

# The Old Senate

MACHADO DE ASSIS

A FEW DAYS AGO, on the spur of some prints by Sisson, I found myself in the thrall of a vision of the Senate of 1860. Images are never worth more than the retinas on which they are registered. A politician viewing that particular body will find therein the same soul as his bygone fellows, while an historian will glean from the scene information of value to history. A simple onlooker may note nothing but the portrayal of time past and the expression of lines steeped in that general tone one gets from all things dead and buried.

I went into journalism that very same year. One night, upon leaving the Ginásio Theatre, Quintínio Bocaiúva and I decided to stop off for a cup of tea. Bocaiúva was then in the full figure of youth, slim, silken-skinned, with a trim moustache and serene eyes. He already had those same slow movements as today, and a touch of that distant air which Taine found in Mérimée. Much the same was said of Challemel-Lacour, whom someone recently described as *très républicain de conviction et très aristocrate de tempérament*. Only the latter part applied to our Bocaiúva, but he was nonetheless liberal enough to make a staunch republican. Over tea, we spoke initially of literature, and then politics, a subject of his raising, and much to my surprise, as this was certainly not our wont. One could not properly say that we discussed politics, rather I answered the questions that Bocaiúva put to me, as if to sound my views. I probably had none of any rounded or fixed persuasion, but, such as they were, I believe I expressed them with proportion and precision that was, at most, adequate to what he was about to offer me. In fact, we parted that evening with an appointment set for the following day, at Paula Brito's bookshop, in what used to be Constituição Square, beside the São Pedro Theatre, mid-way between Cano and Ciganos Streets. Resurrecting such dead nomenclature is the vice of an aging memory. That next morning, I found Bocaiúva writing a note. It was something about the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, which was about to resume circulation under the political direction of Saldanha Marinho. Bocaiúva had come to offer me a job in the newsroom alongside he and Henrique César Múzio.

Such trifles, a pleasure to write if less so to read, are hard to escape when recollecting erstwhile times. Suffice it to say that, after recess that same year, I was off to the Senate as reporter for the *Diário do Rio*. With me in the galleries, at this time or soon thereafter, were Bernardo Guimarães, from the *Jornal do Commercio*, and Pedro Luís, from the *Correio Mercantil*, and I shall never forget the many good times we three had together. Though Bernardo Guimarães was somewhat our elder, we nonetheless broke the bread of friendship. We would cross together the square at Aclamação, which was not then the park it is now,

but rather a large stretch of waste land, empty as the fields of São Cristóvão. We sometimes lunched together at a restaurant on Latoeiros, now Gonçalves Dias, a change of name, incidentally, brought upon the recommendation of the *Diário do Rio*. The poet had once lived there and it was Múcio, a friend of his, who canvassed Town Hall for it, much to our embarrassment. Pedro Luís was possessed not only of the passion that smouldered in his verses dedicated to Poland and, later, in the speech that would see him into the Chamber of Deputies, but also of grace, sarcasm, acute observation and a broad laugh that made his already large eyes seem even bigger. Bernardo Guimarães spoke and laughed little, content to intersperse the dialogue with a well-spoken word, correction or anecdote. The Senate lent itself no less than the rest of the world to the conversations of we three friends.

Few members remain of the old House. Paranaguá and Sinimbu bear the weight of the years with ease and grace, especially admirably in the case of Sinimbu, who I reckon to be the elder. I heard him speak on many occasions. Hardly one to enflame debate, but he was simple, clear, interesting and, physically, never lost his poise. This generation knows well the firmness of the public figure, who would become president of the Ministerial Cabinet and overcome the most stringent opposition. One particular incident of recent years may illustrate the man's nature. Once, as he left the Chamber of Deputies with the Viscount of Ouro Preto, a cabinet colleague, both bound for the Agriculture Department, they were followed by an angry mob. Their carriage pulled up outside the secretariat building; the two stepped down and stood for a moment facing the jeering, booing crowd. It was then that I clearly saw the difference in their temperaments. The Viscount regarded the mob with chin held high and an air of affront, while Sinimbu, indifferent to their presence, seemed simply to show his companion a certain stretch of wall. That was the man I knew from the Senate.

In order to properly assess my impression of those men, whom I saw gathered there, day in, day out, it is important not to forget that no small number of them had witnessed the *Maioridade*<sup>1</sup>, some the Regency<sup>2</sup>, some the First Reign<sup>3</sup> and even the *Constituinte*<sup>4</sup>. They had made or witnessed the history of the early years of the regime, and I was a wide-eyed, curious boy. They struck me as having a particular aspect, half of them militant and half triumphant, half of them of the people and the other half of the establishment. Yet at the same time I could not help but think of the derision and ridicule that political passions had heaped upon some of them, and that those serene and respectable figures now sitting in their narrow chairs had not always enjoyed the respect of others nor perhaps even their own serenity. I stripped away their grey hair and wrinkles and imagined them young again, ardent and restless. I began to grasp that part of the present one can detect in the past, and vice-versa. I bore within me the *oligarchy*, the *coup d'état of 1848*, and other political milestones of opposition to the conservative establishment, and to see the heavyweights of that party, full of

smiles and camaraderie, conversing jovially among themselves and with others, sharing coffee and snuff, I asked myself if these were really the men who could make, unmake and remake the elements and rule the land with an iron hand.

The senators reported regularly for work. Rare were the occasions when a session was cancelled for lack of quorum. One particularity of the day was that many arrived in their own carriages, such as Zacarias, Monte Alegre, Abrantes, Caxias and others, starting with the eldest, the Marquis of Itanhaém. Due to his advanced years, the latter was the least assiduous, though his attendance was still far greater than one could have reasonably expected of him. He could hardly climb down from his carriage or ascend the stairs, and would drag his feet all the way to his chair, right of the table. He was dry and wizened and wore a wig and heavy spectacles. At opening and closing ceremonies he aggravated this aspect by donning the senatorial robes. Had he worn a beard he might at least have disguised the withered, shrivelled state of his visage, as his shaven face merely exacerbated his decrepitude. In fact, a clean-shaven mug was the preserve of another demographic of the house, still the majority at the time. Some, like Nabuco and Zacarias, came clean-shaven every day, while others, such as Abrantes and Paranhos, left Swiss burns, or, as with Olinda and Eusébio, opted for a full collar beard. With the exception of Caxias and Montezuma – a Montezuma of secondary order -, moustaches were few and far between.

The figure of Itanhaém was a good case in itself against lifelong tenure, but it is also true that tenure lends the house a certain sense of perpetuity, which can be gleaned from the faces and demeanour of its members. There was an air of family about them, as they disbanded for the summer, shore-bound or in search of some other diversion, reconvening after recess, year upon year. Of course, some did not return and new-arrivals took their place; but all families persist through births and deaths. They bickered constantly, as large families will, only to make up and fall out all over again; perhaps better proof than any other of their pertaining to humanity. Then too, as before, liberal principles were evoked to contest lifelong tenure. Naturally, some voices that had been vibrant out of doors fell silent once within, but the seeds of reform abided, were gathered up into policy and, as in so many other cases, eventually became law.

Tumult never beset the sessions. Attention was intense and constant. Generally, the galleries were sparsely frequented, and, toward the end of the afternoon, were all but empty, bar the occasional sleeper. Naturally, vote of thanks speeches and other such occasions drew larger crowds. Nabuco and one or other of the big names had the privilege of attracting a full house, especially when expected to launch some attack or defence. On these occasions, quite exceptionally, an audience was admitted to the Senate chamber itself, as was common during the temporary Congress, though, as was also praxis at the latter, the spectators refrained from interrupting proceedings with applause. Decorum, which had been less stringent under De Cavalcanti, was tightened under the presidency of Abaté.

There was no shortage of orators, but only once did I hear Eusébio de Queirós address the house, and it left upon me a most vivid impression. He was fluent, abundant, clear, but not to the detriment of vigour or energy. It was not a speech of attack, but rather one of defence. He spoke in the capacity of Leader of the Conservative Party, or *pope* to the *cardinals* Itaborái, Uruguai, and Saião Lobato, among others, together comprising a veritable *consistory*, to use the famous description of Otaviano at the *Correio Mercantil*. I have not read the speech since, nor would I have the time or opportunity to do so now, but I fear the effect would be somewhat tempered in the absence of the orator's voice, which seduced the ear. The subject was far from promising: he sought to explain and defend an accumulation of public positions, an accusation levelled by the opposition press. It was the twilight of the oligarchy, the dusk of the conservative hold on power. The elections of 1860, in the capital, dealt the first blow to the establishment, if not the death blow, I am not sure; parties never fully understand the immediate reasons behind their rise to power or fall from grace, unless they happen to come through violation or restoration of constitutional law. However it was, the truth is that the elections in the capital that year struck a victory for the liberals. They brought to my adolescent mind a rare and special vision of the power of the poll booth. I shall say no more of it here, nor of the general movement and the sincere fervour of the voters, incited by articles in the press and by the speeches of Teófilo Otoni, nor of the events, scenes and clamour of those days. I have not forgotten them, or most of them; I still guard the memory of an obscure voter who came up to Otoni near the Sacramento parish church. Otoni did not know the man, and he probably never saw him again, but the fellow approached him and showed him a wad of bills he had just swiped from the purse of one of Otoni's opponents. The smile that accompanied the news has never faded from memory. In the throes of the most ardent hardships of this world that nameless mouth has sometimes sprung to mind, most likely true and honest in everything else in life, there candidly confessing, for no greater personal gain, the fine theft successfully committed. No mould can sully this puerile moment in my mind's eye; after all, lest we forget, even the clearest waters are not immune to the occasional rain-borne rotten straw – if indeed it be rotten, or in fact even straw.

Eusébio de Queirós was rightly respected by allies and opponents alike. He had not the trim figure of a Paranhos, but he basked in the glow of a particular and celebrated history, the kind that the social and political chronicles of other nations pick out and examine, but which our own customs – excessively unbridled in his speech, I might add – do not allow to be set to writing. There is little to be gained in repeating now what was expressed back then, especially without recourse to the unique and extreme beauty of the person in question, so often seen in the streets and halls of this city. Tall and robust, suffice it to say; I do not recall the finer details.

The Senate proportioned few heated sessions, though many were lively. Zacarias could reinvigorate any debate with his sarcasm and the precision and

vigour of his barbs. His speech could be biting, refined and swift, aided by the effects of certain guttural sounds, which made it more penetrating and irritating. Whenever he stood up it was almost certain that someone would be spattered with blood. His reputation as a debater, whether as an oppositionist, minister or cabinet chief, extends to this very day. He did have his audacities, the kind I believe no-one else would be able to get away with, such as his “un-right” choices. Yet politically, his was a dry and haughty nature. In a book of his usage, a certain *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, with smudgy pencil annotations in various places, the following words appeared in underline (v.1, p.44), attributed to the Earl of Oxford in reply to the Duke of Buckingham, in which Oxford declared that he “neither cared for his friendship, nor feared his hatred”. Reading personal feelings into simple notes or recollections in works of study is a risky business, but here I feel Zacarias’ spirit found its fellow. In private, on the contrary, so long as he was well-inclined toward someone, it was hard not to be fond of the man. He was frank, simple, confident and a trustworthy friend. People who knew him privately, sharing his company among the trees of Conde Street or the books in his library, state and re-state that he was a pleasure to listen to and unforgettably gracious and polite in his kindness towards others. At the Senate, he sat on the left side of the house, near the foot of the window, just below Nabuco, with whom he exchanged thoughts and observations. Nabuco, another of the major voices of the Senate, was especially suited to solemn debates, as he had neither Zacarias’ biting sarcasm nor the happy epigram of a Cotegipe. This was around the time that the moderate conservative core, along with Olinda and Zacarias, was in the process of forming the league and the Progressionist and Liberal parties. With the eloquence of the political writer and a son’s affection, Joaquim Nabuco retold the whole story in a book now cementing the memory of his illustrious father. The elder Nabuco’s turn of phrase had been moulded by the orators of the liberal French parliament. The impression I have is that he prepared his speeches in advance and his mode of delivery brought out their brilliant and solid form. He liked to use literary imagery: I recall one occasion on which he likened the moderating power to a statue of Glaucus. Unlike Zacarias, his gestures were not particularly lively, but rather paused and deliberate. He was full-chested and calm, and when discoursing his voice would assume a sonority it did not normally possess.

Yet all those figures now blur into a common memory; both the heavyweights, like Uruguai, and the featherweights, like Father Vasconcelos, senator for Paraíba, if I am not mistaken, a good man I encountered there and who died not long after. Of another whom one could include in this latter category I can recall only two particular features: the long, grey, serious-looking beard and the caution and precision with which he never voted on a bill without first gluing his eyes upon Itaboraí. It was a way of toeing the party line and obeying the boss, who had inherited the mantle from Eusébio. As the Senate building was small, one could mark all of these gestures and overhear near-every

word spoken aside. Even so, I never once did see a laugh out of Itaboraí, whose muscles I believe precluded such activity – unlike São Vicente, who laughed at the drop of a hat, a hearty laugh too, though he did not wear it well. That said, notwithstanding the senator for São Paulo’s physical inelegances and speech devoid of all sonority, he was heard with respect, just like Itaboraí. Of Abrantes, it was said he was like a canary talking. I am not sure the comparison is wholly warranted; in fact, I always found him fluent, if not a touch sweet, and for a people as tender as ours, the quality was quite precious. Even so, Abrantes was never popular. Nor was Olinda, though the latter’s authority was known to be considerable. Olinda comes to me wrapped in the distant dawn of the monarchy, and in the aurora of the most recent liberal or “nascent establishment”, to use the words of a chief of the league, I see Zacharias, whose every deed was censured by the conservatives, whether of the house or of the press. For the want of reminiscences of another order, let us linger upon the deafness of Olinda, who could have competed with Beethoven on this quality, more political than musical. Though wholly deaf he was not. When he had to respond to someone, he would go and sit practically at the feet of the orator and listen attentively, stony-faced, with not so much as a word or a gesture, and without taking a single note. And his retort would come without delay. No sooner had the adversary finished than he would begin his riposte, invariably, from what I can remember, both lucid and complete.

One day I saw a man with long white whiskers and moustache appear in the House. It was none other than Montezuma, a survivor of the Constitutional Assembly, recently returned from Europe. I could not discern in that bearded face the clean-shaven visage I had known from Sisson’s engraving; I had never seen the man in person. His, more so than even Olinda’s, was a robust old-age. To my youthful spirit, he seemed almost to retain the rumours and gestures of that 1823 Assembly. It was the same man; but one had to hear him now to glean a measure of the vehemence of his attacks of yesteryear. One had to hear the irony of his words today to sense the sarcasm of his rectification to the wording of a question put to the Imperial Minister during that famous session of November 11 and 12: “What I said, Mr. Imperial Minister, was that your good self, as someone who is always by His Majesty’s side, would best know the ‘morale of the troop’, for which one of the honourable secretaries wrote ‘the morale of His Majesty’, which is not what I said, *as of the latter I have no doubt*”.

Now, what I most often heard remarked of him, besides his talent, was his treachery, the subject of many an anecdote; but I have naught to do with political anecdotes. Even so, that one could take his political niceties with a pinch of salt, I have no doubt. Once, for example, he blew loud upon the trumpet of Sousa Franco. With the intention of criticising the Minister of Finance (I do not remember which), he began by stating that the country had never had a real Finance Minister, merely Treasurers. He piled on the adjectives: excellent, illustrious, commendable Treasurers, but not one Minister of Finance. “One,

Mr. President, who gave us something of what we should expect of a Minister of Finance was the right honourable Senator for Pará". And Sousa Franco grinned from ear to ear, delighted with the exception, which must have stung Itaboraí, his rival in finances. However, Sousa's contentment was short lived. On another occasion, smarting from an attack by Montezuma, Sousa took once again to smiling, though this time it was not so much a smile of pleasure as a sneer of disdain. Montezuma stuck out his chest, glared at him in irritation and demanded with voice and gesture that he wipe the grin from his face. He then enumerated his criticisms one by one, culminating each with the refrain: "Wipe the smile from your face, noble senator!"; all the while grim and lively. Sousa Franco tried to resist, but the smirk faded from his lips of its own accord. Sousa was then a man both thin and worn, though he still enjoyed some of the popularity won at the Chamber of Deputies, years before, for the campaign he had waged single-handedly, and apparently in poor health, against the Conservative Party.

In stark contrast with Sousa Franco came the tall and robust figure of Paranhos. He will need no introduction to a generation that knew him and admired him so well, still handsome and strong in old age. I remember to the letter the words someone vouched having said to him, while still a simple student at the Escola Central: "Master Paranhos, one day you will be minister". The student smiled and made a modest reply, but the prophet of his fate had well grasped the value and bent of the lad's soul.

I have many a recollection of Paranhos and of his speeches on both the attack and defence, but one, his justification of the 20<sup>th</sup> of February Convention of Vila da União<sup>5</sup>, stands above the others. The news reached Rio de Janeiro in the same manner as all other events in those days before the telegraph. All the latest from abroad came to us in armfuls, by wholesale, and the news of a battle, a conspiracy or an act of diplomacy was learned all at once, in all its minutiae. We got wind of the pact in a package from the south. The news was not well received, with people taking to the streets. A group of populists, lead by three party chiefs, went to the government to call for the head of the plenipotentiary minister. Paranhos was dismissed and, as soon as the parliament convened, set about producing his defence.

I saw him that day, and it seems I can still see him now. The galleries and tribunes were packed to the rafters; the Senate thronged with politicians and onlookers alike. It was one o'clock in the afternoon when the speaker granted the floor to the Senator for Mato Grosso. Paranhos always spoke with moderation and pause; he would stiffen his fingers and raise his hands in slow and sombre gesture, or perhaps tug at his shirt cuffs, and out would flow his meditated, colourful voice. On that day, however, such was his eagerness to deliver his defence that the first words were more bellowed than spoken: "No to vanity, Mr. Speaker...". His voice then sank back into its habitual diapason, and the speech continued as on any other day. It was nine o'clock at night when he finished, and he was as fresh as he had been at the beginning, with not the slightest sign

of fatigue, neither in himself nor his audience, which responded with applause. It was one of the deepest-set impressions ever left upon me by parliamentary eloquence. The agitation would fade as things progressed, and his defence had been made. A year after demanding his head, this very same city lauded the author of the law of September 28, 1871 as a national glory<sup>6</sup>. And still later, when he returned from Europe, I went to meet him and accompany him to the house. Below a radiant sun, flush with all the commotion, borne by the fervour of the crowd, Paranhos made his way through those same streets that, years before, having returned from the south, he had travelled alone and in disgrace.

My vision of the Senate unfurled through the gestures and the people of those days, all the while distant and remote: it was the Senate of those three years. Other figures came and went. Besides the cardinals, the Muritibas, the Sousas and Melos, there were figures of lower political calibre, such as the riant Pena, zealous and tiny in his speeches; Jobim, who spoke on occasion; Ribeiro, from Rio Grande do Sul, who never spoke at all, at least as far as I can recall. A philosopher and philologist, he kept with him at all times, on the carpet, propped against the leg of his chair, a copy of the dictionary compiled by Morais. I often saw him consult one tome or another during the course of the debate, whenever he heard spoken a word that seemed to him of uncertain origin or dubious acceptance. In contrast with his abstinence was the assiduousness of the oppositionist Silveira de Mota, or one Manuel de Assis Mascarenhas, a good example of that dying breed. He was a short, withered man, with a plain face, sparse white hair and a nature both tenacious and indeed impertinent. A party outcast too, I believe. A good illustration of his tenacity would be the lengths he went to in a crusade to scupper a project to subsidize the Lírico Theatre through lotteries. It was nothing new, merely a continuation of earlier projects. Nevertheless, D. Manuel opposed it by all possible means and in a bevy of lengthy speeches. In a bid to push the project through once and for all, the house would include the motion among the earliest items of the day, but the senator was not to be so easily discouraged. One day, it appeared at the head of the agenda. D. Manuel asked for the floor and frankly declared that he fully intended to speak for the whole session. Any of his colleagues who had business to attend to outside the Senate should therefore avail of the opportunity, because nothing more would be discussed that day. And he spoke right to the end, watching the hands of the clock to see just how long he had left to go. Naturally, there was not much to say about such a trifling issue, but the orator's resolution and the liberty of the regime saw him through, rolling out an endless supply of episodes, reminiscences, arguments and explanations. For example, his aversion to lotteries was by no means recent, but stemmed from some time past when, on his travels in Hamburg, he was pestered into buying a lottery ticket that turned out to be blank. The anecdote was recounted in the minutest detail, just to draw it out. For much of the time he spoke from his seat, but ended his marathon on foot before the table and some three or four colleagues. However, though he imitated



Cato, who also spoke at a day's length in order to thwart a petition of Caesar's, d. Manuel did not meet with the Roman's success. Caesar withdrew his motion, but the lotteries went through, I recall not whether by fatigue or omission on the part of d. Manuel. Acquiescence it most certainly was not. Such were the times.

And in his wake came others, and still others, Sapucaí, Maranguape, Itaúna, and more besides, until they all blurred into one and the lot dissolved, both people and things, as is a vision's wont. It is as if I watched them file in procession down a darkened corridor, the door to which was closed by a man in a black cape, with black silk stockings, black trousers and buckled shoes. The Senate doorman himself, dressed in the ceremonial rigor for convening and disbanding the general assembly. Such obsolescent things! Someone made a vain attempt to impede the doorman, but the investment was so languid and weary that it fell far short. The doorman turned the key in the door, wrapped his cape about his frame and flittered through the window, disappearing in mid-air on his way toward some cemetery, most likely. If there were any use in knowing the name of that cemetery, I would do my best to discover it, but there is little point. All cemeteries are alike.

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## Notes

- 1 *Maioridade*: the name given to the act of July 23, 1840, by which the Senate declared the regent Pedro II "of age" to rule, despite being only fourteen at the time.
- 2 The Regency of Pedro II, 1831-40.
- 3 Reign of Pedro I, September 7, 1822 to April 7, 1831.
- 4 Constitutional Assembly of 1823/4.
- 5 Treaty of Villa da União, signed on February 20, 1865, by the Triple Alliance (Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina) and Paraguay, thus ending the Paraguayan War.
- 6 Law of the Free Womb, which granted liberty to the offspring of slaves born after the date of September 28, 1871.

*Machado de Assis* (Joaquim Maria M. de A.), novelist, short-story writer, dramatist, chronicler and journalist, was born in Rio de Janeiro (RJ) on June 20, 1839 and died in that same city on September 29, 1908.

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