INTRODUCTION

The governor of Alagoas-a small, backwater state on the bulge of Brazil-could hardly believe his eyes. There among the municipal reports for the year 1928, dismal bureaucratic documents in which the accomplishments of local administrators were exaggerated with bombast or their inaction disguised by a cloud of obfuscating clichés, was one the like of which had never crossed his desk before. Wrote the mayor of Palmeira dos Índios: "I do not know whether the municipal administration is good or bad. Perhaps it could be worse. ... I must have made numerous foolish mistakes, all attributable to my limited intelligence." The style, simple and direct, often wryly humorous, was as refreshing as the author's modesty and candor. At times it took on the raciness of popular speech: the mayor could see no point to wasting money on a telegram of condolence just because a deputy in the assembly had "kicked the bucket."

In Brazil there has never been that divorce between intellectuals and government which is so often deplored in the United States—as the mayor of Palmeira dos Índios was to write on a later occasion, "Artists as a rule escape from hunger by getting government jobs"—and his municipal report for 1928 was

soon brought to the attention of literary circles throughout the country. Augusto Frederico Schmidt, an unlikely combination of romantic poet and successful businessman, who at the time had fused his interests in a publishing venture, sensed, as he said, that the mayor must have the manuscript of a novel hidden away in a drawer someplace, and offered his services to the writer. The guess proved correct, and the publisher's offer was accepted, but not until 1933, owing to the economic and political disturbances of the intervening years, did the book appear: $Caet\acute{es}$, by Graciliano Ramos.

In the galaxy of new writers whose emergence in the early 1930's made those years one of the most exciting periods in the history of Brazilian letters, Graciliano Ramos was a relative oldster. He had been born in 1892 in the little town of Quebrângulo, in rural Alagoas, but while still an infant had been taken to his maternal grandfather's ranch near Buíque, in the neighboring state of Pernambuco. This is range country, too dry for crops, subject to periodic droughts which bring death to cattle and ruin to the owners. This was the region of Ramos' earliest recollections, and this is the background of *Barren Lives*.

Ramos' childhood is brilliantly evoked in a volume of memoirs entitled *Infância*. He presents his father, "a grave man with a broad forehead—one of the handsomest I ever saw—sound teeth, a firm-set jaw, and a frightening voice"; his mother, "a puny, aggressive, bad-tempered matron, always bustling about, with a knobby head ill covered by thin hair, an evil-looking mouth, and evil-looking eyes, which, in moments of wrath, gleamed with a flame of madness"; his two grandfathers, one a bankrupt plantation owner, from whom "perhaps I inherited

my absurd vocation for useless things," the other "a man of immense vitality, resistant to drought, first prosperous, then all but ruined, courageously rebuilding his fortune"; and a host of other figures, some of whom, such as the ranch hand José Baía, appear without so much as a change of name in Ramos' novel Anguish.

As is perhaps suggested by the description of his parents, Ramos' early years were not happy ones. His mother had little time for him: the chapter of Barren Lives concerned with the older boy is a reminiscence of the author's childhood. His father, in the patriarchal tradition of Brazilian society, was the incarnation of authority, at times mercilessly blind. Graciliano's first encounter with "justice" was a paternal whiplashing occasioned by the disappearance of a belt-a beating for which the father made no amends even when he discovered that the boy was in no way responsible. Viewing his father's actions with half a century's perspective, Ramos found his outbursts understandable. Unlike his indomitable father-in-law, the elder Ramos gave way before the ravages of drought, abandoning ranching for a series of ill-starred ventures as a shopkeeper, first in Buíque, later in Viçosa and Palmeira dos Índios, back in the state of Alagoas. Unsure of his position, forced to scrape before his creditors and the local political bosses, he vented his spleen on his debtors, his social inferiors, and his children.

He made at least one significant contribution to his son's education, however. Ramos' account of his early schooling is a depressing one: cruel discipline, rote learning, incompetent teachers, classroom material totally inappropriate to the juvenile mind. At the age of seven, a lad with no knowledge of Portu-

guese beyond the rudimentary vocabulary used by the inhabitants of the backlands was assigned to read the *Lusiads*! Small wonder that two years later he was still "all but illiterate." Then one evening, counter to all custom, Graciliano's father called him to fetch a book and read. The book was an adventure story, telling of a family lost in the woods on a winter's night, pursued by wolves. Under his father's questioning, and with his translations into "kitchen language" of the more high-flown literary expressions, Graciliano's understanding unfolded and his curiosity was whetted. The father's tutoring lasted only three nights, but the boy's interest in books, once aroused, was to accompany him to the end of his life.

This interest was of prime importance for his educational development. While at the age of twelve he was sent to secondary school in the state capital, Maceió, he never completed the course, and such culture as he acquired resulted almost entirely from his own independent readings. The Ramos household seems to have numbered few books among its possessions, but the notary of Viçosa had a library, and from him Graciliano borrowed his first work of literary value, O Guarani ("The Guarani Indian"), by José de Alencar, the Brazilian counterpart of James Fenimore Cooper. The postmaster was another source of supply. A man of literary pretensions himself, he encouraged Graciliano to write for a small sheet he had founded, and the resulting products appeared there, much embellished by the boy's mentor. Local stocks proving insufficient for his appetite, however, Graciliano took to filching coins from the cash drawer in his father's shop, so that he might order the works that so tempted him in publishers' catalogs received from Rio. "These crimes caused me

no remorse," he declared, saying that he managed to convince himself of his father's tacit approval of his conduct. And indeed the elder Ramos must have had some idea of the origin of the volumes that accumulated on his son's bookshelf.

One is not surprised to learn that the adolescent reader's taste ran to the novels of Zola and his Portuguese contemporary Eça de Queiroz, then at the apogee of their fame, and the appeal offered by Balzac is understandable. One is surprised, however, to discover that translations of Dostoevsky and Gorki had made their way to the backlands of Brazil in the first decade of our century, and that they were avidly devoured by the young Graciliano.

The years of Ramos' early manhood are a somewhat obscure period in his life. In 1914 he went to Rio to try his hand at journalism. Unprepossessing in appearance, without influential friends, he failed to make his way there, and 1915 found him back in Palmeira dos Índios, where he married. To support himself and his family, he turned, like his father, to shopkeeping. His literary urgings were satisfied by occasional contributions to short-lived local periodicals and, beginning in 1926, by work upon a novel. The novel was not finished till 1928, the year of his election as mayor. By this time he was married for the second time, his first wife having died after but five years of wedded life.

The literary consequence of his venture into politics has already been noted. Once launched as a writer, with the publication of *Caetés* in 1933, he brought out three other novels in rather rapid succession: *São Bernardo*, in 1934; *Anguish*, in 1936; and *Barren Lives*, in 1938.

Meanwhile his material existence had undergone radical changes. The reports of his two years as mayor of Palmeira dos Indios so impressed the governor of Alagoas that, early in 1930, he invited Ramos to Maceió to assume the direction of the state press. He remained in this position until the end of 1931, having strangely survived the Vargas revolution, which toppled his patron along with other governors. A return to Palmeira dos Índios, where he briefly established a school, and a long sojourn in the hospital marked 1932. In 1933 the man who had never completed secondary school was appointed state director of public instruction. With the same practical objectivity and singleminded adherence to conviction that had characterized him as a municipal administrator, he undertook the reform of teaching in Alagoas. It was not surprising that his innovations won him enemies, both overt and covert, among those whose interests were unfavorably affected.

Whether or not those enemies were responsible for his dismissal and imprisonment in 1936 is, however, open to question. The frustrated revolt of the National Liberal Alliance at the end of 1935 led to wholesale arrests and deportations. Ramos, with countless others from all walks of life, was crammed into the hold of a coastal vessel and shipped to Rio, where he was first sent to a penitentiary, then to a prison camp on an island off the coast, and finally back again to the penitentiary. His health, precarious since his hospital experience of 1932, was definitely ruined by the hardships to which he was thus exposed, and his last two months of incarceration were spent in the prison infirmary.

No formal charges were ever brought against him: he was released with no more explanation than had been given for his

arrest. This Kafka-like experience is related at length and in searing detail in a work with which Ramos was occupied at the time of his death, *Memórias do Cárcere* ("Prison Memoirs"). A curious air of resignation pervades the book: there are no outcries at injustice or official barbarity, no attacks on the political order, no attempts at self-justification. Although he admits that his offspring had gone about painting leftist slogans in public places, he himself did not officially adhere to the Communist Party until 1945. Even then his act seems to have been one of protest against the established order rather than a statement of Marxist conviction.

In any case, whatever the grounds for his imprisonment may have been, it was only a little more than a year after his release that he was offered and accepted appointment as a federal inspector of education in Vargas' fascistic New State. With the salary from this post and the income from his books and periodical articles, Ramos eked out an existence until his death in 1953. He did not return to Alagoas, but instead took up residence in Rio, where he enjoyed great respect in literary circles. Elected president of the Brazilian Writers' Union, he made a trip in this capacity to Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union in 1952 to attend a literary congress in Moscow.

Ramos' reputation rests upon his last three novels and the two autobiographical works which have been mentioned. Besides these his other writings are of relatively little interest, save for the light they occasionally throw on aspects of his character or literary processes. Thus *Viagem* ("Journey"), unfinished at his death, in which his European experiences are related in routine fashion, reveals an attitude of little more than open-minded neu-

trality toward life behind the Iron Curtain. One might have expected more enthusiasm from a declared-even if nominal-Communist. Linhas Tortas ("Crooked Lines") and Viventes das Alagoas ("People of Alagoas"), posthumous collections of his contributions to periodicals, contain views of the author on writing, writers, and the Brazilian temperament. Ramos thrice tried his hand at children's literature: with a collection of tall tales. Histórias de Alexandre ("Stories Told by Alexander"); with an insipid short narrative, which nonetheless won a prize from the Ministry of Education, A Terra dos Meninos Pelados ("The Land of Hairless Children"); and with a Pequena História da República ("Short History of the Republic"). The last-mentioned was Ramos' entry in a contest for school textbooks. It is difficult to conceive how he could have expected any regime, least of all one of the type prevailing in 1942, to accept so irreverent a treatment of the nation's history, or how he could have supposed juvenile readers would appreciate the irony which makes his account of public figures and events wryly diverting to adults. Finally, he wrote a collection of short stories, published first as Dois Dedos ("Two Fingers"), and later, in augmented form, as Insônia ("Insomnia"). Of these something will be said in connection with Barren Lives.

Ramos seems to have regretted the publication of *Caetés*. One day during his imprisonment he observed, "with a shudder of revulsion," that one of his fellow inmates was engaged in reading the novel and begged, "For heaven's sake, don't read that! It's trash."

Ramos' judgment is overly harsh. While not worthy to stand beside his later novels, *Caetés* is nevertheless a very respectable

example of the masterwork of an apprentice-the proof that he has absorbed the lesson of his elders and is ready to strike out on his own. It falls clearly within the current of post-Naturalism, showing great concern with the establishment of a milieu in all its details, dwelling on events of the most ordinary nature, presenting a slice of life in small-town northeastern Brazil. The chief influence to be noted is that of Eça de Queiroz, whose use of a similar device in his A Ilustre Casa de Ramires ("The Illustrious House of Ramires") may have inspired Ramos to assign the writing of a historical novel as a pastime for his protagonistnarrator, João Valério. This undertaking, concerned with the Caeté Indians who once inhabited Alagoas-and whose chief recorded exploit seems to have been the cannibalizing of the first bishop of Brazil-not only provides the title of the novel but also gives rise to passages in which Ramos reveals something of his approach to the literary process. Here João Valério has been trying to describe the shipwreck which caused the ill-starred bishop to fall into the hands-and stomachs-of the savages:

With a hesitant pen I meditated a long while on the floating wreckage. I had counted on that shipwreck; I had imagined an impressive description full of vivid adjectives. And there I had only a colorless, insignificant account of a second-rate disaster. It was short too: written in a large hand, and with some words crossed out, it ran to only eighteen lines. Putting a sinking ship in my book—what foolishness! When had I ever seen a galleon? Besides it may have been a caravel. Or a barkentine.

Like João Valério, Ramos, from the beginning, found himself incapable not only of high-flown language but of drawing epi-

sodes out beyond the essential. He was also incapable, or felt himself to be so, of describing that with which he did not have firsthand experience.

The plot of *Caetés* is a simple one. João Valério, a store clerk, nourishes an adulterous desire for Luísa, his employer's wife. She yields to him during an absence of her husband. The latter, informed of her infidelity, commits suicide. Though now free to marry, João Valério and Luísa go their separate ways, their passion dead.

About these central figures revolves a host of minor ones—politicians, boardinghouse keepers, clergy, merchants—occupied with the petty intrigues and gossip of small-town existence. They are singularly lifelike. A number of Ramos' acquaintances claimed to recognize their portraits and accused him of writing a roman à clef, a charge that greatly annoyed him. He himself says, regarding the genesis of his characters, "One thing surprised me: my personages began to talk. Previously my wretched, abandoned, incomplete creatures had been all but mute, perhaps because they had tried to express themselves in an overly correct Portuguese, altogether impossible in Brazil. My book turned out to be full of dialog; it reads like a play."

Indeed, it is largely through dialog that the characters reveal themselves, bit by bit. The resulting psychological portraits are doubtless superficial, for people are not wont to bare their souls in casual dinner-table conversations. The abundant dialog also offers another advantage: by its liveliness it causes the reader to all but overlook the paucity of narrative element.

In Caetés, as in his later novels, Ramos is concerned much less with telling a story than with studying an individual in a par-

ticular situation. The critic Antônio Cândido penetratingly observes: "Without recourse to introspection, inner life is described through the *situation* of a character within a context of actions and events. A double perspective results, for, if the character is revealed by the events, these present themselves in the light of the problems affecting him." Ramos' preoccupation with the case of the individual, with his particular view of ambient reality, is emphasized by the fact that each of his first three novels is related by the protagonist, an arrangement which of necessity results in subordinating all events and characters to his private angle of vision. (Indeed, save for the short stories and *Barren Lives*, virtually the whole of Ramos' writing is in the first person, the author speaking either directly for himself, as in the case of the autobiographical works, or through the mouth of a fictional creation.)

Although not only this approach to the novel but also a number of Ramos' other characteristics—the spareness and precision of his vocabulary, the brevity of his periods, his disillusioned view of life, his wry humor—are to be found in *Caetés*, that book by no means prepares the reader for the novels that were to follow, all of which show a mastery of style and technique that assign Graciliano Ramos a place apart in Brazilian letters. They are remarkably different one from another, and each has found critics to support it as the author's masterpiece.

"Stark" is perhaps the adjective which best befits São Bernardo, by reason of the obduracy of the protagonist, the harshness of the book's atmosphere, the bareness of the narrative, and the strength of the work as a literary creation.

If in Caetés Ramos described the society surrounding him in

Palmeira dos Índios, for São Bernardo he went back to an earlier period in his existence, situating the action in the district of Viçosa. This was a region of both farmers and stock raisers, whose mutually repellent interests led to what at one time was said to be the highest homicide rate in any municipality in Brazil. Small property owners, particularly crop raisers, were systematically eliminated—with a rifle or through economic and political pressure—by the larger proprietors, usually cattlemen. Only the strongest and most ruthless survived.

The story Ramos tells is well suited to so harsh a background. The protagonist-narrator, Paulo Honório, is a self-made man. A foundling, he has forged ahead in life by hook, by crook, by indomitable will, and by endless energy. At the age of forty-five he has achieved the goal of his existence: he is the owner of the property which gives the book its name, a rural estate on which he had once been a field laborer; the ne'er-do-well son of the former proprietor is now in his employ. With a view to begetting an heir, he takes a wife, Madalena, a woman of great goodness and compassion for all. Her charity and sensitivity are totally incompatible with Paulo Honório's brutal, possessive nature. He cannot conceive of Madalena as other than an item of his property, and she, weary of an unending struggle against cruelty, misunderstanding, and jealousy, commits suicide. Paulo Honório realizes at last that he had, in his own way, truly loved his wife, that everything else has no real meaning for him. To fill the empty hours, to unburden the soul he had been unable to reveal even to Madalena, he undertakes to set their story down on paper.

Unlike the protagonist of *Caetés*, Paulo Honório is not a function of his environment; on the contrary the environment is entirely subordinated to his own compelling personality. Paulo Honório embodies the instinct of ownership. It is not a question of avarice; for Paulo Honório all humanity is divided into two classes—men of property and those who work for them. All his efforts have been bent to achieving entrance into the former class. The consequences of his single-mindedness he recognizes in a final summing up:

I do not think I was always selfish and brutal. My calling made me so. . . . This way of life destroyed me. I am a cripple. I must have a very small heart, blank spots in my brain, nerves different from those of other men.

Hypertrophied though he may be, he is not, however, all of a piece. He still possesses human feelings, and it is the inner conflict to which they give rise that makes of him a dramatic personality, that leaves him in the end not one of life's victors but one of life's vanquished.

It would be difficult to imagine a work more thoroughly reduced to essentials than São Bernardo. Paulo Honório's early career is related in a dozen short, but extraordinarily vivid, paragraphs. There is not a single description for its own sake. The phrases that evoke the property of São Bernardo are of the briefest and are always introduced to further in some way the development of events. Here, for example, is the opening of the scene in which Paulo Honório proposes to take over the estate from Luís Padilha, the ne'er-do-well into whose hands it has fallen by inheritance:

I rode toward the plantation house, which looked even older and in worse need of repair under the pouring rain. The spiderflowers had not been cut. I jumped off the horse and walked in, stamping my feet, my spurs clinking. Luís Padilha was asleep in the main room, stretched out in a filthy hammock, oblivious to the rain that beat at the windows and the leaks from the roof which were flooding the floor.

Everything needed to explain Padilha's subsequent acquiescence is here suggested to the reader—his indolence, the neglect into which he has let his property fall, the domineering manner in which Paulo Honório approaches him, stamping, and entering without so much as a by-your-leave.

While the conversations are fully as natural as those of *Caetés*, Ramos has limited them, like all else, to the significant. The sharpness of the interchanges gives them often an air of verbal duels between the characters.

Ramos, speaking through his protagonist-narrator, describes the reduction to essentials quite simply: "The process I have adopted is this: I extract a few elements from an event, and reject the rest as waste."

Stylistically, São Bernardo is a tour de force. The short, abrupt sentences, with their energetic vocabulary, are thoroughly expressive of the personality of the narrator. The writing has the ease and naturalness of popular speech, without recourse to dialect, looseness of construction, imprecision in choice of words, or syntactical error.

It would be hard to conceive of a work more different in overall effect from São Bernardo than the novel which followed, Angústia (translated as Anguish by L. C. Kaplan, New York,

1946). Once again the story is told in retrospect by the protagonist, but whereas Paulo Honório is a man strong of body and purpose, who has battled his way from field laborer to landed proprietor, the Luís da Silva of Anguish is the abulic final offshoot of a decadent family of plantation owners, reduced to a meager existence as a petty clerk in a government office. While São Bernardo has an out-of-doors atmosphere of space and light, the drama of Anguish unfolds in the dark, tortuous recesses of the protagonist's mind. Dialog, so brilliantly handled in the preceding novels, is abandoned for an all-but-uninterrupted inner monolog. Straightforward narrative is replaced by a fragmented confession, in which events are presented in a complex interplay of objective reality, memory, and speculation. The view of persons and events is not merely one-sided; it is deformed by the distorted vision of the protagonist.

The new manner is suggested by this passage from the beginning of the novel:

If I could, I would give up everything and resume my travels. This monotonous existence, chained to a desk from nine to twelve and from two to five, is stupefying. I might as well be a clam. Stupefying. When they close the office, I drag myself over to the clock tower and take the first streetcar to Land's End.

What can Marina be doing? I try to get her out of my mind. I could take a trip, get drunk, commit suicide.

I can see my dead body, thin as a rail, my teeth showing in a grin, my eyes like a pair of peeled grapes, my hands with their tobaccostained fingers crossed on my hollow chest....

I shake off these depressing thoughts. They come and go shamelessly, and with them the recollection of Julião Tavares. Unbearable.

I try to get my mind off these things. I'm not a rat, I don't want to be a rat. I seek distraction looking at the street....

Fifteen years ago it was different. You couldn't hear the church bell for the noise of the streetcars. My room, on the second floor, was as hot as hell. So at the hour the other boarders were leaving for medical school, I would go over to the public park and read the crime reports in the shade of the trees. Of course the boardinghouse has been closed and Miss Aurora, who was old even then, has died.

If Paulo Honório personifies the instinct of ownership, Luís da Silva is the embodiment of frustration. The thought of his family reminds him how far he has come down in the world; his bureaucratic routine gives him no sense of purpose in life; an overdeveloped critical faculty makes him keenly aware not only of the lack of merit of those more favored by fortune but also of his own shortcomings. He had once written a collection of poems; unable to pay for their publication under his own name, he has sold them one by one to others who wished to figure as possessors of literary talents.

Timid in his personal relations, particularly with women ("sex for me was always something painful, complicated, and incomplete"), he is ensnared into an engagement by Marina, the idle daughter of a neighbor family. She spends on a trousseau what he has saved and borrowed for household goods. At this point a man appears who is the exact opposite of Luís de Silva. Julião Tavares, the son of a merchant, has money, social position, women, self-confidence, and an untroubled conscience. Taking a passing fancy to Marina, he seduces and abandons her. All of Luís' pent-up frustration finds its object in his triumphant rival. So obsessed with him does he become that at last he is led to

action. One night, as Julião returns from a visit to his latest conquest, Luís strangles him. He tells his story upon recovery from the extended period of nervous prostration that ensued.

Though attention centers on the personality of Luís da Silva, the novel offers a varied gallery of vivid portraits. Particularly striking is the servant woman Vitória, who buries her savings in the back yard only to dig them up for constant recounting, and who is deeply perturbed when, without her knowledge, Luís borrows from the hoard and makes restitution in coins of different denomination.

Despite the nightmare air of the book, many of the characters are drawn from life. Luís da Silva's grandfather, for example, is patterned on Ramos' own; the latter's henchman José Baía appears under his own name. The original of Moisés, the Jewish revolutionary, was a source of concern to Ramos at the time of his incarceration.

It is curious that this somber story, with its prison-like atmosphere, should have appeared precisely at that darkest period in the author's life—curious because no relation of cause and effect exists between the two facts. The book had been finished prior to Ramos' arrest; one of his many worries in jail was how it might fare in the hands of the publisher. Persecution of the author did, however, contribute to the success with which the novel met on its appearance. It was greeted as a masterpiece; the author was hailed as a Brazilian Dostoevsky. Somewhat more reserved views are expressed today. Antônio Cândido, while paying due tribute to Anguish as a tour de force, finds it "overdone." The work is still, however, the one regarded by a majority of critics as Ramos' best.

The genesis of his next and final novel, Barren Lives, Graciliano Ramos describes thus:

In 1937 I wrote some lines on the death of a dog, an animal that turned out overly intelligent to my way of thinking, and for this reason somewhat different from my bipeds. Afterwards I did a few pages on the dog's owners. These pieces were sold, one by one, to newspapers and magazines. When [the publisher] José Olímpio asked me for a book at the beginning of last year, I invented a few more narratives which could just as easily be short stories as chapters of a novel. Thus there came into being Fabiano, his wife, their two boys, and the dog, the last creatures I have put in circulation.

It is interesting to note that all of Ramos' novels, by his own account, began as short stories. São Bernardo and Anguish were sketched in embryonic form before he took up the theme of Caetés; in this last case "the short story grew all too long and deteriorated into a novel." Caetés having been accepted for publication, Ramos returned to his earlier sketches, developing them too into novels.

Barren Lives is a compromise between genres. The book possesses unity: it presents a cycle in the life of a herdsman and his family, from their arrival at a ranch as refugees from one drought to their departure in flight from another. Yet the individual chapters are relatively independent entities; their order could be altered in various ways without detriment to the whole. Not only were the first parts written for separate publication as short stories, but Ramos himself included three chapters ("Jail," "Feast Day," "The Dog") with other selected short narratives in a volume he published in 1946 under the title of Histórias Incompletas ("Incomplete Stories").

The title, as Antônio Cândido shrewdly notes, is perhaps more significant than Ramos intended, for it well indicates the deficiency that marks his work as a short story writer. None of his compositions in this genre forms a satisfying narrative unit. Each seems but a sketch for, or fragment of, a larger work. In *Barren Lives*, however, the recurrence of the same figures in varying situations gradually produces that sense of wholeness requisite to the self-sufficiency of a work of art.

Of all his output, *Barren Lives* is the work in which Ramos is most concerned with narration, with telling a story, tenuous though it may be. As in the case of his short stories, he here abandons the use of the first person for the third. This technique does not result in any sense of detachment, however, for he still writes at all times from the viewpoint of one of the characters. Five of the chapters in fact are named for the personage whose vision of events colors their presentation. In four more Fabiano reappears as the dominant figure. In the remaining chapters the viewpoint shifts from character to character. Only in the closing sentence of the books does Ramos, perhaps regrettably, speak from a standpoint foreign to his characters.

One can hardly speak of psychological analysis in the case of Fabiano and his family; they are not so much simple as elementary. Their actions are guided by instinct rather than thought; Fabiano's attempt to understand how he comes to be in jail, for instance, suggests that ratiocination is beyond his capabilities. Ramos can therefore treat the dog on very much the same level as her masters, as a member of the family.

Dialog, of which Ramos had made such skillful use in earlier works, is here almost totally missing. Having a minimum of ideas to convey to one another, the members of the family are generally silent, to such an extent that the parrot they once owned never learned to talk. A gesture or an interjection serves for a large part of the communication among them.

The personages of *Barren Lives* are admirably studied in regard to their surroundings. This is, in fact, of all Ramos' works the one in which the relation between man and his milieu is most clearly developed. In *Caetés* the characters are distinctly small-town products, but the town might have been any one of countless others in Brazil rather than Palmeira dos Índios. The action of *São Bernardo* is set in the district of Viçosa and that of *Anguish* presumably in Maceió, but the locale is of little importance to the development of personalities and events.

Barren Lives, however, could take place nowhere save in the drought-ridden interior of northeastern Brazil. (The literal meaning of the Portuguese title, Vidas Sêcas, "Dry Lives," reflects both the parched atmosphere of the region and the desiccating effect it has on the existence of its inhabitants.) It is the work which identifies Ramos with the so-called novel of the Northeast, one of the most fertile veins in Brazilian literature since 1930. Its practitioners have dealt with varying aspects of the region-José Lins do Rêgo with the sugar plantations of coastal Pernambuco and Paraíba, Jorge Amado with the street urchins of Salvador and the cacao wars of southern Bahia, for example. No aspect of the area has attracted greater attention, doubtless by reason of the dramatic effects it offers, than the terrible droughts that periodically visit the backlands. Only a hardy breed could survive such trials, especially when prospects of reward are so few.

Fabiano and his family own little more than the clothes on their backs. Their few belongings are easily contained in a tin trunk which Vitória balances on her head when they set off on one of their forced treks. Their pleasures are small ones-an occasional swig of rum for Fabiano, a pair of high-heeled shoes for Vitória, a trip to town for all at the time of the Christmas festivities. Fabiano is a good herdsman, and the ranch propers under his management as long as the rains come. He gets no thanks from the proprietor, however, whose conversation with his employee usually takes the form of a dressing-down. By a skillful system of advances of money and overcharges for interest, the proprietor sees, moreover, that little or nothing in the form of wages comes into Fabiano's hands at the end of the year. Tradesmen cheat the ranch hand, townspeople scorn him as a bumpkin, a policeman avenges his ill luck at cards by throwing him into jail. Yet Fabiano accepts all this abuse as his natural lot; so was his father used before him, and he has only vague illusions that his sons may know a better life. The height of his wife's ambition is ownership of a single piece of furniture, a comfortable bed.

It is to be remarked that Ramos has no recourse to the more dramatic aspects of life in the backlands—banditry and religious fanaticism—which crop up frequently in other novels of the region. His very descriptions of the drought are sober; he suggests by details, such as the vultures circling in to peck out the eyes of moribund animals, in preference to painting a large-scale picture of natural catastrophe. One might recall in this regard João Valério, whose attempt at a grandiose depiction of shipwreck resulted in a "colorless, insignificant account of a second-rate disaster." Unlike João Valério, who had never seen a galleon, Gra-

ciliano Ramos had experienced drought from his earliest years. The restraint of his treatment reflects his austere temperament rather than any insufficiency of knowledge.

It is difficult to say why Ramos to all intents and purposes turned his back on fiction after the publication of *Barren Lives*. Perhaps he felt he had exhausted the varieties of approach open to a writer of his particular abilities and preferred to avoid any air of repeating himself. Again it may have been a desire to comment still more directly upon the world of his experience that led him to abandon fictional mouthpieces and to devote the major literary efforts of his last years to autobiography.

Infância ("Childhood"), in its poetic presentation of distant figures and events, preserves something of the atmosphere of fiction. Ramos in a sense was still writing from a viewpoint external to himself—that of the boy he had been half a century earlier, a boy who had left a few traces of his existence in Anguish and Barren Lives. The distinguished critic Álvaro Lins holds "Childhood" to be the best-written of all Ramos' works, and indeed it is one of great distinction and charm. It possesses full literary autonomy; while of much interest for the light it throws on the man and his fictional compositions, it can be read and enjoyed for itself alone, as a story or collection of stories.

The "Prison Memoirs," on the other hand, constitute a spiritual diary of a period much nearer at hand, which had left an indelible impression on Ramos' mind. One cannot but wonder at the wealth of its recorded detail, even if, as the author admits, it may not be accurate in all particulars, for it is in its entirety a reconstruction from memory. (Ramos took extended notes during the first part of his imprisonment, but these were later lost.)

Highly uneven—pedestrian passages being interspersed with pages of great power—the "Memoirs" would undoubtedly have benefited from tightening and revision had not death overtaken the author as he was approaching the end of his chronicle.

Ramos once wrote that in his view the principal deficiency from which Brazilian fiction of his day suffered was "lack of careful observation of the facts that are to enter into the composition of the work of art," adding that, "in an undertaking so complex as the novel, ignorance of those facts is detrimental to characterization and results in a lack of verisimilitude in the narrative." He himself was constant in writing only of that with which he had firsthand acquaintance and a feeling of intimacy. In an interview given a year before his death he declared:

I could never conceive an abstract novel, a work of escape literature. My novels are all concerned with the Northeast, because it was there that I spent my youth; it is what I really know and feel. I have lived in Rio for twenty years [sic], but I could never succeed in writing a novel about Rio, because I do not know the city.

Ramos did not, however, feel any scruple about rearranging facts to suit artistic purpose. In *São Bernardo*, Paulo Honório describes the process which we may assume was Ramos' own:

This conversation, obviously, did not proceed exactly as I have set it down on paper. There were pauses, repetitions, misunderstandings, and contradictions, all quite natural when people speak without thinking of the record. I reproduce what I consider interesting. I suppressed a number of passages and altered others. . . . For example, when I dragged Costa Brito over to the clock, I told him what I thought of him in four or five indecent terms. This abuse, unnecess-

sary since it neither added to nor detracted from the effect of the whiplashes I gave him, has gone by the board as you will note if you reread the scene of the attack. That scene, expurgated of obscenities, is described with relative sobriety.

Sobriety is indeed one of the key characteristics of Ramos' manner. It has been noted in the discussion of *Barren Lives*, for example, that the author avoids the more melodramatic aspects of life in the backlands and that in picturing the catastrophic effects of the drought he exercises great restraint. Even Luís da Silva's murder of Julião Tavares, the most violent scene in all Ramos' writing, admirable as a revelation of the workings of the narrator's tortured mind, is related with great simplicity of terms.

Ramos' constant aim was to obtain maximum effect from minimum resources. What he has to say he says in relatively few words. Save for the "Prison Memoirs," none of his works can be described as long. As novels, São Bernardo and Barren Lives are decidedly short. Ramos' sentences too are for the most part brief; at times they seem almost curt. Descriptive adjectives and adverbs are held to a minimum: a sample six-page chapter of São Bernardo exhibits but two of the latter and two dozen of the former.

Ramos was greatly concerned with what he considered acceptable standards of literary expression. Up to the third decade of the present century, Brazilian authors tended to take the usage of Portugal as their model, without regard for the transformations which time, geographical separation, and the introduction of new ethnic elements had of necessity wrought in Portuguese as spoken in Brazil. The Modernist movement of the 1920's revolted against this practice of "speaking one language

and writing another," and advocated vernacular usage as the basis of literary style. The inevitable question, of course, was what level of usage was to be taken as standard. If turns of popular speech often brought savoriness and spontaneity to literature, excessive reliance on the model provided by the man in the street, or in the field, resulted in what Ramos characterized as "the intentional mistakes of certain citizens who systematically write things the wrong way." Such writers, he continued, "are purists who have gone astray, seeking to create an artificial language of halting effect." Recognizing, on the other hand, that an "overly correct Portuguese" was "altogether impossible in Brazil," he sought to steer a middle course, avoiding both the stilted and the incorrect. He succeeded admirably. One might well apply to Ramos what he said of one of his contemporaries: "He expresses himself correctly and without floweriness; this gives his prose an air of naturalness which deceives the unwary reader. We do not perceive the artifice; we have the impression that the effect is altogether spontaneous, obtained without effort of any kind."

Álvaro Lins, for his part, describes Ramos' style thus:

Graciliano Ramos' prose is modern by reason of its leanness, the vocabulary it employs, and the taste it exhibits in the use of words and syntactical constructions. It is classic in its correctness and in the tone of what one might term Biblical dignity that marks the sentences. Its distinction derives not from sensual beauty but from precision—from a capacity for transmitting sensations and impressions with a minimum of metaphors and images, simply through the skillful interplay of words.

Both for the transparency of his writing and for the pessimistic

view he takes of life, Ramos has been compared to the greatest of his Brazilian predecessors, Machado de Assis. The aristocratically disillusioned prose of the latter, most often manifested in ironic wit, contrasts with a more profoundly fatalistic attitude on the part of Ramos. It is well exemplified by the passage setting forth Fabiano's feelings following his settling of accounts with the ranch owner:

Couldn't they see he was a man of flesh and blood? It was his duty to work for others, naturally. He knew his place. That was all right. He was born to this lot; it was nobody's fault that it was a hard one. What could he do? Could he change fate? If anyone were to tell him it was possible to better one's lot, he would be amazed. He had come into the world to break untamed horses, cure cattle ailments by prayer, and fix fences from winter to summer. It was fate. His father had lived like that, his grandfather too. . . . He accepted the situation; he did not ask for more. If only they gave him what was coming to him, it was all right. But they didn't. He was a poor devil; like a dog, all he got was bones. Why then did rich people go and take part of the bones?

Life is essentially unjust, and there is nothing anyone can do about it: this is Ramos' view. Other writers of his generation, particularly those from his own Northeast, likewise saw the injustice; they, however, felt that something could and should be done about it. Several took an active part in left-wing politics, and in their works there breathes a conviction that sooner or later a new day must dawn for the disinherited of the earth. Not so Ramos. He admitted of changes in individual situations: a Paulo Honório could rise, a Luís Padilha could sink. There will

always, however, be oppressed and oppressors. Toward both he took an equally cold, one might say clinical, attitude. Suffering he treats with dignity but without compassion.

Though Ramos seems to have taken human pettiness and meanness for granted, human generosity caused him surprise. Gratuitous acts of kindness of which he was the object during prison days were a source of unresolved wonder to him. Is it coincidence that the work which followed upon that period of his existence was not the somber *Anguish* but *Barren Lives*, relatively speaking the most optimistic—or perhaps one should say least pessimistic—of his creations? Despite the natural disasters and human injustices which overtake them, Fabiano and his family breathe an elemental heroism; they bear witness to the unconquerable spirit that bids man carry on, whatever adversity he may be called to face.

By reason of the keenness of his psychological insight, of his deep feeling for the vernacular, of his unfailing sense of proportion, of his skilled craftsmanship in construction, Ramos has been able to fashion from the simplest and most unpromising of materials works which stand among the most impressive creations of modern Brazilian literature. Commonplace incidents, related with that apparent artlessness which is one of the highest forms of art, acquire a depth of meaning far surpassing that of the spectacular shipwrecks to which the João Valérios of the literary world turn for effect. The backlander Fabiano, humble and inarticulate though he may be, takes on a stature and a dignity approaching that of figures of classic tragedy.

"Less is more," Mies van der Rohe has proclaimed. The power of Graciliano Ramos' austere creations well betokens the truth of that dictum.

RALPH EDWARD DIMMICK