

“Father against Mother” or The Anti-Liberalism

“Pai contra Mãe”, ou o Antiliberalismo

Elvis Couto*

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil

Resumo: Este artigo faz uma análise do discurso do conto “Pai contra mãe”, publicado por Machado de Assis em 1906 no volume *Relíquias de casa velha*, com o objetivo verificar, a partir de noções de crítica dialética de Goldmann e Candido, a homologia que há entre a estrutura narrativa e a estrutura histórico-política da sociedade fluminense do século XIX. Assim, discutimos a incompatibilidade entre princípios liberais e práticas comuns ao *Ancien Régime*, como a dominação pessoal direta — o mecanismo do favor — e o escravismo. Por fim, buscamos apreender possíveis sentidos ideológicos subjacentes à perspectiva do narrador: por um lado, o paternalismo como solução menos prejudicial aos escravos do que o falso abolicionismo dos liberais republicanos; por outro lado, o ceticismo em relação a um arranjo democrático-burguês.

Palavras-chave: “Pai contra mãe”. Machado de Assis. Escravidão. Liberalismo.

Abstract: This paper analyzes the discourse of the short story “Father against Mother”, published by Machado de Assis in 1906 in the volume *Relíquias de casa velha*, with the aim of verifying, based on notions of dialectical criticism from Goldmann and Candido, the homology that exists between the narrative structure and the historical-political structure of Rio de Janeiro society in the 19th century. Thus, we discuss the incompatibility between liberal principles and practices common to the *Ancien Régime*, such as direct personal domination—the favor mechanism—and slavery. Finally, we seek to grasp possible ideological meanings underlying the narrator's perspective: on the one hand, paternalism as a solution less harmful to slaves than the false abolitionism of liberal republicans; on the other hand, skepticism towards a bourgeois-democratic arrangement.

Keywords: “Father against Mother”. Machado de Assis. Slavery. Liberalism.

1 INTRODUCTION

Raimundo Magalhães Jr. (1971, p. 66 ss), in *Machado de Assis desconhecido*, tells us that Machado de Assis, during his youth, had liberal inclinations. However, when notable figures from the Liberal Party leaned towards republicanism, the young writer from Rio de Janeiro, an admirer of D. Pedro II, became disenchanted with politics. At the age of forty, enjoying the taste of literary glory in life, he definitively abandoned any kind of partisanship to focus on the organization of social life through the prism of his characters' behavior.

The short story “Father against Mother”, published for the first time in 1906 in the volume *Relíquias de Casa Velha*, transformed into literary form some structural elements of Brazilian society that show, if not the ideological position of its author, certain cultural and institutional aspects—in force at the time of the Empire—averse to liberalism. Certainly—it is necessary to say it—Machado de Assis did not imprint an orthodox or doctrinaire view of his country's politics in his literary texts:

* Professor Adjunto de Literatura Brasileira da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ).

Interest in public life and its problems is not synonymous with partisanship. ‘Defending causes’, permanently and even more ardently, is the lawyer’s profession, the duty of the polemicist and the right of youth and those who have never matured. Machado de Assis did not defend causes; at least he stopped doing so after he matured as a writer” (Carpeaux, 1999, p. 892).¹

Roberto Schwarz (2000, p. 17) says that liberal values such as “the autonomy of the person, the universality of the law, the disinterested culture, objective remuneration, work ethics, etc.” appear, in Machado de Assis's novels, only as an enlightened discourse of the propertied class, since practical life—both represented and real—revolves around slavery and favor. The short story we are dealing with, in which slavery is the theme, awakens more vehemently—due to the power of synthesis of brief forms—the feeling that the liberal paradigm was out of place in Brazilian 19th century, that is, it acted as an inappropriate ideology, inconsistent with our persistent colonial heritage.

“Half a century ago, slaves ran away frequently. There were a lot of slaves, back then, and not all of them liked slavery. They were occasionally beaten, and not all of them liked to be beaten” (Assis, 2013, p. 62).² It is with this subtle humor that the story's narrator begins to present to us the lack of social organicity that characterized Rio de Janeiro at the time of the Empire. There is a mismatch between classes: on the one hand, land and slave owners, averse to practical work and utilitarian activity; on the other hand, smuggled Africans, treated as merchandise and commercialized in Valongo, whose only destination was involuntary servitude. It is true that, between one class and another, there was the group of poor and free whites, who were left with sordid jobs, such as capturing runaway slaves. “Now, catching escaped slaves was then a common occupation, useful, if not exactly noble, and, because it enforced the law and the sanctity of property, it had a secondhand sort of respectability” (Assis, 2013, p. 63).³ It should be noted that the guarantee of private property and respect for the legal system—premises of liberalism—depended, in Brazil, on the maintenance of anti-liberal practices such as slavery and direct personal domination. This basic contradiction—made laughable by the pen of Machado de Assis—gave shape to our specific way of being; in Schwarz’s terms: “liberal ideas could not be practiced, being at the same time indispensable” (Schwarz, 2000, p. 26).

¹ All the translations in this paper were made by the author, with the exception of the translation of Machado de Assis's text, which was made by John Charles Chasteen.

² We will contrast the translation with the original text by Machado de Assis according to the critical edition: “Há meio século, os escravos fugiam com frequência. Eram muitos, e nem todos gostavam da escravidão. Sucedia ocasionalmente apanharem pancada, e nem todos gostavam de apanhar pancada” (Assis, 1975, p. 49-50).

³ “Ora, pegar escravos fugidos era um ofício do tempo. Não seria nobre, mas por ser instrumento da força com que se mantém a lei e a propriedade, trazia esta outra nobreza implícita das ações reivindicadoras” (Assis, 1975, p. 50).

2 FREE LABOR AND DEPENDENCY RELATIONSHIPS

Cândido Neves is the central character of the narrative in question. He belongs to that intermediate class which we have mentioned; he is, therefore, a dependent, that is, someone who, in order to provide for his most basic needs, must to find his way in life, to do a favor to an owner, considering that his condition does not differ substantially from that of slaves. Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco (1997, p. 65) analyzed the function of this type of free worker in the economic system of the Brazilian coffee cycle, in which he had to perform “residual services, which for the most part could not be performed by slaves and were of no interest to men with wealth.”

Raymundo Faoro (1976, p. 322) insightfully noted the sociological meaning of the stratum that Cândido Neves is part of, composed of the “pariahs of domestic service, servants, coachmen and seamstresses, barely differentiated from the slave, like the latter dependent, or more, on the affection or ill-will from the boss.” Therefore, freedom as a progressive and Enlightenment postulate, as a flag raised by liberal-bourgeois civilization, did not constitute a universal value in the newly independent Brazilian society; it was, in fact, a prerogative of the propertied class and an illusion for the individuals who were forcibly co-opted by it. This is the case of the protagonist of our story and the character D. Plácida, who appears in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*: “One and the other, Cândido Neves and D. Plácida, have the same fate as the slave, but not the same guarantees as the slave, whose support is guaranteed by the master. Freedom only serves as an encumbrance to them, and is not in any way, ideologically or politically, socially valued” (Faoro, 1976, p. 326).

Candinho, as he was called in his family, due to the poverty and lack of perspective that plagued people of his social position, dedicated himself to looking in the newspapers for advertisements for escaped slaves, to check the amount that would be paid for them as gratification, to then search the streets of Rio in search of human merchandises that should be recovered by their owners. As almost everything Machado de Assis writes is ambiguous, Candinho's job was not chosen only for lack of a better opportunity, but also because of his unwillingness to do regular work: “Slave catching didn't require you to stay a long time sitting in one place. It only required strength, a sharp eye, patience, courage, and a piece of rope” (Assis, 2013, p. 66).⁴ However, this type of work did not bring our character any financial security, as competition increased, making captures difficult: “Slave catching was a growing business and lots of unemployed men had seen the potential, found a rope, copied the ads, and joined the chase” (Assis, 2013, p. 67).⁵

Cândido Neves's uncertain situation did not stop him from falling in love with the girl Clara,⁶ an orphan who lived with her aunt, Monica, and sewed with her to survive.

⁴ “Pegar escravos fugidos trouxe-lhe um encanto novo. Não obrigava a estar longas horas sentado. Só exigia força, olho vivo, paciência, coragem e um pedaço de corda” (Assis, 1975, p. 53).

⁵ “Como o negócio crescesse, mais de um desempregado pegou em si e numa corda, foi aos jornais, copiou anúncios e deitou-se à caçada. No próprio bairro havia mais de um competidor” (Assis, 1975, p. 53).

⁶ It should be noted that the names Cândido Neves and Clara were used on purpose by Machado, as they reinforce the concept of whiteness and are a way of distinguishing the characters from enslaved black

The two lovers soon became engaged and married. Aunt Monica, who expected a happier and safer destiny for her niece—perhaps a passage, via marriage, to a higher social class—, upon entering the poor house where the couple went to live, warned: “You’ll starve to death, and the child, too” (Assis, 2013, p. 65).⁷

It didn't take long for Clara to get pregnant and for her aunt to worry about her worsening poverty: “You’ll see how hard life is” (Assis, 2013, p. 65).⁸ What bothered Monica most was Candinho's dubious and infamous occupation: “Look at that cabinetmaker fellow, they guy who runs the corner store, the typesetter who got married on Saturday... they all had steady jobs. Don’t get mad, now. I’m not saying that you’re worthless, I’m saying what you’re doing is worthless” (Assis, 2013, p. 66).⁹

Cortázar (2006, p. 155) said that short stories “are the binders of a reality infinitely broader than that of their mere argument, and therefore they influence us with a force that would make us suspect the modesty of their apparent content, the brevity of your text.” Certainly, due to the characteristic formal aspects of the story, such as the condensation of discourse and the shaping of singular moments, we can find in this genre, when intended for the narration of a period panorama, as is the case of “Father against Mother”, the meaning of a given social process. In other words, the aesthetic particularity hides the totality, making it possible to know the essence of that totality through the analysis of that particularity, which, in Hegelian language, we call dialectics.

In the text by Machado de Assis that we are dealing with, we note the literary procedure that Antonio Candido (2015, p. 28) called “structural reduction”, which is nothing other than the conversion of external historical-social data into literary structure. This data is not ancillary; on the contrary, they are essential to the composition, which is why we can say that they are structural. We could even say that there is a homology between the literary and the socio-historical structure, to speak with Lucien Goldmann (1964, p. 36 ss), since the representation of slavery and favor relations in the narrative and the material conditions of existence in monarchical Rio de Janeiro become intelligible through the illumination of the same concept, the concept of work.

3 WORK AS AN ADVENTURE

Candinho's behavior is prototypical; as he is a character, that is, a fictitious entity, he is able to present in an artfully combined way the cultural traits that distinguish Brazilians. Among them, the unwillingness to work regularly typical of the Iberian people who lived between the Pyrenees and Gibraltar stands out, as demonstrated by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1976, p. 13 ss). The Portuguese bequeathed to us the spirit of the adventurer, the ambitious desire to obtain wealth without effort, a feeling that is contrary

people. An ironic distinction, since between poor whites and slaves there was no gap that separated them; the two classes found themselves subjugated by the property class.

⁷ “— Vocês, se tiverem um filho, morrem de fome” (Assis, 1975, p. 51).

⁸ “— Vocês verão a triste vida, suspirava ela” (Assis, 1975, p. 52).

⁹ “— [...] Veja o marceneiro da esquina, o homem do armarinho, o tipógrafo que casou sábado, todos têm um emprego certo... Não fique zangado; não digo que você seja vadio, mas a ocupação que escolheu é vaga” (Assis, 1975, p. 53).

to the spirit of the worker, which, peculiar to Protestant peoples, is characterized by the appreciation for gradual effort and the refined sense of initiative for the transposition obstacles and difficulties. Therefore, work as an adventure constitutes a pattern of mentality and a first semantic layer of the narrative structure, as evidenced by the following characterization of Cândido Neves:

He couldn't tolerate any sort of trade or employment. He was "jinxed", he said. His first idea was to learn typesetting, but he quickly saw that it would take time to master and, even then, he told himself, might not pay enough. He liked the idea of business, which was an excellent career, and so became cashier at a small store. In practice, though, serving customers at the counter annoyed him and wounded his pride, so he quit after five or six weeks. Letter carrier, notary's assistant, messenger for an imperial ministry, and other jobs—were jettisoned soon after he got them (Assis, 2013, p. 63).¹⁰

It should be noted that a liberal value such as utilitarianism, labor activity with a view to promoting the material well-being of as many people as possible, cannot thrive on infertile ground for the impersonal solidarity that defines production relations in a capitalist society. In fact, according to Faoro (1976, p. 236), industry and workers are practically absent from the urban landscape described by Machado de Assis, an aspect of an oligarchic and conservative society that tended less towards horizontality (trapezoid) than towards social verticality (pyramid).

In effect, what attested to the anti-liberalism of the Empire's political-social organization was the lack of freedom for personal fulfillment through work. The principles of the subject's self-determination and the absence of coercion and constraint could not coexist harmoniously with the fact that the productive base was slave labor. Progressive ideas, fermented on European soil and artificially cultivated by our elite, could not, therefore, be practiced, also because, in addition to the institution of slavery, personal dependence prevailed, that is, those who were neither slaves nor owners enjoyed false freedom; they had to subordinate themselves to the whims of the ruling class, often carrying out vexatious acts such as this:

Cândido Neves read the advertisements concerning escaped slaves, carefully copied them on a bit of paper that he put in his pocket, and went out to do some research. He had a good memory. Once he had assimilated the information about the runaways, he quickly found, caught, tied them, and led them away. He was impressively strong and agile. More than once he was standing on a corner conversing absentmindedly and, among many slaves passing by, recognized one as a runaway. And he knew which one—the name, the owner's name, the owner's address, and the amount of the reward, too. He didn't grab the slave right away, either. He waited for the right moment and then, one jump, and the reward was in his hands.

¹⁰ "Tinha um defeito grave esse homem, não aguentava emprego nem ofício, carecia de estabilidade, é o que ele chamava caiporismo. Começou por querer aprender tipografia, mas viu cedo que era preciso algum tempo para compor bem, e ainda assim talvez não ganhasse o bastante; foi o que ele disse a si mesmo. O comércio chamou-lhe a atenção, era carreira boa. Com algum esforço entrou de caixeiro para um armazém. A obrigação, porém, de atender e servir a todos feria-o na corda do orgulho, e ao cabo de cinco ou seis semanas estava na rua por sua vontade. Fiel de cartório, contínuo de uma repartição anexa ao ministério do império, carteiro e outros empregos foram deixados pouco depois de obtidos" (Assis, 1975, p. 50).

Sometimes he shed a drop of blood, the work of the other person's teeth and fingernails, but mostly he got by without a scratch (Assis, 2013, p. 66-67).¹¹

If we take seriously Ricardo Piglia's (2004, p. 91) thesis that the short story is “a story that contains a secret story”, then we will be authorized to see, from this excerpt of Machado de Assis's speech, the evolutionary lines of aspects of the Brazilian social formation, that is, the secret report, the hidden meaning, the objectivity reconfigured by the subjectivity of the author of *Relíquias de Casa Velha*. By extracting the essential from the heterogeneous mass of events, the brief literary form of “Father against Mother” reveals the lack of social cohesion in a country that became independent without modifying the elementary links of the colonial system. Instead of an organic society, there was an appendage of European commerce, a business, a company focused exclusively on the export of tropical foods. The forced adjustment of three ethnic groups—the Portuguese, the Indian and the African - could not result in a harmonious social fabric. The colonizer's predisposition to economic adventure through the use of slave labor triggered social relations devoid of moral nexus. After this situation became more complex, slavery and servility continued to be the ideal complements to the idleness of the oligarchic-rentier elite, who, even after having witnessed the suffocation of the *Ancien Régime*, had not abandoned their aversion to work.

4 FREEDOM AS A FALSE IDEOLOGY

Since brief forms aim to produce an immediate effect of meaning on the reader, as Edgar A. Poe (2001, p. 913) says, or a total impression, as Chekhov says (*apud* Gotlib, 2006, p. 42), we are aware that Machado de Assis chose the form of the short story to express, although not directly and obviously, a certain highly significant perception regarding the political foundations of Brazilian society. If, in Poe's theory, compositional unity is directed towards the contemplation of beauty, in Machado de Assis's narrative, it has this same purpose, but the beauty that its author has in view is not a romantic aesthetic ideal like that of American writer; it underlies social criticism.

Raymundo Faoro's position on the semantic effect, so to speak, that the set of facts narrated in “Father against Mother” produces on the reader is debatable. For the critic, the story would present, if not Machado de Assis's outline of deviating from his youthful penchant for liberalism, a corrosive vision of the process of dissolution of the Empire and the consequent creation of the Republic. This is not a simple objection to the change of the regime, but a rejection of the false values that were promulgated, such as those espoused by the abolitionists. Faoro (1976, p. 326) says:

¹¹ “Cândido Neves lia os anúncios, copiava-os, metia-os no bolso e saía às pesquisas. Tinha boa memória. Fixados os sinais e os costumes de um escravo fugido, gastava pouco tempo em achá-lo, segurá-lo, amarrá-lo e levá-lo. A força era muita, a agilidade também. Mais de uma vez, a uma esquina, conversando de cousas remotas, via passar um escravo como os outros, e descobria logo que ia fugido, quem era, o nome, o dono, a casa deste e a gratificação; interrompia a conversa e ia atrás do vicioso. Não o apanhava logo, espreitava logar azado, e de um salto tinha a gratificação nas mãos. Nem sempre saía sem sangue, as unhas e os dentes do outro trabalhavam, mas geralmente ele os vencía sem o menor arranhão” (Assis, 1975, p. 53).

The social framing of the free worker in the context of poverty allowed Machado de Assis to measure the slave from an original angle. Only he insisted on the calamity that manumission could mean for the captive. The slave would be free, but he would be left without work and without bread, given over to begging. The master alone would profit from the act of generosity, by getting rid of a worthless mouth, aged or damaged from work. Freedom was, under the circumstances, nothing more than cruel rhetoric or a lie.

It should be noted that, according to the argument of Faoro, Machado de Assis's text would reveal the artificiality of the abolitionist campaign organized by the liberals, since the slave, when freed, would be left to his own devices and would no longer have a master to provide you with your most basic needs. Thus, what abolitionists called the conquest of freedom would be nothing more than the exchange of subsistence for the inhospitable condition to which free Brazilians without property or income were subject. Faoro (1976, p. 327) also states:

[...] free, the slave lost his inn and his table, abandoned to poverty. The master notices nothing; the refusal of freedom sounds like an act of extreme generosity. Abolitionists—like the abolitionists of the late 19th century—identified the campaign in the great liberal movement that had burst into the world, attracted by ideology, forgotten of reality. The truth, the truth without a shirt and without a bread, is restored in Machado de Assis's call to conscience, released discreetly, in the fold of a page. [...] Free the slave, he will be on the street, without a job, or he will receive alms from his master, in exchange for equal work, with the old beatings and injuries. [...] The captive disappeared, but the institutions that subject, arrest and shackle the free worker remained standing.

Faoro's exposition shows us that “Father against Mother”, by giving centrality to Cândido Neves, places the free worker one level below the slave, as the slave at least counts on the landlord's support, while the free worker is left with the penury of the excluded in a rigidly verticalized nation.

When Clara finds herself on the eve of conceiving the child, Aunt Monica advises the couple to hand over their unborn child to the foundling's wheel: “It's the best thing for you and for the baby, too. You're deep in debt and can't keep food on the table now. How is this family going to get bigger without more money?” (Assis, 2013, p. 68).¹² To make the situation worse, the owner of the house they lived in gave them an eviction order: “The situation had become acute. They had found nowhere to move, no one to help them. They were going to be out in the street” (Assis, 2013, p. 69).¹³

In fact, as Faoro's argument leads us to believe, there would be a tone of anti-abolitionism in Machado de Assis's narrative, an anti-liberal propensity, an ideological

¹² “— [...] digo que é o melhor que vocês podem fazer. Vocês devem tudo; a carne e o feijão vão faltando. Se não aparecer algum dinheiro, como é que a família há de aumentar?” (Assis, 1975, p. 54).

¹³ “A situação era aguda. Não achavam casa, nem contavam com pessoa que lhes emprestasse alguma; era ir para a rua” (Assis, 1975, p. 55).

position favorable to maintaining the structure of large property, with its paternalistic capacity for absorbing disadvantaged people and enslaved black people in a situation in which compulsory work no longer brought the profitability of the first centuries of colonization? Would this be the effect of meaning desired by the author?

Considering that, in the plot story, according to Walnice Galvão (1982, p. 169), there is a “determining outcome”, it is necessary that we focus on the circumstances that end “Father against mother”, so that we can verify the solidity of Faoro’s critical vision.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

After being evicted, Candinho and Clara went to live in a favor room arranged by Aunt Monica. On that occasion, the child was born and the need to hand him over to the foundling’s wheel made the father sad, who, wanting to get around the fact that would soon be consummated, tried to review

all the notices concerning runaway slaves. Most did not specify the reward; others offered a negligible amount. One, however, promised a hundred milréis. The notice described a woman, a young mulata, with details about her physical appearance and the clothes that she had been wearing when she run away (Assis, 2013, p. 70).¹⁴

Cândido Neves went hunting for the runaway slave, looking for her where she usually went: in Carioca Square, around the churches of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Our Lady of the Good Birth. He didn't find her. There was, therefore, no other option than to give up his son. And that's what happened; as soon as the child fell asleep, the father picked him up and left in the direction of Barbonos Street. On the way, he saw the slave in an alley: “Arminda! he shouted, remembering the name from the advertisement” (ASSIS, 2013, p. 71).¹⁵ It was then that the following happened:

Arminda turned around, suspecting nothing. It was only then, when Cândido Neves pulled a length of rope from his pocket and pounced, grabbing her by the arm, that she understood the danger and tried to flee. But it was too late. Candido’s powerful hands bound her wrists, and he told her to get moving. The slave wanted to scream, and did produce a small, stifled cry, but immediately realized that it was hopeless. No one would come to her aid—rather, to the contrary, anyone who came would help her assailant, whom she now begged to release her, please, for the love of God.

¹⁴ “[...] todas as suas notas de escravos fugidos. As gratificações pela maior parte eram promessas; algumas traziam a soma escrita e escassa. Uma, porém, subia a cem mil réis. Tratava-se de uma mulata; vinham indicações de gesto e de vestido” (Assis, 1975, p. 56).

¹⁵ “— Arminda! bradou, conforme a nomeava o anúncio” (Assis, 1975, p. 57).

“I am pregnant, good sir!” she exclaimed. “If the gentleman has any children of his own, I implore him to remember that child and let me go. I will be his slave and serve him as long as he wishes. Please, young sir, please let me go!” (Assis, 2013, p. 71-72).¹⁶

As the fate of two children was at stake, that of Candinho's newborn son and that of the son Arminda was carrying in her womb, and as not everyone was equal before the law, the right to life was granted to the individual who was in more favorable position in the hierarchy of social classes. This right, however, would not be conquered without a struggle, without members of the two subjugated classes submitting themselves to degrading and shameful behavior — anti-political, so to speak:

The slave put her feet against a wall and resisted turning the corner with all her might, but to no avail. All she achieved was a delay, and after more minutes than it should have taken, she arrived at the house, panting and desperate, and there she dropped to her knees, pleading one last time” (Assis, 2013, p. 72).¹⁷

The ending of the story, surprising, as in a good plot story, written with the pen of cruelty and the ink of social criticism, shames the Brazilian in the face of the Western world. After handing over the slave to the master and receiving a bonus of one hundred thousand milréis, Cândido Neves watched the following scene: “On the floor, where she lay in exhaustion, pain, and terror, the slave miscarried” (Assis, 2013, p. 73).¹⁸ As slaves were treated as merchandises, the spectacle of ignominy perhaps seemed commonplace to those who saw nothing on the horizon of the possible other than a struggle for life: “Her half-formed fetus emerged lifeless into the world, amid the groans of its mother and the exasperation of her owner” (Assis, 2013, p. 73).¹⁹

That said, Faoro's arguments, although they are based on very solid notions and sociological findings, perhaps tend to make us see, in relation to the story “Father against Mother”, a narrator more adept at a decadent monarchy than at a pamphleteer republicanism of impractical ideas, out of step with the Pax Britannica and the liberal-democratic achievements of the French Third Republic. In fact, the narrator, as he takes the facts to an unusual stage, shows the abjection of the institution of slavery, the life of

¹⁶ “Arminda voltou-se sem cuidar malícia. Foi só quando ele, tendo tirado o pedaço de corda da algibeira, pegou dos braços da escrava, que ela compreendeu e quis fugir. Era já impossível. Cândido Neves, com as mãos robustas, atava-lhe os pulsos e dizia que andasse. A escrava quis gritar, parece que chegou a soltar alguma voz mais alta que de costume, mas entendeu logo que ninguém viria libertá-la, ao contrário. Pediu então que a soltasse pelo amor de Deus.

— Estou grávida, meu senhor! exclamou. Se Vossa Senhoria tem algum filho, peço-lhe por amor dele que me solte; eu serei sua escrava, vou servi-lo pelo tempo que quiser. Me solte, meu senhor moço!” (Assis, 1975, p. 57).

¹⁷ “[...] a luta cresceu; a escrava pôs os pés à parede, recuou com grande esforço, inutilmente. O que alcançou foi, apesar de ser a casa próxima, gastar mais tempo em lá chegar do que devera. Chegou, enfim, arrastada, desesperada, arquejando” (Assis, 1975, p. 58).

¹⁸ “No chão, onde jazia, levada do medo e da dor, e após algum tempo de luta a escrava abortou” (ASSIS, 1975, p. 58).

¹⁹ “O fruto de algum tempo entrou sem vida neste mundo, entre os gemidos da mãe e os gestos de desespero do dono” (Assis, 1975, p. 58).

the imported African as more vulnerable than that of the poor and free white man, but he does so with a speech covered by irony, such as like what appears in this maxim formulated by Cândido Neves: “Not all children are meant to make it, said his beating heart” (Assis, 2013, p. 73).²⁰

The narrative of the story illuminates a moment in Brazil's political history, but no ideological direction predominates in it, nor any intention of the author. The meaning of the text's ending remains open. Both sides of the coin are shown with regard to the maintenance of slavery and other colonial-based institutions, such as direct personal domination exercised by the plutocratic layer. On the one hand, enslaved black people and poor, free white people could be expelled from large properties and thrown into poverty. On the other hand, they could be kept under a paternalistic yoke. What seemed certain was that they would not be included in the democratic process to which many Western nations converged in the Belle Époque period. Machado de Assis's humor does not have a precise political direction, it does not show itself ideologically, which is a quality of every great writer. This, however, does not prevent us from interpreting Machado de Assis's humor as an instrument to mock our anti-liberal tendencies or our unwillingness to weaken aristocratic privilege, to legitimize human rights and the possibility of social change, to freedom of action and choice, of self-determination and self-realization in the sphere of work. More than that: we can understand the skeptical and bitter tone of the narrative as disbelief regarding the possibilities of implementing a bourgeois, democratic and liberal regime. It is evident that this interpretation is opposite to that which points to paternalism as a more viable solution than abolitionism, to monarchism as an unavoidable reality, to republicanism as a false ideology. There will be as many interpretations as there are Machado de Assis readers.

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²⁰ “— Nem todas as crianças vingam, bateu-lhe o coração” (ASSIS, 1975, p. 59).

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