

Souza, Laura de Mello e. *Cláudio Manuel da Costa: o letrado dividido*

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The biography of Cláudio Manuel da Costa, written by the historian Laura de Mello e Souza, is part of the “Brazilian Profiles” Collection, published by *Companhia das Letras* under the coordination of the journalist Elio Gaspari and the anthropologist Lilia Moritz Schwarcz. It thus has to be examined in light of these editorial assumptions, otherwise, there would be a risk of incurring a mistaken isolation and ignoring the symbiosis between the editorial profile and methodological choices made by the author. The collection is aimed at the both general readers and specialists, covering the lives of important Brazilians, notably statesmen, artists and intellectuals. Most of the biographers are historians or professionals linked to the human sciences, and present the history of their subject in a concise text and diversified documentary research.

These parameters define the editorial line, the format of the work, and the decision of the historian to write a text with the minimum possible interruptions and quotations. Laura de Mello e Souza has produced a work based on a vast biography and some unpublished documentary data. The citation of the sources appears in one of the final items in the book, called “Indications and comments on the bibliography and primary sources,” with a brief description of the application and use of the sources, systematized into themes in the book. It contains images which portray places – Rio de Janeiro and the countryside of Minas Gerais – and portraits attributed to the subject of the biography, as well as ‘illustrious’ persons who were his contemporaries, his signature and reproduction of extracts from the principal original document used by the author – the inventory of João Gonçalves da Costa, father of Cláudio Manuel da Costa. All the images have titles and are referenced, giving the collections of origin, but kept together in the center of the book, an editorial characteristic which does not allow their integration in the text.

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Cláudio Manuel da Costa, poet and lawyer, a man of great prestige, lived between 1729 and 1789, most of the time in Ouro Preto, then called Vila Rica, the capital of Minas Gerais. His formal education was in the Jesuit college in Rio de Janeiro, while he obtained degree from the Coimbra University. He died single, but lived for 30 years with Francisca Arcângela de Sousa, who was born a slave but emancipated when she gave birth to Cláudio's first child. She was his lifelong companion and mother of his five children, an indelible indication that custom supplants legislation, but not fully, because according to the letter of the law, graduates in service of the Empire could not marry women from 'the land.' Cláudio Manuel da Costa was not Portuguese, but rather Luso-Brazilian, and was unable to overcome his Jesuit and scholastic education, which to a certain extent imprisoned him within the law, to develop enough courage to publically assume his relationship with a black woman.

His dual activities as a man of the law and of the government allowed Cláudio Manuel da Costa to become a typical example of what social ascension was in Minas, around 25 to 30 years after the beginning of mining, because it was different from coastal regions. Minas was a new region, opened at the end of the seventeenth century, and the consolidation of local elites only occurred during the eighteenth century. Poetry made him a man of letters, who "never abandoned the books and the muses of history," but his internal conflicts lacerated him and divided him between political rights and illegal commerce, liberty and values of the *Ancien Regime*, corrupted by the accusations he made against his friends and shrouded in a conflicted and controversial death.

Laura de Mello e Souza makes use of this figure to define various elements which compose the biography, from themes and periodization to the definition of spaces of analysis. One aspect that is evident in the book is the option of the author to let her subject guarantee a tone of originality for the research, a situation which is exemplified by the division of chapters by themes such as: the significance of his name, parents, childhood, education, poetry, profession, friendships, imprisonment and death. Nevertheless, the author does not let herself fall into the trap of letting herself be ensnared by privileging the question of the *Inconfidência*, her decision as biographer and historian is originally based on the figure, his conflicts, his poetry and the meanings of his life. Laura de Mello e Souza actually dialogues with the vast historiographic tradition related to the *Inconfidência Mineira*, expanding the debate about the incongruencies and conflict of the individuals involved in this historic process and also investigates the problems related to documentation and the inconsistent reports which make of the records of the *Devassa*.

The concept of time adopted in the work is related to a type of fluidity, since the phases of life of the person whose biography is being written about are not buried in themselves, much less do they appear as rigid and immobile, thus they are constantly returned to at different moments, both in the past and the future of Cláudio Manuel da Costa. De Mello e Souza's refusal of the traditional linear and factual form of biographic composition is clear, since time involves ruptures and there is no way of conceiving the constitution of models of rationality which establish stable or coherent personalities to human beings. The author demonstrates that the life of the subject of the biography does not end with his death, which leads to an interesting vision: writing about a life is an unfinished and endless work, because new paths will always open which can drag the researcher onto other epistemological paths, with a single certainty: it is hard for a biography to be free of uncertainties, no matter how much the research is based in sources and documents.

Mello e Souza does not cite the specific readings she made about the 'uses of biography,' however, she refers to important texts on the subject from the historian Vavy Pacheco Borges, to whom the biographer dedicates the book. I would venture that her methodological choice is related to Giovanni Levi's proposal, which relates Biography and Context in the sense of filling documentary gaps in relation to the person being written about, through comparisons with other figures with whom he interacted.

Cláudio Manuel da Costa is looked at in general through a context which in turn elucidates aspects related to eighteenth century Minas Gerais. The author uses the biography to approximate the context, not with the purpose of reconstituting it, but with the intention of establishing a relationship of reciprocity between the person and his field of activity. Brazilian historiography about the colonial period Minas Gerais, both consolidated and in constant renewal, is the foundations of the author's research and creates a combination which demonstrates her familiarity with the sources and archives related to the themes and historic period analyzed.

The most emblematic problem with which the author deals in the research is the scarcity of documents which are directly related to the subject of the biography. Laura de Mello e Souza's strategy to present novelties in the life of 'her' subject consists of the valorization of the Inventory of João Gonçalves da Costa (father of Cláudio); the qualification processes for the Habit of Christ of two of his bothers, and some documents signed by Cláudio Manuel da Costa. However, part of the task of the historian consists of living "grappling with the fluid limits between truth and lies, fact and fiction, narrative and science"

(p.190) and letting oneself be dominated by the will to understand the subject in his conflicting and notable aspects.

The poet was the subject of a biography due to some concerns of the author about aspects of his life directly related with the space and place being lived. Cláudio was considered an obsessive poet, someone who cultivated the perfect form, however, it is instigating that his poetry conquered little space among Brazilian lyric poetry, and although his sonnets are beautiful, they do not have a characteristic of universality, to the contrary, they have a language very marked by their epoch.

The poet's whole life was stigmatized by ambiguity and by contradiction, and his death remains today surrounded by uncertainty, having become one of the most controversial objects of Brazilian historiography, creating what can be seen as factions who defend that it was murder or sustain that it was suicide. Laura de Mello e Souza, in referring to the risks and needs which comprehension imposes on the historian, does not avoid to take a position: "if I understand the man who was Cláudio Manuel da Costa, I am led to believe that he decided to put an end to his life. It will never be known if this was done out of despair or due to excess of reason. Perhaps it was because he had lived divided and never found himself, or because as divided as he was, he finally decided to put the pieces together. In his manner" (p.190).

This is a clear indication that the biographer is not obsessed by an irrevocable 'true history' about her subject, but rather is in search of an understanding integration between reality and possibility, plausible or credible. The natural impediments to resort to such a vast 'direct' documentation allows the author to legitimate the use of her conjectures and inferences. At various moments she carries out an exercise of historic imagination applied with the right dosage to a type of 'controlled' imagination, widely supported by the sources. This methodological option is the guarantee of an elegant and instigating narrative, for this reason the work deserves to be read and reread by all who are interested in discovering the subtleties and incongruencies of human life.