

The Reader of Time: The Last Farewell to Dom Pedro II in Paris

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It was the end of the day. The house was already withdrawing into its silence, but my mind remained restless. In bed, I paused a moment to quiet my thoughts. My gaze crossed the windowpane and settled on the moon, which that night seemed pale and sad.

My husband's voice brought me back to the room. "Has something happened, my dear? You seem worried," he asked, settling beside me.

"I received a letter from my father today," I answered, my gaze still distant.

"And how are your parents in Portugal?"

"They are well, at least so the letter says. Though they miss us, they seem settled at the Portuguese court."

"If all is well with your parents, what is it that worries you?"

Given the nature of the matter, I sat up in bed to explain: "It is that, along with the letter, Papa sent the copy of the French newspaper *Le Petit Journal*, of December 26, 1891."

"And what did that newspaper bring, to leave you so uneasy?"

"You must see it with your own eyes," I said, already taking the paper from the drawer beside me.

I handed the copy to my husband, who studied the cover attentively.

"The funeral of Dom Pedro II on the cover of *Le Petit Journal*! And note that it was a funeral with full honors of state," he observed.

"Nothing more just for a man who was an example of statesmanship."

"What does the report say?" he asked, handing me back the paper.

I looked for the page carrying the report. In my girlhood my mother obliged me to study French, and at the time I felt it an unnecessary burden for a child. Today, however, I see how useful that knowledge is to me. And so I began to translate.

(The passage below reaches English through the author's Portuguese rendering of the French original, cited in the references.)

"The funeral of the Emperor of Brazil. The obsequies of the Emperor of Brazil, lately dethroned by a people who seem to mourn him more than they care to admit, have just been carried out with great solemnity in Paris.

The old emperor died in a furnished hotel near the Madeleine; and when his faithful asked where they might kneel to kiss, piously and one last time, his cold hand, they were told: see numbers 39 and 41!

Here is something that might well have inspired in Bossuet a great flight of eloquence. To have reigned for long years over a country as large as two-thirds of Europe, and to end one's days in the commonplace bed of a hotel room, is without doubt a contrast capable of inspiring serious reflection — and never would the celebrated quotation have been better applied: Et nunc erudimini, intelligite qui judicatis terram — Be instructed now, understand, you who judge the earth.

So far as possible, Paris sought to efface the sinister impression; republican France paid a brilliant tribute to the Brazilian emperor.

It remembered that he was a just and good man, and that the cause of his fall was perhaps the decree he promulgated on the abolition of slavery. Besides, Paris loved Dom Pedro because Dom Pedro loved Paris.

Whenever he could, he was our guest: he had the honor of belonging to our learned societies and attended their sessions; and one recalls, finally, the most cordial visit he paid to Victor Hugo. He congratulated the great poet, and his manner was infinitely simpler than that of Charles V picking up Titian's brush.

May he rest in peace! Let us rejoice that we were able to bear witness of respect to this man who was just and compassionate before human misery."

Rereading the report sharpened my feeling of revolt, leading me to remark:

"Observe, husband, that while the Emperor received honors abroad — from a republican country, no less — not a single official tribute was paid him in his own land. It is shameful!"

"And the fact that Floriano Peixoto sent no authority to represent Brazil at the funeral in Paris was a disgrace before the world. There were representatives of many countries there; even of more distant nations, such as Japan, China, and Turkey. But the place that belonged to Brazil stood empty."

"I cannot understand it!" I said, raising my voice in indignation.

"I hear that this posture of Floriano's caused consternation even among some republicans."

"Ah, my dear! I cannot reconcile myself to such injustice. They wish to erase the figure of the Emperor at any cost! We know how much Dom Pedro loved this country! I still think of his suffering when he was forced to board that ship, when he had to leave Brazil... And even in the face of all that suffering, seeing his history usurped, he allowed no reaction to the coup, to spare his people."

"The Viscount of Tamandaré did try to persuade him..."

I fell silent for a moment and looked again at the moon. I asked myself whether the Emperor had in fact made the best decision. It is noble, yes, to wish to spare one's subjects any pain; and yet there would not necessarily have been bloodshed. He had the support of the Navy and, above all, of the people. Perhaps, had he dared to resist, we would not be plunged into this instability.

"Dom Pedro II loved Brazil so much..." I said in a tone of lament, turning to my husband. "Do you know what his last request was?"

"That Brazilian soil be placed in his coffin, should he die far from his homeland."

"Exactly, my dear. He wished to rest in his own land, and since he knew it to be impossible, he asked that a pillow of Brazilian soil be placed in his coffin. A pillow that was laid beneath his head. And if anyone is incapable of being moved by that purest manifestation of love for one's homeland, it is because they have no heart. This government has not even had the dignity to recognize the greatness of this man, and is doing everything to erase his memory! But this land is as much his as it is everyone's here — for he was a Brazilian!"

"Calm, my love. There is no need to work yourself up so. You will wake the children. They will think you are unwell."

"And I am not well at all, husband! Reading this newspaper has awakened my deepest indignation. Ah, but history shall hold to the truth! One day everyone will know the injustice this man suffered. And this newspaper here will serve as proof. I shall keep it for that," I said, resolute.

"So now you have become an archivist?" he teased, with a half smile.

"If that is how you wish to regard me, you are right to do so. But before anything else, I am a reader of time," I answered with conviction.

Perhaps meaning to change the course of the conversation and calm my spirits, my husband took the newspaper from my hands. He leafed through it attentively, until he stopped at the page reporting the funeral.

"The French papers already print in color — that is marvelous! It looks like a portrait. Look," he showed me the illustration. "This image does not seem to have any relation to the Emperor... Here it says *Noël*; it must be something about Christmas."

"Let me read," I said, leaning my head toward the paper in his hands, straining to make out the small print. And once more I used my French:

"The Christmas Shoes (a picture by M. Miéry). Here is Christmas! It seems to us a good moment to publish M. Miéry's delightful fancy.

The child is sleeping — or so it is thought; and the parents, ever so softly, come to fill the shoes with the presents that the Child Jesus is supposed to have brought down the chimney.

But the little rascal has his eyes wide open; he sees, he understands everything: so Father Christmas does not exist!

Poor cherub: it is your first illusion undone; the others will abandon you later. I pity you — and you too will pity yourself — when, disenchanted and sad, you understand that illusion is perhaps the best thing there is in life."

"A small text about disillusion," I remarked, closing the paper with a sigh and putting it back in the drawer. "The editor did well to place that piece beside the report of Dom Pedro II's funeral. He seems to know the feeling of the Brazilian people," I concluded, without hiding the disillusion that weighed on my own chest.

And since, according to my husband, I have become an archivist, I leave here the original copy of the newspaper, so that you may read it and feel the texture of history in your hands.

References

Le Petit Journal: Supplément illustré (Paris), no. 57, December 26, 1891.

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