A MACHADIAN FIGURE

Alfredo Bosi
Universidade de São Paulo

Abstract This article explores the narrative techniques and thematic concerns in Machado de Assis's final novel, *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*. It focuses on the character of Counselor Ayres, a retired diplomat who serves as the narrator and central consciousness of the story. The author analyzes Ayres' perspective, characterized by a diplomatic approach that balances uncovering and covering up truths. The article examines Ayres' use of attenuating language, particularly words like "perhaps" and "appeared," to create ambiguity and mask his critical observations. It also discusses the tension between social appearances and inner realities in the novel, as well as Ayres' role as both an observer and participant in the unfolding drama. The analysis reveals Machado's nuanced portrayal of human nature and social dynamics in late 19th-century Brazilian society.

Keywords Machado de Assis, Counselor Ayres, Diplomacy, Ambiguity, Social Masks

To Antonio Candido

> […] it is not a bad thing for us to move off from shore with our eyes on those who remain.
> *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*, May 15[1]

[1] Credit is due to the following translators, excerpts of whose translations appear throughout: Helen Caldwell, *Counselor Ayres' Memorial* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972) and *Dom Casmurro* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1953); Elizabeth Lowe, *Esau and Jacob* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000); Gregory Rabassa, *Quincas Borba* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998); and Flora Thomson-DeVeaux, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (New York, Penguin, 2020). Special thanks to Catarina Lins for her assistance in editing the final version of this text.

The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas begin at the end of ends: they are posthumous, they come after life and after death. The narrator, no longer among the men who continue their struggles here on Earth, begins by recounting his death only to—leisurely, and with a great deal of freedom—reconstruct his life. *Posthumous*, superlative of *posterus (post)*, "coming after." After life and after death. It is more than just *posterior*; it is an absolute after.

Counselor Ayres' Memorial, Machado de Assis's last book (consciously his last, as he himself states in letters to Joaquim Nabuco and José Veríssimo), was written by Counselor Ayres, a retired sexagenarian diplomat, the perfect trifecta for one "no longer of this world" but with his "eyes on those who remain."

Like Brás Cubas, Ayres writes from the privileged position of already being able to elude the harsh game of society. To borrow language from Machado's own prefatory notes to the reader, the "free form" of *The Posthumous Memoirs* resurfaces, half-concealed, in the "diary form" of *Memorial*. But what matters most to both memoirists is the capacity to exercise a rare and terrible power: the power to say what one thinks. And it seems that only the realm of posthumous maturity or the solitary space of the written diary would lend itself sufficiently to sincerity. In the middle of the journey comes the reluctance to reveal one's true face, or, what's more, the fear of disturbing the sacred auras of self-love. Modesty and fear attenuate, stifle, or silence the true word. Who will say it, after all? A deceased man or a retired diplomat.

They will not say it, however, in the same way. The "deceased man recently an author" will be brazen to the point of cynicism, no longer having to spare himself or others. He is "no longer burdened by the brevity of the age." The terrorizing power of the word devastates in *The Posthumous Memoirs*: individual and family, love and friendship, politics and religion all slip down the slope of nothingness. Even Nature, in a rare occurrence in our literature, reveals to a delirious narrator its sphinxlike face, more the wicked stepmother than the benevolent mother.

As for the diplomat, he is a mediator by trade and under sufferance. Machado splits his time between each of his final two novels. In *Esau and Jacob*, Ayres the character does not always say what he thinks, out of an "aversion to controversy": he listens more than he speaks and conciliates as much as he can. In *Memorial*, it is Ayres who, despite being an unobtrusive and somewhat peripheral character, becomes the narrative focus; he has the power to criticize, to interrogate, to judge all that is being told. In *Esau and Jacob*, a peculiar tale of twins in which everything is either folded or divided, Ayres has already discovered the golden formula: "his gift

for uncovering and for covering up. All diplomacy resides in these two related verbs." The diplomatic game gains a layer of complexity in *Memorial* as it enters the intimacy of first-person narration:

> […] I had to listen to the two of them with that complaisance which is one of *my* perfections, though not a new one. I think I got it at school, if I did not already have it in my cradle. My mother used to tell how I rarely cried for nursey's teat; I only made an ugly, imploring face. At school I did not quarrel with anyone; I listened to the teacher; I listened to my companions, and if at times they were exalted and extreme I made a pair of compasses of my soul with the points opened to the two extremes.

A compass that opens the doors to both extremes. A gaze that measures the eternal duality of all things. A spirit which knows that, where there is history, there is conflict. But the diplomat's job is to mediate both sides' interests and passions. Bentinho's hardhearted but wise remark comes to mind: "I like the mouse; I do not dislike the cat." Can the compass privilege or neglect any one point on its perfect circle? No one has absolute say over anyone else; when conflict befalls, it is best to abstain, or to accept individual reasoning. Ayres' morality teaches the coexistence of opposites and the attenuation of negatives.

A stylistic examination of the ways in which Ayre's perspective is shaped brings us to the word *attenuation*. When confronted with difference, with the prickly shortcomings of life in society, Ayres tends to say first what he sees ("his gift for uncovering"), then to un-say it ("his gift for covering up"), and then, finally, to leave face and blindfold superimposed. The effect is always one of dual possibility: salvation of the positive despite the negative. Persistence of the latter despite the former.

The inner compass does not allow raw facts to maintain their rigid form: the thin line of the circle rounds off the edges and shades, in chiaroscuro, the areas of starkest contrast. Hence the structuring role of the diary form, the intermediating function of consciousness. The immediate presence of things illudes, incites or invokes excessive pain; one must let things happen and, only later, and from afar, take them up in writing: "[…] But now it is getting too

late to transcribe what he said. That can wait for some day when the first strong impression has passed and there remains in my memory only what is worth keeping."

Ayres' remark, deferring the pleasure of direct evocation, makes the case for mediation.

That terrorizing power of saying everything, immediately, unabashedly and without a wrinkle, a power granted to Brás Cubas only after death, seems to inspire fear in the later Machado of *Memorial*. His critical spirit, which before relinquished denial and took pleasure in the death instinct of analysis, now, as it nears its final bend, makes a pact with protective convention. And, as is true of so many pacts, the goal is to enjoy a little peace, given how life's time eats away. Time is the "minister of death" and "the accomplice of desperate crimes"; what little one has left must not be squandered on vain quarrels. That little must bear a lot, and last, simulating the timeless time of happiness:

> As we ascended the mountain our feelings were not quite the same. Campos took great pleasure in the trip we were making by rail. I, as I confessed to him, had enjoyed it more when we went there in a carriage drawn by mules—one of a long train—not for the vehicle in itself but because I could see, appearing little by little in the distance there below, the sea and its city in all its picturesque aspects. The railroad train carries you in a desperate, headlong rush up the mountain right into the Petropolis station. Moreover, I recalled the stops we made, there to drink coffee, there to drink water from a famous spring, and finally the view from the top of the sierra, where the elegant elite of Petropolis waited for us, and escorted us in their carriages and on horseback all the way to their city; some of the passengers from below transferred at this point to carriages in which their families were waiting for them.
>
> Campos went on mentioning all of the good things he found in the railroad train, as a pleasure and as a convenience. The time one saved alone! If I had retorted with the good to be found in time lost, it would have started a kind of debate which would have made our trip still more suffocatingly short. I preferred to change the subject; I seized the last

> few minutes to speak of progress, he too, and we arrived, both highly satisfied, at the city in the sierra.

Perhaps memory, music, and, above all, love are the forms of exception in Machado's final work that conciliate and resolve, in the briefest of moments, the antagonisms of social life, pulling an island of timelessness and pleasure from the depths of historical time. Everyday life, however, brings back the wrinkles of division and cleaves with the wedge of negativity. And, as Ayres the narrator cannot but help to expose it, he invents, at each step, new mechanisms of disguise and diversion.

One way to attenuate is to doubt, or to pretend to doubt. Human language has slippery ways of saying without saying. Take the verb *parecer* ("to appear to"), which asks us to interpret the object while simultaneously veiling our impressions with the subject's uncertainty. The opening scene of *Memorial* takes place at the cemetery. A young Fidelia stands before her husband's grave. According to Ayres, Fidelia *appeared to* be praying. The first-person narrator is not omniscient, but he has eyes and a conscience: he sees the beautiful widow seemingly praying for the dead. Perceptive as a watchman, he suspends certainty (she "appeared to be praying"), leaving room to believe that the gesture may or may not correspond to the soul. He diverts the reader's attention from the image, but once it is established, it can no longer be erased. It is unclear if Fidelia is truly praying, or if she only appears to be praying. Ayres unveils the girl's face to the reader and then conceals it with a mask, but only partially, as the verb *parecer* does not allow the mask to fully cover the widow's face while in the act of prayer. An uncovering-covering up.

The following passage is marked by a similar fold or division:

> At that moment the widow unclasped her hands and appeared about to leave. First she glanced around as if to see if she was alone. Perhaps she wanted to kiss the gravestone, her husband's name most likely, but there were people about […].

What is seen and described is quite clear: the gesture of unclasping her hands, of moving her body as though about to leave, of scanning her surroundings with her eyes. But it is the

meaning of these signifiers that remains unclear: what does Fidelia truly desire? To kiss the grave, her husband's name? "Perhaps she wanted to…" And why does she glance around the cemetery? "As if to see if she was alone." *Perhaps, as if, if*. With these quick, insidious observations, we begin to see Ayres' perspective set into motion: to what extent does the mask of the grieving widow, standing at the foot of her deceased husband's tomb, relate to the secret life of that young woman, whom the diplomat has already called "handsome and most genteel—*gentilissima*, as I have heard said of other ladies, in Rome."? Might not Fidelia's final break of fidelity to the recently deceased already be underway in her wavering, in her desire to kiss the grave but first glancing around? In the end, she does not kiss it. There are people nearby, not to mention two gravediggers who are talking about a heavy, an excessively heavy, coffin. The widow walks away, never looking back.

The word *perhaps* seems neutral, but that neutrality is, rather, ambiguity, which can mask a cutting lucidity. Machado brings Fidelia into Ayres' observatory for a second time, during Dona Carmo and Aguiar's silver wedding. Childless, they treat the young girl as their daughter, at a time when she is wanting and alone: her husband is dead, her mother is dead, her father is distant and irreconcilable. Fidelia is the last to arrive to the party:

> Fidelia had only partially left off mourning: she had on a pair of small coral earrings; and the locket with her husband's portrait, which hung at her breast, was gold. The rest of her dress was somber.
> The jewels and a spray of forget-me-nots at her waist were perhaps in compliment to her friend.

What direction might this last *perhaps* take? Is the homage to her friend not, as it happens, certain? And, if not, what prompts Fidelia to adorn herself thus, with forget-me-nots and coral earrings? The vanity of her beauty? The gracefulness of her young body? Where lies her mourning, or the shadow of the dead? Surely it resides in her dark dress, or in the picture in her locket. But that *perhaps* diverts Fidelia's soul, and ours, not only from the spirit of mourning but also from pure gratitude and deference to Dona Carmo. The story leads to a final truth and two breaches of fidelity: Fidelia will marry again, and, once married, will turn her back on the maternal friendship of Dona Carmo. But might all of this already be stored in that simple *perhaps*?

Time, once again an accomplice of desperate crimes, proves Ayres' doubt well-founded. At the end of the story, Ayres, observing Fidelia's new union, exchanges an intelligent glance, and perhaps a smile, with his sister Rita: "I thought of that day at the cemetery." But then did one marriage negate the other? Was the deceased mercilessly forgotten? Is there irreconcilable opposition? Do the sharp edges begin to show themselves again? Ayres, best man of the second marriage, will not let others—no doubt jealous of Fidelia's beauty or fortune—speak ill of them. He will form one complete circle, joining the endpoints of past and present: "The question is, essentially, to preserve this bond unbroken and keep life's law from destroying what properly belongs to life *and* death. I believe in Fidelia's 'two' loves; I have come to believe that they form one continuous, unbroken love."

Everything would thus be satisfactorily resolved in the best of all possible worlds. But that would imply awarding the palm branch to some holier-than-thou positivity, uncharacteristic of our Machado-Ayres, who cannot resist the temptation to doubt once more, facetiously shading his own profession of faith:

> When I was an active member of the diplomatic corps I did not believe so many things could be all stuck up together. I was suspicious and distrustful. But if I retired it was for the very purpose of believing in the sincerity of others. Let the fellows who are still in active service do the distrusting!

Whenever certain remarks are introduced subtly, with words and phrases such as *perhaps, by chance, probably, it appears, I think, I believe, it may be, who knows,* we should expect the profoundest of words to follow, the most drastic of decisions, the strongest of blows. It is circumlocution, a deceitful look or the fleeting smile of someone about to say no. An irrevocable *no*, the hardest of all. Which is why it must be neutralized, compensated for, in the etymological sense: "to weigh against," to counterbalance with the weight of words the plate which is about to fall. Grateful are mortals for the illusion of balance. Even the bonze who stuck a metaphysical nose on the lepers' faces, though he deceived them, acted piously.

Let us now turn to the other young soul, Fidelia's complement, Tristão, whom the Counselor's gaze never ceases to pursue. The first chapter of Tristão's life is told quickly. In fact,

the desire to hurry is ostensive and programmed, as if the narrator were avoiding value judgments, choosing to lay bare only the skeleton of the plot: "At this point he (Campos) related a story that will take only a half dozen lines, and that is more than enough with evening coming on. Let us tell it fast."

The story is one of sponsorship, customary of the social ties of Imperial Brazil. A friend of Dona Carmo's (whom we have already seen as Fidelia's protector) gives birth to a child and, as soon as he is born, gives him to the Aguiars, who welcome him with the affection of a mother and father. They look after the boy for some time, while his mother travels to Minas Gerais to meet up with her husband. Later, Carmo and Aguiar are chosen to be Tristão's godparents. From then on, the boy has two mothers and two homes. Dona Carmo, his foster mother, proves to be more affectionate than his biological mother. Under her care, the boy is lavished with sweets and affection; she pays greater attention to his studies and treats him with a loving tenderness when ill. When it comes time for Tristão to choose a profession, she intervenes on his behalf (the boy wanted to get a university degree, to become a bachelor of laws, but his father intended him to go into business…). Tristão's solicitous godmother continues to come to his aid, until one day his real parents decide to travel to Portugal to visit the boy's grandmother. Tristão wants to go with them. His godparents ask him not to go, to postpone the trip until after he graduates. Tristão insists and goes anyway. "The voyage took place in spite of the tears it cost." The boy promises to return soon, promises to write, to send pictures, "but shortly thereafter the letters grew less frequent and finally ceased altogether—the letters and the pictures and the loving message—perhaps he no longer missed them." *Perhaps* is the pedal that muffles the certainty of fact and the stridency of judgment.

"Perhaps he no longer missed them." But Tristão will return an educated man, certain of his place in the *Cortes* of Lisbon. His return will not be abrupt: he will break the years-long silence little by little, asking for news and pictures, he himself sending only engravings from Goupil's studio. "He asked…for pictures of them, and he sent them some engravings."

Ayres is curious to distinguish the face from the mask: after all, why has Tristão returned to the home of his forgotten godparents? His godparents, always showing benevolence toward their prodigal son, exhibit the boy's nostalgic letters and imagine the rebirth of an affection benumbed solely by the charms of Lisbon. Ayres quietly accepts the old Aguiars' interpretation:

Tristão's letters are part of a game of appearances that does not come without its objectivity. But in conversation with Aguiar, he interrogates him point-blank: "He came only to visit you?"

And the godfather replies, truthfully: "So he says, only to visit us. It's possible his father took advantage of his coming to entrust him with some business errand. Although he closed his firm, he still has interests here. I didn't ask him about this."

At this point, a minor detail in the dialogue shifts the perspective. Tristão *says* that he came back just to visit his godparents. But there again lies that sinuous *perhaps*: perhaps he came on business, at the request of his father, whose former interests as a coffee broker may have left some not-so-inconsequential residue. *Perhaps*, for this is not what Tristão says. Where does the face end, and where does the mask begin?

The entire narration of Tristão's second relationship to his godparents highlights the distance between a manifest attributive schema (Tristão is kind, attentive, solicitous…) and the latent actantial narrative schema: Tristão, from the moment he sets foot again on Brazilian soil, is well aware of what he wants, certain that he will return shortly to the politics of Lisbon, leaving his godparents "[orphans] in reverse." In fact, it is the latter actantial model, which diagrams the subject's effective actions, that prevails over the former, assigning the character his true moral dimension—a dimension that only the Counselor's gaze seems to grasp ("Tristão," he says, "is a politician"). The negative extreme is reinforced by a lady with a knowingly foul tongue, Dona Cesaria, who believes that the young man has married the widow Fidelia out of pure economic interest. But Ayres will never say this, or at least will never say it in this way.

To understand the relationship between narrative focus and character, we must return to the "compass" that the Counselor uses to describe himself. Open to the two extremes of Dona Carmo and Dona Cesaria—the former seeing in her godson a creature of choice, the latter a boy no more than a scoundrel—Ayres allows them to go on saying one thing after the next (it is his way of discovering all of reality's possibilities). Restricting the excessively positive and attenuating the excessively negative, he admits that, after all, a man may very well be, without greater guilt, an ambiguous creature, that is, a "political" being.

There are numerous examples of Tristão's ambivalence, illuminated in typical Ayres fashion: "Tristão, who is dubbed *Brazilian* in Lisbon, like others in that country who have gone back from here, is a naturalized Portuguese" (4 August); "I have heard him speak only half a dozen words that somewhat resembled self-praise, and even so they were moderate words";

"'They say I do not write entirely badly' conceals the conviction that he writes well, but he did not say so; and it might be true" (4 August); "'One never forgets the land where one was born,' he concluded, with a sigh"; "Perhaps it was his intention to make amends for the naturalization he had chosen to acquire—a way of saying that he was still a Brazilian" (19 August); "He possesses great delicacy, and a certain amount of dissimulation" (22 September); "Tristão had attended town councils in France, and appeared to be of a conservative persuasion outside of England; in England he was a liberal; in Italy he continued to be a Latin. Everything fits together and accommodates itself in that diversified personality. What I noticed particularly was that, no matter where, he enjoys politics. It is evident he was born in the land of politics and lives in it" (March 25); "Perhaps he possesses a certain amount of dissimulation, as well as other civilized defects, but, in this world, imperfection is a necessity" (22 October).

The basics of diplomacy accept the mask as a necessity of interpersonal relationships in society, as it is, here and now.

Is Ayres' compass the ideological figure of the later Machado? The strategic (and, in the end, definitive) disguise of a keen social and political conscience? Over the course of the writer's long journey, from Brazilian Empire to Republic, the masquerade, which he observed from early on, gradually outgrew its status as a mere representation of the Romanesque. Viewed from below, from the vantage point of one familiar with the ins and outs of social ascension, the masquerade would come to be entangled with the entire plot of a cyclical daily life. People dancing to the monotonous music of self-preservation. In such a world, the mask is no longer an exception; it is used not merely to cover the face of the most villainous character. It becomes the rule, the stamp of necessity. It is carved into the wheel of Destiny, which, as Ayres points out, rhymes with Divinity and "spares me philosophic cerebrations." The naturalization or reverse consecration of History, manifest in the delirium of Brás Cubas, may also be a masked language that scarcely hides the discourse of suspicion.

Machado's final work, sometimes felt as the softening of all friction, seems, rather, the watermark of a society (or, perhaps, a class) that, having recently emerged from its thorniest dilemmas (the abolition of slavery, the fall of the Empire), seeks to stop and condense its own time, deliberately immersing itself in private joys, which the narrator perceives as worth more than public ones. Ayres, visiting the Aguiars' home on May 14, 1888, senses a great deal of excitement in the air and judges that the commotion must be the result of the newly enacted Lei

Áurea (Golden Law). But he is mistaken. The excitement is over the news that their godson, Tristão, is soon to arrive.

The Counselor, discreet but incisive, leads us to understand that the financial situation is changing. Business is becoming a thing of the city; Fidelia, heiress of the slave-baron Santa Pia, will give part of her property to the former slaves, entrusting brokers and bankers with the task of liquidation. Their interests seem lighter, "freer" than in the days when blacks were bought for coffee. Money, the mediation of mediations, widens the gap between consumption and work, between the graces of sociability and its material conditions. It is ill-mannered to speak *directly* of its necessity or worth; that is, unless Dona Cesaria's foul tongue is assigned such a thankless task… The Counselor listens to her, enthralled. But the ambitions of the young Tristão, who returns from Portugal already well-off and refined, are, more than anything else, political. This is not lost upon Ayres, who casts and reels in his net of suspicion precisely amid these new interests and passions.

The Counselor, as much a "thinking erratum" as the posthumous narrator Brás Cubas, gives rise to two possible Machados: one who demystifies, and one who misleads. In the first instance, he is almost a terrorizer; in the second, almost a conservative. In both, he plays the politics of possibility, which is, perhaps, the essence of diplomacy.

From the mean to the extremes

To analyze the *golden mean* in Ayres' theory and practice runs the serious risk of getting so close to the surface of Machado's style as to ignore, or merely understate, the force of both extremes under tension. One must see the compass in motion. Enraptured by Mozart's melodious harmony, we might well forget that it is the result of musical language taming the whirlwind of Eros and Pathos, who wish to drag the composer to screams, to cries, to laughter and silence. The peaceful classicity of the final layer tries to conceal what gave it life and form.

Ayres is a taught rope stretched between the death instinct (which is analysis and boredom) and the indestructible desire for living beauty and love. He is an observer but also a

voyeur who lives vicariously through the courtship between Tristão and Fidelia.[2] An incisive judge yet solicitous godfather, the Counselor carries within him, concerted, the whisperings of nothingness—heard by yet another Machadian character in solitude—and the luminous sonata that Flora plays on the piano, which carries her off to paradise.

At the mean, we find the perfect diplomat; but it is at the extremes, the rare extremes, that we get a glimpse of the man.

There are moments in *Memorial* that bring about that same dizzying negativity that assails us in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Lurking around Ayres, just as it lurks around Brás Cubas, is the impatient, violent temptation to identify with Society and Nature, as propounded by the terrible ideology of "Social Darwinism." Such ideology holds that a dead man is nothing but dead matter, destined to be forgotten: "the dead are well off lying where they fall"; *"les morts vont vite*"; "first the living and their consortia; the dead and their interments can wait."

The passage in which Ayres the narrator tells of a man's death is a cruel maneuver, despite being written with a mirthful pen. His sister Rita writes asking for information about an auctioneer. Ayres remarks: "I will send her word that the auctioneer died; he is probably still alive, but he is sure to die someday." The Counselor experiences bouts of acedia and misanthropy, almost out of disgust for his fellow man: "I need to scrub myself clean of others' company." Death instinct in the form of boredom, which is, as old moral theology teaches, the death of the soul.

In another scene, that other becomes the object of the malignity of Dona Cesaria, who represents, in the universe of *Memorial*, the limits of aggression. Ayres' superego bows to the *Id*-Cesaria to listen complacently to the "secret causes" of other people's actions, and to delight in her malevolence.

> If this lady did not have malice perhaps she would be of no account, but I have never seen her without it, and it is a delight […] Everything comes forth in words that are relatively sweet and proper, the venom or intention, remaining at the bottom. There are times when Dona

[2] Ayres as a *voyeur* who lives vicariously is José Paulo Paes' interpretation of the Counselor, in the journal *Vozes*, September 1976 ("Um aprendiz de morto." *Revista de Cultura Vozes*, Petrópolis, n. 7, pp. 13-28, September 1976).

> Cesaria's wit is so great that a person feels sorry that what she says is not true and easily pardons her for it.

Death instinct under the guise of moral retaliation.

All said and done, it is the analytical demon that governs Ayres' relationship with Fidelia. He wants to scrutinize the beautiful widow's hidden motives, and he confesses that he would most certainly like to conspire with her father so as to have her always in his sights:

> I confess that if I could have I would have spoken evil of her with the concealed purpose of further inflaming the hatred and making a reconciliation impossible…so that she would not leave here to go to the plantation and I would not lose the object of my study. This, yes, dear paper, this you may record, because it is pure, inside truth, and no one reads us. If someone did read us, he would think me evil, and nothing is lost by appearing to be evil; one gains almost as much as by actually being so.

Perversion of the *voyeur*, chilled passion, analysis for the sake of analysis.

From this first extreme, which the diplomat Ayres is unable to fully mediate or cover up, let us swing briefly to the other, more consoling one: that of imagining a world of the chosen permeated by gracefulness, a Stendhalian space of music and affection in which Eros lives out her moment of beauty and freedom. The Counselor who, quoting Shelley, declares, "I can give not what men call love," is the same bold narrator who enters the hearts of the bride and groom, uttering the unspeakable of their encounter:

> An inner perturbation upset their calculations, and their eyes told their secrets. When they said little, or nothing, their silence said more than words; and they found themselves looking to each other for help, and to heaven. […] They had found out everything. It seems beyond belief how two persons that had never seen each other, or only in passing and with indifference, it seems beyond belief that they now know each

> other, word for word, and by heart. They came to know the whole being. If some little cell or garret remained dark they went at once, eagerly, and penetrated one within the other with a living light that no one had kindled. What I say may be obscure, but it is not fantasy; it was what I saw with these two eyes. And I envied them. I will not alter that statement, I envied those two because in that mutual transfusion the sexes disappeared to become one state.

The *now* of loving knowledge is like a sudden spark, without a past to explain it in light of reason or, at least, verisimilitude ("It seems beyond belief…"). It is the now of gracefulness (here, entirely immanent), the joyous moment that seems to oppose the opaque time of public history, that time we know as the "minister of death" and the "accomplice of desperate crimes."

In *Esau and Jacob*, the suspension of eternal temporality and its edges is already fulfilled by Flora's character; and it is sustained by the work and grace of music, an art that employs time to create the very illusion that suppresses it.

Flora, at the piano: "Music had for her the advantage of not being present, past, or future. It was something outside of time and of space, a pure ideal."

Beyond those walls, the Empire was falling, and the provisional government of the new Republic was being formed. But there, at the piano:

> Flora did not understand forms or names. The sonata brought the feeling of absolute lack of government, the anarchy of primitive innocence in that corner of paradise which man lost because of his disobedience and one day will regain, when perfection brings the eternal and only order. Then there will be no progress or regression, but stability. Abraham's bosom will enfold all things and persons, and life will be a clear sky. That is what the keys told her without words, re, re, la, sol, la, la, do…

In *Memorial*, music plays an organizing role in the plot—an observation made by Antonio Candido, who analyzes the progressive awakening of passion in Fidelia as she returns to the

piano from which she had abstained during her widowhood.[3] Music, for Fidelia, will have an analogous meaning to that of Flora's sonata (another soul divided between twin loves): that of annulling the distances of time and space, and creating a harmonious world, without the sacrifice of choice, a world in which Pedro and Paulo, the dead Noronha and the living Tristão, will embrace each other eternally. This is precisely what the Counselor's remark suggests when he hears Fidelia playing for her absent fiancé, just as she had once played for her husband:

> I did not ask her for music; it was she who, of herself, went to the piano and played a piece by some composer or other—and if Tristão did not hear it in Petropolis it was not for want of expression on the part of the pianist. Eternity is farther away; yet she has already sent fragments of her soul to that place. Music's great advantage is it speaks to the dead and the absent.

But the moment of ecstasy and the enjoyment of art are rare, fleeting states of grace, as are the cruel extremes of negativity and death. The exception, which, through contrast, sheds light on the entire system, is the figure of Dona Carmo (and perhaps Dona Fernanda, in *Quincas Borba*), for whom such a state of grace appears to be habitual.

It is more common, however, to remain in the middle of the story and in the middle of History: "[…] but life, my fine friend, is made up strictly of four or five situations, which circumstances vary and multiply in people's eyes" (*Quincas Borba,* Chapter CLXXXVII). Ayres takes the idea and makes it his own:

> Life, on the other hand, is like that, a repetition of acts and gestures, as in receptions, meals, visits, and other amusements; in the matter of work it is the same thing. Events, no matter how much chance may weave and develop them, often occur at the same time and under the same circumstances; so it is with history and the rest.

[3] Antonio Candido. "Música e música." *O observador literário*. São Paulo, Conselho Estadual de Cultura, 1959, pp. 23-28.

And the beloved image of *Dom Casmurro*, of the sea beating against the rocks "since Ulysses and even before."

The conception of History emanating from the pages of *Memorial* is that of a cyclical time: a History woven with recurrent, if not symmetrical, acts and moved by the "genius of the species." A conception that runs contrary (at least in design) to the evolutionist metaphor of an arrow-time, a time of linear progress—a time which upheld the political values of the Generation of the 70s, and of a young Machado, but which can no longer entirely dominate the scene of ideals at the turn of the century.

On this last horizon, which bends and closes itself off to better hide the reborn conflicts of passion and interest, the role of our dear Counselor is to compose, with the prose of everyday life, at least the effect of a classic harmony: to stoically endure difference, to humorously live with the mask and, whenever possible, to diplomatically reconcile the oppositions.

References

Candido, Antonio. "Música e música." *O observador literário*. São Paulo, Conselho Estadual de Cultura, 1959, pp. 23-28.

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*. Trans. Helen Caldwell, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972.

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Dom Casmurro*. Trans. Helen Caldwell, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1953.

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Esau and Jacob*. Trans. Elizabeth Lowe, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *Quincas Borba*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Trans. Flora Thomson-DeVeaux, New York, Penguin, 2020.

Paes, José Paulo. "Um aprendiz de morto." *Revista de Cultura Vozes*, Petrópolis, n. 7, pp. 13-28, September 1976.

Translated from the Portuguese by Daniel Persia.

This publication was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.