

The Place of Machado de Assis in the Present

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Translated by Andrew Jager

Abstract. In this paper it is argued that Machado de Assis was not just a critic of the “Brazilian elite,” as the above-mentioned analysts seem to believe, but rather a critic of humanity, a critic of human nature. This is his legacy. This article suggests that it is our duty to demonstrate the richness and relevance of Machado’s work to our own contemporary circumstances.

I have always found that one of the things lacking in the work on Machado de Assis was a biography done in a more modern style, one that could combine both narrative and analysis and that would not create an impression of Machado as a tedious and outdated character. Over the ten years in which I researched and accumulated material on Machado’s life, work, and the era of his production, I became ever more convinced of this necessity. After all, for many Brazilians—who are accustomed to having to read Machado as a school requirement with no assistance, save that of historical dates and footnotes—the impression is that the shortcoming of his works is exactly their tedious and outdated nature. It came as a surprise to me that important writers and critics also classified him in these terms. Mario de Andrade, the author of *Macunaíma* and the central ideologue of Brazilian Modernism, said that Machado wrote with “his back turned to Brazil.” In fact, it was not merely an isolated few who thought of Machado in these terms.

The main objective of my biography, *Machado de Assis—Um Gênio Brasileiro* (*Machado de Assis—A Brazilian Genius*, Imprensa Oficial, 2005), therefore became to demonstrate the richness and relevance of Machado’s work to our own contemporary circumstances. This richness and relevance is inti-

mately related to the way in which Machado observed his era and surroundings. In now classic biographies, such as those by Lúcia Miguel Pereira and Raimundo Magalhães Jr., the idea of Machado (or “Machadinho” [“little Machado”], as Lúcia Miguel Pereira refers to him at every opportunity) as floating above his time and society and writing from an ivory tower is constantly reinforced. My challenge was to show the opposite—without, however, forgetting that Machado’s work transcended his time and cannot be mechanically explained by an exploration of his life. While those classic biographies contained large amounts of relevant material, I wanted to demonstrate Machado’s place in his own time and the importance of his work to the present.

I spent more than a year composing the book and when I finished it, I felt the numbness that comes with a finished obligation, or better to say, of a finished labor of love. The feeling of transporting myself to the world of nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro was intense and immensely worth it. Once again I found that the time of the monarchy and the transition to a republic were far from stable and monotonous, to the contrary of what is taught in schools and written in newspapers. Brazil was in a *sui generis* condition as the only kingdom in South America, a situation that was in part preserved due to the transfer of the Portuguese court to Rio de Janeiro in 1808. Political and intellectual debate was bitterly incited between republicans and loyalists, especially after the War of Paraguay (1864-1870), while D. Pedro II postponed the abolition of slavery (Brazil of course was the last country in the Americas to achieve abolition). This situation tormented loyalist abolitionists like Machado and his dear friend Joaquim Nabuco, who dreamed of the Third Kingdom of Princess Isabel. Further, Rio underwent rapid transformations: at the time of Machado’s birth, there was no sewage system and lighting was done by oil lamp; in his lifetime he witnessed the diffusion of photography and print technology, the invention of the telegraph and the electric light, the streetcar, cinema, and even automobiles. Machado was also shocked by the series of actions that followed the republican *colp*, which perplexed him so greatly that he remained silent for two years as a result.

All this agitation conflicted with stories about the Second Kingdom and Machado de Assis. This also sheds light on several questions raised in Machado’s work that ironically treat the rhetoric of the debate between conservatives and liberals, for example, as he was aware that a transfer of power rarely alters the structure—a fact that Brazilian society lives with even today. Machado also placed himself at a midpoint in the debate incited as a result of Brazilian writers

adopting the naturalism of Émile Zola and Eça de Queiroz. Machado defended a form of Naturalism that maintained the lessons of Romanticism and concentrated on the interior lives of characters, as opposed to merely external signs. Other characteristics of his style—such as the tone of conversations, the use of autonomous episodes, the rhythm created by short chapters—can also be linked to his experience as a journalist, including his work for women magazines.

Another reason to connect Machado to his time was the common understanding of certain terms and concepts in the day, such as epilepsy (even more confused with mental illness than it is today) and Positivism—which was curiously adapted in Brazil and not merely an adoption of Auguste Comte's philosophy. Another example is that "melancholy" was not simply a state of sadness or depression, as it is currently understood; the word was also used to describe someone who was unable to "elevate one's soul to God." This is a theme—religion—that my research on Machado's life has shown to be more important than generally thought. Machado was so critical of Catholicism that he refused to accept a priest's anointing—this is a point that I insisted on using to open my first chapter. Actually, other biographies make this gesture seem to be conventional, while in fact it was very rare in those times. From this point is derived the underestimation of the influence of the satirical illuminations of Diderot and Voltaire on his short stories and novels, beginning with *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*.

Apparently, my biography achieved its goal. A common opinion in reviews was that the book explored Machado more deeply in his time and city, bringing to the realm of biography what Raymundo Faoro, Roberto Schwarz, and John Gledson have contributed in their analyses published in recent decades. However, few have explored specific points, such as those I have cited here, especially Machado's aversion to religion. Some have pointed out that I interchange interpretations of important texts: the final sentence of *Brás Cubas* (where, instead of recognizing human pettiness, we find the "deceased author's" final gesture of arrogance, stating his preference not to have had children, as this would have meant he would not have been saved by his anti-hypochondriac plaster); Bentinho's attraction to Escobar (which he transmits to Capitu in a certain way); and some references to the works of the first phase (in which we see "sprouts" of the ambiguous and meditative style that would appear after 1880). Reviews should be more pragmatic.

Also, a few commentators noted that by forcing Machado to be analyzed in his own time, I attempted to return him to a higher level, much like a sub-

merged ball coming out of the water. Despite his status as a public servant and faithful husband of 35 years, and the shame he felt from his crises and absences caused by epilepsy, Machado intensely experienced cultural and political life, frequently attending *soirées*, balls, the theatre, and the opera, beyond being decorated by the emperor and writing odes to him. Machado was part of a generation of brilliant intellectuals in that formative period of the nation: he was a friend (and godson) to older figures, such as José de Alencar and Joaquim Manuel de Macedo; he was a friend to younger figures (and godfather to a few of them), such as Nabuco, Euclides da Cunha, Raul Pompéia, José Veríssimo, Olavo Bilac and Graça Aranha. From all of this material, however, emerged incomparable work that surpassed the others in subtlety and audacity—because Machado faced the complex questions of his day on paper and, as such, blazed an independent trail. He was not just a critic of the “Brazilian elite,” as the above-mentioned analysts seem to believe, but rather a critic of humanity, a critic of human nature. This is his legacy.

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