

RACE, POLITICS, AND LITERARY  
TECHNIQUES IN RECENT BOOKS  
ON BRAZILIAN LITERATURE

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*THREE SAD RACES: RACIAL IDENTITY AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN BRAZILIAN LITERATURE.* By DAVID T. HABERLY. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Pp. 198. \$27.95.)

*THE CRAFT OF AN ABSOLUTE WINNER: CHARACTERIZATION AND NARRATOLOGY IN THE NOVELS OF MACHADO DE ASSIS.* By MARIA LUISA NUNES. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983. Pp. 158. \$29.95.)

*THE DECEPTIVE REALISM OF MACHADO DE ASSIS: A DISSENTING INTERPRETATION OF DOM CASMURRO.* By JOHN GLEDSON. (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984. Pp. 215.)

Roman Jakobson asserted in his famous essay "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics" that in scholarly discussion, "disagreement generally proves to be more productive than agreement. Disagreement discloses antinomies and tensions within the field discussed and calls for novel exploration." The books under review here exemplify the advantages of disagreement in scholarly work. They not only strongly disagree among themselves on various points but are polemical books that dissent from established interpretations, thus inviting disagreement and calling for new investigations.

David Haberly's *Three Sad Races: Racial Identity and National Consciousness in Brazilian Literature* provides an attractive introduction to Brazilian society and literature, studying the relationship between these two subjects by focusing on the racial background of six major writers: Gonçalves Dias, José de Alencar, Castro Alves, Machado de Assis, and Mário de Andrade. Well-written and persuasively argued, this book will be widely used by nonspecialists in Brazilian literature. My main concern in this essay is the relationship that Haberly establishes between race and literary production in Brazil.

Haberly's main thesis is that Brazilian literature is the product of miscegenation, "the end result of the interaction of . . . three racial groups," the red Indians, the black African slaves, and the Portuguese

colonizers who comprise the “three sad races” of the title. Haberly’s central argument seems to be a syllogism: “If one accepts the hypothesis that literary creativity derives from suffering and alienation, and if one also accepts Brazilian ideas and expectations about race, it is only reasonable to conclude that nonwhiteness itself can be viewed as a supreme creative crisis of physical misery, psychological exile, and social marginality” (p. 7). As a syllogism, Haberly’s argument may be formally correct. But Haberly’s hypothesis that literary creativity is “the result of a private crisis of misery and alienation” and that therefore “great texts presuppose uncommon suffering” (p. 7) is based on a traditional Romantic myth. Indeed, this myth pervades Haberly’s book, along with two other closely related fallacies: first, the biographical fallacy, which tries to explain a literary text according to the life of its author, and in which the insistence upon the tragic life of the artist is only a subspecies; and second, what I call the fallacy of retroactive or a posteriori reading, which identifies some external variable as the main cause for a given text after (and only after) this variable is known to be applicable to the text. Despite Haberly’s affirmation that “it is important to avoid falling into the biographical trap, pursuing one-on-one correlations between life and work” (p. 74), this *modus operandi* is precisely the one he uses in most of his book.

For example, the Indianist poems of Gonçalves Dias are explained by the poet’s suffering, which in turn is explained by his ancestry and physical appearance. The illegitimate son of a part-black and part-Indian mother and a Portuguese father, the poet is presented to the reader as “no more than one and a half meters tall . . . , [having] a dark complexion, prominent cheek bones, and a slightly flattened nose” (p. 19), an appearance that Haberly believes made him feel like “a kind of freak” in the white world (p. 19). Although Haberly presents secondhand evidence to document his physical description of the poet and Gonçalves Dias’s alleged feelings of inferiority, the relationship between this sense of inferiority and his racial origins remains unproved. For example, one could suggest that Gonçalves Dias’s “constant sense of inferiority” (p. 19) was due to his stature. Even in Brazil, where the average adult is shorter than in North America, it seems likely that an adult could feel quite unhappy about being only four feet and eleven inches tall (the equivalent of a meter and a half).

Haberly employs biographical details about Gonçalves Dias to analyze the text of his most famous poem, the “Canção do Exílio.” Because this poem expresses longing for a country where there is only nature, “the virgin world before the coming of the Europeans,” and “no cities, no trace of civilization,” Haberly concludes that Gonçalves Dias is not really writing about the Brazil of the mid-nineteenth century but is longing instead for “his own lost childhood” and for the land of his “Indian heritage” (p. 29).

Haberly also explains to the American reader that the botanical allusions in the poem—the *várzeas* (meadows) and *bosques* (small groves of trees) “are not the Amazonian jungle” but the description of “a specific geographical area” (p. 29). According to Haberly, this area is precisely that found near the farm in Maranhão where Gonçalves Dias spent his childhood. Because Haberly’s book is written for a general North American audience not necessarily acquainted with the Portuguese language, it is perhaps useful to point out that the words *várzeas* and *bosques*, if seldom used in contemporary colloquial speech, are traditionally poetic words in Portuguese, as are *meadows* and *groves* in English. For readers who associate Brazil only with images of Rio de Janeiro or the Amazonian jungle, it may be helpful to know that *várzeas* and *bosques* are found throughout Brazil.

Not all of *Three Sad Races* is limited to this kind of search for biographical evidence, however. Haberly sporadically offers a genuine literary analysis, as in his interpretation of the metrics of the “Canção do Exílio.” I find his study of the poetic structure of the text to be insightful and sensitive, but I cannot understand why Haberly employs the accentual-syllabic system of English poetry to analyze a poem written in Portuguese when it is well known that the metrical structure of the Romance languages is based on the syllabic system in which accent or stress is only a secondary poetic device. Yet Haberly does not emphasize here Gonçalves Dias’s use of the *redondilho maior*, a popular verse form dating back to the Middle Ages in both Portugal and Spain.

But *Three Sad Races* should not be judged as a formal literary analysis of Brazilian literature, which is not its intention. Its main goal is obviously to confirm Haberly’s hypothesis about the relationship between the nonwhiteness of an author and the content of his literary production. It is therefore interesting to observe what happens when no such correlation can be found, as in the case of Castro Alves.

Acknowledging that Castro Alves is known in Brazil as the “Bard of the Slaves,” the great apostle of abolitionism, Haberly states that his main goal is “to understand the origins of that image and the nature of [Castro Alves’s] commitment to the antislavery movement” (p. 56). Based on details of chronology, Haberly concludes that Castro Alves’s reputation as the champion of the slaves seems “somewhat illogical” (p. 57). He adds: “Moreover, few serious efforts have yet been made to understand the origins of his abolitionism. Some critics have been tempted to suggest a genealogical explanation; but although Castro Alves’ photographs do show quite a swarthy young man, no biographer has been able to come up with any hard evidence of African ancestry” (p. 57). This passage suggests to me that had “any hard evidence of African ancestry” been found, Castro Alves’s poetic production against slavery would fit into Haberly’s theory, and the origins of his abolitionism would be thus validated. But because the poet (al-

though “swarthy”) cannot be proved to have any African forebears, he could not be a genuine champion of the slaves. Because Castro Alves had no black blood, his commitment to the abolitionist movement was not “political” but “philosophical”; his ideology was not “original” but “rooted in European Romanticism”; his defense of the slaves was only a “poetic pose”; and this pose, which resulted in his “sense of oppression and entrapment,” “was the primary basis for Castro Alves’ abolitionism.” Because Castro Alves did not have black ancestors, slavery was not a reason for personal suffering but only a “personal metaphor,” and his poems become simply “metaphorical structures.” Hypothesizing that nonwhiteness “defines the origins and nature of the production of individual writers [and] . . . by extension, determines the character and purpose of Brazilian literature as a whole” (p. 7), Haberly faces a problem in trying to explain the white poet’s abolitionist position. His conclusion cites a “basic fact”: “Castro Alves was writing not about the slaves, but about himself” (p. 61).

With Machado de Assis, Haberly’s problem is reversed. While Castro Alves was a white man who wrote about black slaves, Machado was a mulatto who wrote mostly about white people. But according to Haberly’s use of the biographical fallacy, Machado could only be writing about his own racial condition of miscegenation. In yet another example of what I call a posteriori reading, Haberly suggests that “miscegenation appears frequently in Machado’s works, carefully disguised as love between individuals of different generations . . . , different social rank . . . , or different nationalities” (p. 172). Therefore, according to Haberly, when Castro Alves, a white writer, is talking about slaves, he cannot really be talking about slaves because he is not a nonwhite; and when Machado de Assis, a mulatto, is not talking about mulattoes, he has to be talking about miscegenation because he is not white and must be talking about his racial condition. If one were to accept Haberly’s suggestion that miscegenation is “carefully disguised” in many of Machado’s texts, then the same could be said of any number of works written by authors of mixed ethnicity.

This racially biased approach is also reflected in Haberly’s interpretation of Machado’s life. Haberly did not invent this bias, of course; many Brazilian critics still consider Machado’s racial origins to be a crucial factor in understanding the man and his works. But Haberly’s analysis seems to me unfair. For example, he says of Machado: “The boy learned to read and write and somewhere picked up a knowledge of French, so essential for social and intellectual acceptance” (p. 72). Had a poor white young man or woman done the same, his or her efforts would probably be considered laudable. But because Machado was a mulatto, he is viewed as necessarily struggling for “social and intellectual acceptance.” What Haberly does not mention is that French

was indispensable for anyone—black, mulatto, red, or white—with a serious interest in world literature in nineteenth-century Brazil because few international texts had yet been translated into Portuguese.

In Haberly's interpretation of the relationship between Mário de Andrade's life and works, I agree with Haberly's reading of *Macunaíma* as a text about the multiracial character of Brazilian culture but disagree with his implication that unless *Macunaíma* is read as a personal projection of Mário's racial origins, the work would necessarily be "a failed text" (p. 146). *Macunaíma* has already been recognized as one of the most important texts in Brazilian literature by many critics who never thought of interpreting it according to Mário's ethnic background. I strongly disagree with Haberly's opinion that "Mário de Andrade must be read as a nonwhite writer" (p. 137). Mário can be read as a mulatto writer, or as a male chauvinistic writer, or even as a homosexual writer. But the quality of such readings will depend upon the skill of the critic in avoiding the oversimplification associated with any kind of reductionist approach to literature. In my opinion, Haberly has not avoided this temptation. For example, he observes:

The concept of parallel and multiple racial identities, existing simultaneously at a number of separate points of the continuum, also made it possible for Mário to believe that *other, nongenetic identities* could be added by education or taste. Thus he claimed that he was not only red and black and white, but French, as a result of his schooling; Italian, because of his love for music; North American, because he admired the United States, and so on. . . . The simultaneous coexistence of these *inherited* and *assumed* identities was a *comforting idea*, one that could work to preserve him from the fear and self-doubt that marked other nonwhite Brazilian writers. (P. 138, emphasis added)

I believe that identities are neither "inherited" nor genetically determined and that "other, nongenetic identities" can indeed be added or assumed by education and other life experiences. These beliefs are, I suppose, very comforting notions about the human race, even for those who do not need to "preserve" themselves from fear and self-doubt about their own racial origins.

Comparing Haberly's book with Maria Luisa Nunes's *The Craft of an Absolute Winner* illuminates the kind of stimulating disagreement mentioned at the outset of this essay. Nunes's analysis of Machado de Assis's literary production was published in the Greenwood Press series entitled "Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies." The author certainly does not ignore Machado's racial origins, which are mentioned immediately in the preface. But the few paragraphs dedicated to the subject make it clear that Nunes is not interested in Machado's racial identity but in his identity as an individual and a writer. Explaining her choice, Nunes suggests that Machado "did not wish perhaps to be known as a black, white, or mulatto artist, but as an artist" (p. x).

Nunes perceives two major limitations to the “psycho-biographical approach” to Machado’s works: “First of all, Machado de Assis’s reticence about his personal life coupled with the vitality of his texts force the critic to deal with and analyze the texts themselves. Secondly, the psycho-biographical studies of the man and his works often verge on racism and contribute little to an understanding of the works” (p. 4).

In studying Machado’s novels, Nunes applies contemporary techniques of textual analysis, subsumed under the name of “narratology.” She defines narratology as “a method of reading texts according to theoretical and esthetic premises based on the study of such elements as point of view, or the relationships among author, implied author, narrator, characters, and reader; time structures; the structure of irony, satire, and allegory; thematics; and reader-narrator relationship that aid in uncovering the full significance of the texts” (p. 11). Nunes’s ultimate goal is to establish a “theory of character” in the novels of Machado de Assis. Nunes concludes that “Machado de Assis’s theory of character is metaliterary—based on values of world literature, a response to the literature of his time, and conscious of itself as literature” (p. 142). While this conclusion is not new, her specific analyses present valuable insights for the reader interested in Machado’s works. For example, in chapter four, “Story Tellers and Character: Point of View in the Later Works,” Nunes suggests that the distanced point of view of the narrators in Machado’s late novels is due to the use of “romantic irony” (pp. 65–66). This observation is innovative, although it might be more productive to define the concept of “romantic irony” by tracing it to its originator, Friedrich Schlegel, and by investigating in greater depth its appropriateness to a new interpretation of Machado’s texts.

Although a relevant addition to Machadian studies in the English language, *The Craft of an Absolute Winner* is specialized in both its focus and its literary approach. Its readership will undoubtedly be restricted to those interested in Machado’s novels and recent trends in literary criticism. Some readers might view Nunes’s strictly literary approach to Machado’s novels as a severe limitation, if they assume that Machado’s race and social status are indispensable factors in understanding his novels in the larger context of Brazilian society. I believe that this hypothesis is disproved by John Gledson’s *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis*, which analyzes in detail *Dom Casmurro*. Although Gledson makes no mention of Machado’s racial origins, his study argues for reading Machado as a realist whose “intention to reveal through his fiction the true nature of the society he is portraying” is successfully realized (p. 9).

*The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis* carries the subtitle *A Dissenting Interpretation of Dom Casmurro*. Gledson disagrees with the



currently held opinion that Machado is not a realist writer—in the sense of typical nineteenth-century “realism”—but a precursor of both modernism and the so-called Latin American boom (p. 2). Gledson views Machado as a realist of a special kind, a “deceptive” realist. His main premise is that “what Machado’s novels set out to do is in essence no different from what many nineteenth- (and seventeenth-, eighteenth- and twentieth-) century novels try to do, that is, to give us a view of the society to which the novelist belongs” (p. 2).

The first chapter of Gledson’s book aims at showing how *Dom Casmurro* is a deceiving text, but one that contains a hidden truth about society: “There is a truth to be divined here by the careful and perceptive reader” (p. 15). Gledson develops this kind of careful reading, paying close attention to “facts” mentioned in Bento’s narrative. He suggests that despite Bento’s deceptive intentions, “we can trust the facts themselves as given (if the word ‘fact’ can be accepted for the time being, for all its vagueness)” (p. 17). I find Gledson’s reading of *Dom Casmurro* generally quite illuminating, despite one instance where I believe Gledson was deceived in his search for facts and in trying to correct the deceptive narrator of the novel. Narrator Bento Santiago attributes to an *antigo* the saying he paraphrases as “I loathe a guest with a good memory.” Gledson observes: “The author who said this was in fact not an *antigo* but Erasmus” (p. 34, n. 12). But Bento was actually correct because Erasmus was directly quoting in Greek from an ancient, Lucian of Samosata. This minor instance does not compromise Gledson’s reading of Machado as a realist writer; however, it certainly underscores that in the deceptive narrative of Machado de Assis, facts are very hard to confirm.

“Politics,” the third chapter of Gledson’s book, is his most ingenious contribution. Here Gledson suggests that *Dom Casmurro* can be read as an allegory of contemporaneous Brazilian history, as a fictionalized comment on the most important historical events of Machado’s time. For example, Gledson proposes that the polemic sustained in the novel between the narrator Bento and the young leper Manduca about the Crimean War can only be fully understood if the reader is able to make an “allegorical leap” and perceive that the real subject of the polemic is not the Crimean War, but the Paraguayan War (p. 142). Gledson adds credibility to this interpretation by analyzing the references to the Paraguayan War in other works by Machado (pp. 146–56). Gledson concludes, “In terms of the larger history of the Empire, the Paraguayan War can perhaps be seen, like the episode in the novel, as an independent, but thoroughly characteristic digression” (p. 156).

In another challenging historical reading, Gledson suggests the existence of an allegorical relationship between the death of Escobar—an event that divided the novel into two epochs, “one of trust and

happiness and another of anguished doubt" (p. 132)—and the formation of the Rio Branco ministry, which was viewed by Machado as a similar dividing point in Brazilian political history. According to Gledson's interpretation, because the Rio Branco ministry marked the end of the historical period known as "Conciliação," *Dom Casmurro* can be read as a novelistic account of these times of change during the Second Empire.

Gledson's argumentation for the presence of historical themes in Machado's novels is based on solid research. His interpretations will certainly appeal to readers interested in Brazilian history, even if they sometimes seem a little farfetched. In general, I believe that *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis* fulfills the author's stated intention: "This book pretends only to further the understanding of Machado de Assis, a valuable task in its own right and one which will, I hope, send the reader back to the novels and short stories with renewed insight and capacity for fresh discovery" (p. 12).

Similarly, I hope that the disagreements discussed in this review will send readers to these three fine books on Brazilian literary studies as well as to the original works themselves. Sharing Jakobson's optimism about the advantages of disagreement in scholarly work, I believe that these texts represent important contributions to an understanding of issues of race, politics, and literary techniques in Brazilian literature.