



Machado de Assis. *Páginas Recolhidas*. Rio de Janeiro; Paris: H. Garnier, 1900. *Brasiliana Itaú*. Uma grande coleção dedicada ao Brasil. Ed. Pedro Corrêa do Lago. São Paulo: Capivara Editora, 2009.

*Machado de Assis: The Reverse of the Reverse*¹

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Abstract: *Some concepts drawn from critical reviews published by Machado de Assis between 1850 and 1870, such as those of the inventory and mitigated realism, reveal parallels with the artistic platform embraced by the conservative Revue des Deux Mondes. Rather than a panegyric to outdated ideals, however, what seems to be at stake here is Machado's distinctive defence of an alliance between ethics and aesthetics, literature and politics, resulting in a very advanced grasp of the art form in an equivocally enfranchised country.*

Keywords: *Machado de Assis, realism, Revue des Deux Mondes, Henry James.*

I

It is not exactly a novelty. Machado de Assis is the first Brazilian writer to rub shoulders with the great names of world literature, the writer with whom, according to the country's tradition of historical thinking, Brazil became emancipated in literary terms. But, in certain areas, like that of criticism, he took up a position which, at first sight, would never have seemed on the cutting edge. Machado refuted the contamination of the French school of realism, advocated the cause of decorum and purity, and defended outdated procedures, perhaps even that of mere *kitsch*.²

In fact, if a careless reader were to glance through the article he wrote in 1878 for *O Cruzeiro* about *O primo Basílio*, by Eça de Queirós, he or she would judge that it was a discourse produced for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, the mouthpiece of the great bourgeoisie and of antirevolutionary ideals.³ The author begins by recognising the talent of his Portuguese colleague, but laments the fact that he is an “undisguised realist”, a “zealous disciple of the realism propagated by the author of *Assomoir*”. In rejecting “the doctrine, not the talent and much less the man”, he echoes the formula coined by Saint-René Taillandier: “it's not the painter who should be blamed, but the system” – of which variations appear in the *Revue* (Parreira 179).

In truth, even though Machado may not be an example of the critic satirised by Balzac in *Illusions perdues*, since we know that he was sincere in his admiration for the writer (as evidenced in his letter to Henrique Chaves, written in August 1900 after Eça's death), the fact is that he begins his review following the lesson of Lousteau to Lucien:

praising the author or the work and, after demonstrating his impartiality, reproving the “system” to which the books of the new literature belong.

His criticism of the “servile photographic reproduction of the tiniest ignoble things”, of the fact that the disgusting underclass are treated with “minute attention” and the “precision of an inventory”, echoes the *Revue*’s censure of the extreme zeal of the realists in the representation of the complete, detailed and exhaustive portrait of reality – above all when the depiction emphasises the subject’s physicality and roughness, supposedly exaggerated and perverse. Thus, Machado notes that Eça’s realism is based on the “spectacle of physical passions, needs and perversions”. Similarly, Gustave Planche praises Auguste Barbier for having avoided, in his description of the mental asylum of St Mary of Bethlehem in the poem “Bedlam”, the lewd gestures, shouts and burlesque movements, the “endless exaggeration” in short, which would have delighted the “realist school” (*op. cit.* 173-4).⁴

We also find in the *Revue* various arguments against the idea of the inventory, repeated twice in Machado’s article, and of the mechanical reproduction, supposedly without mediation, of photography. It is the case of Taillandier himself, who, in 1863, observed that Flaubert’s *Salammbô* would pass as “an official report, a work of statistics”. Some years before, Émile Montégut said that Alexandre Dumas the Younger “possessed an optical instrument and an acoustic instrument which he points at the Parisian world; and he sees, listens and writes. In a word, Dumas is what we describe today as a realist” (*Ibidem* 183-4). There was, at heart, a lack of discrimination, of judicious selection, reminiscent of Machado’s criticism concerning the fidelity of the author who “forgets nothing and hides nothing”. Eça’s concern for accessories, for minute detailing, would be an excessive distraction from what was essential to the plot.

The problem, for the Brazilian, lay in the fact that Eça was an “intense and complete” realist, rather than a “mitigated realist” – which also recalls a certain tendency amongst the *Revue* critics, who, from the 1850s onwards, began to defend the advantages of a kind of fusion between realism and idealism, of an eclectic art, also related to the concept of “pure art” (an expression used twice by Machado, in the article). In fact, returning to the subject a fortnight later, he added that no longer did one seek the “weary portraits of decadent Romanticism”, since there was something “in realism which could be harvested making use of the imagination”. Imagination and creation would be above the mere copying of details, of unrestricted imitation – since art could only benefit if the author decided to *blend* some of the procedures of realism with a technique which went beyond the principles of the new doctrine.

Finally, in quoting the “head of the school”, who had said that “the rough outline is not precise”, recommending that “we turn our eyes to reality, but let us exclude Realism, so that we don’t sacrifice aesthetic truth”, Machado appears to endorse the thesis of Louis de Geoffroy (1851), who, after complaining of the perfect precision, of the grotesque figures and of the art made for everybody of *Un enterrement à Ornans*, by Coubert, concluded that the “truth is not always truthful” (*Ibidem* 166n).

Indeed, Machado's defence of "aesthetic truth" seems to have touched a chord amongst Brazilian advocates of the primacy of form, as we see in the, much later, essay by Afrânio Coutinho, national representative of the American New Criticism. He praises Machado, often using the terms of the author himself, taking for example the idea of "mitigated realism", which does not mean copying reality, but selecting and suggesting imaginatively, transforming it according to internal norms of concision and elegance.

Naturally, Machado's art is realistic. But it is a mitigated realism, verily an impressionist realism. It was not the whole of reality that interested him. He knew how to select that which would help to portray the impression, the sensation, the emotion generated in the spirit by its no presence. [...] His art is more the transfiguration and interpretation of reality rather than that of photographic reproduction. (Coutinho 78-80)

Coutinho goes on to state that Machado's art is classical, insofar as it separates art from morality; in other words, by distinguishing between "aesthetic truth and ethical truth" (in essays like "Ideias sobre o teatro" [Ideas on the theatre]), the writer was defending artistic autonomy. In short it is in the light of this defence of "literary, aesthetic or poetic values" that we should, according to him, understand his judgement of *O primo Basílio* (*op. cit.* 92 and 93).

But is Machado's defence of "pure art" similar to the emphasis of the *Revue* on eclectic art, on good taste, on the half-tone, the *juste-milieu* and the *pièce bien faite* – in short on the aesthetic accommodation of elegant trash, to the reduction of the artistic to the pleasurable and the captivating? (see Hauser 815-33). Although, in this and other articles (like "A nova geração" [The new generation], for example, in which he recalls the expression used by Baudelaire – "*cette grossière éphitète*" – against realism) Machado presents himself as being frankly antirealist, is he subscribing to reactionary idealism, the neoclassicism of dubious taste, and to the futile, easy, agreeable art associated with the Paris of Napoléon III and Haussmann, the artist of destruction? If his work already indicates that this is not the case, it is certain that even his criticism may point in another direction, if we read it carefully. Even so, since he was such an assiduous reader of the magazine, would there not be some trace of it remaining, but in another guise? If so, what guise would this be?

II

Although the reply is linked to an analysis of what Machado de Assis described in 1873 as the "instinct of nationality", the discussion begins in a certain way with his first article, written fifteen years earlier for *A Marmota*, "O passado, o presente e o futuro da literatura" [The past, present and future of literature]. The all-embracing ambition evident in the title presents the question in an attempt to conjugate literature and politics:

the country had achieved its political emancipation, but what about literature, the other face of civilised society? In other words, was there a literary *fiat* corresponding to the political *fiat*? (Assis 785-9).

For him, Brazilian literature, enslaved to European, above all Portuguese, literature, was not purely national in nature. Although he does not present himself as a tooth-and-nail enemy of material progress, he complains that this “magnificent pretext of speculation” alone is evidence of the harm done by it. Steam power and the telegraph should not only accelerate the process of the exchange of merchandise, but also of *ideas*. Material progress should also be reflected in *artistic* progress.

It was down to the writer to make himself a “social man”, integrated into social movements – in order not be paralysed by the Medusa’s head of foreign inundation (Machado was referring to the large-scale importing of French plays into the Brazilian theatrical circuit, which was acquiring an industrial character).

In “Notícia da atual literatura brasileira: o instinto de nacionalidade” [News of contemporary Brazilian literature: the instinct of nationality], the critic takes up the argument once again, in another key (Assis 801-9). Machado sees works of poetry and fiction, all the literary forms, as an attempt to clothe oneself “in the country’s colours” – in the search for “another independence”, which has neither a 7th September nor a River Ipiranga.⁵

Once again, while seeing in this independence “signs of vitality and the future bounty” of Brazilian literature, Machado does not consider the process, fruit of the efforts of many generations, as already concluded.

The reason that many works, possessed of the instinct of nationality, had still not reached literary independence, was due to the fact that (perhaps due to “not having historical conditions and motives”) they revealed nothing more than “a certain local colour”.⁶ The error lay in only “recognising the national spirit in works dealing with a local *subject*”. Or, on the contrary, with regard to poetry: “A poet is not national just because he inserts into his verses lots of names of the country’s flowers and birds”. This would only be a “nationality of vocabulary”, lacking “imaginative touches”.

Machado basically means that “local colour” alone is not enough – a criterion maybe, but insufficient on its own.

He wonders whether Shakespeare is any the less English for setting his plays in Denmark, Italy or Egypt. Is there a distinction to be made between the Longfellow of *The Song of Hiawatha* and that of *The Golden Legend*? Would Gonçalves Dias be less Brazilian in non-indianist poetry?

Rather than having a superficial localism, these authors reveal themselves to be *intimately* national, irrespective of the setting or subject. The proof is in the statement of a “notable French critic”, that a certain writer, Masson, has “an interior Scottishness”.

Does it come as a surprise that Machado read this review in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*? It is an essay by the nowadays not-so-celebrated Louis Étienne, which appeared in the July-August 1866 issue of the *Revue*: “*La critique contemporaine en Angleterre: David Masson*”. The extract continues as follows:

However the *Scottishness* of M. Masson (I lend him the term) is not only on the surface. Just as we can be perfect Bretons without always talking about gorse and heather, M. Masson is a good Scot without saying a word about thistles. It is there perhaps subtly, but the Scots do not despise subtlety, an interior *Scottishness*, which, with a turn of Scottish thinking, applies itself to national subjects, but also to human and general subjects. (Étienne 901-26)

This quality that the author identifies as the “Scottish temperament” constitutes something deeply rooted and even hereditary – something, therefore, from which one cannot escape, and which is not in superficial details, but in something far deeper. Once again it appears that we are seeing the rarified dispute inspired by the *Revue* between superficiality and profundity (the realists being superficial in their depiction of the material envelope, while the idealists desire to reach the profundity of the human enigma). Machado, however, once again appears not to follow the script exactly. As he explained earlier, what is under discussion is only an intimate feeling, which “makes a man of his time and country”.

We can understand his point of view better in his observations on Gonçalves Dias. The author of *Os Timbiras* was not entirely Brazilian in the “Sextilhas de Frei Antão”, where not only is the *subject* Lusitanian, but also the (antiquated) *style*. Machado’s emphasis is on something which he judged, in accordance with the ancient image, to reside in the interior – but what is inside would not be the soul as such, but the style. Rather: the soul *is* the style. Or, as he argued in “O ideal do crítico” [The ideal of the critic] (1865), relating it to the soul (of the book): the laws of poetry. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the comparison between literature and politics as something of action (independence), present in “The past, present...”, reappears, almost ten years later, in “O ideal...”, politics in its legislative aspect. The legislator/critic should meditate about works, seeking his “intimate sense”, which unlike hollow phraseology (which only praises or depreciates) and the superficial reading of impressions, would be worthy of “literary science” (Assis 798-801).

When we read the later essay, “O instinto de nacionalidade”, we see Machado arguing that “everything is raw material for poetry, since it contains the *conditions of the beautiful* or the *elements* of which *it is composed*”. Thus, the laws of poetry or the laws of the beautiful, related in “O ideal do crítico” to the soul or spirit of the book, are shown here to be linked to the *compositional elements*. Machado thus seeks to emphasise the importance of form.

But, notwithstanding Coutinho’s reference to the autonomy of the poetic spirit, what calls one’s attention with regard to this aesthetic truth is precisely that the formal elements are fundamentally linked, as we have seen, to the intimate sentiment that makes a writer “a man of his time and of his country”.

To give an example, Machado quotes the speech of old Ogib, when his son is criticised for absencing himself from the other warriors to live alone, in *Os Timbiras*. In the poem, Gonçalves Dias uses the sublime image of the condor, a Romantic topic, to

explain the loftiness of the solitary figure. However, the implied notion of grandiosity – linked in a certain manner to the vast and magnificent Brazilian landscapes, rivers, fields, virgin forest (subject/material) – is only effective when the *expression* is simple, since the “sublime is simple”.⁷

In the same year as Louis Étienne’s essay on David Masson (1866), Machado had already made it clear why, from the artistic point of view (in other words, checking whether “the author met all the requirements of the chosen form”), *O culto ao dever*, by Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, was a weak novel. The subject appeared to him to be valid: a young woman sacrifices her personal sentiment of love in the name of the collective interest, of the fatherland, in convincing her fiancé to go to war. However, Machado complains that we do not *perceive* Angelina’s love, while the attitudes of the young Teófilo show him to be a cowardly young man, to say the least. With regard to Angelina’s love, this “only appears in the words of the narrator”, just as the emphasis on duty resides in the “repetition of the word” (Assis 845).

There is something faulty, therefore, from the point of view of the execution, or, to use the author’s terms, of the imagination or creation – the author did not succeed in transfiguring the facts (the mere copy, the simple description of an event resembles the procedure of a “news sheet”) with the “magic wand of art”. On the other hand, in “*Iracema*, by José de Alencar” (another review from 1866), “*one sees* the beauty of movement” in the “scene” in which Iracema tells Martim that she is carrying his child. Compared with a similar scene in *Natchez*, by Chateaubriand, as far as Machado is concerned, Alencar’s is more successful (*Ibidem* 851).

It is worth paying attention to some small suggestions: the beauty of a movement which *one sees* – and which, if the reader sees it, is because the author *shows* it – unlike Macedo’s narrator, who restricts himself to recording the circumstances –, in addition to the idea of the *scene* as the proper time-space for that depiction. What is under discussion, therefore, are elements of composition which would subsequently serve to justify Machado’s appreciation of the character of the servant Juliana, in *O primo Basílio*, whose motivation is strong, unlike that of the heroine Luísa, who lacks any moral accentuation; the latter being, in a word, no more than a “puppet”.

His argument is that, once the affair with Basílio is over, were it not for the episode of Juliana’s theft of the letters, the novel could well have been concluded. Thus, Eça passed from the principal (the action of the characters and their sentiments) to the supplementary, the accidental, the fortuitous (the incident of the letters). Unlike *Othello*, in which, despite the episode of Desdemona’s handkerchief, the drama exists in the characters and in their moral situation (the treachery of Iago, the jealous soul of Othello), the problem that the reader has in front of him is a mere plot detail: “will Luísa get the letters back?” (*Ibidem* 910). The drama is already over. Or never really began.

III

Allow me to make a quick comparison with another author, contemporary of Machado and an assiduous reader of the *Revue*, and who was also much concerned with the construction of characters: the American Henry James.

While Machado complains of the importance given to supplementary aspects of the plot (the episode of the letters) in *O primo Basilio*, in detriment to the axis involving the drama of the characters, James comments, in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, that the novel originated from the idea of a young woman facing up to her destiny. Like the Russian novelist, Ivan Turgenev, one of his great literary influences, he thinks of his characters as “image *en disponibilité*” (“unattached”). The germ is not (never is), therefore, in the plot, but in this single character, to whom the details of the subject and settings would have to be superadded. James is unable to envision the situation divorced from this support, or in other words, his fable disconnected from its agents. Around them, the appropriate complications, relationships (or the “architecture”, which consists of “what one does with the subject”), are carefully created. In this sense, *The Portrait* is little more than “an organised ado about Isabel Archer” – a commotion which yet, in order to expose the complexity of the character, at times makes use of resources which are not merely technical, but pyrotechnical (“pyrotechnic display”) (James 1070-85). If he makes up the fable or plot around his hero or heroine, in the sense of wondering what he or she would do if this or that happened to them, we must suppose that the existence of elements that are gratuitous or disconnected from the “moral situation” (Machado) of the characters is rare or nonexistent.

Another point of interest is the question of the characters that he describes as *ficelles*. According to the eighth edition of the French Academy Dictionary, one of the definitions of the term, whose original meaning refers to a hemp cord used for tying parcels, corresponds to a trick (like that of an art or trade) or artifice. In the figurative sense, there are expressions like “*tirer les ficelles*”, in other words, to manipulate others without appearing to do so, and “*celui qui tient les ficelles*”, the most important character, who holds the real power.⁸ In the story “La Ficelle” (1883), by Maupassant, nobody believes a crafty peasant accused of robbing a wallet when he states that he only took a little cord; for everybody, the “*ficelle*” is a mere pretext used to cover up the “truth”. For James, the trick or skill consists precisely in creating a character in such a way as to make the best use of the principal (like Isabel Archer), developing him or her satisfactorily. Thus, the *ficelle* is less an agent of the subject than of the treatment; not the carriage itself, but the wheels on the carriage, in James’s own metaphor. The example in *The Portrait of a Lady* is that of Miss [Henrietta] Stackpole. If Isabel, “a true agent”, belongs directly to the subject, being an element of the “essence”, Henrietta, as “light ficelle”, is no more than an element of the “form”.

In the preface to *The Ambassadors* James returns the subject with regard to Maria Gostrey, another of his completed *ficelles*. She arises, in the logic of the procedure, in relation to an important aspect, that of the point of view. The question is in the fact that

James intended to make his novel follow “a small compositional law”, that of employing only one centre of conscience to tell the story – in the sense that only the awareness of Strether about all the others, and only his, would serve the author to show it: “I should know them [the other relationships] through his more or less groping knowledge of them, since his very gropings would figure among the most interesting motions”. It would be the use of a single centre that would give the novel “a large unit”, “the grace of intensity” (*Ibidem* 1304-21).

As we know, James attempted to avoid, in his long narratives, “the romantic privilege of the ‘first person’”, since the technique which presupposes the use of his character as “hero and historian” brings with it, for him, “the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation”. But, if we do not have the testimony of the hero, how can the necessary information be provided without recourse to the “seated mass of explanation after the fact, the inserted block of merely referential narrative”? In short, without simply “telling”, or rather, to “his creator” telling – as occurs in Balzac and, to a certain extent, in several of James’s previous narratives? The technique, he argues in the preface, would run counter to “modern impatience”. In fact, this appears to be precisely the complaint that Machado makes about Macedo – that the character’s love only appears “in the words of the narrator”, by means, in the end, of *telling*.

In order to be able to show Strether’s past, for example, in addition to the conditions which enabled him to take up his ambassador’s position in Europe, and since he could not make use of the theatrical resource of having characters speaking to each other about him (since what is under discussion is his consciousness, the drama of his consciousness which we are following), James ensured that he would have “a confidant or two”. Waymarsh, to a lesser degree, and Maria Gostrey, as an “unmitigated” agent (in Machado’s terms: “intense and complete”), would act as *ficelles*. Miss Gostrey would be, in this sense, “the reader’s friend.... from beginning to end of the book”, helping to give “lucidity”, to offer details about the plot or about the protagonist’s past.

As an element of the “dramatist’s art”, the “ficelle” would be something related to a “scenic consistency”, presented not only in the use of this procedure, but principally in the task of “disguise”. James is obliged to conceal the job of the *ficelle*. Let us recall too how this element of artifice is related to the pyrotechnics of the complications or complexity, of the evolution of the fable of Isabel Archer and, also, if we wish, to the “magic wand of art” mentioned by Machado. We should not forget that the form is a resource of the artifice, which makes the relationship of a character appear to be organic, when in fact it is merely inorganic.

But, then, and this appears to be the heart of the matter, James says that the disguising of the nature of *ficelle* of Maria Gostrey transforms her “**false** connection” into “a **real** one”. The relationship between Maria and Strether, in short, has nothing to do with the *matter* (“the matter of my subject”), but everything to do with the *manner* (“the manner of my presentation of the same”), but he handles her “for fully economic expression’s possible sake” as if she were “important and essential” and, thus, she *becomes* important and essential. In other words, that which belongs to the field of form,

of expression, of procedure, is transformed by his own art into something belonging to the subject, the content, the essence.

What James implies here, and what Machado appears to be implying, in his emphasis on style, is not a move in the direction of mere aestheticism, but the fact that both instances, those of form and content, are, as we have come to recognise, interrelated, to the extent that one cannot be separated from the other, and this is not only an aesthetic truth but also a *measure of aesthetic excellence*. So much so that, the more an author manages to introduce into his work the rules and laws connected to his inner sentiment (and not only to overlay it with the superficial elements of a mere “nationality of vocabulary”), the more he reveals himself to be “a man of his time and of his country”. Only in this way, if he does not completely escape the risk of pyrotechnics and entrapment that wary modern eyes associate with artistic procedure, then at least it seems to be more adequately justified.

Notes

- 1 Translated into English by Peter James Harris
- 2 This article takes up a discussion initiated in my book *Realidade possível: dilemas da ficção em Henry James e Machado de Assis* (São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2012, principally 161 and 201), but, I would like to think, advances in the sense of attempting to understand the specific nature of Machado’s proposals in a context which involves international ideology and the significance of its acclimatisation on Brazilian soil.
- 3 ASSIS, Joaquim Maria Machado de. *Obra completa* (Vol. 3). Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 903-13. Subsequent references to articles written by Machado are based on this edition. For the conservative stance not only of the *Revue*, but of many of the great European publications, like the *Frankfurter Journal*, see OEHLER, Dolf. *O velho mundo desce aos infernos: auto-análise da modernidade após o trauma de Junho de 1840 em Paris*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999.
- 4 (My italics). This is a reference *avant la lettre* to the school, since the review is from 1837. In this period critics described the new aesthetic directions perceived in Hugo, Lamartine or Balzac, indiscriminately as “materialistic”, “realistic”, or sometimes even as “naturalistic”.
- 5 Translator’s Note: the date and place in 1822 when Dom Pedro I granted Brazil its independence in response to a public petition.
- 6 In “O passado, o presente...” [The past, present...], the characteristic of local colour, seen without the subsequently indicated mediations, seemed to be capable of freeing Brazilian literature from submission to its European counterpart, conferring on it “a purely national character”. (*Ibidem* 785)
- 7 Similarly, he would say some years later (quoting Hugo), in “A nova geração” [The new generation], that, if there is reality according to nature, there is also reality according to art, the two separated by an impassable limit.
- 8 In this way we can trace a parallel between Machado’s puppet and James’s *ficelle*: both are artificially supported by cords and threads. The *ficelles* of James are always secondary characters, so much so that Machado criticises Eça for having converted his principal character into a puppet. Let us also note that Machado was aware of the “dramatic” use of the *ficelles*. In “A chinela turca” [The Turkish slipper], it is in this way that the bachelor Duarte reads the wearisome drama “in seven pictures” by Major Lopo Alves: “What remained were the incidents, the characters, the *ficelles* and even the style of the most finished types of tousled Romanticism”. (ASSIS, op.

cit., Vol. 2, 296). (Fonte: *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*, 8th Edition, The University of Chicago, RTFL Project, 2001. <http://portail.atilf.fr>>; accessed on 16/10/2013.)

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