

## A GENEALOGY OF ALFREDO BOSI'S WRITINGS ON THE WORK OF MACHADO DE ASSIS

Hélio de Seixas Guimarães

*Universidade de São Paulo*

**Abstract:** This article traces the development of Alfredo Bosi's critical approach to Machado de Assis's works over four decades, highlighting his initial engagement with the question of whether human behavior is driven by instinct or social forces. It examines Bosi's subsequent focus on the concept of humor, drawing on the work of Alcides Maya and Augusto Meyer, and his exploration of the "stylistics of distancing" in Machado's writing. Guimarães concludes by emphasizing Bosi's later commitment to a multifaceted approach that considers the interplay of individual psychology, social context and literary form to understand Machado de Assis's complex fictional world.

**Keywords:** Machado de Assis, Literary Criticism, Social Hierarchy, Open Realism, Humor

In a 1978 essay that prefaced an anthology of short stories by Machado de Assis, Alfredo Bosi offered a diagnosis and expressed an aspiration concerning the understanding of Machado de Assis's work: "*Sigo notando que no importa mucho para nosotros, hoy día, saber que el contexto condicionante sea explicado por el narrador en términos de un estado natural del hombre. En realidad, si optamos por el otro extremo del proceso, viendo en la competencia social el móvil de las asimetrías, tal vez podamos algún día escribir las debidas interpretaciones, sin olvidar que Marx quiso dedicarle a Darwin El Capital y que fue este último quien no aceptó. Machado de Assis parece haber fundido la naturaleza y la sociedad en la misma imagen.*"<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "Prólogo". In: ASSIS, Machado. *Cuentos* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1978), p. xxxiii; reproduced in "A Máscara e a Fenda" in BOSI, Alfredo et al. *Machado de Assis* (São Paulo: Ática, 1982), pp. 437-57; *Encontros com a Civilização Brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro, n. 17, pp. 117-49, nov. 1979; *O Enigma do Olhar*. 4th ed. (São Paulo: WMF/ Martins Fontes, 2007), pp. 73-125.

This comment suggests that, in the 1970s, readings of Machado de Assis increasingly emphasized social factors to understand the behavior of the Machadean characters. The critic's expressed desire was then for greater balance between explanations based on human nature and those based on the action of social forces on individuals.

Thus, a problem was established that would accompany Bosi's criticism in the several essays he dedicated to Machado de Assis for over four decades: to what extent do the characters created by Machado de Assis act on instinct or respond to social determinations? This marked a new stage for a far-reaching critical discussion on the emphasis on national or universal dimensions of the works of Machado de Assis – and Bosi would play a fundamental role, proposing a permanent relativization of the readings of the Machadean oeuvre based on social or sociological categories.

In the 1978 essay, which would be published in Portuguese in 1982 under the title “A Máscara e a Fenda” [The Mask and the Breach, included in this volume], Bosi observed a growing trend, which had started in the 1930s with the studies of Lúcia Miguel Pereira and Astrojildo Pereira, and gained strength in the 1970s with the newly released books by Raymundo Faoro, *A Pirâmide e o Trapézio* [The Pyramid and the Trapeze] (1974), and by Roberto Schwarz, *To the Victor, the Potatoes!* (1977/1979). Although following different theoretical paths, these critics deepened the connections between the works of Machado de Assis and the Brazilian sociohistorical context, identifying, in social asymmetries, the main motives of Machado de Assis' characters. These were times that brought Assis's realistic dimension to the fore, the turning point of which was Faoro's work.

In the first essay dedicated to Machado, Bosi also emphasizes issues related to social hierarchy. His starting point and main critical framework is the reading of Lúcia Miguel Pereira, who articulates the entirety of Assis's work around issues of ambition and social ascension. It is not by chance that he dedicated “The Mask and the Breach” to her when the text was published, with some modifications, in the collection *O Enigma do Olhar* [The Enigma of the Look] (1999). Yet, already in the first essay, other issues that relativized the social focus merited his attention.

Based on Alcides Maya's reading, Bosi reclaimed the concept of humor as the key source of Machadean prose. Augusto Meyer suggested to him the image of the mask and the idea of masking that would enable the irruption from 1880 on, with *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, of author Machado de Assis' inner demon. Such concepts and images, so dear to Meyer, would have important developments in Bosi's critique, largely based on the dynamics between the mask and the look, respectively metaphors of the constraints of life in society and of what is “human-

like” in the Machadean characters. As for Faoro’s reading, about which he would later write with great admiration,<sup>2</sup> Bosi shared his interest in the moralistic side of Machado, a writer deeply concerned with the human behaviors of his characters and narrators, with whom he has a complex relationship that also involves sympathy rather than only judgment and criticism.

From the contrast between the masquerade and the comprehension of the human condition, Machado’s humor emerged. Bosi studied the topic in detail in the essay “Brás Cubas in Three Versions” (2006), which is included in this volume, drawing on the writings of Augusto Meyer and Luigi Pirandello.

In the opening essay, Bosi explores how characters striving for social ascension come to recognize the need for appearances and adopt the masks necessary for making the transition with minimal suffering. Written during a time of major changes in Brazilian society, the Second Reign (1840-1899), the analyzed short stories depict characters grappling with the dramas of a conscience torn between the traditional morality of sentiments and the new standards of utilitarian morality, emblematic of the triumph of realism and the bourgeoisie.

Class asymmetry is thus identified as the core event of Machado’s early stories, distinguished by characters entangled with strategies of betrayal and deceit, exposing the contradictions between idealizing models and utilitarian practices, aiming to affirm the autonomy of the subject. However, throughout his works, Machado would delve increasingly deeper into “the post-Romantic certainty that the autonomy of the subject is an illusion,” as stated in “The Mask and the Breach,” emphasizing the need for conforming to dominant appearances, to the mask, as a means to succeed, a skill that characters of his later works would master to perfection.

Written almost ten years before “The Mask and the Breach,” the chapter on Machado de Assis in the first edition of *História Concisa da Literatura Brasileira* [Concise History of Brazilian Literature] already bore the influence of Lúcia Miguel Pereira and Augusto Meyer’s essays. Drawing on Pereira’s critical and biographical study, the chapter acknowledges the impact of Machado de Assis’ personal situation on his work as a valid critical assumption, whereby sociological and psychological dimensions converge on both the author and his work. As a literary historian, Bosi prioritizes Machado-artist over Machado-man, corroborating Meyer’s reaction to the biographic mania that predominated in Machadean criticism in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of which Pereira was a leading representative. The author of *História Concisa* follows the paths of the best

---

<sup>2</sup> BOSI, Alfredo. “Raymundo Faoro leitor de Machado de Assis”. *Estudos Avançados*, v. 18, n. 51, pp. 355-76, 2004.

criticism produced until then, defining the central question that would later engross the interpreter of Machado de Assis: calibrating how nature and society affect and respond to the actions of Machado's creatures and investigating each character's room to maneuver – even those within the same social class – among external determinations.

Thus, one issue that impressed the author of *História Concisa* is the “management of distancing” that, from his perspective, accounts for the greatness of the novels written and published after *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, and would reach its zenith in the “absolutely Machadean figure of counselor Ayres.” The character, who is also the narrator and fictional author of *Counselor Ayres' Memorial* will be one of Bosi's greatest points of interest among the whole set of Machado de Assis' characters. The diplomat emerges as an alter ego not only of the writer and his “sharp sense of what is relative,” but also of an inspirational figure for Bosi, the critic Antonio Candido, to whom he, certainly not by chance, dedicates the essay “Uma Figura Machadiana” [A Machadean Figure, included in this volume]. Ayres can also be read as the alter ego of Alfredo Bosi himself, who throughout his career emphasizes the mediation and ambiguity of the Machadean figures, and relativizes any definitive and poignant interpretation. The counselor is also a double of the literary critic, as the one who writes about the act of writing, a mediator, a reflective man.

All these dimensions of Aires emerge from his first reading especially dedicated to *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*, published in 1973 as an introduction to a popular edition of Machado's book in the collection *Bom Livro*, which formed generations of Brazilian readers. In the brief preface, Bosi eschews strict biographic interpretations that link the novel's characters to Machado's life story, and according to which the character Dona Carmo would be molded on Carolina, Machado de Assis' wife. In the narration of *Memorial*, Bosi notes the opening of an “interval between the narrative focus and the object,” which implies distancing and allows us to characterize the “counselor's look” as that of someone who “does not laugh nor cry, does not love nor hate, but understands.”<sup>3</sup> Questions that would permeate all his critical work on Machado de Assis are here configured, and they would be further developed in the essay “The Enigma of the Look” [included in this volume].

The 1973 “management of distancing” would lead, in 1999, to the proposition, made in “The Political Theater of Machado de Assis”, of a “stylistics of distancing” that would characterize Machado's writing, in which movements of approximation and distancing by the characters and

---

<sup>3</sup> “Apresentação”. In: ASSIS, Machado. *Memorial de Aires*. São Paulo: Ática, 1973, p. 5.

narrators track or match the narrated topics. These movements will also be associated with a phenomenology of the look – of the writer and of his narrators. According to Bosi, their involvement with what is narrated and experienced is dynamic and not determined by a univocal point of view, which a predominantly sociological reading would tend to fixate based on a social characterization of narrators and characters considered as types.

In a different sense to that of readings derived from the study by Helen Caldwell, which took the category of unreliable narrators in the interpretation of *Dom Casmurro* to its ultimate consequences, Bosi sustains that Machado does not see the characters Brás Cubas and Bento Santiago from a fixed point, at a distance, as execrable beings to be execrated by the readers. Writer, narrators, characters and also us, readers, share the same human nature. Bosi's critique converges once again with that of Augusto Meyer, for whom Brás Cubas represents the author's demonic side, his Daimon, "the subterranean man," and not something or someone apart from the author, who faces his creatures from a distance, enabling them to criticize Brazilian society or capitalism, which is the core of readings that emphasize the sociohistorical dimensions, especially those of Roberto Schwarz.

For Bosi, the relationship of Machado the author with his narrators (which sometimes coincides and sometimes differs from those of Machado the man) is not one of dissociation, nor of mutual distancing, which would then ultimately serve to denounce the abject practices of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Brazilian elite, of which characters such as Brás Cubas and Dom Casmurro would be representative types, skillfully created by the writer as class enemies. According to Bosi, the author's relationship with these narrators is marked by circumspection, which implies distancing and understanding, criticism as well as compassion. The author oscillates between movements of distancing from and approximation to the narrator, in accordance with the very movements of the narrator, who gets closer to and moves away from himself as a character when reflecting on past experiences, which are the main focus of the narration. That would be enough, as Bosi states in "The Enigma of the Look," to make the social type dialectical.

Bosi analyzes this dynamic of distancing and approximation, drawing attention to the particularities of tone, especially in *Dom Casmurro*, as he does in "The Enigma of the Look:

In the case of *Dom Casmurro*, the idea of author-narrator division involves another order of difficulties. The novel has its own logic: Bentinho is not a replica of Brás Cubas, and it is necessary to reflect on the difference so as not to judge the narrator solely according to his class type.

Machado chose to reconstruct, deepen and nuance the inner story of the narrative voice, which renders a vacillating Bentinho, vulnerable, fearful, if not shy, from the very beginning of his familial relationships, impressionable to the extreme and, for a long time, in love with the girl of humble origins whom he desires to marry and does indeed marry, enjoying a few years of marital bliss. It is a tale of love, suspicion, jealousy and desire for revenge, not a chronicle of sensual affairs and satiety interspersed with cynical comments, like that of Brás Cubas. To ignore or disqualify the tone in which the drama is narrated, and to suppose that the author has all along forged a contemptibly captious narrator to whom all credit must be refused, is to push the hypothesis of dissociation to problematic extremes.

Bosi thus refutes the hypothesis of an authorial consciousness that would somehow act against this narrator, being critical of his class position. The most emphatic refutation of this interpretative hypothesis would come in 2002, in an essay that defends the absence of class prejudice between the families of Bentinho and Capitu, and, furthermore, sees sincere joy in how Bentinho's mother expresses herself when predicting her son's marriage to Capitu:

To state that Dom Casmurro deceives us, readers, because he is an imposter and a charlatan, is to convert the drama into an insensitive farce, an ultra-ideological, unrealistic hypothesis that tends to replace flesh-and-blood characters with allegories of social class.<sup>4</sup>

This hypothesis would have to assume an idealistic author who created a realistic narrator "to better condemn him in the light of an exemplary moral perspective according to which the bad guys must be and will be punished for their conduct," as he states in "The Enigma of the Look." For Bosi, these entities are not dissociable, and he believes that the ideological place from which the man and author Machado de Assis saw and judged interpersonal relationships was not as marked or determined, but was rather broad, ambivalent and ambiguous.

In the first edition of "The Mask and the Breach," Bosi pointed out in Machado's first works of fiction certain contradictions between "the idealizing clichés" and "a perfectly utilitarian class conduct," and, in the later works, the convergence between the "ideology of fatalism and the

---

<sup>4</sup> BOSI, Alfredo. *Machado de Assis*. São Paulo: Publifolha, 2002, p. 67.

counter-ideology of mockery,” concluding that “Machado is certainly neither utopian nor revolutionary (to the extent that the latter approaches the idea of utopia): he proposes nothing, expects nothing, believes nothing.”

From his earliest writings, Bosi depicts Machado as a skeptic who does not believe in or expect anything, and sees no prospect whatsoever of redemption or overcoming. Thus, Bosi dismisses any possibility, on the part of the writer, of a univocal perspective or conclusion regarding the historical process or to politics. Instead, he portrays an acute observer of his surroundings, whose representations are free from peremptory judgment, endowing Machado’s work with a rare capacity to apprehend reality in its most diverse aspects and dimensions and placing him in a unique position among realistic writers.

Although he defined Machado de Assis’ fiction as “the most balanced pinnacle of Brazilian realistic prose” in his *História Concisa da Literatura Brasileira*, in later essays Bosi was more specific in his interpretation of Machadean realism. In “The Enigma of the Look,” he states that it is an *open realism* that does not exclude, a priori, any aspect of the real. In that essay, *open realism* encompasses other dimensions of reality, rather than merely the organization of society into classes or a coherent and distanced view of political and social processes:

The novel is the place where the two narrative models intersect, the conventional realist and the resistant or stoic realist. The intersection densifies to the threshold of an enigma the meaning of the author’s look, which is always a problem and always requires an interpretation. Pascal, a Jansenist, and the skeptical moralists of the seventeenth century, such as La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère, also admitted, when elaborating their ethical phenomenology, the existence of rare souls that are able to resist themselves and the “world” (by grace or by intimate pride), alongside an absolute majority that sags under the weight of their common mortal condition of selfishness and its coterie of trickery and villainy.

The fact that the former interact with the latter in the same society, and even in the same family circle, gives Machado’s realism a breadth and a diversity of psychological modulations that any unitary and sharp definition of his perspective is problematic. Perhaps it is feasible to say that Machado’s universalizing aim, so keen in laying bare the “moi haïssable,” dialectically transcends (while preserving outdated elements on

a different level) the dominant typological schemes by which there would only be two characters on stage: Brazilian paternalism and European liberalism. These abstract and necessary figures of interpretation are insufficient to capture the concrete richness of fictional individuals.

Although Bosi acknowledges the existence of types in Machado's works, his emphasis is on the uniqueness of the characters and their psychological and existential complexities that bring them closer to human beings in their singularity, ineffableness and indefinableness.

Bosi argues that, in Machado, characters from the same social strata do not behave in similar ways, and mentions several heroines from his early novels – Guiomar, Helena, Estela. All of them are poor, but they have very diverse reactions and behaviors toward the rich and potential possibilities for social ascension. Likewise, and this is quite emphasized both in "The Enigma of the Look" and in "Brás Cubas in Three Versions," Brás Cubas and Bento Santiago are notably distinct characters, even though they are both men of the elite.

More recently, Bosi reexamined the behavioral patterns of characters in the final chapter of *Ideologia e Contraideologia* [Ideology and Counter-ideology], titled "Um Nó Ideológico" ["An Ideological Knot," included in this volume], where he discusses the oscillations in Brás Cubas' awareness regarding Eugênia, which are not restricted to class differences. According to Bosi, these are existential and moral oscillations that incorporate and transcend the social typology of the narrator-protagonist in his role as an idle rentier. This becomes clear when one considers Machado's cultural background, which draws on French moralism and the English humorous lineage. Bosi contends it is a matter of observing the social asymmetries and the various ways they resonate within the characters, who are not gobbled up by their types precisely because they can reflect on themselves and their experiences.

In a more abstract dimension, for Bosi, the meaning of great literature is not depleted when it apprehends the dominant ideological framework, as in Machado de Assis. Literature is great precisely because it is also able to capture the counter-ideological dimensions of its time through the plurality of voices that necessarily compose a great work of art. Corroborating in his critique the readings of the fundamental Italian theorists Francesco De Sanctis and Benedetto Croce, Bosi states that the counter-ideological dimension gains strength from its contrast with the ideological one, a dynamic that a hermeneutic critic must be able to deal with, and he duly emphasizes an aspect of literature that seems fundamental to him: resistance to oppression and dominant values.



Underlying this critical approach is the category of intuition, which comes from Croce, for whom “art is intuition.” With Croce, Bosi shares a radically anti-positivist stance, which contrasts with sociological interpretations that emphasize the idea of “objective form,” according to the Marxist tradition. In Bosi’s criticism, as a reference prior even to Croce, we find the formulations of Francesco De Sanctis, for whom the artistic form is irreducible to general ideas or allegories. Intuition is one of the foundations of Bosi’s critique, which points to a dimension of human (and also authorial) experience that eschews pure objectivity and rationality, opening a possibility of subjective and, ultimately, even irrational understanding that points to the enigma, a notion precious to him.

If the local and historical reference (Rio de Janeiro in the Second Empire) is “almost everything,” Bosi argues in “The Enigma of the Look” that it is not everything; after all, Machado’s work is intelligible in other languages, cultures, times, and places very different from those that were part of its production.

Machado de Assis’ main object is human behavior. This horizon is reached through the perception of words, thoughts, works and silences of men and women who lived in Rio de Janeiro during the Second Empire. The local and historical reference is no less important; and for the sociological criticism it is almost everything. [...] If today we can incorporate the Machadean look of a century ago into our societal perceptions, it is because his look was permeated with values and ideals whose dynamism was not exhausted in the spatiotemporal framework in which it was applied. Wide and deep, therefore, is the field of “almost” in that almost-everything.

By polemicizing with sociohistorical criticism, which identifies a fundamentally mimetic and allegorical intent and a predominant satirical tone in the text of Machado de Assis, often construed as a denunciation of Brazilian social formation, Bosi emphasizes its psycho-existential dimensions and humorous tone, arguing that there is also acceptance and understanding by the author and his narrators of the very object of criticism. Thus, objectification in the form is not the gist of it, as proposed, for instance, by Roberto Schwarz, nor is the definition of authorial intent, as stated by John Gledson, but rather a phenomenological apprehension, the description of a perspective in motion, which is that of Machado, of the critic and should also be adopted by the

readers. Critical interest, therefore, oscillates between the authorial instance, thought of as variable, incongruent, multiple, human, and the reader, who must be capable of understanding and accepting this oscillation without wanting to produce a final explanation or determine a closed meaning for the text.

Seeking a hermeneutic perspective on the “three dimensions” of literary texts – the representative or mimetic, the expressive or existential, and the constructive or formal –, Bosi understands that, dialectically, the critical accentuation of only one of these aspects, whether through a sociological/historical or psychological/existential or formal/intertextual slant, will always be insufficient, and argues that other viewpoints are required.

Thus, likewise, but rather than specifying the links between Machado’s oeuvre and the Brazilian way of life, a trend that predominated in Machadean studies since the 1970s, the general movement of Bosi’s readings is to mitigate not only what he considers an overvaluation of the mimetic dimension, but also the effort to determine a univocal ideological vector. This also implied the relativization of realism based on social differences and the weight of worldly issues on the characters’ behavior.

Relativization, a constant gesture in Bosi’s readings, becomes even clearer after the publication of “Brás Cubas in Three Versions,” in which, as the title indicates, three dimensions for reading the novel are explored: the intertextual, also defined as constructive, mainly by José Guilherme Merquior, Enylton de Sá Rego and Sergio Paulo Rouanet; the one based on the moral and cognitive motivations of humor, which could be called expressive, represented by Alcides Maya and Augusto Meyer; and the sociohistorical one, defined as mimetic, undertaken by Lúcia Miguel Pereira, Astrojildo Pereira, Raymundo Faoro, John Gledson and Roberto Schwarz. Without dismissing any of them, but gravitating toward the expressive approach, Bosi proposes a more balanced reading encompassing the formalist, psycho-existential and mimetic dimensions. In “Brás Cubas in Three Versions,” he suggests a fourth dimension, outlined in the essay “Machado de Assis na Encruzilhada dos Caminhos da Crítica” [Machado de Assis at the Crossroads of Criticism]: the dialogic dimension, that of readers in different times and places who have been assigning various meanings to and emphasizes on the multiple aspects of Machado de Assis’ prismatic text.

Since Alfredo Bosi wrote the preface that is at the origin of “The Mask and the Breach,” the field of literary studies has increasingly tended toward a greater specialization of its objects and methods, leading to a proliferation of theoretical and critical frameworks regarding the work of Machado de Assis. Bosi’s critical work has resonated in recent decades, attentive and sensitive to

changes, while maintaining an admirable coherence between its hermeneutic principles and the attempt to apprehend, in the work of Machado de Assis, the dynamic balance between society and nature, type and person, realism and universalism.

**Hélio de Seixas Guimarães** is a professor at the University of São Paulo (USP), researcher at CNPq and vice director of the Biblioteca Brasileira Guita e José Mindlin, at USP. He is the author of *Machado de Assis, o escritor que nos lê* (Editora Unesp, 2017) and *Os leitores de Machado de Assis* (Nankin/Edusp, 2004; 2nd ed. 2012), among other books and articles. He recently organized the collection *Todos os Livros de Machado de Assis*, published by the Todavia and Itaú Cultural. He was a visiting professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Tinker Visiting Professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Translated from the Portuguese by Tiki Net and reviewed by Carlos Malferrari.

This publication was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.