

Crônica in Fifteen Themes

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I.

I believe that reading transforms us a bit into the author being read. When I read Machado de Assis, I feel like I am the “sad scribe of trifles,” thinking the way he thought, seeing the world the way he saw it. I enjoy myself, I am transported, I learn. I am civilized. I am perplexed, I laugh, I stop and reread, I don’t understand and yet I do, I let my mind wander, I escape, I am captivated. I sigh, get dizzy, forget, compare and update, reread...

II.

When I write my *crônicas* under Machado’s inspiration, it is as if I have been relieved of all feelings and simply follow a train of thought. He transports me to the realm of reason. *Crônicas* are the fruit of pure thought. It reminds me of an old saying that goes, “For he who feels, the world is a tragedy; for he who thinks, it is a comedy.” Machado’s irony seems to emerge from a crystalline thought, completely stripped of feeling, but also free of any kind of agenda, ulterior motive, or sentimentalism, and therein lies his greatness. He was a revered man, a kind soul, noble and refined in everything that he did. He didn’t claim to change the world, he just subjected it to his commentary and irony. Or rather, he subjected it to himself. He was a thinker in whose hands irony was like a silk glove. His *crônicas* are flights of fancy. He is spirited and seems inebriated—but inebriated with thoughts.

III.

Machado found the sources for his *crônicas* in newspaper articles, and some of his columns were meant as commentaries on the happenings of a given

week. From one piece of information he went to the next, and the next, and the next ... The Orient is being demolished; in the state of Ceará, a man is buried alive; a dinner with Blest Gana; a performance of *Il Trovatore*; a slip of the tongue; the arrival in Rio de Janeiro of a group of celebrated Argentine singers; the Turkish constitution; Luís Sacchi's will; Dona Lucinda's little shoe; local festivities in the Glória church; horseracing; the Imperial census counts a seventy percent illiteracy rate; the obituaries; the anniversary of the Independence; a street brawl; the sidewalks of the Rua das Laranjeiras ... The facts themselves are trivial. They are merely the spark that ignites his flow of thoughts, a flow that becomes a whirlpool and almost reaches the point of delirium. Machado often came upon the themes for his *crônicas* during his walks through the streets of Rio de Janeiro, on trolley rides, during chats with his servant, in the gatherings at nightfall on the Rua do Ouvidor, from a thought that popped into his head, or a bout of the flu. He let his mind wander and from there his *crônicas* were born. Blessed with this freedom, he gives us a glimpse of his world-view.

IV.

But where in these irreverent *crônicas* can we find the other side of Machado, the man known as peace-loving, reserved, shy, a doting husband, an exemplary civil servant, a researcher of the somber refuges of the soul? I believe the answer lies in language. Machado de Assis writes in a disciplined, carefully constructed language that models the kind of originality and turn of phrase that he himself once preached in a letter to Joaquim Nabuco. I open a book of his *crônicas* at random:

I take up my pen with fear. Am I speaking French or Portuguese? The illustrious Brazilian Latinist Mr. Dr. Castro Lopes coined a series of neologisms that struck him as indispensable in order to do away with the French words and expressions that have infiltrated our language. Now, I have no wish other than to speak and write good Portuguese, and if I discover that what I have said up until this point leaves something to be desired, then I'll say to hell with writing and start communicating with gestures.

There is a certain circularity to each of his paragraphs, as if they were mini-*crônicas* within a *crônica*, a perfect construction. Even his sentences have a life of their own:

There are many ways to tell a story, but only one is worthwhile.

I prefer to serve them some little pastries.

Everything requires a certain refinement.

Each of his words has personality and captures the time: *espora*, *Intendência*, *égua*, *assombroso*, *fonógrafo*, *aventado*, *freguesias*, *perífrase*, *ênfase*, *pratinho*, *calembour*, *hereges*, *farmacêuticos*, *botica*, *quebra-nozes*, *chuva*, *burro*, *bond*, *rábano* ... His words have a certain flash of wit.

V.

There are people who don't know how, or forget, to scrape off the patina of humor to see what lies beneath. This explains an accusation by a friend of mine regarding some of my articles that take a light-hearted turn. "You laugh at everything," he said to me. And I responded that yes, I do laugh at everything, like the famous barber of the comedy, *de peur d'être obligé d'en pleurer*.

Without a doubt, Machado de Assis was born with his spirited verve, but perhaps he further honed this gift when, at age nineteen, he joined the magazine *Marmota* and *Petalógica*, a literary-comedic society founded by Francisco de Paula Brito "to stand up to those who lied—by lying to them." These early experiences certainly laid the foundation for his irony and gave wings to the boyish, light-hearted spirit that he never outgrew. This irony and light-heartedness made for precisely the kind of tone that suited the journalistic writing of the time, and he soon made a name for himself. As he matured, he cultivated an inquisitive spirit, increasingly incorporating reflections on the human condition and more "serious" views of the world, while polishing his language to a high sheen and acquiring an excellent erudition.

VI.

Machado's language and erudition were not the products of a formal education. In fact, he only received a rudimentary education. Hence he was an autodidact who absorbed knowledge from books and the people around him. This might explain his free-thinking and originality. His writing style emerged from, among other things, his upbringing as an orphan taken in by an aristocratic family. Other important factors were his contact with teachers

in the school where he sold sweets as well as with the books he wooed in used bookstores or in Paula Brito's bookshop. It was in this bookshop where, at a young age, he made the acquaintance of several intellectuals, poets, and writers, such as José de Alencar and Gonçalves Dias. He learned French from an oven-keeper in Madame Gallot's bakery next door. His wife, Carolina de Novais, a sophisticated and highly educated woman, influenced his readings, encouraging him to delve into the Portuguese classics and introducing him to English writers. His curious and thirsty mind absorbed everything. But the spirit blows where it wishes.

VII.

It is something of a shock that a poor boy without schooling could have achieved such greatness in one of the most difficult and complex human endeavors. He suffered due to the prejudice against his humble origins and his mixed racial background, which he always avoided talking about. He needed to make it on his talent alone. He spent his childhood and youth as an outsider. Humor involves, among other things, a sense of not belonging in the world to which it refers. It betrays an anxiety over being accepted and at the same time pride and indifference regarding that acceptance.

VIII.

Machado de Assis' career in journalism began in 1855 when, at sixteen years of age, he published poetry in the magazine *Marmota*. He later worked as an apprentice to a typographer at the National Press, as a clerk at Paula Brito's bookshop, and as a proofreader for a newspaper. Between 1855 and 1859 he worked for the newspaper *O Paraíba* in Petrópolis, and from 1858 to 1864 in the *Correio Mercantil*. In 1859, he began writing serial publications in the magazine *O Espelho*, which gave him the opportunity to perfect his style. In 1850, Quintino Bocaiúva, editor-in-chief at the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, invited him to join his staff, where Machado de Assis reported on Senate debates and wrote some theatre criticism. He stayed with this newspaper for seven years, in different sections, which allowed him to broaden his horizons. It was during this time that his *crônicas* about weekly occurrences, literary concerns, and the like began to appear. He debuted before the general public in *Diário*. The responsibility involved in broadcasting his opinion led Machado to reflect and participate in local life as well as in polemics and debates on important themes such as the Paraguay War, the abolition of slav-

ery, and even about international affairs. He also wrote for the *Semana Ilustrada*, the *Jornal das Famílias*, and the *Gazeta de Notícias*, the latter beginning in 1881 up until four years before his death in 1908. Thus, his *crônicas* are the work of an entire lifetime.

IX.

There are those who believe that Machado de Assis invented the *crônica*, along with José de Alencar, who had already begun writing his own highly successful *feuilleton* “Ao correr da pena.” Attempts at defining this distinctly Brazilian genre abound. It is not a *chronicle* in the classic sense, that is, a narration that follows a temporal sequence or that recounts important events. The Brazilian *crônica* might be defined as a form of journalism written in the first person that takes as its theme events both big and small, which are narrated and commented upon in a literary tone.

Machado de Assis wrote *crônicas* for over forty years, at times under a pseudonym such as Dr. Semana, Manassés, Malvólio, João das Regras, Job ... Of this material, the only *crônicas* published in book-form during his lifetime were the ones he selected for *Páginas recolhidas*. It was not until after his death that his *crônicas* were finally published in book-form.

X.

I can't say for sure in what year the *crônica* was invented, but it probably goes all the way back to the very first women to live next door to each other. Every evening these neighbors would sit outside and chat about their day. Most likely they would begin by complaining about the heat. One would exclaim that it was so hot that she didn't feel like eating dinner, and the other would reply that she was positively stewing in the heat. From the topic of stew, the conversation moved to the subject of another neighbor's vegetable garden, and then to the love life of said neighbor. And there you have it, it was the easiest, most natural thing in the world. And that's the origin of the *crônica*.

By imagining this simple origin for the *crônica*, Machado explains his own predilection for the genre. He declared himself unwilling or unable to write about truly important events; he preferred subjects that were much more mundane. That's why he called himself the sad scribe of trifles. For him, the *crônica* was anything but sad or heroic, much less epic or tragic.

XI.

The characters in Machado de Assis' *crônicas* appear in an almost dizzying succession. The sheer number and variety of these characters is astounding. It is as if, in a single instant, he went from one end of the world, of time, to the other. But they are all part of something bigger, an innovative, creative union. Although their appearance is dictated by the mundane events he chose to narrate, these characters represent a kind of archive of his knowledge and affections. They also reflect a sort of aesthetic selection. As always, Machado de Assis is a Midas of words who transforms everything he touches, making it his own. A quick list of some of his characters reveals to what extent they are Machadian: the prophet Abdullah; Dr. Jesuíno Martins; Columbus; Wagner; Garnier the bookseller; the novelist Ann Radcliffe; the Greek hero Achilles; the counselor Duarte de Azevedo; Mr. Hudson; the philosopher Diogenes; Eve, Moses, and Noah; Dr. Dias da Cruz; a simple, good man; Sophocles; Pontes the bullfighter; Emília Rosa, the pretend smuggler of counterfeit money; Sir Nathan Burraw, the dwarf; Lord Charendon, the historian of Cromwell's revolution; Robinson Crusoe and Sancho Panza; Victor Hugo; the homeopathic physician Dr. Tloesquelec (could he be a real person?); the noted Barão da Passagem; the illustrious Mrs. Clara Maria de Jesus, queen of the sisterhood; the poet Valentim Magalhães; the emperor Dom Pedro; Taunay and Lafayette; a ship-chandler; Del Vecchio, Mohammed, and Racine; Trossotin and Vadius; Mohammed, Talleyrand, the vicar and provincial deputy Alves dos Santos, Macário or Pantaleão, Balbino and Maximiano, Caesar and Sulla, Machiavelli, Spencer, Comte, Aristotle, Mr. Zama, Corneille...

XII.

And then there are certain Machadian themes, like the trolley. Machado de Assis always talks about riding the trolley, and I imagine him sitting there in his coat, tie, and pince-nez, watching the city go by. He talks about church bells, or about cattle, donkeys, bulls, and horses, or about the roses in his garden. He loved roses. He talks about his servant, with whom he had hilarious conversations. He talks about the Portuguese language, the police, Spiritism, swindlers, the opera, music, skeletons, pharmacies, apothecaries ...

His settings: the Royal Portuguese Reading Room, Rua do Ouvidor, Rua da Carioca, Caju cemetery, the Castelões sweetshop, the House and the Senate, the Prado Fluminense where the horse races were held; Paquetá Island, or Isle of Love; the Glória district; Tehran; Paris and London; the streets of Rio de Janeiro, including Alfândega, Uruguaiana, Gonçalves Dias, Quitanda,

Ourives, Rosário or Sete de Setembro, and Saúde; São Cristóvão; Sergipe, Ceará; Onze de Junho plaza; Gameleira in Bahia; Central Station, Greece, Niterói ... He usually didn't describe Rio because he lived the city life so intensely and knew it so well that description was unnecessary. His familiarity with the landscape transports us through the city streets, inside houses, clubs, and theatres ... His *crônicas*, just like his works of fiction, are one of the best ways to get to know nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro.

XIII.

Machado writes his *crônicas* as if he were chatting with his reader or readers, all the while turning these conversations inward, as if he were speaking to the reader within himself. And he reveals his fiery wit. At times he pretends to be submissive:

"Unfortunately, I cannot go out; the doctor forbids it. He tells me that it's too risky to leave the house in this humidity, so I'm stuck inside." It would appear that Machado has simply made up the doctor's advice on a whim, or else he's the one who doesn't want to go out.

At other times, his writing is tinged with fatalism:

"Too bad. You've waited this many years, and you can wait a few more."

He turns his irony on himself: "There I've said in twenty words what would have been better said in two." He unleashes his irony on others: "Do you know what I have here, dear reader? A pearl. You don't believe me? I expected as much. But my revenge is that as soon as you see it, you'll grab it and have it made into a shirt button, that is, if you're not married, because a pearl this large is really best suited to adorn a lady's neck."

He has a prophetic side as well, such as when he predicts the invention of a new form of energy that will bring about the earth's demise, or when he refers to the creation of a new capital of Brazil, or in a *crônica* dedicated to the twentieth century. He contemplated the future and hazarded a few guesses. But, as he liked to preach, "let us be true to our own century and to our own language."

After the death of his beloved Carolina, his *crônicas* took a somber turn. And as he grew older, his philosophical side predominated over his light-hearted side. His texts became denser, fuller, deeper.

XIV.

By writing about the most mundane of subjects on an almost daily basis, Machado de Assis became an increasingly engaged writer. His *crônicas* have extraordinary documentary value. They not only document an entire time period, they also refute those who accuse Machado of being detached from reality, distant from the world, alienated.

XV.

"Adjectives come and go; nouns stay."

Ana Miranda is one of the most important contemporary Brazilian writers. She is the author of sixteen books, including novels, poems, and others genres. Her first novel, entitled *Boca do Inferno* (*Bay of All Saints & Every Conceivable Sin*, Viking, 1991), was published in 1989, and was translated in various countries. For this book, she was awarded the *Jabuti* prize in 1990. Among other books, she has also published *Desmundo* (adapted to the cinema by Alain Fresnot); *Amrik*; and *Dias & Dias* (winner of the *Jabuti* and the Academia Brasileira de Letras de Ficção prizes for 2003). She collaborates with the magazine *Caros amigos* and writes for other magazines and newspapers as well. She was a visiting writer at Stanford University in 1998. Her literary work is registered in *Kindlers Literaturlexicon*; and in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1991 edition. Her novel *Boca do Inferno* was included in the list of the hundred best Portuguese-language novels of the twentieth century. For more information, see: www.anamirandaliteratura.hpgvip.com.br