



The historical magic of the wizard of Cosme Velho

Study shows Machado de Assis, novelist or civil servant, as a critic of Brazilian truculence

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t first sight, nothing could be less propitious for literary flights than the dozy atmosphere of a government department. Oddly enough, all that boredom worked miracles for some of our writers, amongst them Drummond, Graciliano, Guimarães Rosa and, now we discover, the wizard of Cosme Velho.

This is the theme of the recently launched *Machado de Assis historiador* [*Machado de Assis the historian*] (Companhia das Letras, 345 pages, R\$ 41.00), by Sidney Chalhoub, who was able to count on the support of FAPESP in his postdoctoral studies at the University of Michigan, USA, where he concluded his research into how the years as head of the snail-paced second section of the Directorate for Agriculture, of the Ministry of Agriculture (between 1870 and 1880), contributed to the making of masterpieces like *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* [*Posthumous memoirs of Bras Cubas*]. "Machado the novelist and Machado the civil servant shared the same ideology: both learnt to expect nothing of any good from the Brazilian slave-owning seigniorial class of the 19th century", says Chalhoub.

The period in which he was at the head of the department coincides with the whole social and political debate waged by the politicians of the Empire, which ended up culminating in the law of September 28, 1871, afterwards called the Law of the Free Womb. Both the "Machados" were involved in the polemics. "The novelist took pride in showing in his writings that the polish and apparent civility of masters and property owners was seated on violence and arbitrariness, and also that it suggested the capacity of its dependents for penetrating this ideology and twisting it in pursuit of their own objectives", he explains.

"The civil servant was working to submit the private power of the masters to the dominion of the law. He believed in the importance of the public authority to discipline seigniorial barbarity." After all, the policy of this elite was based precisely on the inviolability of the will of the masters that, alongside the ideology of its dependents (for whom it was better to agree and to fight on the sly than to face the wrath of the master), gave the new Brazilian social relationships a natural and perennial sense.

"I try to show in the book that one of Machado's objectives is to analyze the ways of day to day political activity of the dependents, men and women, free or

The novelist's writing desk: capable of denouncing the slave-owners crisis



enslaved", says the researcher. In this context, Chalhoub observes, "Machado was capable of 'translating' the complexity of his historical time, of interpreting the connection between things, and of showing the indetermination inherent in the historical experience". Here it is that literature manages to make history, in particular by means of the famous "Machadian dialogs". "The dialogs are an important part of this analytic exercise, since they show dependents seeking to attain their own objectives within the seigniorial ideology, in such a way as not to expose themselves to the characteristically uncivilized retaliation of which property owners and masters of slaves were capable."



To this end, one does not even have to await the great works of his maturity. "A novel like *Helena* is far more complex than one may suspect at first sight. She, for example, when she wants to get something from Estácio, works the situation in such a way as to turn it into a desire of him, Estácio, to do precisely what she, Helena, hopes to be done. In short, everything very subtle, indirect, feigned, like Machadian literature itself", the researcher notes. A literature for attentive eyes, since as Chalhoub says, "perceiving it calls for the reader to decode for himself the greater part of the grimaces and jests that make up the wench's art of resistance, and any reader of the 19th century would know how to observe this appearance going against the grain, and the wizard certainly counted on this observation."

In a way, the historian was the father of the novelist. "The story of Estácio and Helena, rather than a tearful drama of an impossible love, is the description of the period of uncontested hegemony of the seigniorial-slave-owning class, whose deep crisis the novelist had experienced between 1866 and 1871, and whose breaking up he observed with an investigative eye in the 1870s", says the author, for whom Machado de Assis, in writing *Helena*, no longer had any illusions about the continuity of the status quo of power. For Chalhoub, the writer

therefore lets the girl speak for him. But the times were not yet showing a light at the end of the tunnel. "If he no longer has any illusions, Machado suffers with the impasse and sees no alternative, and, accordingly, the protagonist's ambiguity translated the historical experience of a countless number of dependents of those times: seduced by the seigniorial ideology, Helena and her peers could show themselves to be grateful to the masters and resisted shaking the traditional structures."

THE PROJECT

Machado de Assis and
the Emancipation of the Slaves

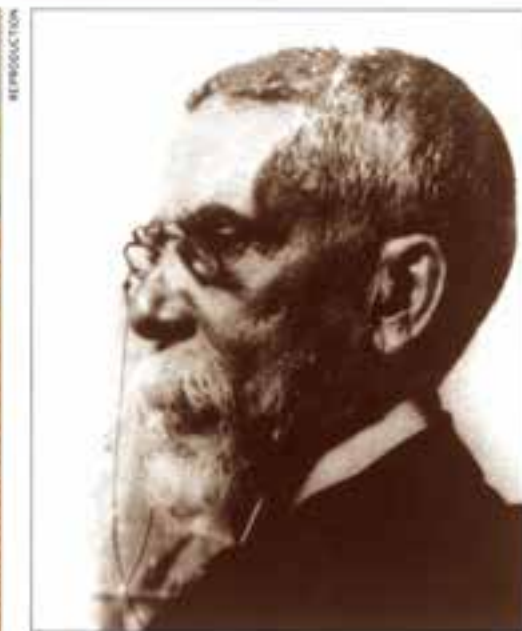
MODALITY
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Nothing more natural: how could one fight against centuries of domination and against a class whose paternalism was configured in a world idealized by the masters, an "imaginary society that they dreamed of making real in daily life", in which everything happened as a function of their desire. Against this, the only thing possible was the "cunning" of the dependents in twisting round the seigniorial will in favor of their own survival. Hence, in the researcher's words, "the challenge of Helena, Luís Garcia, Capitu, José Dias and so many others of asserting their difference in the very center of the rituals of the seigniorial domination". A dangerous theater in which one had to know the limit for living in the midst of violence only by the power of words.

Slavery and freedom - Accordingly, Machadian Brazil was far more than just the masters-slaves dichotomy. There were intermediary conditions between slavery and freedom that, at the



Machado and Rio de Janeiro stamped on a note: to get what they wanted, dependents feigned their discourse

same time that they tinge the traditional view of a society split between masters and slaves, suggest the precariousness inherent to the condition of these dependents." The wizard's great "ploy" arose precisely in the wake of the discussions that he witnessed (and in which he took part) as a civil servant. "The crisis of the seigniorial slave-owning society had its origins basically in the historical process of the emancipation of the slaves". The sorcerer's magic was precisely to go beyond the dichotomy and to perceive the interstices, using this knowledge as raw material for his novels. Hence the novels keep on changing subtly in tone, each one of them, says Chalhoub, "with a social logic of its own; it is important to see the manner they arise in the history of their time, and the manner they rise up against it, trying to understand it and to transform it".

Accordingly, after *Helena*, in *Iaiá Garcia*, from 1878, the narrative now reflects the decisive crisis of paterna-

lism. "The novelty is that the dependents pit themselves against a seigniorial will that is more conscious of itself, aware of the resistance to its designs, and decided to make its authority prevail by means of astuteness and even fraud, not hesitating to coerce the subordinates", the author notes. Everything is consolidated in *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*. "There is the common ground of the criticism of the seigniorial world, now in an almost brutal way, in its exposure of the masters' arbitrariness and violence, but also in its suggestion that there were situations in which the dependents ran rings around the all-powerful Brás Cubas. In *Memórias*, Machado rewrote *Helena* and, if the boy is the father of the man, Brás is the son of Estácio." Little by little, the struggle to corrode the elite became more intense, almost open, and the rotten powers show themselves in their entirety. Brás decides the destiny of the black butterfly like he decides the life of his so-

cial subalterns, and intrigant Mrs. Plácida had only come into existence because there was a need for her to come. Making ill use of the freedom of death, Cubas is a blabbering master, whose revelations of arrogance astonish us for their sincerity.

After the rawness of *Memórias*, Machado does the "cerebral criticism of *Dom Casmurro*, a novel that is as serene as it is surgical in relating the seigniorial horrors. Perhaps an autopsy of the world of the slave masters, since this had vanished, in great measure, at the moment the book was written", the researcher observes. The "political chess game of the dependents" is now bothering the masters, who see treachery and dissimulation in all corners and eyes. "Capitu knew the art of the political dialog. In *Dom Casmurro*, the girl is the mother of the woman. Whenever they are subjects of the story, the dependents betray the masters. If this is the only possible clef, we can breath with relief: Capitu betrayed Bentinho." •