

Blurring Borders: The Self, the Wanderer and the Observer in Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Machado de Assis¹

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Much has been published and discussed in relation to Edgar Allan Poe's and Charles Baudelaire's intertextual dialogues, as well as to the French reception of Poe's writings and aesthetic theories through Baudelaire's translations and essays. Likewise, there have been several studies in Brazil comparing Poe's and Brazilian writer Machado de Assis's short stories and individual aesthetic theories, as well as studies regarding Baudelaire's aesthetic reception in 19th century Brazilian literature.

However, despite some academic studies and papers in Brazil referring more closely to their literary projects and their possible intertextual bindings, a deeper study into how Machado de Assis may have actually read and subverted Poe's writings so as to fit it within his own framework and thus help foster his project of defending the formation of a national literary identity still needs to be carried out. The same may be said about both Baudelaire's role in Poe and Machado de Assis's literary encounter and Machado de Assis's reception of Baudelaire's aesthetic theories and poetics, beyond Amaral's study regarding baudelairean reception by Brazilian 19th and 20th century literature.

In this paper, therefore, I want to take a transatlantic voyage while addressing the question of how Machado de Assis may have actually incorporated and, paradoxically, subverted Poe's and Baudelaire's imagery, *topoi* and aesthetics into his own literary project. Two broad aspects regarding the three authors' writings will be tackled: the universe of mind and man's isolation vis-à-vis society, within the scope of the fantastic as a genre. To do so, I will focus on "Só!" [Alone/Lonely], a short-story published by Machado de Assis in 1885, thus aiming at addressing how the self, the wanderer and the observer appear in this story and how they dialogue with the same figures in some of Poe's and Baudelaire's writings, notably the former's "The Man of the Crowd" and the latter's "Les Foules", "A une Passante", "La Chambre Double" and "La Solitude".

The story is preceded by an epigraph taken from Psalm 54: "I have stretched myself fleeing and have lived in solitude."² (185) The choice of this epigraph seems quite purposeful for the theme of the story. Told from a third-person omniscient point of view, "Só" opens with its main character, whose first name is Bonifácio, entering his house and locking himself up, all by himself. The narrator briefly mentions the fact that the property faces a practically-empty street, with few passersby and inhabitants. Its precise location is unknown, but the narrator "believes it was located in the direction of Andaraí" (185), a neighborhood located in the Northern part of the city of Rio de Janeiro, today pretty close to the worldwide famous Maracanã soccer stadium, but in those days quite distant from the city center. I want to claim that this certain vagueness of location granted by the expression "believes it was located in the direction of Andaraí", and the lack of information regarding time, Bonifácio's last name and companions does not seem sheer coincidence, but rather points toward important elements in the story and the genre it belongs to. We shall go back to this later.

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² All the translations from quotes from Machado de Assis's story as well as from theoretical texts in Portuguese are mine.

The narrator, then, interrupts the story to explicitly refer to Edgar Allan Poe and his "The Man of the Crowd"³ (the name of the short story is not mentioned, though its plot is briefly and explicitly summarized). As the narrator says,

A great writer, Edgar Poe, in one of his admirable tales, tells us about the evening stroll of an unknown person along the streets of London, as they get empty, with the patent objective of never being alone/lonely⁴. "This old man," [quoting Poe's story] I said at length, "is the type and the genius of deep crime. [...] He is the man of the crowd". (185)

The narrator then resumes the story and contrasts the character from Poe's story with Bonifácio, who "was incapable of crimes or going after peopled locations, so much so that he was retreating to an empty house." (185) We are slowly told that he wanted to "rest from people's company", an idea inspired by a distant relative, Tobias, apparently a philosopher (or something of the like), another stance of indefiniteness in the story, or "weirdo" (185) from the city of Sao Paulo as the narrator puts it, who, after a long stay in Portugal, had come back to Brazil and stopped in Rio de Janeiro and since then had been living "close to Jardim Botânico" (185), another existing neighborhood in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Details about his name, occupation, exact address are blurred, marked by the use of adverbs of doubt and modalized discourse, therefore as indefinite as those referring to Bonifácio's. All the narrator says is that this Tobias had the habit of systematically locking himself up for months inside his house, together with a Nigger (he uses the word "Negro" in Portuguese, in the jargon typical of slavery days) and his ideas. The narrator underscores the fact that Tobias' company consisted of his ideas rather than the Nigger – in fact, the latter is only mentioned once and does not play any role in the story, besides that of an extra near objectification. In a flashback the narrator lets us know that Bonifácio had asked Tobias whether he took any pleasure in those very long periods of deep reclusion, to which the latter responded it was "the best gift in the world" (185) and after which he explained the sort of company he kept, in quite an exaggerated and ironic discourse, a trademark of Machado de Assis's short stories and novels. Indeed, as one may see from the quote below, the description of the ideas' actions accompanying Tobias during his voluntary reclusion, something left unquestioned by the narrator and Bonifácio himself, personify those ideas as if they were real and opinionated, in direct opposition regarding the objectified slave, as discussed above. This is what Tobias says:

I bring a certain number of ideas; as soon as I am alone, I have fun talking with them. Some already come pregnant with others and give birth to five, ten, twenty ideas; all these guys leap, play, dance, go up and down, sometimes fight with one another, hurt themselves, and some die; when I recover consciousness, many weeks have gone by. (186)

³ First published in November 1840 and then at Burton's Gentleman's Magazine in December 1840. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" [Text-02], *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, December 1840, 7:267-270. Available at < <http://eapoe.org/works/tales/crowda1.htm>>. Accessed 03/24/2014.

⁴ In Portuguese there is only one word for alone or lonely: *só* or *sozinho*. Thus, its meaning may be ambivalent and only distinguished through context. For the sake of translation here, I have opted to bring both words (alone/lonely) so as to maintain such ambivalence.

Therefore, inspired by Tobias' words and habit, Bonifácio retreats to an isolated house, totally alone, like Robinson, to experience something similar. Although the narrator does not give any further details about whom this Robinson might be, the reader might quickly associate the name with that of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, as if the narrator were, for the second time in the story, building an intertextual dialogue with foreign canonical literature, in this case referring to the image of a man alone on an island, except for Friday's company, with whom the reader might associate the figure of the slave, Tobias' company. Back to the story once again, the narrator tells us Bonifácio spends the first hours inspecting every corner of the house, recently empty after some time rented to an anonymous tenant, looking for maintenance problems. At dusk, deep melancholia starts arousing as he remembers the dinners at friends' houses, social gatherings, people's company, habitual experiences he would not have that night. He fixes himself some dinner, decides not to wind the clock anymore – so as not to have the company of a clock ticking or the notion of the passage of time - and goes to bed early.

The following morning, after washing and having a leisurely breakfast, he seeks for the morning newspapers, to soon realize, quite annoyed, he had not taken action to receive them there. He then starts inspecting an old chest of drawers, where he finds old letters, brief notes, fragments of old thoughts and concentrates on reading them through. His annoyance strikes him once again as he realizes he cannot understand all that old reading material. Inside one of those drawers, he then finds a small lock of hair attached to a small note indicating when it had been cut. The latter soon reminds him of a woman's name and he says her name, Carlota, out loud to himself. What follows is a long digression full of memories of good times past, of happy social gatherings, of love lost now briefly recovered in remembrance, of the lady's carriage, of her physical beauty and magnificent jewelry. Details long forgotten now step up and keep him company. This sensation is so strong that he believes she will soon pass by his window, and he rushes into the front garden to look out for her in a moment which might remind the reader of Baudelaire's poem "A une Passante", originally published by *L'Artiste* in 1860 and belonging to *Les Fleurs du Mal*. In this poem, the lyrical I spends time looking out a café window, when he suddenly sees a woman quickly passing by and walking down the sidewalk, and realizes he would have loved her had they in fact met:

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! trop tard! Jamais peut-être!
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
O toi que j'eusse Aimée, ô toi qui le savais! (101)

In Machado de Assis's story, the narrator argues:

He had this sort of imagination which hope gives to all men; he figured in his mind Carlota's passage, her entrance, her surprise and her recognition. He even supposed he could hear her voice; however, this is what had been happening to him since early morning, differently from others. From time to time, fragments of sentences came to his ears. (187)

Melancholic, unable to see Carlota, he enters the house when it starts drizzling and then raining heavily. Bonifácio has the impression this rain will continue falling for hours and days on end, says the narrator, as he loses track of time, in a sort of deep dive inside his self. The initial sensation of isolation, of being alone at the house gives place to an ever despairing sensation of loneliness, of deep melancholia, of total separation from the world outside. Deep inside his feelings, memories and ghosts, Bonifácio seems to plunge into an

ocean of the unknown. In a state of reverie, he even suffers from a terrible nightmare, to wake up to the realization that reality was no better company: "hours were more and more endless. There were no more hours; time was not divided according to the clock, as a book without chapters." (189) Struggling to keep his sanity alive, he tries to write some letters or sing chunks from an opera, but words do not come to him. "Solitude, as walls from a mysterious prison cell, would tight him up and would not take long to smash him." (189)

Feeling he was then "split into two men, one being the voice of reason trying to convince the other, the voice of madness, that he was playing stupid in that situation" (190), that his self was being psychically shattered between the voice of reason and its doppelgänger, the voice of madness and despair, Bonifácio suddenly stands on his feet and dashes out of the house, back into society and partying, ready to come up with an excuse for his disappearance for two days. Despite the sensation of losing track of time, in fact the narrator tells us that two days had been the total period of time he had succeeded in keeping himself in deep isolation. The following day, back to society and both relieved and bewildered, he tries to visit Tobias, but he finds him unavailable, as the latter had once again isolated himself in his house. Two weeks later they meet by chance and Bonifácio complains of the hard times he had suffered. Mocking at him, Tobias lets him know that his sensation of loss and despair had taken place because of a mistake he had made: according to Tobias, Bonifácio had forgotten to take his ideas with him. The story ends humorously and ironically after a long narration whose tone of melancholia permeates the greater part of the plot.

How does this story relate to Poe's, a reference the narrator explicitly makes right from the start? How does this story relate to Baudelaire's poems, besides "A une Passante", as already discussed in this paper? This is what we will now try to approach.

On the very first page of "Só" there is an explicit mention to Poe and Robinson. However, this was not the first time literary allusions appear in Machado's writings. For example, in a preface to a later collection of short stories, called *Várias Histórias* [Several Stories], published in 1896, Machado mentions Poe and Merimée as masters of the short story as a genre, and considers Poe one of the best North-American authors. Furthermore, intertextual echoes in relation to Poe seem quite present in Machado de Assis's short stories, novels and essays. We may cite a few examples, among so many already pointed out by critics.

In "Chinela Turca" [Turkish Slipper], the ambiance of dreams and the oppression of time granted by the tic-tac of a pendulum reminds readers of "The Pit and the Pendulum" or "The Masque of the Red Death" by Poe, with a lighter tone, however. In the latter's stories, the reader encounters tragic or near-tragic endings, a quite gloomy or claustrophobic ambiance, a climate of explicit terror, whereas in "Só", a happy ending as well as a sarcastic –ironic tone prevails. In "O Espelho- teoria da alma humana" [Looking glass –theory of the human soul], the dichotomy brought by the doppelgänger projected in the homonymous object and the division between ego and id, exterior and interior soul remind readers of at least two of Poe's stories, "William Wilson" and "The Fall of the House of Usher": in both narratives, the duplication of the characters, shattered between good and evil in the former story, or between brother and sister in the latter one, takes place. In both cases, characters are annihilated. In Machado de Assis's story, this does not happen, as there is a happy ending and the ironic tone permeates the narrative – the dissociation between the self and the other facing the mirror is quickly solved when the main character resumes this habit of wearing a uniform and thus recovers his lost and shattered identity. Thus, both the ambiance and plot regarding Machado de Assis and Poe differ quite significantly and their characters face diverse destinies.

Another example of dialogue between the Brazilian and North-American writers is discussed by Teixeira: the former's "O Alienista" [The Alienist] and the latter's "The

System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether". In the Brazilian novella, the plot addresses the story of a pseudoscientific experience conducted by a physician who tries to convince local authorities and the population from a small village that it would be possible to separate the sane from the insane as a means of treatment by locking the latter up in a prison-like institution. Such experience eventually results in more insane being imprisoned than originally planned, which leads the doctor to decide to reverse places and lock up the sane so as to protect them. Carried out in a highly ironic and critical way (with attacks against political institutions, easily manipulated by the pseudoscientist), as Teixeira argues, and centralized in the question of sanity versus insanity, "O Alienista" seems to bear an intertextual dialogue with Poe's "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether". In the latter short story, however, events take place inside a psychiatric institution in which the narrator is invited to have dinner and ends up witnessing the total reversal of roles after a rebellion of the insane, who had taken up power and locked up the doctor and nurses in a cell. The narrator manages to escape, but the climate of terror and the grotesque descriptions are much stronger than the atmosphere in Machado de Assis's narrative.

In sum, in the intertextual dialogues briefly mentioned above, Machado de Assis seems to have lightened up the events and motifs borrowed from Poe's narratives, thus giving them more ironic and critical nuances, as well as political contours – criticism against institutions of power, for instance, seems much more explicit in Machado de Assis than in Poe, as Teixeira argues.

I tend to believe Machado de Assis is not alone in bringing references to Poe in his stories and writings. Rather, this belongs to a wider panorama encompassing the reception of foreign authors by 19th-century Brazilian literature and is explained, as a phenomenon, by the heavy circulation of foreign works during the 1st and 2nd Empires in Brazil. It is worth mentioning the rising bourgeois society was then undergoing the formation of a reading public eager for access to works in English and French, mainly. If the latter was becoming the language of the elite in cities like Rio de Janeiro, capital of the Empire, as well as Salvador and Sao Paulo, those two still more provincial, there was a strong market for literary works published in books or in installments in newspapers and journals distributed and subscribed by that elite. However, one also read in English, as Vasconcelos points out, which may confirm the fact that Machado de Assis translated Poe's "The Raven" straight from English, as Daghlian argues.

Therefore, through the circulation of Poe's works in Brazil, both in English and French, by means of Baudelaire's translations, equally read by Brazilians in those days, one may understand how Poe's works' reception by Machado de Assis took place, as well as Baudelaire's role in this process. According to Bottmann (2013),

Edgar Allan Poe, the fiction writer, debuts in Brazilian translation in book format rather late: 1927. This does not mean we did not know him before that. His works in poetry and prose, even though filtered by French Symbolism, were read, analyzed, imitated, venerated since mid 19th century. Poems and tales were sparsely translated and published in some local press journals since 1870's, and the renowned translation of "The Raven" by Machado de Assis came out in 1883. (90)

As Daghlian (1999) argues,

[a]s expected, Baudelaire is frequently associated with Poe. [Brazilian critic] Sérgio Milliet, for example, talks about the

French poet's role as an intermediary and [Brazilian critic]
Britto Broca says that, although Machado may have read
"The Raven" in the original, he was attracted to Poe through
Baudelaire. (12)

Thus, if Poe's poem was translated by Machado de Assis from the original, his contact with the former's short stories would have taken place through Baudelaire's translations, then freely circulating in Brazil, as Daghljan suggests. After all, as Meirelles argues, the French author had been widely read in Brazil since mid 19th century through his poems and essays published in several journals and periodicals. At least one of them, the *Revue des Deux Mondes* easily circulated in the country, according to Vasconcelos. It was probably this way that Machado de Assis may have read Baudelaire in French and had access to his translations of Poe's stories.

Perhaps another piece of evidence pointing toward Baudelaire's role as intermediary in Machado's reception of Poe's tales may be found in "Só". As mentioned above, when the narrator interrupts the story right in the beginning to evoke Poe, instead of the latter's full name or just his last name, what the reader sees is Edgar Poe, exactly the way he was known in French literature after Baudelaire's translations and essays on his North-American counterpart. Besides, this was the way in which Baudelaire referred to Poe in two of the four essays he wrote so as to introduce his translations and collections of Poe's tales, which he named *Histoires Extraordinaires*, as Bottmann mentions in an essay dedicated to Poe's presence in Brazilian literature, with special regard to "The Black Cat" and its translations to Portuguese. I tend to believe this is no coincidence.

Turning now to the story itself, we shall see if Poe's presence is restricted to this evocation and if Baudelaire's role lies exclusively in his task as a translator facilitating Machado's reading of Poe's tales, as critics such as Daghljan, Britto Broca and Sergio Milliet have argued.

Like many Poe scholars, Mages discusses Poe's tales from a psychoanalytical point of view. To him, "What makes [Poe's] work difficult to place in this literary time frame is the almost modern psychological interpretation of man's inner mental processes well in advance of twentieth-century Freudian analysis." (174) In Machado's story, right from the epigraph, the *topos* of voluntary solitude arouses, precisely what Bonifácio, the main character, will pursue when locking himself up for two days, far away from everyone, except for his fragmented memories and anxieties. In this sense, the character is revealed through his inner mental processes, the same kind Mages claims Poe brings in his stories. In fact, in "The Man of the Crowd", a story not explicitly named in Machado's story, but briefly summarized, as mentioned above, the main character is described as someone who fears solitude and seeks for constant social company on the empty and scary streets of London. In Machado's story, this same fear arouses when Bonifácio begins to lose sanity in his voluntary reclusion. Although crime is not present in the latter's story, as the narrator himself puts it, the parallel between both stories seems quite strong.

As Alvarez discusses, perhaps the same may be said of Baudelaire's prose poem "Les Foules", originally published in 1861 by *Revue fantaisiste* and regarded by some critics such as Zimmermann as an essay, where the poet tackles the pleasure of being in the crowd. In Baudelaire's text one reads:

Le promeneur solitaire et pensif tire une singulière ivresse de cette universelle communion. Celui-là qui épouse facilement la foule connaît des jouissances fiévreuses, dont seront éternellement privé l'égoïste, fermé comme un coffre, et le paresseux, interné comme un mollusque. Il adopte comme

siennes toutes les professions, toutes les joies et toutes les misères que la circonstance lui présente. (155)

Another possible parallel related to Baudelaire is the prose poem "La Chambre Double", originally published in *La Presse* in 1862. In this poem, Baudelaire anticipates the proustian experience of memory triggered by a taste, a smell, a sense which reminds the character of times past. In this prose poem, one reads

Une chambre qui ressemble à une rêverie, une chambre véritablement spirituelle, où l'atmosphère stagnante est légèrement teintée de rose et de bleu.

L'âme y prend un bain de paresse, aromatisé par le regret et le désir. - C'est quelque chose de crépusculaire, de bleuâtre et de rosâtre; un rêve de volupté pendant une éclipse. (149)

The parallel with Machado's story seems possible: instead of a chambre, with a suffocating atmosphere and a rich sensorial and kinesthetic experience ("[c]'est quelque chose de crépusculaire, de bleuâtre et de rosâtre"), Bonifácio locks himself up in a house, but this ambiance and the experience lived inside this place brings up a whole series of reveries, regrets and desires which may also remind us of Rousseau's *Les Réveries d'un Promeneur Solitaire*, written between 1176 and 1778 and posthumously published in 1782 in incomplete form. That is, solitude once again, the same solitude evoked by the epigraph from Machado's story, taken from Psalm 54, where one reads "I have stretched myself fleeing and have lived in solitude." (185), the same solitude evoked by the epigraph from Poe's "The Man of the Crowd", in turn taken from La Bruyère and quoted in French: "Ce grand Malheur, de ne pouvoir être seul" (185), which also appears in Baudelaire's prose poem "La Solitude", in its 1855 version. In this latter text, Baudelaire evokes directly or indirectly Rousseau, Robinson Crusoe and La Bruyère:

Mais cette séduisante solitude n'est dangereuse que pour ces âmes oisives et divagantes qui ne sont pas gouvernées par une importante pensée active. Elle ne fut pas mauvaise pour Robinson Crusoe; elle le rendit religieux, brave, industriel; elle le purifia, elle lui enseigna jusqu'où peut aller la force de l'individu.

N'est-ce pas La Bruyère qui a dit: "Ce grand malheur de ne pouvoir être seul"? (164n)

Further on in this same prose poem, Baudelaire associates solitude to dusk, in all its ambivalence: "Il en serait donc de la solitude comme du crépuscule; elle est bonne et elle est mauvaise, criminelle et salutaire, incendiaire et calmante, selon qu'on en use, et selon qu'on a usé de la vie." (164n) That is the same image he employs in "La Chambre Double", where one reads "[c]'est quelque chose de crépusculaire" (149). It is worth mentioning this image also appears in Machado de Assis's story, although undressed from the crime connotation quite recurrent in Baudelaire's prose poems. In "Só" the narrator briefly mentions the passage of time when Bonifácio realizes it is the "ave-marias" time or dusk, in 19th century lexicon. This allows us to argue that Machado de Assis grants a more prosaic and less gloomy tone to this period of the day than what one sees in Baudelaire's works.

On the other hand, Baudelaire and Machado de Assis handle the passage of time through similar imagery and feelings of oppression. In "La Chambre Double", one reads "Non! Il n'est plus de minutes, il n'est plus de secondes! Le temps a disparu!" (150), whereas in Machado's story one reads "hours were more and more endless. There were no more hours; time was not divided according to the clock, as a book without chapters" (189). As discussed above in relation to the similar images and motifs present in Poe's and Machado de Assis's short stories, although the latter reconfigured the former's plots according to his interests and literary projects, here one sees the same phenomenon: the Brazilian short story writer seems to be incorporating Baudelaire's themes, metaphors and images, thus given them his own contours.

In sum, "Só" seems to bear an intertextual dialogue with some of Poe's tales and Baudelaire's poems and prose poems in relation to at least two overall themes: on the one hand, the universe of mind, where the self is split up and duplicated as a doppelgänger of itself, in apparent anticipation of the psychoanalytical questionings brought by Jung years later; on the other hand, man's anguish when seeking or rather fleeing isolation vis-à-vis his society, and thus ending up trailing an interior voyage where he takes the simultaneous roles of wanderer and observer of his own feelings while wandering and mentally diving into an ocean of emotions, memories and anxiety. Such a voyage, causing profound disturbance and estrangement for the characters and the reader alike, is only enabled thanks to the suspension of time and external verisimilitude. That is the reason why time, characters' identity and space are indefinite and both characters and the lyrical I are physically, emotionally and spatially isolated in Poe's and Machado de Assis's stories and Baudelaire's poems and prose poems. That is also why, as I have argued in this article, the ambiance of indefiniteness, anguish and disturbance, *topoi* usually linked to the fantastic as a genre, render Machado de Assis equally tributary to Poe and Baudelaire and, thus establish an intertextual weave with their works.

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