

## “Local Thesis of Global Potential? How Machado de Assis Became a Classic of World Literature”

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**João Cézar de Castro Rocha: *Machado de Assis: por uma poética da emulação*. Rio de Janeiro 2013. Coleção Civilização Brasileira. Editora Civilização Brasileira. 366 pp.**

João Cézar de Castro Rocha's massive new book addresses the still astonishingly dynamic discussion regarding Machado de Assis' peculiar place in Brazilian literary history and in world literature, and it is written with a patience and a precision that inspire (rather than just facilitate) a compact description of its most important theses and insights. The central argument stems from a concentration on the years between 1878 and 1880 in Machado's literary career; that is, on the decisive leap of aesthetic quality in his writing that took place between the last of his early novels (*Iaiá Garcia*) and *Historia Póstuma de Brás Cubas*, the first of those works that gave Machado the status of an undisputed, popular, and truly admired national classic (including that of a frequently mentioned but not always fully appreciated author of “world literature”). Castro Rocha proposes an immediately plausible hermeneutic formula to conceptualize the difference between Machado's early narrative texts and his five classical novels. Unfolded along the plot lines of romantic conventions that had spread across national borders since the early nineteenth century, Machado's first tales and novels never invited those inexhaustibly centrifugal, and ultimately self-reflexive readings that his mature works began to provoke after 1880 (Castro Rocha associates the concept “autor matriz” with this centrifugal reading effect,

and he also insists on the contrast in intellectual style between “Machadinho,” as some of his contemporaries used to call him, and the post-1880 Machado).

The true and important historical discovery of this study emerges from a joint interpretation of several texts (all from 1878) in which Machado criticizes Eça de Queirós’s immediately successful novel *O Primo Basílio* and in which Eça reacts to Machado’s challenge in the most polite and differentiated fashion. Castro Rocha reads these texts as a dialogue thanks to which Machado became aware of the potential importance that the notion of *aemulatio* could have to clarify the position of his own writing and to give it a new practical orientation. He briefly—and competently—alludes to the function of *aemulatio* as a mode of poetic production and as a *locus* of poetological reflection in the literary culture of the European Renaissance before concentrating, after the analysis of the correspondence between Eça and Machado, on a careful systematic exploration of its potential as a key perspective for the historical and present understanding of “non-hegemonic” or “peripheral” cultures and their literatures. There are three layers of *aemulatio* that he distinguishes: 1) *aemulatio* excludes, above all, the idea of any radical innovation “out of nothingness” (that is the formerly divine *creatio ex nihilo*), in favor of “invention” understood as a modification and elaboration of previously existing states of literature and discourse; 2) *aemulatio* implies a tendency towards “historical compression,” that is, towards a juxtaposition of texts from different historical environments and times; 3) under the specifically “historicist” premises of the nineteenth century, such “compression” requires an attitude of “deliberate anachronism.” Some of my favorite pages in Castro Rocha’s book show how it was above all Eça’s polite refusal to accept Machado’s identification of him as a “disciple” of Zola and of Flaubert that ultimately helped the latter to understand emulation as a complex and productive poetic life form.

In several well-documented chapters, Castro Rocha goes on to highlight a consequent attitude of emulation with a number of great novelists from Machado’s own and from the previous centuries, above all with Lawrence Sterne, as leading to the discursive identity that has constituted the particular aesthetic appeal of Machado’s classic novels. It goes along with a transformation of the roles of the author, the text-implicit narrator, and the implied

reader into an innovative and highly personal network of perspectives and tones. Inevitably, such a demonstration needs to come back to insights familiar from previous critical and historical analyses of Machado's master novels. But Castro Rocha's main intuition, i.e., his use of the notion of *aemulatio* as a necessary vanishing point for the understanding of all historical and poetological observations regarding the mature Machado, indeed provokes a reaction that I associate with truly innovative ideas, namely a perplexity about the fact that such a powerfully plausible and convincing insight had never before crossed my own mind.

Indirectly, however, Castro Rocha's book does more than cross a threshold within Machado scholarship. There is also reason to appreciate his intellectual style and his style of writing as being part of and setting the tone for a generation of critics from Brazilian and Latin American universities who are now running literature departments and who, thanks to the quality of their work, can progressively afford to ignore the distinction between cultural "periphery" and cultural "center" whose history and whose concepts still belong to their intellectual toolkit. To begin with, I was impressed by the calm (and sometimes even self-ironic) security with which Castro Rocha does not only navigate the totality of Machado's work and its different genres but also uses, far from the increasingly superfluous impulses of certain polemical positions from the past, the results of a vast body of international scholarship accumulated over more recent decades (both theoretical and specifically referring to the work of Machado). Also, Castro Rocha's range of knowledge and of literary-historical competence impressively transcends national (Brazilian) and the continental (South American) borders: his is a world-literary breadth and a historical depth which, if at all, used to be accessible only to a very small number of his Brazilian antecessors—none of whom had at his disposal the cosmopolitan ease that characterizes each page of Castro Rocha's book.

That Castro Rocha's arguments and descriptions are much closer to the literary texts in question than to academic "theory" debates (the latter being often enough impenetrable for non-academic readers), may indeed be a—still seldom mentioned—part of a new critical situation in South America (and I refrain from celebrating it as a "return to what literary studies should always be

about” insofar as this new situation does explicitly profit from the intense theory debates that took place during the final decades of the twentieth century). Very much in this spirit, Castro Rocha’s discussion of the relationship between *aemulatio* and the cultural situation on the “periphery” presupposes the results of intense discussions in the past but abandons their sometimes aggressive undertones and their inherent self-stylization of “peripheral” intellectuals and their classics as “persecuted virtue.”

This book about the greatest classic of Brazilian literature is a step of serenity towards a new self-reference for Brazilian literature within the global intellectual and aesthetic environment. In their convergence, all these conditions and layers of *Machado de Assis: por uma poética da emulação* and its reflection enable Castro Rocha to engage in a critical practice of patience and documentary plenitude. His book unfolds a single thesis of both historical and aesthetic importance over more than three hundred and fifty pages in order to assign, through the lens of this thesis, a new status to the work of Machado de Assis and to Brazilian literature at large. Perhaps it even announces a new pace of criticism, without the analytical haste or political hysteria that the older generation, my generation of scholars, had such a hard time leaving behind.

There is, finally, a larger context within which the discovery of *aemulatio* as the central principle of Machado’s classical work goes beyond the scope of literary history in the strict sense of our concept. What made his choice look so unlikely and so difficult to grasp was the dominance of a social construction of time during the nineteenth century, the so-called “historical world view,” that seemed to exclude Machado’s deliberate anachronism and his relation of *aemulatio* with authors from chronologically and culturally separated worlds. Thanks to Castro Rocha’s intuition and its development in the chapters of his book, we can now understand the freedom that Machado took for an immediate engagement with authors from the past, understood to be a historically eccentric condition, for the idiosyncratic form and for the specific appeal of his texts. But this attitude was eccentric in a world that enthusiastically and unconditionally believed in “progress,” in a world that considered time to be a necessary agent of change, obliging humankind to leave each past “behind” and to go through an “imperceptibly brief present of transition” in order to approach

each future as a “horizon of possibilities” to be shaped by human action. Seen from this angle, the poetic practice of Machado de Assis was a practice against the grain, all the more so within a Brazil that was about to inscribe the word “progress” on its flag.

In the early twenty-first century, however, we are living our everyday lives within a construction of time whose present has become an ever broadening present of simultaneities, between a future filled with threats that seem to come towards us and a past that tends to inundate the broadening present, instead of falling behind, into distance and oblivion. Seen from the historicist worldview (as a worldview that has not been “left behind” either—but that no longer occupies the social and cultural center of our time), the new present can be identified as an expanding sphere of anachronism, juxtaposition, and immediacy in our access to the different worlds of the past. Perhaps this environment of global—but of course non-deliberate—anachronism was the hermeneutic condition for Castro Rocha’s discovery of *aemulatio* at the center of Machado de Assis’s master novels. The question remains open whether, in the long run, it will also change the premises of their aesthetic appreciation.

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