

THE DUSK OF WRITING: MACHADO DE ASSIS'S LAST PAGES AND THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF BRAZIL*

O OUTONO DA ESCRITA: AS ÚLTIMAS PÁGINAS DE MACHADO
DE ASSIS E A PROMESSA NÃO CUMPRIDA DO BRASIL

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The understanding of the narrative power of Machado de Assis is greatly enriched if we pay attention to the way in which his *referent*—the things he speaks about—are diluted by a sort of blurred horizon. My hypothesis is that Machado's deft depiction of the world in its half-light hides a mechanism—that is double-edged: both poetic and political, both literary and historical.

I have recently explored this topic in a book on the last novel by Machado de Assis, *Counselor Aires's Memorial*, published in 1908 (Monteiro, 2016). If you turn to these final pages of Machado's writing, you get the sense of a prose that is in the process of fading out. The most obvious point of reference here are Edward Said's reflections "on late style". I might recall, however, that in his dialogue with Adorno, Said speaks of a "nonharmonious, nonserene tension" (2007: 11-13), whereas in the late Machado we see a sort of *giving up*, turning in on oneself as all vital drives are suppressed. Counselor Aires, the narrator of the *Memorial*, is a retired diplomat, a disillusioned old man who lives love and history only vicariously.

* Translated from the Portuguese by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux.

But where does *history* come in? In a move dating back at least as far as the great turning point that was Roberto Schwarz's work in the 1970s, studies of Machado de Assis have been structured around the question of how much attention ought to be paid to history in order to understand the text (Schwarz, 1990). This critical debate traces a truly transatlantic arc. At one end we have the approach proposed by Portuguese critic Abel Barros Baptista (2008), which practically erases history from the framework we use to understand the text. At another, we find the provocative suggestions of Sidney Chalhoub (2003), who deliberately kidnaps Machado de Assis and brings him over to the history department, where he is welcomed as a colleague.

Machado de Assis is a symbolic body in high demand. Historians, sociologists, literary critics, pedagogues, musicians, the black movement, the publishing market, the official government line, they all want Machado for themselves. What Machado de Assis *is actually saying* about his and about our time is an inescapable question, one that demands that we return to the issue of the blurred horizon. In shrinking back, curbing his essential impulses, and abandoning the future, what is the narrator of *Counselor Aires's Memorial* telling us?

My hypothesis is that the subtle erasure of shapes and forms is more than a poetic achievement. What we have here is an interpretation of republican history, which is also the history of flawed rights, precarious legality, and many movements for the affirmation of subaltern identities, as those who study Brazil know well. The Brazilian Republic, inaugurated in 1889, the year after the abolition of slavery, inherits a strange body from the Empire: the ex-slave, the freedman, and also the "free" individual who had lived under patriarchal domination, all of whom fit poorly into the framework of modernity in the tropics. Machado de Assis was not only a contemporary of slavery, but also of a Republic that did not deliver on its word. The unfulfilled promise of a modern country, we might say.

The dusk of writing is a way of saying that that which is poetically blurred on the horizon is also fading out as a promise for the future. In the late Machado de Assis we find nothing but an exasperating present, resistant to opening itself up to the future. It is as if the sketch projected by the artist onto the horizon never becomes concrete, leaving us before a diabolical poetic web that points toward the unfulfillment of history, or at least the unfulfillment of the future. In other words, the poetics of blurred edges suggests the unfulfillment of an *ideal* history, which the militant positivism of Brazilian republicans would attempt to drag down to earth with all the conviction and blind violence of the obstinate.

This picture extends far beyond Brazil, of course: this is the vertigo of modern society, transformed by the *Belle Époque* into an irresistible landscape, although it is clearly impossible to hide the violence at its root. The contradiction is a familiar one: the *fin-de-siècle* dream of civilization would repress the democratizing urges of the masses, pouring its energies into ideal, clean, hygienic, impeccable—and violent—landscapes.

The prose of Machado de Assis ironically suspends the certainties of this civilizing drive, the violent nature of which was made patent across the world in imperialism and colonialism. In Brazil, the great chronicler of that violence would be Euclides da Cunha, who saw in time that the arrow of civilization was also a vector of death, and that which his contemporaries called “civilized” was just the other side of barbarism.²

But Machado’s style has little to do with the headlong Gongorism of Euclides da Cunha’s writing. They are opposites in their tone, although both pay keen attention to the human tragedy unfurling before their eyes. In the case of Machado de Assis, criticism of slav-

2 On the “dualismo ilusório” that separates barbarism from civilization, see Schwarz, 2014.

ery mingles, in his work, with a critique of the masculine role of head of household, as if the writer were applying a magnifying glass to the fabric of society. One should note that that fabric would remain unaltered in Brazil, despite the libertarian winds that blew alongside the abolitionist movement and despite the republican propaganda and fantasies that would follow it.

The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas, published in book form in 1881, is narrated by the pampered son of a family whose wealth depends on the slaveholding economy. In graceful and witty turns of phrase that recall the hopscotching style of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator can do whatever he pleases with the text, since he's dead and says whatever catches his fancy (Rouanet, 2007). But the dead narrator can do all this because, while he was alive, he could also do whatever he liked with whomever crossed his path. The world exists solely to sate the appetites of this individual, who sees himself as the center of the universe. There is no more complete critique of the mindset of the master than the simulation of the posthumous writings of one of its children, opening the black box of class secrets in order to reveal the symbolic violence upon which its privileges are founded.

Dom Casmurro, which would come in 1900—alongside the Vienna publication of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as Lucia Serrano Pereira (2004) reminds us—is a plunge into the structures that maintain the subject shackled to his or her own fantasies, their foundations rooted in jealousy, envy, and the fear of loss. Bento Santiago, the narrator, is yet another overgrown pampered boy who deals poorly with the frustration of his desire. In the all-encompassing shadow of a mother who can desire nothing more than the image of the dead Father, Bentinho grows close to his neighbor, a girl poorer than him, and marries her. The book, as we know, is a sequence of suspicions cast on the *fidelity* of that woman, whose greatest sin was to maintain

a desire of her own. The narrative is the expiation of a man who expedited death sentences for his wife and child, as different studies have pointed out (Schwarz, 1997; Peixoto, 2005; Fitz, 2015).

In short, both before and after abolition, and even before that which became known as the “second phase” of his fictional production, Machado de Assis offers flashes of class or gender consciousness, shedding light on the gray zone in which the secrets of patriarchal domination rest, in a society built on the reality of slavery.

Another thrust in Machado de Assis's prose, running through these and other works, points to the insanity of those who *judge*. Judgment is an act that Machado himself—to turn to the author peeking over the shoulders of his narrators—makes suspect. His prose is a simultaneously cunning and subtle *moral suspension*, drawing readers' gaze at the precise point at which actions have not yet revealed their meaning. Faced with the vertigo of this moral suspension, what message can be revealed here? Is it not the future, as a revealed message, that is left hanging?

The suspension of moral judgment leads us to one of Machado's deepest wellsprings: the skeptical gaze of the classical moralists, especially French moralists such as La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, and Pascal (Bosi, 1999). Of course there are differences between a La Rochefoucauld and a Pascal, especially in terms of faith—clear in the latter, erased from the mundane horizon of the former. It has been said of La Rochefoucauld that his was “godless Jansenism”, a formula that, curiously enough, pops up again in Afrânio Coutinho's (1959) take on the “philosophy” of Machado de Assis.

A godless Jansenism means something like a definitive plunge into the world of lust, with no hope of salvation. This is the chance to see literature as an enormous laboratory of customs, where the classic hero has lost his halo and all are ordinary people. This may be Machado's only “democratic” concession in terms of human nature:

jealousy, envy, fear, and greed cut across social classes, characterizing all from poor to rich. We all receive our share of vices, and our virtues are often nothing more than masks meant to hide the true drive behind our actions, which is self-love. Just as in the world of La Rochefoucauld, virtues conceal vices, which in turn feed into virtues. Perhaps this is what Paul Dixon would call a “fascination for homeopathic medicine”, functioning both thematically and narratologically: “Like counteracts like” (2015: 142).

On judgment, it is true that Machado de Assis weaves his web so as to *wink* at the reader, as if to say: dear reader, I’m not judging, I don’t go that far, but you—why don’t you take the leap and do what I do not? Why don’t you go ahead and judge, yourself?

But to dive into the abyss of judgment must mean facing down the madness of reason, and the fact that the Law, as Kafka and Agamben teach us, is a blind spot, an unavoidable knot of arbitrariness. To take Machado de Assis’s paradox to its limit: what can be the fate of he who judges, but to draw close to madness?

One of the stories published in 1906, in *Relíquias da casa velha*, is entitled “Suje-se gordo!”, a translation of which might be “Wallow in your filth!”. The narrator of the story recalls that once, during an intermission at the theater, he had spoken to a friend about his repugnance at the idea of having to *judge* someone. He then relates his first time serving on a jury, when he was called to evaluate the case of a young employee accused of stealing a small sum from his place of work. In the end, despite a lack of conclusive evidence, the young man was declared guilty. We hear that, during deliberations, one of the members of the jury declared that what irritated him in the case was the fact that the poor bastard had stooped for so little. “Quer sujar-se?” said the juror in question. “Suje-se gordo!” (Assis, 2008: 666). In other words, if you’re going to stoop to corruption, don’t do it for so little.

The phrase stayed with the narrator, who, much later, found himself on another jury, this time to evaluate the guilt of an employee accused of stealing money from the bank where he worked. The evidence was clear, and the sum was enormous. Imagine the narrator's surprise upon realizing that this defendant was his old acquaintance from the jury, the same who had said: "Is it filth you're after? Then wallow in your filth!"

In the end, the lawyer's defense and dissimulation were so effective that the thief was declared innocent. However, the moral of the story (if there is one) has less to do with the lack of condemnation of the illicit act, and more with the transformation of the trial into that which it truly is: a vast theatrical production. The story itself is whispered between the acts of a play: nothing is certain, all takes place amidst the murmuring of the corridors of the theater. The narrative unfurls in the intermission of certainty, in the interval between men's playacting.

This last Machado de Assis is interested in what comes before the concert, or before harmony can be established. His attention (and ours, as readers) turns to that which precedes the apotheosis of revelation. That is, we're taken to gaze upon that which the deaf rumble of the audience both masks and reveals. It seems clear to me that there is a touch of a baroque sensibility here: this is, in David Jackson's terms, "Machado's operatic theater of the world" (2015: 151). That said, and unlike the vision of a baroque mentality, in Machado de Assis fate is not merely a secret inaccessible to the actors in the great play of which we are all a part. In Machado de Assis's world, fate itself has been stolen—that is to say, we are orphans, faced with the lack of definition as to which way the world is headed.

That uncertainty is also the impossibility to detect the direction taken by the subject. Unlike the characters of naturalist literature, who are held hostage to their own nature, Machado's characters dis-

play nothing, in and of themselves, that might allow one to predict the direction of their actions. We find not the slightest shadow of biological or racial determinism, nothing to foresee the characters' reactions to their social context.

I believe that this issue has been most fully developed by José Luiz Passos (2014) in his investigation into the moral formation of the *person* in Machado de Assis's novels. He focuses, not by chance, on the dramatic models which the writer used to educate himself, as an aficionado, translator, and author of plays. But above all, as a reader of Shakespeare.

But let us return to the story “Suje-se gordo!” Unlike a detective novel—a genre which Machado de Assis was quite familiar with, as a reader of Edgar Allan Poe and Guy de Maupassant—this story brings us no revelation. There is no purloined letter in a corner of the room, the final piece of a jigsaw to be assembled by a clever investigator. Machado purloins our purloined letter, if one can put it that way, removing the key from the scene and leaving us to face a cunning, profound lack of definition.

This being said, one of the most common errors in the interpretation of Machado de Assis is to attribute a radical skepticism or boundless nihilism to his works. While it is true that judgment is suspended (and Capitu, the wife of Bento Santiago, is the sore point in this resistance to judgment, as a blatant sign of its ultimate impossibility)—it is no less true that a social and political principle is unveiled in the story that I have just analyzed. Let us return to the plot to note that, in the first trial, the irritation at the wretched thief sprang from the fact that he was poorer than the man who would be judged later. After all, the defendant in the second trial had said that if it was filth we were after, then we should “wallow” in it. In short, those who gleefully dive in and roll around in a lack of respect for the law find themselves happy

and rich at the end of the play. The others, the petty thieves, are those who pay the piper.

Given the hue and cry about corruption in contemporary Brazil, where the wrath of justice poorly masks class or gender hatred (here I refer to the violence turned towards Brazil's current president), perhaps we should remember that corruption is built into the DNA of Brazilian politics, and is not, unfortunately, the exclusive province of one party or one person. As Sidney Chalhoub recalls, from 1831 to 1850, 750,000 Africans were smuggled into Brazil and enslaved against the laws of the nation (2016). The ruling classes, we might say, wallowed in that filth. And they came out clean, declaring themselves innocent. Just like in the story.

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But let us turn to the last pages by Machado de Assis. *Counselor Aires's Memorial*, as we read in the note from the fictional editor, would barely suffice "para matar o tempo da barca de Petrópolis" (Assis, 2008: 1238). That fleeting sensation becomes clear when we read what the author of the diary is said to have written it in 1888, recounting a conversation with a friend as they wound their way up through the mountains of Petrópolis:

Ao subir a serra as nossas impressões divergiram um tanto. Campos achava grande prazer na viagem que íamos fazendo em trem de ferro. Eu confessava-lhe que tivera maior gosto quando ali ia em caleças tiradas a burros, umas atrás das outras, não pelo veículo em si, mas porque ia vendo, ao longe, cá embaixo, aparecer a pouco e pouco o mar e a cidade com tantos aspectos pinturescos. O trem leva a gente de corrida, de afogadilho, desesperado, até à própria estação de Petrópolis. E mais lembrava as paradas, aqui para beber café, ali para beber água na

fonte célebre, e finalmente a vista do alto da serra, onde os elegantes de Petrópolis aguardavam a gente e a acompanhavam nos seus carros e cavalos até à cidade. (Assis, 2008: 1238)

This passage, like so many others in *Counselor Aires's Memorial*, is a masterful web of historical references. Through it we see that time careening onward is an obstacle to the desires of Counselor Aires, who seems to live in *another* time. This is not, however, a case of simple nostalgia. Aires is referring to the velocity of impressions, and here we had an entire world fading away, much like the subject of this dim, slow narrative, which in the monotony of its prose successfully masks spirited, unspoken desires, all of which are doomed to failure. The narrator is a creature of the time that ran out, with the elegant figures since gone, no longer awaiting him atop the mountain range. Counselor Aires, like other modern narrators, writes amidst the ruins of his time, disabused of the dizzying promises of progress.

The fact that *Counselor Aires's Memorial* is marked by slowness is clear to all. But we might ask what that slowness disguises, and what it reveals. Once, after a talk about the book, I heard the following question from an audience comprised almost entirely of foreigners: if Brazil is so prone to imagining itself as the “country of the future”, how can we think of the future in the works of Machado de Assis? In order to respond, we should remember that Machado de Assis “stops” at the Empire—that is, he does not venture far into the republican period in his last two novels, both, incidentally, connected by the figure of Counselor Aires. His last book was written in the first decade of the twentieth century, but its timeline focuses on the period just before the passage from Empire to Republic—thus from 1888 to 1889.

In a classic of Brazilian historiography, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda investigates the causes of the transition to the Republic, seeking them out between the lines of the parliamentary debates

from the last decades of the Empire. In *Do Império à República*, the historian comes to a peculiar conclusion, an imagined reconstruction of the moment in which Marechal Deodoro, founder of the Brazilian Republic, deposes the last imperial cabinet, arresting its ministers but guaranteeing that the rights and dignity of the Emperor would be preserved. The last sentence is a sort of prophecy as to the nature of the Republic:

Nem nesse momento, nem ao deixar o portão do quartel-general, estava certo, Deodoro, de que as oligarquias monárquicas pertenciam ao passado, e ia começar o tempo da oligarquia republicana. (Holanda, 1985: 360)

Here we have a key for understanding Machado de Assis. This is no longer the useless dance of conservatives and liberals in their endless trading-off of power. The scene imagined by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda reveals a macabre permanence, taking the form of a time that does not move forward, rooted in the oligarchical nature of Brazilian politics, the future of which has always been a blank. A “decapitated future”, in Sartre’s terms, referring to the absence of the future in Proust and Faulkner (*apud* Oore, 2000).

But let us turn back in time, to see how Machado de Assis himself conceived of the problem, as he wrote for the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *Gazeta de Notícias* over the course of the transition from Empire to Republic. In the *crônicas* entitled “Bons dias!”, the text published on May 11th, 1888, just two days before abolition, is an entertaining combination of irony and political shrewdness. In it, the *cronista* dons the mask of a cynical defender of property, and mocks the masters who hired runaway slaves, saying that, in doing so, they displayed a lack of “solidariedade do direito comum”, disrespecting the other masters’ prerogative, or right, to own slaves freely (Assis, 2008: 810).

The text closes out with a dialogue with a citizen who asks how the *cronista* can be blind to the approaching Republic, already visible in Brazilian skies. Faced with the skepticism of the narrator, who sees nothing more than parrots in the air, the interlocutor lets out a declaration in German, read in the *Rio-Post*—the newspaper of the German community of Rio de Janeiro. It went as follows: It would be easy to prove that Brazil is more of an absolute oligarchy than a constitutional monarchy.

The next *crônica*, on May 19th, sarcastically strips away the goodness of those masters who acted ahead of the abolition law, which had been signed on May 13th, and moved to free their slaves themselves. This was the case, as readers of *Counselor Aires's Memorial* know, of those slaveholders in the Paraíba Valley who moved before the law and held onto a last shred of their power—because they, and not the State, were the authors of their slaves' manumission.

There is a strange interplay of loyalties in *Counselor Aires's Memorial*—starting with the protagonist, a young widow whom the old narrator desires, but cannot ultimately possess. Her name is Fidélia, which is an evident allusion to the problem of fidelity, but which also plays into a complicated inter-textual relationship with the opera by Beethoven, in which Fidélío is the mask that faithful Leonore uses to seek out her imprisoned husband. In the opera's romantic plot, Leonore holds up the mask of loyalty because she knows that her husband is alive, in the depths of a dungeon, waiting for his sweet spouse to rescue him. The sonorous expression of the rescue and the distance that separates them is magnificent, as opera lovers well know.

But in Machado de Assis's plot, Fidélia's husband is dead from the start. If the foundations of fidelity have been swept away and there is no husband to rescue, then what to do with the mask? (Monteiro, 2008).

Counselor Aires's Memorial is an unfurling of suspicions, a poisonous question hovering over the character's loyalty, both personally and in terms of her class. Where do her allegiances fall? Fidélia, the daughter of slaveholders from the Paraíba Valley, sees the approach of Abolition as not just the liberation of the slaves, but also of herself. Once freed of the dead weight of her husband and father, a new marriage becomes possible, although the future of that alliance does not lie in Brazil. It is overseas, in far-off Europe, where the young couple, Fidélia and Tristão—this time an allusion to the opera by Wagner (Gledson, 1985)—will make their lives. Only the old are left in the Brazil of Counselor Aires, sunk into an endless melancholy, their gaze fixed on the ruins left behind, with no future in sight despite the approach of the Republic. Here I recall the importance of the “threshold” as a space that “both opens and closes worlds and past experiences” (Vieira, 2013: 48).

In Machado de Assis, the future as an unknown quantity is not the result of fate or the flaws of tropical civilization. Rather, it is the result of the historical evolution that carried slavery to its ultimate consequences, and to its temporal limit. The writer speaks of a country whose elites would keep on applying plasters to the wounds of history, imagining that progress was inevitable and that social ills would be cured with time, and not by the vigorous actions of men and women—to wit, with politics.

The stoicism of the narrator—a Counselor to the vanishing Empire—allowed critics to compare *Counselor Aires's Memorial* to Cicero's *De Senectude*, as if the writing beckoned to death. In referring to the last novel by Machado de Assis, poet and critic José Paulo Paes speaks of an “abolished past”, and sees the plot through the same melancholy lenses that the Counselor wears and offers to the reader (Paes, 1985). But Machado is a crafty old man, and we might invert the critical equation to suggest that this is not a matter of the

past being abolished, but rather an abolished future—which is the title of my most recent book.

Perhaps unconsciously following the path blazed by Astrojildo Pereira (1991), at times we imagine a Machado de Assis who points towards the “future”. However, for him the future is the *ritornello* of a wheel that spins without ever freeing those who keep it moving.

As Machado de Assis wrote *Counselor Aires’s Memorial*, the Republic had already shown its claws, which stretched across the country, and the same Republic had already dealt with the “social issue” with a brutality to rival the era of slavery. Justice be done to Astrojildo Pereira, who, albeit misled by the “dialectic elements” of Machado de Assis’s thought, reaffirms the *political* nature of his writing, caught in the impasses of a society that undertook countless revolutions so as to never fulfill them (Pereira, 1991).

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I would like to recall another text by Machado de Assis, written between the diegetic time of *Counselor Aires’s Memorial* (1888-1889, when the narrated story takes place) and its actual writing, which came nearly twenty years after the proclamation of the Republic. I refer to a *crônica* from the series called “A semana”, published in February 1897 in the *Gazeta de Notícias* in Rio.

In a waggish reflection on celebrity, the writer observes a simple woman he had seen in the street, looking for a newspaper with the portrait, in her words, of that man “que briga lá fora” or is fighting out over there (Assis, 2008: 1370). Scolding the less-than-attentive reader, the narrator explains that the man fighting out over there was none other than Antônio Conselheiro, the messianic leader of the revolt of Canudos, an enclave in the backlands of Bahia holding out against republican policy.

We can only wonder if Machado de Assis did indeed see a simple woman on the streets of Rio de Janeiro looking for the image of the famous Antônio Conselheiro:

Leitor obtuso, se não percebeste que “esse homem que briga lá fora” é nada menos que o nosso Antônio Conselheiro, crê-me que és ainda mais obtuso do que pareces. A mulher provavelmente não sabe ler, ouviu falar da seita dos Canudos, com muito pormenor misterioso, muita auréola, muita lenda, disseram-lhe que algum jornal dera o retrato do Messias do sertão, e foi comprá-lo, ignorando que nas ruas só se vendem as folhas do dia. Não sabe o nome do Messias; é “esse homem que briga lá fora”. A celebridade, caro e tapado leitor, é isto mesmo. O nome de Antônio Conselheiro acabará por entrar na memória desta mulher anônima, e não sairá mais. Ela levava uma pequena, naturalmente filha; um dia contará a história à filha, depois à neta, à porta da estalagem, ou no quarto em que residirem.

Esta é a celebridade. Outra prova é o eco de Nova Iorque e de Londres onde o nome de Antônio Conselheiro fez baixar os nossos fundos. O efeito é triste, mas vê se tu, leitor sem fanatismo, vê se és capaz de fazer baixar o menor dos nossos títulos. Habitante da cidade, podes ser conhecido de toda a Rua do Ouvidor e seus arrabaldes, cansar os chapéus, as mãos, as bocas dos outros em saudações e elogios; com tudo isso, com o teu nome nas folhas ou nas esquinas de uma rua, não chegarás ao poder daquele homenzinho, que passeia pelo sertão uma vila, uma pequena cidade a que só falta uma folha, um teatro, um clube, uma polícia e sete ou oito roletas, para entrar nos almanaques. (Assis, 2008: 1370)

It is touching: the “celebrity” of Antônio Conselheiro lies in his having become legend, but it is also in the loyalty that he inspires in the woman of the people, who believes that the “fight” unleashed

in the backlands of Brazil has to do with her. For us, familiar with the masterpiece of Brazilian literature that is *Rebellion in the Backlands* by Euclides da Cunha, it is ironic that Machado de Assis should write in his *crônicas* that perhaps a new Coelho Neto—that is, a skillful writer—might come to enshrine Canudos.

The book by Euclides da Cunha on Canudos would appear five years later, as if responding to Machado’s prophecy. *Rebellion in the Backlands* would be an examination of the chronic inability of the Brazilian Republic to take responsibility for citizenship and shelter those groups of the poor, free and freedmen, who would form the “dangerous classes” of the coming decades, and would be targeted by hygienicist policies, when not simply falling victim to the police or the army.

Social class, race, State neglect: here we have the ciphered equation of the last writings of Machado de Assis.

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Finally, I should like to recall the correspondence between Fradique Mendes, a character created by Eça de Queirós, and Eduardo Prado, dated 1888 and addressed to Brazil:

Quando o império tiver desaparecido, perante a revolução jacobino-positivista que já lateja nas escolas, e que os doutores de pena hão-de necessariamente fazer de parceria com os doutores de espada; quando, por seu turno, essa República jacobino-positivista murchar como planta colocada artificialmente sobre o solo e sem raízes nele, e desaparecer de todo, uma manhã, levada pelo vento europeu e doutoral que a trouxe; e quando de novo, sem luta, e por uma mera conclusão lógica, surgir no Paço de S. Cristóvão um novo imperador ou rei—o Brasil, repito, nesse momento tem uma chance de se desembaraçar do “tapete europeu” que

o recobre, o desfeia, o sufoca. A chance está em que o novo imperador ou rei seja um moço forte, são, de bom parecer, bem brasileiro, que ame a natureza e deteste o livro. (Queirós, 2014: 391-401)

Over a hundred years after the death of Machado de Assis, criticism has lent us enough elements to deepen the investigation of the *abolished future*, which is tied to the slowing-down of time and the sensation that everything is ruled by infidelity. The *rallentando* of *Counselor Aires's Memorial* still bears something of Machado's "classicizing" bent, he himself a lover of books who would cast a suspicious eye on yet another prescription from Eça (this time from Eça's Fradique Mendes, in his correspondence with the great supporter of the Empire Eduardo Prado), this vision of a Brazil finally freed from the European carpet, ready to fly freely toward its destiny.

The *rallentando*, in short, is not an accidental musical side effect, nor the fading strength of an old writer. Time's refusal to move forward, in *Counselor Aires's Memorial*, is the cipher of an age that strode forward at a bold, confident pace, without realizing that the promises made along the way would never be kept.

Machado de Assis speaks to the failure of those promises, which remains, deep down, the failure of our own future.

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ABSTRACT

In Machado de Assis's last novel, *Counselor Aires's Memorial* (1908), the main characters see themselves stuck between, on the one hand, an “abolished past”, which is related to the vanishing Empire and the end of slavery, and, on the other hand, the absence of any future. The sense of hopelessness is conveyed by a powerful poetic depiction of a world that cannot be changed. Therefore, this article aims to show how slowness and the lack of definition in Machado's late production is a cryptic, but profound critique of the unfulfilled promises of the Brazilian Republic.

Keywords: Machado de Assis; *Counselor Aires's Memorial*; history and literature; late style

RESUMO

No último romance de Machado de Assis, o *Memorial de Aires* (1908), os personagens principais se veem presos entre, de um lado, um “passado abolido”, relacionado ao Império que fenecia e ao fim da escravidão, e, de outro lado, a ausência de qualquer futuro. A falta de esperança se expressa por meio da poderosa projeção poética de um mundo que parece jamais poder ser alterado. Assim sendo, o objetivo deste artigo é revelar como a lentidão e a indefinição, na narrativa tardia de Machado de Assis, produzem uma crítica velada, conquanto profunda, das promessas não cumpridas da República brasileira.

Palavras-chave: Machado de Assis; *Memorial de Aires*; história e literatura; estilo tardio