

The Quest for National Identity in Edgar Allan Poe and Machado de Assis

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Abstract

This article's aim is to analyze the quest for national identity in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and the Brazilian writer Machado de Assis, in a comparative perspective that brings us the possibility of perceiving the ways in which both authors reflected upon the constitution of national identity. Firstly, I will analyze the contexts where the authors produced their works, in order to understand how and why they expressed their concerns regarding nationalism and imitation of literary models. Secondly, I intend to discuss their importance as writers in Brazil and in the United States, considering that both Poe and Machado were very important for the constitution of Brazilian and American literature. Finally, my intention is to analyze some essays produced by the authors, such as 'Ideas about the theater', 'The ideal of the critic' and 'Instinct of nationality', by Machado de Assis. In relation to Poe, I will briefly discuss 'Exordium to critical notices', a letter written by the author to his editors and also one of the articles that composed the famous series entitled 'Little Longfellow War', in order to demonstrate Poe's tendency to refuse an idealized perception of nationalism, as well as the ways in which he conducts his literary quest for national identity.

Keywords: nationalism, national identity, literary imitation, local color

1. Brazil and the United States in the Nineteenth Century: The Literary Contexts Surrounding the Works of Poe and Machado de Assis

In the nineteenth century, there were many similarities between Brazil and the United States, as both nations were recently independent and had slavery as one of its main social institutions. Both Brazilian and American literature were facing problems regarding the assimilation of foreign literary models *versus* the search for nationalism through the idea of "local color". Poe and Machado, as key figures in the intellectual circles of their times, proposed very lucid and critical reflections about this subject, as we will analyze in this article. Machado established a productive dialogue with many foreign writers, including the French Dumas, Stendhal, Montaigne and Victor Hugo, and the British Lawrence Sterne and Jonathan Swift, among others. His relations with American authors are not very well explored by Brazilian critics, although Hélio de Seixas Guimarães (2008) had already begun to analyze the emergence of American paradigms in Machado's work. John Gledson, as well as José Luiz Passos, had already explored the similarities between Machado and Henry James, arguing that the Brazilian writer had identified himself with the cultural displacement experienced by James, who was born in the United States but became naturalized as British. A similar situation can also be observed in relation to Poe, who was born in the North but lived in the South. Therefore, Machado could have also identified himself with Poe, as he was a black man in a time when blacks were slaves and did not have many chances of social ascension. As a very creative and critical author, Machado was attentive to the literature produced in the nineteenth-century America, which can be proved by the explicit reference to Poe's 'The man of the crowd' in his short-story entitled 'Só!' (Alone), published in 1885. The relations between the two writers were also analyzed by Renata Phillipov (2011), who points out many similarities between 'O alienista' ('The alienist'), published in 1882, and 'The system of Dr. Tarr and Professor Feather' (1845).

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The similarities regarding nationalism and the quest for national identity, however, remain unexplored. It is time to reflect upon them, as they bring the possibility of discussing many aspects related to Brazilian and American social contexts, something that is important to be understood in order to analyze Poe's and Machado's works properly. The United States were more advanced than Brazil in many social aspects, according to Eric Hobsbawm (2012): "there was not, in the United States, an old nobility to seduce men with aristocratic titles. There were very few distractions and huge opportunities for the ones who followed the logic of money obtainment." (p. 229, my translation). From 1778 to 1820, the country's area has doubled; from 1820 to 1850, the population has increased from 9 to 23 million people. (Spiller, 1963). There was a very strong ideology related to money, power and improvement, which stimulated the gold run in California, as well as a rapid process of modernization. However, the real development of North-American economy was observed after Civil War, in the 1860s, when the United States became the first nation to participate actively in the capitalist world. In this sense, Gary Richard Thompson (2004) stresses that, when Poe was born in 1809, "American nationalism was in full force both at home and abroad." (p. 18). Therefore, Poe's interest was natural in a context characterized by a search for national identity, that enabled writers to construct certain representations of the new country. Brazil, on the other side, was facing a slow process of modernization, accelerated by the approval of the law entitled Eusébio de Queiróz, that prohibited the traffic of slaves, which helped to modernize Brazilian economy. But the true development of Brazilian modernity will be observed only in 1888, with the end of slavery, as well as the end of Brazilian empire, that stimulated a strong process of urbanization in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the capital of Brazil at that time.

The United States abolished slavery in 1863, becoming a model to be followed by Brazil. The fascination by this country appears in a text published in 1878, in which Machado says that the USA represents a "new navigation streamline" to be discovered by Brazilians, and that the approximation between these two countries could be positive for Brazil. (Assis, 2008, p. 94, my translation). The interest for American cultural aspects was due to the fact that Brazilian culture and literature were characterized by a strong fascination by French literary models, and authors such as Machado de Assis, from 1870 onwards, started to question this preference. This is manifested in the essay 'Instinto de nacionalidade' ('Instinct of nationality'), in which Machado mentions the "Song of Hiawatha", written by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Machado also mentions Poe in many of his narratives, showing that he was really interested not only in American themes themselves, but also for the themes developed in Poe's narratives, such as 'The man of the crowd', 'William Wilson', 'Some words with a mummy', among others. Poe is best known for his horror stories usually set in mysterious places, which led critics to consider him as an author that gave little or no importance to the social and political environment of his time. Gary Richard Thompson (2004) says that "until recently, the usual sketches of Edgar Poe's life and career have tended to psychoanalyze him according to simplistic Freudian models and to describe him in isolation from the social and political currents of his time." (p. 16).

There was a strong tendency to analyze Poe's works as a consequence of a tormented life marked by the death of beloved women, as well as by alcoholism and poverty. Recent criticism began to review these notions due to the emergency of discussions that established relations between Poe's writings and the sociopolitical problems of his time: "Like his contemporaries, he exhibited a strong interest in things American, but in a global rather than a provincial context (...) The political events of Poe's turbulent America seem almost premonitory of his own divided self." (Thompson, 2004, p. 16). Another important aspect of Poe's criticism is that, as he was considered to be a Southern writer, he was very critical in relation to the Northerner cultural hegemony. He also criticized the imitation of British literary models, arguing that a true American literature should be established without any ideas and concepts that would limit the artists' creativity. This is one aspect that approximates Poe and Machado, as the Brazilian writer also fought against the passive assimilation of French models. Machado de Assis, as one of the most relevant Brazilian writers, was responsible for the foundation, in 1897, of the Brazilian Academy of Letters. He also wrote many important novels, among them *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (*The posthumous memoirs of Brás Cubas*), published in 1881, one of the books that introduced Realism in Brazilian literature. Machado also published, in journals and magazines, a lot of short chronicles in which he reflected upon the social and economical aspects of Brazil during the nineteenth century. These texts allow us to perceive the author's critical view regarding the society where he lived, a view that can also be observed in relation to nationalism. Another relevant aspect to be considered is that both Poe and Machado published their essays in the periodic press. Their publications were conducted by some ideological rules imposed by the editors, and authors had to obey them in order to earn some money. Terence Whalen (2004) argues that "it was Poe's job to implement and articulate the *Messenger's* editorial policies", which stimulated the author to adopt certain procedures to convey his ideas. (p. 936).

Similarly, Machado, who published in many Brazilian newspapers from the beginning to the end of his career, was also influenced to adopt some rhetoric strategies in order not to create negative impressions in his fellows. The attitudes towards nationalism and the quest for national identity were, thus, determined by the editorial constraints upon the authors, which motivated them to look for subtle and indirect ways to express their criticism. This, however, did not stop American writers and editors to see Poe as a controversial figure, perpetuating a very negative image that began to be deconstructed only some decades ago. Machado was also a victim of preconceived impressions, such as the ones defended by the critic Sílvia Romero, who, in 1897, made many negative comments about the writer. Brazilian criticism on Machado de Assis has already overcome Romero's opinions, showing that he is one of the most important authors to reflect upon Brazilian society and the ways in which this society was formed.

2. Poe, Machado and Literary Criticism: Imitation and Romantic Nationalism under Suspicion

First of all, it is important to emphasize that Poe and Machado believed that literary criticism should be an independent activity that focused on the information that came from the text itself, not from external opinions about the text. Poe, for example, argued that the style of American critics were very similar to the ones observed in the British Quarterly Reviews. In the author's opinion, a review does not necessarily convey a critical view of the text analyzed. The analysis, thus, frequently fell into "the cant of generality", that is, in the tendency to comment the text in a very superficial way. Poe believed that literary criticism should dismiss "errors of grammar", and focus on "the heart of the subject and the author's design." (Poe, 2004, p. 634). In a very similar way, Machado de Assis also believed that literary critics ought to have some independency and be free of preconceived ideas: The critic ought to be independent (...) from the writers' vanities and also from his own vanity. He should not cure the literary inviolabilities, nor the blind adorations; but he should also be independent from the suggestions of pride, and the impositions that come from his self-esteem. The critic's job ought to be a constant battle against all these dependencies (...) To be relevant, criticism has to be impartial (...) (Assis, 2008, p. 1103, my translation). The idea of independent criticism will become the ground where both authors will campaign for their perceptions of nationalism and literary imitation.

In 'Ideias sobre o teatro' ('Ideas about the theater'), published in 1859, Machado de Assis, who was a theater critic at that time, argued that "the theater has become a school of intellectual adaptation for the conceptions of strange atmospheres and remote skies", saying that "it refused the national mission of walking in civilization; it does not have any local color; it reflects the strange societies, it is motivated by revolutions that are alien to the society it represents (...)" (p. 1029, my translation). At this point of his career, Machado was very young and prone to defend Romantic nationalism, as we can see in the claim for representations related to the idea of "local color". However, the major problem was not necessarily the lack of "national mission", but the uncritical incorporation of foreign models, as we can see in another essay, entitled 'O passado, presente e futuro da literatura' ('The past, the present and the future of literature'), published in 1858: "Why do we need to have these translations enervating our dramatic scene? Why do we need to have this flood of French plays, without the merit of "local color" and full of wrong perceptions and sometimes, Gallicisms?" (p. 1005, my translation). This attitude in relation to literary imitation will continue throughout Machado's career, showing the ways in which the author was concerned with the future of Brazilian literature. The romantic and youthful aspects that characterized the author's reflections will be overcome in maturity, which does not mean that he abandoned his critical attitude towards cultural and literary imitation, but that he started to write his comments in a more subtle and sophisticated way.

Similarly, Poe, in 'Exordium to critical notices' (1842), criticized the American habit of "importing our decisions from the mother country." (Poe, 2004, p. 632). In this essay, Poe points out that "For many years we enacted a perfect farce of subserviency to the *dicta* of great Britain. At last a revulsion of feeling, with self-disgust, necessarily ensued. Urged by these, we plunged into the opposite extreme. In throwing *totally off* that "authority", whose voice had so long been so sacred, we even surpassed, and by much, our original folly. But the watchword now was, a "national literature!" – as if any true literature *could be* "national" – as if the world at large were not the only proper stage for the literary *histrion*. (Poe, 2004, p. 632). With his reflection, Poe universalizes the idea of nationalism, arguing that American literary representations should not confine to the idea of "local color". In his point of view, the idea of "national literature" was very limited, as it did not consider that the aspects from the "world at large" could be also suitable for literary creation.

A very similar attitude appears in the famous essay entitled ‘Instinto de nacionalidade’ (‘Instinct of nationality’), written by Machado de Assis in 1873. The author begins the text reflecting upon Brazilian literary production in the nineteenth century, claiming that the instinct of nationality was present in the majority of the books published at that time. According to the author, the concern with nationalism is a symptom of vitality, offering authors a good source of inspiration. However, Machado did not agree with the ways in which this nationality was represented in literature, saying that the opinion which sees as national only the books that represent national identity is erroneous. It is important to emphasize that ‘Instinct of nationality’ was published in New York in a journal called *O Novo Mundo (The New World)*, created by José Carlos Rodrigues, a Brazilian lawyer who decided to live in the United States. Therefore, the essay signals Machado’s interest for American culture and literature, as well as the interest for authors such as Longfellow: (...) as this text is going to be printed in American and British lands, I ask if the author of “Song of Hiawatha” is not the same author of *Golden Legend*, that does not have any relationship with the land where he was born, a land which considers him as an admirable singer. I will also ask if *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Ceasar*, *Romeo and Juliet* have any relationships with English history and with English territory, and if Shakespeare is not an essentially English instead of simply being an universal genius. (Assis, 2008, p. 1205, my translation). This passage shows that Machado refused an idealized perception of nationalism, mentioning America, and also England, as lands which consider as “admirable singers” two poets that, according to him, wrote poems that had no relationship to American and British history, respectively. Machado’s concerns in relation to literary nationalism are going to be even clearer in the following excerpt:

There is no doubt that a literature, a recent literature, should deal with the matters offered by its region; but we should not establish poor doctrines to impoverish it. The writer might have, above all, a certain “intimate feeling”, that transforms him in a man of his time and his country, even if he writes about remote matters in time and space. (Assis, 2008, p. 1205, my translation). The idea of “intimate feeling” shows how Machado advocated a process of literary creation completely free of bias and other preconceived ideas that used to limit writers’ creativity by pressuring them to compose “national” books exclusively. For Poe, the main problem of American literature was, as it has already been mentioned, the tendency to imitate British literary models. The author saw this tendency as a limitation for the establishment of a real American literary production. This idea is exposed in ‘Letter to B’ (1836): You are aware of the great barrier in the path of an American writer (...) one might suppose that books, like their authors, improve by travel – their having crossed the sea is, with us, so great a distinction. Our antiquaries abandon time for distance; our very fops glance from the binding to the bottom of the title-page, where the mystic characters which spell London, Paris or Genoa, are precisely so many letters of recommendation. (Poe, 2004, p. 589). Poe argues that foreign models served merely as “letters of recommendation” that would become a “great barrier in the path of an American writer”. Nationalism was seen by the intellectuals as a solution for this problem, which is also criticized by Poe: We are becoming boisterous and arrogant in the pride of a too speedily assumed literary freedom. We throw off, with the most presumptuous and unmeaning hauteur, *all* deference whatever to foreign opinion – we forget, in the puerile inflation of vanity, that *the world* is the true theatre of the biblical histrio – we get up a hue and cry about the necessity of encouraging native writers of merit – we blindly fancy that we can accomplish this by indiscriminating puffing of good, bad, and indifferent without taking the trouble to consider that we choose to denominate encouragement is thus, by its general application, rendered precisely the reverse. (Poe, 2004, p. 605).

Like Machado, Poe puts romantic nationalism under suspicion, perceiving it as a “puerile inflation of vanity” that led authors to fall in the “blindly conceived idea” of liking a “stupid book because, sure enough, its stupidity is American”. (p. 605). Poe’s criticism against Longfellow is a good example of the author’s attitude towards nationalism, as he did not approve the poet’s writing, regarding him “as an overrated clique writer.” (Thompson, 2004, p. 636). Poe accused Longfellow of plagiarism and lack of originality, with the purpose of attracting attention to himself. Although well-succeeded in his intentions, Poe was rejected by the most conservative literary circles of the United States, as Longfellow was a Harvard professor and had a very strong reputation among American writers. According to Poe, “Mr. Longfellow’s conception of the aims of poesy is erroneous”, and his texts are characterized by didacticism and by a “deep reverence for the true.” (p. 638). Beauty, not didacticism or the search for the truth, should be the aim of poetry. In this sense, Poe says that John Keats was the only poet of his time that was able to attain beauty: “He is the sole British poet who has never erred in his themes. Beauty was always his aim.” (p. 641). Although published in newspapers, Poe’s essays were very harsh and similar to the texts wrote by Machado de Assis in the beginning of his career, which explains why the author was so much rejected by his fellows.

Machado, on the other side, developed a more subtle way to criticize his contemporaries, something that Poe was not able to do due to his problematic temper and his premature death at the age of 40. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that Machado, in 'Instinct of nationality', refers to Longfellow as an "admirable singer" of the American land. This idea, however, is deconstructed when the author demonstrates to refuse the confinement to regionalist themes, something that Longfellow does in 'Song of Hiawatha'. This shows that Machado reinforces Poe's ideas about the quest for national identity, which corroborates the confluence relations between both writers.

3. Conclusion

Nationalism and the quest for national identity were perhaps the major concerns of both American and Brazilian writers. Machado's interest in American cultural aspects is not only literary but also political, as both Brazil and the United States were recently independent and searching for literary independence as well. Machado's and Poe's reflections are, thus, extremely modern, as they break with two conventional instances: the first one, which was associated with romantic and exacerbated nationalism, and the second one, associated to the tendency of incorporating foreign models in a passive way. Therefore, a critical view could be established, giving rise to the perception of a modern literature characterized by novelty and by a true quest for national identity. Based on these ideas, it is possible to say that Machado's identification with Poe was more than just a coincidence, but a political and spiritual connection that would turn both authors in relevant writers in the nineteenth-century literature.

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