

NOTES ON LATE STYLE IN HENRY JAMES AND MACHADO DE ASSIS

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Abstract: This paper is a preliminary comparative reading of Henry James' 1903 novel *The Ambassadors* and Machado de Assis' 1908 novel *Memorial de Aires*. I trace out thematic and formal parallels and inversions between the two novels, setting them in the theoretical framework of Edward Said's notion of late style: a conception of artistic lateness understood "not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" (7). Late style in this sense is characterized by the shifting, oblique narrative perspectives of the two novels, which serve to figure the central themes of exile and self-exile so significant to the life histories of the respective protagonists. The free indirect discourse of James' late style takes shape through verbal accretion and expansion; Machado's late style, in contrast, takes shape through the reduction and redaction of the protagonist's diary by a fictional editor. Integral to the intransigence and unresolved contradictions of the two novels—on both the thematic and stylistic planes—is a prominent deictic axis, around which various meanings of "here" and "there" play: Europe and America, remembering and forgetting, youth and old age, and the living and the dead.

Keywords: late style, Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, Machado de Assis, *Memorial de Aires*

In his posthumously published *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2006), Edward Said examines an array of works produced late in the lives of their creators, from Euripides to Beethoven's "third" period to Constantine Cavafy's poetry to the single novel written by the Sicilian aristocrat Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. Tracing the textual marks of a given author's struggle with time and death, Said discerns in the dislocations of anachronism, anomaly, and exile a conception of artistic

lateness understood “not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” (7). Late style insists, he argues, “on the increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism,” which it both expresses and “uses to formally sustain itself” (17). The readerly intuition that I want to test in the present “notes” on late style is that apartness, exile, and anachronism are thematic and formal keys to two quintessentially “late” novels: *The Ambassadors* (1903) by Henry James and *Memorial de Aires* (1908) by Machado de Assis. The well-known final scene of Machado’s novel provides a poignant image of such apartness in the Aguiar couple, alone again in their Flamengo home after the departure of their quasi-adoptive children: “Queriam ser risonhos e mal se podiam consolar. Consolava-os a saudade de si mesmos.” (1525). Devastating as this scene is, it is worth noting the perspective from which it is composed: on the verge of entering the house, the Counselor pauses, hesitates, and quietly retreats, finally casting his oblique gaze back on the couple through the doorways of their home. His tangential position calls to mind one of the most striking formulations of late style to be gleaned from Said’s reflections: the description of the Greek Alexandrian poet Constantin Cavafy as standing, in the words of E.M. Forster, “motionless at a slight angle to the universe” (2004). Forster’s image of Cavafy is a fitting emblem of late style in *The Ambassadors* and *Memorial de Aires*, two novels that interrogate what it means and what it costs to live at an angle to the universe, to live representing others. The aging, widowed, childless protagonists of these two novels take stock of lives not entirely their own: Lambert Strether, James’ protagonist, has virtually nothing to his name, except a little magazine he edits thanks to the patronage of Mrs. Newsome, the wealthy New England matron whose interests he is tasked with representing in Paris and whom he stands to marry if he succeeds in his mission; Counselor Ayres, who has represented Brazil abroad as a diplomat for thirty years, finds new life back in his native country, city, and language, to which he has returned to live out his remaining days. The language of loss and gain that both Strether and Counselor Ayres so often speak—taking “the measure” of characters and situations and musing on the “cost” of words and actions—has a metafictional resonance in which one can hear James and Machado taking stock of their own lives dedicated to representing others. Both must have felt in their bones the ironies of the literary lives they led—not least among which was the intensely public and yet deeply solitary nature of writing fiction that draws so much on the experiences of their respective social milieus. In this sense, both James and Machado “lived through” the people who surrounded them—people they did not exactly regard with admiration. A note of this irony of the literary life can be heard in Counselor Ayres’ assertion that “a diplomacia me ensinou a aturar com paciência uma infinidade de sujeitos intoleráveis que este mundo nutre para os seus propósitos secretos” (1497). The play of perspective

upon which irony depends, and which figures so prominently in the prose of late James and late Machado, has one of its roots in the oblique social positions of the two authors: James as the American in Europe, Machado as the mulatto in Rio de Janeiro.

One of the figures of irony—and one of the recurring tropes of Saidian late style—is exile. Though not precisely exiles, the two protagonists of *The Ambassadors* and *Memorial de Aires* are in significant ways exiles from themselves, having perhaps played the role of representing others a little too faithfully and a little too long. Strether, a man of fifty-five who has by his own admission “failed..in everything” (76), has little more to his name than the monthly magazine he edits thanks to Mrs. Newsome’s largesse. He is sent to Paris by Mrs. Newsome to be the New England matron’s “ambassador”; his “mission” is to extricate her son, Chad Newsome, from what she deems a dubious romantic involvement with a Parisian woman. If Strether manages to convince Chad to abandon his lover and return to Woollett to run the booming family business, Strether stands to gain the wealthy Mrs. Newsome’s hand in marriage and the material comfort that has eluded him all his undistinguished life. The ambassadorial plot, however, is merely the background for a drama of consciousness in which Strether, James’ “man of imagination” (6), strains to compose his own picture of the people and scenes he finds in Paris. Initially, he sees only as Woollett sees, convinced that Chad is wasting his youth on a disreputable lover. Chad charms Strether with his exquisite manners and taste, exuding the refinement and sophistication that can only have taken shape through a “virtuous attachment” to the older Madame de Vionnet. In a dramatic scene late in the novel, Strether discovers that Chad and Madame de Vionnet are indeed lovers; his illusions about their supposedly “virtuous” attachment dispelled, Strether defies his ambassadorial duties to take the side of Madame de Vionnet, imploring Chad to live up to his commitment to his lover. Strether’s immersion in Paris and proximity to Chad revitalizes the aging man and his sojourn in Europe comes to signify the end of a dreary self-exile in New England, where he has led a life of “dreadful cheerful sociable solitude” (79) since the death of his wife and his young son. His return to Europe—his first since his honeymoon some thirty years before—marks a bittersweet homecoming to his younger self. The self-exile of which he gradually becomes aware acquires a distinctly metaliterary resonance when he remarks to his friend Miss Barrace that he has no “life of his own”: “No—not for myself. I seem to have a life only for other people” (214). He echoes these words on the final page of the novel as he articulates the “logic” that has guided him throughout: “That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself” (470).

In apparent contrast to Strether's "failure in everything," Counselor Ayres bears the marks of social prestige in his name: the honorific "Counselor" was bestowed by the Emperor Pedro II on distinguished intellectuals and members of the liberal professions (Jackson, 2015: 258). His social distinction, however, turns out to be merely decorative; he has simply been agreeable to everyone, heard more than he heard, and, in sum, lived vicariously: "A diplomacia que exerci em minha vida era antes função decorativa que outra cousa; não fiz tratados de comércio nem de limites, não celebrei alianças de guerra; podia acomodar-me às melodias de sala ou de gabinete. Agora vivo do que ouço aos outros" (1142). At the age of sixty-two, he has returned to his native Rio de Janeiro in January of 1887 to live out his remaining years: "Aqui estou, aqui vivo, aqui morrerei," he states emphatically at the end of his 9 January 1888 entry, the first of the novel's text. Like Strether, he is a childless widower radically divorced from his past—a past metonymized in his thirty years of diplomatic duty abroad. In one of his more lugubrious veins, he expresses the abyss between past and present as the boundaries of his solitude: "Eu tenho a mulher embaixo do chão de Viena e nenhum dos meus filhos saiu do berço do Nada. Estou só, totalmente só. Os rumores de fora, carros, bestas, gentes, campainhas e assobios, nada disto vive para mim" (1470). The parallelism of the Counselor's concluding phrase ("nada disto vive para mim") and his motto of vicarious living ("agora vivo do que ouço aos outros") reveals one of the opposed pairs or poles through which the novel can be read: the silence of old age and solitude and the music of youthful conviviality and youth.¹ The poles of silence and music, solitude and company—which Pedro Meira Monteiro (2005) has linked to Machado's reading of Augustine and Pascal—analogueous to the acts of memory and forgetting, the stark image of which is his late wife buried in foreign soil. This marks him out from his sister Rita and the young Fidélia—both widows who repatriated their late husbands and both of whom pay dutiful respect to their graves in the São João Batista cemetery, where the plot of the novel is set in motion. The glimpse the Counselor catches of the beautiful young widow Fidélia at the cemetery, and the subsequent social proximity he enjoys with her through the mediation of the Aguiar couple, are the initial occasions of his renaissance. The other cause of his late rebirth is language: "cansado de ouvir e de falar a língua francesa, achei vida nova e original na minha língua, e já agora quero morrer com ela na boca e nas orelhas" (1503). That the Counselor's homecoming to himself occurs upon his return to his native city, country, and language marks one of the many parallels and inversions with respect to James' novel. It is the return to Europe that gradually brings new life to Strether, who expresses his new vivacity in the famous *carpe*

¹ José Paulo Paes (1985) reads the novel through the poles of the living and the dead, the young and the old, the real and the vicarious, and here and there (Brazil and Europe).

diem speech in Gloriani's garden in Book Five, the original "seed" of the book: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to" (176).

The foregoing biographical sketches of Strether and Counselor Ayres, indispensable as they are for establishing significant points of contact between the two novels and their protagonists, run the risk of what Ruth Bernard Yeazell (1976) warned against as too fluent a translation of the elaborate idiom known as "late James"—a blithe rendering of the complex play of perspective by which Strether and the Counselor are constituted (13). They come into existence, indeed, through the slight angle at which James and Machado set their readers, and the labor of reading these two novels is in large part taking the shifting measures of this angle. The narrative strategy through which this slight angle is created in *The Ambassadors* is James' well-known free indirect discourse: a narrative discourse emanating from the perspective of a single character, a single "center" of consciousness, that is translated, expanded and commented upon by a third person narrator. In the preface to the New York edition of *The Ambassadors*, James lays out the principles of his free indirect discourse, describing how the other characters who "people the scene" of the novel will be presented to the reader only through Strether's perspective:

But Strether's sense of these things, and Strether's only, should avail me for showing them; I should know them but through his more or less groping knowledge of them, since his very gropings would figure among his most interesting motions, and a full observance of the rich rigour I speak of would give me more of the effect I should be most 'after' than all other possible observances together" (10-11).

The "rich rigour" of restricting the narrative point of view to Strether's "sense of things" but also commenting on that point of view in the voice of a prodigiously articulate narrative creates what Ian Watt called the "multidimensional quality" of late Jamesian prose, "with its continual implication of a community of three minds—Strether's, James's, and the reader's," corresponding to three levels of development: the character's perception, the narrator's seeing of them, and "our own trailing perception of the relation between these two" (257). The "community of three minds" through which James' late style is constituted provides the narrative matrix for a dynamic representation of time. As Adrian Poole (2008) has noted, James constantly alternates and blends tenses, shifting from the apparent immediacy of a present tense "now" ("at the present sharp hour"; "on the spot"), a pluperfect preceding the notional "now" ("he had wanted to put himself in relation"), and the "double sense of prospect and retrospect" (Poole's words) of phrases such as "He was to feel many things on this occasion" (238) and "He was to reflect later on" (420). In short, the slight angle at which James

sets his readers to the action of the novel is constantly shifting; the “rich rigour” of limiting the narrative point of view to Strether’s perspective produces what Terry Eagleton (2005) has called “a linguistic web so close-knit and fine-grained that it allows no scintilla of meaning to escape” (154).

A passage from Book Two, Chapter II provides a good example of James’ characteristically oblique yet voluble mode of presentation. Strether is taking one of his first strolls through Paris, trying to “put himself in relation” to Chad before meeting him:

He had wanted to put himself in relation, and he would be hanged if he were *not* in relation. He was that at no moment so much as while, under the old arches of the Odéon, he lingered before the charming open-air array of literature classic and casual. He found the effect of tone and tint, in the long charged tables and shelves, delicate and appetizing; the impression—substituting one kind of low-priced *consommation* for another—might have been that of one of the pleasant cafés that overlapped, under an awning, to the pavement; but he edged along, grazing the tables, with his hands firmly behind him. He wasn't there to dip, to consume—he was there to reconstruct. He wasn't there for his own profit—not, that is, the direct; he was there on some chance of feeling the brush of the wing of the stray spirit of youth. He felt it in fact, he had it beside him; the old arcade indeed, as his inner sense listened, gave out the faint sound, as from far off, of the wild waving of wings.
(87)

Verbs of oblique contact, carefully placed in highly periodic sentences that delay and deflect their semantic and syntactic resolution, articulate Strether’s indirect approach to Chad’s youthful state of mind: to “put himself in relation”, to “edge” along, to “graze”, to “brush”. The shifting verb tenses and moods—*had wanted*, *would be hanged*, *was*, *might have been*, *grazing* and *feeling*—trace a similarly oblique temporal approach to what will be a dramatic meeting between Strether and Chad in Book Three. That the whole scene of a possible brush with the “stray spirit of youth” is glimpsed by observing the artifice of literature—the “charming open-air array of literature classic and casual” disposed on the tables—posits and rejects in the same phrase the capacity of literature to produce knowledge of reality: what is displayed is “classic” and “casual.” With an eye to the artifice of the editing and revision of Counselor Ayres’ diary in Machado’s novel, one might say that in contrast James provides his readers with the “diplomatic” text of Strether’s consciousness: an imaginary transcription of all the verbal information emanating from a single character’s mental activity.

In contrast to the accretion of oblique detail in James’ late style in *The Ambassadors*, Machado’s late style works by calculated reduction and redaction. As the presumed editor of the diary states in the prefatory “Advertência,” he has “pruned” the Counselor’s manuscript: “Tratando-se agora de

imprimir o Memorial, achou-se que a parte relativa a uns dois anos (1888-1889), se for decotada de algumas circunstâncias, anedotas, descrições e reflexões, — pode dar uma narração seguida, que talvez interesse, apesar da forma de diário que tem” (1399). The editor's supposed textual pruning fits with the sculptural metaphor implied in the ambiguity of the novel's title: the *Memorial de Aires* is not only a kind of “memoir” but also a memorial or funeral monument (like the ones we see in an early scene in the São João Bautista cemetery): a monument that has been chiseled out of the “raw stone” of the Counselor's diary. Indeed, the Counselor's terse prose is often in keeping with the sculptural motif in such lapidary statements as “Desde namorada, ela exerceu sobre ele a influência de todas as namoradas deste mundo, e acaso do outro, se as há tão longe” (1416) or “Tudo é possível debaixo do sol — e a mesma coisa sucederá acima dele —, Deus sabe” (1465). These aphorisms demonstrate the characteristic balancing of the Counselor's phrasing around an implied deictic axis—under the sun and above it, this world and the other—followed by a clause that unsettles that same deictic axis: “Deus sabe” or “se as há tão longe.” Indeed, epigram and aphorism exist in constant tension with uncertainty in the Counselor's prose: the adverbs *acaso*, *talvez*, and *quase* are among his favorites. His tendency to cast uncertainty on nearly every affirmation and negation he makes is one he shares with the purported editor of his diary, who recurs no less than three times to the adverb *talvez*: “Quem me leu Esaú e Jacó talvez reconheça estas palavras do prefácio”; “Nos lazeres do ofício escrevia o Memorial, que, apesar das páginas mortas ou escuras, apenas daria (e talvez dê) para matar o tempo da barca de Petrópolis.”; “...pode dar uma narração seguiu a, que talvez interesse, apesar da forma de diário que tem” (1399). As many of Machado's most perceptive readers have noted, we tread on ever-shifting ground in the *Memorial*; the flightiness and obliqueness of the Counselor's prose—like the birds who are the only sign of movement in the cemetery scene at the outset of the novel—draws out the other semantic resonance in the title of the novel: the unpredictable movements of memory, working back and across the currents of time, which can also be read as the currents of the Atlantic that separates the Counselor from his late wife and from half of his past.

Another one of the “slight angles” at which Machado sets his readers is in relation to genre. K. David Jackson (2015) has noted how *Memorial* foregrounds its mixed genres: poised between the diary of the Counselor's text and the novel created by the editor's interventions, *Memorial* is framed by two epigraphs from medieval troubadours Johan Zorro and Dom Denis I, king of Portugal—suggesting an allegorical narrative thread of voyage by sea occasioned by romantic desire—while allusions to Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, Goethe's *Faust*, and the poetry of Shelley echo throughout the text, just as the voices of street vendors and letters read aloud in drawing rooms resonate throughout

the novel. The generic tension of the text is at various points figured as a tension between verse and prose, as in the passage in which the verse from Shelley (“I can give not what men call love”) first enters the text: “Não pensei logo em prosa, mas em verso, e um verso justamente de Shelley, que relera dias antes, em casa, como lá ficou dito atrás, e tirado de uma das suas estâncias de 1821” (1412). The verse/prose dichotomy surfaces again at a crucial moment in the narrative—in the entry for 13 May 1888, the momentous day of the abolition of slavery in Brazil—recast as a dichotomy between poetry and history:

Ainda bem que acabamos com isto. Era tempo. Embora queimemos todas as leis, decretos e avisos, não poderemos acabar com os atos particulares, escrituras e inventários, nem apagar a instituição da História, ou até da Poesia. A Poesia falará dela, particularmente naqueles versos de Heine, em que o nosso nome está perpétuo. (1432)

Earlier in the passage, the Counselor recounts how he almost—“quase, quase” he writes, recurring to another one of his favored adverbs of uncertainty—took part in the public celebrations of abolition. “History” here is of course the institution of slavery and the slave trade, while the verses he refers to are those of “Das Sklavenschiff” (“The Slave Ship”), by the German poet Heinrich Heine. Curiously, the allusion leads to no sustained reflection on slavery and abolition; the Counselor proceeds to correct Heine’s spelling of the surname of the slave traders in the poem and point out that there are no ducats in Brazil, as the poem assumes. Like Strether—whose exuberant imagination only very rarely calls up the memory of political violence in veiled allusions to the beheading of Mary, Queen of Scots, the French Revolution, and the Paris Commune of 1871—the Counselor seems peculiarly resistant to reflecting on the historical change he is supposed to be living through (or is presented as such by his editor). The theme of the public and the private referenced in the passage quoted above surfaces in the very next diary entry in the novel, when the Counselor learns that Tristão has written to the Aguiar couple after a long period of silence—setting in motion the marriage plot of Tristão and Fidélia and shelving the question of slavery. The subtle indirections and meandering quality of the Counselor’s prose—punctuated by all those *acaso*, *talvez*, and *quase*—trace the outline of anachronism, in the etymological sense of the word: the Counselor’s “roving pen” (“pena vadia”) moves against time, against the current of dawning of historical change. Through the aging diplomat exiled from his own time, Machado sets his readers at a slight angle to history, allowing his readers to glimpse historical change in a polished prose that is so often grazing the hard surface of history.

Written in opposite corners of the Atlantic world—James from Lamb House in Sussex, Machado from his home in Cosme Velho—*The Ambassadors* and *Memorial de Aires* stand at a slight

angle to each other. Strether's last failures—failing the interests of Woollett and then failing the interests of Madame de Vionnet—proves to be the one that saves him; the Counselor's last success leaves him largely where he was when he returned to Brazil. As masters of late style, both James and Machado weave into the fine fabric of their prose the ironies of lives not quite one's own: a life dedicated to the art of fiction, a life spent representing others. The intransigence, unresolved contradiction, and difficulty of their respective late styles are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the shimmering brilliance of what seem at first glance the simplest of words: "here" and "there." Our trailing perception (to recall Watt's phrase) of these authors' movements across the deictic axis described by these two key words must constantly confront their resistance to definition. In *Memorial de Aires*, "here" is not just the world of the living in contrast to that of the dead ("Aqui estou, aqui vivo, aqui morrerei"), but also Brazil in contrast to Europe ("esta outra vida de cá"), and the home from which he writes in contrast to the street or the drawing-rooms of others. "There" sometimes means Europe (where his wife is buried), sometimes means the realm of the dead, and at other times the far-off place where lovers go to consummate their love ("Alá vou, madre," as the epigraph from Dom Denis reads). For James, deictic words are also a way of refracting, in Said's formulation, the "definitive cadences of death" (24). In the final passage of *The Ambassadors*, Strether converses with Maria Gostrey in yet another scene in which they take stock of the words, scenes, and events that they have witnessed in Paris. Maria has all but proposed to Strether, who has presumably rejected her, citing his "logic" of not gaining anything for himself in the whole ordeal. Sighing away "all comically, all tragically" his rejection of her marriage proposal, Maria quips, "I can't indeed resist you," to which Strether responds, in the very last words of the novel: "Then there we are!" (470). And yet, feeling that we have been set a distinct angle to the universe of the story, we are none the wiser as to where "there" is and what the renewed Strether plans to do there.

Craig Osterbrock earned his Ph.D. in Spanish and Portuguese from Yale University in 2024 with a dissertation on the poetics of translation of Brazilian poet-translators Augusto de Campos and Ana Cristina Cesar. He is currently at work on a book manuscript on the subject, provisionally entitled *Timbre and Translation*, in which he expands the traditional scope of translation studies to examine the various material lives of translations made by Ezra Pound, Campos, and Cesar. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in peer-reviewed journals such as *Santa Barbara Portuguese Studies* (“Augusto/Hopkins: Translation and the Fourth Dimension of a Poem”) and *Hermeneus* (“Ezra Pound’s *Rimbaud* (1957): Translation and the Art of the Sketch”), as well as in edited volumes such as *Poesia-Crítica-Tradução: Haroldo de Campos e a educação dos sentidos* (“Começos impossíveis: uma leitura da poesia inicial de Haroldo de Campos”; Ed. K. David Jackson and Eduardo Jorge; Peter Lang, 2022) and *The Routledge Companion to Ezra Pound* (“Mediations of Tradition/Traditions of Mediation: Ezra Pound, Augusto de Campos, and the Synchronic Anthology”; Ed. Mark Byron, Steven Yao, and Michael Kindellan, 2026). In addition to literary translation and print culture studies, his scholarly interests range from the roots to the reception of modernist traditions, embracing comparative modernisms and lyric theory.

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