

Master and friend

Nílson Souza

I had memorized his private phone number because every Sunday, around mid-afternoon, those eight digits would appear on the display of my desk phone. Before even saying “hello,” I would say, “Good afternoon, Dr. Scliar!”

Then he would greet me with his gentle voice, recall some piece from my field to praise it, and only then ask his usual question: “I have two topics for my Tuesday column. Which one do you think is more newsworthy?” And he would read the two articles.

I would listen intently and with unmistakable pride. After all, if only by listening, I could consider myself the first reader of unpublished writings by the author of more than 100 books, including some masterpieces of Gaucho and Brazilian literature. Before expressing my humble opinion, I used to joke, “This has to go on my résumé: an immortal from the Brazilian Academy of Letters is consulting me about what to write.”

Despite his many virtues, Moacyr Scliar was a simple man. For all his mastery of the art of storytelling, he listened to and respected the observations of an expert in generalities, as journalists are usually called. To please a friend, he put himself in the background, as he did when he dedicated the first page of his *Cenas da vida minúscula* (Scenes from a tiny life) to me, describing himself as the “co-pilot” of this humble editor.

That’s because my pilot’s license for literary journeys allows only short flights, at most a newspaper column.

However, on the day of his death, February 27, 2011, I dared to make a reel through the editorial that *Zero Hora* published in his honor. I emotionally wrote this paragraph that plays with the titles of some of his works:

Multiple and immortal, the protagonist of scenes from a truly gigantic life, this one man who is worth an entire army, who sowed the peace of literature in Bom Fim, who wrote his own bibles and many manuals of this collective passion for reading, who provoked tropical dreams in countless readers, this centaur of all the gardens of Rio Grande do Sul deserves the millions of embraces of all of us.

I didn’t go to the autograph session of his latest book, *Eu vos abraço, milhões* [I Embrace You, all of you], which tells the story of a young missionary who joins the Communist Party and exchanges Rio Grande do Sul for Rio de Janeiro. There, in 1929, the young Gaucho loses his ideological illusions and ends up working on construction of the statue of Christ the Redeemer.

Scliar never even complained about my absence. Instead, he brought the book to my office and signed it at my desk: “To the great Nílson, eminent journalist and a great

friend.” Today, looking at the dedication with its repeated adjectives, I realize his generosity in the first “great” and my immense pride in the second.

Dedications are a real challenge, especially for prolific writers like Scliar, who published several books a year. The great (this one, indeed) Mario Quintana, with whom I had the good fortune to cross paths a few times in the corridors of Caldas Júnior, once told a story about a little girl who approached him with a book in her hands and asked for a dedication. The poet asked the girl’s name and wrote something like this: “To Lili, with all my dedication.”

I read Scliar’s novel about the adventures of young Valdo in Rio and had the opportunity to tell him, even during the reading, that I was deliberately taking my time so the book wouldn’t end too soon. He commented that a writer could receive no better compliment.

But I finished it. And today, as I reread the ending, I feel an infinite pain for my friend who passed away. He wrote, as if it were a farewell message: “How beautiful Brazil is. How good it is to live! Oh, my grandson. How good it is to live.”

I am still not completely convinced that Scliar died. And this doubt of mine has nothing to do with his passage through the Olympus of Brazilian writers. Whenever we joked about his literary immortality, he would repeat the catchphrase of one of his colleagues at the Brazilian Academy of Letters: “Immortal is not without death!”

But he seemed to deserve both adjectives.

Even at 74, he was what could be called a perfect athlete, exercising body, mind, and soul. He played basketball at the YMCA, stayed away from vices, ate well, walked without rushing, treated everyone with kindness, didn’t argue with anyone, and kept his neurons constantly active.

Nothing gave him more pleasure than writing. Whenever he passed by my office, he offered to help with editorials, which are anonymous texts that represent the opinion of the newspaper and not necessarily the opinion of the person who wrote them. On more than one occasion, I accepted the offer, less out of necessity than for the opportunity to provide readers of the opinion pages with the excellent writing of the acclaimed writer.

Somewhere in the past, it was written that he would be recognized.

In his Sunday chronicles in the Donna section, Scliar used to list names that determined fates – people who were registered with names or surnames related to their future professions. For example, there was a doctor named Fernando Cura or a hairdresser named Leda Penteado. The list is endless, mainly because Scliar’s readers loved the game and usually contributed more and more names. Few people knew, however, that the author himself was christened with a prophetic name. Moacyr, which

means “son of pain” in the Tupi language, could only become a doctor. But he also had everything he needed to become a writer. His mother was a passionate reader and found inspiration in the name of the son of the Indigenous woman, Iracema, in José de Alencar’s famous novel.

“I was born to be a reader as well as a writer,” he admitted when commenting on his baptismal name.

Two destinies, two subjects, immortal and deathless. Everything in Scliar was admirably double.

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