

## The metaphysical identity of beings and a gaze into the starry sky<sup>1</sup>

*A identidade metafísica dos seres e um olhar para o céu estrelado*

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**Abstract:** This text presents the Machadian's character *Quincas Borba*, a dog, and the philosopher Kant as the same pure subject of knowing.

**Key-words:** Machado de Assis; Quincas Borba; Schopenhauer.

**Resumo:** Este texto apresenta o personagem machadiano Quincas Borba, o cachorro, e o filósofo Kant como o mesmo puro sujeito do conhecimento.

**Palavras-chave:** Machado de Assis; Quincas Borba; Schopenhauer.

*Teu infinito sou eu.*

*[Your infinity am I.]*

Belchior

1

The teacher Rubião, sole heir to the philosopher Quincas Borba, on condition that he take care of the latter's dog as if it were a person, initially merely tolerates the animal.

In the first version of the Machadian novel *Quincas Borba* there is a scene in which the moribund philosopher Quincas Borba plays with his dog, which shares his name, kisses him on the forehead and calls him, affectionately, *pelintra* – 'shabby'. In the definitive version of the novel, however, what stands out are the blows the dog suffers at the hands of the teacher, often when it comes to him seeking affection. The hand that caresses is the same one that strikes, the mouth that kisses is the same that expectorates, say the verses of the Brazilian poet Augusto dos Anjos.

Quincas Borba the dog, without losing confidence in his new owner and despite the kicks and clouts that he receives, not only from the teacher but also from

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<sup>1</sup> This text will be part of my book *To the Victor, the Potatoes: caricature, parody and tragedy – Machado de Assis and Schopenhauer*.

his servant, seeks the friendship of everyone patiently and in an ever-renewed way. He believes he has his owner's fondness, and each time he expects to receive affection from him.

The possibility of a kick or a cuff does not ever occur to him. He has a trustful nature, and if ever he is struck, it is soon forgotten. Caresses, on the other hand, no matter how absent-mindedly they may be given, make a lasting impression. He likes to be loved, and gratifies himself with the belief that this is so<sup>2</sup>.

The life of the animal – Assis' narrator informs us – is neither wholly good nor wholly bad. He is given a bath in cold water by a boy, something he does not particularly like, every day. Rubião, his new owner, lets him circulate through the house, and be present at lunch and dinner. Sometimes Rubião plays with him and encourages him to jump. However, if visitors should arrive, he has the dog taken away. The Spanish servant pretends to treat the animal well; however, far from his master's supervision, is apt to drag him along by an ear or leg, hurling him far from the house, closing all means of entrance and screaming *perro del infierno!*, infernal dog! In one of these scenes, in pain, Quincas Borba retires to a corner, silent and glum, and there stirs about a little until he finds a position that is just right, settles down, and then he closes his eyes to... **think!**

In one of the most beautiful scenes in the prose of Machado de Assis, the narrator enters the mind of the animal and finds it full of many varied... **ideas!** The dog thinks. Dog's thoughts, that he silently and sleepily collects and combines. He simultaneously recalls and merges certain images in which the face of his passed-away friend, the mad philosopher Quincas Borba, arises far away, vaguely and fragmentarily, and then blends with the face of his present owner, until they appear to be only one person.

## 2

Machado de Assis' reader is aware that the author emphasizes, in most of his novels, a psychological analysis of his characters via the notion of unconscious motivation, something which he borrows from Schopenhauer (*Die Welt*) and E. v. Hartmann (*Philosophie des Unbewussten*), a notion with which he opens up the minds of his characters and reveals their true natures and secret motivations for actions, which escape the very consciousness of the characters themselves. More than a few literary critics with an understandable romantic inclination, coming from an aesthetic love of nature, have said that Assis, due to that narrative characteristic, neglected in his

<sup>2</sup> ASSIS, M. *Quincas Borba*, cap. XXVIII.

literature to describe the exuberant landscape of Rio de Janeiro, the city where most of his narratives occur. This, I think, is an unfair criticism. Machado de Assis' descriptions of Rio de Janeiro's landscape excel by being succinct: with two or three words he depicts an entire painting which does not lose any aesthetic impact. This being said, I do recognize that Assis, in his maturer novels, is primarily a *voyeur* of the human psyche, and precisely because of this, is a moral sceptic. He has a sadistic predilection for examining the fragility of the behavioural values that guide his characters and to show how all their values are negotiable.

### 3

Now, in the aforementioned scene, the Brazilian novelist makes use of this psychological-analytical resource – the expedient by which he examines the unconscious of his novels' characters – to examine Quincas Borba's mind, in the very moment after the animal has suffered mistreatment by the Spanish servant, when he retires melancholically to a corner. I quote the 'Warlock of Cosme Velho' himself:

By now there have been many thoughts – too many thoughts; at any rate, they are a dog's thoughts, the mere dust of thoughts, perhaps less than dust, the reader will say. And yet the truth is that that eye that keeps opening every little while to gaze so expressively into space seems to translate something that shines inside, very deep inside something else – I don't quite know what words to use when referring to a dog's body – which is neither the tail nor the ears. Man's poor, inadequate language!<sup>3</sup>.

We can observe that Assis' narrator examines the animal's psyche and in the depths of those eyes that open to the space above, what he finds is the insurmountable border, in my representation, of all subjectivity; i.e., there is an unnameable abyss before which language – with no exception made for literary language – fails completely. This is the frightening discovery of language's limits in expressing the inexpressible, the "absolutely unrepresentable". We have here the incapacity of narrative to apprehend the deep meaning of subjectivity, the incapacity to apprehend subjectivity via the mechanism that defines human rationality itself – the tongue, written or spoken, as a form of human language that we believe would be able to tell us the meaning of the world before us and within us.

I think, however, if the gleam in the eyes of this dog which open every now and then to gaze expressively into space above him, in a gesture that expresses something deep within his nature, cannot, together with that which underlies it, be understood in a comprehensive way by human language, it is because the infinity of this canine subjectivity, an infinity that belongs also to human subjectivity, which common

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<sup>3</sup> Idem, cap. XXVIII.

substrate is Nature, escapes from any description by human language, regardless of how perfect this may be, and including artistic language. This is the drama of language, which each one experiences tragically to a greater or lesser degree, although everyone perceives it when they fall into a linguistic misunderstanding. By fixing on the infinite space above him, Quincas Borba's expressive eyes, which manifest something that the narrator cannot encapsulate, indicate that something shines within their subjectivity, something that every sensitive reader's eyes would indicate too were they to stare into the immense space above them, before the greatness and the power of nature. This was Kant's case in *Critique of Judgement*, in denominating the *feeling of the sublime* experience, i.e., the sensation of the incommensurability of space and of the power of nature before oneself, as an experience of infinity. In other words, an experience of nature's supersensible substrate.

Always very impressed upon by the vastness of the starry skies above him, the Milky Way, and by the other worlds upon worlds and their periodic movement in the vastness of space and time, Kant confesses, in a passage deservedly oft-quoted due to its beauty, that there were two things that filled his mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily he reflected on them: *the starry heavens above him and the moral law within him*. I quote him:

Zwei Dinge erfüllen das Gemüt mit immer neuer und zunehmender Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht, je öfter und anhaltender sich das Nachdenken damit beschäftigt: Der bestirnte Himmel über mir, und das moralische Gesetz in mir. Beide darf ich nicht als in Dunkelheiten verhüllt, oder im überschwenglichen, außer meinem Gesichtskreise, suchen und bloß vermuten; **ich sehe sie vor mir und verknüpfe sie unmittelbar mit dem Bewußtsein meiner Existenz**<sup>4</sup>.

The feeling, therefore, proves to Kant the presence within himself, the Königsberg philosopher, of infinity, of the substrate of things and nature. A feeling which, in the case of instances that exhibit nature's greatness, like the vastness of the Milky Way, is denominated the mathematical sublime; and in events that show devastating natural power, like in sea storms and volcanic eruptions, is called the dynamical sublime.

#### 4

Now, in this Kantian context of the starry heavens hanging over the philosopher, what to say about the Machadian dog Quincas Borba, that in a corner of the residence also looks so expressively into space above him? What does Quincas Borba's expressive stare have to do with the astonished one of Kant's at the Milk Way?

<sup>4</sup> KANT, I. *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, grifos meus.

The answer – and here I bring Schopenhauer to the fore, to attempt to translate infinity within the philosopher Kant, and within the dog Quincas Borba expressed by his eyes – is that what happens in Quincas Borba’s and in Kant’s mind, when they look into space above them, is exactly the same. In another words, one is dealing with the unconscious feeling of the metaphysical identity of beings, i.e., in both the canine and philosophical eyes we find the so-called timeless pure subject of knowing that he or she looks out of him- or herself in his or her identity which reflects the metaphysical identity of the one and indivisible Will to Life. It is he or she that sees, in the mirror of representation, the activity of this Will that became a cosmos; it is this pure subject of knowing that knows wherever there is knowledge to be found, or, in the mystical terms of Schopenhauer: this pure subject of knowing is *das EINE Weltange*.

## 5

It is – to conclude with the technical Schopenhauerian words – the clear re-establishment of a vision of the unity originating from the *in itself of the cosmos*, amid the illusory plurality of its appearances. The Will as a thing in itself, up to here blind in its unity, now acquires a vision and sees, in these hugely special moments, the spectacle of its own activity, in the incommensurable greatness and power of nature, which is that Will itself, though manifested in various beings. Nevertheless, through every one of these, the Will itself looks into the mirror of representation, whether it be through the eyes of the dog Quincas Borba or those of the philosopher Kant.

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