

Machado de Assis, a Contemporary Writer

João Almino

I still read Machado as if he were a contemporary writer. There is no need to excuse him for having written in another century. He is the master *par excellence* of my literary generation in Brazil and has influenced myself and other writers, as he did with previous generations.

In Brazil, each generation discovers its own Machado de Assis. Scholars of different tendencies have also applied their approaches to his works. So one should not be surprised to find one Machado for cultural studies, another for structuralist and historicist approaches, or to see his work considered as romantic, realist, baroque, modern, or even post-modern. Obviously his work cannot be reduced to any of these approaches or interpretations, perhaps because of its ambiguity, its oblique and distant look, its lack of linearity, its subjective perspectives, and the fact that it does not endorse any of the great ideological currents and nor conforms to the dogmas of his own times—the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Machado was a truly independent thinker who functioned as a double critic to the romantics and to naturalism, at the time a new realist trend. He did not believe blindly in progress. He was not an adept of positivism, of evolutionism, or of other types of determinism. He was not a socialist, a republican, or an abolitionist. Nonetheless, all of these philosophic, political, and aesthetic currents are treated, from a distance, in his works.

Despite writing in a digressive manner—in fact, in some of his novels, the digressions are at times more relevant than the main plot—he was closer to realism than to the baroque. Nevertheless, his was an imaginative realism, a realism of ambiguity, where objectivity does not exist outside a subjective per-

spective that is often centered on an inconsequential and frustrated self. The most daring imagination is at the service of the bare truth, as in the case of the memoirs of a dead man, Brás Cubas, whose first virtue is sincerity.

His distance from all absolutes derived from his skepticism, and a pessimism seasoned with humor. For him there is no utopia and no "paradise in the end," nor any "social selection," to use his own words. His novels usually narrate the misadventures of desire. On the other hand, in his major novels we find no extraordinary dramas, no suicides, no murders, no maddening passions or passionate crimes. Or, we could say, the great dramas do not have the appearance of a drama. The tragedy of living offers enough material for a narrative in which every sentence is of interest to the reader.

Machado de Assis has contributed to a tradition of urban literature that has avoided descriptivism and the picturesque. He did not idealize Brazil or Europe. Brazil is never an *a priori* in his works, which results in the fact that it is universal and very Brazilian. I do not hesitate to say, in conclusion, that no other writer could represent Brazil better, and that his works should be included among the highest expressions of world literature.

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