

The Beautiful Form of Sadness: Machado de Assis' *Memorial de Aires*

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Abstract. *Memorial de Aires* is not simply a novel of sadness but a novel that shows how sadness can grow into a form between the dimensions and through the movements of time. Between an existential future that can only hold nothing, a present that has become empty, and a past that is now receding from the present, time appears to move slowly. It is from this perspective that we can read Machado de Assis' *Memorial de Aires* and Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) as converging texts.

I

The story told by Machado de Assis' last novel, published in 1908, the year of his death, is easily summarized. It is the story of Aguiar, the administrator of a bank in late imperial Rio de Janeiro, and of his wife Carmo. What the text refers to as their "old age" (Dona Carmo's insistently recurrent epithet is "a boa velha") must be a stage in their lives that, today, we do not find particularly advanced. The Aguiars may well be in their early or mid-sixties—as was Machado in 1904, when his beloved wife Dona Carolina died. Like the Machados, the Aguiars are a childless couple, and because Machado wants us to imagine what good, caring parents they would have made, he describes their existence as "reverse orphanage"—"orfandade avessa." But the Aguiars have found ways to fill the void in their life with "substitute children"—"filhos postiços." Long before 1888, when the action of the novel begins, they have helped to raise their godchild, Tristão, who has since joined his Brazilian parents in Lisbon and from whom they have not received any news in a long time. More recently, the Aguiars have offered a home to Fidélia, a very young and very beautiful widow who, after her husband's early

death, cannot rejoin her family because their marriage had been the fulfillment of a *Romeo and Juliet*-like passion—a passion against the will of the parents. Young Tristão's long-announced return to Rio de Janeiro marks the one central event in the novel, and opens a time of quietly and intensely enjoyed happiness for his foster parents. A few days before his scheduled return to Portugal, however, where a political future awaits Tristão, he confesses to his foster parents, and soon also to the good society of Rio de Janeiro, his love for Fidélia whom, to everybody's delight, he soon marries. But he does not renounce his dreams of a political future. Pretending—and perhaps even half-believing—that they will leave Brazil only temporarily so that Fidélia can meet Tristão's real parents, the young couple departs for a life in Portugal, thus ending forever the late happiness of the Aguiares.

II.

This plot makes for what Hollywood calls a “bittersweet story”—and yet it might be an unrecognizable rendition for somebody who has read *Memorial de Aires* without “reading for the plot.” For the plot must miss what gives Machado's last novel the quality of a unique masterpiece—much as it happened to one of its first reviewers, Almáquio Diniz, who complained that Fidélia, according to him “the main character of the book,” was scarcely developed (“franzina”), and who also found that the form of the book was not “justified” (297). The form of the novel is that of a “memorial,” a diary of remembrances in which the Conselheiro Aires, a former diplomat—whose Christian name the reader will never know—writes down, quite irregularly, notes and reflections about the slow course of his life as a retiree. It has to be said that Almáquio Diniz's double misunderstanding was the exception among contemporary reactions to *Memorial de Aires*. Most early readers praised the stylistic mastery of Machado, who was then in his prime as the single most canonized author of the emerging Brazilian nation—with a style “as perfect as any Portuguese writer's style” (Alencar 290). Above all they appreciated the grace and the lightness of his literary touch, and they even had a point—a point, however, that came as a vague intuition rather than based on analytic certainty—in comparing Machado de Assis to Gustave Flaubert. But nobody, it seems, has ever explained what specific features account for the impression of the book's incomparable greatness. On the contrary, *Memorial de Aires* has been overshadowed by Machado's earlier novels—although its readers always seem to agree, albeit without words, on its superb quality.

III.

The secret of this novel's greatness, one of those secrets that remain secret because they are so apparent, lies in its form, and it is Machado's complex use of the form of the "memorial" that gives its fictional author, the Counselor Aires, the status of the book's true hero. This hero appears to be idle and relaxed—but he is always in full reflexive control of his feelings and of his dignity. Aires believes himself to be of a particularly mild and serene disposition: "eu não odeio nada nem ninguém,—*perdono a tutti*, como na ópera" (Memorial 72).¹ If it was part of his professional obligation and competence as a diplomat not to trust people, Aires now wants to believe in everybody's sincerity—and mostly can afford to do so: "Quando eu era do corpo diplomático efetivo não acreditava em tanta coisa junta, era inquieto e desconfiado; mas, se me aposentei foi justamente para crer na sinceridade dos outros. Que os efetivos desconfiem!" (206). Above all, the perspective of his quiet life seems to set everything and everybody at a distance—in many different ways. Even his own impulses and spontaneous reactions are experienced at such a distance that Aires hardly ever feels like following them. This actually is the attitude with which he enters the novel. Aires' sister Rita, his only living relative, a widow in happy peace with her life and world, writes him a note apologizing that she did not write the day before to commemorate the anniversary of his return to Rio, and proposes that they go to the family grave the following day in order "dar graças pelo seu regresso." Aires' commentary, in the following line, contains the form of his complex character in a nutshell: "Não vejo necessidade disso, mas respondi que sim" (68).

IV.

Everything indeed becomes remote in Aires' diary, often even remote in space. Remote are the places where his profession as a diplomat had taken Aires—although we hardly learn to which countries he actually went. Remote remain even the dramatic political events in Rio de Janeiro during the years that his diary covers, 1888 and 1889, the years of abolition and the foundation of Brazil as a Republic. At some point, a former friend invites Aires to join him in his coach for a political manifestation. But after some hesitation he renounces, believing that he owes such distance to his character and to his former profession: "Estive quase, quase a aceitar, tal era o meu atordoamento, mas os meus hábitos quietos, os costumes diplomáticos, a própria índole e a idade me retiveram melhor que as rédeas do cocheiro aos cavalos

do carro, e recusei" (96). Remote above all is the world from which young Tristão arrives and to which he will return. This is the European world of high-spirited politics surrounded by those opulent sounds of opera music that first bring Tristão and the beautiful Fidélia together, around the piano at their foster parents' house, thus fulfilling the promise of their operatic names. But the remoteness of the European world—above all: the never-ceasing awareness of the remoteness of the world's center—keeps the world of Brazil in the status of a colony. Coming from the center, Tristão is the one protagonist who has a ready-to-hand word for every single feeling that overcomes him. It is Tristão who talks about "elegiac" moods and about his "melancholia" to the always melancholic Aires. But can one trust these words and their operatic promise if already Tristão's name appears to be so wrong? Tristão is an entrepreneurial young man incapable of sadness—and Fidélia, his future wife, will in the end break all those professions of conjugal faith that she has dedicated to her late husband. Contrasting with the world that Aires has quit, the *hic et nunc* of his life as a retiree and of his "memorial" is the world of post-colonial Rio de Janeiro and its environments: Flamengo and Botafogo, Petrópolis and Niterói. But he never describes the sublime landscape of this city, and he gives us no words to imagine his house where all the notes of the diary are written. At some point, his sister Rita writes him "pedindo informações de um leiloeiro" (98). This is the moment when, in a surprising attack of emotion, Aires makes the attempt to push even the thought of his own death into comforting distance: "Que sei eu de leiloeiros nem de leilões? Quando eu morrer podem vender em particular o pouco que deixo, com abatimento ou sem ele, e a minha pele com o resto; não é nova, não é bela, não é fina, mas sempre dará para algum tambor ou pandeiro rústico. Não é preciso chamar um leiloeiro" (98).

V.

Fully depending on the notes that Aires is supposed to write in his diary, a reader who is eager to know how the plot will proceed may well develop the feeling of being on short supply. For in a specific sense, Aires is an "unreliable diary writer." Every word of the novel should be taken as the sincere expression of its main protagonist but this protagonist writes with great irregularity. Sometimes his entries begin indicating a month and a day; sometimes he mentions just the weekday, and sometimes only the time of the day. There are wide temporal gaps between some of the entries, and Aires insists, over

and again, that these gaps depend on his emotional and physical disposition, rather than on the invariably slow course of the events: “9 de junho // Este mês é a primeira linha que escrevo aqui. Não tem sido falta de matéria, ao contrário: falta de tempo também não; falta de disposição é possível. Agora volta. // A matéria sobra” (105). Or, a bit more dramatically, towards the end of the novel: “Sem data // Já lá vão dias que não escrevo nada. A princípio foi um pouco de reumatismo no dedo, depois visitas, falta de matéria, enfim preguiça. Sacudo a preguiça” (198). Whenever the reader does not have to worry about following the action, whenever the author of the diary seems to have found a rhythm, this rhythm can be both painfully and delightfully slow. Aires has a habit of returning to his previous notes, of revising, commenting, and interpreting them, almost endlessly: “21 de março // Explico o texto de ontem. Não foi o medo que me levou a admirar o espírito de Dona Cesária, os olhos, as mãos, e implicitamente o resto da pessoa. Já confessei alguns dos seus merecimentos. A verdade, porém, é que o gosto de dizer mal não se perde com elogios recebidos, e aquela dama, por mais que eu lhe ache os dentes bonitos, não deixará de me meter pelas costas, se for oportuno. Não; não a elogiei para desarmá-la, mas para divertir-me, e o resto da noite não passei mal” (201). But there is something much more disquieting, almost more philosophically disquieting, than the narrator’s irregularity and obsessive slowness. For sometimes Aires remarks that he writes although he has nothing to write about: “13 de julho // Sete dias sem uma nota, um facto, uma reflexão, posso dizer oito dias, porque também hoje não tenho que apontar aqui. Escrevo isto só para não perder longamente o costume. Não é mau este costume de escrever o que se pensa e o que se vê, e dizer isso mesmo quando se não vê nem pensa nada” (118). This is where the fictional narrator of *Memorial de Aires* indeed rejoins Gustave Flaubert, the author who, in the correspondence with his lady lover, once famously described the dream of writing a book “based on nothing,” a book whose structure would not depend on any plot, let alone on a referent. Machado de Assis’ *Memorial de Aires* and the fictional Aires’ “memorial” often appear “empty” in this very sense—but different from Flaubert who dreamed of a book “on nothing” as a purely aesthetic challenge, Aires seems to suggest that writing regularly, even writing on nothing and without any clear direction (as if “wandering”), can give a form to one’s existence: “Estou cansado de ouvir que ela vem, mas ainda não me cansei de o escrever nestas páginas de vadiação. Chamo-lhes assim para divergir de mim mesmo. Já chamei a este *Memorial* um bom costume. Ao cabo, ambas as

opiniões se podem defender, e, bem pensado, dão a mesma cousa. Vadiação é bom costume” (122). Over and again, Aires proves himself to be a master in giving form to the slow course of his everyday and even to the concepts in which he reflects about this everyday. But there is a different, more aggressive meaning of nothingness in the narrator’s text and in his life, a meaning that beats writerly nothingness as it consists of a lack of referent. Aires, like his sister and like Fidélia, has lost his spouse, but the grave of his wife is far away, in Europe. Aires, unlike the Aguires, does not even have substitute children. His children “never came out of the cradle of Nothingness”—“nenhum dos meus filhos saiu do berço do Nada.” There is nothing that speaks to him but the sound coming from the timepiece on the wall, once every hour: “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. Quando muito o meu relógio de parede, batendo as horas, parece falar alguma cousa,—mais fala tardo, pouco e fúnebre. Eu mesmo, relendo estas últimas linhas, pareço-me um coveiro” (151).

VI.

And yet, despite such merciless, quiet bleakness; *Memorial de Aires* also is a tender novel of lost illusions, of illusions, to be precise, in which Aires and the Aguires never fully believed. Aires sees beautiful Fidélia for the first time during that visit to the graveyard with which the novel begins, and when he remarks to his sister that Fidélia’s name may not prevent her from engaging in a new marriage, Rita teases him with the suggestion that he, Aires, could be the man to end her widowhood. Despite their age difference, this would not have been an impossible thought or a socially impossible development in late nineteenth-century good society, above all not in the good society of the post-colonial world. As Aires begins to befriend Fidélia at her foster parents’ home, he also begins to fall for this, his sister’s idea. But in the very first confession about this attraction that he permits himself, Aires still tries hard to believe that he is only fascinated as an observer of the young widow’s interesting character. Writing as if he spoke to the paper of his diary, the lonesome observer of the world and of himself notes: “Escuta, papel. O que naquela dama Fidélia me atrai é principalmente certa feição de espírito, algo parecida com o sorriso fugitivo, que já lhe vi algumas vezes. Quero estudá-la se tiver ocasião. Tempo sobra-me” (93). Only a few pages later, Aires imagines how Fidélia comes to his house to ask him whether she should stay a widow for-

ever; how he tells Fidélia that widowhood is not the life she is made for; and how she then confesses that she had indeed thought of him as her future husband. In his solitude, it takes Aires some time to finally “understand” that this was a dream—and then writes down “achei-lhe graça” (102). Aires regains control, at least for a while, by convincing himself, counter to his first intuition, that beautiful Fidélia, after all, will remain a widow forever—without excluding that it may just have been jealousy or envy that made him change his mind (109). When Tristão finally appears on the scene, the space for Aires’ dreams and even the space for those rationalizations through which he tries to maintain the form of his quiet life begin to dwindle. A few days before Tristão proposes to Fidélia—but while Tristão is still uncertain about Fidélia’s affection—Aires confesses to himself that he can no longer afford to be completely open with himself: “Aires amigo, confessa que ouvindo ao moço Tristão a dor de não ser amado, sentiste tal ou qual prazer, que aliás não foi longo nem se repetiu. Tu não a queres para ti, mas terias algum desgosto em a saber apaixonada dele; explica-te se podes; não podes” (177).

VII.

In similar conversations with himself, Aires does not need to fully acknowledge the loss of his hope to become Fidélia’s husband one day because he had never fully admitted to this hope when it actually existed. But we all are so very familiar with the impossibility of completely repressing a feeling of loss in similar situations that we can sense Aires’ pain by the extent to which he pretends that he does not feel such pain. From Aires’ outside observer position, things seem to be much clearer in regards to the loss of his friends—the Aguiares. For in the end the name of the always-happy Tristão does adopt a well fitting meaning, as it is him who causes a loss and thus inflicts a wound that will only heal with his foster parents’ death. From the moment when Fidélia and Tristão announce that they want to travel to Portugal, Dona Carmo and her husband seem to know that their family life will soon reach its conclusion. In the last scene of the novel, in the last entry of the diary (“Sem data”), Aires enters into the Aguiares’ house through a door that stands open. Seeing, from afar, their solemn sadness, he decides not to talk to them. But his last glance and the final two sentences of the novel cast a beautiful picture of the Aires’ sadness: “Ao transpor a porta para a rua vi-lhes no rosto e na atitude uma expressão a que não acho nome certo ou claro; digo o que me pareceu. Queriam ser risonhos e mal se podiam consolar. Consolava-os a saudade de si mesmos” (219). Aires

wants to see an attempt in his friends to be smiling and serene. But what really comforts them is “a saudade de si mesmos.” I imagine that a very superficial (and slightly ungrammatical) reading would translate these final words as “their solitude,” meaning that the Aguiares would somehow find “consolation in their own solitude.” But the meaning of the Portuguese word “saudade” is more complex than what “solitudo,” its Latin origin, may suggest. Above all, “saudade” refers to the longing for a past situation that is irreversibly lost. Taking into account this more complex meaning of the word “saudade,” we may paraphrase—or indeed interpret—the final sentence of *Memorial de Aires* in the following way: “what gave them consolation was the memory of their past happiness, a happiness that they knew was forever lost.” Or in the form of an existentialist paradox: “What gave them comfort was the realization that their selves were forever amiss.” The simultaneity between the happy past remembered and the awareness of a present and future of loss gives form to the Aguiares’ pain, a form that Aires finds embodied in their appearance: “Ao fundo, à entrada do saguão, dei com os dois velhos sentados, olhando um para o outro. Aguiar estava encostado ao portal direito, com as mãos sobre os joelhos. D. Carmo, à esquerda, tinha os braços cruzados à cinta” (219). It is difficult to say what exactly we find beautiful in this image and in the form of the Aguiares’ sadness. I will not indulge in inevitably banal psychological speculations about this question. But Machado de Assis does offer his readers the possibility of enjoying as beautiful the pain of his protagonists—a possibility that, quite astonishingly, has nothing cynical because it can only be based on the reader’s identification with the protagonists’ pain.

VIII.

In writing about an author from the geographical periphery of Western culture it feels like a present-day obligation to confirm that he was (every bit!) at the intellectual and aesthetic height of European literature and thought of his time. Certainly, Machado de Assis’ *Memorial de Aires* lends itself perfectly to such an evaluation, which is unavoidably condescending. We can say, for example, that the Conselheiro Aires is a typical “second order observer,” that is, an observer who cannot help observing himself in the act of observation. Thus Aires illustrates an epistemological role as it had emerged during European Romanticism, being a part of that profound transformation in the predominant Western worldview that Michel Foucault has forever baptized as “the crisis of representation.” But if it belongs to the conquests of the second-

order observer to discover that each world representation depends on the observer's perspective and that there is an infinity of perspectives, Aires is successful in taming the complexity of such a potential observer. For he wants to trust people, he wants to see his world the way a retired diplomat is expected to see the world and, above all, he finds consolation in realizing that his own worldview tends to converge with the worldview of his friends, the Aguiares. Another badge of academic-intellectual honor that *Memorial de Aires* clearly deserves is that of a "Flaubertian modernity." Machado de Assis comes as close as any nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelist to writing a novel "based on nothing," based on a world without events and a time that seems to stand still.

But without playing the somehow tacky (hide and seek-like) game of historical "belatedness" and "anticipation," I would like to finish by suggesting that, with the specific means of a novel, *Memorial de Aires* is engaged in an intellectual problem that will surface, almost two decades later, in Martin Heidegger's 1927 *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), without finding a full conceptual development there. I am referring to a passage in paragraph 68b of *Sein und Zeit*, where Heidegger tries to unfold the concept of "Stimmung" as indicative of an important dimension of human existence. The word can be translated as "mood" or as "attunement"—the second possibility being more precise because it takes into account the meaning of the word "Stimme," that is, "voice," the root of "Stimmung." As an exemplification of what attunements are, Heidegger writes about "fear" and "anger," "hope," "joy," "enthusiasm," "serenity," and "boredom." Somehow surprisingly, he then moves on to claim that an analysis of the different attunements will provide a particularly profound understanding of the "thrownness" of human existence, namely, of its position between the "ecstatic" time dimensions of a future that holds nothing but "nothingness," and a past that, as "tradition," has always already determined what we can be in the present. "But what should different attunements have to do with 'time?'," Heidegger asks himself, trying to answer his own question by showing how each attunement is shaped by something that lies in the existential dimension of the past.²

It is from this perspective that we can read *Memorial de Aires* and *Sein und Zeit* as converging texts. *Memorial de Aires*, as I have tried to show, is not simply a novel of sadness but a novel that shows how sadness can grow into a form between the dimensions and through the movements of time. If the Aguiares gain "consolation" from "the nostalgic memory of their past happiness," this implies that their present is empty and that no expectation exists for their ful-

filled past to insert itself into the empty present. Between an existential future that can only hold nothing, a present that has become empty, and a past that is now receding from the present, time appears to move slowly, as if it was approaching a standstill. But what is only a bleak description of a state of human existence when described in philosophical terms can turn into the beautiful form of sadness when cast into literature. Sadness, no doubt, is a “Stimmung” that is most typical for old age in human life—when we have to live, increasingly, on the memories of irreversibly receding moments of happiness. Forming a strange chiasm, however, sadness is also an attunement typical of the New World—of the New World as a (post-)colonial world where the life of the center vanishes into a past that becomes more remote each time. We have long known that the tropical world is a world of sadness. Through Machado de Assis’ final novel this knowledge can become the reader’s own experience.

Notes

¹ I am quoting *Memorial de Aires* according to the critical edition established by the “Comissão Machado de Assis.”

² All the translations from the German original of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* are my own.

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