

# MACHADO DE ASSIS'S OWN WRITINGS ABOUT HIS EPILEPSY

## A BRIEF CLINICAL NOTE

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ABSTRACT - Machado de Assis's own writings about his epilepsy are here given. They come from his correspondence with his friend Mario de Alencar during the last 8 months of Machado de Assis's life. These are the only places where Machado de Assis dealt clearly with his epilepsy during his entire life.

KEY WORDS: epilepsy, Machado de Assis.

### Os escritos de Machado de Assis sobre a sua epilepsia: breve nota clínica

RESUMO - Os escritos de Machado de Assis sobre a sua epilepsia são analisados aqui. Eles provêm da sua correspondência com seu amigo Mario de Alencar, durante os últimos 8 meses da vida de Machado de Assis. Este é o único lugar em que Machado de Assis tratou claramente da sua epilepsia durante toda a sua vida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: epilepsia, Machado de Assis.

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In his 1992 article on the epilepsy of Machado de Assis, Guerreiro<sup>1</sup> assembled all the data that investigators had by then discovered. He reviewed the material of Lopes<sup>2</sup> and Peregrino Junior<sup>3</sup>. In his general review article Guerreiro included a photograph of Machado de Assis having a seizure in a public place. In this present article we draw attention, in detail, to one body of data that formerly has escaped the notice of previous writers on this subject - Machado de Assis's own writings about his epilepsy.

There is only one place in which Machado de Assis writes about his epilepsy. It is in his personal correspondence, in volume 31 of the complete works of Machado de Assis, published in 1938<sup>4</sup>. This volume contains 271 letters. One hundred and fifty-eight of them are from Machado de Assis for other people, and 113 of them are from others to him. In this extensive correspondence, covering the period from 1859 to 1908, only in his correspondence with Mario de Alencar is his epilepsy discussed.

Mario de Alencar was especially equipped to discuss this subject with Machado de Assis<sup>5</sup>. A minor writer, but a close friend of Machado de Assis in the last 10 years of his life, Alencar suffered from periods of depression, acute anxiety attacks, phobias and various psychosomatic problems. He was hence well acquainted with neurological and psychiatric difficulties and with medications and other treatments then available for them. He also knew the physicians in Rio de Janeiro who were interested in such disorders and the major pharmacies which carried all medications for them. In this present article we shall deal only with Machado de Assis's epilepsy; we shall not deal with his episodes of depressiveness and other health problems.

This correspondence consisted of 22 letters from Machado de Assis to Alencar and 37 letters from Alencar to Machado de Assis. Since telephones and other modern means of communication did not then exist to any great extent in Rio de Janeiro, people often wrote letters to one another in

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the same city, and sent them by the postal system. Many things that today would be done by telephone and other current means were then done in this manner. If this had not been so we would today have no writings by Machado de Assis himself about his epilepsy. The period of correspondence between Machado de Assis and Alencar runs from 1 January, 1898 to 29 August, 1908, one month before Machado de Assis died. The subject of epilepsy is mentioned in this correspondence only in the last 8 months of Machado de Assis's life, when he was dying and knew it.

Epilepsy is first mentioned in a letter dated 21 January, 1908, which Machado de Assis wrote from his long-time home at 18 Cosme Velho street in the Laranjeiras district of Rio. In it Machado de Assis says, "I am getting along well, except for the usual difficulties of old age, and experiencing without any change the original sin." His use of the term "original sin" for his epilepsy strongly suggests that he probably had this disorder, perhaps with intervals of freedom from it, from childhood onward. The fact that by the term "original sin" Machado de Assis was referring to his epilepsy is correlated in a footnote by Fernando Nery, who collected and carefully researched all aspects of these letters. Neither Machado de Assis nor Alencar had much confidence in physicians and rarely consulted them. In a letter dated 8 February, 1908 Alencar refers by himself as "a sick man without a doctor," by his own choice, and both he and Machado de Assis at various points in their correspondence note that Machado de Assis is similar in this respect. However, on rare occasions each of them consulted Dr. Miguel Couto. In a letter dated 20 February, 1908 Alencar asks, "Did you go to Miguel Couto on Thursday? What did he tell you?"

Machado de Assis for a number of years suffered from both upper and lower gastrointestinal symptoms, with nausea, lack of appetite, occasional vomiting and diarrhea. All these are typical early symptoms of any excessive intake of bromides<sup>6</sup>, which constituted the main, but only poorly effective, treatment for epilepsy at that time. Machado de Assis apparently took bromides, at least at intervals, during an indefinite period of time. On July 29, 1908 Alencar inquires if Machado de Assis is taking nux vomica, a common medication then prescribed for upper gastrointestinal symptoms<sup>7</sup>; on 30 July, 1908 Machado de Assis assures his friend that he is taking nux vomica and that it is helping him. On 6 August, 1908 Alencar writes, "Though I am not a doctor, I think you could not begin again to take the tribromides<sup>7</sup> until your intestines are better." Alencar also recommended that his friend should take calcium carbonate for his gastrointestinal symptoms, which was probably good advice; he also recommended sulfur capsules for his gastrointestinal difficulties, since sulfur was at that time employed for a wide variety of illnesses.

Alencar suggests that, by relieving his gastrointestinal distresses, calcium carbonate will help him to "withstand the other sickness." As Fernando Nery makes clear in his well researched footnotes, the terms "other sickness" and "the other" were ways in which these old friends referred to Machado de Assis's epilepsy. The final letter of Machado de Assis to Alencar, on 29 August, 1908, one month before he died, contains these words: "My dear friend, I read a few pages of the bibliography of Flaubert. I found the same solitude and sadness that I have, and even the same sickness, as you know, the other. Farewell ... an embrace from your old friend, Machado de Assis." Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), the French novelist and author of *Madame Bovary* was well known to have suffered from epilepsy throughout his life<sup>8</sup>, from childhood onward.

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