

Voices in Machado de Assis's Short Story about a Fire in Montevideo / Vozes no conto de Machado de Assis sobre um incêndio em Montevideu

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ABSTRACT

In his dialogical reflection on utterance, Voloshinov emphasizes that its implied component is the one that is common to a social group and does not need thus to be explicit. In that manner, the author observes that when adding, juxtaposing memory situations in reported time and space, it is possible for the enunciator to coordinate perceptions concerning existence in fiction and to relate them to intonations that increasingly narrow the interlocution between things lived and utterances. In view of that, we analyze the short story *Um incêndio* [*A Fire*] by Machado de Assis based on a dialogical perspective. This short story was motivated by the news of a fire that had occurred in a port area of Montevideo. The news was told by the engineer Abel Ferreira de Matos, who, in turn, had heard it from the boy Manuel Bandeira.

KEYWORDS: Brazilian literature; Short story; Dialogism; Intonation

RESUMO

*Na reflexão dialógica sobre a enunciação, Voloshinov enfatiza sua porção subentendida como aquela que é comum a um grupo social e que, portanto, não precisa ser explicitada. Dessa maneira, o autor observa a possibilidade de o enunciador, ao acrescentar, justapor, situações de memória no tempo e no espaço narrados, conjugar percepções acerca da existência em matéria de ficção; vinculá-las a entonações que estreitam ainda mais a interlocução entre as coisas vividas e o enunciado. Diante disso, analisamos, pelo ângulo dialógico, o conto *Um incêndio*, de Machado de Assis, motivado por notícia de um incêndio ocorrido em região portuária de Montevideu, que lhe deu o engenheiro Abel Ferreira de Matos, que, por sua vez, ouvira do menino Manuel Bandeira.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura brasileira; Conto; Dialogismo; Entonação

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The Machado de Assis of 1881 (critics prefer to focus on his mature years) is the author who casts a suspicious glance at the things of the world. For him, certainty is a matter of choice. Thus, his texts observe everything from the way the fictionist expresses his doubts concerning art and life.

The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas (ASSIS, 1997)¹ surprises us with a narrator-character who is a deceased author. Established in prefaces and settled by the narrative, he cancels the truths of his authorial work, making himself a subject of the utterance – a pseudo author and narrator. This demonstrates that Machado de Assis wants the text to surprise the reader and to make known that fiction is language construction, without a logic conclusion, or a principle of casualty to rule over it. In *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, Assis (1997)² associates ideas in the inner part of the whole plot. This makes us pose the following question: What is ideal and remarkable in Brás Cubas's life? What can a melancholic man wish (and be) if he has no will or desire for affection?

The essential theme of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (ASSIS, 1997)³ is romance: the association of matrimony with patrimony. Brás Cubas's father wants him to marry a young woman of means; Virgília's father also wants a wealthy husband for her daughter. It turns out that he saw Lobo Neves as a suitor for his daughter. Virgília also preferred him, but did not abandon Brás Cubas. Thus, she became a false wife and a false lover. Brás Cubas accepted everything from Virgília, mainly because, for convenience's sake, everything he did in his life was falsified – just as Virgília did. Brás Cubas has a false heart; he lives far from the notion of right or wrong and lives his doubt according to his hypocrisy. The same occurs to Lobo Neves, who is superstitious, troubled, and lives far from the truth. There is nothing exemplary in the conduct of the protagonists of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (ASSIS, 1997);⁴ only the conduct of the narrative is audacious.

Besides being a hypocrite, Brás Cubas is talkative; ironically, he has the looks and the gestures of someone modern. In one of his aphorisms, in order to think for every men, he manifests that we have the “power of restoring the past to touch the instability of our

¹ ASSIS, Joaquim Maria Machado de. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Translated by Gregory Rabana. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

² See footnote 1.

³ See footnote 1.

⁴ See footnote 1.

impressions and the vanity of our affections” (ASSIS, 1997, p.57).⁵ As we can observe in the excerpt, Brás Cubas reveals that he is inspired to promote the Baudelarian modernism. He also alludes to the possibility of going back in time in order to search for the memorable and the exemplary, to confront them with lived experiences, and to choose values among them that are living and true between the past and the present.

The point of view of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (ASSIS, 1997)⁶ is adopted by means of a narrative mobility that breaks with the realistic bonds between the individual who writes and what he writes and establishes a representation of the writing act. In this novel Assis (1997) represents the manner through which he altered the fictional contract between writer and reader. By doing that, he brings the reader close to the course of his fiction and gives his deceased narrator-character-author autonomy to commemorate the way he wins and loses in life, the way he negotiates his freedom, pretends, and even overcomes nature, our mortal nature. Brás Cubas’s freedom has no limits. He is extravagant, absolute, and controls the narrative scene. Even being dead, he is able to see, observe, and analyze.

In the section Warning to the Reader of *Papéis avulsos* [*Single Papers*], published in 1882, Machado de Assis, who is also a short story writer, quotes Diderot and warns us about the way the short story (similar to life) surprises us with its outcomes. As we read this Warning and others in his short-story collections and based on the Preface of *Páginas recolhidas* [*Reserved Pages*], published in 1899, we notice that the narratives start to deal with different subjects. Besides, the prologues of the books are beyond the scope of discussion of the short-story literary form. In *Relíquias de casa velha* [*Relics of the Old House*] (ASSIS, 1962d, p.658),⁷ the Warning only reminisces about its production; thus, it expresses no critical opinions regarding the structure of the short stories. The same

⁵ See footnote 1.

⁶ See footnote 1.

⁷ In this article, we use the Portuguese edition of Machado de Assis’s complete works from 1962, which was edited by José Aguilar Publishing House, under the care of Afrânio Coutinho, who added the short story Um incêndio [A Fire] (ASSIS, 1962e) to the book *Outros contos* [*Other Short Stories*]. This short story, which interests us, is Machado’s last short story. It was initially published in the Brazilian Almanac Garnier in 1906. In a book, it was first published as the penultimate short story of the second book from *Relíquias de casa velha* [*Relics of the Old House*] (ASSIS, 1937) in W. M. Jackson Inc.’s edition, which published the author’s complete works. In 2008, José Aguilar Publishing House, with the copyrights of Nova Fronteira, included Um incêndio [A Fire] in book three. With the previous book it shares the series of Machado de Assis’s short stories, simply named *Conto* [*Short Story*] (ASSIS, 2008). It is again the penultimate short story of the work, for the last one was O escrivão de Coimbra [The Scrivener from Coimbra] from 1907. It also proceeded from the initial edition of the Brazilian Almanac Garnier.

occurs in the aforementioned *Páginas recolhidas* [*Reserved Pages*]. This short-story collection brings a curious epigraph from Montaigne's work, whose meaning is close to Machado de Assis's literary attitude in the light of the fictional process that we study here: "Quelque diversité d'herbes qu'il y ayt, tout s'enveloppe sous le nom de salade" (ASSIS, 1962c, p.575).⁸ The French philosopher's maxim confirms the fictionist's purpose and intents: to produce a text based on somebody else's ideas and on various world themes.

In Machado de Assis's chronicle *Bons dias*⁹ [Good Days], published in the *News Gazette* in 1889, he discusses the merit of parodying. He starts out by stating that the way one's discourse and arguments are appropriated by the discourse of the other is congenial. This way, he claims possession of the parodied text for the direct reason that it "belongs to the other," the one who first seized its content. Next, he believes that the parodistic attitude is silly; however, in his last observation, he confirms that "[...] somebody affirmed that once a person cites another person's text, it is the same as if he/she had created it" (ASSIS, 2008, p.223).¹⁰ Thus, he sanctions the appropriation of somebody else's text and does not encourage a discussion or a debate on the issue.

The upright section *Bons dias* [Good Days] includes topics of everyday life, using an assumed tone of conversation. It starts with its title – a greeting that is followed by a dialogue with the reader, to whom the chronicler simulates closeness. He uses that tone of singular conversations with which we are familiar. These conversations are present in Machado's enthralling narratives and are defined according to his strategy, described in *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*: "Conversation was a better vehicle; it is one that has swift, noiseless wheels and carries you without jolting" (ASSIS, 1972, p.136).¹¹

For Machado de Assis, the short story focuses on an action; it does not spread in time, nor does it expand its memory. When stemming from conversations, it introduces its subjects within dialogues, among conversationalists, enabling the reader to listen to them. In this manner, a conversation makes up the short story, and the short story stems

⁸ "No matter how varied the greenstuffs we put in, we include them all under the name of salad" (MONTAIGNE, 2003, p.870). The full reference is: MONTAIGNE, M de. *The Complete Essays*. Translated and edited with an Introduction and Notes by M. A. Screech. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

⁹ First chronicle written in an upright section with a homologous title.

¹⁰ Text in original: "[...] alguém afirmou que citar a propósito um texto alheio equivale a tê-lo inventado".

¹¹ ASSIS, Joaquim Maria Machado de. *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*. Translated by Helen Caldwell. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1972.

from a conversation. According to Diderot, “When one tells a story it is for a listener” (2010, p.3).¹² In the Warning found in *Papéis avulsos* [*Single Papers*], Machado, a reader of Diderot, observes another piece of advice from the encyclopedist and takes it into account: “when a short story is created, the soul is happy, and time fades away; life’s short story ends, and we do not realize that” (ASSIS, 1962b, p.252).¹³

Thus, the argumentative dimension of the short story apparently results from a free structure, a formulation used by Machado de Assis to control the realistic genre once again.

During conversations between Abel Ferreira and Machado de Assis, the latter is told the story of Um incêndio [A Fire], pursuant to a description made by Manuel Bandeira, who had heard it from the English sailor, the protagonist, while they were in the Hospital de Estrangeiros [Hospital of Foreigners] in Rio de Janeiro. Abel Ferreira listened to the narration of the story from the boy Manuel Bandeira at this very Hospital, during his visit to the son of his friend, Manuel Bandeira’s father, with whom he worked in the Ministério da Viação e Obras Públicas [Traffic and Public Works Ministry]. Thus, Machado de Assis, upon selecting from new, given, and presumed situations, determines the subject matter of his short story. He then gives it a literary form, whose initial intonation makes evident the conversation that he had with his friend Abel Ferreira, based on what the latter had heard from Bandeira.

In this manner, in the first lines of the short story we read the following: “I did not make up what I’m about to tell you, nor did my friend Abel. He heard a detailed account of the incident, and one day, in a conversation, he concisely reported it. It was stamped on my memory, and here it goes, exactly the same” (ASSIS, 1962e, p.1129).¹⁴ On account of that, the reader is enticed by the expressiveness of the first line of the short story and the intonation of the utterance, which comes from the two negatives that are emphatically repeated. The intonation reveals an expression of desire, value, and assessment. It enhances the object (in this case the short story), determines its reading, and reveals that

¹² DIDEROT, D. *This Is Not a Story*. Translated by Peter Phalen. Salt Lake City, UT: Project Gutenberg, 2010. Available at: < <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/34544>>. Access on: May 18, 2015.

¹³ Text in original: “[...] quando se faz um conto, o espírito fica alegre, o tempo escoá-se; e o conto da vida acaba, sem a gente dar por isso”.

¹⁴ Text in original: “Não inventei o que vou contar, nem o inventou o meu amigo Abel. Ele ouviu o fato com todas as circunstâncias, e um dia, em conversa, fez resumidamente a narração que me ficou na memória, e aqui vai tal qual”.

its composition is a recollection. In the passage, we take into consideration not only the phatic function that is present in the arrangement of the communication between the enunciator and the reader, but also the moment when the point of view of the short story is established for the narrative. Thus, for us the intonation and the gathering of personal memories predetermine the content of the narration. This intonation, which interests us here, reminds us of the contributions of the so called Bakhtin Circle, specifically the essay *Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry* by Voloshinov, who states that intonation: “[...] establishes an intimate connection between discourse and the non-verbal context. Living intonation, as it were, leads discourse beyond its verbal limits” (1983, p.13).¹⁵ As we are trying to point out, apart from the circumstances of the conversations that motivated the short story under study, *Um incêndio [A Fire]* seems to be full of presuppositions. This case is an example of the transition from life circumstances to literary meaning. It shows how the interlocutors and the author together determine the short story style and wording, which depart from the emphasis given by the intonation of the author, who expresses his willingness to try writing a story based on stories to which he listened and on values which are close to his literary universe.

Um incêndio [A Fire] introduces the reader to a conversation around the impressions on the validity of voluntarism and on disposition, the moving willingness to act in the other person’s stead. Everything occurs in the form of dialogues between conversationalists. The reader listens to them as an intertwined discourse that permeated the discussed arguments within a specific context. The short story examines this situation when the protagonist’s behavior and the behavior of the crowd about which the sailor appears to be enthusiastic are alternatively focused upon. In this sense, we observe the circumstances in which the character walks around Montevideo until he comes across a fire:

It was an April Saturday. B...arrived at that harbor and disembarked. He went for a walk, drank some beer, smoked, and in the evening he walked toward the pier, where he was waiting for the ship boat. He was reminiscing about moments in England and pictures from China. He turned at a corner and saw some commotion at the end of other street. As he had always been curious for adventures, he hurried to see what

¹⁵ VOLOSHINOV, V.N. (BAKHTIN, M.M.). *Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry: Questions of Sociological Poetics*. Translated from Russian into English by John Richmond. In: SHUKMAN, Ann (Ed.). *Bakhtin School Papers*. Oxford: RTP Publications, 1983. pp.5-30.

was going on. When he arrived at the scene, the crowd was already bigger. There were so many voices, and the wagons that came from everywhere made so much noise. Speaking a poor Castilian, he asked around and found out it was a fire (ASSIS, 1962e, p.1130).¹⁶

In face of that, “the generous soul of the officer could not help but storm through the crowd and into the building entrance” (ASSIS, 1962e, p.1131).¹⁷ It was an entrance corridor that gave access to the upper floor of the building on fire. From the street, the flickering lights of the flames gave people a deceiving view of the building, projecting an image of a woman at the top floor who “seemed to hesitate between death by fire and death by fall” (ASSIS, 1962e, p.1131).¹⁸

For Machado, society is the raw material from which one understands the human condition. That is why his short stories are directed to the behavior and feelings of his characters. He thus prioritizes representing their sensations, their inner world when they face uncertain fate.

Machado de Assis’s literature is not constrained by barriers. In fact, he refuses them. He wants to make variations, comments, and give no consolation. He wants the anecdote with its originality; thus, he prefers laughter and humor. In *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*¹⁹ he indulged in philosophical speculations based on which he brought the possibility of working with ideas that for him were uncertain, eventual, and casual to his fiction. This was done from the perspective of modernism and through the disorderly emotions of his protagonists. Thus, he worked with multiple ideas, both his and somebody else’s. That helps us understand the breach of the bond between the subject who writes and his writing as he produces his “writing act,” the term he preferred to use.

In view of that, José Aderaldo Castello’s comment becomes necessary:

There is not much of a difference between Machado de Assis’s criticism and his chronicles, for they are guided by the same concern: to

¹⁶ Text in original: “Era um sábado de abril. B... chegara àquele porto e descera a terra, deu alguns passeios, bebeu cerveja, fumou e, à tarde, caminhou para o cais, onde esperava o escaler de bordo. Ia a recordar lances de Inglaterra e quadros da China. Ao dobrar uma esquina, viu certo movimento no fim da outra rua, e, sempre curioso de aventuras, picou o passo a descobrir o que era. Quando aí chegou já a multidão era maior, as vozes muitas e um rumor de carroças que chegavam de toda parte. Indagou em mau castelhano, e soube que era um incêndio”.

¹⁷ Text in original: “[...] a alma generosa do oficial não se conteve, rompeu a multidão e enfiou pelo corredor”.

¹⁸ Text in original: “[...] uma mulher, no alto do prédio incendiado, que “parecia hesitar entre a morte pelo fogo e a morte pela queda”.

¹⁹ For reference, see footnote 1.

understand and interpret human reactions. They point to the balance and impartiality of someone who sees how things change and how human nature is diverse and uncertain. Through criticism, it would be possible to understand art as a way to communicate indifferently and uninterestedly. Art validates itself (CASTELLO, 1969, p.49).²⁰

Machado's critical spirit is sharp. His 1865 essay *O ideal crítico* [The Ideal Critic] addressed Brazilian Literature writers: "[One must] know the topic about which one talks. One must search for the spirit of a book, must examine it, and deepen it until one finds its soul..." (ASSIS, 1962g, p.800).²¹ What we notice in this act of critique from 1865 is that the fictionist aims to create a new Brazilian literature, one that is materialized and spiritualized according to its time. As an author who is in tune with his time, he also chooses to stay away from both a romantic and a realistic perspective of originality.

In a time of realism Machado de Assis's 1879 essay *A nova geração* [The New Generation] outlines the background of the national post-romantic poetry. The article, which addresses Brazilian poetry, resumes the analysis that he made about the same topic in 1873, viz., the article *Instinto de nacionalidade* [Nationality Instinct]. He also referred to the same topic in a chronicle of *Notas semanais* [Weekly Notes] from 1878. In this chronicle he makes some reflections based on Baudelaire's legacy: "[...] every literary movement of the world is included in our books [...]" (ASSIS, 1962f, p.389).²² Way back in 1879 Machado de Assis believed that national poets, who walked the path of poetry, read Victor Hugo and Baudelaire, the precursor and the preconizer of literary modernism. For the critic and fictionist, they understand Victor Hugo, but do not understand Baudelaire so well. Machado emphasizes that Baudelaire is contrary to realistic determinism, a literary attitude that is identical to that of the Brazilian fictionist Eça de Queirós. This is clearly asserted in his article from a year before, i.e., *Eça de Queirós: o primo Basílio* [Eça de Queirós: Cousin Basílio]: "[...] the danger of the realistic movement is that someone might assume that the thick line is the correct line" (ASSIS,

²⁰ Text in original: "Não há muita diferença entre a crítica e a crônica de Machado de Assis. Ambas são presididas pela mesma preocupação de compreender e interpretar as reações humanas. Ambas denotam o equilíbrio e a imparcialidade de quem enxerga a mutabilidade das coisas, a diversidade e as incertezas da natureza humana. Através da crítica, chegaria à compreensão da arte como forma de comunicação desprendida ou desinteressada, válida em si mesma".

²¹ Text in original: "Saber a matéria em que fala, procurar o espírito de um livro, escarná-lo, aprofundá-lo, até encontrar-lhe a alma..."

²² Text in original: "[...] todo movimento literário do mundo está contido em nossos livros [...]".

1962i, p.908).²³ In A nova geração [The New Generation] Machado will also observe that “Baudelaire himself rejected being classified as realistic – *cette grossière épithète* (this impolite epithet), he wrote” (ASSIS, 1962h, p.811).²⁴ In A nova geração [The New Generation], published two years before *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*,²⁵ Machado still criticizes realism again. He states that “Realism knows neither necessary nor accessory relations; its aesthetics is the inventory” (ASSIS, 1962h, p.826)²⁶ and that “[...] reality is good; Realism is the one that is good for nothing” (ASSIS, 1962h, p.830).²⁷

Thus, when Machado de Assis reflects upon the national post-romantic poetry, he seems to be close to Baudelaire’s literary modernism and in the scope of a discussion in which new aesthetic definitions are proposed according to the aesthetic experiences of that time. In this sense, in a time of literary modernism A nova geração [The New Generation] shows the critic and fictionist’s discussion on the fictionist’s experimentation and life experience with new literary attitudes and his physical interaction with the world materiality. He does not want to make an inventory of that, but to observe it according to the values of the current time, or as Charles Baudelaire (1995, p.14) puts it, to the “memory of the present.”²⁸ For the French author, “[...] almost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations” (BAUDELAIRE, 1995, p.14).²⁹ Based on the concepts above, it is possible to state that the tender presence of things is amalgamated with the sensations of what was lived and experienced. It is a place of ephemeral and brief beauty, and a theme that the fictionist is able to acclaim. This still relates to Baudelaire, to whom the literary work encompasses the beauty it renders sacred in the memory of the present together with the eternal values of the past, and the fortuitous and contingent values of the present.

Machado de Assis keeps a logical, formal, and constant structure in his texts, which makes possible for him to stylize irony. Besides that, in his texts he often makes it

²³ Text in original: “[...] o perigo do movimento realista é haver quem suponha que o traço grosso é o traço exato”.

²⁴ Text in original: “Ao próprio Baudelaire repugnava a classificação de realista – *cette grossière épithète*, escreveu”.

²⁵ For reference, see footnote 1.

²⁶ Text in original: “O realismo não conhece relações necessárias, nem acessórias, sua estética é o inventário”.

²⁷ Text in original: “[...] a realidade é boa, o realismo é que não presta para nada”.

²⁸ BAUDELAIRE, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Translated by Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press, 1995.

²⁹ See footnote 28.

clear that he complements them with prefaces and with situations from someone else's texts. Thus, his narratives cover a course of constitutive tensions that tells us of his way of writing, which at the same time enables us to keep a method of reading his fiction. Machado's literary discourse is constructed along the side of somebody else's discourse. In Machado's text, the presence of the other stems from the one who speaks. For the fictionist, one text complements the other just as life complements art.

The critic Machado de Assis requires that the Brazilian literature take a new stand and have a new reader. Thus, his talent is directed towards the creation of his narrator, who is given a voice that amplifies the narrative's point of view by making use of other people's arguments. Machado achieves an aesthetical autonomy in Brazilian literature and starts to require a new and even more experienced reader for his texts.

This is how we analyze the enunciative mobilizations of the narrator of *Um incêndio* [A Fire]. As we have stated before, this is a short story comprised of reflections and refractions of the news of a fire that occurred in a port area of Montevideo. According to the report present in two of his chronicles from 1955, viz., Machado de Assis (BANDEIRA, 1958, p.357-58) and Machado e Abel [Machado and Abel] (BANDEIRA, 1958, p.358-60), this is a piece of news to which Manuel Bandeira listened in 1902. In both chronicles, Manuel Bandeira comments on the short story *Um incêndio* [A Fire] by Machado and especially on the creative production of its author, who give tribute to the boy Manuel Bandeira from the epigraph of the short story. He does that by providing us with an interweaving of situations that unleashed the creative process of the short story and created a space of interlocution where the intellectual friends, the boy Bandeira, the writer Machado de Assis and the engineer Abel Ferreira, could meet.

According to the chronicle, *Um incêndio* [A Fire] stems from the news of a fire in Montevideo. Bandeira himself told it to the civil engineer of the Ministério da Viação e Obras Públicas [Ministry of Transportation and Public Works], Abel Ferreira de Matos, who, in turn, told Machado:

Abel heard the case of the short story *Um incêndio* [A Fire] from me, and I heard it from the protagonist himself, an officer from the English Navy that had just had his "badly hurt leg" healed at the Hospital dos

Estrangeiros [Hospital of Foreigners], where I was hospitalized. I was almost dying” (BANDEIRA, 1958, p.359).³⁰

According to the chronicle Machado e Abel [Machado and Abel], when Abel Ferreira heard the case of the English man from the boy Manuel Bandeira, he told him that “[t]his is a short story for Machado de Assis” (BANDEIRA, 1958, p.359).³¹ And that was what Abel did: he told it to Machado according to what the writer had authorized his narrator to say in the first line of the short story:

I did not make up what I’m about to tell you, nor did my friend Abel. He heard a detailed account of the incident, and one day, in a conversation, he concisely reported it. It was stamped on my memory, and here it goes, exactly the same. You will not find the sharp point, the peculiar soul that Abel gives to everything he expresses, be it his idea or, as it is in this case, someone else’s story (ASSIS, 1962e, p.1129).³²

Thus, Machado de Assis takes on the structure and the narrative of a story that is given to him. He keeps his narrator away from the position of an anonymous mediator, and with that point of view he seems to be involved in the narrative.

Therefore, reading the short story Um incêndio [A Fire] comprehends other two readings, that is, the chronicles Machado de Assis and Machado e Abel [Machado and Abel] by Manuel Bandeira from June of 1955. Between authors and texts, there is an interweaving of voices in the course of 49 years, when echoes and implications are placed without conflict. Thus, we find the resonance of such voices in Machado de Assis’s short story, based on Bandeira’s chronicles, which modulate the reading of the narrative Um incêndio [A Fire], its progress, and its use of words. Thus, the chronicler’s voice characterizes the event reported in the short story and establishes the use of words in Machado’s penultimate short story. As we will see later on in this text, it also guides the reading of the epigraph.

³⁰ Text in original: “O caso do conto Um incêndio ouviu-o Abel de mim, que por mim, que por minha vez o ouvi do próprio protagonista, oficial da marinha inglesa, que acabava de curar a sua “perna mal ferida” no Hospital dos Estrangeiros, onde eu então me achava internado, morre-não-morre”.

³¹ Text in original: “É um conto para Machado de Assis”.

³² Text in original: “Não inventei o que vou contar, nem o inventou o meu amigo Abel. Ele ouviu o fato com todas as circunstâncias, e um dia, em conversa, fez resumidamente a narração que me ficou na memória, e aqui vai tal qual. Não lhe acharás o pico, a alma própria que este Abel põe a tudo o que exprime, seja uma ideia dele, seja, como no caso, uma história do outro”.

Um incêndio [A Fire] is narrated in the first person, a permeable point of view that makes possible a subjective interaction with the supposed voices. From different voices and diverse narrative lines, it associates not only memory with fiction, but also the perceptions of existence in terms of fiction and memory data coded with fiction. In the scope of the literary trends of that period and of narrative poetics, this is an amalgam between friendship and reading relationships. We should also mention that the voices of discourse bring indicators of place and time to enunciation and materialize the dialogic relations of the text. In the creative process of the short story, Machado de Assis registers an echo of voices that is accepted and well assimilated in the constitutive development of the narrative.

The case of the short story also presupposes an encounter between Manuel Bandeira and Machado de Assis at Largo do Machado [Machado Public Square] during a streetcar ride. Machado's destination is Cosme Velho [Old Cosme], and the route starts at the Largo [Public Square]. Manuel Bandeira's destination is Avenida Laranjeiras [Laranjeiras Avenue]. He also takes the streetcar at Largo do Machado [Machado Public Square], but his destination is beyond Cosme Velho. Bandeira recalls this moment in the chronicle *Machado de Assis* (1958, p.358):³³

We should say that despite being skeptical and with no faith in mankind, Machado de Assis behaved with cordiality and kindness in life. I remember that at the age of fourteen I got on a streetcar at Largo do Machado [Machado Public Square] and so it happened that I was sitting next to the old writer. He was reading the newspaper *A notícia* [*The News*]. It would be natural if he did not give attention to me and kept on reading. But he did not do it; he folded the paper and stroke up a conversation. He knew me from the Ministério da Viação [Ministry of Transportation], where my father worked as a technical consultant of the Minister Alfredo Maia and where he worked as the chief of the Accounting Department.

This happened in 1902, when Machado was appointed as the Accounting Director of the Ministério da Viação e Obras Públicas [Ministry of Industry, Transportation and

³³ Text in original: "Diga-se, aliás, que, apesar de céptico e sem nenhuma fé nos homens, procedia Machado de Assis na vida com cordialidade e bondade. Lembra-me que, nos meus quatorze anos, tomei um bonde no Largo do Machado e aconteceu que ao lado do velho escritor. Vinha ele lendo um jornal, A Notícia. Era natural que não me desse atenção e continuasse na sua leitura. Pois não o fez: dobrou a folha e puxou conversa comigo. Conhecia-me ele do Ministério da Viação, onde trabalhava meu pai como consultor técnico do Ministro Alfredo Maia, e ele como chefe da Seção de Contabilidade".

Public Works]. Francisco de Assis Barbosa (1990, p.104),³⁴ who was Manuel Bandeira's biographer, states that at the time of this encounter Bandeira attended the Externato do Ginásio Nacional [National Gymnasium Day-school], later called Colégio Pedro II [Pedro II School]:

The propensity for the Portuguese classics comes from the contact with Silva Ramos, his teacher, and his classmate Sousa da Silveira. He knows by heart the main episodes of *Os Lusíadas* [*The Lusiads*]. When riding a streetcar next to Machado de Assis, he and Machado talk about Camões, and the young school student is proud to recite an octave of *Os Lusíadas* [*The Lusiads*], the one which the Machado wanted to remember but the exact words had faded from his memory.

With such memory, Manuel Bandeira introduces the topic of the conversation he had with Machado at Largo do Machado [Machado Public Square], that is, the moment he recites line 33 of Canto V from *Os Lusíadas* [*The Lusiads*]. Thus, he presumably makes us aware of the reason for the epigraph that starts the short story Um incêndio [A Fire], decisive for the short story writer's tribute to Manuel Bandeira. The writer chooses the short conversation they had on a streetcar and surrounds it with expressions of gratitude; at the same time, he ratifies the symbolic traits of the passage from Canto V with traits of the short story composition.

Through his narrator, who is indirect and simulating, Machado de Assis adjusts to Manuel Bandeira and gives him the benefit of the formal pleasure for the shared topic, which is afterwards accomplished in a fictional creation. This kind of pleasure also surrounds Bandeira's chronicles when he presumedly sees himself before the octave of *Os Lusíadas* [*The Lusiads*] that he recited to Machado and when it is inscribed in an epigraph in the short story.

Thus, in the themes of Bandeira's chronicles there is the disclosure of the origin of Machado's short story, i.e., its source, by means of an ironic enunciation which works on the characters and adjuvants in situations of their social relations, as individuals, in life. As we have already mentioned, it gives us the necessary support to read it and it

³⁴ Text in original: "Do contato com Silva Ramos, seu professor, e com o colega Sousa da Silveira, nasce o gosto pelos clássicos portugueses; decora os episódios principais de *Os Lusíadas*. Viajando em um bonde na companhia de Machado de Assis, conversam os dois sobre Camões, e o jovem colegial tem o orgulho de recitar para o mestre uma oitava de *Os Lusíadas*, de que este queria lembrar-se e cujas palavras exatas se haviam apagado da memória".

shows us the author's intent, demonstrating the way how he adjusts or not his writing to the circumstances he is to narrate.

According to Emil Staiger, “[t]he principle of composition most truly epic in character is that of simple addition. On a small as well as on a large scale epic brings independent elements together. The process of addition goes on continually” (1991, p.122).³⁵ For Staiger, the epic literary work is different from the lyric work, for it observes without changing spirits. Because of that, it adds one event to another in a symmetrical way. Thus, there is an autonomous correspondence between observed and added parts, for their point of view is also determined by the analyst as unchangeable. According to Staiger, that happens because the epic literary work, differently from the lyric work, does not plunge into time, recalling it in details. The epic work recalls it from only one point of view, the narrator's, whose memory determines time in space as a register of his point of view, which places that which was recalled. Thus, the one who remembers also shows what he recalls without changing spirits. He juxtaposes and adds one recalled situation to another. In Machado de Assis's case, this happens by giving us a short story and his tribute to the co-authors and the character without changing spirits and by accomplishing a counterpoint in a sum of occurrences mediated with poetics.

Based on lived realities, the interpersonal relations start to participate as the mediation and motivation of the short story, in which the voice of Machado de Assis's narrator is composed with the voices of Manuel Bandeira and Abel Ferreira. Not only do we read this from the epigraph, but we also notice it in the affective and interested literary attitudes among them, which are consolidated by the desire to be placed in the value of the referred object, in the constitution of that object, in its event.

This way, *Um incêndio* [A Fire] is comprised of conversations and chronicles, compatible with the tone of Machado de Assis's *Warnings* in his last short-story collection. The *Warnings* relate to his preference for literary reasons that address the diversity of life circumstances. However, the fictionist surprises us by the way he makes Manuel Bandeira (and Abel) his presumed readers, something that Bandeira makes clear 49 years after the publication of the short story. It is necessary to emphasize that the place of the replying refraction is first indicated with face-to-face interactions in circumstantial

³⁵ STAIGER, Emil. *Basic Concepts of Poetics*. Translated by Marianne Burkhard and Luanne T. Frank. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

and amicable relations. Later, they are arranged literarily through meaning relations that are established between the short-story text, its epigraph, and the chronicles. Thus, once again, according to Voloshinov (1983, p.12; emphasis in original), “[o]nly what *all of us* who are speakers know, see, love and acknowledge, in which *we* are all at one, can be the implied part of an utterance.”³⁶

We want to consider the totality of those three verbal interactions with their dialogical relations separated in time and space. In them, different discourses are manifested in actions by means of utterances that reflect and refract them, confirm them, identify them through their voices, and ratify them in art based on living models.

We should concentrate on the way Machado de Assis thinks of fiction by means of dialogism. Besides that, we should remember that, in the 1858 essay *O passado, o presente e o futuro da literatura* [The Past, the Present, and the Future of Literature], the critic Machado de Assis (1962j, p.789) assured that Brazilian literature was inclined to represent a “lively existence, the existence that lives, the existence that is developed fruitfully and progressively.”³⁷ This is the moment when he suggested a “literary *coup d’état*” in the scenery of the national literature.

Um incêndio [A Fire] brings an episode with verisimilitude and original finish. It is about a humorous short story of observation by a mature author. Through an ambiguous and simulating narrator and stemming from his textual comparisons, Machado de Assis goes beyond the original report. In it, we have the natural and social gesture of a sailor, the protagonist, followed by feelings of frustration in face of the incident. He feels foolish due to the comic and insignificant situation that he lived. Thus, Machado’s character is revealed as being free from naturalism and fatalism, from possible grievances brought by the circumstances of his frustrated attitude, which he almost paid with his life. It is about a character used to movement, to wandering, to casual things, to street sensations, to incidents in travel and in life. He is not attached to the absolute; he does not succumb to the inapprehensible, the inapprehensible nature. He wants to understand scenes, to interfere in the scenes through his feelings, which he did unsuccessfully.

Well, what happens is that, for Machado de Assis, images, as well as words, simulate and dissimulate. Images also produce truth and deception. In the short story, the

³⁶ See footnote 15.

³⁷ Text in original: “[...] existência animada, a existência que vive, a existência que se desenvolve fecunda e progressiva”.

image of a mannequin was understood, according to the sailor's spontaneous action of salvation, as the appearance of a woman in trouble. It happens that the protagonist notices the mistake that he made only in the midst of a thick fire, as the building burning to ashes was about to collapse and almost killed the savior in his salvation endeavor:

As there was no woman to be taken by Death, it seemed to observe him, the generous savior, attentively. The officer doubted the truth for an instant; the horror could have taken away all the human being's movements, and incidentally the mannequin would be a woman. He was coming closer; no, it was not a woman, it was a mannequin. Here it is, the incarnated and naked back; here they are, the shoulders without arms; here it is, the wood to which every mannequin is fixed. Now, it was necessary to escape from death (ASSIS, 1962e, p.1131).³⁸

When the sailor is aware of the trick of the image, he becomes frustrated. This is the kind of frustration that, according to selected affinities, Machado's narrative brings close to pessimism, to warnings against idealism, voluntarism, and even to the absurd. In such a manner, on the one hand, Machado works with image perceptions, with uninterpretable and inaccurate sensations, with nuances, and on the other, in his way with words he reports *Um incêndio* [A Fire], a new conception that results from the observation of instantaneous and momentary things, which connect him to the impressionists and their new perceptions of familiar things, everyday life, and the contemporary environment. In *Um incêndio* [A Fire] a sailor plays the role of a *flâneur*, someone who likes the crowd, who wants the crowd, for the crowd brings that which is different, the other, the unexpected. He is a *flâneur*, who is neither cool, nor plunged into inertia. His is similar to Brás Cubas.

Therefore, from the one side, just as Staiger wants, the image of a fire is curiously directed to the plot of actions, i.e., to added and increased occurrences that oppose truths with appearances, which is usual in Machado's fiction. On the other side, as the mature Machado wants, in new narrative circumstances it is directed to the catastrophe of a sailor, in which the protagonist goes beyond the tone of Machado's character, being motivated to change his worldview in face of the unfavorable results he lived without seemingly

³⁸ Text in original: "A morte agora, não tendo mulher que levasse, parecia espreitá-lo a ele, salvador generoso. O oficial duvidou ainda um instante da verdade; o terror podia ter tirado à pessoa humana todos os movimentos, e o manequim seria acaso mulher. Foi-se chegando; não, não era mulher, era manequim; aqui estão as costas encarnadas e nuas, aqui estão os ombros sem braços, aqui está o pau em que toda a máquina assenta. Cumpria agora fugir à morte".

being beaten by adversities. According to the final lines of the short story, the narrator tells us about the last news he had on the protagonist: “[...] I heard that, after a long time in England, he was sent to Calcutta, where he could rest his broken leg and his desire to save people” (ASSIS, 1962e, p.1132).³⁹

When reading *Um incêndio* [A Fire], we observe that the literary form of plot structure of Machado’s short-stories is kept. However, the author takes on somebody else’s words and humorously reasons with them. He keeps somebody else’s voice, his source, and makes dialogism possible in the inner part of the narrative discourse. He does it even when he establishes an intersecting play of words (his own and somebody else’s), promoting an opening in the literary perspective of his short-story narrative. Then, Machado de Assis is freer from the socio-political-cultural tensions that always affected the constitution of the identity of his characters.

Um incêndio [A Fire] shows the fictionist according to the way he used the theme for literary representation. His critical-creative nature based on modernism has a Baudelairian tone: from a diffuse event happening on the street, he established the protagonist’s role. The subjectivity of the situation is based on the length of the transitory circumstances that are lived and valued according to the advent of modernism, which points to the end of the notion of the totality of an event. The event seen from the city scenery is fragmented, intermittent, diverse; because of that, it is different and unexpected.

Moreover, in a very revealing way Machado de Assis brings the inquietudes of modernism, identified in the protagonist’s role, to his penultimate short story. According to men’s role in society, he is a person who is free to choose his destiny. Such role shows us an autonomous and positive individual, but who is unconcerned at the same time. He seems to be free, emancipated, exempt whether from Brás Cubas’s lies, i.e., from his presumed illuminism, or the false and apparent Brás Cubas’s refusal to an easy intelligibility that comprehends and explains the things of the world. Thus, far from gloom and disillusion, even when frustrated, he is constituted by a kind of consciousness that dissolves an authorial poetics that is free from the weight of institutions and their conveniences in face of power. Thus, he makes it singular and constituted of the author’s

³⁹ Text in original: “[...] soube que, depois de alguma demora em Inglaterra, foi mandado a Calcutá, onde descansou da perna quebrada, e do desejo de salvar alguém”.

relations with his criticism, poetics, and his life before his friends. More than that, the structure of *Um incêndio* [A Fire] reflects the same free attitudes of the emancipated and intelligent protagonist in the literary attitudes of his author, in his intent to amplify the ironic and humorous trait with originality and aesthetical autonomy, which is constant in his fiction.

Humor, the good humor, is a voluntary attitude that expresses affinity sometimes in an extraordinary or well-founded way, almost provoking laughter. The studied case is not about that kind of humor, which, with its temper, amuses the short story's source and the whole creative process. This way, the short story writer humorously assumes the production of situations introduced to him by friends, by giving us his way of narrating the literary work in a time when, as in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*,⁴⁰ he questions about loneliness, human finitude, dissimulating fear in face of death and attenuating the insipidity of everyday living. However, he also separates his character from the concepts of love and glory, making him familiar with his limitations, and without resenting it, he lets him act before the controversies of life, composed of the affectivity of friends, his readers and character: Manuel Bandeira and Abel Ferreira.

We read that Machado de Assis received a topic for his short story from a given source. It was given by his friends in a decided and consented way. He had the task to make a parody. In this short story, we finally read how the author, voluntarily or involuntarily, accomplished what was impossible for the hypocrite and talkative Brás Cubas to understand with pleasure and humor, including the friends Manuel Bandeira and Abel Ferreira: the “power to restore the past in order to touch the instability of our impressions and the vanity of our affections” (ASSIS, 1997, p.57).⁴¹

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⁴⁰ See footnote 1.

⁴¹ Text in original: “[...] restaurar o passado, para tocar a instabilidade de nossas impressões e a vaidade dos nossos afetos”.

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