

Machado de Assis and the Brazilian uses of the Roman World

Machado de Assis e os usos do Mundo Romano no Brasil

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Abstract:

The myths, the characters and the history of Classical Ancient World attend the work of Machado de Assis, the best-known and most universal of Brazilian writers. Although it is very uncertain how effective was the author's knowledge of ancient languages (Greek and Latin), he used to appreciate entering in his short stories and novels an unceasing dialog with the Greek and Roman Literature through quotes, imitations and appropriations of that legacy. In one of his literary columns, the writer signals a little of its rewriting practices to describe a dream in which he mixes the ancient Rome and Rio de Janeiro of his time, for example when the Narrator declares, "I go up Via Appia, and I turn on Rua do Ouvidor" (*Subo a Via Ápia, dobro a Rua do Ouvidor*). It is visible that the past and present mingle on a tame craziness, showing, in the course of this text, that ancient Rome was present with all its signs most prominent, Virgil, Appia, Maecenas and Augustus, among characters and places from the tropical capital. By the analysis of excerpts like this, in this paper I seek to sketch some of the roles of Classical culture in Machado's work, and, at the same time, to propose a reading of Machado on the light of Classical Reception Studies.

Keywords: Classical Reception Studies; Roman World; Machado de Assis.

Resumo:

Os mitos, os personagens e a história do Antiquidade Clássica frequentam a obra de Machado de Assis, o mais amplamente conhecido e universal dos escritores brasileiros. Embora seja muito discutível qual o conhecimento efetivo do autor relativamente às línguas clássicas (Grego e Latim), ele costumeiramente gostava de inserir em seus contos e romances um incessante diálogo com a literatura grega e romana através de citações diretas, imitações e apropriações desse legado. Em uma de suas crônicas, o escritor registra um pouco dessas práticas de reescritura ao inserir um sonho no qual ele mistura a antiga Roma e o Rio de Janeiro de sua época, por exemplo, quando o narrador declara: Subo a Via Ápia, dobro a Rua do Ouvidor. É visível que o passado e o presente se misturam em uma loucura branda, mostrando, no curso deste seu texto, que a antiga Roma estava presente com todos seus mais proeminentes signos, Virgílio, Via Ápia, Mecenas e Augusto, entre personagens e lugares da capital tropical. Através de análises de excertos como este, neste artigo, eu procuro delinear alguns dos papéis da cultura Clássica na obra de Machado e, ao mesmo tempo, propor uma leitura de Machado à luz dos Estudos de Recepção da Literatura Clássica.

Palavras-chave: Estudos de recepção da cultura clássica; Mundo romano; Machado de Assis.

The extraordinary literary life of Machado de Assis (1839–1908), arguably the greatest Brazilian writer, has recently been the subject of a significant study by David Jackson (2015). Despite his fame at home, Machado's novels and short stories were translated into English only in the second half of the twentieth century, and his global reputation continues to suffer from

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the cultural isolation of Brazil, the sole Lusophone country in Latin America. This is a neglect which Jackson decries and seeks to remedy (2015, p.xiv).

A passage from the introduction to *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, the title given to the first English translation of Machado's masterpiece *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, conveys the strength and value of this writer:

For all his restraint and good humour, Machado de Assis hurls at his readers a fierce challenge, unrecognized by many, offensive to some, a joy to those who are strong enough to accept it. The challenge lies in Machado's vast iconoclasm, which is likely to involve destruction of the reader's own icons. In his best work, Machado is perhaps the most completely disenchanting writer in occidental literature. Skeptics generally destroy certain illusions in order to cling to others. (Assis, 1952, p.11)

In this paper I present some of the other challenges presented by Machado. My intent is to sketch some of the roles of Classical culture in his work, and, at the same time, to propose a reading of Machado in the light of Classical Reception Studies. The influence of a wide variety of literatures and authors has long been professed in Machadian scholarship (ROCHA, 2005), and the Classical tradition is eminently present in the author's imagination. As the narrator-writer of *Dom Casmurro* himself alludes, allegorically (HANSEN, 1999), in chapter two: "It must have been the taste of the time to put classical flavor and ancient figures into paintings done in America [sc. Brazil]" (ASSIS 1997, p. 5).

There are a small number of studies about Classical themes in Machadian work. Among these, one should single out the articles by Brandão (2001, 2008) and Ramos (2011), which respectively explore the influence of Greek literature and mythology in Machado's works¹². Virtually none of this work has appeared in Anglophone contexts, and this paper aims at turning this incipient discussion into a more extensive dialog. The Ancient legacy is received in a paradoxical manner in Machado's postcolonial context: the author employs ancient *reminiscências*¹³ in his literary creation, but he also criticizes the use of the very same legacy for having at times been a weapon of postcolonial elite oppression, or of persistent "colonial iniquities" as Schwarz prefers (2005, p.2). What might explain this Machadian appropriation is

¹² Since the first draft of this paper, some relevant texts about this subject have been published in Portuguese, like the two papers of MARTINS, 2015 and 2016. I'll approach those new perspectives in outcoming book about Brazilian Nineteenth's Translation and Reception in which I'm working at the moment.

¹³ Machado normally uses the Portuguese word *reminiscências* when he is considering themes and allusions from classical texts, myths and history. This noun derives from the Latin *reminiscentia* (*reminiscor*), meaning "to recall to mind", and its use in Portuguese texts works as a verbatim translation. Though English translators have used "reminiscences" to express this idea, in this paper I prefer to transpose the Portuguese word itself.

the paradoxically poetic and oppressive way in which Classical tradition arrived in the neoclassical palaces and the slums of Rio de Janeiro, as this paper aims to show.

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Probably any classicist who has read Machado de Assis will recall the declaration made by the protagonist of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*¹⁴ in chapter XXIV, “Short, but joyful”:

I’m not saying that the university hadn’t taught me some philosophical truths. But I’d only memorized the formulas, the vocabulary, the skeleton. I treated them as I had Latin: I put three lines from Virgil in my pocket, two from Horace, and a dozen moral and political locutions for the needs of conversation. I treated them the way I treated history and jurisprudence. I picked up the phraseology of all things, the shell, the decoration... (ASSIS, 1997a, p. 51–2)¹⁵

Here we have a very critical view on the elites’ use of Latin. This idea of Latin as a piece of decoration or a simulacrum of erudition, like a varnish, can still be found in Brazilian newspapers and heard in political speech today. It is undeniable that Machado himself, the creator of Mr. Brás Cubas, employed these ornaments. However, his own practice transcends the merely contemplative or frankly servile character evident in some of his contemporaries. Machado’s practice, as I intend to show in this paper, is framed by his perspectives on rewriting and parody.

When contemporary classicists work on the reception of antiquity in the New World, a context that has been described as post-colonial, it is usual to point out the diasporic situation of the Classical tradition – since it has left the Old World and migrated to new places, merging with new people and cultures. Thus, the milieu in which Machado wrote is inserted into a post-colonial context – especially when we consider 1822 as the landmark of Brazilian independence, or if we bear in mind the conflict between what is autochthonous and what is universal, which took hold in most Latin American countries at the end of nineteenth century.¹⁶

In an article about the foundation of Brazilian Literature, Haroldo de Campos identifies

¹⁴ This is the great novel by Machado published in 1880. For the second English edition by E. Percy Ellis, the title was translated as *Posthumous reminiscences of Braz Cubas* (ASSIS, 1955).

¹⁵ “Não digo que a Universidade me não tivesse ensinado alguma; mas eu decorei-lhe só as fórmulas, o vocabulário, o esqueleto. Tratei-a como tratei o latim: embolsei três versos de Virgílio, dous de Horácio, uma dúzia de locuções morais e políticas, para as despesas da conversação. Tratei-os como tratei a história e a jurisprudência. Colhi de todas as cousas a fraseologia, a casca, a ornamentação...” (ASSIS, 1960, p.155-6).

¹⁶ I acknowledge Professor Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos for his improvements to my text on this point.

the real place of Machado in our literary development:

It is Machado de Assis, for his universalist features, for his non-aprioristically typified Brazilian character, i.e., for his selective and critical reading of the universal literary code from within a Brazilian context, but also from an extremely personal standpoint within this very context, who is the most representative of our writers of the past. (CAMPOS, 2005, p. 8)¹⁷

In a certain sense, the way Machado receives and reuses the Greek and Roman *reminiscências* has some of what Lorna Hardwick has called the “paradoxical situation of classical texts in post-colonial contexts” (2007, p. 2). On the one hand, the Brazilian author reuses the Classical tradition in a positive sense of literary enrichment, but, on the other hand, he also criticizes the use of the same legacy, since this tradition sometimes becomes an instrument of oppression by a post-colonial elite, as it is possible to read in Brás Cubas’s declarations above.

Brás Cubas expresses a coherent reflection and also a well-founded criticism of the misleading use of Latin, mocking a certain kind of elite discourse. Nevertheless, Machado’s evident seriousness in making use of good Latin translations – as well as the ones found in his personal library¹⁸ – reveals that this crooked Latin was not the only one presented in his chronicles¹⁹ and in his work in general. Machado takes a stance against misapplication of the Classical legacy, but does not let this exclude his own use of it. It is a fact that, in spite of such misapplication, Machado unceasingly appropriated Latin and Greek quotations and *reminiscências*, seeing in them much more than mere erudition and rhetoricism.

It is helpful here to recall the description of the house on Rua de Matacavalos, quoted above. There, the narrator describes the effigies of Caesar, Augustus, Nero and Massinissa which adorned the living room and which he considered *démodé*. However, through a metaliterary reading of this fragment, it becomes evident that the mention of the celebrated

¹⁷ In his short but fascinating account of Machado, David Jackson pinpoints this “extremely personal standpoint” in a few words: “Machado is an incomparable figure and an exception for his time, whether for being grandson of slaves, for being entirely self-educated, for never having travelled beyond the vicinity of Rio de Janeiro, or for his invention of an original moral, ethical, and philosophical world in his fiction” (JACKSON, 2006, p. 37).

¹⁸ Jean-Michel Massa, a French Machadian scholar, published *La bibliothèque de Machado de Assis* in 1961. Jobim (2001) edited a book about this library which collects papers by some important scholars and includes recent work by Massa himself.

¹⁹ “Chronicle” translates the Portuguese word *crônica*, which refers to a kind of short essay, often a mixture of journalistic facts and ironic narrative, published in newspapers. In the poetic words of Miranda: “The facts themselves are trivial. They are merely the spark that ignites his flow of thoughts, a flow that becomes a whirlpool and almost reaches the point of delirium” (ROCHA, 2006, p. 600).

Romans is an illustration of the new literature of the Americas, meaning that there used to be a place for Ancient material, even though, at first sight, it now seemed unfashionable and in bad taste.

A few paragraphs later the same narrator adopts an invocatory tone – and the *invocatio* of the epic is clearly alluded to – and addresses the same generals:

Yes, Nero, Augustus, Massinissa, and you, great Caesar, urging me on to write my own Commentaries, I'm grateful for the advice, and I'm going to put down on paper the reminiscences that come into my head. (ASSIS, 1997a, p.7)²⁰

Even this interpellation of Caesar sounds ironic, according to the previous comment, since writing memoirs necessarily brings to Dom Casmurro's mind a reference to this ancient author whose authority on the genre is widely recognized. Machado himself knew the commentaries by Caesar, since in a chronicle of 1863 he traces a review of a Portuguese translation of the *Gallic War*, made by another Brazilian, Sotero dos Reis (ASSIS, 2008b, p. 102). Writing memoirs in the tropics "inevitably" requires Caesar. The paintings in the living room are likewise a testament, therefore, to the method of Classical invocation exercised by Machado. The classical past appears for the author mingled *with* and reflected *on* present events, in a way that allusion and remembrance are recurrent.

Another similar declaration about this method appears in a late chronicle of 11th November 1894, which opens with the following thought: "Antiquity surrounds me on all sides. And it does not bruise me. There is a fragrance in it, yet now applied to modern stuff, as if it had replaced its nature" (ASSIS, 2008b, p.1118). After this moving assertion, there comes a jest from someone who seems to want to unsay what had just been said:

The outlaws from today's Greece, for instance, have better taste than the *clavinoteiros*²¹ from Bahia. When we read that some people have been disemboweled in Thessaly or Marathon, we do not know if we're reading a newspaper or Plutarch. The same doesn't happen in Ilhéus.^[22] The thieves from Athens take your money and your watch, but in Homer's name. Truly, these are not thefts, they are classical reminiscences. (ASSIS, 2008b, p.1118)²³

²⁰ "Sim, Nero, Augusto, Massinissa, e tu, grande César, que me incitas a fazer os meus comentários, agradeço-vos o conselho, e vou deitar ao papel as reminiscências que me vierem vindo" (ASSIS, 1969, p. 69).

²¹ Outlaws found in the northeast of Brazil, named after their weapon (*clavina*), a kind of carbine.

²² Ilhéus is an important city in Bahia state in the northeast region of Brazil.

²³ All the translations without identification from the Portuguese texts by Machado are mine. "Os bandidos da atual Grécia, por exemplo, têm melhor sabor que os clavinoteiros da Bahia. Quando a gente lê que alguns sujeitos foram

The chronicler, then, illustrating his previous thought with the suggestion that the crimes of Greek muggers are not thefts but allusions to the Ancient World, seems to banalize his earlier poignant remark. This is Machadian irony once again, which desires to laugh about itself with the reader. In what follows, the chronicle delves deeply into the presence of Antiquity in contemporary life: he mentions a translation of *Aeneid* newly released in England; he gives a summary review of *Cenários*, a book of poems by a young man who, in his opinion, shows “a huge influence from Antiquity”; he says that the United States has bought a new-found collection of Greek papyri; and he reports that France has acquired two statues of Apollo found in Delphi. After all this, the chronicler feels an obligation to recapture the thought which opened the chronicle, and he says:

Antiquity is good, but I need to rest a little and breathe modern airs. So I recognized that everything nowadays has been impregnated by Antiquity, and although I seek the living and the modern, the Ancient appears to me from nowhere. (ASSIS, 2008b, p.1119)²⁴

Now close to his sixties, Machado still recognizes the power of antiquity in his time, just as did the young poet who wrote *Versos a Corina* (Lines to Corinna).²⁵ The chronicle itself, moreover, illustrates within the pages of a newspaper what had already been represented fictionally in *Dom Casmurro*, as presented above.

However, this contact with the Ancient does not always happen in a positive way. Although Machado seems to enshrine the literature of the past, he does not esteem the Latin references essayed by his contemporaries. Thence the parody and misrepresentation of Latin texts in his newspaper chronicles.

Machado himself practices this misrepresentation in his chronicle *Bons dias!* (Good Morning!) of 26th January 1889. The fictitious author, who had in a text of 6th June 1888 – in the same series of chronicles – publicly asserted his profound ignorance of the Latin language,

estripados na Tessália ou Maratona, não sabe se lê um jornal ou Plutarco. Não sucede o mesmo com a comarca de Ilhéus. Os gatunos de Atenas levam o dinheiro e o relógio, mas em nome de Homero. Verdadeiramente não são furtos, são reminiscências clássicas”.

²⁴ “A antiguidade é boa, mas é preciso descansar um pouco e respirar ares modernos. Reconheci então que tudo hoje me anda impregnado do antigo, e que, por mais que busque o vivo e o moderno, o antigo é que me cai nas mãos”.

²⁵ “Versos a Corina” (*Lines to Corinna*) is the title of a poem published in *Chrysalidas*, an early book by Machado (1864). The allusion to the muse of Ovid testifies to the Classical accent of young Machado’s writings.



can rarely resist using such lines in his own work, and indeed opens three of his chronicles with Latin quotations. Perhaps because of this “ignorance” – even though not an ignorance on the part of the true author of the piece – the lines are altered. In one of them the attitude is openly parodic. Instead of the line *vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas* (*Ecclesiastes* 1:2, “vanity of vanities and everything is vanity”), the chronicler, scared by the prospect of yellow fever, a tropical disease, opens his text with: *sanitas sanitatum et omnia sanitas* (“health of healths and everything is health”). Following this there is an interesting reflection on the use of quotations. Here is the beginning:

Sanitas sanitatum et omnia sanitas. Graceful, isn't it? It is mine; I mean, it is mine in a sense of being someone else's. I found this parody on *Ecclesiastes* in a critic's column from a British paper. You can see that it is not just their cheese which deserves our appreciation; but also the newspapers, and mainly the ones which exhibit taste and grace. My role in this exchange is to find the best sense for the sentence, because there it is simply about a book, and here we describe the whole city. I believe I just wrote a decasyllabic verse, “and here we describe the whole city” [e cá tratamos da cidade inteira]. I do not have time to turn it into prose. I repeat myself, and will add what somebody already said that quoting a text is the same as writing it for the first time. I believe this is nonsense; but protected by this quotation I say first the parody was mine. (ASSIS, 2008a, p.223)²⁶

We notice that Machado uses his chronicler *persona* license to versify about the incorporation of quotes in his text. He declares the paraphrase and then explains it, confessing that in reusing it he will “find the best sense for the sentence”, as if changing a quotation is tantamount to creating it, as the chronicler seems to claim. The curious fact about these parodies is the essential Latin rewriting they demand. Evidently somebody who can replace *vanitas* by *sanitas* – and understand this meaning, even if via the reading of British newspaper – needs to have a reasonable knowledge of Latin language, contrary to what the *persona* of the chronicler declares.

An example of the crooked use of Latin erudition in a similar context comes in a chronicle in the series *Notas semanais* (Weekly Notes), of 1st September 1878. Facing a negative answer from the Chamber of Deputies (akin to the U.S. House of Representatives)

²⁶ “*Sanitas sanitatum et omnia sanitas.* Gracioso, não? É meu; quero dizer, é meu no sentido de ser de outro. Achei esta paródia de *Ecclesiastes* em artigo de crítica de uma folha londrina. Já veem que não são só os queijos daquela naturalidade que merecem os nossos amores; também as folhas, e principalmente as que escrevem com sabor e graça. A parte minha neste negócio é aplicar melhor a frase, porque lá só trata de um livro, e cá tratamos da cidade inteira. Creio que saiu-me um verso decassílabo: “e cá tratamos da cidade inteira”. Não me sobra tempo para transpô-la em prosa. Repito o que disse, e acrescento que já alguém afirmou que citar a propósito um texto alheio equivale a tê-lo inventado. Creio que é tolice; mas, fiado nela, é que ousei dizer no princípio que a paródia era minha”.



regarding a demand by the attorney of the judiciary that dinner should be served when court meetings take too long, Machado is relentless in his criticism:

The government was right, and twice so; the first time because the Law prohibits it, and obedience to the Law is the supreme demand; the second time because in a certain way, dinner is an agent of corruption. I do not want to hear Latin sentences such as *primo vivere, deinde judicare*. I do not want to hear physiological considerations, nor popular proverbs or other similar reasons, which are good only to delude the ignorant or sway the careless, yet lack any value to those who have a proper perspective. The thing here is simply moral; and the presence of a roast beef will not decrease it or change its nature. I do not want to hear about dinners in politics either, because in some cases there is no incompatibility between a vote or a plate of lentils; and, politically speaking, the sausage is a public good. The case of jurors is different. (ASSIS, 2008b, p.468)²⁷

“I do not want to hear Latin sentences” expresses his indignation against the current fashion in public discourse, so often devoid of content. It is as if the Latin lines themselves guarantee the candor of the request. Machado ranks himself next to the educated man who has “a proper perspective” and is not fooled by vain erudition.

Those two excerpts from Machado’s chronicles show the paradox of his legacy, which confirms Lorna Hardwick’s assertion about the Classical reception in a post-colonial context, remarked upon at the beginning of this paper. While Roman culture and literature are brought into his texts as a method, there is a depreciation of the same culture and literature in the use made of it by the elites.

In a poetic chronicle of 7th January 1894, Machado reports a dream in which he identifies himself as Virgil, the great Roman epic poet. But maybe the verb “identify” is insufficient here: the narrator in the dream *incarnates* Virgil. The author starts with the nuisance of the cicadas which prevent him from sleeping. The narrator is in bed, caught between dream and reality:

Who is this cicada that wakes me every day in this devilish Summer. [...] Then a rooster comes. The rooster is a Moslem bummer, right clock, mediocre singer, bad food. The rooster comes and with the cicada makes a concert of voices that wakes me totally. I admonish laziness, collect the pieces of the dream which remain, if I had any,

²⁷ Teve razão a Câmara, e teve-a duas vezes; a primeira, porque a lei o veda, e a obediência à lei é a necessidade máxima; a segunda, porque o jantar é, de certo modo, um agente de corrupção. Não me venham com sentenças latinas: *primo vivere, deinde judicare*. Não me venham com considerações de ordem fisiológica, nem com rifões populares, nem com outras razões da mesma farinha, muito próprias para embair ignorantes ou colher descuidados, mas sem nenhum valor ou alcance para quem olhar as coisas de certa altura. A questão é puramente moral; e a presença do rosbife não lhe diminui nem lhe troca a natureza. Não me venham também com o jantar na política; porque, em certos casos, não há incompatibilidade entre o voto e o prato de lentilhas; e, politicamente falando, o paio é uma necessidade pública. O caso dos jurados é outra coisa.



and I look into the dossal of the bed and the wood on the ceiling. Sometimes I see a backyard in Rome, from where an old rooster wakes the notable Virgil, and I wonder if it is not the same rooster that wakes me, and if I am not myself Virgil. It is a time of calm craziness, which succeeds my sleepiness. So, I walk up Via Apia, turn on Ouvidor street, and I encounter Maecenas, who invites me to have dinner with Augustus and an old acquaintance from the colonial Brazil Company.²⁸ Next is the turn of a bird singing in the garden, and then another one and one more. Birds, rooster, cicada sing a morning symphony, so I get out of the bed and open the window. (ASSIS, 2008b, p.1036)²⁹

The interesting thing about this chronicle is the mixture between Rome and Rio de Janeiro. “I walk up Via Apia, turn on Ouvidor street” is a wonderful juxtaposition. The past and the present blend together in a calm craziness. Ancient Rome is present with all its most outstanding signs, Virgil, Via Apia, Maecenas and Augustus. Rome attends Machado, therefore, because he has always has been a votary of Roman literature, not only because it was a fancy in his time. This evocation of the past as a universal identity among men and cultures seems to preserve itself despite the misuses of that very same past. The strength of a sentence such as “for me, today, everything is impregnated by the Ancient” seems to flow not from shallow varnish, but from the soul of a writer who sometimes felt possessed by an ancient mind like Virgil’s, who was for him a constant companion in his reading of the present.

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²⁸ The Brazil Company was a colonial Portuguese institution founded in 1649. It was created to take over commerce with Brazil, in such a way that Jewish and New Christian capital would be immune from confiscation by the Inquisition. This kind of Chamber of Commerce was abolished in 1834.

²⁹ "Quem será esta cigarra que me acorda todos os dias neste verão do diabo. [...] Nisto entra um galo. O galo é um maometano vadio, relógio certo, cantor medíocre, ruim vianda. Entra o galo e faz com a cigarra um concerto de vozes, que me acorda inteiramente. Sacudo a preguiça, colijo os trechos de sonho que me ficaram, se algum tive, e fito o dossel da cama ou as tábuas do teto. Às vezes fito um quintal de Roma, de onde algum velho galo acorda o ilustre Virgílio, e pergunto se não será o mesmo galo que me acorda, e se eu não serei o mesmíssimo Virgílio. É o período de loucura mansa, que em mim sucede ao sono. Subo então pela Via Ápia, dobro a Rua do Ouvidor, e esbarro com Mecenas, que me convida a cear com Augusto e um remanescente da Companhia Geral. Segue-se a vez de um passarinho que me canta no jardim, depois outro, mais outro. Pássaros, galo, cigarra, entoam a sinfonia matutina, até que salto da cama e abro a janela."

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