

THE POLITICAL THEATER IN THE *CRÔNICAS* OF MACHADO DE ASSIS

Abstract: This article examines Machado de Assis's “*crônicas*” (chronicles, or newspaper columns), arguing that his interest in politics was primarily focused on the “political theater” rather than on political ideologies or historical processes. Bosi analyzes how Machado depicted politicians as actors engaged in performances, highlighting their gestures, rhetoric, and individual traits rather than their political substance. The article also examines Machado's chronicles on international politics, where he observes the same patterns of vanity and self-interest driving conflicts across the globe. Bosi concludes by highlighting the strengths and limitations of Machado's political satire, rooted in a skeptical moralism that exposes the limitations of human action while acknowledging the enduring power of art and nature.

Keywords: Machado de Assis, Chronicles, Politics, Skepticism, Moralism

Foreword by Luiza Franco Moreira

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In the essay that follows, Alfredo Bosi explores the treatment of politics in the *crônicas*—short prose pieces—that Machado de Assis regularly contributed to the Brazilian press. The focus falls mainly on his later *crônicas*, especially those of the 1890s, which were devoted at times to current events and at times to recollections of the past. Bosi's goal is to reconstruct the perspective underlying these texts—in his view, that of a skeptical moralist.

Bosi's sustained engagement with Machado's works is remarkable for its coherence and originality. Through multiple discussions of his novels, short stories, and journalism, the critic pursues a phenomenology of Machado's *olhar*, or of his ways of looking. The critic takes the way of looking as a problem: its meaning in each text may be apprehended only through an effort of interpretation. Bosi's notion of *olhar* opens the way for the critic to explore diverse literary strategies that, taken together, make up Machado's outlook; at the same, Machado's *olhar*, understood as a flexible site of textual mediation and reflection,

enables Bosi to bring to light the writer's values.

There are wide ranging implications to the critic's choice to focus on Machado's later *crônicas*. The most celebrated author of the country by that time, Machado was writing immediately after the fall of two institutions that had defined the 19th century in Brazil and, thereby, formed the context of his own career: slavery, which had been abolished in 1888, and the Empire, which had been overthrown by republicans in 1889. These widespread transformations, however, remain in the background of the critic's argument. Bosi brings the focus to fall, rather, on the question of how to understand the contrast between the works of the younger and the mature Machado de Assis. This problem has long been a matter of concern for literary scholars in Brazil. Bosi proposes an innovative interpretation, together with an original periodization. The shift that gave rise to the style of his maturity, Bosi argues, results from an extended structural crisis. This process of change began in the late 1860s, when Machado, disillusioned with politics, took his distance from the liberal ideals that he had passionately supported earlier. It developed in multiple dimensions—"ideological, stylistic, and broadly speaking existential"—over time, and eventually shaped the skeptical outlook that, starting in the late 1870s, distinguishes the work of his maturity.

Bosi characterizes Machado's *olhar* in his later journalistic pieces by tracing the key role that a stylistic of distancing plays in these texts. Although the writer's interests range far and wide in space and time, looking back on recollections of the political disputes of his youth, engaging with matters local to Brazil's young republic, and exploring wars and conflicts in the international arena, his later *crônicas* take a skeptical step back from the matters they discuss, in order to present politics as a spectacle empty of meaning. Machado focuses instead on the gestures and rhetoric—the mere theater—of political men. Bosi calls attention to an allegory that closes one of the author's best known *crônicas* of recollection, "The Old Senate." Machado imagines a long line of half-forgotten political men from his youth marching towards the doorman of the Senate, whose antiquated black attire he meticulously describes. The critic sees a figure of death in this doorman. However, Bosi argues, Machado's *crônicas* evoke an alternative to the hopeless lack of meaning of political life. Through repeated, if brief references to Tennyson, Renan, Shakespeare, Heine and other great writers, Machado stresses the contrast between the enduring value of art and ideas and the vanity of politics.

The argument of "The Political Theater in the *Crônicas* of Machado de Assis" opens up into topics Bosi develops in other essays devoted to Machado, but also into his seminal essay on the intellectual history of 19th century Brazil, "A escravidão entre dois liberalismos"

[Slavery Between Two Liberalisms]. Machado's moralism comes to the fore in "O enigma do olhar," [The Enigma of the Look] in particular in Bosi's remarks on the three levels of characterization discernible in his fiction. The critic distinguishes between the satirical social types, which make up the vast majority of characters in the novels; a smaller group of characters who attain the level of person, due to their individual drive and passion, and the very few characters who offer models of moral dignity—those who at times act freely and according to higher principles. The skepticism of Machado's maturity appears perhaps more fully in "Uma figura machadiana," [A Machadian Figure] an essay devoted to the writer's last novel, *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*. In the essay on Machado's journalism, the critic briefly calls attention to the affinity between the outlook of the *cronista* of the 1890s and that of Counselor Aires: in both cases a stylistics of distancing prevails, and goes hand in hand with the abiding existential awareness of death.

Bosi's discussion of the varieties and transformations of liberalism in 19th century Brazil in "A escravidão entre dois liberalismos" may be usefully read together with the essay on Machado's *crônicas*. Drawing on his deep knowledge of the intellectual and political history of 19th century Brazil, and relying on a Gramscian understanding of ideology, Bosi reconstructs in detail the conflicts and impasses of the debate on slavery and abolition that unfolded roughly during the period of Machado's career. Bosi demonstrates that the majority of liberals were unwavering defenders of slavery, with the exception of one current of abolitionists in the later part of the century. The political conflicts examined in detail in "A escravidão entre dois liberalismos" are discussed only briefly in the essay on the *crônicas*. However, when taken together, these two texts suggest that the skepticism of Machado's maturity internalizes his disillusion with the liberal politics of his youth and, further, that it expands over time to shape ways of looking that balance the meaninglessness of life and certainty of death against the enduring power of art.

The originality of Bosi's approach may be illustrated through a brief reference to the arguments of another influential critic of Machado, Roberto Schwarz, whose work has been available in English for some time now. Schwarz is chiefly concerned with the form of Machado's novels, as it is established through the movement of their irony. In his view, Machado's irony discloses a fundamental contradiction between Brazil's cultural life, in which liberalism and its images of individual freedom set the tone, and the country's material life, driven by the social relations of slavery. Relying on the critical distinction between narrator and implied author, Schwarz undertakes detailed, insightful discussions of Machado's ironic treatment of the first person narrators of *Dom Casmurro* and *Posthumous*

Memoirs. It will be helpful to call attention here to at least one significant contrast between Schwarz's approach and Bosi's. The arguments Bosi develops present Machado as an intellectual, in the expanded sense that Gramsci gives the term. Machado's complex ways of looking at the world, as the critic reconstructs them, enable the writer to reflect on the matters of public concern of his times so as to shape a distinctive, skeptical position.

In closing, it seems appropriate to call attention to a new direction in the criticism of Machado de Assis in recent years. Literary scholars are devoting increasing attention to Machado's treatment of race. Eduardo de Assis Duarte has traced a pattern of discreet yet devastating reflection on racial inequality all through his works. This contemporary awareness of Machado's concern with race may be useful in suggesting another angle of approach to the characterization of Counselor Aires, the retired diplomat who serves as narrator in his last novel. Even here, authorial irony may have a role to play. In his diary, Aires shows himself to be a decided supporter of the law that abolished slavery; he still lets slip, here and there, tasteless, gratuitous jokes at the expense of the Blacks who had recently attained freedom but remained impoverished.

The Political Theater in the *Crônicas* of Machado de Assis

by Alfredo Bosi

“What is politics but the work of men?”

A Semana, 10/30/1892

Machado de Assis had a taste for telling stories about politicians. Several of his *crônicas* speak of parliamentarians from the past or contemporaries of his. Stories about politicians. This preference still leads some of his readers to think that the newspaper columnist was paying tribute to History and Politics. The mistake is understandable and caused by the laudable intention to show that a great writer is somehow always participative and, ultimately, committed. In the wake of our admiration comes the risk of subjecting the reading to wishful thinking. Everything suggests, however, that Machado did not believe in anything or expected anything (or almost nothing) from Politics or History, capitalized here to differentiate them from the writer’s true subject: politicians and their stories.

Actors on stage

One of the dramatic and crucial events of the Second Empire’s public life was the dismissal by D. Pedro II in 1868 of Zacarias de Góis’ liberal cabinet and its replacement by Itaboraí’s ultra-conservative cabinet. Although His Majesty could formally avail Himself of the Moderating Power, the abrupt change of cabinet, with a liberal majority in the Chamber, looked like a coup, an abuse of authority, an extemporaneous manifestation of so-called “personal power.”

The commotion was great in party circles, and liberal guilds and newspapers denounced the emperor’s attitude as Bonapartist. For historians of the stature of Joaquim Nabuco and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, the 1868 cabinet crisis marked the decline of the monarchic regime. Liberals became radicalized, and republicanism experienced its first major surge. Things were finally moving, and the crisis would not be temporary.

Machado de Assis watched it all as an observer sympathetic to the liberals, as this was his ideological leaning throughout the 1860s. But what remained in his memory and in his words when recalling that momentous session that closed an era and opened another?

Twenty-seven years later, reporting the death of Saldanha Marinho, a member of that dissolved chamber, a friend of his, an ardent liberal, a Freemason, and, finally, a

republican, Machado de Assis would publish a *crônica* in *A Semana*, dated June 16, 1895. His recollection of the session is sharp, the narrative lively, the details precise. But neither the focus of his elocution nor its general tone impart the relevance and ideological density conferred to the event by the historiographical consensus. For the writer of 1895, the parliamentary event of 1868 is made up of fragmentary gestures of applause and jeer; after that would come the nothingness that time weaves over itself:

The liberals came back later, again they went out and came back, and then they left for good, so did the conservatives, and with the ones and the others, the Empire.

The scholar of imperial politics knows that, between 1868 and 1871, with the struggle over the Free Birth Law [Lei do ventre livre], and in the next two decades, fierce clashes inside and outside the Parliament would occur; and that electoral reform, Abolition and the Republic would not have been possible without new and old liberals (“liberals against liberals,” in Sérgio Buarque’s felicitous expression) and old and new conservatives confronting each other. Society itself was changing, the economy was modernizing, capitalism—even if late—was pressing forward, immigration was already a fact, regional inequalities were deepening; in short, the history of the Brazilian people and the history of the Brazilian State proceeded with their traumas and demands. But Machado’s reading concerns the gestures, rites, shouts, clapping, silences, life, passion, and death of individuals, the very cycle of existence through which some go, others return, and all eventually leave for good. He was interested, as an artist, in the style of political actors; their ephemeral performances—at times laughable, at times pathetic—attracted him, but not some possible sense of Politics and History, which does not agree with his *crônicas* nor is easily found in his novels and short stories.

This ebb and flow of events, to and from the Lethes of oblivion, is strategically elaborated by Machado’s discourse on generations. After all, *les morts vont vite* (a recurring phrase in his *crônicas* and in Counselor Ayres’ diary), and the young do not keep memories of them:

Young reader, I do not know if you had just been born or if you were still in school. If so, you will hear about that day in July, as the boys of that time would hear about the [Emperor’s] age of majority

or the end of the Piratinim republic, which was the pacification of the South, half a century ago.

Assuming as true the hypothesis that the young reader did hear about that day in July 1868, Machado begins to reawaken their memory by describing the receptions hosted by ministries or parties at those times.

Machado's recollection goes straight to the theater of politics. The galleries and boxes were full of people, since the public wanted to experience emotions from curiosity to indignation to the indefectible vanity of being seen in a place where prestige and "influence" meant everything.

Once the viewpoint shifts from the political act to the spectator's impressions, the general conclusion is that, deep down, we all love rhetoric, "we love the fencing with words, and we feel delighted applauding the exact and beautiful strokes." This remark places the writer and his readers in a common ground and introduces the key figure of a public eager to watch the deputies' performance, which will be skillfully applied to the spectacle of that afternoon in July 1868. To weaken and efface any particular historical drama from the session evoked, the writer will say that "there was also applause in 1868, as in 1889, as in other interesting sessions, even if they were simply inquiries of ministers." As before and after, on "interesting" occasions, the galleries were solemnly warned that they should not show any sign of approval or disapproval, and they did not heed it. The recollection proceeds: "I still hear the applause of 1868, thunderous, sincere, and unanimous." Again, the theatre: Itaboraí enters, Zacarias leaves. To dodge the surprise of defeat, the loser would have claimed that since Lent, he felt that the fall was inevitable. The writer comments: "A great athlete, he sought to land with grace." Zacarias is a consummate actor, and the performance has a circus feel: equilibrists must show dexterity when they land. And Zacarias fell with grace.

The game, however, was already decided. Machado is convinced that against force (in this case, the Emperor's will), arguments would be useless—of hope and indignation alike. Nevertheless, amid the choir and in the open scene, one and the other were heard, quixotic scruples. These were voices from the defeated chamber. Someone made an aside, confident that it would still be possible to undo what had been done; this someone "maybe did not know how to read politics": the writer has forgotten his name but insinuates that this was the voice of a naive man who ignored the science of force and of the *fait accompli*, that is, politics. Saldanha Marinho, whose death motivated the *crônica*, showed the opposite

attitude due to his candour and haughty independence. Machado had got to know him closely during his time as a journalist in the liberal newspaper *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*. Saldanha could have remained silent that afternoon or simply voted against the formal motion of dismissal that the chamber always addressed to the imposed cabinet. But he opted, instead, to deliver his hard truths and land on his feet. The writer ponders that it would have cost him nothing to be firm without launching his invectives at the monarchy. Saldanha, together with Otaviano and Otoni, had already, in 1860, defeated “illustrious conservative leaders” and inaugurated the liberal interregnum; however, he risked losing everything and fell from grace. Zacarias and Saldanha, different actors in similar situations: “what is politics but the work of men?”

The moral of the *crônica*:

O bygone times! The vanquished and the victorious are all entering history. Some still remain, bald or grayed by time, and two or three girded with deserved honor.

This *entry into history*, the ineluctable path for all—liberals, conservatives and republicans, losers and winners—tends to suppress the actual political drama, emptying it by the action of time, which we all know is the vehicle of death, “complicit in attacks.” From this inescapable indifference, Saldanha Marinho, *as an individual*, is saved; his shift to the Freemason-Republican camp is thus interpreted: “He had changed camps, or else he had just returned to that which was his by nature.” Actors react as they can to the blind force of power (the essence of politics), trying to play their roles; and, just as on stage, heroic characters are rare and distance themselves, sometimes pathetically, from characters moved by the routine of particular interests.

Saldanha Marinho’s intrepid attitude in 1868 is initially attributed to his change of party affiliation, as he had “changed camps,” but soon after, the writer considers, as a better hypothesis, a personal fact, the “nature” peculiar to that worthy combatant: “or else he had just returned to that which was his by nature.” The reader who intends to go beyond personal considerations and discover what Saldanha Marinho’s struggles meant for Brazil’s political history will encounter long-lasting ideological tensions that far surpass Machado’s psychological explanation, which points to the singularity of that public figure’s character.

Through Quintino Bocaiúva, Saldanha Marinho had invited the young Machado to write the parliamentary *crônica* for the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* while the liberals attempted to

resume their majority in the Chamber. However, the opposition between liberals and conservatives would have divergent ramifications from the 1860s onwards. On the one hand, the Liberal Party, led by Nabuco de Araújo, Zacarias, and Saraiva, remained loyal to the regime, although constantly denouncing the excesses of personal power—a position accentuated in the crisis of 1868. On the other hand, the republican radicalization emerged, which partnered with Freemasonry. That was the option of Saldanha Marinho, the first signatory of the republican manifesto, a consistent advocate of universal suffrage, and a Jacobin who bitterly polemicized with the Catholic Church by supporting the court decision that punished the bishops of Olinda and Pará. The “religious issue” divided the Empire’s political and cultural forces. In general, both new liberals and historic republicans supported the Masonic campaign: the young Nabuco and Rui Barbosa supported the regalist State against the ultramontane Church, reconnecting with Catholicism only in their later years. As for Saldanha, he wrote, under the pseudonym of Ganganelli, a Masonic and anticlerical denunciation, *A Igreja e o Estado* [The Church and the State]. Invited by Deodoro da Fonseca to join a preparatory committee for the republican Constitutional Convention, he proved to be a staunch defender of the lay State, advocating the separation of the Church from the State, in which he was backed by the positivists and agnostic liberals.

All that this struggle involved in terms of demonstrations and counterdemonstrations in a mostly Catholic country (the Empire’s official religion) evidently would not fit in Machado’s 1895 appraisal of Saldanha Marinho, who had just died. The year 1868 had been, in any case, one in which opposing forces, barely pacified since the Conciliation of the 1850s, would once again face each other. To write the history of these struggles would mean to have a glimpse of the history of the Empire’s downfall. Machado, writing in 1885, *post festum*, shows no interest in what would happen in the parliamentary scene backstage that the Chamber offered in one of its “interesting” ceremonies. What attracted him was the rhetoric of individual performances in contrast. It is the nature of spectacles to shine for only a few hours before dimming; the *crônica* evokes them, knowing that they belong to yesterday and should be forgotten by tomorrow. What is impressive in Machado’s text is the fleeting movement of appearances, which is alive and true insofar as political mechanisms do not dispense with theatrical aspects; the restless audience that sometimes jeers, sometimes applauds; the formalist presidents who, in vain, demand silence; the athlete who lands with grace (his name was Zacarias); and the man faithful to his indomitable nature (his name was Saldanha Marinho). “The liberals came back later, again they went out and came back, and then they left for good, so did the conservatives, and with

the ones and the others the Empire.”

An entire life from gallery to gallery

A Semana, 11/27/1892

The writer continued to spend hours in the chambers' galleries even after physically distancing himself from his youthful post of parliamentary observer. These are imaginary hours that the page of *A Semana* recalls on November 27, 1892, but no less revealing of a writer who views and listens to legislative sessions as a theatrical scene. We have the impression of the spectacle and the respective spectator's reaction. There is no content, just the form of pure enactment. No ideas, no solid projects, just the quality sounds of the speeches: serene and polite in the Old Senate; noisy in the Chamber, "beautiful agitation;" shouting, at last, in the republican intendency. The listener discerns and punctuates the crescendo that accompanied the passage of time and regimes:

The best thing about the new intendency is that it set an example by itself, becoming so excited that it made us forget the Chamber's most beautiful days. In my gallery life, which is no longer short, I have watched great parliamentary disturbances; rarely have they approached the stars of the new representation of the municipality. The noble corporation must not become faint-hearted. Shout, even if it requires work.

The definitive construction of the figure representing the audience, which only wants to watch the spectacle itself, appears in print as the character named Calisto, to whom the author dedicates the "*bala de estalo*" [pop candy, which is how Machado called the *crônicas* in this series] of May 10, 1885, the eve of the Saraiva cabinet's commencement:

Calisto only loves one thing more than ministerial crises, which is the introduction of new cabinets to the chambers. [...] Do not attribute to Calisto any political concerns, little or great, or any love for Dantas or Saraiva, for the project of the one or the other, nor for the great issue being debated right now in all spirits. It matters

little to Calisto to know of a problem or its solution; as long as there is noise, the rest is dispensed for free.

“Finance, finance, all is finance;”

“... In the end, an everlasting ennui”

A Semana, 10/9/1892

The Republic triumphed, but with it came more than the noisy councilors who set the tone for the new intendancies' debates. The new times would also bring the financial carousel, the economic bubble of the *encilhamento*, with its plethora of currency issuances, the luxuriant credit granting, the gambling, the cascade of bankruptcies. The political scene shifts from the parliamentary arena to businesses, banks, the stock exchange. Everything is a matter of more or less paper money.

Raymundo Faoro, in *Machado de Assis: a pirâmide e o trapézio* [Machado de Assis: the Pyramid and the Trapeze], minutely reconstructed this brief though intense period of Brazilian capitalism, which, mediated by the State, was recklessly practicing its first steps in the nascent regime. Along with the picture outline (its reflection) came the mark of Machado's perspective, the reflection of the intellectual who, in the face of the “anything goes” for money, felt even more refractory and distant instead of included in the parliamentary theater's galleries. These, at least, amused him; his stage was the chambers where every move could be applauded or jeered. The political animal fascinated the analyst of passions. But the pure *homo economicus*, multiplied by the financial orgy, only bored the 1892 writer, and he will return, years later, through the pen of *Esau and Jacob's* narrator describing the figure of Nóbrega, the begging lay-brother, “the Brother of the Souls,” enriched in the dubious games of the *encilhamento*.

In the composition of October 9's *crônica*, the stylistics of distancing is exemplary. The page opens with a mention of the ponderous world of bankers and the lawsuits filed by the victims of stock exchange scams. The tone that the empire of finance inspires in the writer goes from “grave, gloomy and tragic” to simply “tedious.” In the final paragraphs, we recognize the same oppressive matters with which the newspapers were saturated; the author's expression is reiterated: “In the end, an everlasting ennui.”

Between the ennui of the opening and the ennui of the epilogue, what does the writer interpose to distract him from the prosaism of the *encilhamento*? His comments on two heartfelt deaths, those of the laureate poet Tennyson and the idol of Machado's youth,

Ernest Renan. What may seem like a gratuitous game, a gratuitous somersault, is actually a strategic leap.

The contrast between the tedious content of newspapers (banks, stocks, currencies...) and the evocation of the idyllic English poet or the wizard of skeptical language, the creator of that “pure and solid [style], made up of crystal and melody” could not be any sharper. Tennyson and Renan, dead and distant, appear close and alive like beams of light, and their presence makes even more leaden the atmosphere of the monetary policies launched by the Minister of Finance.

The reality of uncontrolled inflation is not ignored, nor could the writer of *A Semana* ignore it, no matter how tedious he found the topic. But, in transposing it to his writing, the author elaborates a detached language through which the subject places and declares himself existentially extraneous to the situation presented in the headlines of all the country's newspapers. The near object of contemporary history is sectioned, mentioned, but placed outside the circle of the *self*, while Tennyson's lyricism and Renan's translucent prose fulfill the writer's desire for beauty and meaning.

In truth, what can I say about the ponderous matters of a week patched together with codes and praxists, stitched with numerals and citations? Prisons, what have I to do with them? Lawsuits, what have I to do with them? I do not run any company, not anonymous, nor pseudonymous; I have not founded banks, nor am I willing to found them; and of all things in this world and the next, the one I understand the least is the exchange rate. Not that I deny it the right to go up; but I have heard so much lament for its fall as I hear now for its rise, I do not know if from the same people, but with these same ears. Finance, finance, all is finance.

The shift from an observer of the new society into a skeptic educated by the school of classical moralism was acutely noted by Raymundo Faoro.¹ More than a mere reflection of the empirical context, which the newspapers presume to mirror, Machado's prose is reflective consciousness, the work of an alert mind that converts everyday impressions into value judgments. What the eyes see is mediated by moral and stylistic considerations, so the

¹ Raymundo Faoro, *Machado de Assis: a pirâmide e o trapézio*, São Paulo, Cia. Ed. Nacional, 1974, pp. 495- 505.

historian who approaches Machado's writing only to collect a document from the past risks losing the very dimension of its meaning, thus narrowing the scope of interpretation. Without a hermeneutic effort, empiricism shows itself as simplistic.

In the *crônica*, seemingly meandering and whimsical, which first comments on the *encilhamento*, then on Tennyson and Renan, finally returning to the *encilhamento*, everything that would supposedly be current, a subject for the press, is in the end deadly tedious and, strictly speaking, is not of interest to the narrative focus: "Prisons, what have I to do with them? Lawsuits, what have I to do with them?" But he who has just died, the man of thought and word, occupies the writer's entire mind and heart. Machado was not a provincial and myopic journalist, nor was the Brazilian literate culture of his time marginal and incapable of dialoguing with the spearheads of Western intelligence.

Machado without borders

"Il mondo casca!"

Cardeal Antonelli

"Tailors will take a long time to measure and cut the beautiful Turkish cloth to make the suit that Western civilization has to wear."

A Semana, 9/20/1896

Brito Broca, who knew Machado's *crônicas* by heart, left us some brief and lucid essays in *Machado de Assis e a política* [Machado de Assis and politics].² The book is full of acute observations delivered without ideological pretension or bias, as it does not aim to either prove that Machado was alienated or that he was the most radical critic of Brazilian society of all time. Brito Broca merely reads and writes down various aspects of Machado's *crônica* production without nudging it in this or that direction. The result is felicitous: in addition to the clean prose, free from extrapolations, the reader is given a nuanced view of how the writer read the world's confusions, which, because they are typical of the "human clay" (in

² Brito Broca, *Machado de Assis e a política*, São Paulo, Polis, Rio, INL, 1983.

Machado's expression), were not found only in this or that nation nor were unique to this or that people. Insanity, inconsistencies, vanity, and hypocrisy were widely distributed across our planet, although, by living and writing in Rio de Janeiro, it was to be expected that Machado would rather dwell on the problems more apparent to his curious eyes. But the reader of European newspapers and telegrams, which arrived in growing numbers and increasingly faster in the last quarter of the century, would inevitably comment with the very skepticism on the events from abroad. Free from xenophobia or Eurocentrism, thus showing the broad scope of his views and insights.

After reviewing some local *crônicas*, Brito Broca unveils a borderless writing style at the end of chapter *A semana política de Machado* [Machado's Political Week]. Here and there, the world seemed to fall apart, concurring with a particular Roman cardinal who, upon hearing alarming or strange news, used to exclaim: "*Il mondo casca?*".

Abroad, the sequence of events presented an even more disquieting aspect. The struggle for Cuba's independence continued, aided by the United States against Spain. Menelik was engaged in heroics in Abyssinia. Jameson was invading the Transvaal, prompting Machado to recall the famous phrase by Pascal: "*La force est la reine du monde?*"; the dissolution of Turkey was imminent; and even in Korea, at this turn of the century, there was war. "It is not necessary to say what Korea is doing"—claimed the serialist—"It has now just killed so much and in such a way that it was necessary to kill it as well." Meanwhile, the President of France offered peace proposals. Frankly, the world's variation is little, and this is reason enough not to be discouraged by dismal prospects. Machado de Assis himself provides us with this lesson on hope. On page 184, he says: "I thought the world had lost its way amid so many wars and calamities, and then I sighed in relief: Shakespeare's parties were coming to an end in London with great shine."³

This world, which always seems to be on the verge of ruin (the meaning of the Italian cardinal's phrase: *il mondo casca!*), is always changing its appearance as time inevitably passes: "Days pass, and months, and the years, and political situations, and generations, and feelings, and ideas" (June 16, 1878).

One of the historically visible forms taken by this incessant passing—whose limit is the death of institutions—is what is called, in a broad sense, modernization. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Machado could witness vast and profound changes in the international scenario, in mores, in the sciences of nature and society, in techniques, and in

³ *Machado de Assis e a política*, cit., p. 187. The page numbers indicated by Brito Broca refer to the edition of the *crônicas* published by Ed. W. M. Jackson, Rio, 1937.

everything that has to do with material progress. These changes were extraordinary, and his look caught them both in the telegraph's quick pace and, more slowly, in the transition from the old to the new Brazil, from the old to the new Rio de Janeiro. In one of his last *crônicas*, Machado deplors the early death of Heine, who, born in 1800, could have lived to the end of the century to witness the shift from the Holy Alliance legitimism to anarchism and nihilism... "The days pass... and ideas."

History, which is made up of passions and interests, does not pursue ethical values. Modernization rarely humanizes human relations;⁴ it almost always degenerates into a competition between nations for power and wealth, deepening the writer's pessimism.

The wars mentioned by Brito Broca and remembered in the *crônicas* are evidence of the madness of men, which never ceases with time. As for the century of progress, with its revolutions and reactions, "annexations and de-annexations," its empires, and new colonies, it would encounter all sorts of cruel surprises. The modernization imposed on Africa, Japan, the Philippines, India, Russia, Turkey, and Greece... did not spare the civilian populations' blood, which was shed as barbarously as in the dark centuries.

Our observer, though well informed, shrugs off all this, as he had done when contemplating the national follies of the *encilhamento*:

African wars, Asian rebellions, the fall of the French cabinet, political agitation, the proposed abolition of the senate, the Egyptian box, socialism, anarchism, the European crisis, which shakes the ground, and it does not *explode* only because nature, my

⁴The widely known exception, which has been variously interpreted by economic historians, is the abolitionist legislation; even though slow, in Brazil and throughout the West, it always paved the way for the transition from the old to the new liberalism. On this point, one may read the study by Sidney Chalhoub, *Machado de Assis historiador* [Machado de Assis, the historian], Companhia das Letras, 2003, which reveals the reactions of the public worker Machado and the writer Machado to the maneuvers aimed at hampering the liberating effects of the Law of September 28, 1871. The owners' resistance and their power to block the liberal state initiatives were widespread in all social formations founded upon the plantation system: in Brazil, in the Afro-Portuguese colonies, in the French and Spanish Antilles and, militarily, in the United States. Legal emancipation took a long time to materialize among us, but neither was its pace quick in the French, Spanish and Portuguese legislative chambers, where abolition was accompanied by compensation to owners. Here and there... The old liberalism (European and Brazilian) employed slave labor whenever it could; and in the European colonies' legislation, emanating from metropolitan chambers, favored the owners even when they were forced to liberate the enslaved individuals. After the Restoration, exclusionary liberalism found and took its place in Western Europe and the Americas.

friend, abhors this verb, but it surely will break apart before the end of the century, what does it all matter to me? What does it matter to me that on the island of Crete Christians and Muslims kill each other, according to yesterday's telegrams? And the agreement, which the day before yesterday was made between Chileans and Argentines and undone yesterday, what have I to do with this blood and with what is going to happen? (*A Semana*, April 26, 1896)

Extreme lucidity and extreme detachment seem to join hands in these disdainful questions: "What have I to do with this blood?" "What does it matter to me?"

The height of European imperialist expansion coincided with the climax of the ideology of progress, of which industrial and universal exhibitions and the *Belle Époque* would be ostensible evidence. It is no accident that the colonization policies employed discourses based on the belief in civilization, a keyword of the time. Those were absolutely not peripheral discourses, which can always and easily be regarded as having a monopoly on foolery. This was about military incursions from the world's center of power, where new conquering attacks originated. The writer, attentive to telegraphic dispatches, does not lose either the facts or their violent content: "Italy is now a great kingdom that no longer speaks to poets, despite its Carducci, but to politicians and economists, and it enters Africa with sword and fire, like the other European powers" (March 8, 1896).

With sword and fire. The perception of the new colonialism covered up with the reasons for progress could not be clearer. The evils, moreover, knew no borders, with inhumane conflicts exploding everywhere.

But see the killings of Christians and Muslims in Constantinople. The cable has been telling us terrifying things. Hundreds of gravediggers were used in the Turkish capital to open hundreds of graves to fill them with hundreds of corpses. They do not tell us, that is true, if at least death made brothers Christians and Muslims, but it is not likely. The hatred that ends life is not hatred, it is a shadow of hatred, simple and shallow antipathy. The real thing is what passes on to other generations, which seeks the second in the womb of the first, violating mothers with iron and fire. That is hate. It is likely that the gravediggers have separated the bodies, and it

will be out of piety, for we do not know whether, even on the way to the other world, the Quran will not instill in the Gospel. A telegram from London says Istanbul is quiet; good, but for how long?

They also began killing in the Philippines, killing and dying for independence as in Cuba. Spain is moved and willing to kill too, before dying. It is an empire that continues to crumble by the law of things and resists. So goes the world this week; it is unlikely to go differently by next week (*A Semana*, September 6, 1896).

That the ugly spectacle of human endeavors knows no national borders is the subject of several *crônicas* based on telegrams and newspapers from Europe that regularly arrived in Rio de Janeiro. But that the practice of *cannibalism* could be found not only among indigenous peoples but also among civilized people at the end of the 19th century is hard to believe indeed! But this is exactly what is reported in the *crônica* of September 1st, 1895. It is worth analyzing its composition.

The opening sentences candidly narrate acts of anthropophagy perpetrated by an English teacher who devoured several children in a Guinean school for natives. The British schoolmaster's conduct is staged and rationalized in the following terms:

It may be that the teacher wished to explain to the listeners what cannibalism was, scientifically speaking. He took a little boy and ate him. The listeners, not knowing the difference between scientific and vulgar cannibalism, asked for clarification; the teacher then ate another child. Guinean minds, unlikely to have an easy understanding of an Aristotle, still did not understand, and the teacher continued to devour little boys. This is what, in pedagogy, is called a 'lesson of things.'

Since that was the reason, the teacher, in the end, 'sacrificed himself,' 'in order to civilize uneducated people,' 'for the love of teaching, dedication to science, to the noble mission of progress and culture.'

Sarcasm rules every word of the period, and everything results in a satire about a

civilization considered superior to that of colonized peoples. The intertext is the famous modest proposal that Swift (another eighteenth-century moralist) made to the English of his time: since Irish children are infinite in number and raising them is costly for the kingdom, they should then be roasted and eaten, thus becoming useful for the public good, as well as delicious and nourishing. In the Irish Dean's sardonic words, anthropophagy appears as a justifiable and even worthy action. But, turning his eyes to 1890s Brazil, our writer reports some cases of cannibalism that occurred in Salinas, a small village lost in the hinterlands of Minas Gerais. Though barbaric, these acts can be compared to the *encilhamento's* scams of 1890-91: "We have eaten each other here too, without offense to the penal code—at least in the chapter on murder." Here and there...

The typical opposition, civilization versus barbarism, formulated in the nineteenth century by the heralds of neocolonialism, falls apart under the blows of Machado's writing. The velvet curtain that hypocritically concealed the horror scene is raised. Barbarism appears as the common background of the history of all peoples: "When the custom of anthropophagy returns, it is only a question of replacing the 'love one another' of the Gospel with this doctrine: 'Eat one another.' After due consideration, they are the two refrains of civilization."

What distinguishes the flagrant barbarism in the hinterlands of Minas from that practiced by the English teacher is solely the possibility of giving the latter an "explanation," which, despite being absurd and inhumane, is articulated in terms of reasoned discourse. The core of Machado's satire, as in Swift's modest proposal, focuses on the very content of the argument justifying the bestiality promoted in the name of civilization. *Il mondo casca*, but the show goes on.

On the much less sinister subject of electoral venality, Lélío, in a *bala de estalo* dated October 5, 1884, reports with dismay the recommendation made by the Minister of Justice not to confer any more ranks in the National Guard until the next election. The official order was a public admission of the purchase and sale of votes throughout the country. Is this a case of a vitiated parliamentary representation in typical Brazilian style? Yes and no. Yes, because of the content: the ranks of Major and Colonel of the National Guard were local distinctions. No, considering the spirit and form: Lélío tells us that Louis Philippe, king in France's parliamentary liberal regime between 1830 and 1848, reportedly would have induced voters to sell their support "through concessions of tobacco houses." At this point, as at other times, the writer goes from perplexed to simply jocular: the tobacco houses exchanged for the votes of the French were quite real, but the ranks of colonel without their

respective battalions would be purely abstract and nominal. Why, then, not draw them by the Court lottery? The proposal, though ingenious, would probably not satisfy the candidates to the government, who wanted to negotiate safe, well-counted, and personalized votes.

The electoral farce of parliamentary monarchies brings us back to the theater of politics, which is national and international. Here and across the Atlantic, they may have a high or low style. Low, on occasion, is the English way, whenever discussions in the House of Commons end in solid punches; as also happens in the Rio de Janeiro City Council, where some conflicts are resolved with fists. “The punch is English,” ponders Machado, “but if we have imitated from the English the two chambers, the chief of cabinet, the three arguments, and other political uses of a purely nervous nature, why don’t we imitate the punch, the healthy punch, the taut, straight punch that leaves bloodied chins and brings conviction to souls?” (July 2, 1883). There always will be nativists, however, who, rejecting exotic customs, will prefer the “quince-tree stick of childhood,” also called, in Brazil, “shrimp”... In so doing, they preserve the healthy habits of their ancestors.

As for the high style, it is no coincidence that it also comes from London. The Queen is praised by the lord chief of justice at a banquet honoring the actor Irving: the noble minister finds no better praise than comparing Victoria’s majestic role to that of an actress “on the stage of human affairs, performing with grace, with dignity, with honor and with a noble simplicity” (August 15, 1883).

Considering that to perform is to appear, and this is even better than to be (a conclusion already drawn in the short story “The Bonzo’s Secret”), one fine day, the writer will end up listing the topics and tropes that parliamentary actors must recite on the appropriate occasions. The rhetoric comes from centuries-old Europe, but there are always new opportunities to use it, and the audience, restless in the galleries, asks for nothing more than the glitter and those borrowed coats useful like phrases by Spencer, Comte, Leroy-Beaulieu, etc.... (July 10, 1883). The alliance between theater and rhetoric comes from afar, and parliamentary debates only update it. Here and there.

The forms of the past and the force of nature

“La force est la reine du monde.”

Pascal

“But what is nature if not an art already made?”

A Semana, 10/18/1894

What can we say about Machado’s judgment according to which the contemporary world would be less poetic than the olden times? Everything suggests the insinuation of a certain amount of ambivalence in the passages in which the writer laments, half ironically, half nostalgic, that old Ottoman customs were replaced with the parliamentary tail-coat adopted in modern Turkey. Commenting on the fall of the Sublime Porte and the refinements of the sultan and his harem, Machado exclaims as if he were an obstinate nostalgic: “I started to write this *crônica* at the moment when the Orient is crumbling, and poetry seems to expire in the calloused hands of the vulgar populace. Poor Orient! Miserable poetry!” (July 1, 1876).

Since it is not plausible that Machado preferred the millenary despotism to the Turkish reformers’ liberalism, we are left with the impression that the author, not seeing any poetry in the “new transformation in the Constantinople scene,” takes pleasure in chronicling the perishable character of beliefs and regimes: “The gods vanish and with them the institutions.” The latter’s demise does not necessarily bring any good or evil: it is only suggested that the poetry of yore is vanishing as political modernization triumphs. The beauty of tradition succumbs to the force of ideological shifts. “But what I ascertain from everything that comes to us through the submarine cable and transatlantic steamships is that the Orient has ended and with it the poetry.”

That there is poetry and beauty in the forms shaped in the past, abstractions made from the violence of those times (which, by the way, persists in the 19th century)—this is the opinion reiterated in the pages of *A Semana*. We should follow the tracks left by the writer’s apparently nostalgic reflections to really grasp their meaning.

The idea that the past, as an arcane stage of humanity, would hold the secret of an ingenuous and living beauty in its myths and sagas is a *topos* that dates back to at least the eighteenth century. Vico and Rousseau conceived of it in different ways: it has nurtured

Romanticism by lending it, through the aesthetic reflections of Schiller and Leopardi, vigorous formulations.⁵ A motive for the discomfort of reductionists, there is a well-known passage from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in which Marx is perplexed by the persistence of Greek art's allure in the middle of the era of railroads and ocean liners. And this is the same hypothesis by Vico of the millenary permanence of mythical fantasy, characteristic of humanity's childhood, which appears in the discourse of the dialectical materialist.⁶ The sociology of culture came later, generating a plethora of historicist hypotheses and seeing in the nostalgia for the beautiful olden times the defense of traditional social groups against the rising tide of capitalism, utilitarianism, and prosaism. In Brazil, and narrowing our scope, the Weberian Raymundo Faoro glimpsed a certain facet of Machado de Assis opposed to the hegemony of money and the wealthy that the years of the *encilhamento* created and which displaced the old and decorous customs of the previous stratified social order.⁷

If, on the one hand, the triggers that influenced the writer, the naked facts of the economic game, were invading his daily life and occupying the pages of *A Semana*, on the other hand, the moral and aesthetic reaction of the writer Machado de Assis fed on the traditional antipathy to the Philistine bourgeois, to the man of profit and business, who would be called Procópio Dias, Cotrim or Palha in the universe of his fiction.

From European cultures, formed before the overwhelming modernization at the turn of the century, came images of pregnant forms, whole and strong, which could take

⁵ Machado translated into Portuguese Schiller's poem "The Gods of Greece," from which I transcribe the penultimate stanza:

*"Foram-se os numes, foram-se, levaram
Consigo o belo, e o grande, e as vivas cores,
Tudo o que outrora a vida alimentava,
Tudo o que é hoje extinto"*
["Home! and with them are gone
The hues they gazed on and the tones they heard;
Life's beauty and life's melody:—alone
Broods o'er the desolate void, the lifeless word."
Translated by E. B. Lytton]

⁶ "Why should not the historical childhood of humanity, where it attained its most beautiful form, exert an eternal charm because it is a stage that will never recur?" (Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*; translated into English by S.W. Ryazanskaya).

⁷ Machado's *crônica* of July 7, 1878, brings these words of aversion to one's quick enrichment: "On this issue of false notes, false pounds and false letters, I believe that everything comes together in an expression by Guizot: Become rich! Ominous words, if not accompanied by something to temper it. Getting rich is good; but it will have to be at an ox's pace, at best at a water cart's pace."

shape and resist for a long time because the “disenchantment of the world” had not yet dampened the vigor of creation. Homer and Plato, Dante and Shakespeare, Leonardo and Raphael, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Olympian Goethe would no longer be possible under the pedestrian routine of contemporary societies. The opera remained as an exception that proved the general rule. The skeptical Machado sometimes yields to the artist Machado who, after his masters of disenchantment, Leopardi and Schopenhauer, would still be enchanted by the unrivaled beauty of works that could persist in the memory of those men still sensitive to their allure.

Like Nature, art is powerful, fertile, and creates its own forms and laws. And like Life, its ends are not measured in terms of the good and evil of men, disregarding the fancies conceived by mortals: that is the secret of its perpetuity in a universe where the rule is the usury of time.

The deaths of Tennyson and Renan had such an impact on the writer that the Stock Exchange’s ups and downs, the bank issuances, and the *encilhamento*’s gambling are reduced to a tedious insignificance. Machado’s reaction to the international scene will be exactly the same. Commenting on a telegram from London dated April 24, 1896, which brought the news of the end of the Shakespeare parties, the writer reviews with disdain the political upheavals that at that time were stirring emotions across the planet and then compares them with the perpetuity of the English dramatist, in terms that could not be more assertive: “The Shakespeare parties have ended...” The telegram adds that:

the North American delegate was received with great sympathy. The Monroe Doctrine, which is good as American law, is nothing against these English souls embracing the memory of their extraordinary and universal representative. One day, when there is no more British empire nor North American republic, there will be Shakespeare; when English is not spoken anymore, Shakespeare will be spoken. Then, what is worth all the current discords? The same as those of the Greeks who left us Homer and the tragedians. What is worth the Transvaal Dongola’s expeditions against the combats of Richard III? What is worth the Egyptian bank in the face of Shylock’s three thousand ducats? Egypt itself, even if the English manage to own it, what can it be worth in the face of the lovely Cleopatra’s Egypt? The parties of the human soul have ended.

(April 26, 1896).

Would it be gratuitous and inexplicable the millenary persistence of the great works of poetry and art *against* (this is the preposition used by Machado) the past and present institutions and political scene? History becomes empty of meaning, while Homer, the tragedians, and Shakespeare fulfill the authentic values the human soul can aspire to. The survival of art, for our author, does not depend on the passionate reader's pure will. The fictional work's value rests on its firm connection with *force*, the true ruler of the world, in Pascal's grave words; force, which is synonymous with nature and life. The founding relationship between art and reality is conceived by Machado in terms that go far beyond the limited and minor reflection of facts in the newspaper *crônica* by the fiction writer. The facts only demonstrate to society the resources employed by force, "ruler of the world." What is transposed and stylized by the novel is the very game of fate played by men and women bound to the instinct of conservation; they want to live, and they want power, but their body and soul bears the stigma of precariousness. Vanity of love, vanity of fame, all is vanity, to better rhyme with Ecclesiastes' sentence. Force alone, the primary cause of existence, does not pass. A unique counterpoint to the inconsistency of human projects, it was in it that Napoleon saw the exception to the biblical word:

Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity. Napoleon once amended these words from the holy book. It was precisely on a day of victory. He had the wish to see the corpses of the old Austrian emperors, he went where they were deposited and spent a long time in contemplation, he, also an emperor, until he muttered, as in the book: 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' But soon after, to correct the text and himself, he added: 'Except perhaps force.' Whether or not the anecdote is accurate, the words are true. (August 4, 1895).

And what would remain of the History made by men and women that Nature produces, reproduces, and undoes in its eternal return? There remains the memory of the beauty that, through obscure, perhaps unconscious shortcuts, obtained the secret of force and revealed it in all kinds of artistic forms. Art: the force that creates forms. But as the awareness of his own finitude undermines the poet's craft from within, his works of fiction also end up losing the vigor of the old sagas and epics, assuming now the veil of melancholy.

This is the prosaic condition of the modern narrator, and those who went deeper, from Croce to Lukács, from Benjamin to Adorno, would not say otherwise. This idea was already (but without the shadow of pessimism) in the master of all, the ever-young old Hegel: If we look now at [...] the state of affairs in the world of today, with its civilized, legal, moral, and political conditions, we see that nowadays the scope for ideal [creation] is only of a very limited kind.⁸

Returning to the stage: the figures of decorum and its *décor*

Few critical expressions have been the object of so much contempt as the infamous “ivory tower,” with which one seeks to denounce the alienated conduct of people and institutions closed in on themselves. However, and this is a source of perplexity to all of us who admire the greatest of our writers, Machado de Assis used it in praise and as a norm of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in the December 7, 1897, session, when closing the works of its first year of existence. The context was the proposal of the plans to be fulfilled by the Academy in the following year, something that the president should formulate:

Born amid serious concerns for the public order, the Brazilian Academy of Letters has to be like other analogous associations: an ivory tower, where literary spirits are welcomed, bringing only literary concerns, and from where, raising their eyes to all sides, they may see clearly and quietly. Men here can write pages on history, but history is made out there.

He then recalled the exemplary deference with which Napoleon, thanking his election as a member of the Institute of France, addressed his new confreres by stating that for a long time, he would be “their disciple”... Napoleon was then a young twenty-eight-year-old man; Machado, when delivering such words of exclusive devotion to literature, was almost sixty years old.

The issue is sensitive, inimical to militancy, and equally averse to fetishism. Throughout his long life as a writer, Machado de Assis consistently manifested a propensity for decorum. A character trait apparent to all his biographers and which the psychological intuition of a subtle scholar of his person and work, Lúcia Miguel Pereira, sought to

⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, I, 193; translated by T. M. Knox.

understand in terms of the existential self-defense of a poor and sickly mixed-race man, to whom only merit and sober and discreet conduct could offer some chance of social advancement. The love of decorum would prevent his fragile and vulnerable intimacy from receiving the blows of the public sphere and its direct or oblique forms of domination.

Raymundo Faoro, in his study mentioned above, tries to go further: Machado was born and raised in a social and political context in which stability had been achieved with effort and was highly valued. It was guaranteed by the monarchical institution and by a parliamentary system imitated from France and England, which was respectful of customs and formulas. It was a society jealous of its ranks and hierarchies, though not yet stiffened by centuries; a society of haughty *bacharéis* (holders of a bachelor's degree) who, in turn, supported the interests and aspirations of certain classes, such as the agrarian oligarchies and the big exporters, or of certain *status groups*, such as the magistracy, army, clergy, and court bureaucracy.

Even in the opposition, any viable liberalism in the Second Empire's first decades could only be exclusionary since the regime was based on censitary suffrage in the wake of the Restoration's electoral reforms.⁹ The rhetorical tirades occasionally heard in the Chamber against the Emperor's "personal power" could not, strictly speaking, undermine the core of the political system or its functioning. As for Machado de Assis's ideological

⁹ In *Cidadania no Brasil. O longo caminho* (Citizenship in Brazil. The long road) (Civilização Brasileira, 2001), José Murilo de Carvalho puts into perspective the censitary suffrage's elitism, arguing that "the majority of the working population earned more than 100 mil-réis per year." Compared with other nations' systems at the time, ours does not seem to him less liberal: "The income requirements in England, at the time, were much higher, even after the 1832 reform. Brazilian law allowed the illiterate to vote." Later in the book, Carvalho compares the percentages for Brazil with those for European states more advanced in formal liberalism. In 1872, 13% of the free Brazilian population voted; the figure was 7% in England; 2% in Italy; 9% in Portugal; and 2.5% in the Netherlands (pp. 30-31). But Carvalho also shows that the system's undemocratic character was not so much in the number of voters as in the practices of co-optation, fraud and violence that marked most elections. In his dense study of the history of universal suffrage in France, Pierre Rosanvallon calls the eligibility requirements of the Charter of 1814, the fruit of post- and anti-revolutionary liberalism, "draconian" (*Le sacre du citoyen*, Gallimard, 1992, p. 271). Liberals were always rigorously exclusionary when it came to define who would hold the power to legislate. Guizot, a theoretician of French conservative liberalism and one of our imperial elites' primary sources, proclaimed without hesitation: "In matters of freedom, there are universal rights, equal rights; in matters of government, there are only special, limited, unequal rights" (Address to the Chamber of October 5, 1831, in Rosanvallon, 1992, p. 325). In both France and Brazil this doctrine was consistently applied, limiting the number of voters. We have reliable data for France for 1831: 90% of the 200,000 voters had the right to vote because of their rural properties (Rosanvallon, 1992, p. 318).

script, with the exception of his first writings as a parliamentary journalist (the liberal *crônicas* of the 1860s), it was not characterized by the direct vehemence of an indignant opponent. The tone of his remarks softened with time, and irony replaced open denunciation as the writer became skeptical of politics, either national or foreign, though he remained attracted to the scene where deputies and senators played their roles.

The roots of this change in perspective and tone from the young Machado (1860 to 1866) to the mature Machado, which is already apparent in the *crônicas* from the late 1870s onwards, are yet to be sufficiently cleared, in my opinion. In his excellent *A juventude de Machado de Assis* [The Youth of Machado de Assis], Jean-Michel Massa lists some liberal themes Machado ardently advocated in the *crônicas* published in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*: non-censitary direct suffrage, as the censitary system is described as “unfair and hateful” (its abolition in France only occurred in 1848, sixty years after the revolution); repudiation of the French military intervention in Mexico; denunciation of Solano López’s dictatorship and support for the war in Paraguay, seen as a crusade for the freedom of a kindred people. His attacks on the conservatives and the clerical press, then profoundly reactionary, were vigorous.

Where and when to identify the caesura, the turning point?

Machado’s famous admission of having “[lost] all illusions about mankind,” mentioned by the biographer Lúcia Miguel Pereira, dates back to the 1879 crisis; more precisely, to the months of illness that preceded the writing of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Machado was then in his 40s.¹⁰

In his study, Massa focuses on the first period of change in the late 1860s. A sociological approach tends to magnify certain factors in Machado’s rise in society that would purportedly have dampened the political passion of his youth: his admission as a public worker (he was appointed Assistant Director of the *Diário Oficial*, the Official Gazette in 1867); leaving his position at the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* (1867); receiving the imperial title of Knight of the Order of the Rose (1867); and finally, his marriage to Carolina Augusta Xavier de Novais, daughter of a bourgeois couple from Porto, Portugal.

Eugênio Gomes, an attentive reader of Machado’s whole body of work, informs us that the rising of the moralist Machado “is more evident from the 1870s onwards when his adoption of humorous ‘nonsense’ began to alter the tone of the writer’s moral reactions.”¹¹

¹⁰ Lúcia Miguel Pereira, *Machado de Assis. Estudo crítico e biográfico*, 6^a. ed. Belo Horizonte, Itatiaia; São Paulo, Edusp, 1988, p. 192.

¹¹ Eugênio Gomes, *Machado de Assis*, Rio de Janeiro, Livraria São José, 1958, p. 65.

The various hypotheses about the genesis of the mature, skeptical, and “classic” Machado, even though plausible, do not account for the depth of the change, which was structural: ideological, stylistic, and, in a broad sense, existential. The occurrence of a discontinuity thus seems to be corroborated. As equally happened with a profoundly Machadian character, Joaquim Fidélis from the short story “Posthumous Picture Gallery” (“Galeria póstuma”), “there are reasons to believe that, from a certain point onward, he was a profound skeptic, and nothing more.” And Otto Maria Carpeaux saw in Machado de Assis one of the rare *twice-born* in our literary history.

It could be said (a hypothesis to be tested) that his religious agnosticism and, especially, his disillusionment with politics had already suggested the extensive ideological and existential skepticism that would characterize the author of *The Posthumous Memoirs* and *Miscellaneous Papers*. In this case, the discontinuity would have occurred in two stages: at the end of the 1860s, when the journalist Machado leaves behind his ostensible engagement; and ten years later, when the crisis is internalized and permeates the core of his narrative style.

In any case, the fact that there are two phases in Machado’s writing is not just in the critics’ imagination: the idea of transformation appears in the preface to *Helena*’s 2nd edition (1905), providing evidence that the writer himself was aware of the break in his literary biography.

Crucial events such as the crisis of 1868-71, which culminated in the battle over the Law of Free Birth, the direct election, the Lei Áurea [Golden Law], the campaign for and the proclamation of the Republic, the naval revolt and the Canudos’ bloody campaign would assume, in their playful and disenchanting prose, the form of spectacles.¹² The writer was observing everything, but he had lost the enthusiasm that had driven him in his youth.

¹² I refer, here, to the book by Zacarias de Góis and Vasconcelos, *Da natureza e limites do Poder Moderador* [On the Nature and Limits of the Moderating Power], whose first edition was published in 1860. See the essay by Cecília Helena de Salles Oliveira, *Zacarias de Góis e Vasconcelos*, São Paulo, Editora 34, 2002.

THE OLD SENATE

“If it were worth knowing the cemetery's name, I would go and look for it, but it isn't; all cemeteries look alike.”

His evocation of the Senate of the 1860s, which he had come to know very well as editor at the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, is unforgettable. “The Old Senate” is a long *crônica*, composed sentence by sentence with the stylistics of distancing. These are youthful memories put together more than thirty years after Machado had witnessed the public sessions of that powerful but discreet collegiate.

Researchers studying our political history will have to dig hard to extract from these pages of ingenuity and art the very object of their study, that is, the vast and factual drama of history and politics. Nevertheless, the reader of our best memoirist prose will delight in the political figures and their stories, barely noticing the projects, clashes, and contradictions of those public men—liberals and conservatives alike. On the other hand, the reader will not forget some of their facial features, some of the gestures and quirks that marked them, the tone and timbre of their voices. *Materiam superabat opus.*

Above all, the observer is the consummate artist educated at the fine school of French realism. He is the shrewd narrator who knows the value of detail and that a nod, a wave of the hand, a shaven face, the guttural sounds uttered by an irritated voice, the turn-a-deaf-ear tactics, the fingers tugging at shirt cuffs, white whiskers, and mustaches, a sidelong glance, an open or restrained laugh may serve as a metonymy for an entire figure. The artist is interested in what the scientist considers ineffable: the individual.

The writer, in revisiting the 1860's Senate sessions, aimed to demarcate the limits of his recollections scrupulously. He had no interest in presenting the former parliamentarians as a professional politician or historian would, but only as a “simple onlooker [who notes] nothing but the portrayal of time past and the expression of lines steeped in that general tone one gets from all things dead and buried.” May we learn from Machado himself to recognize the precise limits he had set for himself, which he is so evidently aware of! The writer knows and clearly states that he is not a historian nor is playing the role of a politician: “A politician viewing that particular body will find therein the same soul as his bygone fellows, while a historian will glean from the scene information of value to history.” But the

artist turns his eyes to the actors' words and gestures and to the scene with its *décor* and decorum.

What first struck the “wide-eyed, curious boy” at the Senate (the young Machado had then barely reached his twenties) was precisely the serenity of those men who, between a coffee and a pinch of snuff, knew how to “rule the land with an iron hand.” They were half men, half institutions. They had gone through, on the open scene, painful moments, having suffered the “derision and ridicule that political passions had heaped upon some of them,” but ended up having a proud aspect, which ranged from triumphant to haughty indifference.

The writer then recalls the names of three ministers, Paranaguá, Sinimbu, and the Viscount of Ouro Preto. Machado recalls their names, but above all, their ability, which they always showed, of “never losing the poise.” They were masters in this art, and the reader will not get to know much more about them. To understand what was happening behind all the poise, one should open a book on political history, preferably *Um estadista do Império* [A Statesman of the Empire], still unpublished at that time, but which Machado quotes and praises since he knew what his dear friend, Joaquim Nabuco, was writing. Recounting his father's life, Senator Tomás Nabuco de Araújo, the abolitionist leader called attention to the relationship between the speeches and the Second Empire's living and contradictory reality. In the Chambers and in the same old Senate, there were also echoes of the country outside those walls, from the commotion of the Praieira Revolt to the intra-oligarchic divisions to the bloody episodes of the Paraguayan War, and in the background, there was a society tied to slavery and to a vitiated political representation that the “new liberals” were trying to correct. It is up to the historian to discover all of this behind the Machadian expression “political passion.”

In this respect, the narrator's treatment of an episode that gives a glimpse of the Empire's electoral process in one of its most vulnerable aspects is exemplary. Recalling the victorious liberal campaign in the 1860 elections, the writer still guards the memory of an “obscure voter” who approached Teófilo Otoni in the first round, showing him a wad of ballots stolen from one of Otoni's opponents... The act itself was reprehensible and could give rise to bitter criticism of the partisan free-for-all of the time. Machado, however, keeps fixing in the reader's mind only the transgressor's smile, “that nameless mouth [...] most likely true and honest in everything else in life.” And, if more severe words occasionally appear in the course of the narration—“even the clearest waters are not immune to the occasional rain-borne rotten straw”—soon an erratum relativizes everything, erasing the

traces of any censure: “if indeed it be rotten, or in fact even straw.” Would the writer be second-guessing the ethical rigor that had led him to call rotten straw the theft of ballots? That is Counselor Aires’ style in the *Memorial*: advancing and retreating, discovering and covering up (“the two verbs of diplomacy”), to eventually neutralize reproach and praise alike, perhaps both excessive. The stylistics of distancing and softening bring the *crônica* and the literary narrative close together.

There are also portraits or, more precisely, profiles drawn with the hand of a skilled draftsman. Zacarias, Montezuma, and Paranhos figures become alive in the middle of parliamentary debates. But these are psychological traits peculiar to oratorical performance. The writer systematically omits the contents of their rhetoric, leaving historians to understand the political drama that the speeches were bringing to light. For all of them, the drama was not a minor aspect since each one, at different times, engaged deeply with controversial topics. The Moderating Power, for example, the mainstay of the Empire, was the subject of a controversial essay by Zacarias de Góis e Vasconcelos; perhaps no other apology for the monarchic-parliamentary precept—“the king reigns, but does not govern”—agitated the political climate of the long imperial period as much.¹³

As for the so-called, by euphemism, “servile question,” we know of the pioneering and coherent struggle of Montezuma, that is, Francisco Gê Acaiaba de Montezuma, Viscount of Jequitinhonha, an educated mixed-race man, that our writer insists on describing as wearing long white whiskers and mustache. It was from this slave trader’s son the first abolitionist voice raised at the Institute of Lawyers long before the drafting of the Law of Free Birth, that would make the fame of Paranhos, the future Viscount of Rio Branco. What a wealth of material for a political history! In this case, Politics with a capital p!

When talking about each one of them, Machado sticks to this or that anecdote, to this or that witticism, always tending toward the biting remark. Machado’s style is more peculiar to the profiler than to the historian who addresses the complexity of social processes underpinning individual actions. The *décor*, the ideal setting for that theater of images, almost shadows, was the old Senate. Hence the spectral tone with which his evocation ends. The last view is of a dark corridor in which its former occupants disappear one by one. The door of the old house is closed by a man in a black cape, black silk stockings, black trousers, and buckled shoes. An allegorical herald of death, the Senate doorman opened and closed the

¹³ See Raul Pompeia, *Escritos políticos*, vol. V of his *Works* (edited by Afrânio Coutinho), Civilização Brasileira, 1982, pages 80-5, 91, 95 and 102-4. The preface letter to Rodrigo Otávio’s *Festas Nacionais* is transcribed in the same volume, pp. 287-99.

building on solemn occasions:

Such obsolescent things! Someone made a vain attempt to impede the doorman, but the investment was so languid and weary that it fell far short. The doorman turned the key in the door, wrapped his cape around his frame, and flittered through the window, disappearing in mid-air on his way toward some cemetery, most likely. If there were any use in knowing the name of that cemetery, I would do my best to discover it, but there is little point. All cemeteries are alike.

Death does not seal the fate of senators only, making them equal in the final hour. It struck with the same punctuality men of action who were strengthened in more dangerous combats than those waged in the parliamentary arena: Saldanha da Gama and Floriano Peixoto were gone within a week; and the writer does not hide the surprise of attending the successive funerals of two ruthless enemies, the rebellious *Esquadra* and the iron marshal who had subdued him:

I am not the one to narrate neither what this city saw yesterday, when the corpse of Floriano Peixoto was taken to the cemetery, nor what it saw before, when he was transported to *Cruz dos Militares*. Seven days ago, when I spoke of Saldanha da Gama and the Coriolanus funeral rites he was given, I was far from guessing that, a few hours later, we would be notified of the Marshal's death. Thereby, fate placed, within walking distance of each other, the death of one of the heads of the rebellion of September 6 and of the Head of State who tenaciously fought against and defeated it. This is history. We are all the threads in the fabric that the weaver's hands are making, to serve the eyes to come, with their various moral and political aspects. Just as there are solid and bright ones, loose and faint ones also exist, not including the multitude of those lost in the background colors of the picture (*A Semana*, July 7, 1895).

THE MISTAKE AND THE ILLUSIONS OF THE REPUBLICANS

“If I were emperor, the first thing I would do was be the first skeptic of my time.”

Balas de Estalo, May 16, 1885.

The old Senate’s specters have disappeared down that dark corridor from where there is no way back except when the memory walks down it.

But along with the *saquaremas* and the *luzias*, there appeared the republicans. Machado got to be acquainted with several of them, and for some of them he had respect and friendship: Quintino Bocaiúva, Lafayette Rodrigues Pereira (who defended him from Sílvio Romero’s diatribes), Saldanha Marinho, Lúcio and Salvador de Mendonça, Veríssimo, Bilac, Raimundo Correia, Rui... The republican campaign, which formally began with the Manifesto of 1870, only inspired him a mischievous apologue... a Persian apologue like Montesquieu’s *Lettres*.

The apologue appears in the *crônica* of August 11, 1878. At the end of its first decade, republicanism’s reach was still limited, despite the electoral advance reported by the writer: “This time it seems that the Republican Party made a more solemn entry into the electoral process: it fought alone in some points; in others, it fought with alliances; this policy resulting in some partial victories.”

Apologues are usually expected to deliver a message to be deciphered at the end of the narrative. In this *crônica*, however, the key to the allegory is disclosed earlier by the author: “The Republican Party, notwithstanding the convictions of its members, was born mainly from a mistake and a metaphor: the metaphor of personal power; and in this respect I will recount an apologue... a Persian one.”

The mistake and the metaphor will then be illustrated by the story of a young man from Tehran, “a great fop and even greater loafer,” adjectives that, opening the apologue, betray the narrator’s derogatory view of the allegorized organization. He is young, for he was just born; he is a fop (*gamenho*), a term for dandy young men with an upper-class flavor, the same class of farmers and self-employed professionals who professed republican ideals; in short, the boy is a loafer, an attribute that situates the party opposing the regime in a negative semantic field.

The interspersed clause—“notwithstanding the convictions of its members”—

means, at the same time, a concession to the earnest supporters of the cause (Machado was acquainted with many of them and did not wish to give offense) and a reinforcement of the main thesis: *the republican organization founding had been a mistake*.

The apologue then follows the story of the young man from Tehran. He has no profession; he is rich and indolent, which makes his father tell him to choose a trade. Metaphorically: the party is aimless and composed of men disinterested in any consistent enterprise.

In any case, the young man leaves his home curious to “travel all over the country” to find out if he can choose a profession “that would seem most fit and profitable to him.”

Republicanism would have been spread thus, lacking firm roots and, for that very reason, eager to find them and see them growing in the nation’s soil. And it is this idea of planting that will serve as the basis of the parable. The young man decides to grow limes, the famous Persian limes. But the novice farmer’s efforts do not bear fruits. The lime trees, no matter how much he watered and even cast spells “with words from the holy books,” did not grow, let alone bore fruit. I leave it to the acumen of historians of the Second Empire to identify who was the *wizard* to whom our farmer eventually turns in despair.

How to explain this agricultural failure if tasty limes were abundant in other lands? The causes of such a dismal result had to be uncovered. These could be various: “lack of some salts in the compost, sparse rains, a certain disposition of the land, the inexperience of the farmer.” All of these are deficiencies that can be read allegorically as reasons for the failure of new ideas. In fact, at that point, they could not attract the discontent with the monarchy, which had already found its place in the Liberal Party’s radical wing. The *Reform* group had the role of arguing coherently for direct elections and protesting against the postponement of the abolitionist laws.

What then would the limes and the Republican campaign lack? A more fertile land, more humidity in the air, a more skilled farmer—all representations of what, in a *crônica* written a few days later, Machado will point out as the nation’s “mental state, its customs, its constitutional childhood” (September 1st).

Would those be historical causes for the ineffectiveness of certain progressive proposals? (It is worth revisiting the thorny question of the ideological limits of Machado’s skepticism).

In any case, our unsuccessful farmer had to name some culprit: he ended up accusing the sun because “it was too hot, and desiccated the plants.” This was the *visible culprit*. The allegory finally finds its target: the Emperor’s personal power was, for the uneasy

republicans, the original sin of Brazilian politics.

The writer was not content to just clarify the apologue's meaning. He went further, explicitly dismissing the reason alleged by the republicans, which he called a mistake. In Machado's view, the roots of our political ills would not rest on the Moderating Power that the Constitution of 1824, in the wake of its French counterpart, had entrusted to the monarch.

The Manifesto of 1870 leaves no doubt about the new party's main target. To fulminate against the imperial prerogatives, the signatories, among whom stood out Saldanha and Quintino Bocáiuva, Machado's personal friends, refer to politicians from the Empire's entire ideological spectrum. They do not even let out the harsh words of a resentful conservative, José de Alencar, who depicted D. Pedro II's personal power as a "monstrous polyp." Classical liberals such as Francisco Otaviano and Nabuco de Araújo were equally recalled to endorse the same position.

For Machado de Assis, the party had been born from a misunderstanding: this is what the *crônica* affirms without having to prove it, not least because the writer does not feel obliged to play the role of a historian: the delicious privilege of giving an opinion is enough. Once the Republic had been proclaimed, the writer (and the novelist of *Esau and Jacob*) shows no enthusiasm for the regime. In a *crônica* published on September 1, 1895, lamenting the suicide of Raul Pompéia, he describes Pompéia's political passion as an "illusion," and we know Pompeia was republican to the extremes of Jacobinism:

Politics, without any doubt, has come his way to give him that firm embrace that turns the careless passerby or the adventitious lover into an eternal lover. The image is flawed; it silences this other part of the truth—that Raul Pompéia has not entered politics due to the seduction of a party but forced by a situation. As the situation agreed with the sentiments and temperament of the man, he found himself a passionate and sincere advocate of all the illusions—of which half should be lost to make the journey lighter.

Certainly, including himself among those who esteemed the author of *O Ateneu* but "did not share his political ideas," Machado also says that he did not know him when Pompéia was fighting for the abolition in São Paulo. Had he known more of Pompéia's life story, Machado would probably have had a more nuanced view of the militant's "illusions."

Pompéia's republicanism emerged during his academic years, in 1882-85, and was always accompanied by an ardent abolitionist commitment. His tirades against São Paulo's rather moderate republicans are well known; these, in the words of Alberto Sales and Rangel Pestana, retaliated by denouncing his "exaggerations" and the "sentimentalism" of the followers of Luís Gama and Antônio Bento, both venerated by the young Raul Pompéia. Moreover, Pompéia's aversion to the monarchic regime is deeply ingrained in the satire that a character from *O Ateneu*, Dr. Claudio, makes on the "unlikable tyrant," D. Pedro II.

As of November 15th, his republican passion intensifies and, to the same degree, also his intransigent nationalism and unconditional support for Floriano Peixoto, which the naval revolt would stir among the new regime's Jacobins. Some fleeting concessions to the person of Pedro II can be discerned in articles written by Pompéia in the middle of 1886 when he considered it his duty to defend the government from attacks by *O País*, which he deemed injurious. The figure of the exiled old king later awakened sentiments of pity and respect in him. But whenever he aimed to assess the Second Empire in its entirety, his judgment was consistently severe, if not mordacious.

Reading the preface he wrote for Rodrigo Otávio's *Festas Nacionais* (1893), we find a full expression of his interpretation of Brazilian history since the coming of age of D. Pedro II:

It was the crime of the Second Empire not to make the slightest attempt to address our historic misery. On the contrary. We were a colony... and even more so with D. Pedro, the last."

"Fifty years this monarch had to build and strengthen the civil vitality of Brazil. Fifty years it was of inertia and neglect. And this will be the greatest offense recorded by the honest and exact History of the Second Empire's benign ineptitude.

Later, he denounces "the persistent denial of its Platonic abolitionism" and "the negative work of the stifling of the national character."¹⁴

The contrast between the political attitudes of Machado de Assis and Raul Pompéia

¹⁴ The text's source is a passage by Spencer, quoted in the *crônica* of November 6, 1892. Rather revealingly, the writer omits the progressive context of the philosopher of evolution and focuses on the idea that laws can do nothing if not adapted to "society's moral and mental conditions."

is striking and deserves careful attention. Machado expects nothing from politics regarding effective intervention in the public sphere. Politics as a source of change or innovation does not have a place in his *crônicas*, which focus on the precariousness of the actions and the emptiness in the words of men... or rather of politicians. While the young Pompéia denounces corrupt politicians in the name of his abolitionist and nationalist ideals, Machado tends to doubt even the effectiveness of plans conceived with the best intentions, such as Saldanha Marinho's proposal for restoring the Municipal Council's prestige and dignity.

The *crônica*, published on September 1st, 1878, is worth examining. Written a few days after the apologue that mocked the republican campaign, it agrees with Saldanha's initiative, whose democratic character was expressed in the value attributed to citizen representation; the writer nevertheless believes that the proposal, even if approved by the legislative and executive branches, "will not have the desired effect." His pessimistic reasoning recalls the tone of the English and French conservatives who influenced European political thought after the Restoration: Burke, Benjamin Constant, Chateaubriand, Guizot. They all have in common the belief that the law is useless without the customs that precede and must support it. Innovative projects need to rely on "the moral and mental conditions of society. The institution may even subsist in its external forms; but the soul, there is no creator to infuse it."¹⁵

Reflecting on the gap between the legislator's good intentions and the weight of the "nation's state of mind," the writer expresses his skepticism about the viability of the democratic initiatives presented by the parliament and the newspapers. There seems to be no way out for this unfortunate country where traditional politicians dissemble to maintain the *status quo* while progressives, animated by "liberal sentiments," propose measures that are certainly ineffective. The political theater merely stages the impasse that it cannot resolve.

Machado, for instance, disbelieves in the liberal struggle against excessive administrative centralization. For him, a struggle that is on everyone's lips is a "flower of rhetoric, a perpetual campaign." His reflection contains a strong dose of determinism, a result of his skepticism:

¹⁵ The *crônica* of July 1st, 1885, expresses the same idea when it excuses the Chamber's tardiness in voting proposals considered urgent: "Just as a government without equity can only be sustained by a people equally without equity (according to a master), so too a lax parliament can only thrive in a lax society. Let us not believe that all of us, except the legislators, do everything on time. What would say the sun, which gave us both the hammock and the fatalism?" In other words, the political activity just reproduces organically what we are. What can we do?

Rare are those who see that centralization was not the result of the whim of some pioneers but *rather an inevitable effect of preexisting causes*. It is supposed to have killed local life, when the lack of local life was one of the causes of centralization. *Men were simply the instruments*. This is what came to pass with municipal power: its life has withered, not by an act of a zealous power, but *by the force of an ineluctable law*, by virtue of which life is lax, morbid, or intense, depending on the conditions of the body and the environment in which it develops. This comes to pass with the right to vote; the election reform will be an improvement to the process and therefore desirable; but will it deliver all the political and moral advantages we expect from it? There are several factors the law does not replace, and these are the nation's state of mind, its customs, its constitutional childhood... (emphasis added).

We should agree that, in these words, we do not find a firm belief in the transformative capacity of political action. As a factor of change, political action would represent a *quantité négligeable*.

But what remedy do I give to make all the elections pure? None; I do not understand politics. I am a man who, for reading newspapers and having gone as a child to galleries of the chambers, has seen a lot of reform, a lot of sincere effort to achieve the electoral truth, avoiding fraud and violence, but for not knowing of politics, was not knowing the cause of the failure of so many attempts [...] I have seen other reforms; I saw the direct election serve the two parties according to their situation. Saw... What haven't I seen with these poor eyes? (*A Semana*, December 8, 1895).

However, with such words of skepticism, not everything seems clarified to me regarding Machado's position in the face of the republican regime.

There is no doubt that his political tendencies had nothing in common with the Jacobinism of Raul Pompéia and the Florian cadets. However, this was only one of the

strands of republicanism, certainly the most extreme in anti-monarchist terms and, as such, distant from the writer's sympathies for the new open and civilist liberalism of his friends Nabuco and Taunay. The other strand came from the Republican Convention of the 1870s, represented by the Coryphaeus of the Republican Party of São Paulo, which emerged victorious after the military interregnum (1889-93). Their close relations with coffee farmers were notorious. The mature Machado of the *crônicas* of *Bons dias!* (April 1888-May 1889) did not object to this current unfamiliar to him; but his keen eye could not ignore the linkage that connected it with the robust coffee oligarchy that had joined the Abolition movement only in the campaign's final phase.

This will be the ideological significance of the *crônica* published on May 11, 1888, two days before the Golden Law. The writer refers to the masses being freed during those last days. The text narrates the case of runaway slaves who went to Ouro Preto and were hired by some owners for good pay. They were farmers who took advantage of the situation that preceded the extinction of the captivity regime. They rented workforce still legally enslaved, formally breaking the bonds of solidarity with members of their class.

At that time, an interlocutor who makes a statement about the episode (apparently unusual) enters the story, affirming that the writer "does not see that something is in the air." This, he explains, "is a republic." The regime change seems to him, moreover, indispensable, an opinion that is not shared by the narrator, for whom the government (monarchist) "is not going badly" because it is a hat that fits the head. "It goes awfully," retorts the other. "It is getting off track." And here, taking a sudden ideological leap, the interlocutor defines what this republic should be, that is, on which axis should rotate to suit the nation's reality. But he says it in German, much to the perplexity of the writer, who pretends not to understand the language, and the reader, who most likely does not understand it:

"This must be if not with the monarchy, at least with the republic, what the last year's June 21st *Rio-Post*:

"Er dürfte leicht zu erweisen sein, dass Brasilien weniger eine konstitutionelle Monarchie als eine absolute Oligarchie ist."

[That is, "It would be easy to prove that Brazil is less of a constitutional monarchy than an absolute oligarchy."]

"But what does that mean?"

"That it is from this last trunk that the flower shall sprout."

The metaphor is transparent. It is from the trunk of the Abolition that the Republic will sprout, which is what happened. The liberal monarchy fell, overcoming a regime in which the oligarchies managed to govern without the mediations of the old parliament.

A Manichaeian reading of the *crônica* (Machado, the monarchist, versus the impending Republic) is tempting, but it should be nuanced. The numerous steps in which the writer sardonically observed the ills and political theater of the Second Reign serve as a warning to measure the distance he knew to take in the rhetorical action of parliamentarians and the survival of exclusionary liberalism, here and there, in Brazil and in the European monarchies and republics under full colonialist expansion. The process as a whole was negative to the point that nothing could be expected from institutional changes.

As for the merger of republic and oligarchy, foreshadowed in the *crônica*, it is worth reading passages from Joaquim Nabuco's *O Abolicionismo* [On Abolitionism] inspired by the liberal-democratic ideas. Nabuco gives us the vision of a contradictory (and historically attested) order in which

republicans, who consider the monarchical government of England and Belgium degrading, appear exercising within the limits of their farms, on hundreds of entities demoted from the dignity of *person*, power greater than that of an African chief in his domains, without any written law that regulates him, no opinion that oversees him, discretionary, suspicious, irresponsible (Chapter "O Partido Abolicionista" [The Abolitionist Party]).

BUT, IN THE END, WHAT IS POLITICS?

Here is what reveals a survey—a true public opinion survey...—which the writer simulated in his *Bala* dated July 8, 1885:

Having sent the question by mail, the writer selects some answers and comments on them in a tone between the jovial and the sardonic:

I am not publishing all the definitions received because life is short, *vita brevis*. However, I make a rigorous selection and present some of the main ones before recounting what happened to me during this inquiry, which will be seen later if God does not command

otherwise.

One of the letters simply said that politics is taking the hat off to older people. Another claimed that politics is the obligation not to pick the nose. Another that it is, while one is at the table, not to wipe the lips on a neighbor's napkin or on the edge of the towel. A dancing club secretary swears that politics is to treat girls with due respect, not giving them nicknames when they already have a pair for the dance. According to a Tijuca resident, politics is to thank the friend who pays for our fare with a lively smile.

Many letters are so long and confuse that one can hardly take anything from them. Of these, I will quote from one sent by a barber, who defines politics as the art of being paid for his trimming of beards, and from one sent by an apothecary for whom true politics is not to shop at the corner pharmacy.

Politics appears, in most answers, as etiquette, that is, as a comedy of manners in which the demonstrations of courtesy must be reciprocal. Ultimately, everything boils down to individuals acting for self-interest: the apothecary should refrain from buying at the corner pharmacy, as this would mean favoring the competition; the deputy will not vote against the government on the so-called servile question, contenting himself with half measures, even though he claims to be in favor of immediate abolition; in short, no parliamentarian will do favors to anyone who is not his friend or voter...

These are local situations, Brazilian variations of recurrent tendencies of the "human clay," thus explained in the words of an 18th-century *philosophe*:

And the most numerous class, which alone comprehends the far greater part of humanity, is that of men so entirely devoted to their own interest, that they consider the welfare of the whole. Concentrated in their own happiness, these men call honorable only those actions that serve themselves.

And later on:

If the physical universe is subject to the laws of motion, the moral

universe is equally so to those of interest. Interest is, on earth, the mighty magician, which changes the appearance of all objects to the eyes of every creature (Helvetius, *Essays on the Mind*, 1758, II, 2).

Machado's *crônica* reflects some of the words and attitudes of imperial Brazil's politicians. If the *crônica* reflects these words and attitudes, it also brings the reflections peculiar to the writer Machado de Assis, with his way of looking at things and the tone of his voice, always seeking to go further and deeper than the mere empirical record. The things reflected are mediated by his reflections on them. And these reflections do not stop at national borders.

Machado's awareness of the ambiguous or ever-changing character of the political scenario, which is the expression of individual interests and ambitions, led him to contemplate with the same disillusioned eyes both the Brazilian partisan political activities and the English parliamentary practices.

In a *crônica* dated August 4, 1884, Lélío pretends to transcribe two speeches by deputies to the Rio de Janeiro's provincial assembly, one conservative, the other liberal, both speaking the same language in a session in December 1868. And he concludes: "the name is what distinguishes." But politics being what it is, "the work of men," something similar could be found in an English candidate's short speech in 1869: "I want political freedom, and that is why I am a liberal; but to have political freedom the constitution must be preserved, and that is why I am a conservative."

The same prestigious British source brought this other piece of news, which had the rare power of astonishing the usually phlegmatic writer: Not a week ago, the London correspondent in the *Jornal do Commercio*, said that the conservatives there called for the dissolution of the Chamber, but that the liberals *fear it, because they are the government*. If this is not a topsy-turvy world, I don't know what it is (*Balas de estalo*, March 13, 1884). Here and there...

Perplexity, irony, sarcasm; they are all particular forms of a subjective and cultural reaction to the shower of *faits divers* that national, and at the time also international, means of communication rained down on the curious and well-informed editor hidden under the pseudonym of Lélío.

The work of Machado's interpreters today is also one of reflection. It remains to be seen whether the dialectical reader, who happened to have survived the 20th century, will passively and unconditionally make his own the image of Brazil as reflected, conceived, and

interpreted by the writer. This is an image of a country conditioned by a “state of mind” that had barely left colonial times. The image of a society trapped in “ineluctable” habits, which means a style of thinking that differs from the heated protest, made up of love and hate, revolt and hope, which emerges from the abolitionist writings of Luís Gama, André Rebouças, José do Patrocínio or Cruz e Souza, mixed-race and black men who feel indignant because motivated by an ideal of a future of freedom. Machado’s *cognitive filter* is in no way similar to that found in Raul Pompéia’s Jacobin *crônicas* nor to the dramatic historical essays of Euclides da Cunha, who was rather sensitive to the great racial, class, and cultural divides of the Brazilian nation. It is just a matter of comparing Lélío’s disillusioned words in his *balas de estalo* (“tenderly sarcastic,” in the words of Valentim Magalhães) with the liberal-progressive *pathos* that permeates Joaquim Nabuco’s lively pages written in the same 1880s. What would be left of political texts without deciphering their perspective or hearing the tone of the voice that produced them?

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS IN MACHADIAN POLITICAL SATIRE

To me, it seems that the questions that matter the most, in terms of the history of ideologies, are the following: what is the ideological counterpoint that lends a coherent support to Machado’s satire on Brazilian politics and politics in general? If satire is a counter-ideological discourse, what would its internal reason and the scope of its negative force be? From the writer’s viewpoint, what discourse would be credible in opposition to the national parliamentarians’ *vana verba*? In the name of which higher principle should the rhetoric of political theater be demystified?

In the whole spectrum of ideologies contemporary to Machado, none seem to support his universal disdain for the occupation of politicians. Going deeper into the question, we may find that disbelief in any and all doctrines promoting humanity’s moral progress on the path to civilization (positivism, evolutionism, socialism...) results in the age-old hypothesis that everything eventually repeats itself. So it is with Nature, and so the wheel of fate turns. The figure of the circle applies as much to the Empire’s perpetual and ineffective electoral reforms as to certain barbaric customs of the human animal, which were supposed to have disappeared forever. The episodes of cannibalism in England and Brazil, recounted in the *crônica* of September 1st, 1895, illustrated this dismal philosophy of eternal return, which the expression “walking in circles” accurately describes. Anthropophagy is coming back, and it can always come back.

Horrible, I agree, but all we always do is walk in circles, as someone has said... I cannot remember if it was Montaigne who said it; I would have to go now and search for the text in his delicious language. The French have a refrain that could apply to human life, if their philosopher is really right:

Si cette histoire vous embête,

Nous allons la recommencer.

The Portuguese have this other one to help in keeping pace when two or more are walking together:

Um, dois, três.

Acerta o passo, Inês.

Outra vez.

The wheel of History is a trope that does not fit the progressive conceptions of time; it only invites a stoical resignation. But to the extent that we manage to discern a vein of nonconformism in the depths of skepticism, just as we perceive a persistent pessimism in the depths of criticism, we will be getting ever closer to contemplating the enigma that Machado's way of looking is.

Why does Augusto Meyer's (and in part Raymundo Faoro's) hypothesis, which I make mine, of a skeptical moralism on the part of Machado, help decipher the enigma of his way of looking?

The answer is that the skeptical moralist sees the universe of politics as a gathering of men who add a supplement of power to their particular goals. Hence the unedifying spectacle that vanity, cowardice, stupidity, venality, hypocrisy, greed, indifference, and opportunism make enabled by the faculty of legislating, corrupting, enticing, or punishing allies or adversaries. "What is politics but the work of men?" Politics reinforces, as the collective instrument that it is, the defensive and aggressive tendencies of each individual who enters the political stage. How to build an equitable republic with individuals centered on their own interests?

For the traditional moralist, the customs of the human clay cannot be reformed with laws, decrees, and sworn or granted constitutions. Habits are rooted in the selfish nature inherent to every man; a nature that always reappears, sometimes unabashed, sometimes masked by civilization.

The evil denounced, the vice mocked, and the iniquity exposed have deep origins in

social life, which is governed by force or cunning. Machiavelli, still and always: politics, a theater of lions and foxes.

Applying Machado's skepticism to Brazilian politics leads to a rich and paradoxical result. The satirical arrow wounds and cuts across our local ills to reach similar targets beyond our borders: *il mondo casca!* The evil is ours, but after due consideration, we can affirm it is not only here but also there and elsewhere, as politics is always the work of men from whom little or nothing should be expected.

However... in going beyond our national targets, the criticism becomes, contradictorily, both stronger and weaker. Stronger because the power of satire goes beyond the isolated fact, the episode; satire seeks to understand it in the light of the writer's awareness of human fragility. The universalizing reflection supplements the empirical, a stylization of the event's immediate effects. Weaker, however, because it shifts the immediate cause of the evil to a general existential condition that relativizes the specific mechanisms operating in the local context; in doing so, it shows disbelief in the possibility of any doctrines or political measures strong and effective enough to remedy the denounced evil. Empiricism (*here are the facts...*) and pessimism (*here is the man...*) can add to reduce to zero the hope for a possible political solution to what is happening in front of our eyes here and now.

Understanding the intimate nexus between political satire and skeptical moralism makes us respect the spirit and letter of the *crônicas*; and perhaps we might resist the temptation to *see only the one Machado that interests us*, thus managing to glimpse the real Machado, that is, concrete and complex, local and universal. Or is it too much ambition?

Documents require textual and historical criticism. Literary *crônicas* of a great writer also require, but even more so, a close examination to identify his point of view, the roots of his thought, his values and anti-values, his pathos, his style of narration, his rhetorical procedures. It is a task still to be accomplished, and it is the very threshold of interpretation, below which everything dissipates in the anecdotal or lends itself to the bewilderment of arbitrary allegories.

Notes

General note – The excerpts from all *crônicas* cited were transcribed from the following sources:

Machado de Assis, *Obra completa*, org. por Afrânio Coutinho. Rio de Janeiro, Aguilar, 1971.

Machado de Assis, *Bons dias!* Introdução e notas de John Gledson. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1990.

Machado de Assis. *Balas de estalo*, org. por Heloísa Helena Paiva de Luca. São Paulo, Annablume, 1998.

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