

## Absence of Time: The Counselor's Dreams

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**Abstract.** This article aims to explore the narrative focus of Machado de Assis' last novel, suggesting that engagement with the concrete history of men goes hand in hand with the narrator's gross indifference in relation to the goings-on of the world around him. Counselor Ayres' diary may provide a clue to a better understanding of a well-known paradox in Machado's work: how can a narrator who distances himself from the world reveal it so profoundly? Lastly, might not this engagement/indifference binarism hold a key to understanding our current *interest* in Machado de Assis?

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

### 1. Introduction: divided criticism

A delicate question seems to be emerging amongst some scholars of Machado de Assis. Running the risk of simplification one might imagine that the author of *Cosme Velho* has been oscillating lately between the extremes of engagement and disengagement, as though, through different critical lenses, Machado were being divided in two: the historian and the moralist; the author who is committed to problems of his time, and the aesthete who delights in penetrating the most delicate aspects of human psychology. While it is not my intention here to outline the body of criticism on Machado de Assis—a task demanding more time and space—it seems worthwhile nonetheless to emphasize an apparent tension in the understanding of Machado's work, one that

gives rise, perhaps wrongly so, to a divided field of criticism, as though there were, in fact, these two opposing and incommunicable Machados.

Such tension, if one concedes briefly the illusion of “modules of reading,” might situate at one of the poles of criticism those commentators who in one way or another develop and radicalize the lines of reading opened decades ago by Roberto Schwarz. Of these it would be fitting to note John Gledson and Sidney Chalhoub, both of whom provoke a certain ill-ease amongst those readers who seek to cultivate an “elevated literature”—one that hovers above the dust of history, shaking out writing to remove from it the troubling marks of time.<sup>1</sup> In this module of reading, granting the differences between the authors, *history* ceases to be a mere backdrop, providing the keys that allow one to crack the code of the text, and extract from it on the one hand, the historical *motifs*, and, on the other, the very *structure* of the narrative. The reader will already see where we stand: the closer we come to understanding the narrative voice through attention to the class conflicts that rule the Brazilian social universe of the Second Empire (understood therein the discrepancies between the civilized norm and its double unreality at the periphery of the system), the closer we will come to the complexity and novelty of the analyses of Roberto Schwarz. In other words, one of the main results of this line of criticism is the emergence of a deceptive narrator, of which Brás Cubas and his “volubility” (the term chosen by John Gledson to translate “volubilidade”) are a perfect example.

On the other hand, we have authors who, while they also do not disregard history, nonetheless appear to adhere more decisively to the strategies of narrative composition, inviting the gaze to shift towards a broader perspective, seeking to map this terrain, which is the most strictly “literary” Machadian text: its references, its more or less illustrious filiations, and its less instantaneous concerns, so to speak. One can easily see why such critics are frequently accused of anachronism, hermeticism, etc. This being the largest field of criticism, it is hard to point to only a few authors. However, risking impropriety, I am reminded here of two commentators who, though quite different, both seek to examine the literary core of the text: on the one hand, Gilberto Passos offers us an admirable group of interpretations of the intertextual fabric that sustains Machado de Assis’ poetics; on the other, it is Alfredo Bosi who has come forth lately to revalorize the humanist affiliation of Brazil’s greatest writer, showing him as indebted to a certain “moralism” that is in no way moralizing but that, quite on the contrary, is characterized

by the description of the smallest actions of man in society, with the revelation of his dissimulation manifesting the powerful empire of self-interest (of class or individual) in every disinterested gesture.

The entire issue appears to lie in the relationship of the author with his time. What is curious here is that, if we distance ourselves from the artificiality of this divide amongst critics, avoiding seeing in Machado de Assis *either* the man entirely devoted to his time *or* the writer distanced from it, we will thus be able to verify, to great critical advantage, that *engagement* and *indifference* form an inseparable pairing in the prose of the inventor of Brás Cubas. In other words, it is time that we see, or verify, just how the “interest” in Machado can reveal itself exactly where it seems most inaccessible, most hidden, most ethereal. In the moments when the narrator distances himself from and lets go of the problems surrounding him, it is there precisely that we will find the sting of time, penetrating deep into the soul, all the more pained the more invisible it becomes.

## II. Reality: the narrator pulls back, time dissolves

In this essay I examine *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*, from 1908, wherein Machado de Assis seems truly bent on removing himself from his own historical time. Counselor Ayres' life, during the last gasps of the Brazilian Empire, is entirely in fact a slight suspension from the world, as though it were possible, for just a moment, to stop it and observe it without being moved.<sup>2</sup> The feeling is one of withdrawal and almost disbelief in relation to the tumult of the world, which is out of place and time from the narrator:

I am alone, completely alone. The sounds from outside, carriages, mules, people, bells and whistles, none of this has life for me. At most the clock on my wall, as it strikes the hours, seems to be saying something, but it speaks slow, very little, and mournfully. I myself, as I reread these last few lines, get the feeling that I am a gravedigger. (111)

This suspension from the world, be it in the somber and almost welcoming refuge in which Ayres hides himself away, or in the mystical ecstasy of the anchorite, suggests the desire to transcend time or the world of the century—*Oubli du monde et de tout, hormis Dieu*, in the well-known and exacting formula of Pascal (564). However, in Machado de Assis, it is music that seems to allow us also, now and then, to take leave of the world, to finally forget it.<sup>3</sup>

In *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*, Fidélia is cheered by a letter and goes to play the piano; a moment in which the notes carry far, perhaps to the distant place where her beloved is:

Seeing that she enjoyed our conversation, I did not ask her for music; it was she who, of herself, went to the piano and played a piece by some composer or other—and if Tristão did not hear it in Petropolis it was not for want of expression on the part of the pianist. Eternity is farther away, yet she has already sent fragments of her soul to that place. Music's great advantage is it speaks to the dead and the absent. (171)

Eternity, or the state of celestial glory to which the listener and the expressive instrumentalist are cast, presents us with the perfect harmony of sounds, remembering that rapture through music is also a momentary break from the world. Paradoxically, however, sounds themselves (that is the sensations roused in the human body), can take us to the greatest heights of rapture at the very moment in which we soar above and beyond the material world, approaching the ultimate and mysterious feeling of vibrations, when they become pure consonance with the soul, letting us eventually be touched by that *interior* music that is at once silence and harmony.

We are not far here from the complex musical conceptions of Saint Augustine, concerned as he was, so many centuries before Pascal, with that which the Greeks called "analogia," that is, the perfect relationship between numbers, which our dilacerated soul in its imperfection can barely achieve, except in glorious moments like the one experienced by the young pianist from Rio: "*a eternidade é mais longe, e ela já lá mandou outros pedaços da alma*," in the original.

A reader of Saint Augustine, and of the same Pascal who fascinated Machado de Assis, Simone Weil, in her desperate resistance, suggests that God remains in infinity, at the greatest possible distance from us, leaving us no more than the lacerating lack of harmony, impeded by that very distance which separates us from Him. There is, however, a fleeting instant in which this laceration is overcome, thanks to music:

Dieu [...] a créé des êtres capables d'amour à toutes les distances possibles. Lui-même est allé, parce que nul autre ne pouvait le faire, à la distance maximum, la distance infinie. Cette distance infinie entre Dieu et Dieu, déchirement suprême, douleur dont aucune autre n'approche, merveille de l'amour, c'est la crucifixion.

Rien ne peut être plus loin de Dieu que ce qui a été fait malédiction. Ce déchirement par-dessus lequel l'amour suprême met le lien de la suprême union résonne perpétuellement à travers l'univers, au fond du silence, comme deux notes séparées et fondues, comme une harmonie pure et déchirante. C'est cela la Parole de Dieu. La création tout entière n'en est que la vibration. Quand la musique humaine dans sa plus grande pureté nous perce l'âme, c'est cela que nous entendons à travers elle. Quand nous avons appris à entendre le silence, c'est cela que nous saisissons, plus distinctement, à travers lui. (697)

But where ought we to seek the sublime proportions of this mystical and analogical song? Certainly not in the sounds themselves, since in the Augustinian register the senses of this world, when unaided by the tormented exercise of the spirit, are an unspeakable villainy. But what music might this be that is capable of elevating the soul, carrying it above the mountains to communicate with the absent and deceased? A music, suggests the Counselor, that is far-reaching, in an infinite time in which the soul vanishes, like those sounds that fade and vanish we know not whereto. Vibrations that advance, advance, advance, to be lost in infinity, and finally become silence.

*A silentio* ... From the complete absence of vibrations, as though miraculously, will come meaning. Meaning is hidden or revealed in the exact analogies that guide song. There is thus a moment in which music simply signifies, although we are left without so much as a vibration. A moment in which only the relationship between numbers remains, when music can be only an image—of the universe, or of the soul. Pure ideal.

Let us listen further to the testament of that same fictitious Ayres, in a famous passage from *Esau and Jacob*, when Flora goes to the piano, the day after the fall of the Emperor:

Flora was not averse to pity or to hope, as you know. But she could not identify with her parents' agitation, and she took refuge with her piano and her music. She chose I don't know what sonata. That was enough to remove her from the present. Music had for her the advantage of not being present, past, or future. It was something outside of time and of space, a pure ideal. When she stopped, she heard loose phrases from her father or her mother: "But how was it that ..." "Everything was done secretly ..." "Was there bloodshed?" Occasionally one of them would make a gesture, but she did not see the gestures. Her father, his soul limping, talked a lot and incoherently. Her mother brought another kind of vigor to the conversation.



She would remain silent for a few minutes, as if she were thinking, unlike her husband who, when he was silent, would scratch his head, wring his hands, or sigh, when he did not shake his fist at the ceiling.

La, la, do, re, sol, re, re, la, sang the piano of their daughter, with these or other notes, but they were notes that rang to flee from humanity and its discord.

One can also find in Flora's sonata a kind of harmony with the present moment. There was no definitive government. The soul of the young woman was in tune with that first light of dawn or last glow of sunset—as you wish—in which nothing is so clear or so dark that it invites one to leave one's bed or light the candles. At most, there would be a provisional government. Flora did not understand forms or names. The sonata brought the feeling of absolute lack of government, the anarchy of primitive innocence in that corner of paradise which man lost because of his disobedience and one day will regain, when perfection brings the eternal and only order. Then there will be no progress or regression, but stability. Abraham's bosom will enfold all things and persons, and life will be a clear sky. That is what the keys told her without words, re, re, la, sol, la, la, do ... (154-155)

The present, mere instant that it is, dissolves in an ideal delight, pouring out the girl's soul into the line of time, to annul it in the end. But it is clear that Machado de Assis cannot be understood merely in terms of delight, or the sublime of the senses.

Flora and Fidélia, exceptional creatures that they are, achieve this passage to and from the "eternity [that] is far away," but the noises in this case do not seem casual or without import. A few scattered phrases, in counterpoint to the melody, which steals the soul of the girl from the salon, and one ought to pay them some attention: "but how is it that [...]" "everything was done secretly ...," "was there bloodshed?"

Outside, beyond the cozy floral nook, the machine of the world is at work, and it cannot be understood with musical notes. In fact, the reader of crafty Ayres' account—here writing in the narrative form—is invited to recompose the picture of these characters precisely in the contrast between the rapture, when the music tends towards "pure ideal," and the sounds, in which part of the secret of history is hidden. Before this scene, one can but let oneself be rapt—this is the call of the notes—and pay attention to those expressions that are rather out of place.

In light of the Republic that declares itself on the horizon, and the Empire that is fading into oblivion, the three questions, "loose phrases," gain special

dimension if analyzed with care. The element of surprise is made quite clear (“But how was it that ...”), suggesting possibly some confusion about a change that, as we know from the narrative, might be resumed in the changing of signs (“troca das tabuletas”).<sup>4</sup> To the extent that everything might have been done, who knows, “secretly.” And the question—“was there bloodshed?”—reveals, perhaps more than the supposedly bloodless façade of Brazilian institutional history, the surprise of those characters faced with a change that indeed lacks bloodshed, that most vital element of revolutions, capable of making them at once both terrible and sublime.

“Flora did not understand forms or names.” Return, Progress, Republic, Empire, liberals & conservatives, *luzias*, *squaremas* ... . There are a number of ways to show the emptiness of names, but perhaps none is more efficient than painting a picture in which the vanity of passions, expressed in the time of men, reveals itself in its opposite: the infinity and rapture of Flora and Fidélia’s experience at the piano.

The significant silence is then the moment of being pulled up out of the present, which can, paradoxically, bring the bustle of the world, now by contrast more audible than ever, closer to the reader. But it is from this tension, or this sensation of a unique and eternal order, that a double meaning may be born, one of the world that has been left and of the music that is leaving the world.

Why emphasize this silence?

*A silentio* ... . Augustine, in Borges’ view, was perturbed by the unusual spectacle of master Ambrosius reading in silence (Mammì 349). This was the beginning, in these twilight hours of “ancient culture,” of an intimist reading that would seek the interior prosody, or that which only an internalized perception would be capable of perceiving and receiving.

Music without sound ... . This is the limit that, like a mystic plethora, allows a lost harmony to be achieved, that same harmony that “one day [man] will regain.” But a song that is not carried through time might not be audible except by this complex combination of perceptions that have transcended the senses, operating in an ethereal realm, that is, in a place that is no place. This does not however concern a void, because even Augustinian poetics are anchored precisely in the mysterious auscultation of a *homo interior* (Augustine), able to reveal itself, in divine love, through the voiceless song that Flora or Fidélia’s unpretentious fingering seems to announce. Such characters of Machado de Assis find themselves, in the serene ecstasy of those at the piano, before this “clear sky,” this welcoming and harmonious bosom

of Abraham. This is the moment in which meaning is devoid of the sensory, when the vibrations appear to have reached that limit at which they grow still, undetectable now, able to be confused with the exact harmonies of the Idea: "*Idealidade pura*," in the words of the narrator.

To transcend the sensory is to avoid time, a recourse frequently found in Machado's prose, though here the comforting welcome of the divine bosom, in the moment of glorious "stability," seems definitively impossible, or rather, it seems to reveal itself very fleetingly, like a flash, here and there, as in these two moments, in which Flora and Fidélia go to the piano. In Saint Augustine, however, the passage to and from the world is the inescapable torment of the spirit, although a horizon of bliss also allows itself to be glimpsed in the experience of silent prayer or music without sounds. The difference, if there is one, is in the tone. Machado works with noises, and in his prose the metaphysics of these ineffable harmonies seems to serve precisely to show that which is not harmonious, the base and inescapable ("*vai vassouras!*") noise of the world.<sup>5</sup> It is as if Ayres, toying perilously with the eternal, at the close of the century, wanted precisely to make time stand still. It is as though, threatening to leave this world, hearing the silent melodies of the beyond, he were becoming a special listener, who, fleeing from time, could sound it out like no one else.

This detachment from time—by which the movement of things and of society is measured—may be the affirmation of faith in the power of the spirit, in everything beyond the world and its movements. In the case of Machado de Assis, however, detachment is the narrative trick that allows the writer's spirit to move, with agility and grace, across time. A radically *permissive* strategy that criticism has tried to relate, in rich detail, to the intertextual complexity of Machado's two last novels (see Passos, *As Sugestões do Conselheiro*).

The *permissiveness* of this narrator can be taken further still. Free from the fetters of the century, he is able to cast a keen eye when the present is the only thing that exists, indelibly wounding the sight and hearing of the observer. We are, however, still within that game of contrasts, when the simulation of the eternal allows one to understand and feel the vanity of human history, that is, the vanity of one's very being in time. But this calls for an abrupt change in registers, because doubt about the present time (which is nothing if not the pure instant from which we are fleeing), is substituted by the distressing certainty that the present is all we have left. In fact, it is in the present that time itself looms over us, as sufficient cause for the destruction of the world and men.



Thus we launch ourselves, from the heights of metaphysics, to the skeptical observation of the physicality of the passions of men, who move about in the historical moment. This takes us to another plane wherein Machado is a master. Let us accompany him briefly.

### III. Dream: the narrator approaches, time condenses

The “great lecher” (“o grande lascivo”) is how Augusto Meyer referred to Machado de Assis (37). Note that the key lies in the moralism of La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère, harsh observers of human nature. The idea here is not to return to the *grand siècle* and the chiaroscuro of classical portraits, so able as they are to penetrate the masks of men who frequented the salons, playing with perspectives, in order to compose an almost deliquescent image of human virtues. Here it is merely fitting to observe the slight movement of a keen eye that takes refuge, so it seems, on the edge of time, that is, on the verge of the eternal.

Dreams, woven by *sui generis* poetics, can facilitate the effect of contrast and the sensation of temporal confusion, playing with registers that are as different as the ecstasy of ideal passion that makes us take leave of the present, and the noise of the street that also makes us aware of it:

This morning, as I was thinking about the person who is supposed to have been smitten by the widow, the widow came to see me, to consult me as to whether she should restore him to health or no. I found her in my living room, dressed in the usual black with white trimmings. I asked her to sit down on the settee, seated myself in the chair close by, and waited for her to speak.

“Counselor,” said she, half laughing, half serious, “what do you think I should do? Marry or remain a widow?”

“Neither the one nor the other.”

“Don’t make fun of me, counselor.”

“I am not making fun of you, my dear lady. Widowhood is not suitable for you, with your fresh green youth. Marriage, yes, but to whom? unless you mean to me?”

“You are the very one I had in mind.”

I took her hands, and my eyes sank into hers and hers into mine; mine went so deep that they bored through her forehead, through the back of her neck, through the back of the settee, through the wall, and came to rest on the face of my servant, the only person in my bedroom, where I was lying in bed. In the street rang out the shrill voice of almost every morning: “Brooms for sale! Dusters!”

I understood that it was a dream, and I found it amusing. The street-cries moved on; meanwhile my servant José excused himself for entering but it was past nine o'clock, close to ten. I went to my ablutions, to my coffee, to my morning papers [...]. (50-51)

Although the fact that this is a dream is only made apparent at the end of this excerpt, an oneiric tone is set from the very outset, with the strangely indiscreet—and thus titillating—morning visit of the widow, who is inexplicably at ease when one takes into account the relationships and etiquette that dictated conversation and comportment during the period. A complex social universe, replete with tacit rules and prompts, underlies this reverie that, moreover, comes to an end in the servile face of the valet. The rapture of the dream is shattered by the repeated cry of the hawkers in the street (“Brooms for sale!”), to the reader’s amusement. But the cheerful appearance of the scene conceals the acuteness of the gaze with which we too, as readers/listeners/spectators, penetrate that narrative environment, established in the brutal contrast of social inequalities. The sting of work, after all, is a most important element in Machado’s prose, more deeply wounding the more discreet it is, tempered by humor or the oneiric poetics in question. In the same *Memorial*, Ayres’ moralism had already been expressed in a small jewel of an observation: “poetry may not be necessary to ones’ morals but it can lend them charm” (27).

One need understand the meaning of this at once gracious and charming “moralism” that belongs to the *moralistes* La Rochefoucauld and Pascal, so different from one another and yet both profoundly Augustinian: the former in the somber picture painted by his maxims, and in the belief, ingrained in Jansenists, in the falsity of human virtues and the domain of self love in this fallen world; the latter in the chiaroscuro effect that unmasks the mundane word, revealing its precariousness, suspending us, humans, between hope and despair in a moment that is at once fatal and vivifying.

The gaze may in fact be, in this sense, that of a moralist, a look capable of penetrating and analyzing the passions at work in the body but incapable of crossing untouched into the harsh reality of work. We join Ayres in ravaging the diaphanous body of the delightful widow (in an overwhelmingly sensual move), but our eyes come to rest upon the face of the valet, “my servant,” devoid of adjectives, the only person really in that alcove. The harshness of this scene is belied by the puerile charm of the dream, as it is discov-

ered to be in the end. Everything then returns to normal: the valet excuses himself, servile and ever close at hand (“my servant José”—“*o meu José*,” in the original Portuguese), and suffering is forgotten, giving way to the idle and aristocratic habits of the retired diplomat: ablutions, the morning coffee, newspapers . . . . Suffering has been forgotten, swallowed up by the scene, though the wound it has opened cannot be forgotten instantaneously. Only a miracle would be capable of that.

But we still have a dream to analyze, a rare and extreme dream.<sup>6</sup> Let us listen to it and to its preamble:

It seems I have acquired from the Aguiars a taste for children, or a fondness for them, which is a more elegant expression.<sup>7</sup> Walking just now along the Rua da Gloria, I came upon seven children, boys and girls, of various size, who went abreast, hand in hand, in a line. Their age, their laughter and liveliness drew my attention and I stopped on the sidewalk to watch them. They were all so full of grace and seemed such friends that I began to laugh with pleasure. The story would have ended there, had it not been for what one of them said—a little girl who saw me as I stood laughing and said to her companions, “Look at that big boy laughing and smiling at us.”

The words showed me what a child’s eyes are. Me, with this great white mustache and gray hair, they called me a big boy! Most likely they give this name to a person’s height without asking for his birth certificate.

I let the children go by as I made the reflection. They went, jumping, stopping, pulling to the right and to the left, sometimes breaking the line, then joining hands again. I do not know where they separated and scattered. I do know that after ten minutes I saw nothing of them; but I saw other children, alone or in pairs. Some of them carried bundles or baskets that pressed down on their heads or were heavy upon their backs. They had begun to work at a time when the others had not yet left off laughing. Perhaps it is due to having carried nothing in childhood that I now have the boyish aspect that the other children saw in me. No, no, it was not that. Each age gives its own aspect to things. Childhood naturally sees “green.” These children, too, if I laughed, might find that “the big boy was laughing and smiling at them.” But I went along in serious mood, thinking—perhaps pitying their weariness. They, not seeing that my white hair ought to have appeared black to them, said nothing; they went silently on their way, and I on mine.

When I arrived home I found my servant José at the front door. He said he was there to wait for me.

"For what reason?"

"No reason; I just came down here to wait for Your Excellency."

It was a lie; he had come down to relax his legs in the street, or to watch the maid servants of the neighborhood go by, they too being in need of relaxation; but, as he is adroit, clever, polite, serious, attentive to duty—all the talents and virtues in short—he preferred lying like a gentleman to admitting the truth. And I, in gentlemanly style, forgave him and went to take a nap before dinner.

It was a short nap, some twenty minutes, just enough to dream that all the children of the world—with burdens or without them—made a great circle around me and danced a dance that was so joyous that I almost burst with laughter. They all spoke of "this big boy who laughs so much." I woke up hungry, bathed, dressed, and came first to write this. Now I am going to have dinner. Later I will probably go to Flamengo. (98-100)

*Le présent d'ordinaire nous blesse*, said Pascal (337). After such words, what further commentaries can be made? I ask, however, the reader's indulgence, for textual criticism calls for such commentaries. Ah, well.

It does not seem that the "legacy of our misery," in the words of the deceased Brás, can be understood alone, without some sort of counterbalance. Just as there is no Jansenism without God,<sup>8</sup> there can be no human misery without joy. Misery, if we are to believe Pascal, is the paradoxical source of human greatness. And Machado, according to his conversation with his old friend Joaquim Nabuco, did not read the *Pensées* for mere entertainment! (Assis, "Crítica" 939).

But if, in fact, there is a Jansenist, Augustinian foundation that accounts for the pessimism of Brás Cubas' creator, one cannot understand it without, precisely, that "stability" and "perfection" that suggest, after all, that this life of ours is no more than the constant and radical *lack* of something that went beyond and remained there, lost in an ideal time or space. The dream is still, to all intents and purposes, the space for the manifestation of that which we desire and have lost.

I maintain, nonetheless, that Machado de Assis establishes himself in the realm of *time*, and his prose can be most informative. Through his narrator, those first and neatly aligned children that he in fact *saw*, give him cause for laughter that would soon be lost in the cruel vision of the child-workers. The suffering of child labor, which continues to pain us today, is all the more poignant for being revealed in its opposite, that is, in the harmonious anarchy

of the original line of children, breaking apart and coming together again in juvenile merriment, pure innocence, before the captivated eyes of the old man.

This is the very condition of the Aguiars, a couple who wants what belongs to them without really being theirs, who seeks something that distances itself and disappears in the very moment in which it seems to have been won. Their false children depart, leaving them with nothing, or almost nothing, a nothingness that, nevertheless, consumes them, in the melancholy of the final scene of *Memorial*.

It would not be by chance if the happy and innocent children, untouched yet by work, were to mistake the age—the *time*—of the narrator, while the others, without the “grace” of this first group, are silent, because he himself grew quiet before them, unable to muster a smile. To a commiserative counselor (“pitying their weakness”) the scene is disconcerting, becoming painful and awkward. So much so that, in a rarely seen extreme, the narrator says not what he sees and which *is* (a moralist register), but that which *ought* to be (a prescriptive, ethical register): “They, not seeing that my hair *ought to have* appeared black to them, said nothing; they went silently on their way, and I on mine” (emphasis added). Immediately thereafter, the familiar register returns, immersing the reader in the domestic universe of a certain class, at a certain point in Brazilian history, full of meanings, with the deftness of a servant who quite brilliantly performs the elements of his own subordination (“adroit, clever, polite, serious, attentive to duty”). These are the *political dialogues* in Machado de Assis (Chalhoub, “Dependents Play Chess”).

Next comes twenty minutes of sleep, the ending to what may be the most moving scene of the book,<sup>9</sup> when an original indistinction (“all the children of the world—with burdens or without them”) paves the way for the shared merriment (“made a great circle around me and danced a dance that was so joyous that I almost burst with laughter”) that, if one examines it closely, is imbued with religious meaning. There is so much “grace” in this scene that ends, as if miraculously, with Ayres himself, a deacon, becoming a “big boy” (“*este moço que ria tanto*,” in the original).

But one must awaken, fall from and cast aside this state of rapture. This is the moment when time, with its signs and rhythm, once again comes to the fore: “I woke up hungry, bathed, dressed, and came first to write this. Now I am going to have dinner. Later I will probably go to Flamengo.” A chain of prosaic events once more thrusts the old man into the idle routine of the wealthy, picking up the threads of the story and allowing the intrigue to continue, the plot to resume.



The wound was opened, and its only salve is the miracle of the dream. All it would take, however, to make the pain return would be for time (history) to enter on the scene again. In contrast to the levity of that primitive circling and the beauty of that first string of children are the heavy burdens of child labor, when the smile is consumed, giving way to the infinite, perplexed meditation of the narrator. Perplexed: from the Latin, that which *receives a blow*.

The final stroke then of irony from Ayres/Machado: "Perhaps it is due to having carried nothing in childhood that I now have the boyish aspect that the other children saw in me" ("*Dar-se-á que a não ter carregado nada na meninice devo eu o aspecto de 'moço' que as primeiras me acharam agora?*," in the original).

Before the shared merriment came the mutual pain of exclusion. But not even the final grace of the easy life of this character(?) can overcome the violence of the past and present scene, which man is still able to see and feel, in his fellow being. As in Pascal, greatness is born of misery.

#### IV. Conclusion: Machado de Assis, a moralist?

I feel it quite justifiable, although it might seem somewhat eccentric, to adopt a critical stance that looks to such distant authors as Pascal or even Augustine in the formation of Machado's literature. After all, they can teach us to listen to the silence upon which rests the harmony of Flora and Fidélia at the piano. Without such harmony, the noise of the world—figuratively speaking, the concrete history of man—would perhaps become less perceptible, or less audible. Of course, when heard from the mountaintop, the tumult of the city may be heard with some disdain, but also with a certain amount of fascination.

Complete disdain is only possible in those who have distanced themselves too much from the world, cutting themselves off from the sensory, reaching the blazing realm of ideas, moral judgments being suspended. In this realm, which is the limit of thought, everything becomes comprehensible: "*par l'espace l'univers me comprend et m'engloutit comme un point, par la pensée je le comprends*" (Pascal 351). Everything is comprehended in this privileged analysis, which is the moralist exercise *par excellence*.

It concerns a true ascesis, a sort of refuge exemplarily simulated by Machado de Assis, who acts through his refined and disinterested character Counselor Ayres. The affectation of this disinterest must, however, be hidden in order for the naturally eclipsed figure of the memoirist to appear verisimilar. Thus, a narrator is created who fades into the rarified space of writing.<sup>10</sup> An "apprentice of the deceased" ("*aprendiz de morto*"), as José Paulo Paes called him.

Shifting our focus, to boldly employ an illustrious analysis, we might have before us the formidable “*style de l’absence*,” definitive of a literature that gives itself over to pure description, the literature of the *honnête homme*:

Si l’écriture est vraiment neutre, si le langage, au lieu d’être un acte encombrant et indomptable, parvient à l’état d’une équation pure, n’ayant pas plus d’épaisseur qu’une algèbre en face du creux de l’homme, alors la Littérature est vaincue, la problématique humaine est découverte et livrée sans couleur, l’écrivain est sans retour un honnête homme. (Barthes 60-61)

Perhaps Ayres is testing the limit of this language-equation, not by chance in the fragmentary form of a diary, at a perilous standstill confronting the abyss that fascinates the author: silence before the human void.

It is a moralist literature that, being thus, casts a critical eye that hides itself in the fringes of time. So often the figure of the moralist is paired with that of the anchorite, and it is no coincidence then that Ayres hides away from the tumult of the world, visiting it as though he was not entirely there, at least not with the same passions and dissimulations of men. This is the supreme dissimulation of the moralists, a finely and dangerously wielded weapon. Supreme dissimulation because it is all no more than a carefully crafted structure of a discursive web in which we are caught, capable of holding our gaze at points specifically chosen by the narrator, positioned strategically in the interstices between the words and gestures of the characters, wherein their true interests and desires are kept hidden because they are belittling.

But let us not make Machado more of a nihilist than he is. In fact, one ought to ask if there really is such a demon whispering in his ear. He who uses the term “moralist,” keeping true to the etymology, speaks of the actions of humans and their meaning, of that which hides itself, in the end, beneath the *morals* of words and gestures.

Nor ought one merely suggest the redemption of some sort of *ethic* in Machado’s work, or of his own belief in man and human sympathy, the latter being enfeebled by the torpor of a pernicious discourse—the discourse of a moralist. Likewise, we ought not imagine that a certain sector of recent criticism is focused merely on redeeming the “velho bruxo” from the webs of pessimism, creating a Machado de Assis who is all-believing in man and his affects. What is interesting is that the critical search for the veracity (more so even than the verisimilitude) of the characters, by means of a careful auscultation

tion of the narrative voice, seeking its focus, extends questions of meaning that may, in fact, reveal the gaze and the hope of people who are almost real. At the same time, this very gaze unveils the historical mechanisms of social exploitation and representation (Bosi, "Machado de Assis and O Teatro Político").

It seems to me that, just as one could never understand La Rochefoucauld or Pascal without considering their time, Machado de Assis also demands a reading that takes into account the historical aspects that inform and shape his prose, in a game of hiding and revealing through which the (hi)story itself is told.<sup>11</sup> But, as in the case of the French moralists, it may only be possible to understand him, as I have suggested, if we allow distinct gazes to cross on the page, falling at times on the singular, at times on the universal, on the instant (man in his time), or on the eternal (simply, "man"). Only in this way, I believe, can we recuperate the history from Machado de Assis' text, a text that is, after all, an interwoven mesh of dialogues with his time, but also with the literature of all times.

But in the end the historians may be right. It is still the urgency of time that gives birth to writing: music has done no more than make us aware of the meaning and importance of seemingly loose phrases that are in fact well tethered in the fabric of history, the Republic, and its vain promises; the impassioned oneiric gaze in turn fell upon the harsh reality of exploitation and domination in a world in which work sustains the fatuous happiness, full of meanings though it might be, of Rio's salons. Therein lies the rub of Machado: the dismay of the narrator, regardless of how many masks hide it, rests in the fatuousness of politics, in its inability to respond to men and their needs. Meanwhile, the collapse of politics gives rise to political strategies that are the base of social relations, strategies that are hidden in the words and gestures of men, be they rich or poor, masters or subjects. This is Machado de Assis' field of vision, and it is a moralist's field of vision.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is curious that the insistent provocation of Chalhoub, in his *Machado de Assis, Historiador*, to identify Machado as a "historian" meets with as much disaffection as misunderstanding, because the richness of a study such as his, engaged as it is with the quality of the text, that is, with its specificity as a non-"literary" text, simply or specifically as a "Machadian" one, is not always understood. However, I cannot help but return the reproach against Sidney himself, to whom, if I am not mistaken, many of the efforts of "literary" criticism might seem pure flights of fancy—which condemns him, if I am right again, to not understanding the specificity of this very criticism in its variety and complexity.

<sup>2</sup> I am returning here to a line of thought opened in a previous text (in my essay “Um Sonho Machadoiano”), in which I discussed precisely this distancing from the world as an efficient simulation of the disengagement of Machado’s narrator through a process of hiding his interests and sympathies in order to reveal them on rare and fleeting occasions, as in the dream of Counselor Ayres, analyzed here. In that essay, however, I was seeking to explore what seems to me to be a possible and plausible dialogue between Machado de Assis and certain musical conceptions that hark back at least to Saint Augustine. To anyone interested in such ethereal relationships, I strongly recommend reading that text, whose recomposition in this new essay, hopefully clearer than the last, would not have been possible without my dialogue with students in an undergraduate course on Machado de Assis, taught at Princeton in Spring 2003.

<sup>3</sup> An informative study of music in Machado de Assis can be found in Carlos Wehrs’ book. My thanks to Francisco Foot Hardman for this most useful suggestion.

<sup>4</sup> I am referring here to chapter XLIX of *Esau and Jacob*, in which the sign of the “Imperial Patisserie” had to be changed once the Republic was finally established.

<sup>5</sup> The reference to the broom vendors, who will appear later in the text, gave rise to a well-known observation by John Gledson, for whom the presence of the vendor’s cry (“Brooms for sale!” — “Vai Vassouras!” in the original) in *Counselor Ayres? Memorial*, would have been a cryptic reference to the crisis being suffered by the coffee plantation region of the Paraíba valley (whose capital city was called Vassouras), near Rio de Janeiro. These plantations were a traditional source of prosperity for an elite whose means of wealth were being drastically altered at the end of the Brazilian Empire (Gledson 219).

<sup>6</sup> As Bosi suggests: “pelo meio reconhecemos o perfeito diplomata; mas é pelos extremos, pelos raros extremos, que vislumbramos o homem” (*Machado de Assis* 143).

<sup>7</sup> There is clearly a problem with Caldwell’s translation at this point. The original reads: “Parece que a gente Aguiar me vai pegando o gosto de filhos, ou a saudade deles, que é expressão mui engraçada” (1148).

<sup>8</sup> The bizarre expression is from Afrânio Coutinho, in his study on the influence of Pascal on Machado de Assis’ work. It recalls the key criticism (the “laicized Jansenism”) that would mark Jean Lafond’s reading of La Rochefoucauld.

<sup>9</sup> In a fitting sentence, Afrânio Coutinho references the scene: “um momenteo a razão cedeu. Faz lembrar aquela lágrima de La Rochefoucauld, certa vez em face de um ato de grandeza da alma, e que Sainte-Beuve chamou de uma homenagem muda rendida à natureza humana, por quem não tinha sido generoso para como ela” (140).

<sup>10</sup> This lends the text a most interesting level of vagueness, since the act of writing comes from a narrator who it seems, at least, breaks the “classic” pact of literature, which presupposes that meaning is revealed at the end of reading. In fact, Ayres is not at all far from these moments in which the inscription of the narrative intent fights artificially against the loss of the story’s meaning—a “danger” surrounding any text written in the form of a diary. But this vibration—between what the narrator supposedly wishes to say and what he in fact says—is the source of much of the force of the narration, which, in turn, finds in the paper a surface upon which to record a discourse that is in itself vague, unable to fully express the meaning of what it says, as if the text itself were at once tying and untying itself, like that line of children about which Counselor Ayres dreams. I am borrowing here, quite freely, from Abel Barros’ interesting analysis of the legibility of *Dom Casmurro*. For the development of a future study I would also like to note the idea of the *bet* (the opening scene of Machado de Assis’ last novel) as representative of this impossibility of knowing, *a priori*, the end results of the course of writing. It is, however, curious that the most recent English translation of *Memorial de Aires*, which I chose not to use here, gives it the title of *The Wager*.

<sup>11</sup> Referring to the voices of the subordinates, and to the dissimulation operated by the discourse when it attempts to carve out spaces of freedom in a paternalist society, Sidney Chalhoub

reminds us of characters such as Helena, Luís Garcia, and Capitu, all of whom “reaffirm cultural and political difference while engaging in the rituals of seigneurial domination. It was indeed a dangerous art form that ratified paternalist ideology in appearance even when undermining it. An art of survival conceived amidst tyranny and violence, exercised in the spheres designed and controlled by class antagonists, such political practices of dependent people allowed for the achievement of ends—otherwise unattainable—through the active manipulation of acts and symbols associated with their own subordination. It was the production of a text, a countertext, revealed between the lines (but not to any observer), in the supposedly naïve joke or witty remark, in the ambiguity of words, the ambivalence of intentions. Such was, I think, the art of political dialogues in Machado de Assis” (“Dependents Play Chess” 56).

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