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**SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE  
TREATMENT OF INDIVIDUAL  
CONSCIOUSNESS AND DARWINISTICISM IN  
MACHADO DE ASSIS**

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Abstract

The object of this paper (actually a shorter version of a chapter on Machado for the book I have just finished) is to link some observations about “Human condition” in the shape of the dichotomy between individual and species that I have already developed in reading Swift elsewhere. Machado, as well as Swift, at times blurs or radically separates the individual and the species when arguing the “Human condition”. In both authors, Nature in its biological cycle of life and death, and in Machado’s case with the addition of Evolution, is often used as a weapon of satirical and ironic attack and as such, liberties are taken that depart from strict biological observations. Biological Nature becomes, then, “Nature”, a personification with the intent of moral chastising, rather than any descriptive account of natural phenomena. The arguments advanced by Machado, principally in *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* [The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas] have the appearance of objective descriptions of humankind supposedly based on natural philosophy but their origin is elsewhere; in the tradition of the satirists of the Eighteen century, among them Swift, and as such, they follow the even older tradition of the Menippean Satire.

## Resumo

O objetivo do presente trabalho (que é uma versão do capítulo sobre Machado de Assis do livro que acabamos de escrever) é o de estabelecer conexões entre algumas observações quanto à “Condição” Humana sob a forma de uma dicotomia entre indivíduo e espécie que já havíamos desenvolvido previamente em nosso capítulo sobre Swift. Machado, assim como Swift, dependendo do ponto a provar, fusiona ou separa radicalmente o indivíduo da espécie quando apresenta a tese da “Condição Humana”. Em ambos os autores, a natureza em seu ciclo biológico de vida e morte – e no caso de Machado com a adição da idéia de Evolução – é usada como arma de ataque satírico e irônico e como tal, liberdades são tomadas para que tal ataque seja efetivo. Tais liberdades, entretanto, diferem de observações estritamente biológicas. Dessa forma, a natureza biológica se torna, então, “Natureza”, uma personificação cujo intento encerra uma lição moral em vez de um relato descritivo dos fenômenos naturais. Os argumentos avançados por Machado de Assis, principalmente em *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* têm a aparência de descrições objetivas da humanidade e são supostamente baseados na filosofia natural mas sua origem está em outro lugar. Está na tradição dos satiristas do século XVIII, entre eles Swift, e como tal, tais argumentos seguem a tradição até mais antiga da sátira menipéia.

J. Guilherme Merquior in a preface to *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*<sup>1</sup> by Machado de Assis, writes: “Machado’s irony, like Swift’s, is tinged with repugnance for the absurdity of the human condition. Nature is a scourge; History, a catastrophe”.

Machado de Assis wrote *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*<sup>2</sup> in 1881. The work is a hybrid of a novel, a confession, and has something of Menippean Satire in it<sup>3</sup>. As Machado himself writes in the foreword of the third edition: “Capistrano de Abreu writing about the publication of the book asked: ‘Is *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* a novel?’ [...] to whom the late Brás Cubas answered that yes and no, it was a novel for some and not a novel for others. It is a diffuse work in which, if I, Brás Cubas, have adopted the free form of a Sterne or a Xavier de Maistre, I haven’t done so, however, without having added some ‘peevisish pessimism’ to it”<sup>4</sup>. It is actually at the very beginning, to be precise, in the very foreword written by the author, that the reader takes notice of the deep irony and ambivalence that prevails in Machado’s work. Commenting on the “work” of his narrator, Brás Cubas, Machado writes: “What makes my

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<sup>1</sup> Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. São Paulo: Ática, 1999. p.5. Translations are mine. There are, though, various translations of Machado de Assis’ works to the English language, among which the most recent is *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, by Gregory Rabassa for Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. in *Obras Completas*. Rio de Janeiro: Aguilar, 1962, Vol I. From now on referred as *MPBC*. All translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> Some critics fail to recognise this hybridism. As a consequence, they often accuse authors of irregular conduct, as Frye observes: “It is the Anatomy in particular that has baffled critics and there is hardly any fiction writer deeply influenced by it who has not been accused of disorderly conduct”. ( in *The Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990, p 313). Passim, 307-326. Roberto Schwarz in *Um Mestre na Periferia do Capitalismo*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 2000, is yet another example of this type of criticism. After describing the literary posture of *MPBC* as a kind of prose that goes “from the crazy buffoonery to the most demanding descriptive and analytical prose”, in other words, a style that characterizes the Anatomy or Menippean satire, he thinks that the quality of this “analytical prose” becomes a problem because its “transitive potency takes over the fictional nexus and imbalances the composition”.(p.145). Because *MPBC* is not only a novel but a hybrid, the question of “balance of composition” seems perfunctory. Hyperboles, fragmentations and multi-level styles are only expected in mixture of genres. Joyce in *Ulysses* was accused of imbalance too by Edmund Wilson (see *Axel’s Castle* New York: Scribner, 1955 pp.209-236). It might be that Schwarz resistance to analyse the book as a hybrid would interfere with his *a priori* assumptions that come from a materialistic, Marxist analysis, where literature is a reflection of social artifacts. For this view, the *novel* is the genre *par excellence*. Machado himself, however, insists in the hybridism of his work and puts himself in the tradition of the Anatomy citing de Maistre and Sterne, as well as in other contexts, Swift and Voltaire.

<sup>4</sup> *MPBC*, p.510. “Não sei se lhes meti algumas rabugens de pessimismo”.

Brás Cubas a particular *author* [emphasis mine] is what he calls “peevish pessimism. There is at the soul of this book, however cheerful it may seem, a bitter and rough feeling that is far from coming from its models. It is a glass that may have the artworks of a similar school but holds another wine. I don’t say more lest to enter into criticism of a late person, who painted himself and others as he wished better and more certain”<sup>5</sup>. Machado is already hinting at the unreliability of his narrator, Brás Cubas, unreliability that only works because behind it, all through the book, we can hear the echo of Machado’s own voice or more eloquently, his own silence. Brás is already dead when he decides to write his work, dedicated to the “worm that first ate the cold flesh of my cadaver”<sup>6</sup>. He is then, as he himself points out, not a late author, but a dead man who started writing *after* death: “Não sou propriamente um autor defunto, mas um defunto autor”<sup>7</sup>. And being so, Brás recounts his story, his spoiled childhood, his adult philandering, his shattered political dreams.

The object of this present reading is to link some observations about this “Human condition” in the shape of the dichotomy between individual and species that I have already developed when writing about Swift elsewhere. As will become clear, Machado, as well as Swift, at times blurs or radically separates the individual and the species when arguing the “Human condition”. In both authors, Nature in its biological cycle of life and death, and in Machado’s case with the addition of Evolution, is often used as a weapon of satirical and ironic attack and as such, liberties are taken that depart from strict biological observations. Biological Nature becomes, then, “Nature”, a personification with the intent of moral chastising, rather than any descriptive account of natural phenomena. The arguments advanced by Machado, principally in *MPBC*, have the appearance of objective descriptions of humankind supposedly based on natural philosophy but their origin is elsewhere; in the tradition of the satirists of

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<sup>5</sup> *MPBC*p.510. “O que faz do meu Brás Cubas um autor particular é o que ele chama ‘rabugens de pessimismo’. Há na alma deste livro, por mais risonho que pareça, um sentimento amargo e áspero, que está longe de vir dos seus modelos. É taça que pode ter labores de igual escola, mas leva outro vinho. Não digo mais para não entrar na crítica de um defunto, que se pintou a si e a outros, conforme lhe pareceu melhor e mais certo”.

<sup>6</sup> *MPBC*, p.509. “Ao verme que primeiro roeu as frias carnes do meu cadáver”.

<sup>7</sup> *MPBC*. p.511.

the eighteenth century, among them Swift, and, as such, they follow the even older tradition of the Menippean Satire.

Nature appears in *MPBC*, not only as the primordial queen presiding over Brás's delusion in the famous chapter "O Delírio", but in the constant references to animals, flowers and plants all through the book. These references become ironic comments that measure the similarity of human situations, placing them in a weird and unexpected perspective, not dissimilar to the fabulists Aesop and La Fontaine, to whom the world of nature embodied a moral lesson and animals were an allegory mirroring human behaviour. In Machado's case, this perspective is tinged with pessimistic reflections about mankind and in some cases it offers an uncanny similarity with a modern day ethologist: "that's what she said, meanwhile I, seated, with the arms sunk in my knees, looked at the floor, where a fly was dragging an ant that was stinging the fly's feet. Poor fly! Poor ant!"<sup>8</sup>. Or in the case of a black butterfly entering his room in chapter XXXI: "The butterfly after flying around me, stood on my forehead. I shook it and it flew to the glass pane, and because I shook it again it moved on and ended on the surface of an old portrait of my father. It started moving its wings, it had a certain mocking air that upset me. I shrugged, left the room, but returning there minutes after and finding it in the same spot, I felt a thrust in my nerves, picked up a towel, hit it and it fell. It didn't fall dead; it still twisted the body and moved the antennae in the head. I was sorry; I took it in the palm of my hand and deposed it on the window pane. It was late; the unhappy creature expired in a few seconds. I got a little bit annoyed, bothered. 'After all, why was it not blue?' I asked myself"<sup>9</sup>. What follows, however, is an ironic

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<sup>8</sup> *MPBC*. p.605. "É o que ela dizia, enquanto eu, sentado, com os braços fincados nos joelhos, olhava para o chão, onde uma mosca arrastava uma formiga que lhe mordida o pé. Pobre mosca! Pobre formiga!"

<sup>9</sup> *MPBC*, chapter XXXI, p. 550. A borboleta, depois de esvoaçar muito em torno de mim, pousou-me na testa. Sacudi-a, ela foi pousar na vidraça; e, porque eu a sacudisse de novo, saiu dali e veio parar em cima de um velho retrato de meu pai. Era negra como a noite. O gesto brando com que, uma vez posta, começou a mover as asas, tinha um certo ar escarminho, que me aborreceu muito. Dei de ombros, saí do quarto; mas tornando lá, minutos depois, e achando-a ainda no mesmo lugar, senti um repelão dos nervos, lancei mão de uma toalha, bati-lhe e ela caiu. Não Caiu morta; ainda torcia o corpo e movia as farpinhas da cabeça.

digression in which Machado mirrors the mythmaking mind of humanity, creating meanings out of associative patterns, in the mind of a butterfly: “I imagined that it came out of the wild, satiated and happy... it passes by my window, flies in and comes across me. I suppose it has never seen a man before; it didn’t know, therefore, what was man; it described infinite turns around my body and saw that I moved, that I had eyes, arms, legs, a divine air and a colossal stature. So, it said to itself: ‘This is, probably, the inventor of butterflies’. The idea subjected it, terrified it; but the fear, that is also suggestive, insinuated to it that the better way to please its creator would be to kiss him in the forehead, and it kissed me in the forehead. When expelled, it came to a stop on the window glass and from there, it saw the portrait of my father and it is not impossible that it found out a half-truth, to be sure, that right there, there was the father of the inventor of butterflies, and it flew to him, in order to ask for mercy”<sup>10</sup>.

This type of bathetic construction is easily recognised in Swift, the transfer of a received idea, usually anchored in a belief, to a context that subverts and dislodges not only the idea itself but the producers of it. In the case of Machado, we recognise in the butterfly the caricature of the type of projection that prompted man to create gods. There is awe but there is also a deep misunderstanding of the circumstances which in its limitations, the mind of the butterfly cannot fathom. However, Machado is not dealing with real epistemological limitations. As he sees it, the object of the satire in this scene is the unexamined assumption of thinking that all revolves around oneself. What is at stake, as we will see in other examples, is a psychological flaw, an inherent blindness that becomes a moral flaw when mingled with pride, vanity and self-

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Apiedadei-me; tomei-a na palma da mão e fui depô-la no peitoral da janela. Era tarde; a infeliz expirou dentro de alguns segundos. Fiquei um pouco aborrecido, incomodado. Também, por que diabo não era ela azul? disse comigo”.

<sup>10</sup> *MPBC*, chapter XXXI, p.550. Imaginei que ela saíra do mato, almoçada e feliz... Passa pela minha janela, entra e dá comigo. Suponho que nunca teria visto um homem; não sabia, portanto, o que era o homem; descreveu infinitas voltas em torno do ar divino, uma estatura colossal. Então disse consigo: ‘Este é provavelmente o inventor das borboletas’. A idéia subjugou-a, aterrou-a; mas o medo, que é também sugestivo, insinuou-lhe que o melhor modo de agradar ao seu criador era beijá-lo na testa, e beijou-me na testa. Quando enxotada por mim, foi pousar na vidraça, viu dali o retrato de meu pai, e não é impossível que descobrisse meia verdade, a saber, que estava ali o pai do inventor das borboletas, e voou a pedir-lhe misericórdia”.

centredness. What is new in Machado, when we compare him to Swift and other satirist and ironic writers before him, is that he will use new information to confront this flaw, and this new information is related to Darwin and the theory of evolution.

It is noteworthy to signal that Brás changes his attitudes. If he kills the butterfly of chapter XXXI, he ends by separating the fly from the ant of chapter CIII: “And I, with the native delicacy of a man of our century, placed in the palm of my hand that mortified couple; I calculated all the distance that went from my hand to the planet Saturn and asked myself what interest could have in such a wretched episode. If you conclude from this that I was a Barbarian, you are wrong, because I asked Virgília for a hairpin in order to separate both insects; but the fly sniffed my intention, opened the wings and went away. Poor fly! Poor ant! And God saw that it was good, as it is said in the Scriptures”<sup>11</sup>. Again, the mirroring God-Man-Insect is at work, with Brás serving as the Lord of life and death to the fly and the ant, but now, there is a direct ironic reference to the Bible. In both examples, religion is presented as a mere displacement of perspective prompted by a mental or psychological attitude. In transferring the human perspective to the insect and God’s position to man, Machado is playing with the idea of dislodging mental and psychological frames that permit human beings to think they are at the centre of creation, that they are unique. He does so both by giving human thoughts to insects and by giving godly thoughts to man. This perspective in *téléscopage*, used throughout the book, is also used by Swift in Gulliver’s Travels, in the adjustments in view and space Gulliver has to do, be it in Lilliput or Brobdingnagland. The adjustment in perspective involves the readers as well, and carries consequences that cover a broad ground.

Yet another aspect that approaches both writers and is related to this *téléscopage* is the utilization of the species/individual reasoning to stress

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<sup>11</sup> *MPBC*, chapter CIII, p.605. “E eu, com a delicadeza native de um homem do nosso século, pus na palma da mão aquele casal de mortificados; calculei toda a distância que ia da minha mão ao planeta Saturno e perguntei a mim mesmo que interesse podia haver num episódio tão mofino. Se concluí daí que eu era um bárbaro, enganaste porque eu pedi um grampo a Virgília, a fim de separar os dois insetos; mas a mosca farejou minha intenção, abriu as asas e foi-se embora. Pobre mosca! pobre formiga! E Deus viu que isto era bom, como se diz na Escritura”.



moral flaws. Close to Gulliver's comparison of mortal individuals as expendable Pinks and Tulips, replaceable specimens that only exist to preserve the species<sup>12</sup>, Machado's Brás Cubas dispatches death with similar brashness: "My uncle, the canon, meanwhile died, and so did two cousins. It didn't shock me: I took them to the cemetery like somebody who takes money to the bank. What do I say? Like somebody who takes letters to the post office: I sealed the letters, put them in a little box and left to the postman the care to deliver them himself. It was about this time that my niece, Venância, was born, Cotrim's daughter. Some died, others were born: I continued to fiddle around"<sup>13</sup>.

In both cases, Swift and Machado are using characters to say things that are supposed to shock the reader; Brás is an inherently flawed character who can speak candidly because he is already dead. Death works as a redeeming event that prompts him to examine his life from an off-standing point-of-view. The Gulliver of the quotation above is in a moment of grandiose mood, digressing about the wonders of immortality. Both characters, however, hardly conceal their authors' provocations.

One of the characters in the novel is Quincas Borba, one of Brás school mates, the most handsome, charming and talented one that reappears as a beggar in rags later on, only to disappear again and reappear wearing the finest clothes, rich again due to a fortune inherited from an uncle. Quincas Borba developed a philosophy and part of *MPBC* is dedicated to Quincas exposition of his philosophy.

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<sup>12</sup> When Gulliver knows about the existence of the immortals, the Struldbruggs, he lets himself go imagining what he would do and how he would act if he were one : "I would provide them [i.e. the mortals] with convenient Lodges round my own Estate, and have some of them always at my Table, only mingling a few of the most valuable among you Mortals, whom Length of Time would harden me to lose with little or no Reluctance, and treat your Posterity after the same Manner; just as a Man diverts himself with the annual Succession of Pinks and Tulips in his Garden, without regretting the Loss of those which withered the preceding Year". ( In Swift, Jonathan: "Gulliver's Travels". *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*. New York: Norton, 1973. p.179-180).

<sup>13</sup> *MPBC*, chapter CXVI, p.612. "Meu tio cônego morreu nese intervalo; item dous primos. Não me dei por abalado. levei-os ao cemitério, como quem leva dinheiro a um banco. Que digo? como quem leva cartas ao correio: selei as cartas, meti-as na caixinha e deixei ao carteiro o cuidado de entretar em mão própria. Foi também por esse tempo que nasceu minha sobrinha Venância, filha do Cotrim. Moriam uns, nascima outros: eu continuava às moscas".

Quincas Borba's philosophy is yet another example of this kind of provocation discussed above. "Humanitismo" or *Humanitism* is a "philosophical system destined to ruin all other systems"<sup>14</sup>. "Humanitas", explains Quincas Borba, "the principle of things is not anything but the same man divided by all men. It counts three Humanitas phases: the *static*, previous to all creation; the *expansive*, beginning of all things; the *dispersive*, absorption of humankind and things. *Expansion*, initiating the universe, suggested to Humanitas the desire of taking delight in it, therefore *dispersion* which is nothing but the personified multiplication of the original substance"<sup>15</sup>. The interplay between species and individual is made clear. Individuals are nothing but Humanitas collaborating with or struggling against each other. Their individuality is only a means for the perpetuation of the species: "Love, for example, is a priesthood; reproduction, a ritual. As life is the biggest benefit of the universe and there isn't a beggar who would not prefer misery to death (what is a delicious influx of Humanitas), it follows that transmission of life, far from being a court occasion is the supreme hour of the spiritual mass. Therefore, truly, there is only one disgrace: not to be born"<sup>16</sup>. It is only a matter of a few more lines in that direction, to find the full blow of the "system" where Machado, through Quincas Borba leads the reader: "Being each man a reduction of Humanitas, it is clear that no man is fundamentally opposed to another man, whatever the appearances in contrary may be. So, for instance, the executioner that executes the condemned can excite the vain clamour of the poets, but substantially it is Humanitas that is correcting in Humanitas an infraction of Humanitas' law"<sup>17</sup>. I will say the same of

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<sup>14</sup> *MPBC*, chapter CXVII, p.612. "Sistema de filosofia destinado a arruinar todos os demais sistemas".

<sup>15</sup> *MPBC*, idem, p.612-3. "Humanitas, dizia ele, o princípio das cousas, não é outro senão o mesmo homem, repartido por todos os homens. Conta três fases Humanitas: a *estática*, anterior a toda a criação; a *expansiva*, começo das cousas; a *dispersiva*, aparecimento do homem; e contará mais uma, a *contrativa*, absorção do homem e das cousas. A *expansão*, iniciando o universo sugeriu a Humanitas o desejo de o gozar, e daí a *dispersão*, que não é mais do que a multiplicação personificada da substância original".

<sup>16</sup> *MPBC*, idem, p.613. "O amor, por exemplo, é um sacerdócio, a reprodução um ritual. Como a vida é o maior benefício do universo e não há mendigo que não prefira a miséria à morte (o que é um delicioso influxo de Humanitas), segue-se que a transmissão da vida, longe de ser uma ocasião de galanteio, é a hora suprema da missa espiritual. Porquanto, verdadeiramente há só uma desgraça: é não nascer".

<sup>17</sup> In the story "Il cavaliere inesistente" by Italo Calvino, a similar "justification" is presented by the Knights of the Holy Grail who massacre the poor peasants of a village because they refuse to give them their harvest and animals for free. Torrismondo, a naïf young Knight that was hoping to join the society is

the individual that stabs another; it is a manifestation of the strength of Humanitas. Nothing prevents (and there are examples) that he can be stabbed himself. If you understood well, you would easily see that envy is not but an admiration that struggles, and being struggle the great function of the human kind, all bellicose feelings are the most adequate to its happiness. Thence, envy is a virtue”<sup>18</sup>. When readers think that Machado has gone too far, he finds a way of going even farther. We see Brás embracing the philosophy, but as he needs more explanations, they come now, not in generalizations about “systems” and universal individual cases, like the stabber or the executioner, but in a very particular way, as a subtle but certain stab in Brazil’s slave owned society, as well as a panache that ends in bathos: “Look: war, that seems a calamity, is a convenient operation...hunger (and he sucked philosophically a chicken wing), hunger is a proof that Humanitas submits its own innards. But I don’t want as a document of the sublimity of my system any other thing than this very chicken. It was fed with corn that was planted by an African, let’s suppose, imported from Angola. This African was born, grew up and was sold; a ship brought him, a ship built of wood cut from the forest by ten or twelve men, with sails that eight or ten men weaved, without counting the ropes and other parts of the nautic apparatus. So, this chicken that I have lunched on, is the result of a multitude of efforts and struggles, executed with the sole end of killing my appetite”<sup>19</sup>.

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horrified by what he sees asks why and gets this answer: “Don’t try to peruse the designs of the Grail, novice! – The old man scolded him. It is not we who are doing this; it is the Grail that is in us and moves itself! Abandon yourself to its furious love!”. “Il cavaliere inesistente”. In *I nostri antenati*. Torino: Einaudi, 1960. p.339.

<sup>18</sup> *MPBC*, idem, p.613. “Sendo cada uma homem uma redução de Humanitas, é claro que nenhum hoem é fundamentalmente oposto a outro homem, quaisquer que sejam as aparências contrárias. Assim, por exemplo, o algoz que executa o condenado pode excitar o vão clamor dos poetas; mas substancialmente é Humanitas que corrige em Humanitas uma infração da lei de Humanitas. O mesmo direi do indivíduo que estripa a outro; é uma manifestação da força de Humanitas. Nada obsta (e há exemplos) que ele seja igualmente estripado. Se entendeste bem, facilmente compreenderás que ainveja não é senão uma admiração que luta, e sendo a luta a grande função do gênero humano, todos os sentimentos belicosos são os mais adequados à sua felicidade. Daí vem que a inveja é uma virtude”.

<sup>19</sup> *MPBC*, idem, p. 614. “Olha: a Guerra, que parece uma calamidade, é uma operação conveniente...a fome é uma prova a que Humanitas submete a própria viscera. Mas eu não quero outro documento da sublimidade do meu sistema senão este mesmo frango. Nutriu-se de milho, que foi plantando por um africano, suponhamos, importado de Angola. Nasceu, esse africano, cresceu, foi vendido; um navio o trouxe, um navio construído de Madeira cortada no mato por dez ou doze homens, levado por velas, que oito ou dez homens teceram, sem contra a cordoalha e outras partes do aparelho náutico. Assim, este

Humanitism is also imbibed in a parody of the theory of evolution: “Pain, according to Humanitism is pure illusion. When a child is threatened with a stick, even before being spanked, it closes its eyes and shakes; this *predisposition* constitutes the base of human illusion, inherited and transmitted. The adoption of a system is not enough, certainly, to end pain but is indispensable; the rest is the natural evolution of things. Once man is well aware that he is Humanitas himself, he doesn’t need to return in his thought to the original substance in order to prevent any painful sensation. Evolution, however, is so deep that hardly can be assigned some thousands of years”<sup>20</sup>.

Quincas Borba’s philosophy is not only exposed in *MPBC* but in the novel called *Quincas Borba* (where the philosopher is already dead but left, together with his inheritance, a dog named after himself to a friend, Rubião). According to J.G. Merquior<sup>21</sup>, “Humanitism” is both a caricature of the positivist’s religion of humanity and a refutation of Schopenhauer’s ontology of pain. It is not that “Humanitism” denies violence or pain; in the novel *Quincas Borba*, its theme is exposed in the Darwinian “to the winner, the potatoes”. But Machado’s irony lays exactly in giving it the pretension of justifying reality’s crudeness ‘explaining’ all the pains of this world as the victory of Humanitas, the superior principle of the Being. Like Pangloss in Voltaire, Quincas Borba is a ridiculous optimist. Making “Humanitism” into an absurd theodicy, and transforming its prophet into a grotesque dogmatic figure, Machado’s humour denounces its affinity with Schopenhauer’s disillusioned metaphysics”.

Merquior<sup>22</sup> writes: “Machado took Darwin’s blow against the anthropocentric illusions of humanity to a far more extent than the heralds of

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frango, que eu almocei agora mesmo, é o resultado de uma multidão de esforços e lutes executados com o único fim de dar mate ao meu apetite”.

<sup>20</sup> *MPBC*, idem, p.614. “A dor, Segundo o Humanitismo é uma pura ilusão. Quando a criança é ameaçada por um pau, antes mesmo de ter sido espancada, fecha os olhos e treme; essa *predisposição* é que constitui a base da ilusão humana, herdada e transmitida. Não basta certamente a adoção do sistema para acabar logo com a dor, mas é indispensável; o resto é a natural evolução das cousas. Uma vez que o homem se compenetre bem de que ele é o próprio Humanitas, não teme mais do que remontar o pensamento à substância original para obstar qualquer sensação dolorosa. A evolução porém é tão profunda, que mal se lhe podem assinar alguns milhares de anos”.

<sup>21</sup> op. cit. p.6.

<sup>22</sup> op. cit. p.7.

scientificist evolutionism. He had learnt from Montaigne not to forget that man is an animal subjected to nature and to its caprices – and not the arrogant ‘invulnerable sovereign of creation’. If Quincas Borba overestimates man’s position among the species, Brás Cubas prefers to meditate on ‘what would the hawks say of us if Buffon were born a hawk’”.

It is noteworthy that when writing to explain Quincas Borba’s system, Brás comes up with a sentence that reads: “In this new church, there are no easy adventures, neither falls, sadness, nor puerile joys”<sup>23</sup>. *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* was written in 1881. In a story written a few years later, in 1884, “A Igreja do Diabo” [The Devil’s Church], the devil goes to speak to God in order to propose to “found a church”<sup>24</sup> only to be disappointed at the failure of the enterprise since he discovers to his dismay that people who before, when going to God’s church were hiding their vices, now, as adorers of the devil, hid their virtues. The balanced tone of distant stoicism of the story with the sympathetic figure of the devil, a naïf and inexperienced youth; and a generous, good-natured and patient God is exemplary of how far Machado could go to add an intriguing acceptance of human condition: “Lord, I descend to the Earth; I am going to launch my cornerstone”. “Go”. “Do you want me to come back to announce to you the end of your works?” “Don’t bother”[...]”<sup>25</sup>. This story usually passes silently before Machado’s critics who in the majority are used to emphasize his pessimism and skepticism.

In 1882, Machado publishes a collection of short stories called *Papéis Avulsos*<sup>26</sup> [Loose Papers]. There, at least two of the stories can be thought to add interesting commentary to certain themes of the novel in discussion too. “O Alienista” [The Alienist] is the story of a psychiatrist who arriving in a calm provincial town, finds, in a crescendo of scientific discoveries

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<sup>23</sup> *MPBC*, p.613. “Nesta igreja nova não há aventuras fáceis, nem quedas, nem tristezas, nem alegrias pueris.

<sup>24</sup> Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. “A Igreja do Diabo”. *Histórias sem data*. Rio de Janeiro, W.M. Jackson Inc, 1955. p.146.

<sup>25</sup> “A Igreja do Diabo”. op. cit. p.148. “- Vai  
- Quereis que venha anunciar-vos o remate da obra?  
- Não é preciso;”

<sup>26</sup> Machado de Assis, Joaquim M. *Papéis Avulsos*. Rio de Janeiro: W. M. Jackson Inc. 1955.

allied to political power, that everybody in the town is mad. One by one, citizens are committed to his asylum until the last moment, when in a crisis of self-analysis, the “alienista” himself discovers that he is the only one who is really mad and ends by isolating himself in his own asylum. It is not only madness out of control, like in the case of Quincas Borba in *MPBC*, but in both cases, it is the systematic way in which it is presented that gives occasion to satire and irony.

The same happens with yet another short story called “A Sereníssima República” [The Most Serene Republic], where a scientist in a lecture to the scientific society communicates that he has found out a species of spider that can talk: “From Pliny to Darwin, naturalists from all over the world praise with admiration this little animal whose marvelous web the broom of your unconscious servant destroys in less than one minute”<sup>27</sup>. They speak a language “so rich and varied with their syntactic structure, their verbs, tenses, declensions, Latin cases and onomatopoeic forms”<sup>28</sup>. In this case as well, like Brás with the butterfly, the narrator is confused with a god: “Two forces served to the effort to congregate them: - the usage of their language, from the moment I could discern it a little bit, and the terror I infused in them. My size, clothes, the use of the same language made them believe that I was the God of the spiders and from then on, they adored me. And mark the benefit of this illusion. As I followed them with much attention and detail, noting down in a book the observations I made, they thought that the book was a register of their sins and strengthened in the exercise of the virtue”<sup>29</sup>. The spiders are given a model of a republic, based on the electoral system of Venice. They form two initial parties, the straight and the curve, since they are “mainly geometers, it is geometry that divides them in

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<sup>27</sup> Machado de Assis, Joaquim M. “A Sereníssima República”. op. cit p.243. “Desde Plínio até Darwin, os naturalistas do mundo inteiro formam um só coro de admiração em torno desse bichinho, cuja maravilhosa teia a vassoura inconsciente do vosso criado destroy em menos de um minuto”.

<sup>28</sup> *P.A.*, p.244. “uma lingual rica e variada com a sua estrutura sintáctica, os seus verbos, conjugações, declinações, casos latinos e formas onomatopaicas”.

<sup>29</sup> *P.A.*, p.245. “Duas forças servira principalmente à empresa de as congregar: - o emprego da lingual delas, desde que pude discernir um pouco e o sentimento de terror que lhes infundi. A minha estatura, as vestes talares, o uso do mesmo idioma fizeram-lhes crer que era eu o deus das aranhas, e desde então adorarm-me. E vêde o benefício desta ilusão. Como as acompanhasse com muita atenção e miudeza, lançando em um livro as observações que fazia, cuidaram que o livro era o registro dos seus pecados, e fortaleceram-se ainda mais na prática das virtudes”.

politics<sup>30</sup> soon to give origin to a third party, the straight-curve one and to a fourth, an anti-straight-curve faction. Among corruption and attempts of *coup*, the republic goes on and ends with a fable told by one of the republic's counselors, Erasmus, directed to the ten ladies to whom it is delegated the task of weaving the electoral sack: " 'You are the Penelope of our republic', said he in the end; 'you have the same chastity, patience and talents. Weave the sack again, friends, weave it again until Ulysses, tired of wandering around his legs, come back to his place among us. Ulysses is Wisdom'<sup>31</sup>. As with *MPBC*, this short story bears subtle references to Machado's contemporary society, Brazil during the Empire (the Republic came in 1889), but it also transcends it, because it is first and foremost a reflexion on politics and society at large and has its validity as so for contemporary readers as well.

The *téléscopage* perspective in the story, the man-god creating a society of spiders and for doing so, capable of observing their movements, behaviour and progress from a higher point-of-view that keeps him apart, is an equivalent of Brás Cubas own "immunity", so to speak, when narrating the story of his own life after death.

Chapter VII, "O Delírio" [The Dellusion] and chapter CXVII, "O Humanitismo" [Humanitism], form an axis around which facts and events gravitate throughout the book<sup>32</sup>. Chapter VII finds Brás in bed, in his final days, being visited by Virgília, the intriguing woman with whom he had entertained an adulterous (she was married) relationship for a long time. After being transformed in the *Summa Theologica*, Brás returns to his human form and is taken by a hippopotamus to the origin of the centuries. Insinuating to the animal that this would be very far away, Brás has no alternative instead. When reaching a silent

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<sup>30</sup> *P.A.*, p.248. "" Como eles são principalmente geômetras, é a geometria que os divide em política".

<sup>31</sup> *P.A.*, p.253. " – Vós sois a Penélope da nossa república, disse ele ao terminar; tendes a mesma castidade, paciência e talentos. Refazei o saco, amigas, refazei o saco até que Ulisses cansado de dar às pernas , venha tomar entre nós o lugar que lhes cabe. Ulisses é a Sapiência".

<sup>32</sup> Antônio Cândido writes: "Personally, what attracts me most in his [Machado's] books is another theme, different from these: the transformation of man in the object of man, which is one of the maledictions linked to the lack of true freedom, economically and spiritually. This theme is one of the familial demons of his work, from the attenuated forms of simple egoism to the extremes of sadism and monetary sack. It is linked to it the famous theory of Humanitism, elaborated by one of his characters, the philosopher Joaquim Borba dos Santos [...]". In *Vários Escritos*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1977, p.28.

region, “similar to the sepulcher”<sup>33</sup>, a formidable female figure appears before him. He asks who she is : “Call me Nature or Pandora; I’m your mother and your enemy”<sup>34</sup>. The figure laughs monumentally causing a strong typhoon. “Don’t be frightened’, she said, ‘my enmity doesn’t kill; it is over all by life that it ascertains itself. You live: I don’t want another scourge’.

‘Do I?’ I asked, burying the nails in the hands as if to certify myself of my own existence.

‘Yes, worm, you live. Do not be afraid to lose this rag that is your pride; you will still taste, for some hours, the bread of sorrow and the wine of misery. You live: even now that you are mad, you live; and if your consciousness recovers one instant of sagacity, you will say that you want to live’<sup>35</sup>.

Despite her words, Nature has no expression of hatred, violence or ferocity. It is rather a strong and lively youthful face, with an expression of impassible egoism and unmovable will. Brás tries to respond to her, saying that Nature is only mother, that it doesn’t make life a scourge and that it is not indifferent like a sepulcher. She must only be, he concludes, an absurd fable in the absence of reason and because of his ill condition. Nature answers that she is not only life but death and that he is about to return what she has lent him. Brás desperates and asks for a few more years. “Poor minute!she exclaimed. ‘For what do you need some more instants of life? To devour and be devoured after? Aren’t you tired of the spectacle and the struggle?[...]

‘To live, only. I don t ask for more. Who else put in my heart this love of life except you? And, if you love life, why do you attack yourself by killing me?’

‘Because I don’t need you anymore. Time doesn’t care for the passing minute but for the next one. The next minute is strong, jocund, supposed

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<sup>33</sup> *MPBC*,p.519. “era igual ao do sepulcro”.

<sup>34</sup> *MPBC*, p.519. “-Chama-me Natureza ou Pandora; sou tua mãe e tua inimiga”.

<sup>35</sup> *MPBC*, p.519-20. “- Não te assustes, disse ela, minha inimizade não mata; é sobretudoo pela vida que se afirma. Vives: não quero outro flagelo”.

-Vivo? perguntei eu, enterrando as unhas nas mãos, como para certificar-me da existência.

-Sim, verme tu vives. Não receies perder este andrajo que é teu orgulho; provarás ainda, por algumas horas o pão da dor e o vinho da miséria. Vives: agora mesmo que ensadeceste, vives; e se a tua consciência reouver um instante de sagacidade, tu dirás que queres viver”.



to bring eternity in itself, and brings death, and dies like the other one, but time remains. Egoism, you say? Yes, egoism. I have no other law. Egoism, conservation. The jaguar kills the calf because in its reasoning it is it that must survive, and if the calf is tender, so much better: there you have the universal statute. Come up and see”<sup>36</sup>.

Brás is taken, then, to the top of a mountain to see the spectacle of the history of mankind passing before his eyes in accelerated rhythm. He has hopes of seeing the last century, in order to understand how the times will end but the march is so fast that escapes his comprehension and the hippopotamus that carried him diminishes until it reaches the size of a cat, Brás’cat, Sultão, playing with a paper ball.

Even if Humanitism sounds like a parody of Nature’s theory exposed to Brás during his delusion, with Humanitas substituting for Nature in its self-sufficiency, in the end, Nature as Brás comes to know her is still less inviting than Humanitas. In his explanation, Quincas exudes optimism, as if he had discovered the key to Nature’s procedures herself, and his theory, if taken face value, has found a place for human misery and death, as being part of a higher design and will of Humanitas. However, the reader cannot possibly take the theory without irony. Nature in Brás’ delusion, though, despite its complexion of sheer indifference and lack of malice, comes tinged with irony *against* Brás and the reader. Her speech, although designed to sound impartial and indifferent, is a sharp and direct attack on our “natural” attachment to life and fear of death. This nature-pandora, giver of the good and the bad, of life and death, nurtures her creatures only to the extent that they can serve her and her purposes. The way

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<sup>36</sup> *MPBC*, p.520. “- Pobre minuto! exclamou. Para que queres tu mais alguns instantes de vida? Para devorar e seres devorado depois? Não estás farto do espetáculo e da luta? Conheces de sobejo tudo o que eu te deparei menos torme ou menos aflitivo: o alvor do dia, a melancholia da tarde, a quietação da noite, os aspectos da terra, o sono, enfim, o maior benefício das minhas mãos. Que mais queres tu, sublime idiota?

- Viver somente, não te peço mais nada. Quem me pôs no coração este amor da vida, senão tu? e se eu amo a vida, por que te hás de golpear a ti mesma, matando-me?
- - Porque já não preciso de ti. Não importa ao tempo o minuto que passa, mas o minuto que vem. O minuto que vem é forte, jucundo, supõe trazer em si a eternidade, e traz a morte, e perece como o outro, mas o tempo subiste. Egoísmo, dizes tu? Sim, egoísmo não tenho outra lei. Egoísmo, conservação. A onça mata o novilho porque o raciocínio da lonça é que ela deve viver, e se o novilho é tenor tanto melhor: eis o estatuto universal. Sobe e olha”.

Machado exposes it, Nature in its indifferent evolution becomes yet another punishment for humanity's sense of self-importance, the illusion of being apart and unique, as the myths of the Bible convey, and the illusion of thinking that there is a fundamental difference, as religions like to emphasize, that separates the species from the individual, this last one, being the bearer of an immortal and individual soul.

The overlapping of the individual and the species, for this Nature, dismisses the first as a mere *locus* utilized by the species to keep on its evolutionary and self-preservatory march. One of the strongest chapters in *MPBC*, centers in the character of Plácida, (always referred to with the respectful treatment of "Dona") who comes to embody this overlapping at its most acute. Brás, the narrator of our story, summarizes D. Plácida's life for the reader with words that sound like the Nature he visited herself. The effect is all the more pungent because at certain moments, readers can lose their grip about who is exactly saying what, if Brás, with his usual brashness or Machado himself.

D. Plácida is a humble seamstress who had a poor and unhappy life, being the bastard daughter of a church employee and a sweet maker. She lost the father at ten although by that time she was already grating coconuts to help her mother. She married at fifteen or sixteen to a tailor who died soon and left her with a daughter. She made sweets and preserves and sewed day and night to feed both herself and her daughter and still found time to tutor some children in her neighbourhood for extra money. Struggling not to fall, she was sometimes humiliated by some who misunderstood why she was always accompanied by her daughter in the hopes of finding her a husband – thinking she could be trying to sell her instead. The daughter ran away with the wrong man. D. Plácida fell ill and by that time Virgília's family took care of her. At the moment Brás comes to know D. Plácida, she is old, with thick hands covered with deep wrinkles and marks of needles. Virgília, in the necessity of covering up her adulterous relationship with Brás, arranges for Brás to rent a little house in a quiet neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro and manages to convince D. Plácida to come and live there. D. Plácida, at the beginning, refuses to talk to Brás, thinking

that the situation will compromise the dignity she fought all her life to preserve but compelled by the dire circumstances of her old age, consents. She doesn't like Brás, however, who to ingratiate himself gives her some money for the uncertain days, after all D. Plácida feared that she could end as a beggar in the streets.

Brás tells us her story in a matter of fact way. However, in the following chapter, (LXXV), titled "Comigo" [To Myself] and reproduced here in its entirety, he writes:

"In case some of my readers skipped last chapter, I urge them to read it in order to understand what I said to myself as soon as Dona Plácida left the room. What I said was this:

'Well, then, the sacristan of the cathedral, one day, helping the mass, saw a lady coming in, who would be his collaborator in Dona Plácida's life. He saw her other days, during whole weeks, he liked it, told her some flatteries, stepped in her feet when lighting the altars for the feast days. She liked him, they grew closer, they made love. From this conjunction of lazy lusts sprang Dona Plácida. It is reasonable to suppose that Dona Plácida couldn't speak when she was born, but if she could, she might have told the authors of her days: 'Here I am. For what have you called me?' And the sacristan and the female sacristan would have naturally answered: 'We called you to burn your fingers in the pots, your eyes in sewing, to hardly eat or not eat at all, to walk to and fro, in chores, falling ill and recovering with the finality of falling ill again and recover again, sad now, then desperate, tomorrow in resignation, but always with the hand in the pot, the eyes in the sew work, until you end your day in the mud or in a hospital; it was for that the we called you, in a moment of sympathy'"<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> *MPBC*, p.584. "Podendo acontecer que algum dos meus leitores tenha pulado o capítulo anterior, observo que é preciso lê-lo para entender o que eu disse comigo, logo depois que D. Plácida saiu da sala. O que eu disse foi isto:

'Assim, pois o saacristão da Sé, um dia, ajudando à missa, viu entrar a dama, que devia ser sua colaboradora na vida de D. Plácida. Viu-a outurso dias, durante semanas inteiras, gostou, disse-lhe alguma graça, pisou-lhe o pé, ao acender os altars, nos dias de festa. Ela gostou dele, acercaram-se, amaram-se. Dessa conjunção de luxuries vadias brotou D. Plácida. É de crer que D. Plácida não falasse ainda quando nasceu, mas se falasse podia dizer aos autores de seus dias:

- Aqui estou. Para que me chamastes? E o sacristão e a sacristã naturalmente lhe responderiam: - Chamamos-te para queimar os dedos nos tachos, os olhos na costura, comer mal ou não comer, andar de

The question “for what?” formulated by Brás to Nature-Pandora in his delusion is reproduced in the chapter and answered with a mock “objectivity” and indifference that is all the more shocking because it results from an intentional contrast set up by Machado. Brás’ confiding to himself is an unexpected blow after the previous chapter, where Plácida’s story is told in a neutral tone. Her individuality, so well described in chapter LXXIV is completely shattered in chapter LXXV, where it is Nature’s reasoning (in Brás’ mouthpiece) of sheer preservation of species that counts. If we compare this with Swift’s scene with the prostitute being publicly flayed, and the comment by the narrator that the event turned her appearance for worse [quote], we will see the same strain of individual/species reasoning, where the prostitute as an individual is a mere detail of a more encompassing design that annihilates her.

It is noteworthy that Brás ends the book by writing: “This last chapter is all made of negatives. I didn’t become a celebrity with my plaster, I didn’t become a minister, I didn’t become a caliph, I didn’t know marriage. It is true that, besides all these things, I had the good fortune of not buying my bread with the sweat of my face. More: I didn’t suffer a D. Plácida’s death, neither the semi-madness of Quincas Borba. Adding some things to others, anybody will imagine that there was no lack nor excess, and consequently that I ended my life even. And this person will have imagined wrong; because when I arrived to this other side of the mystery, I found myself with a little overbalance, which is the last negative of this chapter of negatives: - I had no children; I transmitted to no creature the bequest of our misery”<sup>38</sup>.

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um lado para outro, na faina, adoecendo e sarando, com o fim de tornar a adoecer e sarar outra vez, triste agora, logo desesperada, amanhã resignada, mas sempre com as mãos no tacho e os olhos na costura, até acabar um dia na lama ou no hospital; foi para isso que te chamamos, num momento de simpatia”.

<sup>38</sup> *MPBC*. p.637. “Este último capítulo é todo de negativas. Não alcancei a celebridade do emplasto, não fui ministro, não fui califa, não conheci o casamento. Verdade é que, ao lado dessas faltas, coube-me a boa fortuna de não comprar o pão com o suor do meu rosto. Mais, não padeci a morte de D. Plácida, nem a semidemência do Quincas Borba. Somadas umas cousas e outras, qualquer pessoa imaginará que não houve minguia nem sobre, e conseqüentemente que saí quite com a vida. E imaginará mal; porque ao chegar a este outro lado do mistério, achei-me com um pequeno saldo, que é a derradeira negative deste capítulo de negativas: - Não tive filhos, não transmiti a nenhuma criatura o legado da nossa miséria”.

Brás certainly didn't want a child asking him the individual question *par excellence*: "for what?", nor for this matter, Machado himself, who also never had children.

In the exposition of the doctrine of Humanitism and the account of the delusion, there is an underlying comment on human vanity (more of this later) in its attachment to individuality as a narcissistic necessity, the blind illusion that the individual deserves special attention from nature because it is at the centre of creation. At the same time, the pessimistic tones of the book are not the same "peevish pessimism" proclaimed by the book's narrator, but the ones related to this defeated consciousness, who takes on stoically whatever blows the "struggle for life" leads it to take. It is the pessimism of the individual who perceives the processes that made him have a natural attachment to life and at the same time resent it in the disappointment to discover that he cannot pull himself out of his own mortality. In short, the contradiction between enjoying an individual life without realizing that it is precisely because it is individual that it is mortal too, precisely because it is unique, that is subjected to random events.

In the dialectics of negativity established between author Machado and narrator Brás, one can see the struggle of this form of consciousness whose only exit is to resort to irony and humour to keep the loop of pessimism in check. In contrast to that, as said above, the short story, "A Igreja do Diabo" is still a mark of transcendence.

Humanitas is a philosophy that proposes that man is only a vehicle to advance "Humanitas", the abstraction of the essence of mankind. This doctrine postulates the interplay or rather the prevalence of the species over the individual; wars are fought and men die only to advance Humanitas, so individual lives, personal experiences, life stories are only important in the sense that they are embodiments of this blind will called Humanitas. There is a Schopenhauerian bend running through Quincas Borba's philosophy and yet, it approaches, on the other hand, oriental doctrines like Hinduism and Buddhism in which it is by absorbing the individual into a higher stratum, the Universal Being, or by

dissolving the self of the individual by showing that it is an illusion that wisdom is attained<sup>39</sup>.

Quincas actually mentions Brahmanism, but his reference is altogether bathetic and the account in the book deformed for the purposes of satire. The ultimate liberation will come, according to Quincas Borba, when men and women will reach the ultimate comprehension, when they accept that whatever happens does not, necessarily, go against their individualities but only because they are part of a more extensive design, a wider plan called Humanitas. The irony in all that is that painful events like the death of people we love – a situation so many times described by Brás in the book: the narrator's mother, the captain's beloved wife – are subsumed by Quincas' doctrine as minor accidents of necessity. This is the lesson that on the other hand, Nature-Pandora teaches the narrator during his feverish delusion, an attitude that Brás himself will reserve for other people who die in the novel.

After Brás' lover, Virgília, departs, he is introduced to a young woman to whom he entertains hopes of marriage. The reader, in the preceding chapters grows accustomed to her and likes her through the portrait that Brás paints of her. She is young but we don't know her age nor her full name (she is addressed in the book by her nickname, Nhã-loló). Then, in a cluster of three small chapters, Brás dispatches the news this way:

Chapter CXXIV: What is it between life and death? A short bridge. Nonetheless, if I didn't compose this chapter, the reader would suffer a strong shock, very damaging to the effects of the book. To skip from a portrait to an epitaph can be real and ordinary; the reader, however, doesn't seek refuge in the book but to escape life<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> See about this, *Ensayos sobre Budismo Zen* by D. T. Suzuki (Buenos Aires: Kier, 1986), *The Way of Zen*, and *Psychotherapy East and West* by Alan. W. Watts (New York: Mentor Books, 1958).

<sup>40</sup> *MPBC*, p.618-9. “Que há entre a vida e a morte? Uma curta ponte. Não obstante, se eu não compusesse este capítulo, padeceria o leitor um forte abalo, assaz danoso ao efeito do livro. Saltar de um retrato a um epitáfio, pode ser real e comum; o leitor, entretanto, não se refugia no livro, senão para escapar à vida. Não digo que este Pensamento seja meu; digo que há nele uma dose de verdade, e que, ao menos, a forma é pinturesca. E repito: não é meu”.

Chapter CXXV: “Epitaph. Here lies Dona Eulália Damascena de Brito. Deceased at nineteen years old. Pray for her!<sup>41</sup>”. To note: the formality and the shock for the reader to “only now” become acquainted with her full name and age.

Chapter CXXVI, titled “Disconsolation”: “I say no more except that I accompanied her to the sepulture and said good-bye sadly but without a tear. I concluded that perhaps I didn’t love her truly.

See, now, to what excesses an inadvertency can lead; I was a little hurt by the blindness of the epidemics that, killing here and there, also took the life of a young lady who had to be my wife; I didn’t arrive to understand the necessity of the epidemics, even less the necessity of that death. I even believe that it seemed to me the most absurd of all the other deaths. Quincas Borba, however, explained to me that epidemics were useful to the species, albeit disastrous for a certain portion of individuals; he made me notice that horrendous as the spectacle were, there was an advantage to weigh: the survival of the majority. He even asked me if, in the middle of the general mourning, I didn’t feel secretly enchanted for having escaped the plague’s claws; but this question was so unreasonable that it remained unanswered”<sup>42</sup>

There is a lot for the reader to meditate on here<sup>43</sup>. First, the blow of Nhã-loló unexpected death, then, the way in which it is disclosed, with the

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<sup>41</sup> *MPBC*, p.619. “Aqui jaz D. Eulália Damascena de Brito. Morta aos dezenove anos de idade. Orai por ela”.

<sup>42</sup> *MPBC*, p.619. “Não digo mais nada, a não ser que a acompanhei até o ultimo jazigo, e me despedi triste, mas sem lágrimas. Concluí que talvez não a amasse deveras.

Vejam agora a que excessos pode levar uma inadvertência. doeu-me um pouco a cegueira da epidemia que, matando à direita e à esquerda, levou também uma jovem dama, que tinha de ser minha mulher; não cheguei a entender a necessidade da epidemia, menos ainda daquela morte. Creio até que esta me pareceu ainda mais absurda que todas as outras mortes. Quincas Borba, porém, explicou-me que epidemias eram úteis à espécie, embora desastrosas para uma certa porção de indivíduos; fez-me notar que, por mais horrendo que fosse o espetáculo, havia uma vantagem de muito peso; a sobrevivência do maior número. Chegou a perguntar-me se, no meio do luto geral, não sentia eu algum secreto encanto em ter escapado às garras da peste; mas esta pergunta era tão insensate, que ficou sem resposta”.

<sup>43</sup> As Antônio Cândido writes : “His technique consists, essentially, in suggesting the most tremendous things in the most candid manner (like the eighteenth century moralists); or in establishing a contrast between the social normality of facts and their essential abnormality; or in suggesting, under the appearance of the contrary, that the exceptional is normal and the abnormal would be the ordinary. This is the reason for his modernity, despite his surface archaism”. In *Vários Escritos*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1977, p.23.

pseudo-objectivity of the epitaph just to make it even more horrifying and *near*; then, there is the shock related to Brás' feelings towards her (did he really loved her or not?) revealed in chapter CXXVI, then, there is Brás natural reaction of grief, asking the usual question *why* and on top of everything, Machado piles up Quincas Borba's outrageous philosophy, thrown at the reader as a final blow.

There is yet another circumstance that critics usually maintain out of picture but which is essential: the fact that Brás is writing all this *after his own death*: "I expired at two o'clock in the afternoon of a Friday, on the month of August, in 1869...It was in such a manner that I came to the final clause of my days; it was so that I made my way to Hamlet's *undiscovered country* [in English in the original], without the anxieties or the doubts of the young prince but slowly and stumbling as someone who withdraws late from the spectacle. Late and bored. [...]"<sup>44</sup>.

Machado is vague concerning the whereabouts of Brás after death, but this very vagueness imposes some questions. The reference to an "undiscovered country" is already a form of bypassing the issue of place, most especially, Christian expectations about it. We know that Brás can write on paper and ink because his memoirs reach us in a written form on a material support. They were not dictated nor received through a "medium". We may suppose that for this activity of writing, he may have a table or a desk, even that he has a room for himself in order to exercise such introspective task as the writing of a memoir. He may have some privacy. We are left to imagine these circumstances as well as the more mysterious one about *how* his memoirs reach us.

Death, for Brás, is as if it never happened. He has preserved himself as an individual with consciousness and memory and presents himself as so, in all integrity, as a post-mortem narrator. Because there is continuation between life and death, one could be tempted to interpret this as a sign of a traditional view about the dichotomy between body and soul, where the individual

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<sup>44</sup> *MPBC*, p.511-12. "Dito isto, expirei às duas horas da tarde de uma sexta-feira do mês de agosto de 1869...E foi assim que cheguei à cláusula dos meus dias; e foi assim que me encaminhei para o *undiscovered country* de Hamlet, sem as ânsias nem as dúvidas do moço príncipe, mas pausado e trôpego, como quem se retira tarde do espetáculo. Tarde e aborrecido".



soul is immortal whereas the body perishes. If we accept this, however, then we will have to accept that this traditional model goes against the grain of the book. Brás' memoirs would be a negation of the doctrines advanced in the book, the aforementioned Nature-Pandora theory and Quincas Borba's Humanitism. Brás' perspectives about death in his memoirs go against the inexorability of the annihilation of the individual consciousness promoted by the above mentioned doctrines. The very fact that Brás is not, himself, annihilated by death and is able to produce a memoir after it brings a paradox into play. It gets even more complicated if we add the detail that Brás' post-mortem framework is very similar to the one promised by Christian doctrines – preservation of the individual soul (self) once the body is gone. And yet, if Machado is working here within the frame of the duality body and soul, there is no hint of religious eschatology in sight. On the contrary, one senses a materialism in Brás' post-mortem attitude that only confirms that the duality body and soul is here to illustrate a point.

As I have pointed out, however, the strategy of the plot and the conception of a post-mortem point-of-view lead to a paradoxical situation. Even if we pretend that the duality mortal body/ immortal soul can be played out of the range of the philosophical or the religious field that produced it – in other words, to erase Socrates, Plato, the Apostle Paul and Augustine, among others – the problem of death will not be eliminated by this strategy; on the contrary, it only gets more complicated. As it is, Brás' individual consciousness is preserved and with it, the contradiction between his own post-mortem state writing about his own sufferings because of other people's deaths when he was alive. If in death, Brás' has not lost what everybody fears to lose, which is individual consciousness, he could have supposed that the same must have happened to all the dead he knew.

Yet, we know nothing of this. Brás' post-mortem place, even if we don't know where he is, seems to be a solitary place, paradoxically, it seems that this place is actually Brás' consciousness itself, surviving in a vacuum, isolated, separated from the ones he knew. Part of the cogency of Christian consolation in imagining death is not only the irresistible lure of preserving individual

consciousness but to meet again those we loved in earth and live forever in their company. There is no question about this imagination in Brás' after death condition. We are not told if Brás' preservation has only happened to him, a terrible possibility, or if the phenomenon is extended to all human beings. Again, in the case of this last probability, then a question applies: why suffer with death at all, or rather, in Brás' case, why brush it off with such bitterness and irony, playing it down so completely, if, in the end, consciousness survives?

Actually, Brás is *improved* after death, feeling free to examine his life with no veils, no hypocrisies and no limits, as in Chapter XI "The Child is the Father of Man" where he writes about his spoiled childhood (to note, the ironic comparison between species/individual, about which I will comment later): "I grew up; and in this the family did not interfere; I grew up naturally, like the magnolias and the cats. Maybe the cats are less sly and, for sure, magnolias are less restless than I was in my childhood. A poet used to say that the child is the father or man. If this is true, let us see some of the features of the child"<sup>45</sup>. He proceeds to tell the readers how he was nicknamed "the devil-child"; how he broke the head of a slave who refused to give him a spoon of the coconut preserve she was making, how used to ride a slave like a horse, whipping him and if the slave protested, Brás would tell him "Shut up, beast". How he used to do horse play to all visitors, to pinch them; how his mother was weak in temperament and how his father, narcissistically proud of his son, never punished him.

Or in Chapter XX, when he obtains a Bachelor's degree in Coimbra, Portugal: "I had conquered in Coimbra, a great fame as a carouser; I was a wanton, superficial, boisterous and petulant student; given to adventures, making practical Romanticism and theoretical liberalism[...] The day the University granted me in a parchment a science that I was far from bringing in my

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<sup>45</sup> *MPBC*, p.524. "Cresci e nisso é que a família não interveio; cresci naturalmente, como crescem as magnolias e os gatos. Talvez os gatos são menos matreiros, e com certeza, as magnolias são menos inquietas do que eu era na minha infância. Um poeta dizia que que o menino é o pai do homem. Se isto é verdade, vejamos alguns lineamentos do menino".

brains, I must confess I found myself deceived, albeit proud”<sup>46</sup>. And Chapter XXIV: “Maybe the reader is amazed at the frankness with which I expose and underline my mediocrity; I advert you that frankness is the first virtue of a late person. In life, the gaze of opinion, the contrast of interests, the struggle of coveting oblige people to shut up about the rags, to disguise the tears and patches; not to share with the world the revelations they make to their own consciousness [...] But in death, what a difference! What a relief! What a liberation! [...] Because, briefly, there are no more neighbours, nor friends, nor enemies, nor acquaintances, nor strangers; there is no audience. The gaze of the opinion, this acute and judgmental gaze, loses its virtue as soon as we step in death’s territory; I am not saying that it doesn’t extends as far as here, and that it doesn’t inspect and judge us; but it is we who don’t care about inspections and judgments. Live people, there is nothing as incommensurable as the disdain of the dead”<sup>47</sup>.

This last statement reinforces the idea that in “death’s territory”, there are isolated consciousnesses only.

However, Machado may well have had the intention of leaving these aspects open to discussion. Antônio Cândido writes: “In a moment in which Flaubert systematizes the theory of “the novel that narrates itself”, erasing the narrator behind the objectivity of the narrative; in a moment in which Zola preached the massive inventory of reality, observed in its minimal details, he [Machado] cultivated liberally the elliptical, the incomplete, the fragmentary, intervening in the narrative with a zesty gossip, reminding the reader that behind

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<sup>46</sup> *MPBC*, p.540. “Tinha eu conquistador em Coimbra uma grande nomeada de folião; era um acadêmico estróina, superficial, tumultuário e petulando, dado às aventuras fazendo romantismo prático e liberalismo teórico...No dia em que a Universidade me atestou, em pergaminho, uma ciência que eu estava longe de trazer arraigada no cérebro, confesso que ahcei de algum modo logrado, ainda que orgulhoso”.

<sup>47</sup> *MPBC*, p.543-4. “Talvez espante ao leitor a franqueza com que lhes exponho e realço a minha mediocridade; advirta que a franqueza é a primeira virtude de um defunto. Na vida o olhar da opinião, o contraste dos interesses, a luta das cobiças obrigam a gente a calar os trapos velhos, a disfarçar os rasgões e os remendos, a não estender ao mundo as revelações que faz à consciência;... Mas, na morte, que diferença! que desabafo! que liberdade!...Porque, em suma, já não há vizinhos, nem amigos, nem inimigos, nem conhecidos, nem estranhos; não há plateia. O olhar da opinião, este olhar agudo e judicial, perde a virtude, logo que pisamos o território da morte; não digo que ele se não estenda para cá, e nos não examine e julge; mas a nós é que não se nos dá do exame nem do julgamento. Senhores vivos, não há nada tão incomensurável como o desdém dos finados”.

it there was his conventional voice. It was a way of maintaining, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the capricious tone of Sterne, which he liked; of jumping in time and playing with the reader"<sup>48</sup>. One of the narrative strategies of the book is to plant, here and there, a word, an idea, a commentary and then return to it later in order to contradict, to explain or to re-contextualise, usually with an ironic disposition behind. Chapter CXXXVIII is an example of the procedure. Brás in a previous chapter (CXXXIV) writes that his style is not so spry as it used to be because he is now fifty<sup>49</sup>. However, on chapter CXXXVIII, entitled "To a Critic" and written in smaller font to indicate an apart, a separate note, we read:

"My dear critic,

Some pages behind, when saying that I was fifty, I added: "One can feel that my style is not so spry as in the first days". Maybe you find this sentence incomprehensible, given my present state; but I call your attention to the subtlety of that thought. What I want to say is not that I am older now, ever since I started the book. Death doesn't age. I want to say, yes, that in each narrative phase of my life I experience a correspondent sensation. Good God! We have to explain everything"<sup>50</sup>.

The message is clear. Machado and Brás will not have it from literal minded critics, critics who cannot use "subtlety of thought" and interpret accordingly, using not a simple case of mimesis but a complex one, where verisimilitude is not what it seems to be but follows all the shades, changes and complexities of true phenomena. So much for inattentive critics and readers too, who inadvertently had skimmed the chapters without paying much attention to important details like this. Machado and Brás are always commenting on the

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<sup>48</sup> Cândido, Antônio. *Vários Escritos*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1977.p.22

<sup>49</sup> *MPBC*, p.623.

<sup>50</sup> *MPBC*,p.625. "Meu caro crítico,

Algumas páginas atrás, dizendo eu que tinha cinquenta anos, acrescentei: 'Já se vai sentindo que o meu estilo não é tão lesto como nos primeiros dias'. Talvez aches esta frase incompreensível, sabendo-se o meu atual estado; mas eu chamo a tua atenção para a sutileza daquele Pensamento. O que eu quero dizer não é que esteja agora mais velho do que quando comecei o livro. A morte não envelhece. Quero dizer, sim, que em cada fase da narração da minha vida experimento a sensação correspondente. Valha-me Deus! é preciso explicar tudo.

narrative procedures as such and prodding the reader to respond. This creates a meta-narrative level that actually provokes the passive reader into a critic. In extending his reflections about narrative choices and dilemmas to his readers, Machado is making them aware of how these procedures work in the mind of the writer and in doing so, he induces them to a more alert reading, the type of reading that engenders the critic.

This narrative method however, although very instrumental to convey irony cannot, in itself, be a guarantee that the narrator (and the author) is in control of the whole scheme he is presenting. The reticences involving the paradox of death, as we have discussed above, are, in this sense, problematic. As we have seen, the characters in the book, including Brás, suffer death and suffer with the death of their loved ones. If death preserves individual consciousness however, it would be only a matter of a timely transformation and not of complete annihilation, so why suffer? However, there are still unanswered questions concerning these matters. If we all “survive” death, where would we be? Brás seems to “survive” death only as a consciousness, in a solitary (away from the “gaze” of the opinion, etc) “unknown territory”.

Moreover, we have no hint in the living Brás – the character narrated by the dead Brás – that he possessed or was interested in any kind of metaphysical or religious conception of the afterlife. On the contrary, the link between the doctrines of the book (Nature’s and Humanitism) and the living Brás’ own attitudes towards suffering and death seem to prove his disbelief and cynical pessimism. The paradox doesn’t happen when the situation is merely transposed to the afterlife environment, however; it appears with the superimposition of the narrator, the dead Brás, onto the living character, Brás.

In other words: the device nurtured by Christian eschatology (mortal body and immortal soul) is played to scaffold the narration of the dead Brás about a living Brás who never showed any belief in it, with the side effect (or in order to) of playing out of the scene, the very Christian eschatology itself, because Brás afterlife is the survival of a solitary consciousness in an unknown territory. One might as well add that it is “atheist”, because it is not positively

religious. Machado doesn't even go there, leaving the whole matter hinted, never affirmed nor denied. It seems that we are dealing with an issue more in the style of the *Phaidon* than with any interest in theological disquisitions. Alfredo Bosi reminds us that "*Posthumous*, superlative of *post* is what comes after everything: after life and death. It is more than posterior, it is the absolute after"<sup>51</sup>. It is then, from the point-of-view of this absolute after, deprived from any philosophical or religious connotations, that Machado proposes his anatomy of a consciousness.

In a short story called "O Espelho" [The Mirror], the narrator, tells his friend about a strange thing that happened to him when left alone in the isolated property of his aunt for some days. Having been promoted to a position in the army, the narrator is very proud of himself in uniform, before all the family and friends. However, when left alone, he loses consciousness of who he really is and cannot see his reflexion on the mirror unless when wearing his uniform. After the crisis, he comes out with the theory that people, instead of one soul, have two: "No less than two souls. Every human creature brings with it two souls: one, that looks from the inside to the outside and the other that looks from the outside to the inside [...] the external soul may be a spirit, a fluid, a man, many people, an object, an operation. There are cases in which, for example, a simple shirt button is the external soul of a person"<sup>52</sup>. We could find connections between the lieutenant of the story and Brás. If the lieutenant cannot exist without the external consciousness, or soul, of social approval internalized, Brás, on the contrary, is liberated from the social in becoming pure consciousness after death.

As Antônio Cândido puts it: "If fantasy works as though it were reality, if we cannot act except when we mutilate our self; if what is deepest in us, after all, are other people's opinions, if we are condemned not to get what seems

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<sup>51</sup> Bosi, Alfredo. *O Enigma do Olhar*. São Paulo: Ática, 2000. p.129.

<sup>52</sup> Machado de Assis, J. M. "O Espelho". In *Papéis Avulsos*, op. cit, p.259. "Nada menos de duas almas. cada criatura humana traz duas almas consigo: uma que olha de dentro para fora, outra que olha de fora para dentro... A alma exterior pode ser um espírito, um fluido, um homem, muitos homens, um objeto, uma operação. Há casos, por exemplo, em que um simples botão de camisa é a alma exterior d euma pessoa".

most valuable, then what is the difference between good and evil, justice and injustice, right and wrong?”<sup>53</sup>.

The point-of-view of the observer-philosopher is fundamental to establish the appreciation of the “real” condition of life in its crudity as the bottom truth of humanity. Again, Machado’s irony is directed against human pretensions to be unique and apart from the processes of biological “laws” (more of this later). These “true” laws can be unveiled to reveal humanity as it is and this is Quinca’s rôle. When Brás’ ambitions to be a State minister are shattered, he decides to start a newspaper in order to attack the clique that ousted him. Quincas is enthusiastically supportive: “Fight! You can flatten them down or not, the essential is to fight. Life is struggle. Life without struggle is a dead sea at the centre of a universal organism. Soon we came across a dog fight[...]. They were two. [Quincas] noticed that at their feet there was a bone, the reason of the war, [...] a simple, bare bone. The dogs bit each other, snarled with fury in their eyes... Quincas Borba tucked his stick under his arm and seemed to be in extasis. [...] He made me observe the beauty of the spectacle, reminding me of the aim of the fight; he concluded that the dogs were hungry but the privation of food was nothing for the general effects of his philosophy. Nor did he miss to remark that in some parts of the globe, the spectacle is more grandiose: it is human creatures who dispute with dogs the bones and other less attractive meals: a struggle that gets very complicated because there enters in action human intelligence, with all the accumulation of sagacity that the centuries have given it, etc”<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Cândido, Antônio. op. cit. p.27.

<sup>54</sup> *MPBC*, pp.626-7. “Lutar. Podes escachá-los ou não; o essencial é que lutes. Vida é luta. Vida sem luta é um mar morto no centro do organismo universal. Daí a pouco demos com uma briga de case...Eram dous. Notou que ao pé deles estava um osso, motivo da Guerra, e não deixou de chamar a minha atenção apra a circunstância de que o osso não tinha carne. Um simples osso nu. Os cães mordiam-se, rosnavam, com o furor nos olhos...quinces borba meteu a bengala debaixo do braço, e parecia em êxtase...Fêz-me observar a beleza do espetáculo, lembrou o objeto da luta, concluiu que os cães tinham fome; mas a privação do alimento era nada para os efeitos gerais da filosofia. Não deixou de recorder que em algumas partes do globo o espetáculo é mais grandioso: as criaturas humanas é que disputam aos cães os ossos e outros manjares menos apeteceíveis; luta que se complica muito, poque entra em ação a inteligência do homem, com todo o acúmulo de sagacidade que lhe deram os séculos, etc”.

What is at play here is the super-imposition of two trends of thought: one is moral and can be retraced back to the tradition of the great satirists, among which, Erasmus and Swift, that Machado much admired (more of this later). The other is based on Darwinisticism. The difference between Darwinism and Darwinisticism is that Darwinism is a scientific theory about the origin of biological species. Darwinisticism, according to Morse Peckham “can be an evolutionary metaphysic about the nature of reality and the universe. It can be a metaphysical and simplicistic notion of natural law. It can be a economic theory or a moral theory or an aesthetic theory or a psychological theory. It can be anything which claims to have support from the *Origin*, or conversely anything which claims to have really understood what Darwin inadequately and partially presented”<sup>55</sup>.

As Morse Peckham defines it: “The name of Darwin has magnetized to itself a thousand bits and pieces of ideas which are certainly not to be found in the book itself... It has been said a million times and will be said a million times more that for Darwin competition between species and members of species is the only mechanism of directive and progressive evolution. Thus he has been adulated for having revealed that capitalism and its related and derived values was to be found in the natural system of social and economic organization... Again it is always being rediscovered that in natural selection there are cooperative as well as competitive mechanisms at work. Alternatively, it is frequently stated that Darwin failed to perceive elements of cooperation because he was himself the product of a laissez-faire society”<sup>56</sup>. According to Peckham, the problem is that Darwin’s terms and concepts are being used to emphasize a moral world: “First, there is by the very use of the terms an introduction of values into a descriptive construct; or the misinterpretation of descriptive terms by ascribing to the words a *moral* [my emphasis] significance and to the author a *moral* [my emphasis] intention. The roots of this error are to be found in the ancient exhortation that Nature should be our basic model for

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<sup>55</sup> Peckham, Morse. “Darwinism and Darwinisticism”. In *Darwin, A Norton Critical Edition*. New York: Norton, 1979, p.304.

<sup>56</sup> Peckham, Morse. op. cit., p. 297.



Right Behavior. Not surprisingly it is constantly assumed that the *Origin* rests on moral assumptions”<sup>57</sup>.

On chapter CXLII, the following chapter, referring to the dog fight, Quincas Borba comments on his remark about dogs and men and concludes, contrary wise, that men fighting with men would be “more logical, because the condition of the contenders is the same and he who takes the bone is the stronger. But why isn’t it a grandiose spectacle to dispute it with dogs? Voluntarily, locusts are eaten, like the *Precursor*, or worse, like *Ezekiel*; therefore, the bad is edible; it rests to be known if it is more worthy of man to dispute it by virtue of a natural necessity, or to prefer it to obey a religious exaltation, that means, modifiable, since hunger is eternal, like life and death”<sup>58</sup>. Here, the overlapping between a moral standpoint and a Darwinistic trend is yet more evident. If readers are led, by Machado, to be shocked by the comment on humans disputing bones and “other less attractive meals” with dogs, and that humans are *even worse*, since they have intelligence accumulated by years of sagacity (natural selection), the next chapter reserves another surprise, because it is not in contemporary examples of misery that Machado is going to base Quincas Borba’s argument; it is not in Nature, let us put it that way, the “Darwinistic” side, but in the Bible, the moral and religious side. It has the mortal effect of undercutting the reader’s expectations twice. First, because Machado shifts the argument, using the “authority” of the Bible, and second, because he is reminding the supposed pious readers of something they should know already if they are pious readers of the Scriptures too: that John the Baptist when in the desert used to eat locusts and the prophet Ezekiel ate a papyrus roll offered to him by God and found it as delicious as honey.

There is yet another issue introduced in the comment, this on the Darwin side of the argument. When Quincas Borba says that it is more logical for

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<sup>57</sup> op. cit.p.298.

<sup>58</sup> *MPBC*, p.627. “- Disputá-la aos outros homens é mais lógico porque a condição dos contendores é a mesma, e leva o osso o que for mais forte. Mas por que não sera um espetáculo grandioso disputá-lo aos cães? Voluntariamente, comen-se gafanhotos, como o Precursor, ou cousa pior, como Ezequiel; logo, o ruim é comível; resta saber se é mais digno do homem disputá-lo, por virtude de uma necessidade natural, ou preferi-lo para obedecer a uma exaltação religiosa, isto é, modificável, ao passo que a fome é eternal, como a vida e como a morte”.

men to dispute the bone with other men because the condition of the contenders is the same and he who takes the bone is the stronger, he is exposing already, in *MPBC*, the famous theory carried in the book Machado wrote ten years later (1891) whose title is *Quincas Borba*. In it, Rubião, the inheritor of Quincas Borba's fortune and of a dog named after his benefactor [Quincas Borba] is haunted by the "philosophy" of his "master". He recalls Quincas telling him that Humanitas is the indestructible principle of the universe, for "there is in all things a certain substance, hidden and identical, a unique, universal and eternal principle, common, indivisible and indestructible...that is Humanitas"<sup>59</sup>. He is particularly haunted by the recurring image, summarized in the phrase: "To the winner, the potatoes". The phrase indicates precisely the dispute between men "because the condition of the contenders is the same and he who takes the bone is the stronger", advanced in *MPBC*. Machado offers a variation of the possibility, told in the manner of a fable:

"There is no death. The encounter of two expansions or the expansion of two forms can determine the suppression of one of them; but, rigorously, there is no death, only life, because the suppression of one is the condition of survival of the other and the destruction does not reach the universal and common principle. Hence, the preservative and beneficial character of the war. Suppose a potato field and two starving tribes. The potatoes can only feed one of the tribes who because of that, acquire strength to cross a mountain and go to the other slope, where there are potatoes in abundance; but if the two tribes divide up the potatoes peacefully, they won't get enough nutrition and will die of starvation. Peace, in this case, is destruction; war, preservation. One of the tribes exterminates the other...to the loser, hatred and compassion; to the winner, the potatoes"<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Machado de Assis, J.M. *Quincas Borba*. Rio de Janeiro: W.M. Jackson, 1939. p.19. "Há nas cousas todas certa substância recondite e identical, um princípio único, universal, eterno, comum, indivisível e indestrutível... pois essa substância, ou verdade, esse princípio indestrutível é que é Humanitas".

<sup>60</sup> *Q.B.*. p.19-20. Não há morte. O encontro de duas expansões, ou a expansão de duas formas pode determinar a supressão de uma delas; mas, rigorosamente, não há morte, há vida, porque a supressão de uma é a condição da sobrevivência da outra e a destruição não atinge o princípio universal e comum. Daí o caráter conservador e benéfico da Guerra. Supõe tu um campo de batatas e duas tribos famintas. As batatas apenas chegam para alimentar uma das tribos, que assim adquire forças para transpor a montanha e ir à outra

Most critics see in the episode, the classical example of the “survival of the fittest”, and some of them<sup>61</sup>, that kind of survival that characterizes Capitalism. Yet, there is more to the fable than simple Darwinistic mechanically applied as a “criticism” of Capitalism. In first place, the supposed survival of the fittest is yet another way to take issue with a *moral* question; it does not provide the reader with an “answer” or “explanation” why humans are what they are. On the contrary, in sweeping away, in denying death and life to the individual (in the case the individual tribe that will not survive) and making the victory, a victory of the species (it is the “principle” the triumphs), it constitutes much more a moral blow to human vanity than everything else. What makes the “survival of the fittest” is a blind will that advances itself by the sheer strength of its own determination and not by “adaptation” or “natural selection”.

Machado uses the term “struggle for life”, in English, in some of his *crônicas*<sup>62</sup>, written for newspapers. For instance, “We cannot say that he is a vulgar man; he is a life-borer, dedicated to the *struggle for life* with teeth and nails, most of all, nails”<sup>63</sup>. Or in “Well, the wine merchant of number 40 who fakes today some twenty barrels of wine is not doing anything else than defending himself from the wine merchant of number 34 that faked seventeen yesterday.

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vertente onde há batatas em abundância; mas, se as duas tribos dividirem em paz as batatas do campo, não chegam a nutrir-se suficientemente e morrem de inanição. A paz, nesse caso é a destruição; a guerra é a conservação. Uma das tribos extermina a outra e recolhe os despojos. Daí a alegria da vitória, os hinos, aclamações, recompensas públicas e todos os demais efeitos das ações bélicas. Se a guerra não fosse isso, tais demonstrações não chegariam a dar-se, pelo motivo real de que o homem só comemora e ama o que lhe é aprazível ou vantajoso, e pelo motivo racional de que nenhuma pessoa canoniza uma ação que virtualmente destrói. Ao vencido, ódio ou compaixão; ao vencedor, as batatas”.

<sup>61</sup> like Roberto Schwarz, for instance, in *Ao Vencedor as Batatas*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 2000, passim, or Raymundo Faoro in *A Pirâmide e o Trapézio*: Rio de Janeiro: Globo, 1988, passim. See also Michael Wood, “Master Among the Ruins” in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol XLIX, Number 12, July 18, 2002. pp 47-49.

<sup>62</sup> “Crônicas” may be a Brazilian genre (as Antônio Cândido puts it) by definition. They are daily or weekly articles, written by writers in newspapers, commenting lightly on a variety of subjects that include almost anything, but they manage to keep a certain literary, albeit light tone.

<sup>63</sup> Machado de Assis, J. M. *Obras Completas*. Rio de Janeiro: Aguilar, 1962. Vol III. “Crônicas, Notas Semanais, 1878”, p.383. There is a typo in “struggle”: it is wrongly written “strugh”. “Não se pode dizer que seja homem bulgar; é um fura-vidas, que se atira à *strugh* (sic) *for life* com unhas e dentes, sobretudo com unhas”.

*Struggle for life*, as a friend says”<sup>64</sup>. Or, still: “What do you want? People need to eat. Card readers, Heraldry researchers, unashamed poverty, or wines made in the backyard, all that ends in Darwin’s law”<sup>65</sup>.

All these references parallel Quincas Borba’s philosophy, but, again, under the veil of a supposed Darwinism, they are moral observations following the model of the great satirists before Machado.

Machado’s understanding of “Darwin’s law” is one of the many misunderstandings and misinterpretations committed against Darwin’s ideas. It was Spencer who applied the biologic scheme of evolution to society. As Richard Hofstadter writes: “In applying evolution to society, Spencer, and after him the social Darwinists, were doing poetic justice to its origins. The “survival of the fittest” was a biological generalization of the cruel processes which reflective observers saw at work in early nineteenth-century society and Darwinism was a derivative of political economy... Spencer’s theory of social selection, also written under the stimulus of Malthus, arose out of his concern with population problems... In tow famous articles that appeared in 1852, six years before Darwin and Wallace jointly published sketches of their theory, Spencer had set forth the view that the *pressure of subsistence upon population must have been a beneficent effect upon the human race...By placing a premium upon skill, intelligence, self-control and power to adapt through technological innovation, it had stimulated human advancement and selected the best of each generation for survival* [my emphasis]”<sup>66</sup>. This is Quincas Borba’s theory of the potato field *without* Machado’s irony.

It was Spencer as well who coined the phrases “survival of the fittest”<sup>67</sup> and not Darwin. Peckham reminds us, as well, that Darwin is said to have discovered the “Law of Evolution” but it was Spencer who formulated this.

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<sup>64</sup> “Crônicas. Balas de Estalo, 1884”. op. cit. p.433. “Bem, o molhadista do No. 40, que falsifica hoje umas vinte pipas de vinho, que outra coisa faz senão defender-se a si mesmo contra o molhadista do No 34 que falsificou ontem dezessete? *Struggle for life*, como diz o amigo”.

<sup>65</sup> “Crônicas, Balas de Estalo, 1884”, op. cit, p.433. “Que querem? é preciso comer. Cartomancia, heráldica, pindaíba de tutu, ou vinhos confeccionados no fundo do armazém, tudo isso vem a dar na lei de Darwin.

<sup>66</sup> Hofstadter, Richard. “The Vogue of Spencer”. *Darwin, a Norton Critical Edition*. op. cit. p. 392.

<sup>67</sup> Spencer, Herbert. “A Theory of Population, Deduced from the General Law of Animal Fertility”. *Essays*, New York, 1907), I, pp.1-7.

There is no such law in Darwin. In fact, Darwin “disclaims any knowledge of and any statements about Laws of Nature, which he clearly labels mental conveniences or constructs. He is a scientist, not a moralist and not a metaphysician”<sup>68</sup>. Darwin has not written about the “struggle for life” either. The expression he used was “struggle for existence”, a phrase that is in conformity with the principles of natural selection. “Some post-Darwin evolutionists had a tendency to propagate a poorly, naïf-ferocious idea, the pure and simple ‘struggle for life’, an expression that Darwin never used, by the way. It was Spencer. The new-Darwinians of the beginning of the century proposed, on the contrary, a richer conception and demonstrated, on quantitative basis, that the decisive factor in selection is not the “struggle for life” but, inside one species, the differential percentage of reproduction”<sup>69</sup>.

Moreover, writing about the moral consequences of Darwin’s theory, the so-called “ethics of evolution”, Thomas Henry Huxley remarks that the phrase “evolution of ethics” would be more appropriate if we are to follow Darwin’s ideas. He remarks: But as the immoral sentiments have no less been evolved, there is, so far, as much natural sanction for the one as the other. The thief and the murderer follow nature just as much as the philanthropist”<sup>70</sup>.

There is yet another fallacy appearing in this “ethics of evolution” that Huxley addresses, related to the notion that because organisms have advanced in perfection of organization by means of the struggle for existence, therefore, men must look for the same process to help them towards perfection. In other words, what was simply “struggle for existence, becomes “the survival of the fittest”. This fallacy, he suspects, has arisen out of an ambiguity of the phrase “survival of the fittest”. “Fittest” has a connotation of “best” and with it, a moral flavour to it. However, in cosmic nature, what is “fittest” depends on the conditions: “Long since, I ventured to point out that if our hemisphere were to cool again, the survival of the fittest might bring about, in the vegetable kingdom, a population of more and more stunted and humbler and humbler organisms,

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<sup>68</sup> Peckham, Morse. op. cit. p.298.

<sup>69</sup> Monod, Jacques. *Le hasard et la nécessité*. Paris: Seuil, 1970. p.135-6.

<sup>70</sup> Huxley, Thomas Henry. “Evolution and Ethics”. In *Darwin A Norton Critical Edition*. op. cit. p.326.

until the “fittest” that survived might be nothing but lichens, diatoms and such microscopic organisms as those which give red snow its colour... They, as the fittest, the best adapted to the changed conditions, would survive”<sup>71</sup>.

Sir Julian Huxley adds in “Evolutionary Ethics” that the contradictions between the ethical process and the cosmic process can be solved by “on the one hand, extending the concept of evolution both backward into the inorganic and forward into the human domain, and on the other, by considering ethics not as a body of fixed principles, but as a product of evolution and itself evolving”<sup>72</sup>.

Jacques Monod makes a similar point when he attaches the discussion of the “rational” to natural selection. All living beings a part of a more general project of preservation and multiplication of the species and rationality is *also* part of this project of life and nature. Therefore, Reason is not an artificial construction made *a posteriori* to explain the phenomena but a *natural apparatus* shared both by humankind and by nature, an apparatus furnished by the very natural organization in itself, to humankind and its signs can be retraced in nature itself. Thus, such conception of Reason conforms to the theory of evolution because it finds a natural place and an evolutive rôle for human rational task, whereas the conception that prefers to treat reason as a creation *a posteriori*, a product of human mind, tends to preserve the biblical notion that humankind is *separated* from nature and therefore deserves and benefits from a treatment of exclusivity<sup>73</sup>.

Moreover, it is exactly the new notion, brought by Darwin, that humankind is *not* separated from anything else in nature that is hardest to accept. The drive to create some sort of exclusivity to humankind, to separate again, man from the rest of nature is actually deeply embedded in the forms of Darwinisticism. The arguments usually used are human intelligence, aggression, or adaptability; ability with tools, or economic sagacity, to cite just a few. As Monod observes: “We want to be necessary, inevitable, to have an order. All

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<sup>71</sup> Huxley, Thomas Henry. op. cit. p.326.

<sup>72</sup> Huxley, Julian. “Evolutionary Ethics”. In *Darwin A Norton Critical Edition*. op. cit p.328.

<sup>73</sup> Monod, Jacques. op. cit., pp 37-55 et passim.

religions, almost all philosophies, even a part of science witness the indefatigable, heroic effort of humanity to desperately deny its own contingency”<sup>74</sup>.

The alliance established by animist conceptions of philosophy and religion, the idea that there is a deep link between Nature and Man outside of which there is only annihilation and loneliness, is satirized by Machado by a mockery based on Darwinistic conceptions of “struggle for life” and “survival of the fittest”, but we really cannot be sure about Machado’s *own* conceptions in relation to the very same Darwinistic conceptions he advances. The impact on the reader works in layers. In the interplay between moral-satirical attack and the utilization of Darwinistic conceptions, the “outrageous” examples of “preference” and “indifference” for, respectively, species and individual work to corner the reader into, if not a conception, but a sensation of the “contingency” that Monod writes about.

Again, the problem is moral. The blind “laws” of “evolutionary Humanitism” regarded as the bottom line truth, are the excuse to throw at the reader’s face, always politely, the element of ironic shock. Behind the satire of the promotion of the “struggle for life”, there is the use of it to lash human vanity.

Machado hardly succumbs to the temptation of explaining or explaining away recurrent patterns of aggression in human society, exploitation of man by man, the formation of a social contract or the use of reason, to cite just a few. His resistance is the resistance of the Stoic and his pessimism only a reflexion of a deeper non-commitment. Even when it seems that he is endorsing Humanitism or Nature-Pandora theories, it is only a prop with the objective of throwing at the face of the reader the absurdity, the ultimate vanity of thinking that it would be possible to explain human condition with theories and doctrines. He uses “philosophy” to mock human absurdity and human absurdity to mock “philosophy”.

It is in this way that we can understand the character of Quincas Borba, who unites in himself, both conditions: the absurdity and randomness of

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<sup>74</sup> Monod, J. op. cit. p.55.

existence represented by Quincas's life: the golden boy of childhood followed by the pauper days of adulthood, followed by the fortune inherited and the grandiosity of the doctrine, his "philosophy". "Evolution" and "survival of the fittest" could be ironically applied to Quincas, as well as to the character of D. Plácida, yet another example of "struggle for life" examined through the lenses of Utilitarianism: The reader's assumptions about the uniqueness and valour of the individual, taken for granted – even in the contradictory slave society like Brazil's then – as the model of a Humanistic society, are questioned by the empirical examination of what that life really means: obscure, mediocre, replete with suffering... and the dreaded, practical question: "What for". But that doesn't mean that this "empirical examination" is the one endorsed by Machado. *Au contraire*, the thesis of the cold, objective observation, almost "scientific", in the models of the Positivists and Utilitarians, is there as the usual double jab at the reader.

Other provocations in the book come in the form of attacks against religion and the idea of sanity and normality. The main target is to point out to the fragility of human beliefs and how these same beliefs are incorporated into a defensive structure that works only in favour of more vanity and self-centredness. There is no refuge for the self. Either it is insane or its philosophical and religious beliefs are entirely wrong and have to be modified altogether by a new doctrine, in the case Quincas' doctrine, with its annihilation of the individual:

The Alienist called to assist Quincas Borba in a crisis, foreshadows the Alienist of the future short story of *Papéis Avulsos*, who locks the whole town inside his asylum and ends up by being the only locked *by his own diagnosis*. Here, the doctor tells Brás that "there is, in all of us, an Athenian maniac. And who swears that has never had, mentally, two or three loose screws at least, is lying". "Even you!" I [Brás] asked? "Even myself!" "Even myself?" "Even yourself..."<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> MPBC.p.634. "Ora bem, há em todos nós um maníaco de Atenas; e quem jurar que não possuiu alguma vez, mentalmente, dous ou três patachos, pelo menos, pode crer que jura falso.

-Também o senhor? perguntei-lhe  
-Também eu.



And Quincas attack : “I manage to annex to my philosophy a dogmatic and a liturgical part. Humanitism will also be a religion, the future one, the only true one. Christianity is good for women and beggars, and the other religions are not worth more than that one. They all reckon by the same vulgarity or weakness. Christian paradise is a worthy imitation of Muslin paradise; and, as for Buddha’s nirvana it is nothing but a conception of lame people. You will see what is an Humanistic religion. The final absorption, the *contractive* phase, is the reconstitution of the substance, not its annihilation, etc.”<sup>76</sup>.

Quincas at this phase is getting madder, but there is “method in his madness” as it was said of Hamlet. Under the guise of madness, the attack becomes more hyperbolic and outrageous, designed to itch current sensibilities: religion is for the weak and vulgar; and defy logic: the final *contraction* is not annihilation (of the individual) but a reconstitution (of Humanitas), etc.

The contraption of *madness* as a satirical device is an old one, but it suffice to remember Swift’s mad narrator in *A Digression Upon Madness*, or the rational social engineer of *A Modest Proposal* to find Machado’s affinity with the topos.

When Quincas Borba descends into madness he is, however, conscious that he is mad, something that Brás thinks it is a cruel truth because: “this rest of consciousness, like a feeble oil lamp in the middle of the dark, complicated a lot the horror of the situation”<sup>77</sup>. This is supreme irony, for a philosopher who prophesized the spirit of Humanitas as the soul of the species, as the unique monad in a constant evolution of its own will. Quincas now is left with the only thing he tried to get rid of in the elaboration of his doctrine: his individual consciousness. He is mad and *knows it*.

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-Também eu

- Também o senhor...”

<sup>76</sup> *MPBC*. p.635. “Eu trato de anexar à minha filosofia uma parte dogmática e litúrgica. O Humanitismo há de ser também uma religião, a do futuro, a única verdadeira. O cristianismo é bom para as mulheres e os mendigos, e as outras religiões não valem mais do que essa: orçam todas pela mesma vulgaridade ou fraqueza. O paraíso cristão é um digno êmulo do paraíso muçulmano; e quanto ao nirvana de Buda não passa de uma concepção de paralíticos. Verás o que é a religião humanística. A absorção final, a fase *contrativa*, é a reconstituição da substância, não o seu aniquilamento,etc”.

<sup>77</sup> *MPBC*. p.636. “e esse resto de consciência, como uma frouxa lamparina no meio das trevas, complicava muito o horror da situação”.

In the end, it seems that it is Nature-Pandora theory that triumphs: the annihilation of the individual because it is only a vehicle for the species to keep itself in existence. Individual consciousness is only an accident in this monumental task, as if, the development of consciousness, instead of being part of Nature's evolutive program, is, on the contrary, a false development, like the Bengal's tiger tusks, and as so, doomed to disappear without trace. And yet, Quincas in his madness is optimistic, and dies "swearing and repeating that sorrow is an illusion and that Pangloss, the calumniated Pangloss, was not so silly as Voltaire had supposed"<sup>78</sup>, in a typical Freudian situation: denial. One can argue that the whole of Quincas philosophy is a form of denial, based on the most basic existential fear that is the fear of death and the loss of individual consciousness. Death is conquered by the triumph of the species in its blind will of evolution and adaptation. At its limit, Humanitism is a mechanistic application of certain Spencerian and Schopenhauerean concepts. Its metaphysics doesn't deny the Being but denies Death because it denies individual consciousness. It represents a form of gradual annihilation until the last "absorption" and carries in it the denial of free agency, being ultimately deterministic and fatalistic. Quincas is not far either from having built a whole doctrine upon the denial of the evil demiurge of certain variations of Gnosticism. Only in his case, because of the Panglossian optimism that everything is for the good of Humanitas, it is ultimately, a good one, Humanitas itself. Quincas actually doesn't say much about Cosmology or Theology even (except that Humanitism will replace all religions) but it is impossible not to deduct by logic certain implications and one of them is that in order for Humanitism to operate, it needs to attach itself to the principle of Humanitas, which is strength of will with a design, in other words, a god.

Because of these implications, I am reluctant to accept integrally John Gledson's or Roberto Schwarz's readings of Humanitism. The first, sees it, rightly so, as a satire of Comte's Positivism but also as a sort of "more

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<sup>78</sup> *MPBC*. p.637. "Morreu pouco tempo depois, em minha casa, jurando e repetindo sempre que a dor era uma ilusão, e que Pangloss, o caluniado Pangloss, não era tão tolo como o supôs Voltaire".

sophisticated egotism that naturally because of this, convinces Brás as if it were a revelation”<sup>79</sup>. As I have been trying to demonstrate here, Humanitism carries the thesis of annihilation of the individual, and of a blind will, both, therefore, incompatible with egotism. The latter also sustains correctly that it is a satire of the “nineteenth century ‘isms’ with explicit allusion to the Comtean religion of humanity... and other affiliations since in place of the positivistic principles they affirm the struggle of all against all, in the manner of Social Darwinism”, but Schwarz also thinks that “Beside the theses of the *struggle for life*, Humanitism includes the *praise* [my emphasis] of the hierarchic and ritualized society [which is] difficult to conciliate with the first ones”<sup>80</sup> and that the Humanitist ideas justified by illustration “the indifference of the rich for the destiny of their dependents... and explained the necessary and legitimate character of the Colonial exploitation and its present sequels”<sup>81</sup>. In order to justify this thesis, Schwarz uses the example we examined previously here, about hungry Humanitas being fed by the chicken that ate the corn that a slave planted. It is difficult to see in Humanitism *praise* for hierarchy and a justification of the Colonial exploitation as though these were the ultimate *primum mobile* of Quincas’ doctrines. If irony is still a valid term to examine all the parody of this philosophy, it resides between the inevitability of the designs of the Humanitas principle, its blind will, and Quincas’ silly hope that it will revolutionize all the world and replace all other philosophies and religions, as we have seen. In this sense, Quincas is Pangloss and a sillier one, rather than a representative of the ruling class trying to justify its own domination through a patched up half-doctrine. It really doesn’t work that way because *behind* Quincas’ contrivances there is Machado’s voice and hand, directing Quincas to madness and having a final laugh at human vanity. In other words, Humanitism is more a matter of a moral case, in the manner of the eighteenth century satirists; a moral attack against individual delusions of grandeur, as much as Nature-Pandora’s “philosophy”. Machado’s attack lies in the interplay between grandiose doctrines and provincial self-important individuals who think they penetrated Nature’s

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<sup>79</sup> Gledson, John. *Machado de Assis. Ficção e História*. Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1986. p. 73 et passim.

<sup>80</sup> Schwarz, Roberto. *Um Mestre na Periferia do Capitalismo*. op. cit. p.164 et passim.

<sup>81</sup> Schwarz. op. cit p.166.

secret, as well as the pride involved in individual pretensions to *uniqueness* and Nature's utter indifference to it.

It is worthwhile remembering that not very long after Quincas Borba's death, Brás dies too, and as we have seen, his last chapter is all about negatives. Again, in the pairing Quincas-Brás, there is irony at play, since with both *individuals*, there is no continuation of *species*. Both didn't leave offspring and Quincas, actually, passes his name and legacy to a dog.

Nature in its personification as Pandora is a device to punish. The delusion episode shows a dialogue between Man and Nature that is, in truth, a projection of Man's fears. The individual consciousness feels betrayed by Nature when it knows that it is going to die and begs for eternal life. The good justification for this desire to live is life itself and the love of life that was instilled by nature herself in the hearts of all living beings. However, from the point-of-view of Nature, the individual is only the form and shape by which species perpetuate themselves in the biological world, so individual consciousness is not to be considered because it falls off the biological cycle of life and death. It might even be a step in the wrong direction, a mal-adaptation soon to be eliminated. In this sense, the comparison with Gulliver's episode among the Struldbruggs, shows some points in common. With Swift too individual immortality is problematic and if prolonged, as the Struldbruggs show, will only distort Nature's plans.

But what are really "Nature's plans"? Alfredo Bosi writing about *MPBC* observes that: "there is something Darwinian in all this conception of human existence: it is the animalesque universal that would be inside every one of us; hence the continuous struggle for preservation molded upon the biological struggle: those who cannot be lions become foxes. Machiavelli... had already sculpted in an exemplary mode both the faces of the conjunction nature-society: the leonine of the strong and the vulpine of the astute. Outside them, the risk of failure and of obscurity haunts all those who don't adapt to the social jungle... So, the naturalization of society, that in satire serves as a criticism to the ferocity of

human relationships, brings in itself a limitation in its denunciation because what is natural and fatal falls short of ethical judgment”<sup>82</sup>.

Bosi is right in pointing out that the limits of satirical attack lie in the limits of the ethical and moral world and when naturalizing society the satirist is also neutralizing socially acquired behaviour, laws and ethics; however, a satirist can use the mask of Nature to castigate what is “unnatural”; in other words, the satirist, and I believe that this is Machado’s procedure, can denounce this very “naturalness” of “nature” by presenting it as “natural”.

Another point that is interesting to explore is the fact that we cannot take for granted anymore that the basis for ethical and moral behaviour is a cultural development created by humans only. It has been argued by scientists that instead of creating first a society and a culture and then ethics, there is evidence in animal behaviour that a hint of ethics and morality, for instance in the management of aggression inside and outside groups, is fundamental not only to survival but also to establish social links. Konrad Lorenz observes: “In the chapter on behavior mechanisms functionally analogous to morality, I have spoken of the inhibitions controlling aggression in various social animals, preventing it from injuring or killing fellow members of the species. As I explained, these inhibitions are most important and consequently most highly differentiated in those animals which are capable of killing living creatures about their own size. A raven can peck out the eye of another with one thrust of its beak, a wolf can rip the jugular vein of another with a single bite. There would be no more ravens and no more wolves if reliable inhibitions did not prevent such actions. Neither a dove nor a hare nor even a chimpanzee is able to kill its own kind with a single peck or bite... Since there rarely is, in nature, the possibility of such an animal’s seriously injuring one of its own kind, there is no selection pressure at work here to breed in killing inhibitions. Under the unnatural conditions of captivity, where a defeated animal cannot escape from its victor, it may be killed slowly and cruelly. In my book *King’s Solomon’s Ring*, I have described in the chapter “Morals and Weapons” how the symbol of peace, the

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<sup>82</sup> Bosi, Alfredo. *Machado de Assis. O Enigma do Olhar*. São Paulo: Ática, 2000. p. 17-8.

dove, can torture one of its own kind to death without the arousal of any inhibition”<sup>83</sup>.

Writing about human mechanisms, Lorenz observes: “Anthropologists concerned with the habits of Australopithecus have repeatedly stressed that these hunting progenitors of man have left humanity with the dangerous heritage of what they term “carnivorous mentality”. This statement confuses the concepts of carnivore and cannibal, which are to a large extent mutually exclusive. One can only deplore the fact that man has definitely not got a carnivorous mentality! All his trouble arises from his being a basically harmless, omnivorous creature, lacking in natural weapons with which to kill big prey, and, therefore, also devoid of the built-in safety devices which prevent “professional” carnivores from abusing their killing power to destroy fellow members of their own species”<sup>84</sup>.

Of course neither Machado nor Swift could possibly participate in this debate but the point is not that they couldn’t; the point is that recent criticism that bases its conclusions on blurred conceptions of evolution and social Darwinism should be taking these issues into consideration.

However, even if humanity is often compared, by moralists and satirists as well to wild beast in their acts of “savagery”, perpetuating the simile of “naturalizing society” according to the savage “laws” of nature, the persisting factor behind all the imagery is the fact that somehow, for those who compare, the comparison is legitimized by a sense of partition between humankind and nature, perpetuating, thus, the Biblical anthropocentric mode that Man is a special creation. Actually, the comparison is *only possible because* there is this sense of separation. Satirists play upon this assumption both by indicating that there is no division after all (“Humans are savage” and all the topoi of “struggle for live” justifications), a device to shake and shock the assumption of *separation* – and by deriding those who think there is.

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<sup>83</sup> Lorenz, Konrad. *On Aggression*. New York: Bantam, 1969. p.232. See also passim on the subject in: *King’s Solomon Ring*. New York: {ref}. *Behind the Mirror*. New York: Harvest, 1979 and “The Role of Aggression in Group Formation” in *Transactions of the 4<sup>th</sup> Conference on Group Processes*. New York: Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, 1957.

<sup>84</sup> Lorenz, op. cit.p.233.

Anyway it is interesting to note that, much before Lorenz's observation about Humans being basically harmless and because of that also devoid of built-in mechanisms to prevent aggression, Gulliver finds himself in a bad situation among the Houyhnhnms, when discovered that in all his nakedness and frailty, he is a Yahoo, after all, and a worse one, since he lacks the hairs, claws and thick skin that give natural protection to them<sup>85</sup>. In Machado, Quincas, in the already referred episode of the dog fight, equally reminds Brás that in the fight between animals and humans for food the latter have the accumulation of "intelligence" and "sagacity" that complicates everything. Thus, less is more in the case of Swift and more is less for Machado. It is evident that whatever the naturalized portrait of human society is, for the satirist, it is always an excuse to lock humankind in a moral paradox.

The assumption of uniqueness and separation of Humankind from other species and living creatures works to sustain opposite views. The positive trend is not only restricted to Biblical mythology. The anthropocentric trend of thought is also very present in certain trends of science, anthropology, linguistics and any other disciplines that tend to emphasize a *quality* difference between humankind and other biological species, most especially, the near ones (Chimpanzees, Gorillas, Orangutans) instead of a difference in *degree* or *quantity*, which would erase the assumption of uniqueness and separation.

The negative trend is represented by the assumption that humankind is unique only in evil, and is related to the mythology of the original sin. Within this frame, it is common to see the theory of evolution used to justify the worst. Terms like "struggle for life" and "survival of the fittest" become a short hand for the "explanation" and sometimes justification of evil. Primo Levi writes in *I sommersi e i salvati [The Drowned and the Saved]* that in the experience of Auschwitz, "the worst – that is – the fittest – survived. The best all died"<sup>86</sup>. For Levi, though, the worst were "those who could play the system without any

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<sup>85</sup> Swift, Jonathan. "Gulliver's Travels". In *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*. New York: Norton, 1973. pp.204-207.

<sup>86</sup> Levi, Primo. *I sommersi e i salvati*. Torino: Einaudi, 1986. p. 64. "Sopravvivevano i peggiori, cioè i più adatti; I migliori sono morti tutti".

scruple. The best were “the most delicate”, the most innocent” who could not bear to see degradation and bestiality everywhere, to lie and steal: “The ‘saved’ of the Lager were not the best, the predestinated to the good, the message bearers: what I have seen and lived demonstrated exactly the contrary. Those who survived, preferably, were the worst, the egoists, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the “grey zone”, the spies”<sup>87</sup>. Levi’s idea may not be applicable strictly speaking of individuals since many of the best and the worst may have died and survived. Levi himself may have thought of himself as a “worst” because he survived but his readers may have a different opinion. Yet, could his point be sustainable if instead of individuals he was summarizing the perception of a collectivity?

Again, the opposition between the individual and the collectivity or the species gets in the way. Swift said that he liked individuals but detested human kind in general. The objects of attack in the works of Swift and Machado are not, in fact, individuals as such, but characters which, to a large extent, epitomize the “worst”. In Swift’s case, these characters usually represent a collectivity like the Yahoos, the Struldbruggs, the Lilliputians, the Laputans and the scientists of the Academy of Lagado, or they are affected, imbalanced and distorted by some partiality, like the mad narrator of the “Digression” or the “rational” social engineer of the “Modest Proposal” that infects the whole of their views. It is noteworthy that a memorable individualized character in “Gulliver’s Travels”, besides Gulliver himself, is Captain Pedro, the Portuguese navigator. He is humane and kind.

Machado’s Brás Cubas can also be the epitome of the “worst”, and in his case, with a redeeming post-mortem consciousness and frankness to complicate the portrait. Quincas Borba and Simão Bacamarte, the alienated Alienist of the short story of the same name, are the embodiments of madness and mania. Dona Plácida is another good example of individual characterization. Her story shocks the reader because she is individualized enough as a character to inspire compassion and at the same time she is the victim of a cold

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<sup>87</sup> Levi, op. cit. p. 63.



examination in which her sufferings and unhappy life are turned into a mere detail subsumed by collective-species procedures. In the case, the complete indifference of Nature-Pandora to her existence that is unimportant and accessory. Her life is not dissimilar to the millions who subsist in the shadows, the limbo of the survival system. Her individuality is just a statistical proof of the hazardousness of life processes to which it was added the burden of an unjust society.

It follows that Dona Plácida's own existence as an individual is put into question. The "utility" and the "purpose" of a life like that ("What for?") born out of hazard, "struggling to survive" in a society where only the fittest – or the worst- can. Again, the reader is left to ruminate this together with the fact that Brás himself never had offspring.

Swift, of course, didn't have the theory of evolution to give shape and direction to his satire but he, indeed, used to his advantage the pairing individual/species to advance his criticisms. The same pairing was available to Machado and he decked it with the Darwinisticism in order to best serve his satirical purposes. In both, then, as I have already advanced here, the object of attack is targeted to dislodge vanity and pride. As Gulliver writes: "But, when I behold a Lump of Deformity and Diseases both in Body and Mind, smitten with *Pride*, it immediately breaks all the Measures of my Patience; neither shall I be ever able to comprehend how such an Animal and such a Vice could tally together"<sup>88</sup>.

Machado certainly understood Swift's and Gulliver's point<sup>89</sup>, as his readings and references to Swift indicate. Vanity certainly plays an important role

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<sup>88</sup> Swift, Jonathan. Op. cit. p.260.

<sup>89</sup> Machado actually refers explicitly to Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms in a "crônica" published in "A Semana", 1892. (Op. cit. Vol III, pp.551-553.). Writing *a propos* of a change from streetcars pushed by donkeys and moved by electricity, Machado purports to understand their conversation since he knows the "language of the Houyhnhnms" (p.551). Another reference to him can be found in *MPBC*, chapter XCIX (op. cit. p.602). Machado was also an admirer of Sterne, among other English speaking writers and one cannot certainly agree with J.C. Kinnear who claims that "there is really little evidence that Machado could even read English fluently" ("Machado de Assis: To Believe or not to Believe" in *The Modern Language Review*. January 1976, Vol 71, Number 1. Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons. p.62.) Machado translated Poe and Longfellow, there are references to Shakespeare (some in English), to Cowper and Whitman, as well as

in Machado's satirical point-of-view. He had a French version of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* and in 1878 wrote a *Praise of Vanity* in an Erasmian manner<sup>90</sup>. The counselor in "A Sereníssima República" is called Erasmus. There is also a reference to Erasmus on chapter CXLIX of *MPBC*, when Quincas Borba puts forth his "theory of the benefit": "the pleasure of the benefactor is always larger than that of the benefited"<sup>91</sup>, because "First, there is the feeling of a good action, and deductively the consciousness that we are able to practise a good action; in second place, one receives a conviction of superiority to other creatures, superiority in state and means; and this is one of the most legitimately agreeable things, according to the best opinions, to the human organism. Erasmus who in the *Praise of Folly* wrote some good things, called the attention for the complacency with which two donkeys scratch one another..."<sup>92</sup>. Quincas' discourse here, who is approaching his final descent into madness, is akin to Erasmus' *Folly* as well as the mad writer's of Swift's *Digression*. *Vanity* in Machado's *Praise* takes the same narrative prerogative. She speaks after Modesty and says: "Where is it that I don't fit? Where is it that I don't command something? I go from the Rich's salon to the Poor's inn, from the palace to the shack, from the fine and crisp silk to the rough and stingy cotton"<sup>93</sup>. It is worth to remember that in 1884, in the above referred "A Igreja do Diabo", the metaphor of the silk and the cotton is also put to work. They represent virtue and vice, respectively. As we have seen, after an attempt to found a new church, the devil is disappointed because humanity, which in God's time used to practice vice

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other English expressions in his "crônicas" and in parts of his books, including *MPBC* that Kinnear himself analyses in his article.

<sup>90</sup> Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. "Elogio da Vaidade". *Obras Completas*. Vol III. op. cit. pp. 999-1003. "

<sup>91</sup> *MPBC*. p.631. "...o prazer do beneficiador é sempre maior do que o do beneficiado. Que é o benefício? é um ato que faz cessar certa privação do beneficiado, etc..."

<sup>92</sup> *MPBC*. p.632. "Primeiramente, há o sentimento de uma boa ação, e dedutivamente a consciência de que somos capazes de boas ações; em segundo lugar, recebe-se uma convicção de superioridade sobre outra criatura, superioridade no estado e nos meios; e esta é uma das cousas mais legitimamente agradáveis, segundo as melhores opiniões, ao organismo humano. Erasmo, que no seu *Elogio da Sandice* escreveu algumas cousas boas, chamou a atenção para a complacência com que dous burros se coçam um ao outro..."

<sup>93</sup> "Elogio da Vaidade", op. cit. p.999. "Onde é que eu não entro? Onde é que eu não mando alguma coisa? Vou do salão do rico ao albergue do pobre, do palácio ao cortiço, da seda fina e roçagante ao algodão escasso e grosseiro".

under cover, now, as worshipers in the Devil's church practice covert virtue. The devil in disappointment complains to God who answers with the same imagery of silk and cotton invented by the Devil to justify his claims for a church: "What do you want, my poor Devil? Cotton capes have now silken fringes, as well as velvet ones had cotton once. What do you want? It is the eternal human contradiction"<sup>94</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> "A Igreja do Diabo". op. cit. p.153. "Que queres tu, meu pobre Diabo? As capas de algodão têm agora franjas de seda, como as de veludo tiveram franjas de algodão. Que queres tu? É a eternal contradição humana".