The Historical Significance of

*Memórias de um sargento de milícias*

Edu Teruki Otsuka

*Memórias de um sargento de milícias* [Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant], the only novel of Manuel Antônio de Almeida, concerns the ways of life and the practical perspectives of the free poor people of Rio de Janeiro in the early nineteenth century; although restricted in social and geographical scope, it captures an essential aspect of class relations in the country as a whole. Comical in tone, unpretentious in its plotline and unconventional in its social ambience, *Memórias* is generally regarded as a work that diverges from the main trends of Brazilian fiction at the time. Although most novelists attempted to acclimatize the novel as a form in Brazil by writing sentimental stories with grandiloquent language, Almeida withdrew from prevailing romantic standards. By depicting the actions of people who were neither slaves nor owners, he succeeded in constructing a narrative framework that comprehends a decisive historical experience of nineteenth-century Brazilian society. Because of its distinctive features, as we shall see, Almeida’s *Memórias* is an outstanding accomplishment in the early development of the Brazilian novel and is arguably one of the most penetrating works to appear before Machado de Assis’s greater novels.

This chapter begins with a description of some general features of *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* and a brief overview of the main traditional readings of Almeida’s work. Seen as a novel of manners or a picaresque novel, it has been praised because of its alleged accuracy in depicting popular customs in a lively, straightforward way. Thus, the initial critical responses to *Memórias* overemphasized its detachment from the prevailing romantic conventions of its time and, most importantly, gravitated around a loose sense of realism in their tentative critical assessments.
An innovative interpretation of Memórias was proposed in 1970 by critic Antonio Candido; his main argument is presented in the next section of this chapter. Candido contends against those traditional views on Almeida’s novel and redefines the nature of its realism in order to characterize its literary and social relevance. According to him, Memórias’s narrative rhythm is established by a continuous oscillation of the main characters between order and disorder, which defines a structural feature corresponding to the fluctuation of the lower-class free population in nineteenth-century Brazilian society. In Candido’s view, Memórias’s realism and literary effectiveness owe not so much to its accuracy in depicting detail as to its formalization of a general social dynamic.

Candido’s analysis has provided the basis for an extensive discussion of both Almeida’s novel and Brazilian society’s particularities. In the following section, I discuss those connections further by examining a feature of Memórias that has been overlooked by previous readings: the profusion of dispute and acts of vengeance in virtually all the characters’ relationships. Such widespread disposition to quarrel corresponds to the episodic narrative organization and is related to the organization of Brazilian society, marked by slaveholding, patron–client relationships and an extensive urge to affirm social superiority.

Finally, I focus on the role Memórias has played in the historical development of early Brazilian fiction. As the adjustment of the novel as a form to the specific social conditions of the country implied a disparity between the individualist and liberal values of the European plot, on the one hand, and the authority-based relations of Brazilian society, on the other, the first attempts to produce a national variety of the novel confronted problems that required a development of the literary material itself, so that its formal potentialities could come out. Almeida produced a particular formal solution to the maladjustment of European thematic and ideological conventions to local social relations by way of a comical rendering of the tension between modern norms and their ‘colonial’ infringement, thus grasping the specific historical experience of Brazilian society more effectively than other writers’ attempts to juxtapose the European realistic plot and the local environment.

General Features

Memórias de um sargento de milícias first appeared anonymously in weekly chapters from June 1852 to July 1853, in Correio Mercantil, a Liberal newspaper in Rio de Janeiro, and was published in two volumes in
1854–5. It begins by telling the fortunes and misfortunes of Leonardo Pataca, which gradually give way to the exploits of his son, a likeable rascal also named Leonardo, whose bustling life from birth to young adulthood is depicted in a series of loosely tied episodes. In his rambling route towards happiness, Leonardo is raised by his godfather the Barber, grows up as a scamp, falls in love a couple of times, gets in trouble repeatedly and is harassed by the Chief of Police, Major Vidigal, who eventually arrests Leonardo and turns him into a soldier; in the end, Leonardo is nominated a sergeant, marries his childhood sweetheart Luisinha and achieves social ascent.

As the novel follows the experiences of the main characters, it also describes human types and popular customs, sketching a picture of the social landscape of Rio de Janeiro ‘in the time of the king’, that is, in the period when King João VI and the Portuguese court, fleeing from the Napoleonic army, settled in the colonial territory in Portuguese America (1808–21). Being set in the past, Memórias has a semi-historical component, but most of the historical references as well as information about customs are counterbalanced by a fable-like treatment of events.

In fact, Memórias presents a combination of features that resemble traits of different types of writing, and so literary historians and critics have striven to categorize it according to available genre descriptions, and the effort to define its literary affiliations has given rise to stubborn controversy.

During Manuel Antônio de Almeida’s lifetime, his novel did not arouse significant commentary from his fellow writers. Critical attention to it developed only after his death and especially from the late nineteenth century onwards. Since then, it has been regarded as a novel of manners, since it presents social types and occupations, picturesque places, popular customs, religious festivities and other traditional cultural practices. Often praised because of its (alleged) accuracy in portraying popular manners in early nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, Memórias has also been considered a source of historical information, much like the books by foreign travellers who described places and customs in Brazil at the time. Be that as it may, the (supposed) veracity of the register of customs has been taken as evidence of the novel’s realism. Moreover, because it portrayed people of the lower middle class in demotic style, avoiding sentimental lavishness, excess of suffering and pompous language, Almeida’s novel seemed to be disconnected from the main trends of romantic fiction. So much so that Memórias has been said to be a forerunner of the realistic or naturalistic novel.
For sure, Memórias does to some extent provide a chronicle of customs, but, rather than a feature that deviates from romantic convention, or anticipates realism, the documentary vein can be considered something that Almeida’s novel shares with romantic costumbrismo, a particular trend in the Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American literature of the period, which is characterized by a predilection for portraying scenes of local or regional customs and types. Memórias’s connection with Brazilian romantic literature can be best grasped with reference to nationalism, for its description of local circumstances and details is part of a general tendency of the novel of the time to observe and depict multifarious aspects of the country as a whole, since literary nationalism was meant, above all, to write about local scenes and customs. As critic Antonio Candido has argued, the nineteenth-century Brazilian novel developed primarily as a literary device for investigating human and regional diversity and for disclosing unknown aspects of society, thus enhancing the country’s knowledge of itself.

Insofar as the novel’s main character is a sort of cunning rogue and because of its episodic structure, Memórias has also been associated with the tradition of the Spanish picaresque novel of the Siglo de Oro. In a loose sense, the picaresque genre comprises not only the earliest Spanish variety but also works such as Lesage’s Gil Blas (1715), Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1722) and Fernández de Lizardi’s El Periquillo Sarniento (1816), to name just a few. These later ‘picaresque’ novels, however, employ only the external formal structure of the Spanish model, since the moral vision charged with disenchantment (desengaño) is replaced by a new system of values relating to the rising bourgeoisie. To a certain extent, Almeida’s Memórias may even be connected to this tradition, but, as far as historical transformations in social and ideological content can radically alter the meaning of the employment of a previous literary form, particular traits in it that deviate from the picaresque model may be more revealing than the similarities.

Narrative Rhythm and Brazilian Society

Antonio Candido’s ‘Dialética da Malandragem’ [Dialectic of Malandragem] is admittedly the most important and influential modern interpretation of Memórias. Its point of departure is a discussion of Memórias’s literary affiliations, taking issue with both the critics who see Almeida’s novel as picaresque and those who praise it for its documentary information.
Candido acknowledges that Almeida may have been acquainted with works that make use of the picaresque structure, but, proceeding to a comparison of *Memórias* with the picaresque genre, pointing out both affinities with and differences from it, he prefers to describe Leonardo not as a *pícaro* but as a *malandro*,\(^{12}\) that is, a cunning rogue, ‘coming from an almost folkloric tradition and corresponding ... to a certain comic and popular atmosphere of its time in Brazil’.\(^{13}\) Rather than linking *Memórias* directly to a remote Spanish model, Candido investigates the particular elements that connect the novel to local cultural traditions. Firstly, he describes the *malandro* as a specimen of the mythical trickster, common to all folklores, including Brazilian popular stories (such as those about Pedro Malasar tes). Secondly, Candido relates *Memórias* to local satirical writing in journalism, the emergence of caricature in Brazilian newspapers and the comic plays of Martins Pena.

Most decisively, Candido analyses the composition of *Memórias*, focusing on the system of relations in which Leonardo is involved in order to demonstrate how it is regulated by an internal rule of composition that articulates Almeida’s novel to Brazilian society more effectively than does its descriptions of customs. Observing the social map of the fictional universe depicted in it, Candido describes the movement of the characters in the plot as a ‘dialectic of order and disorder’, that is to say, a permanent alternation between acceptance of established norms and transgression of those norms, between licit and illicit, between law and its infringement. This fluctuation can be grasped in the actions of Leonardo, who continuously shifts from one pole to the other; in the course of the story, he turns in succession from devilish child to dependant, from servant of the royal pantries to vagrant, from prisoner to soldier and from prankster to sergeant. This progression is not restricted to situations in which the main characters are involved, for most episodes in the novel, even those concerning secondary events, are ruled by this dynamic of order and disorder, which operates as an organizing principle of the novel’s formal structure.

In a noteworthy passage of his essay, Candido analyses a scene near the end of the novel in which Major Vidigal, till then a central representative of order, is led to infringe the law himself, conceding a favour on behalf of Leonardo in exchange for personal satisfaction, as a result of an agreement with his former mistress. In the chapter ‘Three Women on a Mission’, Leonardo’s godmother, Dona Maria (a wealthy matron) and Maria Regalada (Vidigal’s former mistress) visit the Chief of Police in his house to plead for Leonardo’s release from prison. Vidigal yields ‘to the petition of an “easy” lady supported by a capitalist lady, in a smooth
collusion of the two hemispheres [of order and disorder], on the initiative of a third lady, who circulates freely between the two. As Candido says, there is a particular feature in this scene that synthesizes, as a symbol, the combination of order and disorder and the final subversion of values:

When the women arrive at his house … the Major appears in a cotton print dressing gown and wooden clogs, in a slovenliness that contradicts the uprightness he has displayed throughout the narrative. Perplexed by the visit, dissolving in the smiles and chills of senile eroticism, he runs inside and returns arrayed in his uniform dress coat, properly buttoned up and shining in his gold braid, but with his everyday trousers and the same clogs pounding on the floor. And thus we have our severe dragon of order, the ethical conscience of the world, reduced to a lively image of the two hemispheres, because at that moment when he transgresses his own norms in the face of the seduction of his old and, perhaps, once again lover, he has really become the equal of any of the malandros he has persecuted.

Candido also observes how Almeida’s novel presents the characters’ comings and goings between the social spheres of order and disorder in an open-minded fashion, without ascribing a positive or negative value to either order or disorder, and certainly not endorsing the conventional approval of established norms and admonition of transgressive practices. The narrative voice does repeatedly judge the characters’ conduct, but the frame of evaluation is not stable, so that at times the narrator judges from the standpoint of the norm and at times from that of its infringement. By moving to and fro between the two poles, the narrator himself takes part in the general oscillation of the main characters. The result of this variation in the narrator’s point of view is a ‘moral neutrality’, or rather an incorporation of two diverging social viewpoints that cancel each other out.

Candido’s main insight, however, pertains to the connection of this plot dynamic to Brazilian society. The characters’ movement between order and disorder, he remarks, ‘recalls the mode of formation of families, prestige, fortunes, and reputations in urban Brazil in the first half of the nineteenth century.’ Besides this general resemblance, Candido shows how the novel integrates, in its inner formal structure, a constitutive principle of society. Memórias is significant, he argues, not so much because of the documentary description or the exposition of customs, but because it is ‘constructed according to the general rhythm of the society,'
seen through one of its sectors’. That is, the novel presents, at a deeper level, a hidden principle of composition that unifies the particular elements of the apparent level and also functions as a literary correlative of the social dynamic of Brazil at the time. It is the internal law of the plot, manifesting in the novel’s narrative rhythm, that captures the rule of life crucial for the social reproduction of an entire class in a slave-owning society in which only a few free people worked, and the others lived in insecurity, gleaning the remnants of dependency relations, or surviving by contrivance or petty theft.  

Brazilian society at the time was composed of roughly three distinct social strata: at the top was a class of proprietors who could afford the goods of modern civilization as well as cultural novelties (an example in the novel is Dona Maria, the rich matron with whom Leonardo’s family has connections); as an extension of this class, there was an institutional administration (embodied in the police system, of which Major Vidigal is the unequivocal representative). At the base was the multitude of slaves on whom the burden of manual work was imposed (this group is virtually absent from Memórias). Between these two classes – the essential ones from the point of view of economic organization – was an intermediary group of people who were neither proprietors nor slaves; this class comprised those who had a regular occupation (bailiff, barber) or worked as servants of the Royal House, and all those who lived in dubious conditions (like the necromancer, the Gypsies, swindlers, etc.). As the reader will readily find out, most of the characters in the novel belong to that intermediate, half-anomic social stratum. As a consequence of an economic organization based on slave labour, the situation of the poor free people was marked by particular problems, since they generally depended on the protection of the rich (even if they had regular jobs) or had to resort to unlawful activities for their livelihood. 

In a newly independent country that was striving to build a modern nation, and thus imposed rigid control over any kind of misbehaviour or turmoil, but could not provide the material conditions for an entire class to live in accordance with the law, people could not do without order nor could they live in conformity to it. Refraining from the ideological desire for discipline and accepting the unruly exploits of the poor, Memórias expresses ‘the vast general accommodation that dissolves the extremes, [and] confuses the meaning of law and order’. Because it mingles these disparate attitudes, Almeida’s novel is, to quote Candido again, ‘perhaps the only one in Brazilian literature of the nineteenth century that does not express the vision of the dominant class’.
The society presented in *Memórias* is governed by relationships of favour and dependency; as the narrator puts it, ‘the use of influence, of connections among parents and godparents constituted a true mainspring within the entire working of society’. Such relationships are decisive in the novel’s denouement, in which, as already mentioned, the godmother, Dona Maria, and Maria Regalada make an arrangement with Major Vidigal so that Leonardo may be forgiven. As a consequence of this agreement, the Major not only releases Leonardo from prison and from the humiliating punishment of being whipped, but also promotes him to the position of sergeant (and finally manages his transfer to the militia so that Leonardo can marry Luisinha). This incident indicates the actual power relations that effectively interfere in the course of events and in the characters’ fate.

A comparable instance of the significance of influence and connections occurs in an early episode, in which Leonardo Pataca is taken to the guardhouse after being caught in a necromancy ritual, and the godmother seeks help from a lieutenant colonel who, in turn, appeals to an influential nobleman who manages Pataca’s release. Most of the time, however, such power relations are only alluded to rather than developed in full narrative display. When the godmother finds a position for Leonardo in the royal pantries, the narrator suggests that she has attained it by means of unlawful patronage: ‘How the *comadre* had been able to arrange such a thing for her godson is something that should be of little concern for us.’

Even in the episode in which Leonardo becomes an *agregado*, that is, a dependant attached to the household of a family, the narrator comments on two general situations of the dependant in the family, but the specific problems relating to Leonardo and the matriarchs of Vidinha’s household are only hinted at. At one point, Leonardo is arrested by Vidigal, and the matrons assume Leonardo must have hidden himself on purpose. Their indignation turns into ‘intense hatred’, insofar as they believe that such an attitude of Leonardo’s would be a sign of his ‘ingratitude … toward those people who had so generously taken him in’. Since the family have given shelter to Leonardo, the matrons expect him to be loyal and grateful to them, a reaction that implies that Leonardo’s admission into the family entails the submission of the dependant to his protectors. However, as the plot unfolds, Leonardo becomes a soldier and the problems concerning the social and moral dilemmas of dependency break off without narrative development. Although favour and accommodation are prevailing relationships in the society depicted in
Memórias, most narrative scenes that actually show the characters’ interrelations and actions are dominated by another kind of relationship, one characterized by a disposition to quarrel and revenge.²⁵

Let us examine a sequence of events in the first part of the novel, in which a succession of revengeful actions occurs. Leonardo is raised by his godfather, the barber, who fancies a brilliant future for the child and yearns to see him eventually ordained as a priest. The godfather’s babbling neighbour mocks him when she sees his unsuccessful attempts to teach Leonardo the Lord’s Prayer. The godfather reacts, and an argument takes place, full of mutual insult and offence, until Leonardo appears and mimics the neighbour, avenging the godfather, who bursts into laughter.²⁶ Soon afterwards, Leonardo, now a sacristan, tricks the same neighbour in the church; she complains to the liturgy master, who gives the boy a hefty reprimand. In turn, Leonardo plans an act of vengeance against the liturgy master, making him almost miss his sermon; because he has arrived late, the liturgy master gets into a wrangle with the Italian Capuchin friar who has offered to improvise the sermon in his place, and dismisses Leonardo afterwards. As soon as the news reaches the neighbourhood, the annoying lady, avenged, nags Leonardo’s godfather, and the altercation restarts all over again.²⁷

Throughout the story, similar situations arise: Leonardo Pataca hires a ruffian, Chico Juca, to take revenge against the Gypsy girl; Leonardo’s godmother defames José Manuel, who is contending with her godson for Luisinha’s affection; Leonardo quarrels with the royal pantries’ lackey and with Vidinha’s cousins on account of a love dispute; Teotônio, a prankster, mockingly mimics Major Vidigal; etc. In all these episodes, the prevailing interpersonal relations are ruled by a peculiar disposition to quarrel, which ranges from mockery to physical assault. This propensity for quarrelling throughout the novel suggests that it is not merely an individual trait and is, rather, a socially determined behaviour. Thus, the majority of episodes, however diverse their apparent motifs, are similar in nature, for they are propelled by the quarrelsome disposition that establishes a pattern of successive revengeful actions in the dynamics of the plot and thereby defines a unifying structural principle of the novel.

The main conflict between Leonardo and Major Vidigal is itself tinged by revengeful feelings; the Chief of Police strives to arrest Leonardo not so much because of his commitment to maintaining order, but rather because of a personal dispute. When Leonardo gets a position in the royal pantries and seems to change his ways by living in conformity to the law, the Major thinks regretfully, ‘I wonder if he is really changing … If he does change I lose my revenge.’²⁸
Besides this conflict, which embodies the divergence between different social groups, most episodes in the novel concern rivalry and dispute involving characters who occupy near-equivalent social positions. In the context of a slave-owning society in which patron–client relationships prevail, the propensity to quarrel can be understood as a resource of the poor to imaginarily compensate for the subaltern position they are constrained to occupy. In Memórias, avenging oneself is not so much an action to get even as it is a way of demeaning others to affirm one’s own supposed superiority. It is an imaginary compensation because the one who wins a dispute is momentarily raised to a position of fanciful pre-eminence which is not sustained by any real material basis. So much so that the one who is defeated will soon attempt to avenge himself and, if successful, will reverse the situation and affirm an imaginary superiority in turn.

Wealth and property are the material foundations of social power, sustaining the all-pervading web of favour and the social eminence of the owning class; but among the poor who are located in a roughly equivalent social rank, and especially when they are disconnected from the protection of actual sources of power, vengeance and rivalry are resources for obtaining a sense of social significance.

In Memórias, real power is exerted by Major Vidigal, the police authority and a surrogate of the proprietary class. His activity in the novel consists of patrolling the poor and punishing all irregular conduct, constraining them to live in conformity to a discipline they cannot adjust to in the conditions of the ‘semi-colonial’ country. Imbued with the prerogatives of his position, Vidigal acts as the ‘absolute monarch’ and ‘supreme arbiter’ of justice: ‘he did as he chose, and no one called him to account’.29

This arbitrary will operates as a means to attest and reinforce the upper class’s social superiority. Thus, Vidigal is never satisfied by merely arresting lawbreakers; he subjects them to humiliation, as in the scene in which the Major forces the participants in the necromancy ritual to continue dancing while the grenadiers ridicule them.30 Moreover, Vidigal cannot bear in his vanity to be offended or demeaned in the eyes of others; that is what happens when Leonardo escapes detention: ‘If Leonardo had not run away but had arranged his release some other way, Vidigal might even have become his friend in the end. But having been left in a bad light, the Major would now regard him as his inveterate enemy until he could get full revenge.’31

Likewise, the wealthy matron Dona Maria, who ‘had a good heart, was generous, devout, a friend to the poor’,32 is prone to dispute as well; her mania for lawsuits is an expression of the way she takes care of those who disturb her exercising of her power. At one point, a story is heard
in the town concerning a girl who had run off with a man when she was going to pray at the Stone Oratory, taking with her a ‘goodly portion of gold pieces’. The godmother makes a false accusation against José Manuel, suggesting he was the man with whom the girl had fled, and Dona Maria says, ‘If I were a relative of the girl, I’d slap such a lawsuit on that monster as would teach him.’

The profusion of quarrelsome and revengeful actions in Memórias suggests that characters of the lower social strata re-enact the belligerence and misconduct of the upper-class figures who have unlimited scope for arbitrary action, which is a sign of their social pre-eminence. The reproduction of the disposition to quarrel is, therefore, a result of the organization of society as a whole, in which rigid social hierarchy is continually reaffirmed. If the impulse for revenge is a psychological trait, it is also a socially mediated one and cannot be regarded solely as a problem of personal moral conduct.

This quarrelsome disposition can also be interpreted as a literary correlative of an actual tendency to conflict in mid-nineteenth-century Brazil, concerning the struggle for work in a society in which the free labour market was compromised by the predominance of slave labour. As historians have pointed out, master artisans preferred to train their slaves rather than free apprentices; by the same token, proprietors trained their slaves in skilled occupations, since this would increase the value of the slaves and of the wages they could earn as negros de ganho (blacks for hire). In these circumstances, since the early nineteenth century, poor whites had protested against the training of slaves as skilled craftsmen, which suggests that free whites could no longer compete with slaves to get work. Moreover, at the time the novel was being written, there had been an expansion of social conflicts involving poor free whites, former slaves and negros de ganho who were fighting for work in the streets of Rio de Janeiro. From this perspective, the self-generating movement of successive acts of vengeance in Memórias may also be related to a particular social dynamic of conflict among the poor, although the novel does not portray competition for work directly.

Memórias de um sargento de milícias in the Development of the Early Brazilian Novel

Memórias played an essential role in the adaptation of the European novel to local conditions in Brazil. Because of the historical circumstances in which it appeared, however, Almeida’s work could not solve...
all the literary problems posed by the social and cultural situation of his time, for the local tradition of the novel was not yet sufficiently developed for the literary material itself to be grasped in its full complexity.

In the formative period of Brazilian literature, as studied by Antonio Candido, local intellectuals were eager to participate in modern Western culture, leaving colonial seclusion behind, and at the same time were committed to building a national culture with an identity of its own. Thus, the development of cultural life in the country was and is guided by a perennial tension between universalism and localism. The completion of the formative process implied the construction of a national literary system and the establishment of a local literary tradition, capable of self-reference, that is to say, capable of ‘producing works of the first order, influenced by previous national examples, not by immediate foreign models’. In the case of the novel, the establishment of a local tradition required a complete reworking of the materials writers had to deal with.

As the novel had become a prestigious cultural commodity and begun to be popularized in Brazil, some writers sought to bring about a national version of it, but the first attempts at creating works of prose fiction inspired by the European novel in Brazil were irreparably flawed. Besides the obvious difficulties in mastering coherent plot development and accommodating literary language in the realm of daily prose, since the prevailing style was then deeply suffused by the dominance of poetry, there were particular problems concerning the way the novel as a form shaped empirical elements of social reality.

The main themes of the European novel of the time and the ideological coordinates that guided it did not find exact correspondence in nineteenth-century Brazilian society, since the reproduction of the ‘semi-colonial’ structure conditioned the accumulation of wealth and the cultural up-to-dateness of the upper class. Relocated in this society, the novel would start to operate according to a different logic. Correspondingly, for the Brazilian novel to prosper a previous process of working out the literary material was necessary, adjusting it to this particular historical context.
The challenge of producing a local variety of the novel could not be solved by the mere juxtaposing of local setting and European plot, but to bring together those two conflicting elements was a crucial moment in the formation of the Brazilian novel, since the flaws so produced would disclose the real nature of the local social and literary materials.

After a number of lesser attempts at prose fiction by authors such as Pereira da Silva, Gonçalves de Magalhães, Joaquim Noberto and Teixeira e Sousa, who had written historical, sentimental and melodramatic stories, Joaquim Manuel de Macedo had stabilized the novel as a form in Brazil. With the publication of A moreninha [The Brunette] (1844), he gave rise to a novel of manners which presented characters akin to the local bourgeoisie and contrived a diction and style adjusted to his social environment. Throughout his prolific career, Macedo generally repeated the formula of the sentimental plot. Although his novels were undeniably an improvement on previous efforts, his work was not without flaws. There remained a discrepancy between the portrayal of local characters and the employment of European romantic conventions. As Antonio Candido remarks, Macedo’s work superimposes a romantic plot upon the depiction of socially plausible characters, resulting in an awkward combination; ‘so much so that we wonder how it is possible for such ordinary people to get involved in the unforeseen happenings [Macedo] submits them to’.

In the subsequent expansion of the urban novel, José de Alencar, following in Macedo’s footsteps, developed the rearrangement of the European plot – now in a more realistic vein – in the local social setting. With greater analytical discernment and thematic sophistication, in novels such as Senhora (1875), Alencar left behind the provincial character of his predecessor’s work, bringing the contemporary issues of money and individualism to the foreground. By doing so, however, he also deepened the incongruity between modern European themes and Brazilian social backwardness in the novel’s composition. While the central conflict involving the main characters implies the coordinates of liberal–romantic values, the secondary characters are ruled by traditional patron–client relationships, producing a dissonance. The clash between the two incompatible elements, as Roberto Schwarz has shown, resulted in a fractured or inconsistent form, suggesting that the formula of the European novel was not suited to depicting the logic of relationships in Brazil.

To be sure, the Brazilian novel could not do away with the discrepancy between European form and local social content, but it had to deal with it in such a way as to find a narrative structure capable of turning the incongruity itself into an element of the controlled logic of formal
composition. For that to happen, however, it would be necessary for the literary raw material to be apprehended in its full complexity, understood not simply as supposedly pure local content, untouched by foreign elements, but rather as content that already contained the European form as an ineffective one. The Brazilian novel could only attain full realization when its literary material took in, ‘at the level of content, the unsuitability of the European form’.45

In a different line of development, Almeida’s Memórias belongs to a tradition of comic rendering of popular life. Almeida’s main predecessor was Martins Pena, whose comic plays, such as O juiz de paz na roça [The Justice of the Peace in the Countryside] (1833) and O inglês maquinista [The English Train Driver] (1842), are similar in theme and diction to Memórias. Both Martins Pena and Almeida incorporate a popular social standpoint in their work and deal with modern bourgeois ideas and values with amusing nonchalance. Later, other comical novels, such as Macedo’s A luneta mágica [The Magic Eyeglass] (1869) and Luís Guimarães Júnior’s A família Agulha [The Needle Family] (1870), would come out, although with a somewhat different tone, closer to the local bourgeois viewpoint than to the popular one.

Almeida’s main contribution to the development of the novel in Brazil is the creation of a narrative framework based on the actual social relations that prevailed locally; by doing so, he avoided the incongruency that the direct transposition of the European plot produced in other writers’ works. Instead of clinging to the themes of the romantic or realistic novel, Almeida takes local relations as a point of departure and organizes the novel’s plot in conformity to particular features of Brazilian society; thus, for instance, the motif of social ascent – a crucial one in the bourgeois realistic novel – acquires a different character in Memórias, since it functions according to the logic of relationships of favour.

The fact that the story of Leonardo is set in the past helps to render local social interaction and develop a narrative rhythm and structure suited to the depiction of traditional relationships. In Memórias, the narrator is located in mid-nineteenth-century Brazil and, as such, is partly imbued with modern values and a modern sense of morality. This viewpoint is embedded in some of the narrator’s remarks but is absent from the characters’ consciousness. Thus, for instance, when Leonardo becomes a dependant, a degrading condition from the point of view of the bourgeois idea of individual freedom and autonomy, the narrator remarks, ‘Anyone older – or, to be precise, anyone with more sense and better rearing – would have been ashamed, and perhaps greatly so, at finding himself in Leonardo’s position, but he did not give that a
thought. Much of the novel’s comical effect results from this tension between modern norm and ‘colonial’ infringement.

Nonetheless, the same features that enable Memórias to establish a narrative structure suited to depicting local social relations and avoiding formal incongruity also has a drawback, since they prevent the extensive incorporation of modern motifs and issues or the way they function in the local context. In Memórias, the achievement of a literary form adjusted to local particularities is obtained at the cost of cutting off the connection with the contemporary world. Although the tension between modern moral sense and the arrangements of clientelism is embedded in the depiction of events, Memórias does not work out this tension thoroughly; it has not developed a literary form capable of dealing with contemporary issues and their displacement in Brazil.

Moreover, an effect of Memórias’s formal solution, according to Schwarz, is ‘the suspension of determinate historical conflicts through a general expertise in the art of survival, which does not internalize these conflicts and has no knowledge of moral convictions or remorse’. Although Memórias explores the movement and rhythm of a particular class, it also presents an attractive image of the country – based on conciliation and malandragem – in which historical conflicts are disguised.

The rhythm of continual reversibility between norm and its infringement, as well as the all-pervasive desire to affirm social distinction found in the disposition to quarrel, which Almeida transposes into the structure of Memórias, provided a crucial element of the literary materials Machado de Assis would later deal with in the composition of Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas [The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas] (1880). As Schwarz has shown, once adjusted to the social experience of the upper class, this rhythm ‘is brought up to the Alencarian heights of a demanding, contemporary self-awareness’; conversely, the subjective aspirations of the individual self are adjusted to ‘the lively merry-go-round, with no intention of reforming itself, that the literary tradition of a popular inspiration succeeded in inventing’, so that the combination of the backward system of relations and the modern normative demands results in reciprocal condemnation.

Thus, Manuel Antônio de Almeida’s Memórias de um sargento de milícias marks an essential moment in the formation of Brazilian novel, since its comic deployment of particular patterns of social behaviour achieves a literary result that would be unattainable by means of the uncritical transposition of the prevailing models of romantic or realistic European plots. In exploring relationships of favour, disregard of bourgeois norms, and propensity to quarrel, Memórias has a consistent formal
structure suited to capturing a significant component of the historical experience of nineteenth-century Brazilian society. As Candido suggests, Almeida presented a definite vision of Brazilian society with an acute sense of the potential and the limits of his art, and because of this he prefigured Machado de Assis’s extraordinary literary self-consciousness.  

Notes

1. Manuel Antônio de Almeida (1831–61) was a 21-year-old student of medicine working on Correio Mercantil when he started writing Memórias de um sargento de milícias. It is generally accepted that some of the incidents of Almeida’s novel were inspired by stories he heard from an older newspaper colleague, Antônio César Ramos, a retired sergeant who had worked under the real Major Vidigal.


3. In 1808 João was still prince regent; he became King João VI in 1816, after the death of his mother, Queen Maria I.

4. The first substantial critical assessment of Memórias was by José Veríssimo (1894).


6. Veríssimo, a critic who lived in the period of naturalism, suggests that Memórias was somehow a precursor of realism and naturalism (Veríssimo 1894, 117; Veríssimo 1963, 199); after him, a number of commentaries on the novel would reiterate his assertion.

7. See Merquior 1977, 71.


9. Andrade has claimed that Memoirs is not a precursor of realism, but rather belongs to a tradition of works that emerge on the margins of the dominant trends of their time, such as the Spanish picaresque novel (Andrade 1974, 136–8). Various critics have since explored the affinity between Memórias and the picaresque novel. See, for instance, Montello 1955; González 1994.


12. In common usage, malandro refers to a Brazilian social type, a rogue or a scamp who usually does not work and lives on the margins of legality, employing astute means to survive.


14. Antonio Candido 1993a, 43; Antonio Candido 1995, 94.

15. Antonio Candido 1993a, 43–4; Antonio Candido 1995, 94 (translation slightly modified).


18. See Antonio Candido 1993a, 45; Antonio Candido 1995, 95.


32. Almeida 2000, 166; Almeida 1999, 64.
34. Almeida 2000, 214; Almeida 1999, 94.
36. See Alencastro 1988, 50.
37. For a full account of this connection, see Otsuka 2016, 61–95.
38. See Antonio Candido 1993b; Antonio Candido 1980. See also Schwarz 2012, 36–40.
42. For a description of the early Brazilian fiction, see Daniel (2006, 127–36).
43. Antonio Candido 1993b, 124.
45. Schwarz 1977, 51; Schwarz 1992, 68. See also Schwarz 2012, 33–53.
46. Almeida 2000, 244; Almeida 1999, 112.
47. In this aspect, the limitation of Almeida's formal solution resembles that of Machado de Assis's first novels, although for quite different reasons. See Schwarz 1977, 65; Schwarz 1990, 219; Schwarz 2001, 158.
51. See Antonio Candido 1993b, 199.

Bibliography


