

## FOREWORD

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### Character, an essence of the narrative

More than three decades dedicated to teaching in Creative Writing at PUCRS have led me to consolidate an idea: students have some difficulty in understanding that a character is the true engine of the narrative. Many arrive in the course thinking that a "good story"—not yet available for what is significant—is enough to arouse the reader's interest. Dragged by history, raise a character who lives all the adventures.

I can't say that working this way is a catastrophic decision. It is possible that in the end the narrative is satisfactory, but it certainly meant rewriting, retouching, discouragement, comings and goings, and the result can be considered a miracle.

For these reasons, the first item of my lessons is dedicated to the character. Each one of my students create a character and they are going to live with this character for a semester. Sometimes they complain that it is a long time to dedicate "just" to one character, but I try to neutralize the argument with a question: "And then, have you thought about the situation of a novelist, who lives several years with a unique character?" This, in general, is enough to change what they think about my strategic proposal a little bit.

From the creation of the character, they are subjected to a series of small fictional stories, to verify for themselves the consistency of their creation. Only then, in the second semester, I start to elaborate short stories or, in some cases, novels and other kinds of texts. This is the moment when students have the decisive insight: it's a consistent character that makes history come out. It is as if they always knew it intuitively, but it did not result in productions that would satisfy completely.

The next step is to realize that it is possible to write a novel "without history", in which the character is enough to carry it forward. When we begin to think of examples, a frequency often is posthumous *Memoirs of Brás Cubas*; in fact, when we try to identify the episodes that compose the plot of Machado de Assis's masterly work, everything fails. Events are so small that we have to pay close attention if we want to keep something in our memory. Machado himself, in the prologue to the third

edition, refers to a critical note published by Capistrano de Abreu, where he had asked: "The posthumous *Memoirs of Brás Cubas* is a novel?" Brás himself says: a bachelor who expires at the age of sixty-four, it does not seem to contain all the elements of a tragedy. No tragedy, no comedy. Born into the social elite, he travels through Europe, never marries, maintains some silly sentimental relationships, devotes himself without passion to political life and ends up involved in the failed creation of the Brás Cubas plaster, a panacea designed to heal humanity. Even his death is pathetic: it dies of a banal pneumonia when being exposed to the rain. If we ask a reader of Machado to describe the history of this novel, few will remember all events, remaining in the main biographical lines of Brás Cubas. But nobody forgets his personality, nor the irony and disenchantment that exist in his celebrated phrases: Marcela loved me for fifteen months and eleven *contos de reis*, and in the end I had no children, I did not transmit to any creature the legacy of our misery.

The same logic can be applied to other novels, such as Flaubert's *A Single Heart*, or even Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. What is what you are looking for? If we think about it, in this work there are no great episodes—great actions—that will impress us. It is from Raskolnikov that we remember, not from his hundreds of small actions among dozens of characters that do not quite impress us as much as the protagonist.

A list of the novels that bring in the title the names of their Central characters would fill all pages of this book: Tom Jones, Quincas Borba, Iracema, Clarissa, The Miser, Sergeant Getulio, Madame Bovary, Gabriela, Tonio Kröger The brothers Karamazov, Macunaíma—and so on. In The Young Werther's sufferings, Goethe goes further, not only to announce the hero's name Werther, but also the story revolves around his sufferings. All of this means one thing, does not it?

If you have read a great novel ten years ago, you will soon remember, with force and liveliness, to make a central character and make drama through it, but go cursing your own memory, you can not remember with agility events. A memory in peace and thank her, because

she recorded what really matters. On the other hand, I'm sure you've started reading several novels that you abandoned after twenty pages, and one of the causes is a mistrust. "I do not believe anything I'm reading, nothing makes sense". It is not from the novel that you doubt, it is the character that does not convince.

It is the character, when well built, that gives meaning to everything that happens in history. What do I mean by that? The narrative must convince the reader that all that is there is because the character, by the simple fact of existing, makes things happen. No, the character has no magical or superhero powers. However, it is as if he attracted the events narrated. That is, the events of a story are rooted in the character, including the uncontrollable facts, such as a lightning bolt that destroys a house or the death of a potentate in China, to get the idea of Eça de Queirós in the novel *O mandarim*. Sounds weird, does not it? More like an esoteric teaching. But it is not.

Moving on to the present day, I realize that young fictionists—many of them my former students, so I know them well—prefer to focus on the character all his

attention, making the good performance of his novels depend on him. And they do it successfully recognized by the public, critics, prizes and their publications abroad: a sign that they are right in choosing this way of facing their narratives.

This number is intended to serve as a discussion of several aspects that involve the character, but not only in the critical-theoretical view, but also privileges the creation, which explains a part that opens space for fictional texts. It is possible that this is one of the first works that have this double character: that of thinking about an item in the fiction narrative and, at the same time, bringing creative texts that will serve as an example and proof of the reflective moment.

Like any collective work, who will make the selection is the reader.

That is way, now, the word is with you.

The Organizers