

EXTERIOR SOULS. A REFLECTION ON FASHION AND WRITING IN MACHADO DE ASSIS

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Abstract: Through the examination of references to fashion and clothing, this article is a reflection on what is contingent, accessory and necessary in some of the works of Machado de Assis. What is the function of *qualia* in literature? Is it a mere prop to create "realism" or does it reflect the fundamentals of the very making of literature?

Keywords: fashion; mimesis; *qualia*; public; private; eroticism

ALMAS EXTERIORES.

UMA REFLEXÃO SOBRE MODA E ESCRITURA EM MACHADO DE ASSIS

Resumo: Os elementos da indumentária em Machado ultrapassam o mero acessório para assumirem um manancial de significações que os atraem para o centro mesmo da construção da narrativa. Qual a função dos *qualia*? São tais elementos contingentes, acessórios ou necessários?

Palavras-chave: moda; mimesis; *qualia*; público; privado; erotismo

Imitations produce pain or pleasure not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind.

Samuel Johnson

Whether hats, boots, uniforms, or trimmings, in Machado the elements of clothing go beyond mere accessory in order to take on a plethora of meanings that usually draw them to the very center of the narrative construction. That is what this essay will contend.

It is through this prism that the author articulates the accessory as being necessary. Thus, many aspects tied to clothing or to fashion are represented: dresses, hats, slippers, shoes, boots, and ribbons.

Conrado in “A Chapter of Hats” and Jacobina in “The Mirror” defend the same theory: the exterior soul expresses the interior soul; in the case of Conrado this is due to the choice and continued use of his hat; for Jacobina, it is because of his lieutenant’s uniform.

The implication is clear, and the irony in Conrado’s explanation enhances, rather than reverses, the emphasis. This increased emphasis is the irony, now given back to the reader, of how Conrado also possesses his exterior souls, although without knowing or recognizing it:

Look, dear, I have a philosophical reason for not doing what you ask of me. [...] The choice of a hat is not an indifferent action, as you might suppose; it is ruled by a metaphysical principle [...] the hat is the integration of the man, an extension of the head, a complement decreed *ab eterno*; no one can change it without maiming it [...] no one advised that there is a metaphysical element to the hat [...] Who knows? It may be that not even the hat is the complement of man, but man of the hat...¹

Thus, for Conrado, the hat fulfills a personal, private necessity; with the hat Conrado seeks to make Mariana understand that this need is not about the mere

¹ ASSIS, “Capítulo dos Chapéus”, v. 2., p.403. As traduções dos trechos de Machado de Assis são de Bethany Beyer, e foram feitas a partir das edições em português citadas pela autora do artigo.

use of just any complement, but rather the establishment of a mutual relationship. In fact, Mariana is moved by her father:

[...] a good old man, thin, careful, a former civil servant, plagued with longing for the days when civil servants wore frock coats to their offices. Even now he wore a frock coat to funerals, not for the reason the reader might suspect, death's solemnity or the final farewell's importance, but for a less philosophical reason, its being an old custom.²

In his long-standing customs, Mariana's father not only demonstrates an attachment common to the elderly, but also reflects the implied notion of symbolic rigidity, socially speaking, which is reflected hierarchically in attire. The frock coat is retained because of social habit, and not due to any private sentiment that Mariana's father might feel for the deceased. In this, he diametrically opposes Conrado, for whom using a hat is a personal and private choice. Consequently, he disapproves of his son-in-law's lowly hat. How can a lawyer go out dressed in that manner? The hat should reflect Conrado's social status. The fundamental conflict between father-in-law and son-in-law arises from this point, and were it not for her father's insistence, Mariana would be indifferent to it. At the story's end, Conrado arrives in a new hat, not because he has changed his mind, since he looks from one side to the other, signaling that he feels ill at ease in his new headgear, but instead he does so to please his wife. Conrado, therefore, always acts in response to the private and individual connection that human beings also develop with articles of clothing and, as the story concludes, they often end up overcoming mere appearance.

We see, then, that the theory of Jacobina's exterior soul offers very sophisticated epistemological attractions. In "The Mirror," we know that Jacobina's account, which he relates to a group of friends, is given many years after the fact. In the past, he states that,

[...] The lieutenant eliminated the man. For a few days, the two natures balanced themselves, but it did not take long for the primitive to cede to the other nature; a miniscule part of humanity stayed with me. So, the exterior soul, which before was the sun, the air, the field, young women's eyes, changed in nature and became good manners and making obeisance at the

² Idem, p. 402.

house, everything that spoke to me of rank, nothing that spoke to me of the man.³

The uniform, then, eliminates the man; it destroys the human. And in that process of deindividualization, or of standardization, all that remains is the casing, the empty shell of a social function. The exterior soul, which previously was the expression of Jacobina's individuality, now grows stiff, as does Mariana's father's frock coat, the uniform of public functions and, therefore, the elimination of any connective flexibility – which so characterizes individual liberty, above all in the use of apparel – if it is not controlled and approved through social sanction.⁴

Thus, we are observing that in these two stories a dichotomy is established between the public and private relating to apparel and to its complements. Moreover, the frontier between the public and private assumes a richness of detail always so well expressed in Machadian works with regard to the dialogue that his characters establish with their attire. That possibility takes on interesting forms that are well worth examining.

In “Midnight Mass”, Conceição

[...] entered the room in her bedroom slippers. She wore a white dressing gown, tied loosely at the waist. As she was slender, there was something of a romantic vision about her, not far off from my book of adventures. I closed the volume; she sat down in the chair in front of me.⁵

Nogueira, as the reader knows, waits until the set time to meet his friend; together they will go to the Midnight Mass. Conceição, who had married the widower of one of Nogueira's cousins, is now the man's second wife, “good,” “holy,” “all that was in her was tempered and passive. Even her face was commonplace, neither pretty nor ugly”.⁶ She even suffered her husband's infidelity “with her dignity intact.”⁷ During their short-lived conversation, thirty-year-old Conceição, in the eyes of the seventeen-year-old Nogueira, undergoes a

³ ASSIS, “O Espelho. Esboço de uma nova teoria da alma humana.” *Obras Completas*. Rio de Janeiro, Nova Aguilar, 2006, v. 2.

⁴ I note that the expression “fashion police” is very eloquent.

⁵ ASSIS, “Missa do Galo”. *Obras Completas*. Rio de Janeiro, Nova Aguilar, 2006, v. 2, p. 607.

⁶ *Idem*, p. 606.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

transformation. This change occurs partially due to the eroticism that enters into play between the social and the private spheres, and which is reflected in the small details apparent to Nogueira's fascinated gaze:

[...] so, with the candid turmoil she displayed, she left me with a remarkable impression. Still slender, she had I know not what kind of sway in her walk, like one who struggles to carry her own body weight. Her unbuttoned sleeves fell open naturally, and I saw half of her arms, very pale, and less thin than might be supposed.⁸

She went around the table and came to sit beside me, on the sofa. I turned and caught a glimpse of the tips of her slippers; but it was for only as long as it took for her to sit, the dressing gown was long and soon covered them. I remember that they were black.⁹

By seeing what should not be seen (“caught a glimpse of”), the slippers, even the dressing gown, and the contrast between black and white (Conceição's blue veins), Nogueira is transported from place to place: he leaves the domestic sphere, part of the private world represented by the living room and, through Conceição's nearness, seated on the same sofa, little by little he penetrates the most hidden sphere of intimacy, upon catching sight of her slippers.

It is important to highlight the element of intimacy implied by the glimpse of the slippers, since, beginning with the use of the crinoline, which was in the public sphere, feminine dress was prone to sway. That new element created a newfound erogenous zone: the ankles and feet, which before were shod with slippers and were hardly seen or emphasized; now they had boots and bootlets at their disposal. As James Laver rightly recalls, “It may be said without much fear of contradiction that no fashion is ever successful unless it can be used as an instrument of seduction”.¹⁰

If, in the case of Conceição, the glance is given furtively and the dressing gown is long (elements that pertain to the most intimate sphere), even her turmoil

⁸ Idem, p. 608.

⁹ Idem, p. 609.

¹⁰ LAVER, *Taste and Fashion. From the French Revolution to the Present Day*. London, George G. Harrap, 1946. Also see Charles H. Gibbs-Smith, *The Fashionable Lady in the 19th Century*. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1960.

enters in as an erogenous element, since the seduction of Conceição is done in an unconscious (or almost) natural way, which only increases the erotic potential.

In the case of Capitu and Bentinho, the push into the intimate sphere is given in the hairdressing scene. In chapter XXXII, “Tidal Eyes,” Capitu is in the living room combing her hair in front of the mirror, which already represents a fusion between the social and the intimate spheres – evidently due to the family’s social condition: “it was a small mirror of little value (forgive the cheapness), bought from an Italian peddler, with a rough frame, hanging between two windows from a small brass ring”.¹¹ Bentinho, fascinated by the eyes that he characterizes as being similar to the tide, and which José Dias had defined as those “of an oblique and dissembling gypsy,”¹² loses himself in himself and in the eyes, not that different from Nogueira. In order to say something, he gathers up Capitu’s hair and declares that he can brush it. The next chapter, “XXXIII, “Hairdressing,” dwells upon the narration of the enamored Bentinho’s feelings as he brushes Capitu’s hair, braiding two plaits. “Where was the ribbon to fasten the ends? On the table, a sad piece of dirty ribbon. I put the ends of the braids together, I tied them with a bow, I tidied the work”.¹³

The cheap mirror, as well as the soiled ribbon, offer very significant insights. The intimate sphere – one that results in Capitu’s kiss for Bentinho – highlights not the simple, restrained elegance of “Midnight Mass,” but rather a squalid atmosphere. Instead of the calm balance that exists between Conceição and Nogueira, as they whisper to each other, in the scene between Capitu and Bentinho there is a sense of *hubris*, where Bentinho finds himself dredged by the tide and holds onto Capitu’s hair that is, however, reflected in a cheap looking glass and bound by a soiled ribbon. Capitu:

[...] tall, strong and filled out, snug in a chintz dress, somewhat faded. The thick strands of hair, arranged in two braids, with the ends tied together, in the fashion of the day, fell down her back [...] she wore cloth shoes, plain and old, to which she herself had added a few stitches.¹⁴

¹¹ ASSIS, *Dom Casmurro*, cit., v. 1, p. 828.

¹² Idem, p. 843.

¹³ Idem, p. 844.

¹⁴ Idem, p. 823.

It would be unnecessary to remember that for Bentinho, none of that matters. If the description of Bento Santiago, or Dom Casmurro is *realista a posteriori*, at the same time it depicts Bentinho's indifference to the conventions that separate the spheres, and also the indifference of Capitu, who brushes her hair in the living room and uses a soiled ribbon.

What can be said about those exterior souls?

The mirror's reflection enlivens different, and often opposing, images. In the case of Jacobina, the mirror "was the finest piece in the house."¹⁵ It was also

[...] a large mirror, a rich and magnificent work, that differed from the rest of the house, whose furnishings were simple and modest... It was a mirror that her godmother had given her and that she had inherited from her mother, who had bought it from one of the noblewomen who came in 1808 with the court of King João VI. I do not know how much truth there was in that; it was tradition. The mirror was naturally very old, but its gold was still visible, partially worn by time, some dolphins carved in the upper corners of the frame, some mother-of-pearl embellishments, and some of the artist's other notions. All old, but fine...¹⁶

In a short and concise story like "The Mirror," such a detailed description is surprising, especially when Machado generally avoids them. Except for the brief legend regarding the mirror's origins, perhaps falsely ennobled like the lineage of certain Brazilian families, the visual elements of the description, as in a coded message, invite the reader to bring together the discrepancies: a poor home and a costly mirror; humble people and noble people; gold...but worn gold; the old and the new; poor Jacobina and Lieutenant Jacobina, now properly reflected, or rather *sheltered* in the noble old mirror of high quality.

Without a doubt, Jacobina's mirror reflects a bettered poor man, since he is reflected in a fine mirror. Yet, what will Capitu's cheap mirror reflect? Among the exterior souls of Capitu is Bentinho, aside from the cheap mirror and the soiled ribbon.

The castoff boots on the beach in "Philosophy of a Pair of Boots" pass from exterior soul to exterior soul, each time becoming older and more used. There is a love affair between their first owner, the married Dr. Crispim, and some

¹⁵ ASSIS, "O espelho", v. 2, p. 348.

¹⁶ Idem, p. 347-348.

chocolate-colored boots with mother-of-pearl buttons belonging to a certain widow. And the boots, stepping softly, pass from the carriage, to the streets, and then to dance classes:

LEFT BOOT - [...] The devil of a boy waltzed like someone leaving this life behind. He didn't even buy us for any other purpose, because he had a new pair of boots for outings, varnished and pointy-toed. But for evenings...We were the boots for the route...

RIGHT BOOT – What an abyss lies between the route and Dr. Crispim's carpets...¹⁷

And, thinking that they are definitively retired, the boots are startled when a beggar finds them and, happy at having discovered them, puts them on. The right boot, resigned, concludes: "Ah! Sister! This is the true philosophy!: -There isn't an old boot that doesn't find an old foot".¹⁸

The fable of the boots concludes with a maxim and gives voice to this so-important piece of attire: the shoes that cover our feet. In the lifecycle of a pair of boots we read a reflection regarding fashion's faddish, ephemeral nature in contrast to the most basic functionality: that of serving as a cover for bare feet. And, in this case, ending up on a beggar's feet.

The transience of fashions that follow each other one after another plays different roles. This paying attention to the distinctions: group against group, class against class, *insiders* against *outsiders*, *timing* – the outdated of yesterday (*out*) and the modernity of what is *in* signals a cyclical pattern. It also indicates a cycle.

One of the consequences of such a cycle of the ephemeral is a constant variation between erogenous zones and neutral or sterile zones. In the nineteenth century, the ankle played an erogenous function that was later sterilized according to the varying lengths of women's skirts. Body parts once covered up are now exposed, and upon being uncovered, they acquire an erogenous or a neutral character according to the fashion of revealing or shielding parts of the body.

¹⁷ ASSIS, "Filosofia de um par de botas", cit., v. 3, p. 991.

¹⁸ Idem, p. 993.

Machado makes good use of such elements. The story “A Pair of Arms” reflects a variation of the theme present in “Midnight Mass.” Inácio forgets about himself and everything each time he lays eyes on Dona Severina’s arms, of whom, like Conceição, “it could not be said that she was pretty, but neither was she ugly”.¹⁹

The blame was also Dona Severina’s in constantly baring them. She used short sleeves on all of her housedresses, half a palm’s length below the shoulder; from that point on her arms were on display [...] but it is fair to explain that she didn’t wear them to provoke admiration, but because she had used up all of the long-sleeved dresses.²⁰

In the same way, the Machadian work reflects with precision the psychology of the individual and his or her complex relationship with clothing, as we saw in the articulation of the exterior soul.

As we highlight these few examples brought to the reader’s attention, we see that we cannot consider such *presentations* as mere details. The perspectives and hypotheses generated by them relate directly to what can be defined as a *function of the contingent* in literature. Could it be nothing more than the enrichment brought about through detail? The description of the ornamented mirror?

This function does not necessarily mean the authorial intention, in the sense that the author is completely in control of his *intention*. Literature is full of examples where the author’s intention is eroded by the necessity of the plot or the characters’ needs. The stories write themselves and are written by the characters.²¹ There is, perhaps, that which we could classify as the author’s foundational intention, that is, inherent to the literary work. It can be linked —

¹⁹ ASSIS, “Uns braços”, cit., v. 2, p. 491.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Without going into much detail, we think about Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*, or about Tolstoy, who in a letter to N. N. Strakhov, dated April 23, 1876, said the following regarding Vronsky’s suicide attempt in *Anna Karenina*, which occurs after Vronsky has encountered Anna’s husband, Karenin. “I am guided by the need to bring together ideas that are interconnected with the purpose of self-expression, but when expressed separately from the words, lose their meaning. This connection itself is invented not by the idea, but by something else, and it is impossible to express through words the basis of this connection, but only indirectly, through the words that express characters, actions, and situations [...] For me, one of the most evident proofs of this was Vronsky’s suicide, which you liked. That had never before been clear to me. The chapter in which Vronsky accepts his role, after having encountered the husband, I had written long before. I began to correct it and *very unexpectedly for me, but unmistakably*, Vronsky went and shot himself.” Italics are mine. Tolstoy’s always colloquial tone is also worth noting, especially “went and shot himself.” In *Anna Karenina*. New York, The Modern Library, 2000, p. 927.

although not necessarily — to the author’s intentional choice, but as we see in the footnote in which Tolstoy explains Vronsky’s suicide attempt as being a necessity of the character itself — according to Tolstoy, it is Vronsky who “goes and shoots himself” — we see that the question of intentionality is mediated by extraneous elements.

For this very reason, the concept of mimesis, particularly as it is formulated by Stephen Halliwell, can offer us a clue. Halliwell observes:

What most versions of mimetic thinking, however, as well as arguably most forms of mimetic practice, do presuppose, is both the feasibility and the necessity of human attempts to explore and come to terms with the world through various means of depictive and expressive representation. The indispensable point of mimesis is the quest for meaning, whether that meaning is a matter of discovery or invention, or most plausibly both.²²

As Luiz Costa Lima also notes, “in the mimetic work of art, values, uses, and customs not only circulate, but are also implicitly and explicitly questioned”.²³

Now, what is shown by such descriptive, relational, contingent elements — like those we just saw in the examples of apparel gathered here and there from Machado’s texts — is therefore the exploration of the world through a balanced calibration of discovery, invention, description, and expression. And such a function is necessary, though it may seem incidental.

By way of another example of how greatly that accessory or arbitrariness exercises a necessary function, we will examine Pierre in *War and Peace*. A prisoner of the French, incognito, traumatized, confused, Pierre decides to take shelter in the common prisoners’ hovel instead of joining the officials’ hut, to which he had a right. Upon arriving there, he notes a small man, “whose presence made itself known by the strong smell of sweat that emanated from him each time he moved”.²⁴ As we know, it is the ex-peasant, and now soldier, Platon Karatayev, that was undoing, with harmonic and rounded gestures [*krugli*, in Russian] the string that fastened his improvised shoes (odor and gestures that relieve and calm

²² HALLIWELL, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*. Princeton, University of Princeton Press, 2002, p. 376.

²³ LIMA, *História, Ficção, Literatura*. São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2006, p. 207.

²⁴ TOLSTOY, *War and Peace*. English translation by Ann Dunnigan. Signet Classics, New York and Ontário, 1980, p. 1156.

Pierre due to their completeness and simplicity); also, he had already noticed Pierre's mental state and tries to help him.

The convergence of elements that constitute a scene, centered in the observer's gaze, in the case of Pierre, impotent, fragmented, weakened, and that results in the restoration of his very humanity, is given through a *detail* with all the appearance of contingency: the smell of sweat.

The fictional form known as Realism refines the use of such details, *qualia* – as these elements of perception unique to a given individual's consciousness are called. Adding the elements laden with *qualia* is a *sine qua non* condition for the creation of a mimetic world, whose capacity for representation can do justice to the name of realist literature: the effect of the real.

Frank Kermode, writing about a version of the Gospel of Mark that normally does not make up a part of the known version, and which references a boy in a garment (*sindon*), notes that those commentators that seek to make sense of the passage, and integrate it into the already choppy account of Mark, resort to extrahermeneutical elements that will seek their justification outside of the text.

Yet, this search does not result in any new interpretation, since the passage about the boy running through the street in his garment cannot be explained outside of or apart from the text. If the “gospels sound like history” it is the result of an “extraordinary rhetorical feat,”²⁵ as Kermode stresses.

Meanwhile, the critic's observation can only be validated if the “detail” itself is only a “detail,” and if *qualia* remains *qualia*.

Not all the forms of *qualia* refer only to the *effect of reality*. Upon attentively reading the passage about the smell of sweat, which would be *accessory*, it would truly be *necessary* and essential to understanding not only Pierre's psychological truth, but also the very way Tolstoy conceives his literature, or at least did so while he wrote *War and Peace*. The energy that permeates the work – only those that D. S. Mirsky classifies as beings of “vegetable” nature survive in *War and Peace*.²⁶ It is the olfactory and the visual trepidation that brings Pierre back to the human world. The supposed *detail* is, in reality, fundamental to the

²⁵ KERMODE, *The Genesis of Secrecy. On the Interpretation of Narrative*. Harvard Press, Cambridge Mass., 1979, p. 112.

²⁶ Mirsky analyzes Tolstoy before and after the existential crisis that made him reject *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, precisely because of the use of the “real effect.” Especially consider p. 261-275, and p. 305-325. D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature*. New York, Vintage Russian Library, 1958.

comprehension of the human dimension that operates in that moment, and at the same time, is foundational in its literary operation, its *techné*.

Far from being a rhetorical detail, inserted into the narrative to instill the text with the appearance of reality, it is the observation of the human in Tolstoy that makes it something to be mulled over and brings before the reader that which operates and lives and makes sense, and that which has the worth of psychological truth in the *real* world. In other words, it is the mimetic function intrinsic to the literary work. It leads one to ask if, after rejecting his two great works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, precisely because of the wealth of *qualia*, after his existential and religious crisis, Tolstoy might not have confused the functions of the necessary, the accessory, and the contingent. Everything indicates that he did, given the amount of haranguing and the defiance that we detect, for example, in *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

Machado de Assis, on the other hand, never abandons literary parameters in exchange for what Thomas Mann called “autocratic statements” in Tolstoy.²⁷ In his works, the use of the contingent resolves itself organically in the necessary, and the accessory of fashion never is, as we saw in the examples examined above, ancillary.

In such examples as those we briefly examined, the contingent relative to boots, slippers, ribbons, and hats cannot be read as a mere detail to fill the reader’s eyes with realism’s effects. Fashion cannot be interpreted as a mere accessory or a rhetorical prop. In those instances, we find an interweaving with what the works offer us as the most fundamental: the observation of the human re-created and incorporated into the kernel of words. The creation of a perspective where the fundamental is coherent and cohesive, and therefore *expresses itself also through the accessory*, paradoxically allows it to become part of the *necessary*.

That this world can only be completely perceived and communicated by a human writer to another human reader, through the prism of words, that web, that *techné*, which is literature’s own instrument, is what proves to be fascinating.

²⁷ Article reproduced in the volume *Anna Karenina*, cit., p. 934.

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Received: 11.23.16

Approved: 01.23.17