

## The Poetry of Machado de Assis

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**Abstract.** The poetry of Machado de Assis is usually seen as a secondary part of his work, the privileged portion of which continues to be his prose. In this essay it is argued that Machado de Assis' poetry has been underestimated and that it needs an urgent critical reappraisal. It is also the author's contention that Machado de Assis' procedures regarding the tradition of poetry may enlighten his procedures in the realm of prose. In both cases, Machado was an author deeply concerned with a critical appropriation of tradition.

Machado de Assis is unanimously recognized as the most important writer in Brazilian literature. A novelist and short story writer of exceptional quality, he also wrote *crônicas*, plays, and, for a short period, literary criticism. He should also be considered one of the best poets of his generation, although it should be acknowledged that a considerable number of *machadianos* mostly praise the value of his fictional work. This fact has obscured and delayed the analysis and recognition of his poetry. Thus, his contribution to this *genre* remains practically unknown to the public. However, some academic works are already pointing towards a positive revision of Machado de Assis as a poet. My doctoral dissertation, "The poetry of Machado de Assis" (2000), and the master's thesis of Flávia Vieira da Silva do Amparo, "Um verme em botão de flor: a ironia na poética machadiana" (2004), both defended at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, demonstrate the interest in academia of conducting research on the revival of Machado's poetry. L. C. Ishimatsu published in Spain a book written

in English entitled *The Poetry of Machado de Assis*, one of the most important studies on the topic; yet it is practically unknown in Brazil.

According to some authors and critics it is possible to discern the existence of a prejudice against a writer; supposedly, a fiction writer rarely becomes a good poet. Even respected names like modernist poets Manuel Bandeira and T. S. Eliot manifested themselves in this regard. Bandeira wrote of Machado: "It is very dangerous for a poet to strongly distinguish himself in the domain of prose. In that case he enters into an unfortunate competition, more so than his colleagues: a rivalry with himself" (Bandeira, "Machado" 11).

T. S. Eliot, writing about Kipling, affirms:

When a man is primarily known as a writer of prose fiction we are inclined—and usually, I think, justly—to regard his verse as a by-product. I am, I confess, always doubtful whether any man can so divide himself as to be able to make of two such different forms of expression as poetry as imaginative prose [...] his verse and his prose are inseparable; that we must finally judge him, not separately as a poet and as a writer of prose fiction, but as inventor of a mixed form. (228)

In this case, Eliot refers to what he calls "ambidextrous" writers. However, an in-depth study of Machado's poetry will show that the poet and the fiction writer are joined in the same wordsmith. Among the masters who practice a perfect "ambidexterity" we could name, for instance, Jorge Luis Borges and Thomas Hardy. Also in that lineage are D. H. Lawrence, Guy de Maupassant, Anatole France, Marcel Proust, Rudyard Kipling, Cesare Pavese, and Miguel de Unamuno. Among the Brazilians, one finds Bernardo Guimarães, Lúcio Cardoso, Ribeiro Couto, Mário de Andrade, and Guimarães Rosa, among many others.

In some cases, maybe the sporadic frequency in which prosaists live among muses is responsible for a shared view regarding those multifaceted writers, which emphasizes works of fiction. Nevertheless, Machado was not what can be identified as an occasional rare poet, having produced, throughout his life, a continuous and important poetic work. He wrote close to 300 poems, more than twenty thousand verses. His literary career was marked by a constant dedication to poetry, from his first newspaper publication in 1854 up to 1901 with his poem "A Carolina." Machado's poetic work is, slowly, gaining visibility and earning space in his *opera omnia*, thanks to the posthumous publication of poems that were dispersed in journals and magazines of the

time. This careful recompilation was carried out by researchers such as Raimundo Magalhães Jr. (see *Vida e Obra* 4), J. Galante de Sousa, and Jean-Michel Massa (see his *Juventude de Machado de Assis*).

Regarding his affiliation to a particular literary movement, Machado de Assis could be considered non-affiliated, a modern classic in his conscientious choice for formal rigor, in the equilibrium between the subjective and objective, in the good taste and lucidity with which he structured his verses and his preference for practices that privileged rationality and universality.

### First Poems

At the age of fifteen, Machado de Assis began publishing his verses in Rio de Janeiro. His first sonnet, “À Ilma. Sra. D. P. A.,” the initials of a woman named Petronilha, as revealed in the last verse, illustrates the natural limitations of a self-taught adolescent, evident in the mixed usage of *tu* and *vós* and in the still hesitant metrics. Later appear the first love poems that oscillate between states of euphoria and enchantment, and feelings of amorous disillusion and depression.

### *Crisálidas*

In *Crisálidas*, published in 1864, one may notice a continuation of the tone present in the first poems, and an improvement of technique in the lyrical love poem. One can observe the option of a more controlled expression in order to thwart rhetorical excess, as well as the awakening of an acute literary consciousness that will characterize the more mature style of Machado. Literary critic Ivan Teixeira highlights the poet’s qualities of “conciseness, equilibrium, and good taste.” It would be important to place the poet, through his poems, within the stage of so-called *Weltliteratur*. For instance, the small detail of taking advantage of the Latin qualifier in his initial poem “*Musa consolatrix*”; poems about the political situation in Mexico and Poland; the biblical inspiration in “O dilúvio,” besides other poems that portray personalities such as Monte-Alverne, Cleopátra, Maria Duplessis (the model for Alexandre Dumas in *The Lady of the Camellias*), all prove the unveiling of the young Machado’s cultural perspective.

In “*Musa consolatrix*,” the poet adds a romantic quality to the classic allegory of the inspiring muse. The muse not only inspires the poet but also consoles him from lost illusions, and brings him the desired peace of spirit. The last stanza reads:

Comforting muse

When from my youthful forehead

The last illusion befalls, like a

Yellow and dried-out leaf

That the ground can shoot up the turning of autumn ...

Ah! in your friendly bosom

Take me in, — and there will be my afflicted soul,

Instead of some illusions that I had,

Peace, the ultimate good, final and pure!

[Musa consoladora

Quando da minha fronte de mancebo

A última ilusão cair, bem como

Folha amarela e seca

Que o chão atira a viração do outono ...

Ah! no teu seio amigo

Acolhe-me, — e haverá minha alma aflita,

Em vez de algumas ilusões que teve,

A paz, o último bem, último e puro! (*Obras Completas* 19)]

Romantic poets in general did not merely seek literary glory. In their egotism and exacerbated subjectivity they were also anxious to conquer personal happiness, find amorous realization, pacify their torturous souls, and overcome the existential suffering that depressed them, many times without any real and apparent motive. *Le mal du siècle* was the nineteenth-century mark of that uneasiness, felt by poets who marginalized themselves from the bourgeoisie lifestyle, and who, for that reason, found in dream the sublimation of their fantasies. All poets of the period experimented with that vague nostalgia, including Machado in his first phase. The invocation of the comforting muse is a recurrent topic in poetry and seems to reveal a true yearning for spiritual comfort for the poet and artist, more than a mere literary topic.

Two poems in *Crisálidas*, “Musa *consolatrix*,” and “Última folha,” the first and last in the book, thematize a critical reflection on the creative act of writing: they are meta-poems, the so-called poetics art in the old terminology. In the first poem, the muse serves as a shelter, alleviating the sufferings of the poet, and enveloping him in a state of peace and tranquility. “Última folha” celebrates the theme of fleeing to the “vain rumor of men” (“vão rumor dos

homens”). In contrast to the later pessimism, both poems reveal that young Machado proclaimed consistent faith in the function as well as the value of poetry as food for the soul.

Literary historians consider *Crisálidas* a compilation of poems with a romantic trait, and “Versos a Carolina” is distinguished, due to its grandiose dimension and the emotive tension it awakens when the poet expresses his amorous conflict. At the end of his career, Machado de Assis naturally drew near to the verse and universe of Parnassianism, but without any sign of stylistic submission. Not allowing himself to be entirely seduced by any particular movement, we believe it to be more accurate not to define Machado either as a romantic or Parnassian poet. Maybe it would be more correct to accept the thesis that, after an initiation of subjective nature, Machado worked between the transitions of both movements, without affiliating with a particular one. When he became a mature poet, with full command of his mastery, he revealed an unmistakable originality, incorporating in his poems philosophical themes, couched in a very personal diction at the margins of the most radical paradigms of the literary movements. In this sense, absorbing the best that each aesthetic conception had to offer, Machado was authorized to participate not only in the anthologies of romantic poets, but mainly in those of the Parnassians. Manuel Bandeira included him in his two discerning anthologies of Romanticism and Parnassianism. However, in the introduction to the anthology of romantic poets, Bandeira says: “Machado de Assis, Luís Guimarães, and Luís Delfino subverted like true romantics. The collection *Ocidentais*, containing some of the most admirable poems in our language, does not owe anything to romanticism” (*Antologia Romântica* 10). In the Parnassian anthology, Manuel Bandeira repeats the same concept: “Next to Luís Delfino and Machado de Assis, romantics turned Parnassians [...]” (*Antologia Parnasiana* 20).

Having published *Crisálidas* in a romantic framework he surpassed the ideology, aesthetic, and techniques of Romanticism, overcoming the rigid precepts of Parnassianism and, in a solitary trajectory, constructed his work towards a very personal style.

Due to his longevity, Machado, in contrast to other romantic poets, almost all dead at a young age, lived to see the beginning of the twentieth century, dying in 1908. Thus, he had time to transform and mature his poetry, and finally to acquire his own diction, free of the unrestrained observance of the dictates of the literary movements. This slow and calm evolution coincides with



the tendencies of his temper and taste, clearly evidenced in his prose. The concern with form, care with language, respect for traditions and the equidistant balance when expressing the subjective and objective worlds are some of the presupposed qualities that gave Machado the *status* of master. Péricles Eugênio da Silva Ramos emphasizes the role played by the poet as a linking element between both movements: "Due to his critical agenda and due to the example of his poetry, Machado de Assis is not only a link between Romanticism and Parnassianism, but a legitimate precursor of the second movement" (37).

Nonetheless, currently, with the blurring of the frontiers between genres and literary movements, there seems to be less importance in a classification based only on a stylistic analysis. As useful as the intrinsic vision of the literary phenomena, the understanding of a poetic work such as that of Machado de Assis should also combine a preliminary study of interaction and validation of his poetry in relation to the cultural and humanistic influences that shaped it. At this point, it is not difficult to perceive that Machado permanently dialogued in his poems with the collection of universal knowledge, transcending the limits of egotism and subjectivity.

### *Falenas*

Already in *Falenas*, the narrative vocation of Machado de Assis' poetry is clearly manifested, and it will characterize the best part of his poetic work. One of the noticeable examples is the long poem "Pálida Elvira," which Joaquim Serra defined as "a love short story where there is much laughter, and many tears." These invasions of prose in poetry consist of a visible prevailing of the logical discourse: in opting for a more conventional syntax; in the development of a linear story, subordinated to a plot with a beginning, middle, and end; in the use of the language of social communication, and the use of denotation more than connotation; in the dialogue and the staging of a cast of characters; and the description of the space where the action takes place.

However, *Falenas* is not characterized by its narrative line only. It also reveals moments of pure lyricism, the ability of the poet to capture fleeting and inefable emotions, generally expressed in verses that seek synthesis, and therefore exempt from the contamination of the signs of discourse. Besides that, one can see in *Falenas* a visible and normal maturity in relation to the first book.

Some poems deserve the qualifier of anthological, even though they have not yet been discovered by the majority of critics and public, such as "Sombras," the beautiful "*Ite, missa est*," "Ruínas," "Lágrimas de cera," and

“O verme.” “No espaço” can be quoted among those poems marked by the narrative style, a virtual dialogue between Romeo and Lovelace:

### The Worm

There exists a flower that encloses  
 Celestial dew and perfume.  
 A fertile land planted it  
 The benefic hand of a muse.

A disgusting and ugly worm,  
 Created in mortal mud,  
 Seeks this virginal flower  
 And goes to sleep in its bosom.

It bites and bleeds, and tears and mines,  
 Sucks away its life and its breath;  
 The flower its calyx inclines;  
 The leaves, are taken by the wind.

Afterwards, not even the perfume remains  
 In the winds of solitude ...  
 This flower is the heart,  
 That one the worm of jealousy.

[O verme

Existe uma flor que encerra  
 Celeste orvalho e perfume.  
 Plantou-a uma fecunda terra  
 Mão benéfica de um nume.

Um verme asqueroso e feio,  
 Gerado em lodo mortal,  
 Busca esta flor virginal  
 E vai dormir-lhe no seio.

Morde sangra, rasga e mina,  
 Suga-lhe a vida e o alento;  
 A flor o calyx inclina;  
 As folhas, leva-as o vento.

Depois, nem resta o perfume  
 Nos ares da solidão...  
 Esta flor é o coração,  
 Aquele o verme do ciúme.] (*Obras Completas* 52)

### **Americanas**

At first glance, the following book, *Americanas*, published in 1875, seems a retrocession to an outdated *indianismo*, inspired by Basílio da Gama, Gonçalves Dias, and even José de Alencar. It is, however, in that book that Machado de Assis reaffirms his narrative vocation, a trend that will be a constant in his poetic work. A definite study of Machado's poetry cannot cease to contemplate, in detail, this trait, clearly evidenced in poems like "Potira" or "Niâni." The last one traces certain similarities with medieval amorous lyric, represented in the history of Brazilian literature by the primitive Indianism of Brazil's past. The beginning and ending of "Niâni" reflect on the dichotomy of civilization and barbarism.

We are told ancient stories  
 In overseas lands,  
 Of maidens and princesses,  
 That love made them die.  
 [... .. ]  
 That thus one dies of love  
 Where the jaguar inhabits,  
 Like the princesses died  
 In overseas lands.

[Contam-se histórias antigas  
 Pelas terras de além-mar,  
 De moças e de princesas,



Que amor fazia matar.

[... ..]

Que assim se morre de amores

Aonde habita o jaguar,

Como as princesas morriam

Pelas terras de além-mar.] (*Obras Completas* 107-110)

Regarding the possible aspect of criticism, in relation to the supposed late Indianism, Machado himself defended his position, writing an “Advertência” at the beginning of the first edition of *Americanas*; the following text was later excluded by the author from the *Poesias completas*, where he affirms that the essential is a man’s soul (“a alma do homem”):

[...] Some time, it was the opinion that Brazilian poetry should all, or almost all, be on the indigenous element. Then came the reaction and adversaries not less competent than sincere, excluded it completely from the project/program of national literature. These are extreme opinions that at least seem arguable to me. I will only say that, in my understanding, everything belongs to poetic invention, once it brings the traits of beauty and can satisfy the conditions of art. Now, the temper and customs of our aborigines are many times in this case; it is not necessary any more for the poet to give them the life of inspiration. The generosity, constancy, courage, and piety will always be elements of art. The exterior changes: Calypso’s sandal is a delicacy of art that we do not find in the bare feet of Lindóia. This is, however, the inferior part of poetry, the accessory part. The essential is a man’s soul. (*Americanas* v-vi)

### *Ocidentais*

This book did not have a separate edition, but was included in *Poesias completas*. Contrary to what could be imagined, its title reveals the author’s intention in leaving for posterity only a selection of his poems, since almost half of them, which were published in the first three books, were taken out. Such severe editing shows the poet’s rigor and its refined sense of self-criticism. Meanwhile, in aiming to the preservation of our literary patrimony in an all-inclusive form, a future publication of the poetry of Machado de Assis should comprise the totality of his work. At this point, a critical stance of a holistic character can diverge from that taken by the poet. However, when rescuing his *opera omnia*, this nucleus of excellence preserved in *Poesias completas*, the edition of 1910, which became Machado de Assis’ personal anthology, should be respected.

It is also recommendable to encourage the analysis of those poems that were excluded when *Poesias completas* was published. Among those, one of the best realized is "No limiar," originally published in *Crisálidas*. It is an allegory that constructs, through two characters, a dialectic movement between Hope and Disillusion. Structured in Dantean tercets, with the exception of the quartet in the last stanza, and written in dialogue form, the poem renovates the use of dramatic speech, and, at the same time, takes advantage of the possibilities of the rhetorical tone sustained in the so called *sermo nobilis*. The poet took great care in constructing an extremely lyrical language. The thin veil of melancholy that surrounds the polyphony of the voices, maintains the poem in a muted sound and a fading coloring, diluting the romantic stridencies of the time.

So reads the last part of the poem:

At the Threshold

[... ..]

And as the sky as it darkens  
Would have perchance a reflex  
Where a tired gaze can relax

A beam of soft and pure light  
Made it descend to a deserted fantasy,  
In honey I consecrated the calyx of bitterness.

It was all vain,— it was all a vain dispute,  
Happiness never came. Your time  
Arrives at the time the day ends.

"Come in." — And the virginal face that fades away  
In its hands itself hides. Clouds that ran about  
Cover the sky that the sun now badly colors.

Both, with just one look understood each other.  
One entered home with prideful gait;  
Another one took a detour. They were:  
She, Hope; He, Deception.

[No limiar

[... ..]

E por que o céu que mais se lhe enegrece,  
Tivesse algum reflexo de ventura  
Onde o cansado olhar espairecesse,

Uma réstia de luz suave e pura  
Fiz-lhe descer à erma fantasia,  
De mel ungi-lhe o cálix da amargura.

Foi tudo vão,— foi tudo vã porfia,  
A ventura não veio. A tua hora  
Chega na hora que termina o dia.

“Entra.” — E o virgíneo rosto que descora  
Nas mãos esconde. Nuvens que correram  
Cobrem o céu que o sol já mal colora.

Ambos, com um olhar se compreenderam.  
Um penetrou no lar com passo ufano;  
Outra tomou por um desvio. Eram:  
*Ela a Esperança, Ele o Desengano.*] (*Obras Completas* 192-3)

The collection of poems in *Ocidentais* reaches the moment of epiphany in the work of Machado de Assis. Emblematic poems such as “A mosca azul,” “Círculo vicioso,” “Soneto de Natal,” and other less known, but of the same quality like the one inspired by the myth of Prometheus, “O defecho,” can be found there. The poem “*Suave mari magno*,” of philosophical and maybe autobiographical attributes, should also be highlighted. Also philosophical are the poems, “Uma criatura,” “Mundo interior,” “No alto,” among the beautiful portraits where Machado traces the profiles of figures like Antônio José, Spinoza, Gonçalves Crespo, José de Alencar, Camões, Victor Hugo, and José de Anchieta. The flawless translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” should also be mentioned, and others of La Fontaine, Dante, and Shakespeare. The ascending path of Machado de Assis’ poetic career reaches its peak with *Ocidentais*. From that moment on, it is impossible not to recognize him as a master of poetry, as he was of prose.

Besides the already mentioned books of poetry, several important poems are part of other publications that include poetry and prose texts, like “A Carolina” published in *Relíquias de Casa Velha*; the collection of sonnets titled “A derradeira injúria,” written as an homage to the Marquis of Pombal; “O Almada” an heroic-comic poem—along the lines of *Le Lutrín*, by Boileau, and *O Hissope* by Antônio Diniz da Cruz e Silva—included in *Outras relíquias*. Besides these, the series from the “Gazetas de Holanda,” composed of 48 *crônicas* in verse, initially published in the newspaper *Gazeta de Notícias* and later compiled in an edition of complete works edited by the Jackson publishing house. In the book *Novas relíquias*, we find the short story in verse, “Antes da missa,” which can be considered a poetic sketch. All this material should be compiled, analyzed, and republished with explicative notes, with the objective of a better and correct divulgation of Machado de Assis’ poetry.

A smart strategy to give more visibility to the poems not included in *Poesias completas* would be to assemble them by groups, that is, in separate sections. One of them could include “Versos a Corina,” structured in a long poem divided in six parts and other sub-parts; another, “Lira Chinesa,” constituted of eight poems copied from the French, but revealing a nostalgic sentiment from their original in Chinese. Also, “Uma ode de Anacreonte,” a dialogued poem, humoristic and pseudo-Hellenic; the four poems to Camões, a true gem of Portuguese language, besides the already mentioned “A derradeira injúria,” “Gazetas de Holanda,” and “O Almada.”

If it was valid to consider the thesis of how important the influence of prose technique was to Machado’s poetry, it is possible to suggest, also, the hypothesis that prose, in that blending of genres, basically played two roles. On one hand, negatively, since it weakened the lyrical poet’s voice due to the use of trivial and prosaic formulas that reduce the tension of the poetic language. On the other hand, prose played a positive role, when influencing the production of a narrative poem of quality, recuperating a tradition that Neo-classical and Pre-romantic Brazilian poets tried to copy without great success. From the point of view of an enrichment of humanistic culture, Machado de Assis knew how to understand and renovate the lessons from the masters of universal literature, incorporating a rich cultural patrimony to his poems. In that manner, his poetical production conquered a prominent place in the history of Brazilian poetry. It is a work that sustained the vital balance between the immediacy of emotion and the slow work dedicated to the perfecting of language. Machado de Assis did not lose himself in the futile traps of empty forms or hollow rhetoric. On the contrary, he knew how

to leave for posterity the mystery of his poetry that still claims other interpretations, which will allow the deciphering of their several meanings.

At the time of his death in 1908, Machado de Assis was already celebrated as a true poet. On that date, Leôncio Correia wrote in the *Correio da Manhã* a long and moving eulogy titled “O mês fatídico” (September) since it was also in that month that the writer Artur Azevedo died. Correia conveyed his impressions on Machado’s verses:

About the great Master we can very well say that he was an insatiable poet of incorruptible sensitivity, of formal purity, beautiful corporeity, equilibrium, of the ultimate flight of sound, always seeking to give, through the winged flee of the lines, through the undulating and nervous rhythm, through the divine transparency of the colors, materializations, tangible aspects of the exterior world, all the sentiments, all the suggestive moments, all the spiritual states and all the diaphanous and tenuous clarities, discerners of a never dreamt lyricism.

These are the enraptured words of a journalist and poet who, in that ephemeral moment, was the spokesman for the mourning sentiment in Brazilian arts and culture, a sentiment that saddened the hearts of the admirers of that genius man of letters. Machado de Assis overcame the obstacles and prejudices that he faced during his lifetime, to conquer the “glory that stays, elevates and consoles” (“glória que fica, eleva e consola”), a verse that was later immortalized in an engraved distich at the portico of the Academia Brasileira das Letras, the institution of which he was the first president.

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