

Portrait of Moacyr Scliar: A First-Person Testimonial

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Few people can combine different talents without creating an imbalance in their public persona, and Moacyr Scliar is a good example of how to harmonize these abilities. A man of many talents, he was a public health doctor, a storyteller, a novelist, an essayist, a chronicler, and a journalist.

I met him through an interview he gave to University Radio in 1968, when he was launching *The Carnival of the Animals*. I heard a somewhat metallic voice that would later soften. This voice recounted the various readings of his youth, including Kafka. The Czech author dominated his thoughts and seemed to shape the developing writer. But when I read *The Carnival of the Animals*, I realized that I was in the presence of an author who already had his own way of telling stories. Yes, there was Kafkaesque surrealism, but not only that. There was a deep knowledge of a literary tradition that went beyond Kafka to a vein that runs through the entire history of Western literature, connecting names like E.T. to Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe.

Then came the personal encounter in 1976, when I published my first book; it was still a superficial acquaintance from a book fair, where he congratulated me on the publication. Courteous attention, not implying that he had read the work, of course, but conveyed with such warmth that it enchanted the newcomer. At that time, the great names such as Erico Verissimo, Dyonélio Machado, and Cyro Martins were on a transcendental, superhuman level – that is how we naturally placed them. Thus, Moacyr became one of us with his greeting. This was confirmed by the same kindness he showed other young writers. Therein lies a fundamental truth: no matter how much critical awareness he acquired, he never discouraged young people, and this, over time, with the start of his weekly column in *Zero Hora*, became a habit. Extremely busy – he was still working at the Ministry of Health – he always found time to highlight excerpts from other people's books and reproduce them in the newspaper. I also became accustomed to the notes he would send me – and not just me – from a prescription pad. The content varied, but it usually referred to something I had done that he thought was important to praise. I could be wrong, but I don't think he ever wrote a negative review – that childish attitude to which those who lack talent are prone. He never denied that he was a supportive man, and he showed exemplary complicity with newcomers. Naturally, they sought him out to get his opinion on the first lines of their works. One day he called me, "Luiz Antonio [after my mother, Moacyr was the only one to call me by this childhood name, which I always took as a sign of affection], let's agree on this: I'll suggest your workshop to whoever I think needs to improve their writing, okay?" Of course, I agreed immediately. He kept his bargain as did I. Many of those he suggested are now acclaimed writers or on their way to becoming so.

When he began to work on the Jewish theme, I discovered that we had not only an author but also a human being who brought vitality and humanity to the legion of Bom Fim people. We used to see them in front of their shops on Osvaldo Aranha Street, courteous and shy. Suddenly, this legion revealed its contradictions, its odd characters, its individualities, its sufferings, and its joys. Yes, Kafka was Jewish, but his texts referred to the citizen without name or genealogy. With Moacyr Scliar, people had families and experienced the daily life of everyone else, outside the mythological aura attributed to them by non-Jews. This was new – radically new in our environment and in others. Moreover, it represented the emergence of an ethnicity's capacity for self-reflection, which is only possible when its representatives, beyond the first immigrant generation, begin to acquire sufficient cultural status. The emergence of a "Jewish writer" meant a cosmopolitan leap for the province we were in at the time. I remember that at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, where I was a young professor, the Student Union organized a debate on Judaism, and Moacyr was there, brilliantly stating the obvious: that he felt like a Gaucho just like the rest of us. This, which was a redundancy for those who knew him, nevertheless impressed everyone present. This idea of commitment to "regionalism" would deepen in later works such as *Mês de cães danados* (Mad dog month), *Uma história farroupilha* (A Farroupilha story) and *Cavalos e obeliscos* (Horses and obelisks). At that time, the southern province breathed a sigh of relief. Things have changed since then. Moacyr was one of us.

The Jewish theme permeated much of his work without completely dominating it. From it, he inherited a discreet, almost melancholy, sometimes pathetic, but always irrepressible sense of humor. His characters walked a fine line between suffering and compassion.

The episode of the Brazilian Academy of Letters gained not only fame but also deserved recognition. There was a certain rumor that he was going to the Academy because Mario Quintana was not elected. This displeased me, and I wrote a piece saying that Moacyr would enter the house of Machado de Assis through the front door because of the absolute quality of his work. Before publishing it, I sent it to him by email. He called me and warned me, "But you know you're picking a fight with some guys there." "Maybe," I replied, "but do you authorize me to publish it?" He immediately replied: "You're totally authorized. Who am I to stop you?" The piece was published, and the response was clearly positive.

One fact that always fascinated me was his extreme talent for writing so quickly. For Moacyr, writing was a joy and a pleasure. He never understood writers who considered the act of writing to be torture. He would jokingly say, "Well... if it's torture, why do they write? The fact is that he could work on an enormous number of pieces at the same time without one contaminating the other, and he delivered them all on time. Even in the hospital, when he was still conscious, he worked on his laptop.

I think this astonishing output, which rivals Balzac's, came from the fact that he had a lot to say, but it remains a miracle to count his books and random pieces. He not only had the gift of writing a lot but also of writing anytime and anywhere. I met up with him at Congonhas Airport one scorching hot day. He was sitting at one of the tables in the bric-a-brac lobby, writing on a piece of paper, perhaps from the hotel where he had stayed. I approached him. He saw me and invited me to sit down. On the contrary, I didn't want to disturb him, but he insisted. I sat down. All he asked me for was a little time to finish a sentence. He finished his sentence in his smooth, neat handwriting. He left it there, and we began a conversation that lasted until we parted ways in the departure lounge. He wasn't coming to Porto Alegre. He offered up a lively "See you later" and added "in Porto Alegre," making a twirling gesture with his index finger, as if counting the days that would pass until we saw each other again. I don't know why, it was all so simple and casual, but it stuck with me – that image of him twirling, or rather, counting the days. That was his life: constantly moving forward.

One of the passages I'm most proud of in my biography was when I was a guide for Judith and Moacyr in Lisbon. We were there for a literary meeting at the Torre do Tombo. Accompanied by Walter Galvani and his wife Carla, who were living in the Portuguese capital at the time, we walked the entire Liberdade Avenue and reached Rocio, before going up to Chiado. With my fondness for Eça de Queiroz, I tried to connect the places we walked with passages from Eça's old books. At one point, he exclaimed, "This Luiz Antonio should be elected ambassador to Portugal," and we had a good laugh. Then we all went to Bairro Alto for a wonderful lunch.

In terms of personal relationships, he had a welcoming, human face, but he loathed drama. This could be mistaken for a lack of emotions, but it was quite the opposite. He had them, and strong ones. I rarely saw him bitter towards anyone; he would try to change the subject if it bothered him. Once, I mentioned a particularly unfair and harsh review of one of his books. I tried to show the critic's obvious intellectual shortcomings. Moacyr listened to me in silence and after a while said, "I don't agree with what he wrote, but, well, Luiz Antonio, he said what he thought he had to say. I say my things too, don't I?"

When he fell ill, we were all sad, but we were never aware of the approaching tragedy. Moacyr was a man who took meticulous care of himself and urged everyone to do the same. One clear fall morning, we met on the street, right on Protásio Alves. We were walking in sneakers, shorts, and T-shirts. He said to me in passing, "It's a crime, Luiz Antonio, that we're stopping now to talk, but what are you writing now?" and walked on, while I said to him, looking back, "A novel." On another occasion, he asked me about the usual medical exams a man has to do and if I'd already had them that year. My answer worried him: "Then hurry up and do them! Don't joke around with these things." He never joked about his own health. In addition to running, he played basketball every

week; and of course, all his medical exams were up to date, judging by the order he gave me.

So, the news that he was in the hospital – and in a bad way – left me stunned. It stunned everyone. That could only be a work of fiction. From one moment to the next, that healthy body lost its self-sufficiency, became unregulated, and something larger than it took over. At that point, I wrote a piece in *Zero Hora* that spoke about him in the present tense and ended with, “These are all reasons [there are many more] why we can say that Moacyr Scliar is the perfect example of the writer, mentor, citizen, and friend. And let’s wait for the next book.” Judith read the piece to him, and from his facial reaction, he understood it – although he couldn’t express it with anything more than a tear.

Then came complications, unconsciousness, and the end.

We say that writers do not die because they remain alive in their work. But certain writers cannot die at the pinnacle of their art because their work remains incomplete.

Moacyr Scliar is one of them.

Who knows, wherever he is, he is still making his friendly gesture from Congonhas Airport: “Let’s move on; let’s take on the days.”