

## Moacyr Scliar: literature and humanism

*Wremyr Scliar*

Moacyr Scliar's literary oeuvre, which comprises some 80 books, including novels, collections of short stories, chronicles and articles, is an expression of humanism, understood as a political theory whose origins can be traced back to biblical writings, the Renaissance and the Encyclopedists, the social and economic movements and ideas of 19th-century socialism.

In his work, this humanist path can be recognized as a personal (and even family) trait, present in each of his works, in some with its own clarity and purpose, in others as a backdrop, seemingly obscured, but which eventually reveals itself in his work as a whole. The recognition of Moacyr Scliar's humanist roots is achieved through a series of identities that are shaped organically and are already strong and distinct. It's his family background, then his adolescence and his first steps into literature, and finally, as a public health doctor constantly involved in state activities, his full maturity as a world-class writer. Moacyr Scliar was the son of immigrants. His parents came from Bessarabia, then a region of Romania and part of the Tsarist Empire (now the Republic of Moldova). The small villages were called Tulchin and Tomaschpol, west of the Dniestr River. The villages were known as *shtetl* in Eastern Europe, where millions of Jews lived in humiliating conditions, unable to pursue liberal professions, hold public office, or own land, legally confined to extremely poor areas. The schools were religious, their language the Yiddish dialect, and a close-knit circle provided little contact with the rest of the world.

His grandparents (except for his already deceased paternal grandfather) decided to emigrate in 1914 and 1920, with the help of the JCA (Jewish Colonization Association). Moacyr's father, José, arrived in Brazil at age seven; his mother was a widow, with 11 other siblings, some of whom were already married with children. Moacyr's mother, Sara, who later became a teacher, and her parents and siblings were taken to Quatro Irmãos, in the hinterlands of Rio Grande do Sul, but later moved to the capital, Porto Alegre.

The activity in the colony (there was another one in Santa Maria) was essentially agricultural, in which the immigrants, with little assistance, had no experience. Internecine uprisings (1923–1924) decimated the colonies, and the attractions of urban life, as well as the goal of providing their children with education and knowledge, was the main driver of a new exodus, especially to Porto Alegre, Santa Maria and Pelotas. Moacyr's relatives followed that same path.

Moacyr's paternal grandmother was the sister of his maternal grandfather, so Moacyr's parents were cousins. Ana, Moacyr's grandmother, was given a small house on Voluntários da Pátria Street, on the banks of the Guaíba River. In that small house, Ana, with nine children at the time, welcomed the Jews who would come later; they would come to Porto Alegre with Ana's address and found a safe starting point in a country

where everything sounded so strange to them. They went to Ana to learn about the city, work and housing. They often stayed at her house (her children gave up their beds) until they found a place to live. In this environment, community welfare organizations, a cooperative and, above all, a place of fraternity and support among immigrants, were born.

When they moved to the Bom Fim neighborhood, between aristocratic Independencia Avenue and the fields of Redenção, the Jews maintained the heritage they had accumulated over many generations in Eastern Europe in their small, beloved *shtetl*: they cultivated a strong relationship, the main characteristic of which was mutual support in the face of difficulties and a new life in a country and society so different from the one they had left. Mutual assistance was the norm. Illness, unemployment, family disputes, and small businesses were always discussed in that community.

Moacyr's maternal grandmother, Edith, called *bobe* ("grandmother" in Yiddish) by everyone, would go from house to house where the Jews lived in the Bom Fim neighborhood, with always a word or advice for the problems of her relatives and neighbors. Moacyr's two grandmothers, each in her own way, were outstanding figures in the Jewish community, supportive and caring. They gathered on the sidewalks on warm evenings and in living rooms when winter blew its cold winds. There they talked and told stories, night after night. The houses were poor, and the inhabitants crowded into small rooms. In the living rooms they drank tea made in a samovar (a Russian utensil), and on the sidewalks they had already adopted the *chimarrão*.

Moacyr's parents were excellent storytellers. His mother, an elementary school teacher, had spent some time in the colony teaching immigrant children both Portuguese and Yiddish. As a result, the letters that arrived from Europe, or what was then Palestine, written in the local dialect, were brought to her to be read. The letters were read aloud. Relatives, friends, and neighbors listened to her readings, which told of the horrors of World War II, the difficulties in the Promised Land, and the illnesses and deaths. Sara read slowly, sometimes eliciting sighs or the rubbing of hands, sometimes a few smiles, restrained laughter. Many years later, I saw Sara confide to a close friend that she deleted some parts of the readings, the most painful ones, and created other stories on the spot.

Moacyr Scliar's family – his parents, grandparents, uncles and cousins – would often get together. Henrique, the father of painter Carlos Scliar, was already an anarchist; his other uncles were socialists. There was no lack of books in their homes. They read Jorge Amado, Reclus, Graciliano Ramos, Chekhov, Romain Rolland and Roger Martin du Gard. On the walls were reproductions of Picasso's Dove of Peace and engravings by Vasco Prado and Portinari.

They discussed World War II, the creation of the State of Israel, Getulism, the Cold War, Italian neorealist films and theater. The atmosphere was always lively. Discussions lasted into the night, sometimes heated, sometimes full of laughter. It all

reflected a barely concealed nostalgia for what had been left behind and was now fully being revealed in the post-war period: it had been completely annihilated by Nazism. They gathered to listen to poets, singers, instrumentalists, and even choirs – all in their own homes.

In the 1950s, Henrique coordinated the establishment of a community organization called the Culture Club, whose auditorium bears his name. There, cultural issues were discussed, Yiddish culture was preserved, the symphony was performed regularly, and the most important historical events were discussed in the evenings.

There was another unique aspect to the family: Carlos, Moacyr's cousin, had been an expeditionary soldier in World War II and returned to Europe to study art in Paris. After staying in the same hotel as Jorge [Amado] and Zélia [Gattai] in Saint-Michel and visiting Chagall, he traveled all over the continent. When he finished his studies, he met Picasso at festivals and developed an intense political activity.

Carlos' brother Salomão was a photographer and filmmaker. Together with Josué Guimarães and an experienced technical team, they made the full-length feature *Vento Norte*, the first major film to be made in Rio Grande do Sul.

Esther was a composer and musicologist who went on to become an academic professor in Rio and Petrópolis. Recognized in Brazilian musical history and part of the Ministry of Education's recorded collection, numerous composers and musicians attended her classes and still remember her theoretical teachings.

In this context, Moacyr, who attended these gatherings of family, neighbors and friends, soon realized there was a heritage that could not be wasted, let alone lost. There was certainly encouragement from his mother, with her natural ability as a teacher. But his father, a small businessman, showed his son the importance of a life dedicated to work and discipline on a daily basis. He never saw his father waste money, and he always encouraged him to study, buy books and read constantly. When the writer began to show signs, José saw what he hadn't been able to do come true – barely educated, he would have a son who was both a writer and a doctor.

The roots of Moacyr's humanism are certainly well known, but there is a broader context that led him to embrace literature as an expression of that tendency. His mother was influential and determined. She would buy Moacyr books by Monteiro Lobato, Viriato Correa, Jorge Amado, A.J. Cronin, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, and, of course, the French and Russian classics at the old Livraria do Globo bookstore. They would return home by streetcar, arms laden with bundles of books bought with the savings of their teacher, Sara, who dispensed comforts but always stocked the shelves with books – lots of books.

When she realized that Moacyr had a vocation, she took him by one hand and a short story in the other to Erico Verissimo's house. They entered that upper middle-class

neighborhood, no doubt fearful of the great writer's reaction and intimidated by the houses and the quiet of the neighborhood. Sara rang the doorbell and Erico himself opened the door. She gave him the manuscript and said she would wait for him to read it. A few moments later, Erico returned the manuscript and recommended that Moacyr read a lot and write all the time. When they returned home, Moacyr noticed that the original had been delivered missing one of the pages...

For an entire year, his mother had ordered Moacyr and his brother to write an essay every day. Sometimes the topic was given: my teacher, the sunset on the Guaíba, a Sunday; other times the topic was left open. By the end of the afternoon, with pencil in hand, their mother would read the essays and make the necessary corrections. As the end of the year approached, Moacyr asked to be excused (mother, time off, etc.). His mother Sara didn't allow time off, arguing they had nothing to do during the holidays, so it would be two essays a day. That January, Moacyr wrote sixty essays in... Latin! His first short stories and novels perfectly reflect this heritage. *The One-Man Arm*<sup>1</sup> would be the account of this first experience.

This experience was further enriched by his family. His uncle Henrique owned a farm where he had visitors and guests such as Jorge Amado and Zélia Gattai, Samuel Wainer, Pablo Neruda, and many others. Moacyr listened to them with great interest. In her memoirs, Zélia even remembers the attentive boy who would one day become an established writer.

Moacyr's adolescence, after having been his mother's student at the Jewish community school, interestingly enough, was spent at a strict Catholic school: Rosário, where he attended junior high school. The school's discipline instilled habits he would follow for the rest of his life: incessant work and dedication in everything he did. He left the Rosário School with every possible award as an exemplary student, remembered to this day.

He completed his secondary education attending Júlio de Castilhos state high school. By then he was already writing and had won three prizes. The first was for a story entitled "Letter to My Father," which won a prize sponsored by *Folha da Tarde*, celebrating Father's Day. He won a pair of shoes that came in a clearance box. When he exchanged the pair for another that actually fit, he had to pay the difference ("the first writer to ever pay for a literary prize," Moacyr would say, humorously).

The second prize came in a competition at Júlio de Castilhos state high school. According to journalist Flávio Tavares, the judges had no trouble giving him the highest score. Soon after, Moacyr won the International Short Story Prize, sponsored by the International Union of Students, based in Prague.

When he decided to study medicine, Moacyr stayed true to his roots: in addition to writing, he had to do something for others. And health was his second path. During

his long days in the wards of the Santa Casa Hospital or the Parthenon Sanatorium, *Histórias de um médico em formação* (Stories of a doctor in training) was born, reflecting his deep devotion to the sick and their suffering.

When he graduated and was class speaker, he paraphrased Ferreira Gullar: “Four people die every minute in Latin America.” In the middle of the ceremony, the dean of the Faculty of Medicine became irritated and asked Moacyr, completely out of protocol and in his arrogant way, “Where is this promised Canaan?”

Moacyr was to answer with a life dedicated to public health and literature. He chose a public career, working in public health and coordinating important projects that achieved positive and important outcomes in his field. Later, he began to write routinely about health, completed a specialization in Israel and a doctorate in Rio.

In this vein, he dedicated himself to research and published two important biographies: those of Oswaldo Cruz and Noel Nutels. Teaching medicine was another important aspect of his professional life as a doctor, which was in perfect balance with his life as a writer.

Having lived through Brazil’s political crises (the resignation of Jânio Quadros, the movement for the inauguration of João Goulart) and the difficult years of democratic decline, Moacyr definitely became a humanist. His family roots would now extend twice over in his professions of public health doctor and writer, finding inspiration in biblical texts from which he drew his professional ethics and creativity.

He was no stranger to the Greek and Latin classics. He constantly quoted Hippocrates, Ovid, and Lucretius, which he must have learned at school. He also read Spinoza, Freud, Marx, Borochoy, Sholem Aleichem, Singer, Bellow, and Philip Roth.

Associated with the Zionist youth movement, Moacyr became involved in a socialist movement, a supporter of the *kibbutz*, and a socialist regime for the nascent State of Israel. When the Israeli government began to adopt radical stances, such as the attack on the ship carrying humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, Moacyr wrote, paraphrasing Shakespeare: “more than a crime, a mistake.” The government’s admission of the mistake showed that he was right. He remained constantly critical and asserted his independence.

Invited to a ceremony in Brasilia where the honoree was a Palestinian, he went to the stage and greeted him. He was called a “brimo,” and in this regard he wholeheartedly agreed with the Israeli writers and intellectuals who defended the call for “peace now.” After all, the writer was the son of immigrants who had heard the suffering of his people since childhood.

Winner of four Jabuti Awards (Brazil’s most coveted and prestigious literary award), recipient of the Casa de las Américas Award in Havana, included on a list of all-

time greatest Jewish writers, decorated by the governments of Rio Grande do Sul and other states when he was elected to the Brazilian Academy of Letters, Moacyr was invited by then-President Lula to a private audience where he would be greeted.

With obvious emotion, he recounted this episode in public: the son of immigrants had been honored by the State. His public testimony also highlighted the fact that he had been invited by the metalworker who had become President of the Republic.

Becoming a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters was only the natural consequence of a career dedicated to a dual role: that of doctor and writer. Elected without dissent, he dedicated himself to the Academy, with new projects. Whether at the Academy, Brown University, small rural book fairs, or elementary schools, Moacyr never refused to be with his audience, students, young people, or children. His readers included immigrants who remembered the stories he wrote with such emotion in his lines as well as global audience, represented in almost two dozen languages.

When young writers approached him, he never refused to offer an opinion or a word of encouragement. In small gatherings with ordinary people, he showed the same interest he had in academic meetings or with other established writers.

When he became older, Moacyr refused to have any party affiliation. He supported the State of Israel but did not assert the old Zionism of his youth. He supported the politics of popular government in Brazil and American democracy in its best manifestations, but he did not sign manifestos or political documents. Moacyr understood that his first obligation was to his readers, lovers of literature, with whom he engaged in constant dialogue. If he were to adopt a partisan stance, he would be breaking this commitment, which was essentially ethical, critical, open and independent.

His principles and values were acquired gradually, first through family contact. As a Jew and the son of immigrants, Moacyr Scliar was fully aware of the role of Jewish ambiguity. Adopting a new homeland was the main task, and so was adapting to the customs and history of the new country, but he was also politically aware of a past history that could never be overlooked.

Perhaps because he had read him so often, he was particularly inspired by Kafka. Not so much because of the literature or his style, but because Kafka was a Czech who wrote in German and lived with many German intellectuals who had a problem typical of the identity of Jews who were routinely expelled from their countries, permanently in exodus.

Moacyr traced his first humanist roots from his family, imbued with the ethical values of solidarity and fellowship. He soon realized that Jews were universal beings, but that they lived in villages or small communities. This made him, as he once said, neither better nor worse, just different, an inhabitant of the pores of society. Now, after so many tragedies, they needed to join the body of society, to be useful, to participate, to

influence and be influenced. Why not? Medicine, along with literature, was his vehicle for “entering” society.

As he read and reread the Bible, which he considered a true source of inspiration, both the Old and New Testaments, Moacyr would look to the former for the lessons of justice and fraternity from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets. In the New Testament, he would find lessons in selflessness and a spirit of forgiveness. Like few others, he managed to assimilate two philosophies that seemed contradictory.

From classical antiquity, Moacyr sought an understanding of man and the universe. He had read the classics, assimilated their teachings, and used them as ethical guidelines for life.

From the Renaissance, he was inspired by political realism, rationality, and the rejection of prejudices and dogmas, especially religious ones. The role of science, the curing of diseases, and experimentation were for Moacyr the Renaissance gift he most admired, especially the notion that man was the center of the universe. But the French Revolution and its ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, the birth of the citizen, and the beginning of modern democracy and the republic gave Moacyr the most important legacy of his political education: the belief that utopias lead man, if not to perfect outcomes, then to better ones. In this respect, he could never live with inequality and oppression.

From his family environment, Moacyr Scliar managed to make the boiling political discussions he constantly heard a reality. His protagonists are clearly reconstructed from meetings on the sidewalks or in the modest rooms of his uncles’ and neighbors’ houses. The sofas were worn, the walls unpainted, there were leaks, and the rooms were sparse, but they had libraries whose books were borrowed and often discussed. There were always paintings on the walls, even if they were only copies. From Judaism, Moacyr drew inspiration for *Van Gogh’s Ear*<sup>2</sup> and *Max and the Cats*.<sup>3</sup> From his biblical readings – in fact, biblical re-readings – Moacyr bequeathed us *A mulher que escreveu a Bíblia*<sup>4</sup> (The woman who wrote the Bible) and *Manual da paixão solitária*<sup>5</sup> [Manual of the solitary passion] as well as *Os vendilhões do templo*<sup>6</sup> [(The merchants of the Temple). He published *Sonhos tropicais*<sup>7</sup> (Tropical dreams) and *A majestade do Xingu*<sup>8</sup> (The majesty of the Xingu) as a tribute to the heroic times when public health was first beginning in Brazil. From political experiences and events, he wrote, *Eu vos abraço, milhões*<sup>9</sup> (I embrace you, all of you) as well as *Mês de cães danados*<sup>10</sup> (Mad dog month) and *Vozes do golpe (Mãe Judia, 1964)*<sup>11</sup> (Voices from the coup – Jewish mother, 1964). With a certain sense of public profession, he wrote *O Texto, ou: a Vida – uma trajetória literária*<sup>12</sup> (The Text, or life: a literary journey) in which he describes some of the most remarkable events of his career.

He was analyzed by several critics in *Moacyr Scliar, a escrita de um homem só*,<sup>13</sup> (Moacyr Scliar, one man's writing) whose first chapter is an interview in which he defines his political theory:

I am tired of suffering. There were a lot of leftists in my family. Not my father, who was politically anodyne, a man who had no openness or social concerns.

But I had very educated uncles who were left-wing, and I went the same way very early on. I never became an activist. Many young people from Bom Fim were arrested. That wasn't my case, but I had a very strong political culture.

I read Marx and especially Engels. What fascinated me most was that these authors presented a model for understanding the world that was absolutely logical and mathematical.

It was about the division between the oppressed and the oppressors, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, good and evil.

One country was the symbol of good, the Soviet Union, and one country was the symbol of evil, the United States. In my youth this scheme was very satisfying; it gave absolutely reassuring answers to what we had to think about the world.

But it collapsed, and from then on I lost my political convictions, and my whole generation suffered from this disillusionment. It's not disillusionment with the world, as Max Weber used to say, but disillusionment with the ability of politics to solve the world's problems.

On the other hand, I've come to understand people more and more, and I've become very concerned about the things that make people suffer. I'm not saying there shouldn't be political activism; I'm saying I'm not the person for it.

Understanding people is important because we have no other choice.

The truth is that human beings are very helpless creatures who eventually turn out to be capable of admirable things.

I'm not pessimistic about the human species. A lot of writers of my generation disagree.

That's not my view. Nor is it my view that humanity, or even Brazil, is lost.

That's not true.

I have a clear conviction that over the course of my life, I have seen the world and the country getting better.

This deeply humanist vision will be cemented, as a kind of declaration, in the monumental work *Direitos Humanos no cotidiano*<sup>14</sup> (Human rights in everyday life). In a short essay, Moacyr Scliar analyzes Article 15 (on the right to nationality) of the *UN Charter*, stating:

Coming from a group of people who have wandered for centuries from one area to another, from one country to another, from a group of people who have suffered in the flesh the indignity of being deprived of a nationality, I approach this subject not without emotion.



And I approach it with the awareness of living in a country that has generously welcomed immigrants from all over the world, allowing them to rebuild broken lives and thus contribute to the progress of society as a whole [...].

Nationality doesn't just mean having a passport, nor does it just mean fulfilling legal requirements.

There is an emotional and even spiritual dimension to the question of nationality that cannot be ignored.

When a person is deprived of his or her nationality, his or her personal integrity and ability to realize himself or herself as a human being are undermined [...].

That every country becomes a new Canaan for every person is the great goal that humanity must set for itself at the end of this millennium.

His ethical and humanist approach, free of partisanship or sectarianism, would once again be expressed in his short story "O nascimento de um cidadão" ("The Birth of a Citizen,") included in a collection of legal, political and sociological writings entitled *A história da cidadania*<sup>15</sup> (The history of citizenship). In this short story, Moacyr affirms and reaffirms his commitment to humanity and humankind; a commitment, he says, that is both emotional and rational.

In this tale, Moacyr tells the story of a worker who is laid off. He was paid very little but was able to support his wife and young son. His drama, however, takes place within the family. His wife becomes desperate about the situation, so he goes looking for a job, knowing how difficult it would be. Between coming home and watching his drama unfold, he would rather drink and ends up sleeping on the street. This goes on, day after day, until he forgets his wife's name and his own. Suddenly he is run over.

Moacyr Scliar tells us:

There he lay motionless on the asphalt, surrounded by people. Strangely, there was no pain; on the contrary, he felt light, almost as if he were floating [...].

Someone leaned over him, a policeman, and asked, "How are you, citizen? Can you hold on, citizen?"

He didn't know. It didn't even matter.

Now he knew who he was. He was a citizen. He didn't have a name, but he had a title: citizen.

For him, being a citizen was the beginning of everything. Or the end of everything. His eyes closed. But his face opened with a smile.

The last smile of the stranger; the first smile of the citizen.

As a writer and public health doctor, Moacyr adopted political theory of humanism. The man who needs fiction and the patient who needs the doctor – the two faces of a life dedicated to humanity. In this dual approach, Moacyr Scliar reveals all his

Jewish ethical heritage, plus a humanitarian vision, culminating in what the humble villagers who immigrated in search of a dignified life imagined for their children: they would be citizens.

Moacyr Scliar consciously followed this path, seeking to fulfill an individual and social role. His humanism, though independent and anti-sectarian, was not without emotion and commitment. Even if his dreams were utopian, his universal heritage has been preserved in a literary (and medical) body of work whose realization has a beginning that cannot be measured in time, and an outcome that makes Moacyr Scliar more than a writer and a doctor: a citizen.

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<sup>1</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *O exército de um homem só*. Porto Alegre: L&PM, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *A orelha de Van Gogh*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 1989

<sup>3</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *Max e os felinos*. Porto Alegre: L&PM, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *A mulher que escreveu a Bíblia*. São Paulo: Cia. de Bolso, 1999

<sup>5</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *Manual da paixão solitária*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *Os vendilhões do templo*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *Sonhos tropicais*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *A majestade do Xingu*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *Eu vos abraço, milhões*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *Mês de cães danados*. Porto Alegre: L&PM, 1977.

<sup>11</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. Mãe judia, 1964. In: *Vozes do golpe*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. *O Texto, ou: a Vida – uma trajetória literária*. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 2007

<sup>13</sup> *Moacyr Scliar, a escrita de um homem só*. Porto Alegre: IEL, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. Cidadania. In: *Direitos humanos no cotidiano*. Brasília: UNESCO; USP; Federal Government, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> SCLIAR, Moacyr. O nascimento de um cidadão. In: PISKY, Jayme (Org.). *História da cidadania*. São Paulo: Contexto, 2003.