerned, as early as 1880, with a new theory of verisimilitude, or Realism, one that was only tangentially connected to what we ordinarily think of as “the real” and one that revealed itself to be more a matter of literary and aesthetic conventions about how “the real” should be portrayed in art. “In magical narratives,” Emir Rodríguez Monegal writes, “everything is relevant; there are no loose ends. A perfect structure forces every part to correspond to the whole” (248), a point that is as germane to Machado (one thinks immediately of *Dom Casmurro*) as it is to Borges. Wood believes that we read Machado to understand better not only the power of words but their failings as well, and that, for the later Machado, language reveals itself to be, simultaneously, a form of infinite liberation and creativity and a form of confinement and conformity, a verbal “prison house” from which we can never truly escape. The human experience, for Machado de Assis, reveals itself to be a matter of negotiating, by means of language use, the innumerable paradoxes and uncertainties that result from the tension between these two unreconcilable polarities.

In working this ground, Machado interrogates, and, as we see in “O Alienista” (1881-1882), eventually undermines, the Western enthusiasm for binary thinking, the tyranny of the either/or choice. Little by little, Machado’s probing, self-reflective, and sardonic narratives end

up suggesting that while binary thinking can be useful and productive in certain cases, and that it may, in fact, be biologically “hard-wired” into the human brain (as the early structuralists contended), it is not nearly subtle enough to describe the tangled human condition, which, Machado shows us (his concept of “realidade”), is eternally fluid, frustrating, and deceptive. And language is basically the only tool we have to deal with it, to try and make our existence what we want it to be and to cope with it (and with ourselves) when we fail (which we typically do by deluding ourselves). The dilemma that the skeptical Machado thus leads us into is the unease born of profound disenchantment, which many regard as the anxiety-ridden essence of the troubled modern condition, the one driven by both epistemological and ontological imperatives and desires but riven with doubts as to whether we can ever really gain what we most want – a sure sense of understanding and truth and a balanced, coherent sense of identity.

Wood ends his consideration of Machado’s modernity, and the metaphorical, irony-laden style he uses to convey it, by noting that Machado’s texts are full of gaps and omissions – *aporia*, a post-structuralist might say – that the reader must fill in as part of her response to the “interplay of appearance and desire” (302) that our under appreciated Brazilian master so beguilingly cultivates in all its protean uncertainty. For me, it is this problem – the relationship between the author who writes a text, the ways the text itself then operates as a closed semiotic structure (its structure, style, narrators, characterizations, and multiple points of view, all of which speak, often ironically, to each other), and the ways an engaged reader (the kind of reader Machado sought to create, along with his own brand of “new narrative,” after 1880) will respond to it and extract meaning and significance from it – that constitutes Machado’s unique modernity. And his famous ambiguity.

Professor Wood's essay is of special importance, then, for the ongoing reception of Machado de Assis here in the United States because, as a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Princeton, his discussions of Machado, in the context of other literary giants, will only enhance Machado's fame and reputation. Other scholars will pay attention to what Wood says about Machado de Assis, an author they might not have known of before, and they may be led to undertake their own studies of our Brazilian master, thus expanding Machado's critical frame of reference. And Professor Wood's students, who comprise the next generation of scholars, will have an appreciation of Machado built-in, naturally, to their larger, and comparative, literary perspectives. For them, and for their students, discussions of Machado de Assis as a great world writer will have become an entirely natural and self-evident part of their professional work. This new and expanded recognition of Machado de Assis by comparatists and scholars of English and American literature, I believe, is the key step, and it promises a brighter future for Machado's reception beyond the confines of the Luso-Brazilian world. Professor Wood has now linked Machado (and, indirectly, Brazilian literature itself) not only to the literature of the English-speaking world but to world literature generally. Just as Susan Sontag had compared Machado's fate as an international writer to that of such luminaries as Sterne, Natsume Sôseki, Robert Walser, Svevo, Hrabal, and Beckett (105), and just as Harold Bloom celebrates Machado as one of his "genius" writers, Professor Wood's essay embraces Machado on several different fronts: as a Brazilian writer, as a Western writer, and as a world writer, one whose acute sense of the modern *malaise* makes him the prose fiction equivalent of Baudelaire and whose self-conscious, elusive, and wryly humorous texts do indeed present us with the "travesty of modern ideas reworked by underdevelopment" (Wood 299), a point that reminds us of Machado's tremendous importance as an insightful socio-political commentator and social philosopher.

Appearing in an important new collection of superb essays, edited by our friend and colleague, João Cezar de Castro Rocha, Professor Wood's essay, like so many others in this outstanding collection, seeks to free Machado from the obscurity imposed upon him by virtue of being a Brazilian author writing in Portuguese (a language still understudied even by our colleagues working in Spanish) and to discuss him as an authentic modern master, situating him as a writer whose innovative work has changed our understanding of the modern novel's evolution (Fitz, 2006). It is no exaggeration, moreover, to say that Wood's study, given the issues it touches upon and the impact it will have on future scholars, may well be the linchpin of Machado's current, and so far most important, reception in the United States and the English-speaking world. Further, I believe it is possible to argue now that, as non-specialist studies of Machado increase in both number and quality, we have finally gained the kind of "critical mass" that is needed for our author to escape the solitude that being a Brazilian writer has long imposed on him and to become established as an international icon. As Brazilianists, and as enthusiasts of Machado de Assis, we may have finally achieved the breakthrough we've so long awaited. We can only hope so.

Another important sign of Machado's current reconsideration comes from Professor Paul Dixon, of Purdue University, who has now edited a new collection of Machado-related essays that also seek to inscribe our Brazilian master into other traditions of world literature. Professor Dixon's collection, published in 2004 as a special number of the greatly respected journal, *Santa Barbara Portuguese Studies*, reflects "what might be called the 'globalization' of Brazil's most studied author, Machado de Assis" while also showing how Machado's reception abroad "is in the process of transcending questions of nationality" (Dixon 9). And, in a notable lagniappe, one of the essays, that of Abel

Barros Baptista, convincingly argues for recognizing Machado as one of the founders of the modern short story form, comparing his “contos” to those of such writers as Poe, Maupassant, and Chekhov and contending that Machado embeds his theory about the story form in the narrative of the story itself. By focusing on the conceptual and technical contributions that Machado made to an established international genre, Baptista writes precisely the kind of carefully reasoned and judiciously argued comparative essay that will move Machado onto the stage of world letters.

And yet, I hasten to add, if Machado’s proper reception as a modern master has finally begun to take place, let us remember that it did not come out of nowhere. Although Machado first appeared in English in 1921, as part of Isaac Goldberg’s *Brazilian Tales* (1921), his three great novels, *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, *Dom Casmurro*, and *Philosopher or Dog?* were not translated and sold in the United States until the 1950s. And, as I have already noted, Machado, though known and admired by a great many American readers, writers, and critics, was left off the standard team roster for the “Boom” period, when what was being rather carelessly called “Latin American” literature first began to establish itself in the United States. In spite of support from such influential figures as John Updike and John Barth, Machado was not celebrated in the United States as a “Boom” writer. But perhaps this is actually a good thing. Had he been hailed as a “Boom” writer (his work is so very different from his Spanish American counterparts), what is happening now, in what I am suggesting is his third reception here in the United States, would not be as important as it is.

Influence and reception studies rank among the most challenging we have in the world of letters. Crucial to the development of the emergent field of inter-American studies, questions of influence and

reception have ceased to focus primarily on the importance of the source text, as was traditionally the case in comparative literary scholarship, and to examine more and more the traditions, biases, and prejudices that define the receiving culture and that, in the process, either facilitate or obstruct the reception of foreign materials. In terms of the dismissive reception that Brazilian literature has historically been accorded here in the United States, this remains a particularly thorny and problematic issue. Moreover, as the culture of the United States becomes increasingly leavened by influences from Spanish America, its already tenuous understanding of “Latin America” is rapidly becoming a question only of the Spanish language and of certain cultures from Spanish America and not Portuguese and Brazil, which, as a host of commentators are beginning to note, boasts perhaps the most original and diverse national literature in the New World (see González Echevarría, Pupo-Walker, and Haberly, for example, 1). For inter-American literature to succeed as a new literary discipline, Brazilian writers and texts must play a more prominent role in it. This will be a task for the next generation of Brazilianists, who, without losing their identity as specialists working in a brilliant national literature, must also engage more energetically with this new approach to the concept of “American” literature. To be sure, Brazilian literature possesses unquestionable richness and excellence; what it does not as yet possess is widespread recognition beyond the confines of the Portuguese-speaking world, though, as I reflect on the skill with which our young colleagues are now using the comparative method, I am confident it will. And, as I have tried to show in this essay, there is no better place to begin this process of comparative hemispheric integration than Machado de Assis, a writer whose on-going reception in the United States, in Spanish America, and in Canada is earning him accolades not only as a great Brazilian writer and a great “American”

author, but, in many ways, as the quintessentially “modern” writer. Is this third reception of Machado de Assis the one that will finally earn for him a permanent place in the American literary consciousness, one as secure as that of Borges? Or García Márquez? In our teaching and in our scholarship, we must make it so.

NOTES

¹ For a more complete discussion of Machado’s reception in the United States of the 1950s and 1960s, see Fitz, *Luso-Brazilian Review*, special issue on Machado de Assis, forthcoming.

² Nor was Machado mentioned in Barth’s followup 1980 essay, “The Literature of Replenishment”, which praised the work of Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar.

³ Updike, for example, mentions, but does not discuss, Machado and his “absolute skepticism” in his 1965 essay on Borges (236).

⁴ As early as 1933, for example, the American historian, Herbert E. Bolton, was warning against the “chauvinism” that derived from studying American history from the perspective of the United States only (see Bolton 448). Bolton advocated an integrated and comparative approach to the study of the Americas.

⁵ In a 1970 interview with Rita Guibert, for example, Cabrera Infante defends Machado de Assis’s art, declaring that “There is no more ‘readable’ novel in Latin America than those written by Machado de Assis in Brazil, almost a century ago” (423). Rulfo has long celebrated Brazilian literature in a number of articles and interviews. More recently (1997) González Echevarría has written that “Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, or simply Machado, is the premier nineteenth-century Latin American writer and one of the best of all time anywhere. Had he been born French or English, there is little doubt that his works would be prominently featured in the Western canon. In the Americas he is certainly on the level of Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe. No one in Spanish comes close to his polish and originality” (*The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories*, 95). And Fuentes lauds Machado extensively in his 2001 book, *Machado de La Mancha*, citing his originality and his many contributions to the evolution of the novel form as it exists in the Western tradition and discussing Machado’s importance to the novel’s technical and aesthetic development in Spanish and Portuguese.

⁶ It is important to remember, of course, that, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle defends the Poet against this charge, arguing that because she is not bound to write of things as they really are (as the Historian is), she is free to write of things as they should be, that is, as they exist in a higher, more ideal state. The Poet, Aristotle contends, can thus guide us to higher, and better, kinds of conduct, a point that carries great weight in evaluating the enduring appeal of Machado de Assis’s narratives.

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