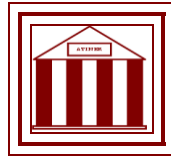


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**Modern experience in Poe,
Baudelaire and Machado de Assis**

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Modern experience in Poe, Baudelaire and Machado de Assis

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Abstract

This article's aim is to analyze the confluence relationships among Edgar Allan Poe (1839-1849), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Machado de Assis (1839-1908), in order to identify representations of modernity and modern experience in texts such as "The man of the crowd", "Parisian scenes" and "Só!". The analysis leads us to the conclusion that these three authors, in a deep contact with the world and the society where they lived, found a very peculiar way to represent modernity, which is synthesized in the idea of a text that "does not permit itself to be read". This sentence serves as a metaphor for interpreting allegorical and ciphered representations constructed by the authors, as Poe, Baudelaire and Machado frequently use strategies that hide the real meaning of their texts. In this sense, aspects related to Brazilian, French and American contexts will be analyzed, in order to understand the ways in which the writers constructed their representations of modernity and modern experience.

Keywords: Confluence, Modernity, Modern Experience.

Nineteenth century literature is permeated by texts in which modern experience is represented in many ways. Authors of different nationalities seek to analyze and discuss this experience, forming a confluent perspective that cannot be dissociated from social and cultural aspects observed at that time. This is the case of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Machado de Assis, whose texts bring very peculiar representations of modernity and modern experience. The aim of this paper is to analyze the ways in which Poe, Baudelaire and Machado constructed these representations, as well as the relationships between them and the literary contexts that shaped the three authors' literary productions.

In recent years, scholars from the field of comparative literature have been working with the idea of confluence, that brings the possibility of comparing works of different authors in a cross-cultural perspective, breaking with the notion of influence, which used to consider the existence of hierarchical relationships among different authors. Pascale Casanova, in *A República Mundial das Letras*, works with the idea of confluence when proposing that writers are able to form "literary families", established when literary works are analyzed in an international scale. When these "families" are formed, ignored properties may appear, revealing unknown aspects regarding the works of the authors involved, as well as their relationships with other authors. (CASANOVA, 2002: 219-220). Therefore, the idea of comparing writers from different cultural and literary backgrounds does not seem odd or impossible, as this comparison may allow us to analyze themes and features that otherwise would not be analyzed or discussed.

The comparisons among Poe, Baudelaire and Machado de Assis also bring us the possibility of deconstructing the famous dichotomy center *versus* periphery, that has always been referred as fundamental in the field of comparative literature. Scholars like Pascale Casanova, Gayatri Spivak and Itamar Even-Zohar argue that both the ideas of "center" and "periphery" are theoretical constructions that must be overcome in favor of a globalized notion of literature, considering that literary space is not linear and that "literary dominated authors are not always in a similar situation. Their common state of dependency does not imply their description as belonging to the same categories." (CASANOVA, 2002: 110, my translation). Itamar Even-Zohar also deconstructs the dichotomy by working with the concept of polysystem, perceived as a dynamic, multiple and heterogeneous whole formed by many literary systems that establish a relationship with different elements from the same system or from another semiotic system. (EVEN-ZOHAR, 1997: 6). The notions of center and periphery would emerge from the unawareness in relation to the tensions observed inside the polysystem, which leads us to say that each polysystem has its own centers and its own peripheries.

Gayatri Spivak, by her turn, proposes the idea of *planetary* as a possible key to compare different literary works, questioning the idea of influence by arguing that there would not be properly a domination among the authors but an universalized concept of culture and literature. (SPIVAK, 2003). Márcia Abreu (2011), with her research about globalization of culture, argues that

there would be an “appropriation” of ideas instead of an influence, especially when it comes to writers like Poe and Machado, who produced their works in contexts characterized by cultural and literary dependency in relation to Europe. Appropriation is what happens with Machado de Assis, who systematizes Poe’s and Baudelaire’s ideas in a very original way, showing that writers considered to be “eccentric” are really able to dialogue critically and productively with external literary references.

The relationships between Poe and Machado can be established from a reference to “The man of the crowd” in the short-story entitled “Sól!”, written by Machado in 1885 and published in the newspaper called *Gazeta de Notícias*. Both narratives discuss the conflicts regarding modern identity, especially when it comes to staying alone or in the middle of the crowd. This conflict also appears in Baudelaire’s “Parisian scenes”, mainly in the poem “To a passer-by”, which can be interpreted as a representation of all superficiality brought by modernity, considering that there is a great anxiety related to the meetings with strangers in the cosmopolitan city, an anxiety that is also very well portrayed in Poe’s “The man of the crowd”. The same anxiety will appear in Machado’s narrative, which again points out to the possibility of approximating the three authors, as they were very attentive to the social changes that come up with the rise of modernity.

According to Marshall Berman (1982), modernity is a global process that does not know geographical frontiers or borders in its manifestations. In France, modernity takes place in the Parisian urbanization processes that transformed a medieval city in a cosmopolitan metropolis. In 1863, the same year the city was remodeled, Baudelaire wrote “The painter of modern life”, an essay that became famous for bringing a sharp reflection about modernity and modern art, characterized as original and innovative, being eternal and ephemeral at the same time. This ambiguity is fundamental when it comes to understand modernity, which is defined by multiple tensions and dissensions that will be portrayed in Poe’s, Baudelaire’s and Machado’s works.

In the United States, modernity starts to develop after American Independence in 1776, reaching its maximum by the end of the Civil War, occurred between the years of 1860 and 1865. Having lived until 1849, Poe expected the modernization of American society, developing very lucid reflections about the nature of culture and literature in a context that was recently independent from British colonial constraints. “The man of the crowd” shows that Poe was attentive to modernity, as it portrays London as a cosmopolitan city, something that could also be said in relation to New York and Chicago, the biggest cities in the USA at that time.

In Brazil, modernity also starts to develop in the nineteenth century, more specifically from 1850 onwards, when the traffic of slaves was forbidden. This fact has led to the appearance of the first industrial elements in Brazilian society, in a process that became even more intense in the 1870s, with the end of Paraguayan War and the progressive decadence of slavery. Machado de Assis’s modernity is evident in the descriptions of Rio de Janeiro, including Ouvidor street, the most famous of the city at that time, and also in the

descriptions of the different people that walk through the streets, including the *flâneur*, one of the most emblematic figures of modernity. The *flâneur* also appears in Poe's and Baudelaire's texts as a figure who analyzes and dissects the behavior of other people, as we can see in "The man of the crowd", in which the convalescent narrator spends his time looking at the window of a hotel in London in order to formulate his own perceptions about the people's appearances, professions and ways of living. In "Só!", Machado also portrays the *flâneur* in the figure of Bonifácio, a man who is very attached to cosmopolitan life but decides to spend some time alone in a cottage, discovering, by the end of two weeks, that he cannot stand loneliness.

The reference to Poe in Machado's narrative leads us to a relevant question: how did Machado get in contact with Poe's work, considering that Poe was an American, and the United States was not at the cultural "center" at that time? The answer lies in the fact that Machado, being a prolific reader of French and English, probably read Poe's texts due to the intermediation of Baudelaire, which can also be explained by the fact that Brazilian literature was characterized by a strong attachment to French cultural aspects. Baudelaire was responsible for changing negative perceptions regarding Poe's works, which were constructed by Rufus Griswold, the first Poe's biographer and posthumous editor of his works. According to Griswold, the writer was "(...) a wild, alienated figure, a lost soul who walked the streets, in madness or melancholy, with his lips moving in indistinct curses, whose harsh experience had deprived him of all faith in man or woman." (WALKER, in CARLSON, 1996: 25). These perceptions affected generations of literary criticism in relation to Poe, helping to create many stereotypes that recent scholars such as Monika Elbert (1992), Terence Whalen (2004) and Gary Richard Thompson (2004) are trying to overcome.

Baudelaire translated Poe into French, an act that transformed the American author in one of the most important references for French poetry and more specifically, for French Symbolism. Machado used Baudelaire's translation as a reference for his own translation of "The Raven", as, according to Jean Michel Massa (2008), it presents almost the same mistakes that were found in Baudelaire's version of the poem. It seems, therefore, very difficult to deny that Poe became known in Brazil thanks to Baudelaire's divulgation, considering, more specifically, the status associated to French culture. In Pascale Casanova's opinion, "French triumph is so broad in France and in the rest of Europe, its prestige became so unquestionable that the belief in the superiority of French language is considered to be the truth in the facts and in the minds at the same time." (CASANOVA, 2002: 92, my translation). As it has already been mentioned, this prestige was also seen in Brazil, becoming the only way in which authors like Poe could penetrate a culture considered to be "peripheral" and dominated by European references.

France, however, was not the only model for literary reference and creation. From 1870 onwards, an interest by English and American cultural aspects started to dominate Brazilian literature as a way of questioning French cultural hegemony and establish new ways of representing the nation, since the

United States was already an independent country at that time. A very significant indicative of Machado's interest in North-American culture was the publication, in 1873, of the famous essay "Instinct of nationality" in New York, as well as the reference, in the same essay, to the famous poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Other references to Longfellow and also to Poe can be found in the already cited short-story "O espelho", in "Uma excursão milagrosa" and in the preface of the book entitled *Várias Histórias*, in which Machado admits that Poe is a parameter for the composition of his short-stories. Thus, it seems almost impossible to deny Machado's interest for Poe, as it helped to shape many themes in his work, including the representation of modern experience.

Literature produced in nineteenth century United States, France and Brazil was characterized by the strong predominance of romantic constructions of nationality, especially in Brazil and in the United States, nations that were struggling against cultural dependence and searching for their own models of literary representation. In France, there was a strong idealization of French Revolution, as well as of the popular conflicts occurred in 1848, which gave rise to very intense nationalist feelings that found in Romanticism the ideal vehicle to develop. These idealizations will be broken by Poe's, Baudelaire's and Machado's texts, that bring contradictory perceptions of modernity, synthesized in "Parisian scenes", "The man of the crowd" and "Só!". It is also possible to observe that the three authors work with allegorical and ciphered representations of modern experience, which is seen as something that, for exposing all the conflicts and problems faced by society at that time, deconstructs romantic idealizations of progress, nationality and modern development that were sustained by intellectuals in the nineteenth century.

It does not mean, however, that the notions of romantic and modern will be considered as opposites. Hugo Friedrich, in his discussion about modern poetry, argues that the modern would represent an overcoming of the exaggerated aspects sustained by Romanticism, which points out to the idea that there is not a contradiction between them but a continuity and even an evolution. (FRIEDRICH, 1978:30). Besides, modern authors like Poe, Baudelaire and Machado did not oppose to Romanticism itself, but to the stereotypes that appear from a conventional view of the romantic. As these stereotypes dominated literary production in Brazil, France and the United States, the writers will find a subtle way to represent modern experience. Subtlety is seen as one of the main characteristics of Machado's style, considered to be a modern writer for exposing the conflicts between appearance and essence, the social and the individual, as we can see in the famous narrative entitled "O espelho" (1882). Even though Poe was more direct in his criticism, subtlety will be also part of his style, especially if we consider that the author, like Baudelaire and Machado, published his texts in the periodic press, having to obey certain rules for publication.

"Parisian scenes" was published as a part of *The flowers of evil*, a book that caused impact on nineteenth century French intellectuality. According to Dolf Oehler, Baudelaire's modernity dwells in a reaction against the most

common clichés observed in French literature of that time, in an absolutely new way of addressing the general public, a way “(...) that invites the reader to enter into the reading as if into the entrance of the shop where the wares of art can be brought to the client.” (OEHLER, in LLOYD, 2005: 15). In Oehler’s opinion, baudelairian’s strangeness can be found in the insertion of reality fragments in texts which, although presenting dreamlike atmospheres, modernize conventional romantic literary practices by getting in touch with the questions related to the bourgeois world. (OEHLER, in LLOYD, 2005: 19). Hugo Friedrich (1978) states that dissonance is one of the main characteristics of Baudelaire’s poetry, which breaks with the *status quo* in order to show all the conflicts brought by modernization processes. The poem entitled “A carcass” is a good example of the rupture with conventional romantic idealization:

And yet you will be like this corruption
 Like this horrible infection,
 Star of my eyes, sunlight of my being,
 You, my angel and my passion!
 Yes! Thus you will be, queen of the Graces,
 After the last sacraments,
 When you go beneath grass and luxuriant flowers,
 The molder among the bones of the dead.
 Then, O my beauty! say to the worms who will,
 Devour you with kisses,
 That I have kept the form and the divine essence,
 Of my decomposed love! (BAUDELAIRE, 2008: 95)

The flowers of evil was accused of being immoral and subversive, which cost Baudelaire and his editors a lawsuit and the banishment of six poems from the book. The poet’s tendency to break with conventionalism can also be observed in “The swan”, which describes Parisian urbanization:

– Old Paris is no more (the form of a city
 Changes more quickly, alas! than the human heart) ;
 I see only in memory that camp of stalls,
 Those piles of shafts, of rough hewn cornices, the grass,
 The huge stone blocks stained green in puddles of water,
 And in the windows shine the jumbled bric-a-brac.
 (BAUDELAIRE, 2008: 333).

The poem brings the figure of the swan as an allegorical representation of modernity and modern man, who faces problems to recognize himself in the new reality brought by modernization:

I saw a swan that had escaped from his cage,
 That stroked the dry pavement with his webbed feet

And dragged his white plumage over the uneven ground.
Beside a dry gutter the bird opened his beak,
Restlessly bathed his wings in the dust
And cried, homesick for his fair native lake :
“Rain, when will you fall? Thunder, when will you roll?”
I see that hapless bird, that strange and fatal myth,
Toward the sky at times, like the man in Ovid,
Toward the ironic, cruelly blue sky,
Stretch his avid head upon his quivering neck,
As if he were reproaching God! (BAUDELAIRE, 2008: 333).

The “fair native lake” can be interpreted as a reference to old Paris, a city that exists only in the poet’s memory. It is possible to observe that the swan does not feel comfortable in the new place, which may be interpreted as an allegorical representation of the anguish experienced by modern man when trying to understand his condition in the modern world. The attitude of “reproaching God” can be read as a sign of the strangeness felt by the swan, whose “white plumage” contrasts with the “uneven ground”, showing the bird’s inadequacy to the context. The possibility of interpreting the swan as a representation of modern man is reinforced by the following passage of the poem:

Paris changes! but naught in my melancholy
Has stirred! New palaces, scaffolding, blocks of stone,
Old quarters, all become for me an allegory,
And my dear memories are heavier than rocks.
So, before the Louvre, an image oppresses me :
I think of my great swan with his crazy motions,
Ridiculous, sublime, like a man in exile,
Relentlessly gnawed by longing ! (BAUDELAIRE, 2008: 333).

The passage above shows that there is a great contradiction between the old Paris, that becomes an allegory in the self’s mind, and the new Paris, considered by him as an oppressive place. The association between the swan and the modern man is clear in the final verses of the stanza, showing that Baudelaire was aware of the allegorical representations he was constructing to represent modernity. This awareness is indicative of high artistic consciousness, besides demonstrating that the poet was able to identify conventionalism and react against it in a direct and, the same time, metaphorical way.

Conflicts against the establishment can also be observed in Poe’s career. The “little war against Longfellow” is a very good example on how the author criticized his contemporaries, who saw him as a negative and destructive literary figure. As Poe had a very harsh critic temperament, and depended upon the publication in the periodic press to earn his living, he was stimulated by the editors to adopt certain strategies to hide the “real meaning” of his texts.

According to Terence Whalen (2004), it was Poe's job to respect and implement editorial policies, especially if we consider that North-American literary context was characterized by a romantic view based on strong nationalist aspirations, which were highly stimulated by expansionism and by the myth of the American conquest. On the other hand, there was a great attachment to British literary models, something that will be problematized by Poe in "The man of the crowd". According to Christopher Gair (2013), this narrative would establish a dialogue with *Sketches by Boz*, by Charles Dickens, which can be proved by the choice of London as the appropriate place for the story's action. In Monika Elbert's opinion (1992), the narrator's obsessive persecution of the man of the crowd would be a representation of the American man searching for his own history, which leads us to the idea that Poe, in a very subtle way, would be calling the attention to the fact that the model of modernity held by American literary circles was imported from England. Besides, descriptions of London could be interpreted as a ciphered way of referring to New York, a city that was also growing and experiencing the effects of rapid modernization. These effects are also portrayed in "The man of the crowd", leading us to interpret it as a narrative that breaks with idealizations related to the rise of modernity in America. The following paragraph shows the way in which modernity is portrayed by Poe:

It was the most noisome quarter of London, where every thing wore the worst impress of the most deplorable poverty, and of the most desperate crime. By the dim light of an accidental lamp, tall, antique, worm-eaten, wooden tenements were seen tottering to their fall, in directions so many and capricious, that scarce the semblance of a passage was discernible between them. The paving-stones lay at random, displaced from their beds by the rankly-growing grass. Horrible filth festered in the dammed-up gutters. The whole atmosphere teemed with desolation. (...) Suddenly a corner was turned, a blaze of light burst upon our sight, and we stood before one of the huge suburban temples of Intemperance – one of the palaces of the fiend, Gin. (POE, 2010: 449).

In this passage, the narrator refers to the problems brought by modernization processes, such as poverty, criminality and alcohol abuse. The mysterious man's identity is also seen as a problem, since the narrator is not able to understand it:

‘This old man, I said at length, ‘is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds. The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the “Hortulus Animae”, and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that “er lasst sich nicht lesen”. (POE, 2010: 450).

The German expression carries an allegorical meaning, representing not only the mystery of modern identity but also the puzzle which was brought by modernity itself, seen as something difficult to grasp. This representation could be interpreted as an indirect way of saying that North-American intellectuality, personified by the convalescent narrator, would not be entirely open for understanding modernity and all the processes it brings together. A similar representation can be found in “Só!”, in which Poe is cited:

A great writer, Edgard Poe, tells us in one of his admirable stories, about the nocturnal run of an unknown man through the desert streets of London, with the intention of never being alone. ‘This old man, I said at length, ‘is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd.’ (ASSIS, 2008: 185, my translation).

The reference to Poe’s narrative aims at establishing a productive dialogue with the metaphor related to the man of the crowd, as the main character Bonifácio, like Poe’s narrator, shows that he cannot understand the puzzle proposed by Tobias, an eccentric philosopher who has the habit of isolating himself from society. Bonifácio decides to imitate him by spending some days alone in a cottage, but fails when discovers that it is impossible for him to be alone. Tobias, on the other hand, is a very clever man who seems to understand the complexity brought by modern socialization processes, which involve the ability of being lonely and, at the same time, deal with people in a relatively reasonable way. Bonifácio knows very well how to live in society, and is mocked by Tobias when assumes that loneliness was something difficult to handle:

He told Tobias everything; he confessed him that, for being tired of living with friends, had the idea of standing alone for some days, but could hardly go beyond two. Tobias has heard him attentively and in silence, asked for all the details and sensations, even the most intimate ones, and Bonifácio has not denied anything (...) In the end, looking above the glasses, he said with a diabolic smile:

-Do you want to know? You forgot of taking the main thing with you: the ideas.... (ASSIS, 2008: 190, my translation).

Throughout the narrative, Bonifácio is described as a man who is very dependent on other people, a characteristic which obliterates his perception in relation to one of the aspects of modernity, represented by the tension between public and private sphere. The protagonist does not understand Tobias’s idea of loneliness, as it is possible to see in the following excerpt:

(...) Tobias’s idea seemed to be unintelligent or, at least, obscure (...) Bonifácio walked, came back, went from one side to another, feeling

he was ridiculous. What time would it be? He did not have the ability of calculating time by the sun. He knew it was Monday, a day when he used to have dinner in Beneditinos street with a coffee commissioner. He thought about this; he thought about the counselor's meeting he knew in Petrópolis; he thought about Petrópolis, about the whist, and he was better at whist than he was in other games (...) (ASSIS, 2008: 188).

It is possible to see that Bonifácio really has difficulties in dealing with loneliness, as his spirit is completely identified with cosmopolitan life, represented by social meetings and by Ouvidor street, where he was used to getting acquainted with people. Machado's narrative points out to the idea that modernity, initially represented by Bonifácio's attitude, does not necessarily correspond to cosmopolitan life, seen as futile and superficial. The "real" modernity dwells in the ability to understand the problems related to socialization, an ability that Bonifácio does not have at all. Therefore, it is possible to interpret "Só!" as a narrative which portrays modernity as something that does not allow itself to be read, or that is read in a distorted and uncritical way. The distortion is represented by Bonifácio's perspective, that personifies all the futility and superficiality which does not permit the character to analyze, interpret and fully understand modernity.

It is interesting to notice that Machado refers to "The man of the crowd" in an ironical way, especially if we consider that irony is one of the main characteristics of his style. When citing Poe's narrative, the narrator stresses that Bonifácio, unlike the mysterious man of the crowd, was not a genius of deep crime and did not look for crowded places. However, the end of the story will show exactly the opposite: "It was three o'clock in the afternoon when he decided to leave his refuge. Such a happiness, when he arrived at Ouvidor street!" (ASSIS, 2008: 190, my translation). Thus, although Bonifácio is not really capable of crimes, he, like Poe's character, cannot be alone. The main difference between the two narratives dwells in the fact that, while "The man of the crowd" brings a tragic perception in relation to the problems of modernity, "Só!" is extremely ironical in portraying the same problems, which points out to Machado de Assis's originality in dealing with foreign influences.

As it has already been mentioned, Brazilian literary context was dominated by stereotypical and romantic perceptions regarding the nation, as well as by a tendency, which can also be identified in "The man of the crowd", of importing literary and cultural models from Europe, more specifically from France. Authors such as Poe and Machado will dramatize their belonging to peripheral nations by constructing allegorical and ciphered representations of modernity, suggesting that it was not perceived and interpreted in the way it should be. Even though Baudelaire does not belong to a peripheral context, it is also possible to consider him as an eccentric and modern writer, as his poems break with romantic idealizations and propose a new way of perceiving man and society. In conclusion, the three authors can really be approximated, as this approximation, to reinforce Pascale Casanova's words, reveals aspects that, as

modernity for Poe, Baudelaire and Machado, were obliterated and could not be analyzed in a perspective that considers influence as the main way in which literary contacts are established.

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