

## Machado de Assis, the Apprentice Journalist

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Translated by Andrew Jager

**Abstract.** This paper analyzes Machado de Assis' literary career from the standpoint of journalism. Machado followed the same strategy to find his path as other writer-journalists of color, such as Teixeira e Souza and Paula Brito, had already done. After all, how could a poor, young mulatto, an orphan and epileptic, come to be the most famous writer in slave-owning Brazil? Only by entering the great halls of literature through the service entrance of journalism.

Machado de Assis is a sort of founding myth in Brazilian literature. After him, everything became possible: it is as if since that time the accomplishments of a certain individual in a certain historical context were open to all who would take the risk and follow the path. However, even our founding myth did not arise out of thin air, so to speak.

Machado followed the same strategy to find his path as other writer-journalists of color, such as Teixeira e Souza and Paula Brito. After all, how could a poor, young mulatto, an orphan and epileptic, come to be the most famous writer in slave-owning Brazil? Only by entering the great halls of literature through the service entrance of journalism. His success in this endeavor must have led innumerable poor writers of color to follow his example, asking: "If one who was so stigmatized was able to succeed, why would I not be able to?" From that point of view, it must have seemed to be simply a matter of opening the door.

This took place sometime between 1854 and 1855, when Machado forced destiny's hand and gathered the courage to enter Paula Brito's printing

house. That was where the youth of 15 years would begin his activities as a journalist and writer, which he did not stop until 53 years later. However, not even in the press did he enter by the front door. He worked as a cashier in the printing house and later as a typesetter for Paula Brito. It was there that the *Marmota Fluminense*—the newspaper where Machado's first poem appeared on 6 January 1855—was published.<sup>1</sup> A small cultural journal of only six pages, three of which were taken by poetry and commentary, the *Marmota Fluminense* was printed on Tuesdays and Fridays.

It is not difficult to see why the already-established Paula Brito would open his doors to the unknown young man. In the biography of this poet, journalist, editor, and bookseller, a self-made man of color who seems to have subverted the slaveholding logic of the Second Empire, there are countless similarities between his life and that of Machado de Assis.

The son of a carpenter, Paula Brito received no formal education. In fact, he never went to school and was taught to read by his sister. Despite these difficulties, he became a poet and translator. He was an apprentice at the National Printing Office and at René Ogier's Printing House, before working at Plancher Printing House, where the *Jornal do Comércio* was published, and where Brito became an administrator and editor. In 1831, with money he had accumulated through thrift and saving, he purchased a small store and a press and began publishing *O Restaurador*. Two years later, he already had two locations and two printing presses. By 1848, he had six manual presses and one mechanical press, considered to be "the biggest in Brazil" (Hallewell 63). By 1855, when Machado de Assis came into his employment, he had no less than 60 employees, nine of whom were French.

The young writer Machado de Assis was not the first to have been helped by Paula Brito. Prior to him, the mulatto writer Teixeira e Sousa (author in 1843 of the first novel in Brazilian literature, *O Filho do Pescador*) found financial and literary assistance in the editor, who had published, among other important works, Gonçalves Dias' *Os Últimos Cantos*, the comedies of Martins Pena, and Gonçalves de Magalhães' *A Confederação dos Tamoios*.

The literary and artistic society founded by Paula Brito, "A Petalógica," was absolutely democratic in its attributes. The goal of "Peta" ("lie") "lógica" ("logic") was "to contradict liars, lying to them so that they, taking what they hear as truth, repeat the lies and spread them all over, thereby becoming demoralized or shedding the bad habit of lying" (Pereira 61).

Just as the conservatives and liberals could have access, so the *lagruistas* and *char-tonistas* could: in the same seat, sometimes discussing the superiority of the day's modes, the advantages of the additional act, José Tomás' ice-cream or the votes of confidence—they all equally warmed the spirits; it was a true mish-mash (*pêle-mêle*) of all things and men. (Massa 87)

Despite his social station, Machado was part of a group that consisted of some of the main writers of the court, such as Casemiro de Abreu, Gonçalves Dias, and the journalist Joaquim Manuel de Macedo. The group met during the week at Paula Brito's house and on Saturdays on two benches in front of the printing house at the Largo do Rossio. It was there that Machado made the acquaintance of Francisco Otaviano, a contact that would turn out to be extremely useful.

In 1856, Machado found work as an apprentice typographer at the National Printing Office, where he worked under fellow writer Manuel Antônio de Almeida, author of *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*. Apparently, he was not the most dedicated worker. Citing Alfredo Pujol, Lúcia Miguel Pereira says that he “ignored his work to read in the corner,” which resulted in his being summoned by his boss. Instead of being chastised, the conversation between the two writers led to Machado coming under the protection of Manuel Antônio de Almeida and a deep friendship was formed.

Although the manual press that Machado supposedly worked with is kept to this day at the National Press Museum, researchers such as Godim da Fonseca and Jean-Michel Massa doubt the story's validity. According to Massa, despite testimony given by Capistrano de Abreu, there exists no document that proves Machado's tenure as an apprentice or employee at the National Press. However, Massa leaves the question open, saying: “No document proves the contrary” (173).

Whether this is a legend or not, it is known that Machado was in the field of typography at the National Press for two years. In 1858, he left the job to be Paula Brito's proofreader and, in the following year, he would occupy the same position for Francisco Otaviano at the *Correio Mercantil*. Otaviano was an amateur poet, a journalist, and politician who assigned to Alencar the column “Ao Correr da Pena.” By climbing this step, Machado left the station of manual worker behind to take up the higher position of journalist, even if he began at a lowly position in this new occupation. It was in this same year that the *Correio Mecantil*, which had very clear positions against slavery and church power, published a few of his poems.

Traces of the feeling of inferiority that gripped the aspiring writer in that period can be seen in “Miloca,” written in 1874. Nearly twenty years after he was free from this position, the author related the tale of a poor poet, an ex-typographer who had been promoted to proofreader, who saw in the eyes of the owner of a mansion where a party took place that he would not feel shame to admit his occupation: “Because this outsider (*pelintra*) has the honor of dining here with me, to see the others dance, to be here amidst people of a certain social order, and while he should listen and be quiet, he responds when no one speaks to him and ends up confessing that he is a proofreader.”<sup>2</sup>

Still, the social ascension of the poor, young proofreader did not stop in mid-path. When *As Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (*The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*) was published by the National Printing Office, where he began as an apprentice typographer twenty years earlier, Machado was no longer an unknown but had become a shining star of Brazilian literature. The consecration of this change in status can be seen when, after work, he would stop for the habitual prose with the men of letters from the publishing houses of Garnier and Lombaerts, or the editorial offices of *A Semana* and *Revista Brasileira*.

It was from the latter group, which was composed of journalists and contributors to the magazine that had been directed since 1895 by the literary critic José Veríssimo, that the base of the Brazilian Academy of Letters was drawn. The Academy was founded on 20 July 1897 by writer-journalists who occupied the forty seats of its board, including Machado, Coelho Neto, and Olavo Bilac. As president of the new institution, Machado turned a deaf ear to critiques that the new Academy merely represented the creation of an intellectual aristocracy that was nothing more than the importation of a European model, incompatible with republican ideas and useless in a country of illiterates like Brazil.

It is surprising that this response would come from Machado, who thirty-five years earlier had cast the adjective “immortal” in an ironic light in an article written in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* upon the inauguration of the statue of Dom Pedro I, when he called attention to the ridiculous nature of the ceremony. “But do you know, reader, who had great influence in yesterday’s celebration? The adjective. Don’t laugh, reader, because the adjective is a great force and a mighty element,” he stated, to shortly afterwards explode with:

Well employed, with style and timing [...] the adjective has played a grand part in the ministerial articles. Let the reader note how this word—immortal—has always come attached to a subject that is detached from intrinsic importance. (Pereira 79)

The adjective “immortal” brought market value and social legitimacy to writers like Machado. It gave their books better chances of being published and of attracting the attention of literary critics. It also helped to place their names on the guest lists of high society and amongst the attendees of conferences. It was not long before the president of the Academy was being complimented with phrases such as “the consecrated leader of our men of letters,” “the master of Brazilian letters,” “the first among all” and “the one and only” (Pereira 186).

With the end of imperial patronage and the beginning of the process of industrialization, conciliatory strategies such as Machado’s would be substituted by more inflammatory positions, such as that of Lima Barreto. The art and money dichotomy made the literary field (of art for art’s sake) in Brazil be constructed in opposition to the field of journalism (of the need to pay the bills), despite the interconnections. Thus arises the contradiction between the ideal model (largely unrealistic in Brazil) of a *full-time* writer from the model of a manual (more appropriately, industrial) laborer, or journalist.

In this division of intellectual labor, the journalist became responsible for “mercenary chores” related to industry and commerce, and the writer became responsible for the artistic chores. The point is that at the turn of the twentieth century the literary and journalistic fields were not so distinct from one another. In fact, even Machado de Assis was obliged to play both sides of this dichotomy in order to survive.

The opposition between art and money, which emerged as one of the fundamental structures of the dominant vision of the world at the same time as the literary and artistic field asserted its autonomy, prevents agents and also analysts [...] from perceiving that, as Zola says, “money has emancipated the writer, money has created modern letters.” (Bourdieu 91)

From the end of the nineteenth century to the current day, when positions in the field of journalism have begun to become scarce due to computerization, a deep recession, and the need for a degree, aspiring writers who dream of a glorious literary career like that of Machado de Assis have been attracted to the major urban centers, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. They constitute a type of intellectual reserve force, but rarely do they manage to have an ambiguous relationship with the market.

Journalism tends to serve as a way to get a foot in the door, a manner of having one’s name spread around, and even a form for establishing those names.

However, many aspiring writers become trapped by the myth that a true writer is one who is able to dedicate all of his or her time to writing, without compromises. They fail to perceive that this myth is based on a socially created character, created by the very modernity that—by incorporating them into the literary field and demanding that they sell their time and talent on the market—at once draws them closer and drives them away from their goal. Trapped by the ambivalent image of the writer as an aristocratic intellectual or a marginal element in bourgeois society, they are unable to see that they produce their books both in spite of and because of these very determinations.

In Machado de Assis' work, it is possible to see how journalism helped the novelist. In 1859, at twenty years of age, he wrote three articles that provide precious clues about his thinking on the following subjects: "O Passado, o Presente e o Futuro da Literatura" ("The Past, Present, and Future of Literature"), "A Reforma Pelo Jornal" ("Reform via Newspaper") and "O Jornal e o Livro" ("The Newspaper and the Book") (Assis 944-963). The texts of these articles have as a point in common a certain fascination with the democratic potential of journalism, which, according to the young Machado, had the "[even greater power to] make aristocracies tremble than popular movements" (963). It was not the skeptic of maturity, but rather a young, optimistic Machado de Assis that would write that journalism is "An intellectual locomotive traveling through unknown worlds, the common, universal, highly democratic literature that is produced daily, bringing with it the freshness of ideas and the fire of convictions" (945). The young writer set out on the adventure of founding his own newspaper, *O Espelho* (*The Mirror*), where he was able to put down these well-crafted lines.

The newspaper appeared, bringing with it the seed of a revolution. This revolution is not merely literary but also social and economic, because it is a movement of humanity striking fear into all of its eminences, the reaction of the human spirit against the existing formulas of the literary world, and of the economic and social world. (945)

Machado even ends up giving literature an inferior position relative to the press. "There is something limited and lacking if we compare [the book] to the newspaper," he says. "The newspaper is more than a book, or rather, it is more in tune with the human spirit. Would nullifying it as a book nullify the stone tablet as well? I do not mind admitting it" (946). The truth is that at the time of his death in 1908, two months after publishing his last book, *Memorial de*

*Aires (Counselor Ayres' Memorial)*, the book had not eliminated the newspaper, nor had the newspaper eliminated the book. This is an exemplary case of how a narrative genre, rather than nullifying the other, fertilizes it.

The year after the publication of the articles, Machado was co-opted by the major press, hired by his friend Quintino Bocaiúva for the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*. Machado worked in the publication's "kitchen," writing and rewriting the ads and news briefs, imparting to them a "clear and clean" style:

much cleaner than calligraphy, in which nervousness was expanded in incredible scratches, blots of all kinds. The disorder of its manuscripts, which only arose out of ink-stained fingers and innumerable broken plumes, arrived at such a point that the newspaper's proofers became outraged, seeing the new writer obliged to learn to write with a specialized teacher, the American calligrapher Guilherme Scully. (Pereira 75)

There remained the problem of errors in Portuguese grammar, the result of the writer's lack of schooling. The biographer Lúcia Miguel Pereira says that the journalist had little patience for details: "He didn't get along well with spelling. He crossed his 'A's in a fantastical manner and his pronouns were typically Brazilian in their whimsicality" (Pereira 119). Still, at that time, none of these deficiencies was an impediment to Machado de Assis' rise in the publication, where he took on the task of the "reports" on the debates in the Senate, and left behind wonderfully ironic entries on the subject. Machado also gained fame as a theatre critic, writing columns for the *Revista Dramática* and others, such as *Comentários da Semana*, *Parte Literária*, *Conversas Hebdomadárias*, *Ao Acaso*, *Semana Literária*, and *Cartas Fluminenses*, under his own name or a pseudonym. If at first Machado's style as a columnist was hesitating, it soon gained the consistency that made it so unique.

The *Diário do Rio's* importance in Machado de Assis' work is immense; in bringing him into it, Quintino Bocaiúva removed him from the amateurism of literary magazines, forcing him to face the mass public, to give his opinion on the subjects of the day, to make him reflect and think. The discipline of frequent collaboration, the sensation of contact with readers of all kinds quickly matured this young man of 21. (Pereira 77)

Like many other writers who followed him, Machado found in the press a way to open up his universe, interacting in environments that were com-

pletely different from those he had known, getting to know the entire social spectrum and meeting people who he would only have heard about as a reader. Yet, the press was still a source of boredom. After having been away from his post as a columnist for two years—his last “Comentário da Semana” (“Weekly Commentary”) was in May 1862 and his first column in “Ao Acaso” in 1864—he continued to work every day in the press, but anonymously, publishing only five articles under his name in twenty-three months. This distance between Machado and the press seems to have been created for strategic reasons, although it is unclear whether Machado voluntarily moved away from political writing, or if the newspaper, which wished to moderate its attacks on the government, forced him away.

Besides his work as a columnist and literary critic, Machado wrote the editorials and gathered administrative chores. He was “A jack of all trades, who wore many hats in the realm of writing and administration” (Massa 506). Overloaded, he realized that he would have to leave the press in order to return to writing novels. The biographer Jean-Michel Massa describes this common situation for journalist-novelists, in which journalistic work tends to be all-encompassing: “In the conditions under which he undertook the above-mentioned responsibilities at the *Diário*, he could see how much this activity devoured the individual, locking up both time and personal liberty” (508).

At one moment—more precisely in 1878, the year in which José de Alencar died—it became necessary to make the choice, which was so feared and at the same time so desired. This choice both freed up the greatest dreams and awoke the most awful nightmares. For Machado, leaving the daily press was akin to placing a bet. “At the time, it seemed to be an error of judgment, as he was a better journalist than a fiction writer,” according to Lúcia Miguel Pereira, for whom the columns in the *Diário do Rio* are far superior to his short stories of the time, or of *Resurreição* (*Resurrection*), his first novel, which he published at thirty years of age (Pereira 139). Taking ill, he momentarily left writing for the press and decided to take his first vacation.

Six months later, Machado de Assis published his first major book: *As Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (*The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This information is based on the testimony of Salvador de Mendonça, who had a great deal of contact with the young writer, although Jean Michel Massa, in *A Juventude de Machado de Assis*, claims that there is no documented proof for this (88); Lucia Miguel Pereira, in Machado de Assis, posits that the story is based in “tradition” (54).

<sup>2</sup> Part of the tale, published under the pseudonym JJ in 1874 in the *Family Journal*, is reproduced in Pereira 61.

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