

EPIC POETRY IN BRAZIL

Literary Innovation and Debate in the 19th Century

Roger Friedlein | Marcos Machado Nunes | Regina Zilberman

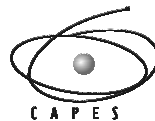


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In the middle of this prose, an epic poem

Antônio Marcos Vieira Sanseverino

Hegel defines the novel as the bourgeois epic. From then on, the novel is established as a genre capable of representing reality entirely, either by distancing or constructing a broad and complex fictional world. Two issues can be interlinked in the 19th century – the relevance of new epic poems and the consolidation of the novel. The first is supposedly fit to represent the national heroes and tell a nation's history. An emblematic work, the epic poem should be able to account for the origin of the national character. The second allegedly has a popular origin, linked to the prose (a way of writing without the care of the epic verse, without the formal elevation), close to the newspapers and industrial production. When considered under the Hegelian tradition, the novel has the potential to fulfill the role of the epic. However, the criteria for construction and evaluation change to account for this prosaic form.

Machado de Assis, an active critic and an attentive reader of literary tradition, accompanies the emergence of the literary works of the time (novels, poetry, plays). In this paper, we will look at how he analyzed the presence of the epic in the Brazilian literature of his time. There had already been an intense debate about the publication of *A Confederação dos Tamoios* by Gonçalves de Magalhães. José de Alencar had attacked the work on different fronts, but in the present text, it is essential to highlight the inadequacy of the historical matter gathered for a Brazilian epic. The subsequent choice of the novel form and the popularity of the works by the writer from Ceará contribute to a tension between attempts at epic poetry and novelistic prose. This debate is present in the Machadian work. It is worth tracking how the epic appears in the Machadian fictional prose. In the first part of the paper,

we will study his critical work in which Machado studies local production. Next, we will analyze the chronicle and, finally, the fiction in novels and, mainly, in short stories.

A critic and the possibility of epic poetry

In June 1866, Machado de Assis observed that the completion of an epic poem is a miraculous fortune, as seen in a critical comment after the publishing of *Colombo*, an epic written by Manuel de Araújo Porto-Alegre. The following fragment condenses the problems to be analyzed in the present text: the place that the discourse on the epic poem occupies in a time when the press, the prose, and the novel were dominant.

Um poema épico, no meio desta prosa atual em que vivemos, é uma fortuna miraculosa. Pretendem alguns que o poema épico não é do nosso tempo, e há quem já cavasse uma vasta sepultura para a epopeia e para a tragédia, as duas formas da arte antiga. Não fazemos parte do cortejo fúnebre de Eurípedes e Homero. As formas poéticas podem modificar-se com o tempo, e essa é a natureza das manifestações da arte; o tempo, a religião e a índole influem no desenvolvimento das formas poéticas, mas não as aniquilam completamente (ASSIS, 2008, p. 1158, my emphasis).

The critical comment by Machado de Assis points to a historical conception of poetic forms, which implies permanence (tragedy) and temporal variation (Greek, French, Shakespearean.). This critical view allows us to understand the presence of epic poetry in the 19th century and its historical variations.

In November 1866, in a letter to Machado de Assis, Joaquim Serra also commented about *Colombo*, stating he expected to read the critical evaluation, which he probably had yet to take notice of. The interest in bringing the word of this poet from Maranhão is that he sparks once again the debate on the “desejo dos que ambicionam uma epopeia nacional” (2008, p. 181), mainly because he considered the epic of Porto-Alegre—in two tomes and forty chants—not only as an epic but also as a “simples roteiro de viagem” or “quase que um drama biográfico” (p. 180). He also mentioned the need for the “modern epic” to seek a new path to treat the marvelous.

In January of the same year, 1866, Machado de Assis, in a review of *Iracema*, by José de Alencar, states that “as tradições indígenas encerram motivos para epopeias e para élogos, podem inspirar os seus Homeros e os seus Teócritos” (ASSIS, 2008, p. 1112). From a historical argument, Alencar wrote a prose poem to elaborate a legend and tell the foundation of Ceará. There are great warriors like Poti, but the poem does not take the course of the epic. Alencar “limita-se a falar do sentimento, vê-se que não pretende sair fora do coração”. While Gonçalves Dias opted for the epic form in *I-Juca Pirama*, Alencar makes another use of the historical argument and chooses to build a romantic heroine who does not “resiste à invasão de um sentimento novo para ela, e que transforma a vestal em mulher” (p. 1113). These two examples show Machado’s care in seeking “ver se o autor atendeu a todas as regras da forma escolhida, se fez obra de arte ou obra de passatempo” (p. 1107).

It is also worthwhile to note an exchange of open letters between Faustino Xavier Novais and Machado de Assis to this reflection. In April 1868, Faustino made a public questioning, as done earlier by José de Alencar¹, and wrote an open letter to Machado about an epic poem that had just been published, *Riachuelo*, which covers one of the crucial battles in the campaign against Paraguay.² Not only does the letter spark the debate on the epic form, but also lists poems that make up a tradition in Portuguese: *Ulisseia*, *Ulissipo*, *Caramuru*, *O Afonso*, among others. Faustino says: “e o poema, no fim de tudo, merecia aceitação mais lisonjeira para o laborioso poeta, que se deu a um trabalho árido e fatigante para coligir dados” (2008, p. 244). In the reply, after a lengthy introduction, Machado says that the author faced the difficulties of the epic and made use of

¹ In early 1868, José de Alencar also wrote an open letter introducing Castro Alves and demanding an evaluation from Machado de Assis about the quality of *Gonzaga*. “O Senhor foi o único de nossos modernos escritores, que se dedicou à cultura dessa difícil ciência que se chama a crítica. Uma porção do talento que recebeu da natureza, em vez de aproveitá-lo em criações próprias, não duvidou aplicá-lo a formar o gosto e desenvolver a literatura pátria.” (ALENCAR, in ASSIS, 2008, p. 130)

² It is worth pointing out that there was no historical distance from the chosen matter, considering that the battle was recent and, more than that, the war had not yet ended. The theme is war and the warrior deeds, which is a matter elevated by the form of the epic, but the work does not contain a typical organization of an epic.

the *ottava rima* and that his poem had many defects that did not diminish its value. Finally, he exalts one of the great qualities of the work, its sincerity: “Tem este livro uma qualidade valiosíssima – é sincero; respira de princípio a fim a emoção do poeta, o entusiasmo de que ele está possuído.”

In this curious debate, the attention and study that Machado de Assis dedicates to the epic form are clearly shown. He demonstrates an essential knowledge of the epic tradition, carefully read by him, but this gesture also comes together with a questioning of the possibility of the epic in modernity. Machado does not deny the validity or permanence of the epic but shows how its form changes over time. In other words, an epic poem written in Brazil during the 19th century should incorporate the transformations that come with modernity and inquire into the local conditions for a national epic. When rereading Machado de Assis’ critical work, one can observe the recurrent and pervasive reference to tradition as a basis for analyzing his era’s poetry, drama and narrative.

In 1875, Machado de Assis, in *Americanas*, builds a work with several narrative poems. Some of them, such as *Potira*, aspire to an epic dimension, which dialogues with Western (Ariosto) and local (Gonçalves Dias) traditions. The analysis of this work will not be undertaken here, but it helps to understand how the critical debate dialogues with the Machadian literary creation. In 1870, Luís Guimarães criticized the lack of Brazilian elements in *Falenas*. In a way, “Notícia do estado atual da literatura brasileira” (1873) and *Americanas* can be read not only as a response to the critic but mainly as an effort to deal with the transformation of literature and narrative poetry under the conditions of the place (Brazilian) and the time (modern).

The chronicler, between a fortnight historian and a candy vendor

In *Ilustração Brasileira*, between 1876 and 1878, Machado de Assis published forty chronicles. These are the *Histórias de quinze dias*, in which, under the pseudonym of Manassés, Machado wrote his intervention in the daily life of Brazil, often using the information in the newspaper. In this series, he builds a dialogue between two women who are neighbors and who speak of the heat and then of their male neighbor. This is the origin of

the chronicle, a trivial and daily conversation about other people's lives. However, at the same time, it is more than that. It is an intervention in the current day.

O que é específico na crônica, pois, é a natureza de sua indeterminação. Sua particular ligação ao tempo vivido, como mostrou Machado de Assis na caracterização de suas origens, faz com que dependa dos acontecimentos com os quais busca interagir, movendo-se e transformando-se de acordo com eles. (...) o cronista está sempre sujeito ao imponderável do cotidiano (CHALHOUB; NEVES; PEREIRA, 2005, p. 15)

In the chronicle, a genre growing in consolidation in the Second Empire of Brazil, we have a space of experimentation in the press, subject to the pressures of deadlines, which leads to formal indetermination. For someone so attentive to apprehending the rules of each genre, it is important to observe how Machado de Assis works. He uses the pseudonym, Manassés, the son of Joseph of Egypt, the one who makes us forget, to pose as a historian with a displaced look at daily life. In *Histórias de quinze dias*, there is a similar process. Machado de Assis rereads a piece of news in an epic key, as we see in the following example. Councilors from a city hall have been suspended for taking advantage of public money. The same night, the City Council was invaded, and the documents that could prove the crime were burned. Hence the chronicler, against the opinion of most people, regards the councilmen as worthy of an epic, as they “foram direto a Tróia, armados em Guerra” (p. 137).

In the same series, Machado de Assis parodies once again the epic poetry:

Tocou a vez a Rocambolé. Este herói, vendo arrasado o palácio de Príamo e desfeitos os moinhos da Mancha, lançou mão do que lhe restava e fez-se herói de polícia, pôs-se a lutar com o código e o senso-comum.

O século é prático, esperto e censurável; seu herói deve ter feições consoantes a estas qualidades de bom cunho. E porque a *epopéia pede algum maravilhoso*, Rocambolé fez-se inverossímil; morre, vive, cai, barafusta, some-se, tal qual como um capoeira em dia de procissão.

Veja o leitor, se não há um fio secreto que liga os quatro heróis. É certo que é grande a distância entre o herói de Homero e o de Ponson de Terrail, entre Tróia e o xilindró. Mas é questão de ponto de vista. Os olhos são outros; outro é o quadro; mas a admiração é a mesma, e igualmente merecida (ASSIS, 2009, p. 157, my emphasis).

That is Part II of the chronicle of January 15, 1877, and, as Sá Rego (1989) points out, it is ironically characterized by the hero of our time. Manassés declares not having read anything other than the comments, yet he thinks Rocambole would be a character superior to us, with extraordinary and admirable capacity. He would have everything to synthesize the values that define our times. He would be our mediator between everyday life and universal values. However, humor undermines the statement. We noticed this in the terms used, such as *xilindró*, *barafusta*, by the simile *capoeira em dia de procissão*. It is also worth mentioning the emphasis given by the chronicler to the lineage that unites Achilles, Aeneas, Don Quijote, and *Rocambole* through the admiration of readers stressing that the marvelous trait of the epic has become implausibility. In the selection of the cited authors, in chronological order (Homer, Virgil, Cervantes, and Ponson du Terrail), there is a passage from the epic verse into the novelistic prose. Cervantes is part of the list considering a rereading of Chivalry novels, marked by the isolation of the central character. With *Rocambole* of Terrail, we would enter the order of an adventure novel, trivialized by the feuilleton, in which the novelistic prose incorporates the speech of the press. In the comical dimension, the chronicle inserts the novel as a continuity of the epic, as a rupture of the poetic form, which can lead to the loss of the heroic. It is also worth noting that this is a hero of the 19th century, the present time. Without national marks, *Rocambole* can be considered the hero of the bourgeois civilization.

Part III of this chronicle, *Stomach suppression*, comments on an advertisement by someone who claims to have invented a panacea that could replace the stomach. The chronicler then speculates upon the panacea that would replace the brain, freeing us from the arduous task of thinking. Thus, there is an association between the subliterate of the time (which does not need to be read to be known) and the misleading advertisement (which promises to eliminate the need to digest). *Rocambole* would be the implausible hero, the panacea that would fill the void of his time, devoid of heroes and credible ideals. By humor, meaning is reversed, and the impossibility of an epic hero, a synthesis between the universal and the particular, is put forward. By association with the newspaper, the epic narrative gains the same falsehood as an advertisement in which the impossible is promised.

When discussing formal experimentation, it is unavoidable to reference the year 1878 and Machado de Assis' publications in the newspaper *O Cruzeiro*. Next to the "fantasies," texts that did not fit any precise definition of genre, Machado adopted the pseudonym Eleazar to write the section of chronicles *Notas semanais* from June to December 1878. In a carping comment on the national reality, the chronicler uses a radical formal experience. Lúcia Granja and John Gledson, in their introductory study, define the series' compositive strategy: "se a história verdadeira não pode ser contada, ele ressalta o fato ao contar outro obviamente falso, em que sua ironia é plenamente exercida, particularmente na justaposição entre Roma e Macaúbas" (GLEDSON, GRANJA, 2009, p. 52). As the two commentators show, fictionalization is used in the chronicle to set everyday life in Rio de Janeiro and, more specifically, render the incongruities comical, such as the leveling of Rome to Macaúbas. That is important to consider how the chronicle made the epic discourse reach Rio de Janeiro.

The same gesture identified by the critics is studied by Roberto Schwarz (2012), when he analyzes a chronicle of *A Semana*, in which the chronicler retrieves Lucrécia's story to examine a piece in a newspaper. It is about Martinha, who killed João Limeira, who had threatened to violate her: "Não se aproxime, que eu lhe furo'. João Limeira aproximou-se, ela deu-lhe uma punhalada, que o matou instantaneamente." The chronicler compares how the two women defended their honor and shows that Lucrécia's fate gains the pages of the History while Martinha's fades into oblivion. Schwarz analyzes the chronicle to show the need to consider the Brazilian matter for a critical reading of Machado de Assis. He points out how the chronicler-narrator depicts the unease of the Brazilian intellectual, who uses Western tradition to incorporate peripheral matter, but in doing so, disqualifies this same matter.

From 1883 onwards, Machado de Assis participated in a collective project in which different chroniclers occupied almost daily a space of *Gazeta de Notícias* under the name *Balas de estalo*. Machado adopted the pseudonym Lélío. On July 15, 1883, one of his most remarkable chronicles was published.

Está achada a *epopeia burguesa*. Não confundam com a tragédia burguesa; essa está achada há muito. Refiro-me à epopeia, o mais difícil, porque *o heroísmo na vida pacata do século não era a mesma coisa fácil de aparecer*. E apareceu; e aqui o tenho nas mãos, nestas poucas linhas que os jornais acabam de imprimir e divulgar:

ATENÇÃO

“Ontem o Sr. José Mendes de Abranches comprou-me objetos no valor de 60\$000.

“Por lapso de soma, porém somente cobrei 50\$00, por cujo motivo o dito Sr. Abranches, conhecendo o meu logro, veio horas depois dar-me os 10\$ que de menos eu havia recebido. *Um ato de tanta probidade não merece ser esquecido*, por isso assim o faço público. – O dono da Camisaria Especial, Ed. Sriber, Rua dos Ourives n. 51, porta imensa, corte.”

Vejam bem o sentimento poético e a insinuação do Sr. Sriber: “*Um ato de tanta probidade não merece ser esquecido*”. Isto e convidar os Homeros da localidade é a mesma coisa; portanto, acudo com o meu esboço de poesia, que porei em verso, se merecer a animação da crítica.

CANTO I

Musa, canta a probidade de Abranches, escrupuloso nas contas, exato nos pagamentos. Que as trompas do século repitam aos séculos futuros este lance extraordinário.

(...)

CANTO II

A Camisaria Especial é o ponto do universo onde os trocos, quando são demais, não são restituídos ao dono da casa. O camiseiro põe todo o cuidado em contar o dinheiro; conta, reconta, soma, diminui, multiplica, divide, unta cuspe nos dedos para não perder nada; é o seu método. (...)

CANTO III

Mas o Abranches não quer só camisas, quer também colarinhos e punhos. Paciente como Penélope, o Camiseiro sobe e desce a escada, para servir o herói. Este inclina-se, palpa, examina, inquire e compra; enfim o Camiseiro diz-lhe o preço. *Abranches, econômico, regateia; depois, manda embrulhar tudo*.

(...)

Então, o deus Cálculo chama um dos seus Erros, e diz-lhe; “Vai, vai ao Camiseiro da rua dos Ourives, e faz com que ele se atrapalhe na conta”. O Erro, fiel à ordem, desce, entra na loja, e atrapalha o Camiseiro, que em vez de dar ao herói trinta e dois mil réis, entrega-lhe quarenta e dois. Nem ele adverte o engano, nem o Abranches conta o dinheiro; pega das camisas, colarinho e punhos, cumprimenta e sai.

CANTO IV

Entretanto, a Probidade, amiga do Abranches, vê a aleivosia, e pensa em salvar o herói. “Não, brada ela; isto não pode ficar assim; *é preciso um exemplo grande, raro, nobre, épico*; é preciso que o Abranches restitua os dez mil réis”.

E, tomando a figura de uma viúva pobre, aguarda o Abranches no corredor da casa deste; mal o vê entrar, lança-se-lhe aos pés. “*Divino Abranches, sou uma*

viúva desvalida; dá-me de esmola o que te sobrar do troco que recebeste". O herói sorri; como pode sobrar alguma coisa do troco? Dócil, entretanto, saca o receptáculo, descinta-o, conta, reconta; é verdade, dez mil réis de mais. Então a deusa: "Em vez de os dares a mim, vai restituí-los ao Camiseiro". E, súbito, desapareceu no ar. *Abranches reconhece o prodígio; algum deus benéfico lhe falou por aquela boca*. Depositada a caixa em casa, e, rápido como um raio de Febo, voa à Camisaria Especial.

O Camiseiro, encostado ao balcão, refletia *na estrada do Madeira e Mamoré, quando o Abranches lhe apareceu*, dizendo que vinha restituir-lhe dez mil réis, que recebera de mais. *O Camiseiro não acreditou; deu de ombros, riu, bateu-lhe na barriga, perguntou-lhe como ia da tosse*; mas o herói teimou tanto, que ele começou a desconfiar alguma coisa; examina a caixa e reconhece que lhe faltam dez mil réis. *A preciosa nota é recebida como o filho prodígio; o Camiseiro beija-a, enche-a de lágrimas*. O Abranches, comovido pela própria grandeza, deixa a Camisaria, e, teso, alucinado pelo albor de uma consciência imaculada e augusta, caminha impávido na direção da posteridade e da glória eterna" (ASSIS, 1998, p. 40-43, my emphasis).

The chronicler claims to have found the matter of the "bourgeois epic," the probity of Abranches, the mark of the heroism of a quiet life. His starting point was a newspaper note published by the owner of the Sribber Shirt Shop, who wanted to praise the honesty of a client who returned the change to him. Machado de Assis writes, then, the chronicle quoted, which triggered an outraged response by the shirtmaker and became a joke among other "baleiros" (literally "candy vendors"), the other chroniclers of *Balas de Estalo*. Cernic Ramos shows that the indignation of Sribber and the effect of this chronicle was such that Lélío became known because of the story of Abranches.

In the opening, it is announced that the bourgeois epic will sing the "heroism of a quiet life." Then follows the transcription of the note by Sribber that makes the gesture of Abranches public, who returns to give back the money received in excess, "An act of so much probity that does not deserve to be forgotten." This is the epic matter, an elevated historical event, a great deed to be remembered by the poet and sung for the community. The "Homer of the region" writes his first sketch. It is worth observing the comment by Lélío, who awaits the critical reception to decide whether he should put the story into verse. Then follow the four chants, written in prose. Despite its precariousness, it is possible to recognize the daily urban life of a modern city, but the language used is elevated. The gods are integrated

into everyday life and compete with each other. God “Calculation” calls “Mistake” and asks him to make Sribier accidentally give ten thousand réis in excess to Abranches. On the other hand, Probity takes the form of a widow, a beggar, to save the probity of Abranches. In the end, Abranches returns to the Sribier Shirt Shop to return the money. As in *Notas Semanais*, the chronicle transcends the mere daily record and extends into imagination. To comment on the bourgeois modernity—calculus, business, tiny daily life—the chronicle applies an epic tone to narrate trivial actions, devoid of adventure, and the great deed becomes the small change.

Machado de Assis incorporates a 19th-century debate presented in Hegelian aesthetics. Hegel, in his *Curso de Estética*, stated that the novel is a “moderna epopeia burguesa” (2004, p. 147). Also, Georg Lukács, in *A teoria do romance* (2000), has a similar definition: “O romance é a epopeia de uma era para a qual a totalidade extensiva da vida não é mais dada como evidente” (p. 55). The hero becomes problematic, ironic, and melancholic, of demonic psychology, and bears the marks of the conflict of the intellectual of the time, a time without gods. In turn, Erich Auerbach (1987) articulates the ordinary matter of daily life as a serious representation through a mixed style. For him, the focus is on seriousness, which makes room for the great deed and the tragedy of ordinary men, not only nobles or lords.

The critical debate of the 1860s and 1870s, in which the possibility of the epic is called into question, reverberates in Machado’s chronicle. In an ironic tone, he turns the epic into adventure, into an industrial novel, undermining the possibility of seriously representing a synthesis of the community values. Here, in the act of Abranches, the small sum, the change of 10 thousand réis, becomes the index of honesty, the value to be celebrated. In such a way, the announcement is demeaned in each of the four “chants,” written in prose, highlighting the emptiness of daily life, the triviality of business, and the lack of epic matter. The movement is the opposite of the novel, instilling the adventure into urban and bourgeois daily life. There is a search for quality values and a whole identity, either through love or honor, in a revolutionary struggle. In the Machadian chronicle, about the routine of the city, the movement is the opposite: it shows the absence of struggle for the epic and honor.

This parodic incorporation of the epic into the chronicle does not allow us to define Machado de Assis' position regarding the possibility of epic poetry. Just as in his critical production of the 1860s and 1870s, the chronicle enables us to observe the modern complexity of 19th-century literature, in which several literary forms coexist, compete with each other, and define themselves by the tension between them. In a way, up to now, we can observe how much the reflection on the epic discourse, at least in Machado de Assis, demands a dialogue with the other literary forms at the time.

Remains of a negative epic and a collection of several undated stories

Regina Zilberman (2012), in a reading of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, shows how much Machado de Assis has incorporated and subverted the journey as an epic theme. More specifically, Brás Cubas shows the opposite of Aeneas: a city-founder hero capable of placing his mission above the love for Dido. The moral strength, exemplary of the hero, leads to choices that define a purpose for the actions. Brás Cubas, the devil boy, indulges in his immediate satisfaction. The demeaned parodic inversion incorporates an encyclopedic dimension. Examples include the opening of *Aeneid*, which appears, as written by the character, *Arma virumque cano (Arms and the men I sing)*, and *The Divine Comedy*, which traverses the plot of the novel with various interruptions, as a new way of conceiving the world of the dead, from Hades to Hell. As for the novel, we could mention numerous signs of the epic presence in the Machadian prose, but we will close the cycle of the epic – and Dantesque – references with *Esau e Jacó*, in which the external narrator incorporates the quotation of Aires as the epigraph of his book: *Dico que quando l'anima mal nata*. Alternatively, yet, the nexus made by the same Aires between the Homeric heroes and the twins: Paulo, as Achilles; Pedro, as Ulysses.

In a way, the novelistic prose, for Machado, takes on the task of articulating the epic dimension of composing an extensive totality, in which the hero synthesizes the exemplary traits of a community in a way that history and fiction intersect in the composition of this founding hero. Brás

Cubas brings these touches of foundational hero in a demeaned key (ZILBERMAN, 2012). At the same time, the decomposition of the corpse, the falsification of the family origin by the father, the ethical fragility, the surrendering to immediate desires, and the lack of purpose show how Machado took the matter of his time and place to point the impossibility of the epic, except as mock.

Is it possible to say that Machado de Assis renounces the possibility of representing reality epically? In a way, criticism shifts to allegory or figurative (when Brás Cubas becomes an image of Brazil or a foundational hero) or to a formal principle (the unreliable narrator). Specifically, in the second case, in Roberto Schwarz's reading, there is a revelation of the narrator's enunciation, approached from its class dimension. Brás Cubas, who is part of a slavery elite, brings to his discourse the marks of a slave owner's attitude mixed with a patina of civilization and literary quotations – a satirical dialogue with Western tradition. The novel is broken down into parts that do not integrate into a totality. It would be essential to observe the principles of disaggregation of this epic ambition.

In the short stories, there are apparent references to epic language, such as the opening of the short story "Capítulo dos chapéus": "Musa, canta o despeito de Mariana, esposa do bacharel Conrado Seabra, naquela manhã de abril de 1879." (ASSIS, 2018, p. 522) After the confrontation with her husband, Mariana leaves her house. Guided by Sofia, she walks the streets of the city, is tempted by the encounter with her ex-boyfriend in a waiting room, goes to the Chamber of Representatives, and returns home, determined to keep everything as it was. This concise summary shows the ambivalence of this brief narrative. On the one hand, trivial and everyday matters would be invalid for the epic dimension. Moreover, besides the character not having magnificence, by choosing the middle class, the narrator adopts language that reveals the distance between the elevated style and the narrative discourse of ordinariness. At the same time, the short story reveals a sphere of women's lives as glimpsed power even though despised by her husband.

In addition, there are numerous references to the epic tradition: authors (Homer, Virgil, Dante, Torquato Tasso, Camões); heroic characters

(Ulysses, Achilles, Aeneas, Cacambo, Dante); and memorable passages. The quotation procedure varies according to the position of the narrator, but the comical tone predominates as mock epic. In the rereading done so far, the serious nature is crossed by some irony, which becomes more and more corrosive. The ironic humor crosses the narratives. The epic quote serves as a point of reference to show the triviality of everyday life.

Georg Lukács characterizes the novelistic hero as isolated and seeking a sense that escapes him in prosaic life. There is a discrepancy between the subjective ideal and the world of its action. This division appears in Machado's short stories, causing the lack of dignity of action. The gesture does not reveal the character's vision. The action masks an intention that is hidden from him. When the character makes a heroic gesture or rises above ordinary life, he isolates himself and approaches insanity.

Let us look at a common character, Rangel, the protagonist of the short story *O diplomático*, with a heterodiegetic narrator. *In media res*, the short story opens with Rangel reading people's fortunes during the June festivities in the house of a notary scribe. These are predictions of an uncertain future. The narrator presents the previous story of a 41-year-old official copyist who aspired to a marriage above his class and ended up single and diminished.

Era solteiro, por obra das circunstâncias, não de vocação. Em rapaz teve alguns namoricos de esquina, mas com o tempo apareceu-lhe a comichão das grandezas, e foi isto que lhe prolongou o celibato até os quarenta e um anos, em que o vemos. Cobiçava alguma noiva superior a ele e à roda em que vivia, e gastou o tempo em esperá-la. (...) Também era certo no saguão do paço imperial, em dia de cortejo, para ver entrar as grandes damas e as pessoas da corte, ministros, generais, diplomatas, desembargadores, e conhecia tudo e todos, pessoas e carruagens. *Voltava da festa e do cortejo, como voltava do baile, impetuoso, ardente, capaz de arrebatara de um lance a palma da fortuna.*

O pior é que entre a espiga e a mão há o tal muro do poeta, e o Rangel não era homem de saltar muros. *De imaginação fazia tudo, raptava mulheres e destruía cidades. Mais de uma vez foi, consigo mesmo, ministro de Estado, e fartou-se de cortesias e decretos. (...) Cá fora, porém, todas as suas proezas eram fábulas.* Na realidade, era pacato e discreto (ASSIS, 2018, p. 710-711, my emphasis).

The short story begins in *media res*, on Saint John's Eve of 1854, with him reading the fortune of the girls at the party. The narrator interrupts the

narrative to introduce him. A man inclined to marry, still single at the age of 41, Rangel “in his imagination did everything.” However, he could not go over the wall that separated him from the desired object. On this night of 1854, his hope lies in Joanhina, daughter of the house, to whom he writes a letter. This is the day of action, a day to reveal his affection. Rangel struggles to hand over his statement to the young woman, but he cannot overcome prudery. Queirós, a young employee of the Santa Casa Hospital, arrives at the party and starts courting Joanhina. Rangel is defeated by Queirós. In the end,

Só consigo, foi-se-lhe o aparelho da afetação, e já não era o diplomático, era o energúmeno, que rolava na casa, bradando, chorando como uma criança, infeliz deveras, por esse triste amor do outono. O pobre diabo, feito de devaneio, indolência e afetação, era, em substância, tão desgraçado como Otelo, e teve um desfecho mais cruel (ASSIS, 2018, p. 718, my emphasis).

This is a story in which the character can only act within the expected social standards, within normalcy, crossed by kindness. He does not break with his bashfulness. Only in the intimate sphere of his room, he becomes a “energúmeno,” explodes, frees his imagination, and manages to perform significant actions without leaving the place. Machado de Assis explores the double sense of the word “energúmeno” (crazed madman) in Portuguese: that of the possessed man, who is possessed by pain, and that of a man deprived of reason and capacity for action. The confrontation with Queirós or his love for Joanhina did not even exist outside Rangel as an action, for neither of them knew of his motivations. Neither the anger he felt for Queirós nor his loving desire for Joanhina came to light. It was his inner, dreamlike universe that turned into action. In the end, Rangel was the best man at Joanhina and Queirós’ wedding. The conciliation was there, but it was reserved only for the others.

The broken threads of the epic

As one observes the Machadian prose (chronicles, novels, and short stories), written starting from the mid-1870s, it is possible to see to what extent the Machadian narrative shows the attentive and critical reading of the epic tradition. Still in the 1860s, Machado de Assis, as a critic, questions

the presence of the epic poem in the middle of the surrounding prose. He advocates its historic transformation but still firmly believes in its possibility.

In poetry, *Americanas* (1875), Machado de Assis tests the possibility of epic poetry, historically transformed but still achievable. In this book, he establishes a dialogue with the epic Western tradition to deal with Brazilian matters. The epic elevation moves away from the chronicle (in the press), from his incursion into the novel and the short story. At the elevated level of epic Brazilian history, in the actions of resistance, Machado de Assis finds the heroic gesture. For example, they are made by anonymous characters, like the ones in the Jesuit chronicle. This appears in poetry, with an elevated and severe tone, in the figure of Potira, a Machadian contribution to the representation of the Indians in the epic Brazilian tradition. By naming an anonymous and briefly quoted person in the historical chronicle and moving away from the religious dimension of the Jesuit, the narrator focuses on the human tension of Potira. She abandoned her tribe, married a white man, and lived in Rio de Janeiro. Kidnapped by the Tamoio chief, she remains faithful to her husband and makes the ultimate sacrifice to maintain the purity of her ideal.

In the prose, however, also in the 1870s, but especially after 1880, when something comes close to a heroic gesture, it is crossed by the irony of a narrator who acts as if he were superior to the poor, women, and slaves. In the chronicle, the narrator uses a pseudonym to evoke the epic tradition to contrast with ordinary characters or deeds allusively. The hero of our time would be Rocambole, who comes from the police station and the feuilleton to represent his time. Money is at the center in the case of corrupt councilmen and the mockery celebration of Abranches' honesty. The cunning Ulysses turns into a "hero" of probity. In these cases, the epic is used in the discourse of the chronicler-narrator to reveal the mediocrity of urban daily life.

Machado de Assis, especially from the 1870s, experiences the possibilities of the modern short story. The short story breaks free from tradition. It is no longer an exemplary narrative or a moral demonstration. It is a short narrative published by the press (magazines or newspapers) in tension between works of art and production for entertainment, which is

an indirect expression of the relationship between art (autonomous production) and commodities (trade-oriented publication). It is in this context that the incorporation of the epic is given an ironic sense. Machado de Assis restricts the epic to the conventional marks used by his intrusive narrators to tell trivial stories. The opening of “Capítulo dos chapéus” is an example of this mismatch between the narrator’s speech (“Muse, please sing the resentment of Mariana”) and the narrated matter (the wife who asks her husband to change his hat). We see the distance between the elevated discourse of the narrator, proper to the epic, and the prosaic life of the characters. The unworthiness of everyday matter has no power to become an epic subject.

This paper did not intend to emphasize the analysis of the Machadian novel. However, it is important to mention that, as a complex totality, it seems to be the summing of the ironic incorporation of the epic. We have the extensive totality, but the fragmentation and discontinuity of the actions of Brás Cubas deflate the epic dimension. The narrator’s speech does not achieve the seriousness that dignifies the narrated matter.

Therefore, it should be asked, even if it is in a negative form, about the contribution of the reflection on the epic to understand Machado de Assis’ work.

A forma, não apenas da poesia moderna, mas também de outros gêneros literários do século que se escoou desde então, é dificilmente imaginável sem *As flores do mal*; a marca da influência de Baudelaire pode ser encontrada tanto em Gide, Proust, Joyce e Thomas Mann, como em Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Rilke e Eliot. *O estilo de Baudelaire, a mistura que tentamos descrever, continua tão vivo quanto antes* (AUERBACH, 2007, my emphasis).

When we move from criticism to literary creation, we see that the Machadian prose (chronicles, short stories, and novels) not only ironically incorporates the epic to show its impracticability in modernity or Brazil but also that the epic becomes an element of discursive tension between the effort of discursive elevation of the narrator and the precariousness of the narrated matter. This discourse falls into the void, either by the prosaism of the slight change in the scene of Abranches (or the resentment of Mariana), by the demeaned nature of the Brazilian daily life, or by the inability of a character to act.

Thus, reflecting on the epic helps to understand the search for an appropriate way to narrate the Brazilian matter. In a modern gesture, Machado de Assis chose the mixture of discursive elevation and the demeaning of the narrated matter. This mixture, however, is subject to tension all the time by the Brazilian gesture of the elite narrator, who tries to disentangle from a supposedly unworthy matter. In this way, the narrator's discourse demonstrates his knowledge of the epic Western tradition. This mastery of the literary lettered tradition will, rather than elevate, further demean the ordinary merchant (Sriber), the inert official (Rangel), or the resigning wife (Mariana). In the middle of the road, the Machadian prose, the epic discourse, not only intermingles with the narrated matter but also accentuates the abyss between the elevated universe of the narrator and the precariousness of the represented reality. The tension may be the result of the narrator's incapacity to recognize the greatness in the gestures of ordinary people.

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