

Ex Cathedra Stories by Machado de Assis

Introduction

Now and then, man, nature, fate, and free will conspire to produce an unlikely genius in an unlikely place. If Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis had written the story of his own life, he may well have built the plot around such a conspiracy — a society in transition, nature besieged by science, dumb luck introducing a poor boy to language and literature, and self-generated gumption thrusting him up the rungs of the social ladder.

Machado de Assis, as he came to identify himself, was born on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro in 1839. His father, a son of former slaves, was a housepainter of African and European race, his mother a Portuguese washerwoman from the Azores. Young Joaquim attended public school but did not do well. His mother died when he was ten. His father later married a woman of his own racial background, a candy-maker at a girls school. There the boy received what could be called informal education — lessons overheard from other rooms.

But a priest with whom he served mass taught him Latin, and then a local baker, an immigrant, taught him French. As a polyglot adolescent, he was later able to teach himself English and German. Words became important to him. He befriended a man who owned a bookstore, newspaper, and printing business who would publish one of the fifteen-year-old's poems in his newspaper. A year later the young man landed an apprenticeship as a typesetter at the government's official publication agency. From

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the fringes of the publishing industry, writing was a natural next step, one he took with the motley baggage of personal tragedy, Catholicism, language, government bureaucracy, and all his eager eyes had observed around him.

He found himself on a lot of fringes. He was born a year before Dom Pedro II became the second and last emperor of Brazil. Brazil itself seemed on the fringe of western civilization, on the wrong side of the equator, with a language not widely spoken in the rest of the world. Its society went through considerable transition during his lifetime, moving from monarchy to republic, from slave-holding to free, from agrarian to industrial, from horse and carriage to leadership in aviation.

One of the most significant transitions — one still underway — became the underlying tension of Assis's fiction: the shift from the hierarchical strictures of Portuguese tradition to a society liberating itself into modernity and its own cultural identity. In almost every story he wrote, people are clinging to the cultural anchor from which their human nature is trying to free itself. Tradition and ancient values pull them one way while passion and independence pull them another. It was a cultural *feijoada* that encompassed the *cangaceiro* as much as the *carioca*.

It is said that Machado de Assis never traveled more than a day from where he was born. His world was Rio, but it was a world complete with all the social squirmings, the political conflicts, the clashing of values, the tides of history, people's efforts to rise above themselves and the muck they held so dearly.

Who better to observe and interpret this upheaval than a man born at the bottom and working his way into the muddle of the middle class? A liberal who adhered to the old monarchy, Machado de Assis questioned the ability of the *hoi polloi* to organize their own lives, let alone their own government. His characters were anti-heroes creating their own problems, people steeped in gossip, their petty pursuits befuddled by their own flaws — vanity, jealousy, hypocrisy, passion, pride, greed, envy, shame, fear, anxiety, and others we have yet to define. Twenty-five years before Freud's pronouncements, he depicted the rumble of ego, *superego*, and the un-

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derlying id, forces he found parallel in personalities, society, and politics.

He was more than a prefrontal Freud. Literary critics have compared him to Chekhov, Dickens, Voltaire, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Barthelme, Beckett, Gogol, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Victor Hugo, Henry James, Vladimir Nabokov, Mark Twain, Jonathan Swift, and Laurence Sterne. Phillip Roth compared him to Beckett. Allen Ginsburg compared him to Kafka. Susan Sontag, John Barth, Salman Rushdie, Carlos Fuentes, and José Saramago expressed their admiration. Harold Bloom called him “a kind of miracle, another demonstration of the autonomy of literary genius in regard to time and place, politics and religion. Woody Allen ranked the novel *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* as one of the five most influential books he’d ever read. Once one considers that, every time the narrator of an Assis story suddenly addresses the reader, one can see Woody Allen, as actor, turning to the camera to tell the audience what’s really going on.

Critics have labeled Machado de Assis a realist for his descriptions of life as it is and for his rejection of standard (i.e. formerly realistic) concepts of beauty and propriety. They have also labeled him an anti-realist for his stories’ hallucinant appearances of insects expressing opinions, gods wrestling with their own myths, a king and queen exchanging souls, the icons of saints discussing their loss of belief in men, and Alcibiades returning to Earth to tell a historian that Athens, too, had idiots.

At the same time, his stories often blaze with mundanity. The reader comes into a story as if walking in on an argument in progress, a play that started before the curtain rose, characters with baggage the reader can only assume. Maybe not much is happening, but it’s happening very fast. An old man reads too much, and then his orphaned godson arrives on a rented mule. A romantic suitor suddenly joins the army and goes off to war. A shy man gets a taste of popularity. A priest compulsively researches the stories of his flock. Through characters engrossed in the banal we delve into the depths of the human experience where souls, by definition, cannot be mundane.

One of literature’s mysterious ironies is the common tendency for writers to be a bit removed from the humanity they explore so deeply. Machado

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de Assis was no exception. Though immersed in the social sea of late 19th century Rio, he was, in ways, incommunicado. He was shy, short, slight, fragile. He stuttered. His eyesight failed with age. He was the wrong color in a time of slavery, which wasn't abolished until 1888. And once in a while his epilepsy took him on forays to a dark and secret place, a petite mort metaphorically akin to the one Roland Barthes called the objective of reading literature. In fact, his epiphanic moment, when he abandoned his silly romanticism and adopted a more serious literary vision, came to him as he recovered from a destating illness at a sanitarium outside of Rio in 1880. Though too weak to hold a pen, he was able to stutter to his wife his defining masterpiece, *Brás Cubas*, a tale told from the perspective of the dead.

Not ten years after the end of slavery in Brazil, this grandson of slaves helped found the Brazilian Academy of Letters, and he served as its first president as the 19th century turned into the 20th. His fellow founders were intellectual monarchists who shared his fear that Brazilians were not capable of governing themselves. Their fears were as prescient as his insights into society and the soul. Brazilians would treasure him through a tumultuous century and then into the next. They still hold him dear. He still lives, and for that matter, so does Brazil.

Glenn Alan Cheney

