

**REALISM AND MORAL REASONING:
AN ANALYSIS OF MACHADO DE ASSIS' CRITICISM OF EÇA DE
QUEIROZ**

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§1. The relationship between moral and aesthetic values would take a new turn in the Portuguese-speaking world after the belated rise of the realist novel in Brazil and Portugal. Although in both countries authors such as Balzac, Dickens, and later Flaubert were soon read and fairly appreciated, the enduring persistence of Romanticism as an agent of nation-building in Brazil, and as a source of nationalistic reappraisal of the past in Portugal, overshadowed until the mid-1870s the emergence of any sustained interest in the full moral implications of the latest trends of the Victorian and the naturalist novel. Portuguese writer and critic Jorge de Sena has attempted to explain the tardy interest in realism and the feeble assimilation of Balzac as a literary model in Brazil and Portugal in terms of the ideological role the persistent romantic representations of reality played in each society:

Não é apenas um moralismo hipócrita que o Naturalismo desafiará depois [...], mas um desejo [romântico] de apropriação mitológica da realidade antiga ou quotidiana, cujas bases económicas são escamoteadas. Por isso o realismo romântico de Balzac, implacável a este respeito, não teve penetração.¹

Comparing Portuguese romantic realists, such as Júlio Diniz and Camilo Castelo Branco, with their Brazilian contemporaries, i.e. Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, José de Alencar, and the early Machado de Assis, Jorge de Sena points out that before Eça de Queiroz started publishing, Brazilian literature, though arising from a largely rural society, was able to produce a stronger urban novel than the Portuguese. Sena shares his interest in the concept of "romantic realism" with Donald Fanger, who had argued a few years before that "[t]he romantic realists [...] were the first fully to realize the potentialities of the

¹ Jorge de Sena, "Algumas palavras sobre o realismo, em especial o português e o brasileiro," *Estudos de cultura e literatura brasileira* (Lisboa: Edições 70, 1988) 532.

metropolis as a subject of fiction.” Quoting one of Theophile Gautier’s characters in *Les Jeunes-France* (1873), Fanger summarizes what he takes to be the conclusion of the romantic realists’ search for an original poetics amidst the quotidian contemporary life: “Poetry is everywhere: this room is as poetic as the bay of Bahia or any locale reputedly poetic.”²

In fact, one of the characteristic moves toward Realism was a break with the thematic hierarchies of Romanticism: objects, scenarios, and deeds of all kinds, but especially those then considered of a low kind, entered the picture. This shift suggests a change of how new aesthetic evaluations of the novel redefined, along the nineteenth-century, the moral criteria used to assess the referent’s literary worth. We need only to think of the way writers as diverse as Balzac, Dickens, Stendhal, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Zola, or Henry James accounted for some of their own works, to realize how morally charged the discourse on the novel was during that century. With only the possible exception of James, Machado de Assis and Eça de Queiroz had been careful readers of this particular canon. However, the paradigm for this new standpoint, in so far as the Luso-Brazilian novel is concerned, certainly derives from Balzac himself, who had stated in his introduction to *La comédie humaine* that the novelist has an advantage over the historian in telling what is almost always left untold, the history of manners; or in Balzac’s own words:

En dressant l’inventaire des vices et des vertus, en rassemblant les principaux faits des passions, en peignant les caractères, en choisissant les événements principaux de la Société, en composant les types par la réunion des traits de plusieurs caractères homogènes, peut-être pouvais-je arriver à écrire l’histoire oubliée par tant d’historiens, celle des mœurs. [...] En copiant toute la Société, la saisissant dans l’immensité de ses agitations, il arrive, il devait arriver que telle composition offrait plus de mal que de bien, que telle partie de la fresque représentait un groupe coupable, et la critique de crier à l’immoralité, sans faire observer la moralité de telle autre partie destinée à former un contraste parfait. [...] [I] me reste à faire observer que les moralistes les plus consciencieux doutant fort que la Société puisse offrir autant de bonnes que de mauvaises actions. Les actions blâmables, les fautes, les crimes, depuis les plus légers jusqu’aux plus graves, y trouvent toujours leur punition humaine ou divine, éclatante ou secrète. J’ai mieux fait que l’historien, je suis plus libre.³

Balzac’s conception of the writer’s task and its bearing on the intricate relationship between human values and the novel is clearly summarized in the above passage. His confessional conclusion, “J’ai mieux fait que l’historien, je suis plus libre,” would for the next hundred years influence how Realism was

² Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 21-22.

³ Honoré de Balzac, *La comédie humaine*, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) I:11, 14-15.

taken as the default mode of expression for the genre. The novel's object would then remain morally and epistemically constrained to depict the diversity of societal and private life in progress. Such view would culminate with Ian Watt's contention that Realism "surely attempts to portray all the varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it."⁴ In spite of the differences of perspectives and goals among critics such as Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin, on the one hand, and F. R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling, on the other, we can reasonably argue that they share the idea of the novel as a structured and evaluative apprehension of human experience through language. Prior to post-structuralism, virtually all critics fell under the spell of Balzac's daring and morally committed scrutiny of the patterns of individual choices and social practices undertaken through his novels. Lionel Trilling, for instance, would sum up in a liberal fashion the humanistic conception of this genre:

The novel [...] is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of man's soul. [...] For our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination has been the novel of the last two hundred years. [...] [I]ts greatness and its practical usefulness lay in its unremitting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination [...] It taught us, as no other genre ever did, the extent of human variety and the value of this variety. It was the literary form to which the emotions of understanding and forgiveness were indigenous, as if by the definition of the form itself.⁵

Such remarkable, if over-optimistic, concept of the novel is a direct result of the triumph and prestige of nineteenth-century realism. But why should the representation of human experience as such carry a sense of moral worth? And what exactly should be the role of the realist novel in our lives? These questions were at the core of the belated emergence of Luso-Brazilian realism.

§2. On April 16, 1878, Machado de Assis, then a thirty-nine year old author of four novels and six volumes of poems, plays, and short stories, published a review of *Cousin Bazilio* (*O primo Bazilio*, 1878), the second naturalist novel by Eça de Queiroz.⁶ The review came out in the pages of *O*

⁴ Ian P. Watt, *The Rise of The Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) 11.

⁵ Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," *Essentials of The Theory of Fiction*, eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy, 2 ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 83, 90-91.

⁶ *Cousin Bazilio* was published in Rio de Janeiro in two pirate editions according to the 1878 version, see Ernesto Guerra da Cal, *Lengua y estilo de Eça de Queiroz: Bibliografía*

Cruzeiro, a news magazine in which two months earlier Machado had concluded the serialization of *Yayá Garcia*, his fourth novel. His critical evaluation of Queiroz has long remained one of the dominant standards of assessing Naturalism in Brazil. Machado argued for a sharper distinction between moral and aesthetic values, with emphasis on a normative conception of narrative verisimilitude grounded on the plausible representation of inner life. Machado's review called for a very specific criterion to assess the effectiveness of the modern novel: fictional narratives should be able to allow for a certain cognitive experience, but though such effect is by and large a result of the representation of human values, moral worth is not binding on successful novels.⁷ In other words, the representation of virtuous characters or reproachable deeds is not a necessary and sufficient condition for successful literary works, though in most cases moral evaluation is at play at the level of the composition of believable fictional lives. In brief, this was Machado's position. But what might the 1878 review tell us about the forthcoming shift toward a more problematic and self-conscious kind of narrative in Portugal and in Brazil?

Both *The Sin of Father Amaro* (*O crime do padre Amaro*, 1875) and *Cousin Bazilio* present a similar structure: they depict the dreadful consequences of the arrival of a foreign bachelor in a fairly specific social setting. In the first novel Amaro, a young priest, takes over the spiritual leadership of a small Portuguese town and, after impregnating Amélia, his landlady's daughter, he causes the death of both his son and, indirectly, of Amélia.⁸ In Queiroz's second novel, Bazilio, an unprincipled bon vivant, comes

queirociana sistemática y anotada e iconografia artística del hombre y la obra. 5 vols. (Coimbra: Universidade de Coimbra, 1975) 42, §120-21. For a confrontation between the first two Portuguese editions, see Manuel de Paiva Boléo, *O realismo de Eça de Queirós e a sua expressão artística*, 2 ed. (Coimbra: Coimbra editora, 1942).

⁷ Eça de Queiroz was not unknown to the Brazilian reader: *As Farpas*, published in Lisbon in 1871, was republished in *Jornal do Recife* without permission in the same year, see Guerra da Cal, *Lengua y estilo de Eça de Queiroz: Bibliografía queirociana sistemática y anotada e iconografia artística del hombre y la obra* 179-92, §649-75. Paulo Cavalcanti, *Eça de Queiroz, agitador no Brasil*, 2 ed. (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1966), analyzed the history of its reception in the Brazilian Northeast and its diffusion with anti-monarchic intention. In 1878, an unauthorized edition of an early and co-authored work by Queiroz, *O mistério da estrada de Sintra* (1870), was published in Rio de Janeiro, see Guerra da Cal, *Lengua y estilo de Eça de Queiroz: Bibliografía queirociana sistemática y anotada e iconografia artística del hombre y la obra* 14, §15.

⁸ There are important differences between the three versions of this novel. Machado reviewed the 1878 version, in which Father Amaro actually kills his son with his own hands. Queiroz rewrote the chapter after reading the review; in the 1880 version, Amaro's responsibility for the child's death is attenuated. Eça de Queiroz, *O crime do Padre Amaro: 2a. e 3a. versões*, eds. Carlos Reis and Maria do Rosário Cunha (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 2000).

back from Brazil and, being rich and unscrupulous, begins an adulterous and incestuous relationship with his cousin, Luiza. Juliana, her maid, discovers the affair and the psychological terror of blackmail, along with Bazilio's indifference, ruins Luiza's life and causes her death. In either novel the seducer has no sense of guilt or responsibility, and much of the author's intended effect is heavily dependent upon the two negative moralizing conclusions: Amaro and Bazilio are neither punished nor experience any kind of regret or remorse. A significant feature of Queiroz's early poetics was a direct and necessary connection between morality and aesthetics. This vision, most probably derived from the way he read Proudhon and Flaubert, was best expressed in the conference he presented on June 12, 1871, at the Lisbon Casino:

Vê-se por isto que influência nos costumes, que ação salutar e moralizadora a arte realista, ou a arte crítica, pode exercer. A consciência encontrará ali exemplos a seguir e a imitar, e outros a condenar e a evitar com cautela. [...] A arte deve corrigir e ensinar; não ser só destinada a causar impressões passageiras e dar-se unicamente ao prazer dos sentidos; deve visar um fim moral. [...] Quando a ciência nos disser: a idéia é verdadeira; a consciência nos segredar: a idéia é justa; a arte nos bradar: a idéia é bela—teremos tudo.⁹

Nevertheless, Machado thought that, in spite of the Queiroz's talent, both novels were pointless. Queiroz's emphasis on descriptions of life's base details undermined the possibility of suitable character construction. Furthermore, if the novels' aim were to induce in the reader a moral response to the protagonists' fate, such an effect would not be achieved unless the reader could understand and empathize with the heroines' drama. Machado pointed out that

Para que Luísa me atraia e me prenda, é preciso que as tribulações que a affligem venham dela mesma; seja uma rebelde ou uma arrependida; tenha remorsos ou imprecações; mas, por Deus! dê-me a sua pessoa moral. [...] Sabemos todos que é afflitivo o espetáculo de uma grande dor física; e, não obstante, é máxima corrente em arte, que semelhante espetáculo no teatro, não comove a ninguém; ali vale somente a dor moral. [...] Ora, a substituição do principal pelo acessório, a ação transplantada dos caracteres e dos sentimentos para o incidente, para o fortuito, eis o que me pareceu incongruente e contrário às leis da arte. [...] Os remorsos de Luísa, permita-me dizê-lo, não é a vergonha da consciência, é a vergonha dos sentidos; ou, como diz o autor: "um gosto infeliz em cada beijo". Medo, sim; o que ela tem é medo; disse-o eu e di-lo ela própria: "Que feliz seria, se não fosse a infame [Juliana]!"¹⁰

⁹ Eça de Queirós, "A nova literatura: Conferência no Casino Lisbonense," *Literatura e arte: Uma antologia*, ed. Beatriz Berrini (Lisboa: Relógio D'Água Editores, 2000) 24, 36. References to Proudhon and Flaubert can be found in different versions of the same conference and along Queiroz's voluminous correspondence.

¹⁰ Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, *Obra completa*, ed. Afrânio Coutinho, 2 ed., 3 vols. (Rio de Janeiro: J. Aguilar, 1962) 3:906-07, 11.

Queiroz's use of chance and fate, as well as his attention to accessory elements of composition—as opposed to a more detailed construction of character motivation—undermined any possibility of bringing about the intended moral effect. The core of Machado's claim may be perceived in his insistence on the opposition between truly moral emotions and mere feelings directed toward an object which is beyond the character's agency: for instance, he stresses the fact that Luiza is afraid of being caught rather than remorseful for what she has done. Indeed, most reactions in both novels belong, in Machado's view, to the realm of raw bodily senses—e.g. pain, hunger, etc.—as opposed to moral sentiments. Only the latter are emotions of self-assessment, such as shame, guilt, remorse, and regret.¹¹ Although the review is unjust with Queiroz, criticizing him for something he apparently did not intend to achieve, Machado's position is not a typically moralistic condemnation of the naturalist novel.¹² Rather, he addressed the plausibility of the heroine's motivations, given her own values and aims; if we accept the restrictions he posed, it seems we cannot take her intentions seriously and, hence, any moral effect is indeed lost.¹³

It is pertinent to recall at this point that when Machado wrote the review, he had just published *Yayá Garcia*, a novel that presents a new project: young Yayá is perhaps the first Brazilian protagonist to have radically changed, in the sense of moral awareness, by the conclusion of the novel. Contrary to Queiroz's heroines of unruly desires, Yayá achieves her "moral puberty" by carefully watching how other people disguise their feelings and act on their shame, pride, and resentment in order to achieve a balanced and calculated conception of

¹¹ Three recent philosophical interpretations of moral emotions extremely relevant for literary analysis can be found in Elizabeth S. Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 226-53, R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and The Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 18-50, Richard Wollheim, *On The Emotions* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1999) 148-224.

¹² For a recent perspective on the debate, which takes Machado's position as a misreading of Queiroz's early literary project, see Paulo Franchetti, "Eça e Machado: Críticas de ultramar." *Cult: Revista brasileira de literatura* 38 (2000) 48-53. Though there are now an extensive number of commentaries to Machado's reaction, some of the most interesting remarks are still to be found in Constantino Paleólogo, *Eça de Queirós e Machado de Assis* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Tempo Brasileiro, 1979), Alberto Machado da Rosa, *Eça, discípulo de Machado? Formação de Eça de Queirós (1875-1880)* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fundo de Cultura, 1963), and Nelson Werneck Sodré, *O naturalismo no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 1965).

¹³ Brito Broca has noticed an interesting exchange of chronicles and letters along the pages of the carioca periodical *Gazeta de Notícias* during the time of the first Brazilian reception of *Cousin Basílio*. He points out that this "romance chegou a criar aqui uma verdadeira mania, uma doença: o basilismo. [...] É bom *O primo Basílio*? É mau? É sério? É decente? É imoral? Eis as perguntas que se formulavam por toda parte." Brito Broca, *Naturalistas, parnasianos e decadistas: Vida literária do realismo ao pré-modernismo* (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 1991) 75.

love.¹⁴ Machado's previous novels were fictions of feigned intentionality. *Yayá Garcia* is precisely the point where the phenomena of deceptive agency and disguised intent are not exclusively seen as a result of the protagonist's past social conditions and humiliations, but rather as a character trait that may be acquired by social interaction. Taking others' intentions seriously is the first condition for unveiling the "syntax of life;" and undoubtedly, this is where we should expect to find the first sign of Brás Cubas' fictional world.¹⁵

The difference in perspectives on realism and moral value between Machado and Queiroz was crucial for the immediate development of the Luso-Brazilian novel. Although not exclusively motivated by Machado's words, Eça de Queiroz would, after responding to his criticism in a personal letter, heavily revise both *Cousin Bazílio* and *The Sin of Father Amaro*.¹⁶ Queiroz's next fictional undertakings would be *The Mandarin* (*O mandarim*, 1880) and *The Relic* (*A relíquia*, 1887), which suggestively distance themselves from the previous two novels. Both narratives embrace a more ironic treatment of motivation and pay attention to the first-person narrator's dilemmas of moral reasoning. As for Machado de Assis' next novel, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (*Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, 1880), it was published exactly two years after his review and further develops what he seemed to have demanded from Eça de Queiroz: a narrative where the complex and plausible composition of intentionality, and not necessarily the strict moralizing lesson, is the primal aim and the core of both character construction and plot

¹⁴ I have elsewhere interpreted this transition in terms of a Weberian rationalization of conduct, see José Luiz Passos, "A sintaxe da vida: Ação e dissimulação em *Senhora e Iaiá Garcia*," *Espelho: Revista Machadiana* 3 (1997): 89-105.

¹⁵ It should be noted that recent scholarship has reconsidered the relations between moral philosophy and literature, these perspectives might shed light on the above discussed issue; for general accounts of the subject matter, see: John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), B. J. Tysdahl, *Literature and Ethics: Proceedings from the Symposium "Skjønn litteratur og etikk," held at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, Oslo, 23-24 April 1992* (Oslo: Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters; Dept. of British and American Studies University of Oslo, 1992), Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: New York: Routledge, 1991), and Lawrence Buell, "In Pursuit of Ethics," *PMLA* 114.1 (1999).

¹⁶ Fragments of the first version of *The Sin of Father Amaro* (*Revista do Ocidente*, 1875; first Portuguese edition 1876) were published between 1876 and 1878 in São Paulo, along the issues 3 through 5 of *República das Letras*. A pirate edition of the 1876 version came out in Rio de Janeiro in 1878, see Guerra da Cal, *Lengua y estilo de Eça de Queiroz: Bibliografía queiroziana sistemática y anotada e iconografía artística del hombre y la obra* 27, §60-61. It should be noted that the title of the English translation unfortunately displaces the original emphasis on the idea of a social transgression—expressed by the word "crime"—in favor of a spiritual offense, the sin.

development. Such a novel inaugurates Brazilian realism at odds with virtually all the contemporary novelistic trends then in practice.

After this incident with Eça de Queiroz, Machado de Assis would write five novels whose main motives lie in a keen interest on skeptical modes of agency, often evidenced throughout the use of narrators that dwell on the ironic scrutiny of intentionality. These narratives can only be described as ethical in the very specific sense that much of their intended aesthetic effect is closely dependent upon the reader's perception of how characters and narrators come to terms with the limited chances they have to satisfy their incommensurable desires, and how enlightened self-interest can be the only way of achieving a successful—though rarely unproblematic—social life. Machado brings to the fore the qualms of deceptive intent and moral quandaries; he portrays people changing their picture of the world as they discover the object of their desire through someone else's eyes. His protagonists typically long for learning the others' motives, while simultaneously striving to hide their own. Throughout his novels, a subtle treatment of agency and motivation is what distinguishes Machado from his contemporaries. Moral life had become, since his early novels, the core and the aim of narrative construction. Contrary to Eça de Queiroz's unmediated link between art and morality, Machado seems to put forward a view that stresses not necessarily a verisimilar representation of objects and events, but rather a plausible depiction of motivation and inner life. As he seemingly insisted on a follow-up to his review, art is not to be taken as morality, though novels are able to convincingly describe processes of moral deliberation. We can now pose the following question: how is it possible to describe actions or events ethically? In other words, what makes strings of words morally compelling? At this point we shall briefly consider some theoretical remarks about realism, language, and moral reasoning.

§3. That both Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein have, in some aspects, conflated ethics and aesthetics is something that remains an altogether alluring and unsettling heritage to those interested in the relations between the two domains.¹⁷ In his anthological yet often overlooked lecture on ethics, Wittgenstein suggested that “a certain characteristic misuse of our language

¹⁷ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” *Philosophical Review* 74.1 (1965): 3-11, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), and Garry Hagberg, *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), for an extended Wittgensteinian commentary on art and meaning; Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 3 vols. (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1948) 217-46; Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Allen Lane Penguin Press, 1993) 57-79, and more recently Christopher Janaway, *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 213-51.

runs through all ethical and religious expressions. All these expressions *seem*, *prima facie*, to be just like similes."¹⁸ When we say "he is a good person" or "this is a good novel" we are in some sense borrowing the word "good" from its empirical use, where it is applied to facts that can be assessed according to a predetermined purpose. That is to say: so far as a chair is strong enough to comfortably bear a person, and a pair of scissors cuts smoothly and effectively, we can state that they are a good chair and a good a pair of scissors. According to Wittgenstein, the contention also holds for the aesthetical use of the same kind of expressions that similarly aim at an absolute judgment of value—i.e. propositions ascribing a superlative attribute to an object, an event, or a state of affairs. Hence the expressions "a good person" and "a good novel" hold a relation of similarity with the empirical use of the adjective "good," which becomes meaningful in its ethical and aesthetical use by way of an extrapolation of its factual sense. A similar argument is made by Kenneth Burke when he points out that the words we use to refer to what is not immediately perceptible, the ineffable or supernatural realm, "are necessarily borrowed by analogy from our words for the other three orders: the natural, the socio-political and the verbal [i.e. the metalinguistical realm]."¹⁹ To make this point clear and to examine how it might bear on the moral implications present at the rise of the Brazilian realist novel, I will restate Wittgenstein's own example in a slightly different manner.

Suppose an omniscient being were to write a book containing all possible events, all the movements of all bodies, and all potential states of mind; in such a book—call it world-book—we would find an exhaustive description of all past, present, and future facts. Indeed, Jorge Luis Borges has already imagined such a book, or collection of books, in "The Library of Babel" ("La biblioteca de Babel," 1944). Wittgenstein's argument is that within this world-book "[t]here are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial."²⁰ This immense amount of language can only describe facts, and no string of words taken either by itself or in relation to others is a priori ethically or aesthetically bound. We can think of the omniscient narrator's role in the realist novel as a paradigm for this stance, and take Flaubert's insistence on the author's neutrality as indicative of a broader attitude that would become a norm of literary composition. As for Wittgenstein, he summarizes his own view with the following thought-experiment:

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, "Ethics," 9.

¹⁹ Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) 15.

²⁰ Wittgenstein, "Ethics," 6.

If for instance in our world-book we read the description of a murder with all its details physical and psychological, the mere description of these facts will contain nothing which we could call an ethical proposition. The murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone. Certainly the reading of this description might cause us pain or rage or any other emotion, or we might read about the pain or rage caused by this murder in other people when they heard of it, but there will simply be facts, facts, and facts but no Ethics.²¹

This example is intended to show how propositions in a natural language are fit to describe empirical state of affairs. Wittgenstein's contention is not that we use language only to point to facts in the world, but rather that we use it to select and direct our interlocutors' attention, as well as our own, to aspects of the world, and that our language allows for the use of words or expressions that refer to facts as similes that enable us to refer to judgments about non-facts, e.g. absolute judgments of value. But how can we understand the use of words that merely refer to facts as an account of something that is beyond the empirical realm?

At this point we might as well ask ourselves how we are to understand much of the propensity of the nineteenth-century novel for taking the description of value-based human actions as grounds for its aesthetical evaluation. For it seems to be precisely here that both domains overlap in the same "misuse" of language pointed out at the beginning of this section. There is one point in which Eça de Queiroz and Machado de Assis seem to concur: novelists should use language to provide complex descriptions not of actual deeds, but rather of pretended ones. And the readers' ability to morally assess such descriptions may enhance or impair their aesthetic fruition. However, if we take Wittgenstein's insight and apply it to the dispute between Queiroz and Machado, we can safely say that fictional descriptions are not a priori morally effective, i.e. meaningful. Rather, they are scripts to be acted on according to certain shared rules of semantic extrapolation—or misuse, to keep Wittgenstein's term. For example: the scene in which Amaro kills his son—in the 1878 version of the novel, and suppressed thereafter—does not hold in itself any ethical weight:

[Amaro] Ergueu-se hirto, com os cabelos eriçados. A criança gemia. De repente abaixou-se, tomou um pedregulho, pô-lo sobre a criança, entrouxou tudo num embrulho apertado, agarrou-o convulsamente, atirou-o à água. Aquilo fez pchah! Umás rãs saltaram assustadas. Amaro ficou imóvel, gelado, fitando o rio.²²

²¹ Wittgenstein, "Ethics," 6-7.

²² Queirós, *O crime do Padre Amaro: 2a. e 3a. versões*, 968.

For Eça de Queiroz, the simple fact that Amaro finishes the novel without any sign of social punishment or self-chastisement is an act of social and moral criticism enacted by the narrative. Machado de Assis, on the other hand, required a sense of purpose for the deed, a context in which choices make sense and express a suitable and believable match between belief, intention, and action. We can call it the plausibility condition.²³ Moreover, the way the description is conveyed is part of how plausibility is satisfied; and when it is successfully undertaken, we may be led to perceive, to “see,” how a given character—a fictional “moral person”—can actually bear such acts. This is a twofold process of acknowledgment: reading a fictional description of a moral deed is not perceiving (first) something that is fictional and (second) that this perception should be morally concerned, or vice-versa. Rather, what we see—when we read—is a fictional description perceived immediately as a description of a moral deed. And if we accept that human beings can come up with fictional descriptions of pretended moral lives with a variable degree of complexity, we will be able to see why for the nineteenth-century writers in question moral imagination plays an essential role in our appreciation of novels. Therefore, it is not a surprise that judgments of aesthetic value were intermingled with judgments of moral value in the rise of Luso-Brazilian Realism. Finally, if we want to understand what motivated these writers to write as they did, we must try to shed light on why Realism can apparently be especially permeable to moral requirements.

§4. Realism still poses a serious challenge to our understanding of the relations between artistic representation and reality. When we look at a realist picture or read a realist novel, what we see, or imagine, is a world that is assumed to be in some sense akin to ours. We look at this imagined world as we would look at our own, or at least we look at it *as if* we were gazing at a world that was, is, or could have been the actual world for someone at sometime. It is not by chance that realist fiction is born out of the late romantic attempt at constituting fully complex and detailed historic novels such as Sir Walter Scott's.²⁴ The point about this attitude we adopt toward signs is the meaning of

²³ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2 ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), provides a useful discussion of intentional actions as “actions to which a certain sense of ‘why?’ is given application.” Another helpful account of “intending” can be found in Donald Davidson, *Essays on actions and events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). These philosophical insights on action can shed light on Machado's criticism of Queiroz's naturalism as unfit by its own programmatic convictions to provide convincing descriptions of human intentionality.

²⁴ Harry E. Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and his Successors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

this “as if,” this operator of modality that connects two worlds on the grounds of some kind of semblance set out by expectation and inference.

I propose we start looking at Realism, following John Searle’s account of fictive utterances, as a convention that offers us the possibility of treating the fictional world as an imagined extension of our knowledge and beliefs about our own world.²⁵ In this respect, Realism rests upon the fact that we can refer to unreal objects and made-up relations by means of pretended speech acts because such objects and relations seem to hold the property of being of a kind similar to those that we actually take to be real. We can describe and paraphrase them in a way similar to that which we do with real, or “serious,” objects and relations; and we can infer from their semblance with their real-life counterparts certain aspects of their constitution. This is what I call the minimal requirements for a theory of fictional realism.²⁶ Treating fictional lives in a novel as we treat real-life people and events seems to be what Machado de Assis demanded from Eça de Queiroz.

In this sense, the most fundamental motif and formal strategy of Machado de Assis’ realism lies precisely on the potentially deceiving nature of the characters’ and narrators’ ambitions and choices when simultaneously aroused and restricted by social expectations and institutions. What distinguishes his novels from the early Eça de Queiroz, and more broadly from the nineteenth-century Latin American novel, is a transition from emphasis on moralizing lessons to ironic scrutiny of deceptive agency. Whereas Romanticism and Naturalism in Latin America had produced fictions of space and locale, Machado presents increasingly complex and subtle motivations to account for the decisions of his characters and narrators. This shift represents the first consistent attempt by a Brazilian writer to account for a plausible portrayal of complex emotional states, ambivalent moral standards, and the perverse implications of rational deliberation when guided toward self-interest.

²⁵ John R. Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse.” *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 73.

²⁶ Such a minimalist account can coexist with a number of different theories of realist art, such as Nelson Goodman’s nominalistic contention that “[r]ealism is relative, [and] determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time” (37); or Roman Jakobson’s semiotic interpretation of the several uses for the word “realism,” and Roland Barthes’ account of the reality effect caused by the presence of ordinary and apparently non-functional objects inscribed in the realist narratives; or even, the classic Lukácsian conception of the homology between social and aesthetical structures characteristic of successful realist novels. See György Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, Gorki, and Others* (London: Merlin Press; Hillway Pub. Co., 1972). Roman Jakobson, *Language in literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987), Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2 ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), and Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

Consequently, as I have pointed out elsewhere, the self-interrogation performed by the narrators of Machado de Assis' later works reads as a critique of perspectives common to the naïve progressive thinking that marked the national modernization projects prevalent in Brazil at the end of the nineteenth-century.²⁷ The distinctive nature of Machado's realism and its significance to the development of literature in Latin America is closely related to his perception that the realist novel should engage the reader in an *aesthetical* practice of moral reasoning, without being limited to or explicable exclusively in terms of normative fictional examples of conduct, as he took—perhaps unjustly—Eça de Queiroz's first novels to be. This conception of literature is largely owed to Machado's reception of the Shakespearean drama, the eighteenth-century English novel, and the nineteenth-century pessimistic philosophy—notably Schopenhauer's. A possible solution to the limitations and impasses of today's criticism on Machado de Assis lies, I believe, both in the analysis of such influences and in a comprehensive approach to the complex ethical awareness evidenced by the author's insistence that his narratives were essentially "moral portraits," and that "the aim of artistic interpretation [e.g. literature] is to make facts and feelings intelligible."²⁸

A concluding remark concerning literature's cognitive value may be drawn from what has been said so far: If, for instance, children can actually learn to identify animals through photographs and other pictorial representations—as psychologists and cognitive scientists have shown—couldn't we think of the novel as a place where we learn to identify or name emotions, perspectives, and even experiences previously unfamiliar to ourselves? This seems to be how Machado de Assis took the novel and this is where we can find the grounds for his criticism of Eça de Queiroz. If we are inclined to second his emotion, the next logical question, which we will not try to address here, is whether novels can actually make us better—or worse—human beings.

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²⁷ Cf. José Luiz Passos, "Crítica engajada e texto engasgado: Machado de Assis e Sílvia Romero na autonomização do campo literário brasileiro." *Chasqui: revista de literatura latinoamericana* XXVI.1 (1997): 9-15.

²⁸ Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, *Dispersos de Machado de Assis*, ed. Jean Michel Massa (Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Educação e Cultura; Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1965) 179.

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