

LITERATURE AND DIFFERENCE: A CONVERSATION WITH ALFREDO BOSI

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Alfredo Bosi was born in 1936 and is today one of Brazil's most important intellectuals. Professor of literature at the University of São Paulo and member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, he is the author of *História Concisa da Literatura Brasileira* [*Concise History of Brazilian Literature*] as well as of a number of books of essays, including *O Ser e o Tempo da Poesia* [*Being and Time of Poetry*] and *Dialética da Colonização* [*Dialectic of Colonization*] (translated into French and Spanish). The text that follows brings together two moments in a long series of interviews I conducted with Bosi in São Paulo in August and September 2005, which will soon be published in book form.

A broad range of topics was covered during these interviews. He talked of his studies in Italy in the 1960s; the influence of his readings of Croce and Gramsci; his theses on Pirandello and Leopardi; his return to Brazil; intellectual resistance and academic experience during the military dictatorship; literature and resistance; intellectuals and popular culture; the crisis of the “subject” in contemporary life; the writing of *Dialética da Colonização*; the Christian sources of his political militancy; the influences of other critics; the critical reception of Machado de Assis and Antônio Vieira; relationships between criticism and poetry; the history of literary criticism in Brazil; positivism and the “Estado-providência” in Brazilian political experience; contemporary debates on literature; and questions about the translatability and contact among different intellectual traditions.

In this summary, I have transcribed the parts of our conversation where Bosi talked about the sensitive question of the “universality” of literature, by discussing two Brazilian authors, Machado de Assis and Guimarães Rosa.

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PMM: Numerous aspects of the field of studies on Machado de Assis have been discussed, including ruptures, differences and proximities. But one aspect has been worked at greater length, albeit quite confusedly, and that is the universality of Machado de Assis. This issue has a special flavor when one looks at Brazilian literature from another country, especially when one is immersed in an academic culture that is part of a hegemonic language, English. In addition, the Machado de Assis who is cultivated by a certain Brazilian pride is often seen as an author whose universality redeems us as a “lesser” people with a “lesser” literature. Setting aside patriotic pride, does the issue of the universality of Machado de Assis make sense? And if it does, what is universal about him?

AB: The question makes sense, and even more so when it comes from outside Brazil. In Brazil—and this reading was already present in Machado’s time—we tend to see him as a writer who stands out from the Romantics who came before him and, in particular, from José de Alencar. The Brazilian tradition at the time was to “discover Brazil” through the Romantics. Later the regionalists, who were Machado de Assis’s contemporaries, appeared on the scene. It was then that the Machadian *difference* was felt in Brazilian literature. José Veríssimo (1857-1916) perceived this very clearly. He was more than lucid, to the point of closing his history of literature with Machado de Assis. This was extraordinary given the times because usually only the great literary currents were studied. Veríssimo could have easily closed his history of Brazilian literature with the literary movements of his own day, but he chose to do a monographic study on Machado de Assis. Veríssimo felt the impact of the difference between Machado and other writers. In our parochial Brazilian literary history, Veríssimo was therefore one of the writers most responsible for the realization one has when reading Machado, in comparison with other writers of the same or of earlier periods. He perceived that there was something in Machado

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that seemed universal to him, namely, his descent into motives. Veríssimo, who was not a critic with a sociological formation like Sílvio Romero (1851-1914), did not see this as something that could be reduced to a local peculiarity. He felt that when Machado descended to the motives for human behavior, that are so often repressed, he was entering the tradition of European psychological novels. José Veríssimo realized that, behind Machado de Assis, there had been Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens, the English novel, and the illustrated philosophical tradition, with all their penetrating analyses of behavior.

The first universalism of Machado de Assis was felt by José Veríssimo, since he contrasted him to other Brazilian writers, especially those who were still holding firmly to Indianism and regionalism or, at the other extreme, to a naturalism imported from France. In fact, romantic literature had rediscovered Brazil by mythicizing the Indians and the descendants of whites and Indians, who had been chosen to represent the country. This was José de Alencar's great dream, as he stated in the preface to his book *Sonhos d'Ouro* [*Golden Dreams*] (1872). But, for a number of reasons, Machado tried to delve further down into the meaning of local behavior, through psychological and moral analysis.

Later, the criticism of Alcides Maya (1878-1944), an important precursor of Augusto Meyer (1902-1970), came to the fore. According to Maya, universalism is contained, or represented, by *humor*: humor as the dissolution of any certainty. Alcides Maya, who was very erudite, was trying to get to the sources of Machado's humor. He studied a great deal of European humor, from Rabelais to Swift, and then went on to nineteenth-century writers in an attempt to show that there is a characteristic in Machado that is not common in Brazilian literature, namely, the breaking down of people's behavior. So the "internal frays" of Machado's critics became the following: is it English humor or not? If it is English, as Sílvio Romero would say, it should be disposed of! But, deep down, Sílvio Romero is such a bad critic that we can even make use of this characteristic. He says such drastic things that they must mean something. Romero's reaction to Machado de Assis was that of a nationalist fighting against something he considered was not

authentically Brazilian. All that sadness could not be “ours.” Sílvio Romero helped us greatly with this error, because, by suggesting what there is of English in Machado [his humor], he makes us answer in the negative, that it is neither English nor even artificial. It is a cognitive and expressive achievement that an Englishman can understand. Or that an American can understand, as Susan Sontag inferred. But one can see that Sílvio Romero consolidated, in a very narrow sense, the idea that Machado did not correspond to the tradition of the Brazilian romance. Only much later—and I feel that the idea of a “formation of Brazilian literature,” extrapolating assertions by Antonio Candido, was responsible for this focus—scholars began to see Machado de Assis as a complement to Alencar, but this thesis seems partial to me (and I hope its renowned defenders will forgive me). I think that the differences are so basic that the similarities are limited to a superficial level. But there are questions related to social asymmetry that are resolved in Alencar’s text in a way that is opposite to that used by Machado de Assis. They may approximate each other through themes—marrying for money, the problem of infidelity, etc.—but the difference is so great, a difference of tone, of perspective, of ideological horizon, that I prefer the idea of a discontinuity.

PMM: But in respect to this, would you go so far as to accept Roberto Schwarz’s criticism? He sees in Alencar a type of counterpart, or almost a sparring partner for Machado de Assis. Machado is what José de Alencar is not...

AB: It’s not a question of devaluing either one. Alencar is an author who is still worth reading. He published three or four very interesting novels and, at least publicly, Machado venerated Alencar. He said that the silence of their contemporaries would be compensated by glory from future generations. Alencar was strongly opposed and surrounded by controversy during his lifetime. His pride was hurt in many different ways. Even so, when you read José de Alencar and when you read the regionalists who were his contemporaries, or the regionalist contemporaries of Machado, you can feel the *discontinuity*—and this is a concept that should be explored further. I’m just

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using a simple word, but it's a very controversial word. I'm saying that the fact that literary history is discontinuous, with interruptions and new beginnings, has to be faced. Traditional literary history, especially from the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, ignores, or reacts to, the idea of discontinuity. It's always trying to find the links, to see where one writer generates another and how one theme gives rise to another. This is a trivial and very risky historicism because, with such a complex phenomenon as Machado, it sends us off only to look for the connections. But even in the so-called first-phase novels [before the *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* came out in 1881], there was the internal tension of the characters. There was suffering, which was not resolved like it would be in *Alencar*. People who in one way or another don't accept living in a climate of favors have a dramatic fate that conservative Romanticism wouldn't want to give them, because this Romanticism would either idealize them or give them a happy ending. But in Machado, some of the characters carry with them an uncomfortable tension, especially some of his women. This is especially true, for example, in an extraordinary novel, *Casa Velha* (and nobody knows when it was written, whether before or after *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*). In *Casa Velha* the main character resists taking part in the system of favors because her feelings were hurt, and even after the young man declares his love for her and after the nagging mother-in-law accepts her, she still prefers to marry a poor man. This is very uncomfortable from a Romantic point of view. Discontinuity in Machado is very strong and has been seen as universality.

In the 1930s, when studies by Augusto Meyer appeared, this was taken to extremes. One might say today that Meyer was a reader who sees Brazilian literature from the point of view of comparative literature. (I wonder why nobody has ever written a thesis about this). He was concerned with affinities with Dostoyevsky and Pirandello, and what he did from the critical perspective was suddenly to put Machado in the position of an author who dialogues with Pirandello, Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky. These are imaginary dialogues that, the more imaginary they are, the more they show the need to

universalize Machado. Meyer perceived what there was of the Pirandellian conflict between life and form, and the masks people need to survive. But whereas Pirandello is tragic, there is a stoic acceptance of the need for the mask in Machado. This can be seen, for example in the case of Counselor Aires [a character in Machado's last novel, *Memorial de Aires* (1908)], for whom one must live with masks. It's impossible to be unmasked all the time.

PMM: Is there anything underneath the masks in Machado?

AB: The need to live, the need for pleasure. It's an instinct for power and for life that is found together with other instincts for living and having power that are right next to them. That is exactly where society creates social roles that people can't destroy. People live out the difference between being and seeming, but in an asymmetrical society. Some can cynically show what they are, while others, in one way or another, hypocritically have to hide what they are.

PMM: So where is the *subject* in Machado if such an instance or category is still valid?

AB: I've never answered that question... Machado writes his literature on the basis of the will to live, to have pleasure, sometimes to kill one's neighbor. The savage will and the mask, side by side, constitute the subject. This is why it is such a strange subject, a subject that dares not speak its name and is always mediated by other masks. Sometimes the masquerade works, as it did for Fidélia and Tristão, in *Memorial de Aires*, but sometimes it does not, as is the case of our beloved Rubião, in *Quincas Borba* [published in 1891]. Sometimes it only works cynically, as it did in the case of Palha and his wife, also in *Quincas Borba*, who moved up in life without remorse. But not Rubião. Rubião got to the point where everything was an illusion, a meaningless flattery, and he realized it, in his madness. If you ask where the subject is in Machado, I'd say: the word is division. Think about the case of Brás Cubas: he lives through all that, as a cynic, a rich man (which sociology studies very well), but after his death he shows what a cad he was. At the same time, he relativizes himself, remembering

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that he was just a man... *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* is an admirable book because it is consciousness looking at life, sometimes accusing, sometimes covering up for what it did. This constitutive duality permeates the subject. Read the book again and you'll see where the living self is and where the dead self is. This is because the critical self is a strategically dead self. Augusto Meyer very aptly says that people who watch themselves live don't live, because they're always analyzing and breaking down the meanings of their own words, actions and silences.

PMM: Machado, throughout his work, seems increasingly to want to conceal himself as a writer.

AB: In this aspect, he's a moralist: he suspects that after the final countdown we have no salvation. We want to live "naturally," but we can't, because in society the only way you can live is through interpersonal relationships. In one way or another you have to have your public identity. For Pirandello, this is a tragedy. Rousseau had already supposed that the social contract would make these relationships possible. Christianity teaches that only God can save us from this radical selfishness, as St. Augustine so aptly put it. The moment man becomes aware of himself, he perceives that he is a plaything of the passions. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French moralists admirably formulated these perceptions of the self.

To sum up, the universal in Machado de Assis is the point where Brazilian literature accedes to the relationship between unconscious forces and the conscious mask. This is a universal moment. I think we can find this degree of self-reflection in all cultures because there is not a single culture where the self lives spontaneously. All cultures involve social constriction. They all imply socialization, some more oppressively or ritualistically, others more cordially, more loosely. This is why babies are born crying. The socialization of childhood is full of suffering.

PMM: But there is something more in Machado, beyond this conflict between the mask and the subject, between the mold and the form of the self. In Machado, in his narrations, the

writer himself is aware of his writing, and in writing there is no room for wagers. Writing leaves us no other alternative but to play the game of masks. Thinking of Counselor Aires, Machado's final murmur is a Mephistophelean bet. It is absolutely perverse, about the fidelity of a woman among dead men, among decomposed bodies.

AB: I think Machado is resigned. You only have to listen to the *tone* of his writing. It's clear that, if you dig down, you can find accusations, and this is what leftist sociological criticism wants to show: Machado is constantly decrying. But actually he sees nothing that can go beyond social asymmetry. An "accusation" without a project is always enigmatic and tormenting. In the case of *Memorial de Aires*, the Aguiars, the couple that ends up alone—recall that "their consolation was missing themselves [consolava-os a saudade de si mesmos]." At least they had the affectionate intimacy between husband and wife that consoled them faced with that "sublimated" ingratitude. But who, at the end, could accuse that ungrateful couple [Tristão and Fidélia, in the plot of *Memorial de Aires*]? They just followed their fate. What about the two old people? There is a tear there when, at the end of the novel, Counselor Aires walks by and sees the two alone.

PMM: Is there a tear at the end of *Memorial de Aires*?

AB: The counselor sheds a tear, since he didn't have the courage to go in when, in the final scene in the book, he sees the two old people alone, the antithesis of orphans. At least I shed a tear.

PMM: Let's go back to the matter of the universalization of human experience and, therefore, to the question of the specific aspect of cultural formations. I would like you to think about the contemporary scene, imagined on the horizon of theories of literature, based on a certain bias that is strangely reputed as universal. It is specifically the agenda of theoretical discussions that is dictated in some way by the American academy. Is there some way to imagine that your reflections in *Dialética da Colonização* might be related, even if indirectly, to the critique of essences? This critique seems to be one of the pillars of this

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field that is so well developed in the world of Anglo-Saxon cultural criticism, which, for some years now, has appeared to be flowing into so-called postcolonial studies. When re-proposing the matrix of hybridism in new forms, aren't you going deeper down into the strangeness and finally into the refusal of fixed identities and of the teleology of national discourse?

AB: In spite of the different theoretical sources, I suppose there might be some affinity between my considerations and a more recent stage in cultural studies, to the extent that the very idea of identity is questioned. If we studied Brazilian culture and went back to the fixation of African or indigenous identities, we would be regressing, almost touching on racial determinism again, but this time on the basis of cultural determinism. This wouldn't be good from the point of view of political ethics (forming intolerant fields, which sometimes actually do arise). But neither would it be good from the viewpoint of cultural reality itself. In the case of Brazil, for example, if I read Guimarães Rosa, I don't come across any racial identity, and maybe not even cultural-spatial identity, even though Rosa's "*Mineiridade*" [the characteristic of being from the State of Minas Gerais, Brazil] is sometimes evoked. All this leads to fetishism. What I find there is extraordinary cultural fermentation created by a very cultured man who has read a great many different things, from Homer to Ezra Pound and from Dante to Joyce. And he has an amazing memory. He is therefore a man who carries Western culture within him, but who also observes local facts that might otherwise appear very particular. If we see these aspects as folkloric facts (each of those moments, all those beliefs that appear in his stories), this could lead to the idea that he is dealing with Brazilian images, specifically, images from Minas Gerais. But handled by such a cultured and universal spirit like his, they appear as existential ways out that can be read by people of any culture. Like the case of the drama of the pact with the devil, for example, a Faustian theme. What can always be said is that Guimarães Rosa arrived at the universal by delving into the regional.

PMM: You touched on a very thorny problem, especially in the case of Guimarães Rosa: the problem of translation. How is it possible to translate Guimarães Rosa?

AB: It's an enormous undertaking, but I don't think it's impossible. Certainly the universalization he gives to the pact with the devil is translatable. But certain particularities, the sound of language, lead us to a discussion that I think is fascinating. Once, when I was giving a talk in Italy about this problem of translation, I jokingly mentioned the taste of barbecued meat, or of Brazilian *feijoada*. The closer we come to bodily, or physical sensations, the more localized our sensations become, and the words that define this perception come closer and closer to the bodily domain. Otherwise we could go to the domain of ideas, as if the body had various levels, some of which can't be translated into another language because they are so closely related to the senses and are on a different plane from universal language. Literature does indeed deal with this plane, but not only with it. Guimarães Rosa's effort was to universalize and to tell urban people like us about purely local situations. And he succeeds in doing this by translating these situations into "literary" Portuguese, a language that is understandable here in São Paulo, for example. These impressions are already translated into writing.

PMM: There is something disturbing about what you're suggesting. It would seem, then, that, in the magical universe of the letter in Guimarães Rosa, the rural is what protects, or guarantees, this zone of bodily perception. Respecting differences in style and without intending to put them into a false dispute, I think, for example, about how Clarice Lispector is an author who has been translated much more often. She is one of the most significant references of Brazilian literature on the editorial market in the United States. Beyond the question of fashion, and the fact that at a certain point Lispector was absorbed by the wave of gender studies, her universe is just as tortured, rich and polyphonic, and it also deals with sound, although not to the degree or the depth found in Guimarães Rosa. But Clarice Lispector's world is basically urban, and deals more closely with middle-class problems, we might say.

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This would seem more translatable, whereas Guimarães Rosa is less translatable. Beyond the question of the sounds, of the rarity of Guimarães Rosa's prose, wouldn't you say that your reference to bodily and untranslatable aspects puts us face-to-face with a problem? Is Guimarães untranslatable because he's telling us about a more rural universe?

AB: Of course there is this impasse for the translator. A translator is faced with a complex world of impressions and images that have local strength, local appeal to bucolic bodily experience that require a search for equivalents in earlier, more primitive periods of European cultures. That is where a translator is going to find them. She or he would have to look for the right words in the medieval rural world, which is the source, for example, of all the proverbs we use. Not long ago, I wrote a preface for a book by a scholar, Martha Steinberg, where she listed English proverbs and translated them into Portuguese proverbs. She said something that I think is necessary to go into, since it's anthropologically very important. She told me that she found equivalences between proverbs in Great Britain and many of those used in Portugal because they have a common source, which are the 1,000 years of the European Middle Ages. Besides the contacts that took place between Great Britain and Portugal, there is a rurality that was truly dismantled only in modern times, after the eighteenth century. This means that concrete experiences, from animals to time, to plant life, to ancient customs, create a broad common field. According to Steinberg, this is not possible with the proverbs of the United States. Corresponding expressions are not easy to find because rural life in the USA, since the times of the pioneers and the eighteenth century, took on their own consistency and problems that no longer seemed to correspond to English or Portuguese rural life. In Brazil, however, most of the proverbs used in northern Minas Gerais and in the northeast of the country are of Portuguese origin. One or another has more local characteristics, from the civilization of leather, but the great majority of the proverbs, and all that prudence they teach, can be found among the English, the Portuguese and the Brazilians, but not as easily among the Americans.

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This might suggest the difficulty of translating Guimarães Rosa. Or maybe it shows the difficulty of translating some of his expressions. We can't forget that he also has a language of the cultured world, which especially includes Dante and Joyce. There is an erudite vein in Guimarães Rosa's work, but everything gets complicated as soon as he concentrates on bodily experience. I've never studied this aspect, but I think that one would have to talk with his translators, like Edoardo Bizzarri (who unfortunately has passed away), who assiduously wrote back and forth with Rosa, from Italy. And the correspondences he found in many expressions were in medieval literature. Bizzarri was a great scholar who knew Dante and medieval pre-Dantean Italian literature quite well. So that was where he found correspondence and analogies. I don't know what difficulties a translator into English would run across. I know that in Germany there was an enormous effort to find good corresponding words and expressions, even by playing with the etymology of the words. The problem of the universality of Guimarães Rosa sometimes forces us to go back in time, that is, not only in relation to the contrast between rural and urban, but also to the primitive versus the modern.

But still thinking of your question about the theoretical setting, Guimarães Rosa is the best proof that you can't crystallize or ossify identities, because he, who was a writer with a broad imagination, moves from the rural and archaic to modern Western culture *lato sensu*, and back again. He is a writer who would definitely refute any ossification of identities. So what can we extract from his work? The unconscious of Minas Gerais? The Brazilian unconscious? I would never take this route. I would say that his writings are a very rich documentary source of Brazilian or "*Mineiro*" realities, but that he sees through things, and he knows that man is a fragile being, and he knows that anywhere in the world pacts can be made with the supernatural, in order to survive. He knows that there are love and hate relationships, and relationships of brotherhood and competition. Relationships of love and hate in the rural world can be understood by any cultured reader anywhere in the world. I would claim a true capacity for

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universalization for Guimarães Rosa, as I claim for Machado de Assis, even though this position might be controversial.