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VOCATION AND AMBITION IN MACHADO 'S CHARACTERS: readings of "Cantiga de Esponsais" and "Habilidoso"

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Abstract

This article analyzes the short stories *Cantiga de Esponsais* and *Habilidoso*, by Machado de Assis, focusing on the tensions between vocation, ambition, and social recognition. The study engages with Alfredo Bosi, who interprets masks as protective strategies adopted by the subject in society, and Otto Maria Carpeaux, who identifies money, sex, and vanity as decisive forces in Machadian characters. In *Cantiga de Esponsais*, Romão Pires embodies the impossibility of transforming inspiration into artistic creation, leading to frustration and the annihilation of his creative identity. In *Habilidoso*, João Maria's trajectory reveals resignation in the face of limited glory, restricted to his immediate social environment. In

both cases, the theory of the two souls—inner and outer—literarily formulated by Machado in *O Espelho* provides an interpretative framework to understand their destinies: while the absence of external recognition condemns Romão to death, João Maria's adaptive capacity allows his ambition to survive, albeit on a reduced scale. The analysis highlights how Machado's narrative intertwines frustration, vanity, and the desire for immortality with the complex relation between subjectivity and social identification.

Keywords: Machado de Assis; short stories; Brazilian literature.

If Machado de Assis, in his brilliant compositions, points out the masks essential to the subject to defend himself from society, as Alfredo Bosi (1982) formulates; It is up to us to point out two of the not so "singular occurrences" in which the masks do not seem to fit well with the individual, not being their rightful place. In Bosi's own words, "why deny the social disinherited the right to shelter in the shadow of money and power?" (Bosi, 1982, p. 442), why would the writer then have denied this pleasure to his characters?

In presentation to the collection *Tales A* (Assis, 1972), Otto Maria Carpeaux points to money and sex as the determining motives in the conduct of Machado's characters. Not forgetting to remember the masks – "imposed by society and put on to adjust to it as far as possible" (Carpeaux, 1972, p. 16) – which would be skillfully removed by the author. The latter, however, in doing so, does not condemn the characters, limiting himself to the revelation of their intimate motivations. The third recurring reason would be vanity that, satisfied,

would promote, in addition to social prestige, the benefits associated with money and sex.

We are also reminded by Carpeaux that, most of the time, the aspirations to greatness of the characters are abandoned with the passage from youth to adulthood. These adults will henceforth settle for the realization of "lesser happiness." The composer of polkas, Pestana, however, is an example of those who escape the rule: he feeds until the end of his life his impassive ambitions for concrete realization. It symbolizes the contradiction "between the poetry of artistic ambitions and the prose of reality" (Carpeaux, 1972, p. 23).¹

The result could not be other than frustration. According to the psychoanalytic definition of the Aurélio dictionary, this would be the "state of the one who, due to the absence of an object (...), is deprived of the satisfaction of a desire or a need" (Ferreira, 1986, p. 815). The absent and desired object is vocation, which, in this case, cannot overcome ambition. The short stories "Cantiga de Esponsais" and "Habilidoso" bring at their core this eternal combat; differ, however, in the elaboration found by each of the characters for such frustration.²

The conductor Romão Pires, of "Cantiga de Esponsais", was about sixty years old. His aged figure, with "a circumspect air, eyes on the ground, sad laughter, and a slow step",

¹ In "Um homem célebre", Pestana, a composer of polkas, lives the frustration of achieving wide popular fame without realizing the ideal of classical excellence he longed for.

² All the short stories mentioned in this article are gathered in: ASSIS, Machado de. *All the tales*. Introduction by Ana Lucia Machado de Oliveira. 1. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2019.

contrasted with the other he became in front of the orchestra, now with his eyes lit up and his laughter illuminated. Of all the daily activities, the only one capable of getting him out of indifference was conducting.

The initial scene is all enunciated from negatives. We become aware of the elements present only through the narrator's promise not to describe them. The description of the house is the same way: it was not rich, nor cheerful, nor did it have a woman or birds, nor flowers or bright colors. The whole tale is marked by the no, metonymic of the impossibility of creation.

Still on the house, it should be said that it was on the "street of the Mother of Men", and who was waiting for him there was the old black man, father José, "who is his true mother". He had music roles at home, none of him, but "if mestre Romão could, he would be a great composer". The reason for the character's sadness is then revealed to the reader.

Then, the narrator reflects on vocation, and states that there are two types of it: "those who have a language and those who do not". Master Romão's was of the second nature, incapable of making himself understood by men. And not for lack of trying, because "it's not that I didn't scribble the paper and interrogate the carnation a lot, for hours". "If I could" he would end the wedding singing he had begun three days after he was married, when he felt "something like inspiration", but it "could not come out".

The impossibility of expression finds a visual correspondence in nature, with the image of a caged bird. The attempts followed many more times during the marriage.

However, after his wife's death, the sadness had only increased, "because he could not fix on paper the feeling of extinguished happiness".

Romão falls ill and is under the care of the slave (who brings him medicines from the apothecary, calls the doctor, and sleeps little at night, in wakefulness – tasks that accentuate the maternal function suggested earlier). He receives neighbors and acquaintances at home who try to cheer him up; to which Mestre Romão smiled, "but to himself he said that it was the end". The doctor is the only one to guess the real reason for the suffering, and advises that "you must not think about music...".

Sensing the proximity of death, the sick man decides to end the spousal singing in order to leave "a little soul on earth"; It is the desires for recognition and immortality that reach the highest expression here, just in the moment before death, as a desperate attempt to overcome it. He started with the existing section until he reached "a certain there", from which he could not proceed.

The composer's hesitant and frustrated attempt is mimicked in the discourse by the repetition of musical notes - "La, la, la...", which gain an anguished resonance. Cleusa Rios Pinheiro Passos attributes to this there the possibility of operating as an adverb of place, "providing a game between the character's work and the idea of creation constituting someone else's space" (Passos, 2009, p. 25).

While he insisted on the composition, he could see a newlywed couple at the window, who inspire a sad smile, but no more than that - "the sight of the couple had not supplied his inspiration". The master gives up, defeated; in the next

moment, the young bride begins to unconsciously hum, something unprecedented and that brought "a certain there", followed by a beautiful musical phrase – "precisely the one that Mestre Romão had been looking for for years without ever finding". Powerless, he expires the same night.

The other frustrated ambition that interests us belongs to João Maria, thirty-six years old, neither handsome nor ugly, but someone for whom "life has spoiled nature". After describing the alley in which João Maria's junk shop is situated, the reader is informed that there is a boy in the street at the window, and four others at the door of the shop, watching. João Maria "accumulates his business with art", painting in his spare time, which are many.

The quick description of the environment, together with the information that his wife serves as a seamstress, washerwoman and cook, and also the fact that his young son does the shopping for the house, assembles the social portrait. The family has no employees or possessions, moved in a hurry, for financial reasons. Even in this environment hostile to art, João Maria has his inclinations.

The painter ignores the lessons of drawing, he only copies whatever comes his way, from vegetables to seafood. For him, reproduction was the maximum expression of the artist. The narrator even states that João Maria considered himself a genius, although he did not know this meaning of the word; He had become accustomed to another: skilled, which he had learned since childhood. In this way, the character's limitation takes shape in this passage, reaching even the lexical plane.

Deprived of his true vocation, what he possessed was obstinacy, "the daughter of a desire, which did not correspond to the faculties". The Machadian narrator will also make use of an image supported by nature, naturalizing what is said. So that his effort, combined with praise, would be equivalent to the pride of the horse stimulated by the spurs; Both individual elements gain strength from the interaction with the other, depending to some extent on their approval.

The canvas on which he now works is the sixth or seventh version of a saint, whom he had copied for the first time from his godmother. The first of them wanted his mother for the oratory. João Maria gave in, after "a long and painful conflict", because "he aimed at public applause, rather than the blessings of heaven".

Regarding the lack of artistic instruction of his mother, D. Inácia dos Anjos, the narrator recalls the copy of Hamon acquired by the boy, but which could never be exhibited. The engraving had been condemned to be "stuffed" in the little room, "where there was no light". The light that the room lacks is a metonym for the prestige light that will be lacking in João Maria's works throughout his life.

The third copy of the saint was exhibited in a mirror and engraving shop on Rua do Ouvidor. The label with his name on the work fulfills the desire for notoriety and applause. But "the light did not seem good to him"; he was on duty at the store, trying to decipher the features of those who saw his painting, and was disappointed because "he didn't read anything (...) on impassive faces". He exhibited again in different stores, without being able to understand the failure, until he gave up

exhibitions. His circle of ambitions is reduced to relatives and acquaintances; His art continues to "plunge into shadow", in absolute opposition to the desired light.

We are taken back to the opening scene, in which João Maria pretends not to perceive the admiration he receives from the four boys, who watch him between whispers and adoration, when in fact "he tastes the admiration". To the point of forgetting about his sick son and the pot on the fire, which his wife had warned him about before leaving with the little one to the homeopathic office. It doesn't seem too much to say that he forgot everything, even his own life, while "the audience is being stunned". Such an audience would be the "last and final horizon of his ambitions: an alley and four boys".

We follow, therefore, very different paths of trajectories in something similar. João Maria's ambition, which had started from the desire for public applause, was restricted to relatives and acquaintances, and reaches expression only in the alley with the four boys. Still, there is delight in feeling admired; The painter is content with the applause possible, he resigns himself to his reality.

On the other hand, he accepted the glory that belonged to him, in the form in which he came, whatever it was. Unlike the posture of master Romão and the famous man Pestana; who had their share of public jubilation and admiration. This, however, was never enough for them; both the notoriety of Mestre Romão, compared at the time to the famous actor João Caetano, and the fame of the polkas of Pestana, played everywhere, were not enough. They lacked a touch of

immortality – exactly what the old regent had wished when he resumed the old spousal project.

The cultural knowledge of these two characters cost them dearly. Perhaps the most awakened consciousness is directly linked to the greatest frustration they have experienced, whose extreme impotence could have no other expression than death. Both musicians were aware of the possibility of creation, and they desired it above all. They would perhaps have suffered less if, like João Maria, they had not assumed the ample creative capacity, and limited themselves to mimesis.

Some comments about Carpeaux's aforementioned presentation are also in order. Our skilful man seems to fit perfectly into the quality of the one who is content with "lesser happiness." However, we cannot agree with the judgment made by maestro Romão Pires, according to which the reason for the impossibility of expression would derive from sadness for the loss of the beloved woman. We cannot prove this hypothesis by the short story; on the contrary, we recall the definition of the two types of vocation offered by the narrator, followed by the express statement that Romão belonged to the second type, those "who do not have [language]".

Furthermore, it is clear in the text that even during the period of marriage, therefore prior to the death of his wife, Mestre Romão could not express himself through music. What he imagined to be an inspiration could not materialize – "inspiration could not come out".

The burning need for external recognition, guaranteeing social identification, recalls Jacobina's thesis, from the short story "The Mirror", based on the existence of two souls – the

interior, of which little is said, and the exterior, object of external identification. Mestre Romão's spousal song seemed to correspond to this object of external and social identification. The absence of this recognition, associated with the inability to achieve it, was responsible for his suffering. Unlike Jacobina, who wearing the uniform saw himself as one again, Romão could never compose his song, he was never "one" in that sense, and he could no longer stand life in such conditions.

Continuing with the same hypothesis, it seems that João Maria's external soul can adapt better to the reductionist changes to which it has been subjected. Even the names of the streets that make up the route taken by the pilgrimage of exhibitions of his paintings suggest a similar diminution.

From the first exhibition, on Rua do Ouvidor, which would represent the possibility of expression, the paintings move on to Rua do Hospício, where perhaps his mental and artistic faculties began to be doubted. The last two streets represent the last attempts at success; thus, Rua da Imperatriz would promise the desired sovereignty; while that of Rócio Pequeno demonstrates the inevitable diminution of his vanity. She becomes small to the point of giving up the exhibitions, but not so much that she cannot be awakened again, even if it is by four boys in an alley.

Thus, by bringing together "Cantiga de Esponsais" and "Habilidoso", it is evident how Machado de Assis explores the limits of artistic creation and the search for social recognition, tensioning vocation and ambition in different trajectories. By problematizing this game between intimate desire and external validation, the witch from Cosme Velho exposes not only

individual dramas, but the very tension between subjectivity and society, which recurrently runs through his work.³

³ According to Alfredo Bosi, "the main object of Machado de Assis is human behavior" (2007, p. 11). For a deeper understanding of the broader understanding of the tensions between fiction and history in this author's literature, the contributions of Coutinho (1965) and Gledson (1986) stand out in the vast critical fortune.

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