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Nihilism and Desire in “The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas”: Literature and Psychoanalysis

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Abstract: Literature and psychoanalysis are put into dialogue in order to perform an innovative reading of Machado de Assis’s *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, which is considered one of his masterpieces, alongside *Quincas Borba* and *Dom Casmurro*. The psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan is used as a theoretical reference.

Keywords: Machado de Assis, Literature and Psychoanalysis, memory, desire, experimentalism

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Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, the master of what came to be known as the “psychological novel,” was the emblematic writer of Brazilian realism at the end of the 19th century. He scrutinized the human soul, and especially its contradictory and hidden desires. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, was published in book form in 1881¹ and is considered one of his masterpieces alongside *Quincas Borba* and *Dom Casmurro*, the webs of desire and the clashes between the life and death drives are masterfully woven and receive a unicersal tone. Indeed, diving into the deliriums of the character Brás Cubas, into his reveries and machinations, is an exercise in unveiling the impossible: the ebb and flow of writing which, from the very first paragraph of the novel, is radically transgressive. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* not only signals the definitive Machadian turn that would allow him to overcome any traces of romanticism that might have dwelt within him previously, but above all by being the “work of a man” (5) implies bringing to the fore new literary techniques.

Machado de Assis’s boldness is clear in the prologue. In his letter *To the Reader*, a letter in which Machado de Assis, when addressing the natural intimacy between those who are frequenting the same page—the writer and the reader—synthesizes all the innovations of

his text. When revealing his stylistic references, namely the Irishman Laurence Sterne and the Frenchmen Xavier de Maistre, both 18th-century writers and precursors of the stream of consciousness and users of caustic humor, Machado announces that, despite the possible discomfort he may cause the readers, the use of these new strategies in his writing is unavoidable, by emphasizing that *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* is the creation of a dead man who is a writer, a “deceased author,” not an “author deceased.” Susan Sontag has stressed the keenness of this literary device in a famous essay: “The reader is invited to play the game of considering that the book in hand is an unprecedented literary feat. Posthumous reminiscences written in the first person” (31). Machado anticipates future revolutions in the novel that will make the most readers of canonical works shudder with disdain: short chapters flirting with nearly blank pages or flooded with exclamation marks and ellipses. In this transgressive form he announces its anti-hero, Brás Cubas, the one who destroyed the romantic hero and, if he was born sprouting as “a delicate flower” (23), it was from this tree of romanticism, from which he detached himself in order to engender modern literature in Brazil. Let us read an excerpt of this inaugural letter addressed to the reader:

The work of a dead man. I wrote it with a playful pen and melancholy ink and it isn't hard to foresee what can come out of that marriage. I might add that serious people will find some semblance of a normal novel, while frivolous people won't find their usual one here. There it stands, deprived of the esteem of the serious and the love of the frivolous, the two main pillars of opinion. Nonetheless, I hope to entice sympathetic opinion and the first trick is to avoid any explicit and long prologue. [...] The work itself is everything: if it pleases you, dear reader, I shall be well paid for this task; if it doesn't please you, I'll pay you with a snap of the finger and goodbye. Brás Cubas. (5)

As if the life of his writing were not enough, Machado declares himself a bookish author, forged in the lines of his readings, so that it is possible to infer that the writer Machado de Assis was born of the fecundation of the world with the entrails of his library. When composing his prologue for the third edition of the same novel, Machado reveals his lineage by evoking a letter his friend Antônio Joaquim de Macedo Soares wrote to him, in which the jurist told him he had found in his book airs of *Travels in My Homeland*, from 1846, by Almeida Garrett, a novel of digressive style, equally innovative in the Portuguese literary scene. Taking on the ironic tone of his Brás Cubas, Machado de Assis replied to his cherished friend: “It's a question of a scattered work where I, Brás Cubas, have adopted the free-form of a Sterne or a Xavier de Maistre. I'm not sure, but I may have put a few fretful touches of pessimism into it” (5). However, Machado, in spite of listing his readings, also reiterates the originality of his novel:

What makes my Brás Cubas a singular author is what he calls “a few fretful touches of pessimism.” There is in the soul of this book, for all of its merry appearance, a harsh and bitter

feeling that is a far piece from its models. It's a goblet that may carry a similar design but contains a different wine. (4)

It is on the basis of these "fretful touches of pessimism" (5), this original mixture in which Brás Cubas is engendered, that we propose to analyse the webs of desire and nihilism that run through the novel. The psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan will be our theoretical reference.

Brás Cubas: He Who Became an Author by Being Born to Death

The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas is narrated in first person by a "deceased author." As these are posthumous memoirs, not only re-significations of his life story are present, but also an attitude which is not committed to "being alive" and the maskings resulting from this condition, making the character even more alive-flesh in his verisimilitudes with the human—this is the main point of Sontag's essay quoted above. Brás Cubas is a subject of desire even after death, because the choice of writing a book, written from the after-life, reveals the urgency implied in the symbolization of his desire. It is as if his desire was inaugurated by death itself, from which his writing overflows: Brás Cubas becomes an author by being born as an author after his death. Describing his peculiar narrative method, the metaphysical character thus defines himself: "I am not exactly a writer who is dead but a dead man who is a writer, for whom the grave was a second cradle" (7).

Desire, as Freudian theory informs us,² originates from lack. It is from a place where the greatest absence establishes itself: the lack of life, that of Brás Cubas's desire is presented to the reader. Engulfed by the death drive, it is in the remains of his life drive,³ that is, in the writing of this deceased author that his desire is re-signified through his memory.

"To the worm who first gnawed the cold flesh of my corpse I dedicate these posthumous memoirs as a nostalgic remembrance" (2). This is how the desire of the deceased author is established, when Brás Cubas begins the account of the inventory of what his life has been. If the initial desire of the individual in life, according to Freud, is established in the oral phase, the initial desire of the individual in the novel, an individual in death, is to be the object of desire of another being in its orality; in other words, the desire to be swallowed. It is to this being who first swallows him after death that he dedicates the memories of his entire life. Brás Cubas then begins his account on the day and time of his death.

He tells us that he died of pneumonia, but that the real reason for his death was indeed a great and useful idea. Brás Cubas died because he had finally chosen to live—and paradox lies at the heart of the novel. This great idea was that of an antihypochondriacal poultice, destined to relieve humanity's melancholy. This poultice would be called "Brás Cubas Poultice." The deceased author confesses that what moved him most was the love of glory, the pleasure of seeing these three words printed in newspapers or on medicine boxes: "Brás Cubas Poultice." Therefore, the invention and commercialization of the Brás Cubas Poultice would quench his

“thirst for fame” (9):

As it so happened, one day in the morning while I was strolling about my place an idea started to hang from the trapeze I have in my brain. [...] That idea was nothing less than the invention of a sublime remedy, an antihypochondriacal poultice, destined to alleviate our melancholy humanity. In the patent application that I drew up afterward I brought that truly Christian product to the government’s attention. I didn’t hide from friends, however, the pecuniary rewards that would of needs result from the distribution of a product with such far-reaching and profound effects. But now that I’m on the other side of life I can confess everything: what mainly influenced me was the pleasure I would have seeing in print in newspapers, on store counters, in pamphlets, on street corners, and, finally, on boxes of the medicine these three words: *Brás Cubas Poultice*. Why deny it? I had a passion for ballyhoo, the limelight, fireworks. (Assis 9)

In this fragment, the reader is introduced to the pendulum movement through which the novel moves, be it between life and death, be it between the real individual and the idealized individual of himself, the one who aspires to sublime, glorious and universal deeds, but whose sincere aim is to gain the benefits of profit and the splendors of fame. If he has not lived a life to his satisfaction, Brás Cubas wishes to inscribe himself beyond his time, whether while still alive, in his “thirst for fame” (9), or after death, through the writing of his memoirs.

However, before his deceased author expires and succumbs to the corners of the other side of the mystery, Machado presents us with a chapter that condenses his project of radicalization in writing: “Delirium” (chapter 7). Here, Machado moves between realism and, let us say, French surrealism, anticipated in the prose of the deceased author by more than forty years. By warning the reader that, in case they are in a rush to finish the narrative, he may skip this reading, Machado subliminally affirms that this chapter has an existence of its own, independent of the rest of the book. The account of a delirium is a privileged space that allows Machado, under the guise of oneiric and disconnected images which anticipate the last instant of a life, to affirm his boldness of rupture and radicality, putting himself at ease to write, with recourse to apparently unconscious and illogical turns. Thus, vertiginously, he goes back in time, beyond the Garden of Eden, transmuting himself into people and things alike, until he again recovers his human form, which is to be captured by a hippopotamus, so that, afterwards, a dialogue can begin between the moribund and the immense Pandora, whose purpose is to ensure with cruel amusement to the one who is at the gates of mystery that on the other side there will only be indefectible nothingness:

At the very first I took on the figure of a Chinese barber, potbellied, dexterous, who was giving a close shave to a mandarin [...]. Right after that, I felt myself transformed into Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, printed in one volume and morocco-bound [...]. Finally, restored to human form, I saw a hippopotamus come and carry me off. I let myself go, silent, I don’t know whether out of fear or trust, but after a short while the running became so dizzying

that I dared question him and in some way told him that the trip didn't seem to be going anywhere. "You're wrong," the animal replied, "we're going to the origin of the centuries." (16)

In this chapter,⁴ in which the author "highlights the tacit dialogue between the literary thought, plane of composition, and the philosophical thought, plane of immanence" (Almeida), there would be a potential synthesis of "Machadian philosophy" with its tragic trait: namely the meaninglessness of existence and the insignificance of what is real. In these pages, the nihilism that runs through the novel and its protagonist are eloquent in the "voluptuousness of nothingness"—as it is said in the chapter 7, "Delirium."

Returning to his pendular writing between the end and the beginning and, again, the end, Brás Cubas, at 64 years of age at the time of his death, in his narcissistic gaze, still did not possess a legacy to call his own. While he was busy preparing and refining his invention, he was hit by a strong draft, quickly fell ill, and confesses he did not treat himself adequately. When he was already worse, on his last legs, he finally decided to seek treatment. It was, in his words, a treatment without method or persistence. And he still hopes to have proved to the reader that it was his invention that killed him. The creation of the individual Brás Cubas, was faced with the unbearableness of his own birth and, if he refused to cling to life, it was because, for himself, the temptation of nothingness was greater:

When I was busy preparing and refining my invention, however, I was caught in a strong draft. I fell ill right after and didn't take care of myself. I had the poultice on my brain. I was carrying with me the *idée fixe* of the mad and the strong. I could see myself from a distance rising up from the mob-ridden earth and ascending to heaven like an immortal eagle, and before such a grand spectacle no man can feel the pain that's jabbing at him. The next day I was worse. I finally did something about it, but in an incomplete way, with no method or attention or follow-through. Such was the origin of the illness that brought me to eternity. You already know that I died on a Friday, an unlucky day, and I think I've shown that it was my invention that killed me. There are less lucid and no less winning demonstrations. (Assis 12)

He died unmarried. He died without children; he died without even having had a regular occupation. He died without having been born—one might be tempted to conclude.

The Desire of the Boy Brás Cubas: "A Gracious Flower" in the Light of Psychoanalysis

After narrating the moment of his death, Brás Cubas remembers the day of his birth: on 20th October 1805 a gracious flower sprouted from the Cubas family tree. He was, from the start, the hero of the house. His uncle João, a former infantry officer, thought he had a certain Napoleon

Bonaparte look about him; his uncle Ildefonso, a simple priest, envisioned he saw a bishop in him. His father answered to all that Brás Cubas would be whatever God wanted and asked everyone if the boy looked like him, if he was intelligent, handsome, and so forth.

The father was proud of the boy: the father stared at him for a long time, full of himself. The boy was the father. The father was the boy. The boy Brás Cubas built his identity based on this certainty. In the certainty of the unavoidable transmission from father to son, turning both into a mirror: narcissism reinaugurated in his own flesh transposed to another being. The boy Brás Cubas as “depository, servant and heir of the unfulfilled dreams and desires of the father” (Käes 7). Investments that mobilize the boy in his prehistory, embroil him in the present and lay his foundations for the future.⁵

Indeed, in the formation of Brás Cubas’ desires, father and mother brought their own desires inspired in the representation of their respective ancestors, and these desires were then projected onto the son, who, in turn, finds in the parents a model of identification.⁶ When he characterizes and discusses the desires, expectations and the character of his relatives, Brás Cubas acknowledges that what matters is the general expression of the domestic environment: vulgarity of character and the love of appearance.

By interpreting the Machadian text in the light of psychoanalysis, it is important to remember that Sigmund Freud graduated as a neurologist at the University of Vienna in 1881, the same year of the publication of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. We identify in the novel evidences of what was revealed by psychoanalysts, namely, the complexity involved in the process of subjectification, which depends to a great extent on the family. This was the process in which Brás Cubas was enmeshed, so that the arrows of his desire, and the objects to be invested by it, were so engendered. Through the father’s gaze, putting himself in his place and identifying himself with him, the desire for the mother is an imperative.

The father, according to him, had always been permissive, satisfying his every wish: “My father [...] would have given me the sun if I’d asked for it [...]” (Assis 30); even in the face of his mischief and transgressions, his father would tweak his nose, laughing: “Oh, you little devil! You little devil!” (31). His mother was, in his words, a saint, with a very good heart. His father was God in heaven and her most loving husband on Earth.

In this game of mirrors between father and son, little Brás Cubas identifies himself with his father, but, since the father was permissive, he had not internalized the Law in his name by imposing limits; the boy is engulfed by his own excessiveness of jouissance that overflows from the relationship between mother and son. By not suffering the castrating threats, he continued to pour out his desire to occupy the father’s place, without restraint in his desires towards his mother, thus establishing relationships for a myriad of perversities in childhood:

From the age of five I’d earned the nickname of “Devil Child,” and I really was just that. I was one of the most malevolent children of my time, evasive, nose, mischievous, and wilful. For example, one day I split open the head of a slave because she’d refused to give me

a spoonful of the coconut confection she was making and, not content with that evil deed, I threw a handful of ashes into the bowl and, not satisfied with that mischief, I ran to tell my mother that the slave was the one who'd ruined the dish out of spite. And I was only six years old. Prudêncio, a black houseboy, was my horse every day. He'd get down on his hands and knees, take a cord in his mouth as a bridle, and I'd climb onto his back with a switch in my hand. I would whip him, make him do a thousand turns, left and right, and he would obey—sometimes moaning—but he would obey without saying a word or, at most, an— “Ouch, little master!” —to which I would retort, “Shut your mouth, animal!” (Assis 24-25)

Gainsaying his mother's castration and carrying in himself a father who did not impose the interdictions in order to keep his *jouissance* at bay, the boy Brás Cubas grows up, “grows naturally” (24), and his desire is marked by transgression in his love choices.

He begins to choose as objects of desire women who are interdicted to him and who seem phallic to him, that is, in Freudian terms, uncastrated. First, he chose a prostitute, Marcela. She was the first passion of his youth, he was eighteen at the time, and if we believe that he really was handsome, gallant and attractive, as he declares in his account, he would have been able, without greater effort, to drag girls of another strain to his pocket:

Yes, I was that handsome, graceful, well-to-do young fellow, and it's easy to imagine how more than one lady lowered her pensive brow before me or lifted her covetous eyes up to me. One of them all, however, the one who captivated me immediately was a... a... I don't know if I should say it. This book is chaste, at least in its intention. In its intention it is ever so chaste. But out with it, either you say everything or nothing. The one who captivated me was a Spanish woman, Marcela, “beautiful Marcela”, as the boys of those times called her. And the boys were right. (33)

According to his memoirs, this passion had two phases: the consular and the imperial. In the consular phase, Marcela's erotic favors were granted not only to him, but also to Xavier. However, Xavier lowered his standards, allowing Brás Cubas to exercise exclusive power over Marcela. But not without having to pay for it. His father financed the satisfaction of his desires, but when the price of his voluptuousness began to put the family's assets at risk, his father withdrew his funding. In desperation, Brás Cubas sacked his own father's legacy and signed notes that he was to redeem one day. Marcela, in Cubas's words, loved him “for fifteen months and eleven million réis, no more, no less” (36).⁷

Faced with the possibility of the family fortune being squandered in order to support his son's love affair with a prostitute, the father, also a victim of his own lack of setting limits on his son's desires, sent him to study in Europe. On the ship, while waiting for a possible storm, he thought of committing suicide. The captain's words causes him to reconsider. When he arrived in Lisbon, he was a mediocre student. Finally, not even he himself knows how he did it, he graduated; although

he wished to extend indefinitely his time at university. After graduating, he did not work, but went on pilgrimages across Europe. The life of vagrancy only ceased when he received a letter from his father, as he was crossing the canals of Venice, warning him that his mother was dying: “Come” [...] “if you don’t come soon, you will find your mother dead!” (Assis 33). Stricken, he rushed back, finding her in her last breath—they had not seen each other for nine years. He did not cry. But after her death life became vague, without any reason. With the mother’s disappearance, death ceased to be a rhetorical image, to strike him with the sharp edge of reality, perfecting what he had already guessed: the frailty and meaninglessness of existence:

I was prostrate. And this in spite of the fact that I was a faithful compendium of triviality and presumption at that time. The problem of life and death had never weighed on my brain. Never until that day had I peered into the abyss of the Inexplicable. I lacked the essential thing, which is a stimulus, a sudden impulse [...] I had given up everything. I was in a state of shock. (51)

This Pandora who had erupted in his delirium seems at this moment to have come earlier, the amplitude of his mother in his life could be equivalent to that figure of a woman with eyes as bright as the sun, the size of the vastness of savage forms, who had presented herself to him when his ties to life were already dissolving and who had said to him: “Call me Nature or Pandora. I am your mother and your enemy” (17).

It was with the mark of this great mother-enemy, the mythical feminine—which carries in itself all the good and all the evil, in Freudian terms, an uncastrated phallic mother—that Brás Cubas continued to affirm his desire, a desire that like the face of the Mother-Pandora was “that of selfish impassivity, that of eternal deafness, that of an immovable will” (18). It was on the back of desire that Brás Cubas followed his route in a permanent movement of return to the womb that had conceived him, as he pleaded in his delirium: “Come on, Pandora, open up your womb and digest me. It’s amusing, but digest me.” (20)

Let the Man Be Born...

When the mother died, the man had to be born. A man to be forged in each edition of himself, crossing the seasons of life towards nothingness, in the words of the then glum and nihilist Brás Cubas: “Every season of life is an edition that corrects the one before and which will also be corrected itself until the definitive edition, which the publisher gives to the worms gratis” (57). But living was necessary, and in the clash between desire and nothingness an inescapable drive dragged him back to the wheel of life. It was at this moment that his father resolutely presented him the bridges that would lead him to establish himself in the world of adult men: getting married and attaining a chair in the Chamber of Deputies. And who would the bride be? The daughter of the man who would take him to Parliament, named Virgília:

“Virgília?” I interrupted.

“Yes, sir. That’s the name of the bride. An angel, you ninny, an angel without wings. Picture a girl like that, this tall, a lively scamp, and a pair of eyes... Dutra’s daughter...”

“What Dutra is that?”

“Councilor Dutra. You don’t know him, lots of political influence. All right, do you accept?” (Assis 58).

Before this family gathering with his father, Brás Cubas had already guessed the name of his future bride at random. Sitting at a table corner, abandoned to a sheet of paper, in a nonchalant manner and with unpretentious logic, he repeated in heterodox typography, the first verse of Virgil’s *Aeneid* “I sing of arms and the man” in Latin, until it flowed into the poet’s name, the same name as the woman to whom he would ally his days, and thus did the author deceased, a realist writer in the best style of a Concretist poet of the 20th century:

	arma virumque cano	
A		
Arma virumque cano		
	arma virumque cano	
	arma virumque	
		arma virumque cano
	virumque	
[...]		
Vir		Virgil
	Virgil	Virgil
	Virgil	
		Virgil
		(56)

Believing him to be oblivious, it was with gratifying delight that the father discovered in his son’s idly writing the name of the young woman he was supposed to marry. But before Brás Cubas met the bride-to-be, his desire was still to float towards other lands, and in them was a lady named Eugênia, whose etymology means “well born.” She was the “flower of the shrubbery” (201) of a spurious relationship between an eminent glosser, a certain Dr. Vilaça, respectable married man, and Mrs. Eusébia, the maiden sister and spinster of a sergeant-major named Domingues, all of them friends of the family of the then boy Brás Cubas. The deceased author says that Eugênia was the “flower of the shrubbery” due to having witnessed a secret meeting, sparkling and luxurious, in one of the shrubs in the gardens of the family’s country house during a dinner celebrating the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte. Sixteen years later, he met Eugênia, daughter of the still single Mrs. Eusébia. But his infatuation for the girl survived only a few suns; it ended as soon as Brás Cubas realized that the young lady was lame, to which she

confirmed “I’ve been lame from birth” (Assis 63):

The worst of it was that she was lame. Such lucid eyes, such a fresh mouth, such ladylike composure—and lame! This contrast could lead one to believe that nature is sometimes a great mocker. Why pretty if lame? Why lame if pretty? That was the question I kept asking myself on my way back home at night without hitting upon the solution to the enigma. (65)

Considering that desire emerges from the lack in the subject, if there is the perspective that the object in which desire is invested will make the subject full and powerful, even if illusory. That is why Brás Cubas pursues women who, like his mother, he believes to hold the phallus. Therefore, desiring and coming to love a woman who seems to him “defective,” due to a limb that symbolizes strength and power, makes any erotic and loving relationship virtually impossible. Since the beauty that arouses desire, too, has the phallic character, emanating power, in this fact lies the astonishment of the deceased author, because a contradiction is established there: how to be, at the same time, phallic and not so, an anguish which is translated in the sentence “why pretty if lame, why lame if pretty?” (65). By believing to have found a phallic woman, and soon after that realizing that she is deprived of power, the desire is divested of the beautiful Eugênia. Disappointed and carrying his emptiness, Brás Cubas is willing to court his father’s chosen bride, the one who is an angel without wings, the young Virgília.

The marriage seems promising, both build a fun intimacy and take delight in each other’s company, until a rival with equal arms appears: Lobo Neves. Promising to offer the already ambitious Virgília the marquisate, Brás Cubas is irredeemably removed from the battlefield of love. This rejection, more than hurting Brás Cubas himself, opens a narcissistic wound in his father, the one who identified eye to eye with the son from the earliest age, placing in the heir his deepest desires and refusing to impose any limits on him. The frustration at this unfulfilled desire is so great—“A Cubas!” “A Cubas!” (76)—that the father soon thereafter was deceased.

But the history of desire imposes its marks, and when he later met Virgília, already married, they fell madly in love. They started to live a torrid love affair. They rented a house outside the city where they could live the delights of love without being bothered. A love whose desires are translated by Machado de Assis in dots, exclamation marks, and ellipses the signs of desire without words, which are those that reveal the impossible of love. Machado refers to “The Old Dialogue of Adam and Eve”:

Brás Cubas

.....?

Virgília

.....

Brás Cubas

.....

.....
 Virgília

.....! (Assis 90)

Thus Brás Cubas loves Virgília, a love marked by the desire for transgression and the affirmation of his father's desire. Until Virgília's husband, Lobo Neves, was transferred to a distant state in the north of the country. Brás Cubas thought of following them, but was unable to do so; then, without fuss and hustle, they said goodbye. After that, again the bachelor life, again life without work, again living at the expense of what had been left to him by inheritance.

Funeral

With Virgília gone, the wandering is re-established and the incurable nihilism was reinstated, reaffirming the meaninglessness of everything. But this nothingness would be filled by his great idea, the idea of the poultice. The idea that would establish in him the phallic power, only authorized to the mother and the phallic women desired by him. But to do so, he would have to divest them of this power and take it for himself, castrating them—Brás Cubas refuses to do so. He preferred to succumb, giving himself up to death, giving himself up to return to his mother's womb, to Pandora's womb to be digested. Through this death he would be part of the phallus that, in life, his desire had always pursued, in order to placate his unstoppable nihilism and finally inaugurating himself as a subject. Closing his memoirs, Brás Cubas offers a short inventory of his "negatives":

I didn't attain the fame of the poultice, I wasn't a minister, I wasn't a caliph, I didn't get to know marriage. The truth is that alongside these lacks the good fortune of not having to earn my bread by the sweat of my brow did befall me. [...] Putting one and another thing together, any person will probably imagine that there was neither a lack nor a surfeit and, consequently, that I went off squared with life. And he imagines wrong. Because on arriving at this other side of the mystery I found myself with a small balance, which is the final negative in this chapter of negatives—I had no children, I haven't transmitted the legacy of our misery to any creature. (213)

By breaking the cycle of existence in himself, to Pandora, to his mother-enemy, greatest object of desire, who inhabited his unconscious until the last delirium, Brás Cubas offers nothingness by descent; this balance, which allows him to finally, so to speak, castrate his mother.

Translated by Winston Carlos Martins Junior

Notes

1. The novel was initially published in separate pieces in the magazine *Revista Brasileira* throughout the year 1880.
2. For more on desire in psychoanalysis, see Jacques Lacan, *O Seminário de Jacques Lacan: Livro VI: O desejo e sua interpretação*, Jorge Zahar Editor, 1994.
3. On the concepts of life drive and death drive in psychoanalysis, see Sigmund Freud's seminal work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.
4. See Afrânio Coutinho, *A filosofia de Machado de Assis e outros ensaios*, Aguilar, 1959; Miguel Reale, *A filosofia na obra de Machado de Assis: com uma antologia filosófica de Machado de Assis*, Pioneira, 1982.
5. René Kâes takes up some Freudian notions and expands the debate on transmission, revealing the importance of parental investments and anticipatory discourses. According to Kâes, "[...] the infant [...] is the one who will give place and meaning to those predispositions which precede him, which violate him, but which are the conditions of his properly psychic conception" (7).
6. On the processes of identification in psychoanalysis, see Jacques Lacan, *O Seminário de Jacques Lacan: Livre IX: A Identificação*, Jorge Zahar Editor, 1994.
7. Translator's note: Gregory Rabassa translates the expression "onze contos de réis" in the Portuguese original simply as "eleven *contos*," which is not very precise. The currency of the time was actually the "real" (plural: réis), while "conto" was a common designation for a million réis. This is why I chose to change this part of his translation in the citation.

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