

Machado de Assis and Reverse Criticism / *Machado de Assis e a crítica às avessas*

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ABSTRACT

During the time he collaborated with the cartoon magazine *Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*] (1860-1876), Machado de Assis, under the pen name of Dr. Semana, was the author of a number of chronicles in which a different kind of criticism, called “reverse criticism” by Raimundo Magalhães Júnior, emerged. This criticism consisted in flattering texts that were terrible from the literary viewpoint. Based on the theoretical formulations of Beth Brait and Linda Hutcheon regarding irony, the article aims to analyze some examples of this kind of criticism that arises in *Semana Ilustrada*, in which it is possible to identify the first signs of Machado’s unreliable narrator.

KEYWORDS: Machado de Assis; Reverse Criticism; Irony

RESUMO

Ao tempo em que colaborou na revista de caricaturas Semana Ilustrada (1860-1876), Machado de Assis, sob o pseudônimo de Dr. Semana, foi autor de uma série de crônicas que alojavam uma modalidade de crítica que Raimundo Magalhães Júnior chamou de “crítica às avessas”, e que consistia em elogiar textos que eram péssimos do ponto de vista literário. Com base nas formulações teóricas de Beth Brait e Linda Hutcheon a respeito da ironia, o artigo tem por objetivo a análise de alguns exemplos desse tipo de crítica que surge no espaço da Semana Ilustrada, no interior da qual é possível identificar os primeiros sinais do narrador machadiano não confiável.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Machado de Assis; Crítica às avessas; Ironia

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When arriving in Rio de Janeiro on February 12, 1868, with a letter of introduction from Joaquim Fernandes da Cunha, Castro Alves goes and visits José de Alencar in Tijuca, a district in Rio de Janeiro. He takes advantage of the opportunity to read the drama *Gonzaga ou A Revolução de Minas* [*Gonzaga or Minas Revolution*] and to recite some of his poems. Impressed with the talent of the poet from Bahia, Alencar writes a letter to Machado de Assis dated February 18, 1868. The letter was published four days later in *Correio Mercantil* [*Mercantile Newspaper*], and in it he asks his friend to introduce Castro Alves to the Fluminense (from Rio de Janeiro) literary society. Besides the request, José de Alencar's letter gives him the status of public celebrity, when he considers Machado de Assis "the first Brazilian critic":

To Virgil from the young man Dante in this pathless way of literary life. I remembered you, sir. Nobody has the same titles. In order to introduce the poet from Bahia to the Fluminense public, it is not only necessary to have city experience in the city press, but it is also necessary to be born in this beautiful Guanabara valley, which is still waiting for its poet.

However, your best title is another one. You were the only one of our modern writers who devoted yourself to the culture of this difficult science called criticism. Instead of making good use of your talent in your own productions, you did not hesitate to apply one portion of that which was received by nature to shape the national opinion and to develop the homeland literature.

Thus, I entrust the brilliant literary vein, which was manifested with so much vigor, to you sir, the first Brazilian critic (ASSIS, 2013, p.336).¹

Answering another open letter from March 1, 1868, also published in *Correio Mercantil* [*Mercantile Newspaper*], Machado de Assis thanks Alencar for his words and does not abstain from acknowledging his role as the "leader" of Brazilian literature:

The task of criticism needs this recognition: it is so hard to practice – sometimes due to required studies, other times to imposed struggles – that the expressive word of a leader is necessary, many times, to bring

¹ TN. When there is no published English version of the work, direct quotes will be translated into English, and the text in the original language will be provided as footnotes. Text in the original: "Para Virgílio do jovem Dante nesse ínvio caminho da vida literária, lembrei-me do senhor. Nenhum tem os mesmos títulos. Para apresentar ao público fluminense o poeta baiano, é necessário não só ter foro de cidade na imprensa da corte, como haver nascido neste belo vale do Guanabara, que ainda espera seu cantor. Seu melhor título, porém, é outro. O Sr. 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. Do Sr., pois, ao primeiro crítico brasileiro, confio a brilhante vocação literária que se revelou com tanto vigor".

back the drained energy and to elevate the exhausted spirit (ASSIS, 2013, p.337).²

Later on, Machado reveals not only the reason which led him to practice literary criticism but also the failure of the task, considering that, in his opinion, criticism was not consolidated in Brazil yet. Besides, there was a lack of impartiality in the assessments:

I sincerely confess that when I started writing my criticism essays, I was stimulated by the idea that I would somehow contribute to the improvement of the opinion that was fading way and, definitely, disappeared. My efforts, which were very restricted, could not avoid the tremendous disaster.

[...]

Your Excellency understands that where criticism is not a well-built and steady institution, the literary analysis has to struggle with that deeply rooted paternal love that transforms our children into the most beautiful kids of the world. It is not rare when hate originates from where it was natural to establish affections. The purposes of criticism are deformed; what arises from impartiality is considered to be envy, and conscience is interpreted as aversion (ASSIS, 2013, pp.337-338).³

Despite discouragement, the principles of the Ideal do Crítico [Critic's Ideal] are disseminated in Machado de Assis's letter from 1968, which had been published three years before in *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* [Daily Newspaper of Rio de Janeiro]. The principles are "awareness of literary science," "independence," "perseverance," "coherence," "impartiality," "tolerance," and "urbanity." These principles are practiced in the analysis of Castro Alves's poems and of the play *Gonzaga ou A Revolução de Minas* [Gonzaga or Minas Revolution].

At the same time it is possible to identify in Ideal do Crítico [Critic's Ideal] "his main lines of activity in literary criticism" (JOBIM, 2010, p.76).⁴ For example, in the section *Semana Literária* [Literary Week] (1866), from *Diário do Rio De Janeiro* [Daily

² Text in the original: "A tarefa da crítica precisa destes parabéns: é tão árdua de praticar, já pelos estudos que exige, já pelas lutas que impõe, que a palavra eloquente de um chefe é muitas vezes necessária para reavivar as forças exaustas e reerguer o ânimo abatido".

³ Text in the original: "Confesso francamente que, encetando os meus ensaios de crítica, fui movido pela idéia de contribuir com alguma coisa para a reforma do gosto que ia se perdendo e efetivamente se perdeu. Meus limitadíssimos esforços não podiam impedir o tremendo desastre. [...] Compreende V. Exa. que, onde a crítica não é instituição formada e assentada, a análise literária tem de lutar contra esse entranhado amor paternal que faz dos nossos filhos as mais belas crianças do mundo. Não raro se originam ódios onde era natural travarem-se afetos. Desfiguram-se os intentos da crítica; atribuiu-se à inveja o que vem da imparcialidade; chama-se antipatia o que é consciência".

⁴ Text in the original: "as linhas mestras de sua atuação na crítica literária".

Newspaper of Rio de Janeiro], signed by Machado de Assis, the text from 1865 is also fit for a reverse reading in so far as the principles proposed there configure the practice of criticism at that time in relation to which Machado is going to be opposed.

Soon after the intermediation of José de Alencar in behalf of Castro Alves, Faustino Xavier de Novais decided to do the same in relation to José Pereira da Silva, the author of the poem *Riachuelo*. In a letter published in *Jornal do Comércio* [*Commerce Newspaper*] on April 12, 1868, Faustino invited Machado to devote himself to the literary oeuvre of Pereira da Silva, by mentioning the mission that José de Alencar had given to him: “The general-in-chief called you. Even though the path on which you would have to tread did not please you, the only option you had was to obey” (ASSIS, 2013, p.345).⁵ And he also emphasized that that kind of distinction made people in the literary sphere jealous, especially those who believed Alencar had exaggerated Machado’s merits. Later on, Faustino commented that the resentment broke out in the upright sessions of the press. He cited excerpts of an article written against Machado de Assis which had been published in one of the city newspapers:

If the one who does not have knowledge of languages in order to study and analyze classics and who has only the ability to read and write feuilletons deserved city experience in journalism and the ostentatious title of the first Brazilian critic, I am not afraid of making mistakes, etc. (ASSIS, 2013, pp.345-346).⁶

Nevertheless, Faustino Xavier de Novais does not inform either the name of the newspaper or the author who would have fired “low bullets” against Machado de Assis. It is known, however, that in the same year an anonymous publication by Progresso Typography came out. Its title was *Literatura Pantagruélica* [*Pantagruelian Literature*]. *Os Abestruzes no Ovo e no Espaço (Uma Ninhada de Poetas)* [*The Ostriches in Eggs and in the Space (A Brood of Poets)*] was a 32-page chapbook which contained parodies of the open letters of Faustino, Alencar, and Machado. The literary piece was soon attributed to Joaquim Manuel de Macedo due to a text published in *O Mosquito* [*The Mosquito*] on

⁵ Text in the original: “Chamou-te o general-em-chefe, restava-te obedecer, ainda mesmo que te não agradasse o terreno que havias de caminhar”.

⁶ Text in the original: “Se aquele que não tem conhecimento das línguas para estudar e analisar clássicos; que tem apenas habilidade de ler e escrever folhetins, mereceu foros de cidade no jornalismo, e o título pomposo de primeiro crítico brasileiro, não tenho medo de errar etc.”

November 28, 1869. In this text, it was said that Alencar had not forgiven the author of *A Moreninha* [*The little Brunette Girl*] because he had parodied the letter he had written to Machado de Assis, introducing Castro Alves to him (COUTINHO; SOUSA, 2001). Regarding the possible attribution to Macedo of such “low bullets,” it is necessary to remember that the writer’s novel *O Culto do Dever* [*The Cult of Duty*], published in 1865 in the heat of the Paraguayan War, was assessed as a “bad book” by Machado in the Literary Week dated January 16, 1866.

Nine days after Faustino Xavier de Novais’s letter, Machado responded to the request of the Portuguese poet, also through an open letter published in *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* [*Daily Newspaper of Rio de Janeiro*] on April 24, 1868. In this letter, before critiquing Pereira da Silva’s poem, he took advantage of the situation to explain, once again, what his intentions were when he embraced the “literary magistracy”: “According to my impression of the books, I objected to them, praised them. Dissimulation was not the muse of these works; I preferred frankness” (ASSIS, 2013, p.352).⁷

Faustino’s letter and Machado’s answer implied that, when assuming the position of critic, Machado would start to face several inconveniences, which explain the reason why the Brazilian writer was not as obstinate with literary criticism as he was with short stories, chronicles, novels and poetry. In the opposite direction of that justification, which is still commonplace among scholars who study Machado’s work, it is possible to say that, in fact, the practice of critiquing was never abandoned. It just changed its shape and place, migrating from sections which were more properly literary to the realm of chronicles, in which Machado’s path as a literary critic started.

Not even being under possible attacks by the press, Machado de Assis avoids exposing the literary publications to “frank,” “impartial,” and “independent” criticism, according to the principles outlined in *Ideal do Crítico* [*Critic’s Ideal*]. At times the method of analysis varied and, instead of giving straight opinions, Machado makes use of irony, which, according to the series of articles published in the cartoon magazine *Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*] (1860-1876), Raimundo Magalhães is going to call “reverse criticism” and “which consisted in flattering exaggeratedly what was miserable or really bad.” The biographer adds that

⁷ Text in the original: “Expunha objeções, tecia louvores, conforme me iam impressionando os livros. A dissimulação não foi a musa desses escritos; preferi a franqueza”.

the transcription of passages would [always] allow the reader to have his own opinion and, thus, understand that the flattering and clever sentences [...] were nothing but enormous mockeries of the unfortunate petty authors of such literary monstrousness” (MAGALHÃES JÚNIOR, 1981, p.55).⁸

When he starts to sign the feuilletons of *Jornal da Tarde* [*Afternoon Newspaper*], whose title was *Coisas* [Things], under the pen name of Lara,⁹ on December 20, 1869, Machado de Assis is going to devote himself to the critique of the work *Angelina ou Dois Acasos Felizes* [*Angelina or Two Happy Chances*], written by José Joaquim Pereira de Azurara.¹⁰ The critique to the fiction arises amidst other topics broached in the chronicle, such as the abandoning condition of the streets in Rio de Janeiro and the change of some of their names. Therefore, it is within that context, distant from literary subjects, that Azurara’s work starts to be considered:

This novel *Angelina ou Dois acasos felizes* [*Angelina or Two Happy Chances*] was published three days ago. It has 78 pages and 13 chapters. It is a literary work worth reading.

There are plenty of pages with descriptions and feelings, with serious reflections and human things, and above all with an overpowering new style.

[...]

I have observed in our present writers the use of popular words which are familiar and disregard the poetical or simply classical expressions. *Angelina*’s author infringes that tradition brilliantly. He knows how to utilize pleasing, genuine, and shining terms.

[...]

Why do we have to say *flesh-colored*, *nursemaid*, *lack*, etc, as any barber would say? The author utilizes *purplish*, *dry-nurse*, *scantiness*, *bow down*, *impervious*, *famished*, etc.

He shows that he studied.

And he finishes the fiction with this question:

Now, my readers, I only have to ask you, should I keep on writing?

Definitely.

⁸ Text in the original: “[...] com a transcrição de excertos que permitissem ao leitor formar o seu próprio juízo e, portanto, compreender que as tiradas elogiosas [...] não passavam de enormes gozações nos infelizes escrevinhadores de tais monstruosidades literárias”.

⁹ The pen name Lara had already been used by Machado de Assis in several short stories that he wrote to *Jornal das Famílias* [Newspaper for Families] (1863-1878), as well as in the chronicle *Chuva e Bom Tempo* [Rain and Good Weather], and in the section *Vespas Americanas* [American Wasps] in *Semana Ilustrada* [Illustrated Week] (1860-1876).

¹⁰ At the same time, Martins Guimarães was also a subject of Machado’s “reverse criticism.” This piece of information can be found in the anthology *Machado de Assis: crítica literária e textos diversos* [Literary Criticism and Several Texts] (AZEVEDO; DUSILEK; CALLIPO, 2013).

We are waiting for a second novel (*Jornal da Tarde* [Afternoon Newspaper], 77, December 20, 1869, p.1).¹¹

To comment upon the fiction *Angelina ou Dois Acasos Felizes* [Angelina or Two Happy Chances] in the inner part of the chronicle, that is, to consider that as a “thing” among others, is an indirect way of prejudging the work negatively. It brings the novel into a context in which the lack of connection between the work and the other approached subjects gives rise to the observation of the own chronicler regarding another eccentric approach: “What kind of point of contact can exist between the battle of Tuiuti and the tomatoes from the market?”¹² Besides that, Machado de Assis’s approximation of the novel to other “goods” aimed to criticize, in a concealed way, Azurara’s concept of literature. This one understood literature as the synonym of “difficult” words, that is, words with an unknown meaning to most people – “purplish,” “dry-nurse,” “scantiness,” “bow down,” “impervious,” “famished” – a kind of over-refinement, which not only removes the naturalness of the text, but also makes the communication with the reader very difficult.

To Lara’s disappointment, on December 23, 1869 *Jornal da Tarde* [Afternoon Newspaper], without any notice, stopped being published. The chronicler had no doubts of what he was about to do: As he was, at that time, a collaborator for *Semana Ilustrada* [Illustrated Week], on December 26, 1869 he dedicated the opening chronicle of the section Badaladas [Tolls], signed by Dr. Semana, to Joaquim Pereira de Azurara’s book. He did that by practically copying the critique he had written in *Jornal da Tarde* [Afternoon Newspaper]. He also pretended that the previous text was not his:

Jornal da Tarde [Afternoon Newspaper] observed that the author selected words which, if they are not vulgar today, at least they were one day. And some of them still are among our greatest poets.

¹¹ Text in the original: “Este romance *Angelina ou Dois Acasos Felizes* foi publicado há três dias. Tem 78 páginas e 13 capítulos. É uma obra digna de ser lida. Abundam as páginas de descrição e de sentimento, as reflexões sisudas e as coisas humanas, e sobretudo arrebatadora novidade de forma. [...] Tenho notado nos nossos atuais escritores o uso de palavras vulgares e conhecidas com desprezo de termos poéticos ou simplesmente clássicos. O autor de *Angelina* rompe brilhantemente com essa tradição. Ele sabe empregar vocábulos eufônicos, legítimos e coruscantes de graça. [...] Para que havemos de dizer *encarnado*, *ama*, *falta*, etc, como qualquer barbeiro? O autor usa de – *punício*, *notrice*, *inópia*, *zumbir-se*, *impérvio*, *famulentos*, etc. Mostra que estudou. Termina o romance com esta pergunta: Agora resta-me perguntar-vos, meus leitores, deverei continuar a escrever? Sem dúvida. Esperamos um segundo romance”.

¹² Text in the original: “Que ponto de contato pode haver entre a batalha de Tuiuti e os tomates do mercado?”

And so it is.

Why should we not use many beautiful and classic words in prose as we do in poetry? This is banishing half the language.

[...]

As the author doubts himself and does not have sensible reason, he sums up with the following question: *Now, my readers, I only have to ask you, should I keep on writing?*

My answer is: you must. The task of a writer is, surely, tiresome, frightening, ponderous, but the gifts of muses are only received by those who know their price.

Exhibitions of talent are worth nothing when they do not defend exceptional merits. Praises must diminish the author's pride. "Write," that is what his pen friends say to him (*Semana Ilustrada [Illustrated Week]*, 472, December 26, 1869, pp.3770-3771).¹³

As to the issue of authorship, the repetition of Azurara's question directed to the reader regarding his future as a writer – after "showcase" his talent with *Angelina ou Dois Acasos Felizes [Angelina or Two Happy Chances]* – leads to the conclusion that the chronicle *Coisa [Thing]*, from *Jornal da Tarde [Afternoon Newspaper]*, as well as *Badaladas [Tolls]*, from *Semana Ilustrada [Illustrated Week]*, were written by the same author, i.e., Machado de Assis. Following the analytical work, we notice that the repetition of the question, now in italics, reveals the operation of appropriation of the text of the other. When it is brought to Dr. Semana's chronicle, it comes with the suggestion of a new intonation, a new reading.¹⁴ The ironic simulation also included the incorporation of the "literary" terms utilized by Azurara – "Praises must diminish the author's pride [...]" – in order to create a second discourse that mimics the incomprehensible structure of the first. This is due to the improper use of words as it happened in the novel.

It is also necessary to add that when Machado de Assis, or, Dr. Semana, critiques the book *Angelina ou Dois Acasos Felizes [Angelina or Two Happy Chances]* in the chronicle *Badaladas [Tolls]*, he keeps on utilizing the method of mixing things. It results in the depreciation of Azurara's work, considering the context to which it is brought. In

¹³ Text in the original: "Notou o *Jornal da Tarde* que o autor usa palavras escolhidas, que, se não são vulgares hoje, já o foram entre os nossos maiores, e algumas ainda o são, entre os poetas. Assim é. Por que razão não diremos em prosa, como se diz em verso, muitas palavras bonitas e clássicas? É proscrever metade da língua. [...] Desconfiado de si, e sem razão plausível, o autor conclui assim: *Agora, resta-me perguntar-vos, leitor, deverei continuar a escrever?* Deve; é a minha resposta. Improba, metuenda, ponderosa é decerto a tarefa do escritor; mas o odiá das musas só o logra quem lhes sabe o preço. Mostranças de talento não valem nada quando não escudam méritos incrassantes. Os gabos devem refruir o orgulho do autor; escreva, é o que lhe dizem os amigos das letras".

¹⁴ Regarding the "appropriation of the text of the other," see Compagnon (2007, p.19).

this sense, this is the path explored by the work, transferred from the book to the chronicle, where it is presented as a quotation. The chronicle, in its turn, was published in a cartoon magazine – as it is the case of *Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*]. These aspects reveal, as we are going to observe further, the ironic intention that moves Dr. Semana’s criticism. This occurs in the quotation with capitalized “literary” terms used by Azurara throughout the novel:

But I am eager to show a sample of the novel style, which is elaborated according to the advice of Boileau, Horace, and common sense. Maybe you, readers, are going to consider me a contradictory person, because I say that the protagonist of this novel, not having the courage to educate her child, had to go out late at night, walking through an IMPERVIOUS and uninhabited way, in order to expose him. I defend myself from that seeming contradiction. And I also defend her and tell you that she BOWED DOWN to the discouragement of educating her child, even with a SCANTINESS of means. She also walked late at night through an almost impervious and uninhabited way because she bowed down to fear, to the horror of the one who should free her from peripetias, but caused her suffering (*Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*], 472, December 26, 1869, p.3770).¹⁵

The action of extracting a fragment of the fiction and inserting it in Badaladas [Tolls] implies the change of the original organization of the text because, within the chronicle, the quotation starts to integrate a new totality and to request a new reading from the reader: The reading with an irony tone, as it has already been observed. Under the orientation of the critic and chronicler Dr. Semana, some “cues” are directed to the reader, such as the italicized quotation of the terms “impervious” (impenetrable, inaccessible), “bowed down” (humiliate oneself, humble oneself) and “scantiness” (scarcity, poverty), which are maybe more proper to or more used in sermons, speeches, juridical practices, or even in other literary context. When they are brought to Azurara’s feuilleton, they indicate the discrepancy between the conventional use of those words and

¹⁵ Text in the original: “Mas eu tenho pressa em dar uma amostra do estilo do romance, que é bem trabalhado, como aconselham Boileau, Horácio e o senso comum. Talvez me considerareis contraditório, leitores, por dizer eu que a protagonista deste romance, não tendo ânimo de criar seu filho, teve-o de sair a desoras, caminhando por IMPÉRVIO e inabitado caminho, para enjeitá-lo. Eu me defendo desta aparente contradição, defendendo-a também, dizendo-vos que – assim como ela ZUMBRIU-SE ao desânimo de criar seu filho, mesmo à INÓPIA de recursos, assim também caminhou a desoras, por quase impérvio e inabitado caminho, por zumbriar-se ao medo, ao terror daquele que, devendo livrá-la de peripécias, fazia-lhe sofrer”.

their use in the new context, which means that, between the lines, the author ignores the basic rule of every writer, that is, the adequacy of vocabulary.

However, on the outer layer of the text, that is, at the level of the utterance, the chronicle has only praises for Azurara's work so as to create the "double constitutive utterance of the ironic discourse" (BRAIT, 2008, p.100),¹⁶ i.e., the tension between "literal" and "metaphorical" meaning, as it is made explicit by Brait:

What is brought up to date in presence cannot be understood unless we take into account an absence that, in any way, resounds there by means of a contextualization that points to the confluence of a presence-absence (2008, p.100).¹⁷

Critiquing the novel *Angelina ou Dois Acasos Felizes* [*Angelina or Two Happy Chances*] in Badaladas [Tolls], whose chronicles were published in *Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*] together with charges and cartoons, is a way of indicating the "double constitutive utterance of the ironic discourse" (BRAIT, 2008, p.100),¹⁸ which is shaped in the "confluence of a presence-absence" (BRAIT, 2008, p.100).¹⁹ Quotations, in their turn, establish the speech of the other, thus creating a polyphonic effect. At the same time, they mean something different, because this is the intent of those who make use of them. This is what Compagnon is going to say: "the meaning of quotations would be, thus, the instantaneous relationship between the thing and the force which pushes it" (COMPAGNON, 2007, p.35).²⁰

For some scholars, irony is considered the "dissociation between what utterance manifests, the literal meaning, and the aimed proposition, which has to do with what is implied" (BRAIT, 2008, p.103).²¹ When this language phenomenon occurs, ambiguity is established. With ambiguity, complicity is also set up between the enunciator and the

¹⁶ Text in the original: "dupla enunciação constitutiva do discurso irônico".

¹⁷ Text in the original: "O que está atualizado em presença, não pode ser compreendido a não ser que se leve em conta uma ausência que de alguma forma ali ressoa por vias de uma contextualização que sinaliza a confluência de uma presença-ausência".

¹⁸ See footnote 16.

¹⁹ Text in the original: "a confluência de uma presença-ausência".

²⁰ Text in the original: "O sentido da citação seria, pois, a relação instantânea da coisa com a força que a impulsiona".

²¹ Text in the original: "dissociação entre aquilo que o enunciado manifesta, o sentido literal, e a proposição visada, que diz respeito ao que está implícito".

reader in a way that the latter shares the ironic simulation, in the sense that he/she apprehends the duplicity of the utterance. Brait still adds, from René Schaerer, that

A selective movement, in the sense of accepting the discourse as being uniquely literal or uniquely metaphorical, would mean to assume a disqualifying attitude about the reception and, consequently, about the irony constructed by the enunciator” (BRAIT, 2008, p.107).²²

When the reader makes a choice for one of the meanings, choosing the literal one when dealing with the metaphorical one, or vice-versa, the humoristic effect is inevitable. This happened when Pereira de Azurara, after reading the critique to his novel published in *Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*], sent two letters of gratitude to the magazine editorial staff. He also sent the comedies *Como Isso é Bonito* [*How Beautiful This Is*] and *Eu não Gosto de Limão* [*I don't Like Lemons*], which the teacher from Guaratiba submitted to Dr. Semana's critique. The chronicler, for sure, does not miss the opportunity to transcribe both letters in *Badaladas* [Tolls] on February 20 and 27, 1870. The first was preceded by an ironic “Introit,” in which he questions the “authenticity” of the letters:

Mr. Azurara is the same author of the novel *Dois Acasos Felizes* [*Two Happy Chances*], about which I talked some weeks ago. But are those letters authentic? Is the author of the novel really the same author of the comedies? Or is it perhaps somebody who wishes to show his works under the shadow of a name already known?

The comedies are good, and I would willfully publish them in *Semana* [*Week*]. But as I do not know whether the author is the same or not, the most I can do right now is to publish the first letter, expecting the author to look for me and confirm its authenticity (*Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*], 480, February 20, 1870, p.3835).²³

To cast suspicion on the authorship of the letters, which, by the way, were signed, under the excuse that another author, in order to take advantage of Azurara's fame, would

²² Text in the original: “Um movimento seletivo, no sentido de aceitar o discurso como unicamente literal ou unicamente figurado, significaria assumir uma atitude desqualificadora da recepção e, consequentemente, da ironia edificada pelo enunciador”.

²³ Text in the original: “O Sr. Azurara é o mesmo autor do romance *Dois Acasos Felizes* de que já falei há algumas semanas. Mas serão estas cartas autênticas? Será realmente o autor do romance o mesmo autor das comédias? ou acaso alguém que deseja, à sombra de um nome já conhecido, mostrar as suas obras? As comédias são boas, e eu as publicaria na *Semana* com toda a vontade. Mas ignorando se o autor será o mesmo, o mais que faço desta vez é publicar a primeira carta esperando que o autor me procure e confirme a autenticidade dela”.

be using the same method of sending his works to the editorial staff from *Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*], in the hope of having Dr. Semana devoted to them, is an indirect way of saying that the comedies are even worse than the novels. For this reason, maybe, this time, instead of “analyzing” the literary pieces, whose titles are enough to assess them, the critic and chronicler chose another strategy at the service of irony: he quoted the whole letter, without any interruption. This is what he does in relation with the first letter, sent from Guaratiba on January 25, 1870:

Most Eminent Editor of *Semana Ilustrada*,
Your Honor has exalted my novel *Angelina ou Dois Acasos Felizes* [*Angelina or Two Happy Chances*], my writing attempt, with your wise and sincere critical judgement. That flattered me a lot, so I intend to submit, to the wise judgement and correctness of Your Honor, any writing of mine that I intend to publish, in the shape of a book, if Your Honor does not refuse the task.

I was encouraged by the advice which Your Honor gave me in that issue of *Semana* [*Week*], in which that assessment was published – (If Your Honor considered that the chignon is truly more poetical and better expressed than my novel, you would say, wouldn't you? So I do not have to believe in the opinion of the feuilletonist of *Diário do Rio* [*Daily Newspaper of Rio*]. He states that he only appreciates that which has something French!... After reading my fiction, he makes the following syllogism:

Everything that does not have something French in it is not gracefully expressed;

well, Azurara's novel does not have anything French (Gallicisms);

thus, Azurara's novel has neither poetry nor expression.

I intend to keep on writing and I am studying to write well.

I have just finished writing a comedy which I called *Como isto é Bonito!* [*How Beautiful This Is!*]. And to be coherent with what I said, or with my intentions, I ask Your Honor, by means of the frankness that distinguishes you, to give me your opinion on it so that I know whether I should publish it or not (*Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*], 480, February 20, 1870, p.3835).²⁴

²⁴ Text in the original: “Ilmo Sr. Redator da *Semana Ilustrada*, Tendo V. Sa. honrado o meu romance – *Angelina ou Dois Acasos Felizes*, - meu tentâmen de escritura, com o seu tão sábio quão sincero juízo crítico, o que muito me lisonjeou – fiz tenção de sujeitar ao sábio juízo e correção de V. Sa. todo e qualquer escrito meu que, em forma de livro, pretenda publicar, se a isso V. Sa. não se negar. Animado pelo conselho que me V.Sa. deu no número da – *Semana* – em que saiu publicado aquele juízo – (Se V. Sa. julgasse que o coque tem de veras mais poesia e exprime-se melhor do que o meu romance di-lo-ia, não é assim? Então não devo crer na opinião do folhetinista do *Diário de Rio*, ele mostra que só aprecia aquilo que algo tem de francês!... Depois de ter lido o meu romance ele estabelece o seguinte silogismo: Tudo o que não tem algo de francês não tem beleza de expressão; ora o romance de Azurara não tem algo de francês (galicismos): logo o romance do Azurara não tem poesia nem expressão) – estou no propósito de continuar a escrever, estudando para escrever bem. Acabo de escrever a última duma comédia minha, a que dei o nome de – *Como isto é Bonito!* – e para ser coerente com o que disse, ou com o que tenciono, peço a V. Sa. que, com a franqueza que o distingue, me dê o seu juízo sobre ela, para eu conhecer se devo ou não publicá-la”.

Making room for the author's voice, which, by the way, was already mentioned in previous chronicles (the question that Pereira de Azurara posed to the reader, "Now, my readers, I only have to ask you, should I keep on writing?"), is a constituent part of the complicity pact established between the enunciator and the reader, which creates "the possibility of another way to understand the message" (BRAIT, 2008, p.105).²⁵ Brait adds that "In this other possibility, a target for irony, that is, a victim is established (...)" (2008, p.105).²⁶ While some readers of Badaladas [Tolls] may have figured out the apparent ironic play in Dr. Semana's critique to Azurara's novel, this one, the victim, gave proof that he read the literal meaning of the critique. He planned to get "encouraged" by the critic and chronicler. That is why the letter of gratitude is sent with the comedy *Como isto é Bonito!* [*How Beautiful This Is!*].

The letter from February 20, 1870 also makes it clear that Azurara, besides not being able to grasp the implicit meaning of the ironic text (the absence echoed at the level of the utterance), does not accept people telling him straightforwardly that his work does not have any value. This is exactly what the chronicler Luís Guimarães Júnior does. In the footnote *Por Paus e Por Pedras* [Through Sticks and Stones] published in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* [*Daily Newspaper of Rio de Janeiro*] on January 1, 1870, as he commented on the fashion of women wearing chignons, he establishes a comparison between the feminine coiffure and the novel *Angelina*: "The chignon has more poetry and is better expressed than Mr. Azurara's novel!"²⁷ In light of that context, it is understandable why *Angelina*'s author poses Dr. Semana the question: "If Your Honor considered that the chignon is truly more poetical and better expressed than my novel, you would say, wouldn't you?" The question, in its turn, only gives additional force to Pereira de Azurara's inability to grasp the ironic meaning of the comparison, which implies the degradation of the work.

It is necessary to say that in *Diário* [*Daily Newspaper*] only Luís Guimarães Júnior mentioned the work of the teacher from Guaratiba, who, by the way, had already sent a copy of *Angelina* to the newspaper editorial staff, to be informed in the section *Publicações* [Publications] from December 19, 1869. Besides that, the "critique" of the feuilletonist boils down to the comparison between the chignon and the fiction. The

²⁵ Text in the original: "possibilidade de outra maneira de entender a mensagem".

²⁶ Text in the original: "Nessa outra possibilidade, instaura-se um alvo para a ironia, ou seja, uma vítima".

²⁷ Text in the original: "O coque tem mais poesia e exprime-se melhor que o romance do Sr. Azurara!"

chignon is the winner, and everything which Azurara added in a tone of resentment has to do with the fact that the chronicler of the Carioca [from Rio de Janeiro] paper belittled the novel because it did not have “anything French,” and it was a product of his imagination.

Not satisfied at exposing Azurara to ridicule, which he does when he publishes his letter on February 20, Dr. Semana hopes that the case could still be a topic for another chronicle. The plan was to create a lie, “the simulation which intends to be taken as true,”²⁸ to question the authenticity of the letters in order to explore “the ironic deceit,” i.e., the discourse offered for “the receiver to guess it or to understand it as a deceit” (BRAIT, 2008, p.107).²⁹ This is why he invites Azurara to look for the chronicler in the editorial staff of *Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*] and to confirm vis-à-vis if he really is the author of the letters and of the attached literary pieces.

Nevertheless, the visit did not happen. Dr. Semana informed it in Badaladas [Tolls] on February 27, 1870, when he transcribes Azurara’s second letter:

Most Eminent Editor of *Semana Ilustrada*

Maybe Your Honor thinks I am an annoyance due to my requiring you to read my writings. However, I ask you not to see me like that: I need an instructor just like a blind person needs a guide, so I come to you to learn.

I aim to have my name among those who make up the vast republic of letters, but I will surely be much below of that position if I do not find a person who teaches me compassionately the way I have to follow in order to reach it. It is a very tangled and dark way for an uninstructed person like me! Will Your Honor deny that to me?

I reasonably distrust myself! I am short of erudition... my understanding needs to be enlightened by the ardent fire of books, which is hardly going to enlighten it! In Brazil a book is still very expensive! And where do I live?... Where the darkness of ignorance is consistent, so consistent that it abstains from lighting just a little of my oil lamp!...

Go on!...

I’ve just finished writing a comedy to which I gave the following title: *Eu Não Como sem Limão* [*I do not Eat without Lemon*]. Your Honor may spare a moment of your attention to read it so you can tell me the good and the bad of it (I am impertinent to think it has something) (*Semana Ilustrada* [*Illustrated Week*], 481, February 27, 1870, p.3842).³⁰

²⁸ Text in the original: “a simulação que pretende passar por verdade”.

²⁹ Text in the original: “o engano irônico” [...] “o receptor o adivinhe ou perceba como engano”.

³⁰ Text in the original: “Ilmo. Sr. Redator da *Semana Ilustrada*, Talvez V. Sa. me considere importuno por exigir que V. leia os meus escritos; porém peço-lhe que tal não me considere, porque eu, carecendo de

The quoted letter leaves no doubts about the “beneficial” effect of Dr. Semana’s critique of the novel *Angelina ou Dois Acasos Felizes* [*Angelina or Two Happy Chances*], because from then on Azurara does not stop writing. After his novel debut, he felt capable of putting his talent as a playwright to the test. The attempt of the teacher from Guaratiba in the dramatic art, as it is known, has nothing original. Brazilian writers of that time followed that path when searching for better visibility and public recognition. However, the titles of Azurara’s comedies – *Como isto é Bonito!* [*How Beautiful This Is*], *Eu Não Gosto de Limão* [*I Do Not Like Lemon*], and *Eu Não Como Sem Limão* [*I Do Not Eat Without Lemon*] – indicate that the theater written by Azurara is slight comedy, which consists of confusion and rude humor. This style plagued the theaters of Rio de Janeiro, and Machado de Assis, in the role of a dramatic critic and reviewer of the Dramatic Conservatorium, is going to be hardly opposed. In regard to the ironic simulation, the titles of the plays only draw the attention to what is not said, a conception of theater which the enunciator does not share.

Nevertheless, if, on the one side, Pereira de Azurara is unable to grasp the hidden meaning of Dr. Semana’s criticism, on the other side, the writer does not stop requesting the critic’s assistance – “I need an instructor just like a blind person needs a guide, so I come to you to learn.” This takes us to Machado de Assis’s words in *Ideal do Crítico* [*Critic’s Ideal*], when he states that “guiding beginners” (2013, p.237) was one of the tasks of critique. Notwithstanding, Azurara seems to be less interested in learning the art of writing, based on those instructions, than in placing his name “among those who make up the vast republic of letters.” Thus, when he called upon Dr. Semana, the author of *Eu Não Como Sem Limão* [*I Do Not Eat Without Lemon*] did nothing more than reflect upon the examples of other men of letters in search for reputation. He followed the example of Castro Alves, who looked for José de Alencar when he arrived in Rio de Janeiro.

mestre como o cego de guia precisa, o procuro para aprender. É minha mira colocar meu nome entre os dos que constituem a ingente república das letras; mas decerto ficarei muito aquém dela, se não encontrar quem condolentemente me ensine o caminho que tenho de seguir para a ela chegar, caminho bem emaranhado, e escuro para os ignaros como eu! Negar-se-á V. Sa. a isso?...Com razão plausível desconfio de mim!... faleço de erudição... meu entendimento precisa ser iluminado pelo vivo fogo dos livros... e dificilmente ele o iluminará!... No Brasil, custa ainda muito caro um livro!... E onde vivo eu?... Onde são espessas as trevas da ignorância; tão espessas que privam de esclarecer em pequeno âmbito a minha lamparina!...Adiante!... Acabo de escrever uma comédia, à qual dei o seguinte título: *Eu Não Como sem Limão* – Queira V. Sa. dispensar um momento de sua atenção para lê-la, a fim de dizer-me o bom e o ruim dela (tenho petulância de crer que alguma coisa ela tem)”.

Besides saying that criticism should work as a guide for beginners, in *Ideal do Crítico* [Critic's Ideal] Machado de Assis also pointed to the fact that authors, beginners or professionals, needed to read good examples of literature with the purpose of improving themselves as writers. That "task," which includes hard and persistent work, seems to be rejected by *Angelina*'s author when he doubts that his "understanding" could be "enlightened by the ardent fire of books." The justification that "in Brazil a book is still very expensive" is valid, because, in fact, the high price of books at that time turned it into an object of restricted access for most Brazilians. It is also necessary to add the reduced number of libraries and bookstores, the elevated rate of illiteracy, the unpreparedness for reading, of which Azurara is an expressive proof.

In order to complete that panorama of privation, the village where the teacher lived, the community of Guaratiba, was not distinguished by the incentive to culture; to the contrary, it is referred to as a place in which "the darkness of ignorance is consistent, so consistent," adds the writer, "that it abstains from lighting just a little of my oil lamp!..." Then Azurara's request for a transfer to teach at an elementary school in the city was granted. In the city he soon became a member of the *Sociedade Ensaios Literários* [Society of Literary Essays]. It was a literary and cultural association established in 1860 in Rio de Janeiro. It gathered writers, journalists, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and some names that went down in the history of Brazilian literature, such as Veríssimo José do Bonsucesso Júnior.

Despite Pereira de Azurara's efforts to fill in the gaps of his education, the author of *Eu Não Gosto de Limão* [I Do Not Like Lemon] is unable to stop entertaining the idea that writing is a manifestation of inspiration, being thus spontaneous and free (the proof of which is Azurara's mass production), and not a process that demands effort and study. The fact that the teacher from Guaratiba aligns with common sense when he conceives of creation as a spontaneous act reminds us of the character Luís Tinoco, from the short story *Aurora Sem Dia* [Dawn Without Day] by Machado de Assis. This short story was published in *Jornal das Famílias* [Newspaper for Families] in November and December of 1870 under the pen name of Victor de Paula. With alterations, the short story was eventually included in *Histórias da Meia-Noite* [Midnight Stories] (1873).

"Being seduced by the glory of others" and assured that "he was destined to great destinies," Luís Tinoco one morning "woke up" as a writer and poet and an inspiration:

“a budding flower on the eve appeared magnificent and blooming in the morning” (ASSIS, 1985, p.220).³¹ In a few hours the young man wrote a sonnet, “whose main imperfection,” according to the narrator’s analysis, “was to have five lines with too many syllables and other lines with too few” (ASSIS, 1985, p.220).³² Even so, the work was published upon request from *Correio Mercantil* [*Mercantile Newspaper*]. When uncle Anastácio asks with whom the nephew learned to make poetry, Tinoco answers courageously: “That is not taught; it comes from the cradle.”³³ A reader “by hearsay,” Luís, “assembled a collection of references and literary names from the production of others” so that “it was not necessary for him, for instance, to have read Shakespeare in order to talk about *to be or not to be*, about Juliet’s balcony, and Othello’s tortures.”³⁴ The only time critics took the time to critique *Goivos e Camélias* [*Gillyflowers and Camellias*] was to write down “some lines that made everybody laugh” (ASSIS, 1985, pp.222-225).³⁵

As we can see, from this fast and partial analysis of the character from the short story *Aurora Sem Dia* [*Dawn Without Day*] (he later on abandoned literature for politics and then quit politics to live on a farm), there are many similarities between Luís Tinoco and Joaquim Pereira de Azurara regarding the mistaken practice of literature, which is contaminated with romantic clichés. Thus, they become targets, or “victims” of the enunciator’s irony: one as the victim of the comments made by the narrator and Dr. Lemos, and the other the victim of Dr. Semana’s critique. The points of contact between the short story and reverse criticism, which include the proximity of the publishing dates, make us suppose that the texts met the project idealized by Machado de Assis: to explore the critical dimension of irony with the intent to educate readers (writers included) to read literature, which means learning to read that which is not explicit in the text but echoes from it. The moral conclusion drawn from the first version of *Aurora Sem Dia* [*Dawn Without Day*], published in *Jornal das Famílias* [*Newspaper for Families*], jeopardized the ambiguity marked by irony. However, it was reestablished when the moral conclusion

³¹ Text in the original: “flor abotoada ainda na véspera, amanheceu pomposa e viçosa”.

³² Text in the original: “era ter cinco versos com sílabas de mais e outros com sílabas de menos”.

³³ Text in the original: “Isto não se aprende; traz-se do berço”.

³⁴ Text in the original: “respigava nas alheias produções uma coleção de alusões e nomes literários” [...] “não lhe era preciso, por exemplo, ter lido Shakespeare para falar do *to be or not to be*, do balcão de Julieta e das torturas de Otelo”.

³⁵ Text in the original: “algumas linhas que fizeram rir toda a gente”.

was removed (alongside the alteration of the narrative focus), and the short story was included in the book *Histórias da Meia-Noite* [*Midnight Stories*].

It is necessary to consider not only the pedagogy of irony, from which Dr. Semana's critique plays a decisive role, but also the "affective value" of ironic simulation, which, according to Hutcheon, cannot be ignored or drawn apart from its "policy of use." This is due to the "range of emotional response (from anger to delight) and the various degrees of motivation and proximity (from distanced detachment to passionate engagement)" (HUTCHEON, 2000, p.14).³⁶ Opposite to polemic, it is possible to consider that the practice of reverse criticism is Machado de Assis's response to the criticism that may have been directed at him by his press colleagues, who may have been jealous of the reputation that the author of *Ideal do Crítico* [*Critic's Ideal*] started to enjoy after being acclaimed "the first Brazilian critic" by José de Alencar in the letter from 1868. Under the disguise of "feigned detachment," "apparent neutrality," the "cutting edges" of irony (HUTCHEON, 2000, p.39),³⁷ Machado also puts to the test the competence that his opponents have to read what was implicit in Dr. Semana's chronicle-critiques.

Against everyone who doubted his ability as a critic, Machado de Assis, with reverse criticism, tried a new and humorous style of critiquing, in which the "evaluative and affective polarities provoked by irony's use and/or attribution" (HUTCHEON, 2000, p.41)³⁸ were represented. In this new style and through Dr. Semana's voice there emerged what would be the unmistakable feature of Machado's production, the unreliable narrator.³⁹

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³⁶ HUTCHEON, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

³⁷ See footnote 36.

³⁸ See footnote 36.

³⁹ The newspapers researched for this article are the following: *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* [Daily Newspaper of Rio de Janeiro] (RJ, 1860-1878); *Jornal da Tarde* [Afternoon Newspaper] (RJ, 1869-1872); *Jornal das Famílias* [Newspaper for Families] (RJ, 1863-1878); *Semana Ilustrada* [Illustrated Week] (RJ, 1860-1876).

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