

Book Review

Fitz, Earl E. *Machado de Assis and Narrative Theory: Language, Imitation, Art, and Verisimilitude in the Last Six Novels*. Bucknell UP, 2019.

Machado de Assis (1839-1908), the most studied Brazilian author, inspires many critical assessments each year, both in Brazil and abroad. In recent years, studies have gravitated around a number of relatively knowable topics such as Machado's engagement with national issues, his racial identity, his development as a writer, his participation in narrative traditions such as satire, his obsession for alluding to other texts, his connection to certain philosophical currents, his narrative technique, his problematic association with both Romanticism and Realism, and his unusual (for its time) depiction of female characters.

Earl Fitz's *Machado de Assis and Narrative Theory*, in a sense, responds to many of these trends by proposing that the Brazilian author problematizes the very tool—language—that makes such things knowable. Importantly, the book introduces methodical doubt about the extent to which, when it comes to Machado, ideas deriving from his fiction can be confidently discerned. Although “Narrative Theory” appears in the book's title, it might be claimed that “Linguistic Theory” would have suited Fitz's purposes equally well, or perhaps even better.

Fitz, who has been a professor at Vanderbilt University for many years, is well known for his prolific studies of important individual authors and of literary relations between the Spanish, Portuguese, and English-speaking worlds. In particular, he has often appealed for a broader knowledge of and appreciation for Brazilian literature. While it is by no means the main theme of the present book, it is easy to detect this advocacy at various moments; the author often suggests that Machado has been neglected outside Brazil and that he deserves a much greater presence in the general assessment of Latin American and world literature. Fitz says that the book is specifically written for non-specialists, which would be consistent with his promotional tendency. However, specialists, whether undergraduates, graduates, or faculty, will also benefit from this volume.

Fitz's introduction clearly lays out his main hypothesis—that around 1878, when Machado would have been working on *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, he had an awakening about the challenging, problematic, and yet richly powerful nature of language. His claim is that Machado intuitively came to comprehend the central tenet of modern linguistics (developed later by Ferdinand de Saussure), that the elements of language, rather than possessing inherent significance, are “arbitrary and relative in terms of [their] ability to produce meaning” (38). Fitz dedicates a chapter to each of the novels published after that watershed (and he includes the novella “The Psychiatrist” as one of these), showing that in an important sense, the equivocal character of language is what each work is about. According to Fitz, Machado's “linguistic turn” explains his uneasiness with Realism and positions him as the first practitioner of the storied generation that would earn the label of the “new narrative” in Latin America.

Fitz claims that Machado should be regarded as a proto-post-structuralist, or as a “deconstructionist” (41-46). Does this mean that he believes the Brazilian author sympathized with the philosophy of Jacques Derrida as far as it goes, arriving at a radical reduction of all writing to “black upon white,” where any stable meaning is by definition beyond the reader's grasp? Not exactly. Like most North American critics who have shown a fascination for post-structuralism, Fitz is not so doctrinaire as to carry things to that logical conclusion. His understanding of deconstruction seems more akin to that of Hillis Miller, for whom a “readable” text is one that posits a single, univocal interpretation, while an “unreadable” text is one that does not. Such an interpretation of “deconstruction” is not so subtractive as the word implies, and it instead often favors the multiplication of meanings—a position that is compatible with the reality of reading Machado de Assis.

The book provides chapters in chronological order about each of the novels from the *Posthumous Memoirs* to *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*. Each chapter, in turn, and again in chronological order, comments on the many passages where Machado's prose seems to problematize itself, either through explicit self-reference or through a process by which the attitudes of characters can be understood as allegories for the functions of writers or readers. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* offers us “an entirely new ‘poetics of the novel,’ one in which semantic play [...] lies at the heart of it all” (70). *Quincas Borba* defies the reader's notion of unity and shows how a “semantic fluidity [...] structures

much of human existence” (108). *Counselor Ayres’ Memorial* gives us a “harmony of disharmony, a kind of endless settling and unsettling” (160). The general attitude seems to follow an arc, beginning with a sense of disintegration in the early novels and ending with a comforting impression of the transcendence of art in the later ones.

Fitz’s insistent focus on language can at times remind us of Brás Cubas’s penchant for staring at the tip of his own nose. One of Machado’s many narrative digressions referenced by the author suggests a possible way of putting this privileging of the medium over the message in perspective. That same Cubas suggests to the reader that analyzing his own style of narration amounts to “a pair of glasses,” allowing the reader to see the entirety of the book more clearly (55). Indeed, the rhythm of the novel alternates continually between self-analysis and depiction of exterior realities. It might remind us of a scenic drive, where we enjoy a rich variety of natural sights, but feel the need to stop from time to time to clean our specs. For this reason, Earl Fitz’s book should be appreciated as a complement to the many other excellent studies of Machado’s relation to a plentiful external landscape. Lest we become overly confident about our ability to know these realities, we should pause and, considering perspectives like those of this book, clean our glasses.

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