Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica

Volume 1 | Number 5 Article 16

1977

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Citas recomendadas

Dwyer, John P. (Primavera-Otoño 1977) "*Dom Casmurro* and the Opera Aperta," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 5, Article 16.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss5/16

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DOM CASMURRO AND THE OPERA APERTA

John P. Dwyer

The initial reading of Machado's *Dom Casmurro*[1] is in many ways an invitation to reread what many critics consider his nearly perfect novel. As Emir Rodríguez-Monegal[2] points out in his study of the "boom" in the Latin American novel, Machado's work prefigures many stylistic and thematic techniques later employed by such 'modern' writers as Borges, Cortázar and Fuentes.[3] Clearly, no one would venture to attach any direct ties of influence among these authors, especially since Machado's work has gone relatively unknown to the majority of the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America. There are, however, certain literary tendencies and devices shared by these authors that make possible a tentative comparison. The use of the unreliable narrator, the theme of the double, the novel as a novel, reflector characters and the "opera aperta" or open novel are examples of this case in point that merit attention. All these elements serve to reinforce the tremendous well of subtlety and ironic narration in all of Machado's works, as much as they tend to emphasize the importance of the role of the reader to the over-all understanding of this work in particular.

Dom Casmurro and the confessional tradition

The ambiguous first-person narration of Sterne's *Tristam Shandy*[4] may well have served as a major influence in Machado's formulation of *Dom Casmurro*. Just as the word "gentleman" attached to the title of Sterne's work helps define the tone of the narrative, Santiago's rightfully earned epithet of "casmurro" aids the reader in understanding the nature of the narrator. As Helen Caldwell points out in her introduction to the translation of the novel, Santiago's nickname encompasses both the tragic and obstinate nature of its bearer. In fact, its importance to the story is underlined by the dedication of the initial chapter to an apologetic explanation of its application to the narrator. Recalling an earlier incident, Casmurro relates how he had inadvertently offended a would-be poet by not paying attention to him while traveling with him on a train. This lack of social grace and courtesy doomed Santiago to an unearned nickname—"The next day he said some hard things about me and gave me the name Dom Casmurro. The neighbors, who do not like my taciturn recluse-like habits, took up the nickname: it stuck" (page 3). The tone of our narrator is one of self-defense as much as it

is of explanation. Knowing that the name has a definite pejorative slant, Santiago admonishes the reader not to consult a dictionary for the meaning of "casmurro." The narrator's attempt has a dual purpose: one, to place himself in the traditional role of authority to the reader who receives only the information the former chooses to convey; two, to hide the real meaning of the word "casmurro," which according to Helen Caldwell (see page V of her introduction) means not only taciturn but also stubborn, obstinate and wrong-headed.

Given this information on the part of the narrator, the reader must immediately begin to qualify Santiago's remarks as being self-protecting and self-serving, a characteristic of the unreliable narrator of many picaresque and confessional novels as outlined in Wayne Booth's study, *The Rhetoric of Fiction.*[5] By initiating the narrative this way, Machado as novelist and creator assumes the mask of Santiago narrator and creator. This idea does not become immediately clear to the reader until certain later events in the novel oblige a rereading of the work. Santiago's suspicion breeds a corresponding literary suspicion on the part of the reader who follows the narrator through his explanation of being a *casmurro.* The selective narrative process of recreating his vital circumstances parallels Santiago's recreation of his childhood estate which he has rebuilt in later years. Henri Peyre's[6] remarks on the "personal novel" provide insight into the craft of fiction found in Machado: (on the novel)

> a narrative of events likely to bring forth the growth and decay of characters and their reactions to the vicissitudes of life, and the creation of beings independent from the author or given free rein by him after his imagination had launched them on their adventurous careers.

Professor Peyre's remarks relate to what we commonly call the traditional novel, the mimetic, historical narrative steeped in the late 19th century realism of Galdós and Flaubert. In essence, Machado, or rather Santiago, has diverted the narrative stream found in this tradition not only to defend himself but also to question the very literary tradition in which he finds himself at work. Just as Sterne does in *Tristam Shandy,* Machado reflects upon the act of writing novels, oftentimes begging the reader's indulgence in his roundabout, descriptive passages. As in the tradition of confessional novels, the very act of writing the novel and of publishing it is, in itself, Santiago's attempt to rid himself of the guilt he has incurred, as well as a way of whiling away his hours as a man of means, the latter being the ultimate symbol of the novelist whose works, destined to be read as a mere means of entertainment, are themselves engendered in the same frame of mind. Equally important to the act of writing is the process of self-questioning on the part of the narrator in his quest for self-awareness in his recollection of a life already lived. This confessional quality attains new

religious dimensions as Santiago maintains a defense of his actions. In a real way, Santiago's explanation of his name prefigures the "explanation" of his life. The narration, however, does not serve so much as a conversion process for Dom Casmurro as it does a purgation of past actions retold at a time when in no way can any of the participants in his narration enter into the novel to discount directly the narrator's authority. The novel belongs to the tradition of St. Augustine's *Confessions* and shares much with the narrative point of view of many modern novelists, as pointed out in Peter Axthelm's study of the modern confessional novel.[7] The effort toward the reconstruction of his childhood circumstances and, as well, the estate where they took place is overshadowed by the tragic circumstances of Capitú's fate. The shades that Casmurro hopes to put to rest return once again to haunt his narrative fabric. The man whose resolved doubt led him to condemn his wife and son for imagined family transgressions now inadvertently lays the framework for the questioning of the very novel designed to resolve the entire question of guilt on his part.

Since Casmurro uses the recollection method on all dramatic levels of consciousness, the very case he hopes to build in his attempts at expiation of possible sins lacks the retrospective flavor of episodes recalled in tranquility, presenting instead a situation conceived by a man left alone with a "story" that has left him nothing with which to be happy. What is a search for truth to Casmurro, is the tragic destruction of her family to Capitu, and the same for the entire social pattern to the reader. The ironic dimension to Cas-murro's will goes unnoticed to the narrator, yet the reader witnesses this trait from the very beginning of the narrative. This move toward irony is one often found in the works of Machado's contemporary, Henry James, whose *Aspern Papers* and *The Liar* include the same ironic dimension present in *Don Casmurro, Memórias póstumas de Bras Cubas* (1881) and *Quíncas Borbas* (1891), Machado's most highly acclaimed novels. The cardinal points of dramatic irony, confessional recollection and unreliable narration are completed by the last concept in *Dom Casmurro* that will be discussed in this paper—the theory of the "opera aperta" in Machado.

Capitú's guilt and the *opera aperta*

In Chapter 59, "Guests with good memories" (something Santiago may not have), Bento speaks about the concept of the novel, the one that he is writing, in particular. His remarks explain part of the problem of narrating an accurate story:

> The fact is, everything is to be found outside a book that has gaps, gentle reader. This is the way I fill in other men's lacunae; in the same way you may fill in mine. (p. 120)

Bento has given his reader other hints about his faulty memory throughout the novel, but this pronouncement implies that not only does he as an

individual have failings in his memory but that he as well invites his reader (gentle reader) to enter into the novel and fill in any gaps, just as he himself does. Allowing the reader the choice of filling in his lacunae, Bento attempts to create a new character in the story, the independent reader who autonomously supplies the missing parts of the narrative. In making this invitation, Santiago accomplishes, or at least hopes to accomplish, an arrangement whereby the reader can with good conscience supply missing data to round out the description of a given character. In actuality, Bento invites the reader to do just as he has done with Capitú when doubt arose concerning her motivations and actions. The narrator has invited the reader to participate in the narrative process, in this way disregarding the bounds traditionally set for a novel. One must always keep in mind that the autonomous character, as well as the autonomous reader, are both inventions of the true author, in this case, Machado. One might question his goal, therefore, in adding this dimension to a novel whose supposed and stated goal is actually a case against a guilty Desdemona and a wronged Othello, Capitú and Bento respectively. A possible solution to the problem lies in a slight interlacing of the motif of the unreliable narrator throughout the novel. In addition to the incomplete definition of "casmurro" by Bento in the first chapter, there are scores of instances where either he, or the characters he at times inadvertently presents in his work, give us cause to doubt what the narrator has to say.

Several times in his story, Bento refers to his inability either to remember a specific detail or to report it objectively. At times, he admits that lying, distortion and deceit have all played an important role in his telling the story. Yet Bento's constant preoccupation with relaying the truth is always present in the novel, ultimately best explained in his statement that: "the inner structure will not take dye. A certificate stating that I am twenty years old might deceive a stranger, like any forged document, but not me" (p. 5). Soon after this appeal for acceptance by the reader however, Bento puts to test the reader's possible trust in him by recounting a scene in which he hides himself as he overhears a conversation between José Dias and his mother as they discuss his future. Bento's hiding reveals a basic slyness on his part and reveals symbolically the marginality of his involvement with the social structure defining his life. Bento only reacts as others prepare his future. His later unfulfilled promises to God (p. 43) emphasize once again his sly nature. Strangely enough, Bento's constant emphasis on truth in the narrative is laced with passages that underline his dishonest tendencies: "I had a notion to lie" (p. 73); "I left with the pretext of going" (p. 76); and "Imagination has been the companion of my whole existence" (p. 84). When not admitting to inventing or distorting stories outright, Bento leans to lapses of memory to explain any discrepancies—"My memory is not good. On the contrary, it is comparable to a man who has lived in boarding houses without retaining either faces or names, but only scattered details" (p. 119).

In short, the reader witnesses the self-described reliable narrator revealing himself to be an incomplete one at best, and a definitely unreliable one at worst.

These tendencies help to weaken an already undermined case against Capitú who, from the initial chapters of the novel, Bento has presented as a force of evil at work against the forces of good represented by his mother whose very gravestone proclaims her a saint (p. 254). Essentially, Bento's case, ending with the final chapter, "Well, and the rest?", demands that the reader recognize that Capitú's potential for evil had long existed—"If you remember Capitú the child, you will have to recognize the one within the other, like the fruit within its rind" (p. 262). Bento's attempts, unfortunately for him, to portray Capitú as a social climber and unfaithful mate all fail for lack of concrete evidence. Bento's remarks on social status are clearly uncalled for in light of the description of true love felt by both in the early stages of their relationship as well as Capitú's willingness to forego all social comforts to insure a happy marriage. The accusation of sexual transgressions made by Bento against Capitú, in reality, are the projections of the desire he felt, and admits to having felt, toward Escobar's wife on the eve of the latter's death. As Capitú reminds him, Bento is accusing a dead man, an act that underscores the futility of his remarks. Moreover, the question of Ezequiel's legitimacy hinges in its entirety on his resemblance to Escobar, a doubtful factor especially since Bento has already told the reader that his son's most salient characteristic is his ability to mimic anyone of his choice, a judgment that would categorize him more in the line of a Bento than an Escobar. At this point, the prosecution rests its case after having sown the seeds of its own repudiation.

If Bento's case is self-defeating, what then does he hope to prove by making it? The anwer to this question lies in the failure of Dom Casmurro to recognize his own obstinacy and jealousy. Thus, he defines even more accurately a *casmurro* than the dictionary he had admonished his reader not to consult. Our narrator has been the architect of his own isolation and must now inhabit his lonely world, one in which the periods and exclamation points of his statement become the question marks of self-appraisal in the written revision of his vital circumstances. Mindful, however, that his story is also a book, the narrator leaves open the possibility of yet another revision or other version of the truth—"I may amend it in the second edition" (p. 137). In reality, the text acquires the dimension of the final truth (Can it be anything else?) with an author entrapped in its maze, searching to extricate himself with the right combination of words. The narrative labyrinth includes the metamorphosis of the three faces of the narrator— Bento, Bentinho and Dom Casmurro, each one the supposed purveyor of truth and innocence, while in actuality all exude the tragic flaw of excessive self-love and obstinacy. This narrative extrication and reconstruction entails both the recollection of facts pertinent to the case against Capitú and

the physical reconstruction of the estate where Bento spent his childhood. The story is a search for these two realities so dearly missed by Dom Casmurro in his later years, in a certain way, a return to the lost innocence of his youth, as he would lead us to believe. Yet just as Bento's verbal restatement of the past falls short of a complete retelling, his efforts to restore the estate are also incomplete:

> The casuarina tree was the same one that I had left at the far end of the estate, but the trunk, instead of being straight as in days gone by, now had the air of a question mark: probably it was startled by the intruder (p. 256).

The intruder, of course, in this past reality is the narrator. The symbolic twisting of the tree trunk into the shape of a question mark mirrors Bento's version of his relationship with Capitú. The casuarina, known for its dryness and indehiscence, whose flowers do not open when the tree matures, symbolizes the narrator's nature perfectly. Just as Bento must heed the question mark of the casuarina, a reminder of the futility of reconstruction, the reader must reapproach the novel, now opened to reinterpretation, to trace the threads of the narrative fabric woven by Dom Casmurro.

NOTES

1. Machado de Assis, *Dom Casmurro* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), translated, with an introduction and notes by Helen Caldwell.
2. Emir Rodríguez-Monegal, *El BOOM de la novela latinoamericana* (Caracas: Editorial Tiempo Nuevo, 1972). See especially pages 52-55, where the author discusses the role of Brazilian literature in the development of the "boom" in the novel.
3. Many essays and short stories by Borges show an obvious preoccupation with the role of the reader in the narrative experience, while Cortázar's *Rayuela* and Fuentes' *Cambio de piel* follow the pattern of the "opera aperta", or open novel as defined in Umbert Eco's *Obra abierta: forma e indeterminación en el arte contemporáneo* (Barcelona: Seix Barrai, 1965).
4. Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy: Gentleman* (Oxford: 1926).
5. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). See especially Chps. 6 and 7.
6. Henri Peyre: *Literature and Sincerity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 161.
7. Peter Axthelm, *The Modern Confessional Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).