

Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant: A Singular Novel

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Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias, by the doctor and journalist Manuel Antônio de Almeida, was first published anonymously in the Rio-based newspaper *Correio Mercantil*. The novel was serialized in the Sunday supplement “Pacotilha” from June 27, 1852, to July 31, 1853, and tells the story of young Leonardo’s exploits during the reign of D. João VI (1808-1821) in the former capital of the colony, Rio de Janeiro. The next two years saw the novel’s first publication in book form. *Mémorias* appeared in two volumes, both of which were printed by Maximiniano Gomes Ribeiro’s Tipografia Brasileira and signed with the pseudonym “A Brazilian.”

Born in modest circumstances in Rio de Janeiro on November 17, 1831, Almeida studied medicine but never practiced as a physician. Even before his graduation in 1856, he had dabbled in journalism, a profession that he described in the following terms: “It is my pleasure to confess that I have not had one day of remorse, and that only the force of circumstance could take me away from the career on which I have embarked.”¹ In addition to editing the *Correio Mercantil*, Almeida also held another position associated with journalism, that of administrator at the “Tipografia Nacional.” Nevertheless, “by force of circumstance”—the illness of one of his sisters—the writer was forced to abandon journalism while exiled in Nova Friburgo, a city in the Serra dos Órgãos, in the countryside of what is now the state of Rio de Janeiro. This life change increased his financial burdens considerably and led him to accept an invitation to run for congress. In order to begin his political campaign, Almeida returned to Rio de Janeiro, where he boarded the steamship *Hermes* bound for Campos, on the northern coastline of the

state. He died, at the age of 30, when the *Hermes* shipwrecked on November 31, 1861.

It is unclear what importance the author himself gave to his novel during his short and troubled life. However, what is clear is that from 1855, the year in which the second volume of *Memórias* appeared, until the year of his death, Almeida never produced another novel. The rest of his work was confined to journalism and to writing reviews, chronicles, and even the libretto for an operetta called *Dois Amores*. Only in 1862 did the efforts of Quintino Bocaiúva result in a new, posthumous edition of the novel; this edition still appeared under the pseudonym "A Brazilian," even though the book's authorship was no longer a secret. Since then, new editions have appeared regularly, and Almeida's novel has become one of the most celebrated and most frequently read Brazilian novels.

Memórias and Its Contemporaries

What have always bothered twentieth-century Brazilian critics of *Memórias* is how little attention men of letters paid to it when it was published in the 1850s. If the work's success in the public sphere remains a matter of debate, its initial critical reception is not so complicated: the novel was not well-received. No critique or review of *Memórias* was published prior to the author's death in 1861. The first evaluation of the author and his work appeared the same year as his death and was obviously motivated by the tragic event. Yet, curiously, such attention was not sufficient to create more awareness of *Memórias*. The comments published by Francisco Otaviano, Almeida's friend and former boss at the *Correio Mercantil*, only concern the journalist's "ardent imagination" and his "rapid and concise style, the kind that made his articles admirable for their sober phrasing, their wealth of ideas, and their beauty of form."² In a biographical sketch published in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* in 1862, Augusto Emílio Zaluar, another friend of Almeida's, focused primarily on his role as a friend and journalist; Zaluar only mentions *Memórias* as a work showing Almeida's great potential as a novelist. In the preface to the 1862 edition of the novel, Bocaiúva explains why he decided to inaugurate the publication of Almeida's collected works with *Memórias*: "The novel, which we begin printing today, first appeared anonymously. That edition disappeared, or at least there are few today who own a copy of it."³

Without a doubt, the novel suffered a certain marginalization before the author's death. Even after being republished in a new edition in 1862, and

despite its increasing popularity, it continued to be poorly received in literary circles. In his *Ano Biográfico Brasileiro*, Joaquim Manoel de Macedo—one of the most prolific and widely read novelists in nineteenth-century Brazil and author of the classic *A Moreninha*—wrote a short profile of the author, considering the novel as “a mild and precise study of the country’s old manners” that “shined as the new dawn of a bright day.”⁴ Meanwhile, in his foreword to an 1876 edition, Almeida’s childhood friend Bethencourt da Silva proclaimed that the author’s talent “was only lightly stamped” on this novel, since it did not qualify as “one of those sublime works that show the pride of a people or the glory of humanity.”⁵

Reassessing *Memórias*

Only in the twentieth century has the novel received a favorable critical reception. The question that arises, therefore, is why did Almeida’s work not get the good press normally accorded a great novel? In other words, what was it about the novel that was so distasteful to nineteenth-century critics? This question, of course, might seem rather naive, since it concerns the specific prejudices that affect the evaluation of any single work. However, twentieth-century critics have not sought merely to question the literary values of the nineteenth century, but to demonstrate the degree to which Almeida’s work proves unrepresentative of these values.

In this sense, the text of *Memórias* has been reconsidered along two different lines, both of which treat the novel anachronistically. On the one hand, the novel is said to represent a return to a literary precedent, since it recovers long forgotten traditions of writing. On the other, it is said to anticipate forms of Brazilian Realism/Naturalism and of 1920s Modernism. In the first case, the novel is placed alongside the works of Mário de Andrade and Josué Montello; in the second, it joins the works of José Veríssimo, Marques Rebelo and Bernardo de Mendonça.

In the introduction to a 1941 edition of *Memórias*, Mário de Andrade for the first time associated the novel with the tradition of the picaresque. Yet his association is rather tangential: it links the story of a young rake during the “time of the king” with the Spanish picaresque novels, given that the picaresque and Almeida’s novel shared a “psychological method of vital non-conformity.”⁶ This method, Andrade claims, already existed in Herondas and Petronius before making an appearance in the Spanish picaresque. This “vital non-conformity” is characterized by:

a temperamental reactionarism that sets them [the authors] against the rhetoric of their time and above all against life as it is lived, that they then delight in praising, purposely exaggerating the shape of events and of men, by comedy, by humor, by sarcasm, by grotesqueness and caricature. And by folly.⁷

Some years later Josué Montello raised this idea once again, directly linking *Memórias* to such texts as *La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Vida y Hechos de Estebanillo González*.⁸

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, José Veríssimo disseminated the idea that Almeida's novel was ahead of its time, in this case predicting the *fin de siècle* movement of Realism and Naturalism.⁹ Novelist Marques Rebelo took this idea even further. In his *Vida e Obra de Manuel Antônio de Almeida*, Rebelo recalled the novel's lack of success when published in book form: "not a single literary magazine wrote about it. It just wasn't literature, they agreed."¹⁰ This assessment, for Rebelo, came from the novel's avant-garde quality, even according to the terms of literary conventions in Europe, "where only a few years later... naturalism appeared."¹¹ He added:

But Manuel Antônio de Almeida... was for Brazil not only the *pioneer of naturalism*, more importantly he was *the pioneer of the modern novel*, and it is in him that we find the true forefather of one Antônio de Alcântara Machado, who also died before he was 30.¹²

Rebelo thus seeks to establish a genealogy for national literature, whose origin lies in Manuel Antônio de Almeida. In the emphasized passages above, this genealogy manifests itself in the use of definite articles that assure the exclusive nature of Almeida's prescience. It also presents a lineage for literature according to which the birth of Brazilian Romanticism is attributed to an unlucky accident of fate. (In this sense, it is important to remember that, for Rebelo, *Memórias* was not a romantic work, even though it had been written under the aegis of Brazilian Romanticism).

Although acknowledging the merit of the nationalistic impulses of romantic authors—from Gonçalves de Magalhães to José de Alencar, by way of Gonçalves Dias—Rebelo insists on the derivative character of these authors' work, compared to that of their European counterparts, and, consequently, on the absence of an original "Brazilianism." *Memórias de um*

Sargento de Milícias, therefore, offers not just an example of literary precocity; instead, it occupies a crucial position in the real lineage leading to the foundation of a national literature. Almeida had accomplished that for which the Romantics only professed an interest: a genuinely national literature. Yet, according to Rebelo, only Naturalism and the work of Machado de Assis developed this realization—that is, only literature produced from the 1870s forward. Recalling Mário de Andrade's observation in his introduction to the 1941 edition of *Memórias*, Rebelo reiterates the stylistic similarity between the two novelists, recognizing Almeida's ghost in Machado de Assis, and by extension, in the Modernist movement of 1922, as his mention of Antônio de Alcântara Machado suggests.

Bernardo de Mendonça takes this position to its extreme. Mendonça sees, in the nineteenth-century's critical disregard of *Memórias*, a symptom of the prolonged delay in the modernization of Brazilian society, given that Almeida was a "pioneer of the modern spirit" and not solely of a literary style or styles.¹³

The Third Way

Although both of these perspectives have circulated widely, they are by no means the only ones possible. There is also a third way, characterized by the rejection of an assumption underlying the other two: the anachronistic feature attributed to *Memórias*.

Writing of Almeida's novel in his seminal *Formação da Literatura Brasileira*, Antonio Candido describes the eccentric quality that characterizes certain texts: "There are in Romanticism some works of fiction that could be called eccentric with respect to the trend started by other works."¹⁴ *Memórias'* eccentricity comes less from its thematization of non-Romantic areas—pre- or post-Romantic ones—as from its valorization of certain characteristics of Romanticism itself, although these characteristics were not considered hegemonic at the time of publication. He writes:

As to his contemporaries, although they esteemed Manuel Antônio as a man and a journalist, they do not seem to have appreciated his novel quite as much, half out of tune as it was with the patterns and tone of the era.¹⁵

Neither ahead of its time nor behind it in the literary canon, *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias* is not marked by anachronism, since Almeida's novel describes elements that, although not dominant at the time of its publication,

were potentially available. For *Candido*, the novel's eccentricity manifests itself in the valorization, on the part of its author, of the novel of manners, instead of the "sentimental exaltation and rhetorical vocation" characteristic of the period.¹⁶ Nevertheless, this valorization implies the perspective of someone well-versed in the sociocultural context of the period. Faced with some typical difficulties with respect to historical circumstances—the country's lack of social complexity, the limits of the literary field, the strictness of the psychological perspective, etc.—, "Manuel Antônio [was] a novelist who was not only aware of his own intentions, but also (within his literary form) of the necessary means to accomplish them."¹⁷ This awareness involves the adaptation of elements of the novel of manners to the discursive conditions for literary production during Almeida's age.

In a later essay *Candido* once more seeks to explain *Memórias* by trying to refute the notion of anachronism; instead, he attempts to "characterize a rather peculiar morality that manifests itself in Manuel Antônio de Almeida's book," which he calls the "rogue's novel."¹⁸ This neither predicts later developments nor harkens to an earlier tradition, but finds a new one, derived from a specific mode of thematizing the cultural and social conditions of the moment in which *Mémorias* was published, and which, according to *Candido*, also corresponds to "a certain comic and popularesque atmosphere of his era."¹⁹ This atmosphere had already seeped into journalism, especially in leaflet-chronicles, and also into political debates. (One of the principal characteristics of works published in "Pacotilha" was their absorption of this atmosphere.)

Candido's essay surely offers a richer analysis than can be discussed here. What I have attempted to do is merely emphasize his contribution to the discussion of anachronism, which in general has been a focal point of critical attitudes towards *Memórias*. However, the most important aspect to remember is that Almeida's novel has survived despite its innumerable classifications, despite various attempts to assign it a literary affiliation, and, above all, despite the total oblivion which initially greeted it. Today, after myriad editions—including translations into French, Spanish, Italian, and English—the novel still raises new and stimulating questions.²⁰ Moreover, it remains one of the most popular nineteenth-century novels outside of academic circles—a fact that certainly would have pleased Manuel Antônio de Almeida.

Notes

- ¹ Rebelo 26.
- ² Otaviano 115-6.
- ³ Bocaiúva 177.
- ⁴ Macedo 413.
- ⁵ Silva 253.
- ⁶ Andrade 313.
- ⁷ Andrade 313.
- ⁸ See Josué Montello, "Um Precursor: Manuel Antônio de Almeida," *A Literatura no Brasil*, vol. 2. Ed. Afrânio Coutinho. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Sul Americana, 1968. 37-45.
- ⁹ See José Veríssimo, *Estudos Brasileiros*, 2nd ed. Rio de Janeiro: Laemmert, 1894. 107-124.
- ¹⁰ Rebelo 38.
- ¹¹ Rebelo 38.
- ¹² Rebelo 38, emphasis mine.
- ¹³ Mendonça xii.
- ¹⁴ Candido, *Formação* 215.
- ¹⁵ Candido, *Formação* 215.
- ¹⁶ Candido, *Formação* 215.
- ¹⁷ Candido, *Formação* 217.
- ¹⁸ Candido, "Dialética da Malandragem" 318.
- ¹⁹ Candido, "Dialética da Malandragem" 322.
- ²⁰ French edition: *Mémoires d'un Sergent de la Milice*, trans. Paulo Ronái (Rio de Janeiro: Atlantica, 1944); Spanish edition: *Memorias de un Sargento de Milicias*, trans. Francisco Ayala (Buenos Aires: Argos, 1947); Italian edition: *Il sergente delle milizie*, trad. Cesare Rivelli (Milan; Rome: Fratelli Bocca Editori, 1954); English edition: *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*, trans. Linton L. Barrett (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 1959). Recently, a new English translation was published: *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*, trans. Ronald W. Sousa, with a Foreword by Thomas H. Holloway and an Afterword by Flora Süssekind. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

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