

“NECKTIES OF A CERTAIN COLOR” – POLITICAL
ENGAGEMENT IN MACHADO DE ASSIS’S
ESAÚ E JACÓ

“GRAVATAS DE COR PARTICULAR” – COMPROMISSO POLÍTICO EM
ESAÚ E JACÓ DE MACHADO DE ASSIS

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When it comes to his politics, Machado de Assis defies simple characterization. While some critics have described him as indifferent, ambivalent, or uncommitted to any particular position, others see Machado as deeply engaged with the social, political, and economic issues of Brazil’s Second Empire (1840-1889). These latter critics see in the first president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters a man of political opinions: *um homem político*, a political man who intervened in the society of his time through his newspaper pieces, novels, and short stories. These critics identify a strong and inquisitive, if often elusive, political stance in Machado’s fiction. What might we make of Machado’s enigmatic politics? Is it possible to reconcile such disparate assessments on the part of critics?

Differing assessments about Machado’s involvement with politics might be explained, at least in part, by critics’ dissimilar ways of understanding the intersection between aesthetics and politics; that is, by the criteria they use to gauge the political attributes of a literary work. Some critics consider the mere treatment of social, economic, and political matters in a novel or short story as evidence of a writer’s engagement with her time and place; they believe, for instance, that even the subtlest references to the nature of political discourse,

which abound in Machado's prose, demonstrate his political engagement. Others need to identify clear political positions taken by characters, the narrator, or the author in order to recognize the political facet of a literary piece.

MACHADO DE ASSIS, POLITICS, AND LITERATURE: A REVIEW

One of the first intellectuals to accuse Machado of indifference towards politics was Brazilian poet and journalist Silvio Romero. Romero claims, in his 1897 study *Machado de Assis—estudo comparativo de literatura brasileira*, that “o culto da arte sufocou-lhe [a Machado de Assis] na alma qualquer paixão deprimente, qualquer partidatismo incômodo e perturbador” (1992: 54). Romero's criticism can be understood as a reaction to Machado's essay “A nova geração”, published in the *Revista Brasileira* in 1879, in which Machado argues that, in the field of literature, aesthetic considerations should always prevail over political ideals. Romero interprets Machado's pessimism as both proof and consequence of his disengagement with Brazilian society. In Richard Miskolci's words, “Segundo Romero, Machado não tinha conhecimento científico nem paixão política, atributos que ele [Romero] considerava essenciais no verdadeiro intelectual” (2006: 359). In 1917, Alfredo Pujol published a collection of seven conferences that he had presented at the Sociedade de Cultura Artística de São Paulo in the same year. Pujol argues that Machado's originality derives from his ability to avoid the influence of his social milieu. But Machado, clearly, was not impervious to the politics of his day, as Pujol suggests. Decades later, Raimundo Magalhães Júnior challenged Pujol's evaluation: “Chega a ser surpreendente a desenvoltura com que Alfredo Pujol afirmou, na primeira jornada de sua biografia, que ‘uma só vez lhe escaparam rápidas palavras sobre coisas políticas’. A alma liberal de Machado de Assis (...) não foi avara em tais manifestações” (1957: 91).

Some contemporary scholars, however, adhere to Pujol’s view. Alfredo Bosi, for example, in his essay “O teatro político nas crônicas de Machado de Assis”, takes issue with scholars who insist that any great writer is, almost by definition, somehow engaged with the politics of his or her day. According to Bosi, Machado is not interested in Politics (with a capital “P”), per se, but his characters are:

Tudo indica, porém, que Machado não acreditava nem esperava nada (ou quase nada) nem da Política nem da História, escritas aqui com iniciais maiúsculas para diferenciá-las do verdadeiro objeto do cronista: políticos e suas histórias. (...) Interessava-lhe, artista que era, o estilo dos atores políticos; atraíam-no as suas aparições efêmeras, ora risíveis, ora patéticas, mas não algum possível sentido da Política e da História, que não cabe nas suas crônicas como dificilmente se depreende de seus romances e contos. (2004)

Bosi persuasively argues that Machado aims to depict the psychological struggles of people fighting for political power, rather than commenting on political ideas; and, since Machado’s characters seem to vacillate between political positions and parties, it is easy to dismiss Machado’s own commitments, and label him apolitical or disengaged. After all, for Machado, man’s very nature is unstable, inconsistent, or even capricious. Machado’s characters and narrators are quick to criticize other people’s attitudes and to disagree with their beliefs, but they offer few solutions. When pressed to show certainty or commitment to a cause, Machado’s characters and narrators falter. They resist doctrine. “É a eterna contradição humana”, God declares in the short story “A igreja do diabo” (Assis, 1975: 61). Indeed, uncertainty is part of the human condition, and Machado conceives political views as tenuous, reversible, and never final. As the narrator observes in the 1904 novel *Esau e Jacó*, when

commenting on the protagonists' views about political issues, "Não eram propriamente opiniões, não tinham raízes grandes nem pequenas. Eram (mal comparando) gravatas de cor particular, que eles atavam ao pescoço, à espera que a cor cansasse e viesse outra" (Assis, 2004: 977). As political actors, Machado's characters do not own their positions, but adopt them, adorn themselves with them, much as they would don a necktie of a particular color.

I wish to suggest that Machado's peculiar way of conceiving political opinions is not synonymous with his own lack of political involvement; rather, it suggests a nuanced form of *critical awareness* and engagement. Bosi correctly observes that Machado, his protagonists, and narrators do not "expect much from Politics"; however, I contend that their seeming lack of political steadfastness does not equate to their total disengagement. In fact, a close reading of Machado's prose reveals a rather keen focus on the political, both at the personal and the national level. His novels and short stories engage with the manners of the salon and the anxieties of an emerging urban middle class, as well as with larger, national transformations, such as the ones brought by the transition from a Brazilian Empire to a republican state.

As John Gledson notes, Astrojildo Pereira was one of the first critics to reject, in the late 1930s, "the absurd belief that Machado was indifferent to political, social and historical issues" (116). In his essays "Romancista do Segundo Reinado" (1939), "Instinto e consciência de nacionalidade" (1959), and "Crítica e política social" (1959), Pereira demonstrates the strong socio-political meaning of Machado's prose. "Existe uma consonância íntima e profunda entre o labor literário de Machado de Assis e o sentido da evolução política e social do Brasil", affirms Pereira in "Romancista do Segundo Reinado" (2008: 28). Similarly, in an essay from 1946, journalist Austregésilo de Athaíde highlights Machado's role

as an important political actor, and notes that Machado saw political participation as a personal quest that was closely connected to men’s passion for personal power, rather than lofty principles or ideas. For this reason, in Athaíde’s opinion, Machado refused to engage in debates over political regimes or ideals. Machado might have refused to join political parties or use his fiction as a means to disseminate political beliefs, but he was definitely not indifferent to political concerns according to Athaíde, for whom Machado’s strongest act of political intervention was his instrumental role in the establishment of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 1896. Indeed, as Athaíde writes:

[Machado] Escolheu para marcar a sua contribuição ao engrandecimento da civitas brasileira a política da cultura, o aperfeiçoamento dos valores intelectuais que são os últimos vestígios que se apagam na história tormentosa dos homens. A mesma Academia é fruto de uma concepção de extraordinária relevância política, no puro sentido dessa atividade ligada à direção dos povos. Ao inaugurar-la deu numa frase o sentido exato da finalidade que entre todas a engrandece e ilustra: “consolidar a unidade política, pela unidade literária”. (1946: 42)

Also aligned with Pereira and Athaíde is Raimundo Magalhães Júnior, who in 1955 published “Machado de Assis e a política”, an essay that demonstrates Machado’s involvement with politics during his journalistic career in the 1860s, and relates Machado’s literary obsession with political achievement to his failure to secure a political post during his lifetime. While the biographical tone of Magalhães Júnior’s criticism makes his essay now outdated, “Machado de Assis e a política” remains relevant for its comprehensive and meticulous analysis of the theme of politics in dozens of short stories, *crônicas*, and novels by Machado de Assis.

In 1957, Brito Broca published *Machado de Assis e a política e outros estudos*, where he analyzes Machado's combative stance toward political discussions as registered in his newspaper publications. Roberto Schwarz continued this line of inquiry with *Ao vencedor as batatas* (1977) and *Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo* (1990), highlighting Machado's portrayal of the peripheral (and contradictory) nature of Brazil's capitalist society. Almost a decade later, the economist Celso Furtado recognized in Machado's novels and short stories a clear historical context, or "horizonte histórico" (1999: 103). Furtado explains Machado's skepticism as a consequence of his inability to find a utopian horizon in which to seek refuge, rather than as proof of his aversion to politics, as it is commonly read by those who deny Machado's interest in the political milieu.

By following a similar line of inquiry, I propose we might better understand how Machado's renowned disillusion and cynicism conceal his political engagement. My argument builds upon a number of more recent publications that argue that Machado in fact communicates his political views through his literary and journalistic pieces.¹ Whereas some of these publications seek to describe his politics, I wish to focus on how Machado's comments about the literary craft itself can be understood as political statements. I read the novel *Esau e Jacó* as Machado's "treatise" on the topic of personal opinion and political engagement. In *Esau e Jacó*, Machado extends his keen self-awareness about the literary craft to accounts of any nature, from daily occurrences to larger, national events with historical importance. I argue that Machado conveys to readers a particular understanding of political opinion and participation through the novel's frequent metafictional remarks—in other words, through recurring

1 For the theme of politics in Machado's works, see Chalhoub (1999), Gouvêa (2005), Segatto (2007), Vilaça (2007), Sengès (2008), Costa (2009), and Boenavides (2011).

observations from the part of the narrator about the process of writing the novel *Esau e Jacó* itself.

ESAÚ E JACÓ: FROM THE PAGES OF THE NOVEL TO BRAZIL'S POLITICAL SCENE

Esau e Jacó starts with a reference to the protagonist Natividade walking up the Ladeira do Carmo, in Rio de Janeiro, to consult with the *cabocla do Castelo* in an attempt to learn more about the future of her twin sons, Pedro and Paulo. The *cabocla's* name, Bárbara, originates from the adjective “barbarian”, “lacking refinement and learning”, “of or relating to a land, culture, or people alien and usually believed to be inferior” (*Merriam Webster*). The *cabocla's* name implicitly positions fortune telling as a barbarian form of narrative, in opposition to other forms of narrative that would be presumably more reliable and faithful to events, such as historical narrative or scientific discourse. However, as the reader learns through a number of meta-fictional comments in *Esau e Jacó*, historical narratives—which readers often assume to be reliable foundations of political discourse—can be understood as something akin to fortune telling. The choice of the name “Bárbara” is, in my opinion, by no means casual; it is indeed Machado's way of mocking his contemporary intellectuals' and readers' trust in narrative objectivity and accuracy.

When read between the lines, *Esau e Jacó* suggests that political opinion shares more similarities with fiction and divination than political actors might want to admit. Accounts based on real-life events are as malleable and ambiguous (not to say enigmatic), as the *cabocla's* speech. With regard to the future of the twins, the fortune-teller predicts: “Coisas bonitas, coisas futuras!” (Assis, 2004: 949). The narrator immediately observes that “Todos os oráculos têm o falar dobrado, mas entendem-se” (2004: 950), therefore suggesting that the meaning of messages relies largely on the receiver's subjec-

tive, and often unconscious, intentions and yearnings. As a close reading of *Esau e Jacó* implies, both fictional and political discourses share with fortune telling a similar elusiveness and imprecision.

The numerous comments about the process of writing fiction that appear in *Esau e Jacó* can easily be applied to historical and, by extension, political discourses. This connection is supported by the narrative's well-defined historical background: the political context of the transition from Monarchy to Republic in late nineteenth-century Brazil. The novel's many references to real-life events are often framed by comments that highlight the malleable and subjective nature of historical narratives. For instance, Paulo, the republican twin, describes his birthday as the anniversary of the day that Pedro I abdicated the throne, while Pedro, the monarchist, defines it as the anniversary of the day His Majesty ascended the throne (2004: 976). Paulo and Pedro refer to the same historical date: April 7, 1831. However, the monarchist twin remembers it as the day when Pedro II was enthroned, while the republican twin recalls it as the day when Pedro I abdicated the throne in favor of his five-year old son, Pedro II. The same historical date possesses different, not to say contrary, meanings. The same date, April 7, holds a positive connotation for both Paulo and Pedro, despite their opposite political convictions. As this passages shows, in the same way that the events that compose the novel are subject to the narrator's whims, historical events are fashioned according to the individual intents of different political actors.

My study examines two aspects of *Esau e Jacó*: first, the novel's metafictional voice; in particular, the narrator's attentiveness to the subjective and contingent nature of fictional narratives. Second, the topic of human contradiction, symbolized by the novel's protagonists, the twins Pedro and Paulo, who are physically identical, but politically opposite. I argue that Machado makes use of metafictional comments, and composes two protagonists that embody the para-

doxical nature of human beings, as a means to indirectly voice his understanding of political discourses and politics in general.

NARRATIVE MASKING: LITERATURE’S LESSON ON POLITICS AND HISTORY

The narrator of *Esau e Jacó* presents his account of facts—i.e., the novel in the reader’s hands—as the product of a method that I term “narrative masking”, which consists in a process of openly hiding some aspects of what is observed while highlighting other aspects. The narrator very explicitly manipulates the events he witnesses by choosing which fragments to include or emphasize, as well as which fragments to exclude or understate in his text. This narrative method is not exclusive to *Esau e Jacó*; it is, in fact, a recurring and striking technique that appears in short stories by Machado de Assis, as well in his other novels, including *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) and *Dom Casmurro* (1899). For example, in *Memórias póstumas*, during Brás Cubas’s lifetime, the novel’s protagonist readily manages to convince himself and others of the appropriateness of certain decisions. Often, these were not the most reasonable nor the most ethical decisions, but simply the ones that would bring Cubas monetary and social gains. Cubas’s ability to pick and choose arguments that support the most profitable courses of action is extended to his *post-mortem* role as the narrator of *Memórias póstumas*. As the novel’s *narrador-defunto*, Brás Cubas employs the same strategy that he had mastered during his lifetime: he composes a narrative that, on the surface, adheres to logical reasoning, while, on a more profound level, derides logical reasoning and challenges objectivity. Other examples of “narrative masking” can be found throughout Machado’s works.²

2 This intriguing concept of “narrative masking” as a characteristic of late nineteenth-century literature merits further development beyond the scope of this reading.

In *Esau e Jacó*, the numerous metafictional remarks about the narrative process make the reader aware that the narrative in his/her hands is not an objective account of events, but rather a clever manipulation of facts that ratifies the narrator's convictions and values. In *Esau e Jacó*, "narrative masking" is also shown to take place in political and historical discourses.

Machado mocks the possibility of completely understanding the logic of events. In addition, in the few instances when the novel's narrator attempts to convince the reader of a certain point of view, he soon enough adds a comment that undermines any reliability of his words. The narrative voice in *Esau e Jacó* clearly cannot be trusted. These are some of the characteristics of the narrative: a) it omits relevant pieces of information and is intentionally imprecise; b) it exposes the impossibility of unveiling characters' true motivations; c) it describes the process of logical analysis as flawed and presents itself as ultimately unreliable. In order to better understand Machado's view of political opinion, it is necessary to examine "narrative masking", more specifically the three characteristics listed above, in more detail.

FACTUAL OMISSION AND INTENTIONAL IMPRECISION

Esau e Jacó is depicted as a text based on an "original"—albeit fictional—repository. As Dirce Cortes Riedel observes in her introduction to *Esau e Jacó*, Counselor Aires's notebooks are presented as a source of original documents on which the novel is based. However, as Riedel notes, the narrator often puts into question the reliability of the process of referring back to the sources (1996: 4). He also questions the faithful nature of the sources themselves.³ As the reader

³ Both María Tai Wolff (1987) and Marli Frantini Scarpelli (2004) develop Riedel's observation further. In the essay "Inexplicating the Nineteenth-Century Novel: *Esau e Jacó*", Wolff descri-

soon learns, the notes out of which the book is made are limited and questionable in content and coverage. The many references to Aires’s notes is no guarantee that *Esau e Jacó* is truthful to the events it portrays.

The notes left by the Counselor are neither comprehensive nor accurate. For instance, it is unclear whether Flora, a love interest shared by the brothers, was the first woman whose love the protagonists disputed. As the narrator admits, “Antes dessa, pode ser que houvesse outras e mais velhas que eles, mas de tais não rezam as notas que servem a este livro. Se brigaram por elas, não ficou memória disso (...). Conjeturas tudo” (2004: 983). In Chapter Four, it remains unexplained why a pregnant Natividade donates money to the Church during a Mass offered for the deceased João de Melo, a former admirer of hers. The narrator suggests, but is not able to guarantee, that Natividade’s generous donation was her peculiar way to thank Melo for his devotion: “Não digo que sim, nem que não; faltam-me pormenores” (2004: 955).

The novel’s inaccuracy results not only from a lack of access to the facts, but also from a tendency to embellish the narrative. When describing Flora’s reserved and shy personality, the narrator admits resorting to exaggeration as a rhetorical device used in order to capture his audience’s attention: “Ao piano, entregue a si mesma, era capaz de não comer um dia inteiro. Há aí o seu tanto de exagerado, mas a hipérbole é deste mundo, e as orelhas da gente andam já tão

bes *Esau e Jacó* as “a novel in which he [Machado de Assis] reveals a careful and suspicious reading of the nineteenth century and its fictions and histories—of its ways of reading and writing—and succeeds in inexplicating its explanations” (1987: 50); in “Repetição e diferença: *Esau e Jacó*, de Machado de Assis”, Scarpelli examines how Machado de Assis “se põe a tarefa de pulverizar fronteiras entre os territórios de verdade e verossimilhança, reconhecendo, nas virtualidades da ficção, a potência de interferir na história, já que as operações de tradução e suplementaridade empregadas por ambas não diferem” (2004: 207-08).

entupidas que só à força de muita retórica se pode meter por elas um sopro de verdade” (2004: 986).

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF UNVEILING CHARACTERS’
TRUE MOTIVATIONS

Esau e Jacó’s third-person narrator is far from being omniscient. In addition, the narrator is not the only one who ignores the characters’ true motives; the characters themselves are often not aware of their genuine motivation, and on multiple occasions there is more than one legitimate drive behind their actions. For instance, when Counselor Aires’s sister, Rita, has her hair cut in honor of her recently deceased husband, the widow herself feels ashamed for her decision, which she does not fully understand. “Que valia cortar os cabelos por haver perdido o melhor dos maridos?” , Rita asks herself; the widow “tinha vexame de um ato tão sincero” (2004: 987). With the passage of time, Rita learns that other people interpret her attitude as evidence of her devotion to her late husband. Her initially puzzling and shameful act soon becomes, in her own opinion, a reasonable and honorable proof of love: as the narrator explains, “Entrou a ver que fizera bem, (...) e, na intimidade, a lembrá-lo” (2004: 987). Years later, Rita is pleased to learn from Flora that her act of abnegation also marks her uniqueness as a woman, as the following passage shows:

– Nenhuma outra viúva faria isso, disse ela [Flora].

Aqui foi D. Rita que lhe pegou nas mãos, pô-las sobre os seus ombros, e concluiu o gesto por um abraço. Todas as pessoas louvaram-lhe a abnegação do ato. Esta era a primeira que a achou única. E daí outro abraço longo, mais longo... (2004: 1071)

Acts are never transparent in their meanings, and any reasoning behind them is merely one possible explanation that coexists with

many others. “Os mesmos sapatos de um irmão das almas, que ia a dobrar a esquina da Rua da Misericórdia para a de S. José, pareciam rir de alegria, quando realmente gemiam de cansaço”, observes the narrator (2004: 950). Events, people, and places are subject to the emotional state of the individuals who interpret them. Even nature is seen through the eyes of the observer: “Quando a sorte ri, toda a natureza ri também, e o coração ri como tudo o mais” (2004: 951).

THE MANY FLAWS IN LOGICAL ANALYSIS AND THE ULTIMATE UNRELIABILITY OF THE NARRATIVE

In the novel, imprecision arises even in the face of an authentic desire to understand events. After receiving good news about her sons’ future, Natividade donates two thousand *réis* to an alms collector, a very high amount for the time. In the chapter “A esmola da felicidade”, the reader learns that the collector had concluded that Natividade and her sister were returning from an amorous adventure. In the narrator’s words,

[o irmão das almas] deduziu isto de três fatos, que sou obrigado a enfileirar aqui para não deixar este homem sob a suspeita de caluniador gratuito. O primeiro foi a alegria delas, o segundo o valor da esmola, o terceiro o carro que as esperava a um canto, como se elas quisessem esconder do cocheiro o ponto dos namorados. (2004: 952)

This episode suggests that one may easily arrive at false conclusions through detailed reflection, sound reasoning, and honest intentions. Logical thinking is no guarantee of accurate inferences.

Machado’s novel openly displays the untrustworthy nature of fictional narratives. To that end, the author employs a variety of metafictional remarks that explicitly undermine the dependability of narrative accounts. As a consequence, the few instances in which the

narrator defends the reliability of the information he shares acquire an ironic tone. One example of such satirical treatment of the narrative voice can be found in Chapter Five, titled “Há contradições explicáveis”. In this chapter, the narrator blames the apparent inconsistencies of his story on his commitment to the truth, adding that:

Um bom autor, que inventasse a sua história, ou prezasse a lógica aparente dos acontecimentos, levaria o casal Santos a pé ou em caleça de praça ou de aluguel; mas eu, amigo, eu sei como as causas se passaram, e refiro-as tais quais. Quando muito, explico-as, com a condição de que tal costume não pegue. (2004: 955)

Machado’s reader, however, is very much aware that the narrator rather designs his accounts of events according to his own caprice. As María Tai Wolff observes, Machado questions the representation of reality both in novels and in history; he “explores the accounts or versions of experience—spiritism, novels, histories, speeches—in which his characters and contemporaries put their faith—a faith which involves both their participation and their manipulation” (1987: 48). Individuals’ explanations may be (and often are) easily manipulated to impart the appearance of reliability. In the face of the unreliable nature of narratives, not much can be affirmed without doubt. This idea is summarized in the tautology articulated in Chapter Twenty-Nine of *Esau e Jacó*, where the law of identity is presented as a conclusion: “O que se deve crer sem erro é que Deus é Deus; e, se alguma rapariga árabe me estiver lendo, ponha-lhe Alá. Todas as línguas vão dar no céu” (2004: 983).

PEDRO AND PAULO: THE OPPOSITE AS THE SAME

In *Esau e Jacó*, the twins Pedro and Paulo symbolize human contradiction. To better understand this symbolism, one must refer back to

the biblical narrative of Esau and Jacob, found in the *Book of Genesis*. The story of Isaac’s twin sons is a narrative about the right of primogeniture, as well as about differentiation (Wajnberg, 2003: 84). In *O gosto da glosa*, Daisy Wajnberg observes that there will always be a question about identity when it comes to the twins: how to distinguish these two individuals who look like one? (2003: 84) A similar question appears in Machado’s novel: Pedro and Paulo are identical and at the same time radically opposite. The twins embody the intrinsic duplicity of human beings, as well as the unstable nature of opinion.

At first, the twins are presented as perfect opposites. But, soon, the reader realizes that Pedro and Paulo are more alike than anyone, or the brothers themselves, would like to admit. For instance, Flora, deeply in love with both siblings, cannot avoid the impression that Pedro and Paulo are the same. In the presence of one, she often feels as if the other were also present. Later in the narrative, and already in the beginning of a delirious state that ends with her death, Flora sees the twins merging into one person: “a imaginação fez dos dois moços uma pessoa única” (Assis, 2004: 1048). But it is not only in the level of hallucination that the twins appear as one. Counselor Aires, for instance, does not agree that Flora’s confusion about the twin’s identity is a symptom of her delirium, because Aires himself also sees the twins as one: “quando lhe repetiram o diálogo, [Aires] rejeitou o delírio” (2004: 1080). In fact, even the narrator himself suggests more than once that Pedro and Paulo are the same.

In spite of their opposite political views, Pedro and Paulo are equally described as a sensible man, or “um rapaz de juízo” (2004: 1037), and are elected to the House of Representatives in the same year, therefore suggesting that both political extremes are similarly sensible and reasonable. In reference to the house inhabited by the twins, the narrator asks, “Como pode um teto só cobrir tão diver-

“... e os pensamentos?””, and quickly explains: “Nem esqueça o próprio crânio do homem, que os cobre igualmente, não só diversos [pensamentos], senão opostos” (2004: 1066). Pedro and Paulo symbolize the multiple nature of individuals. The identical brothers are one person and different people at the same time; they are the multiple combined in one. The twins represent the capacity of an individual to behave in a contradictory way and to hold opposite opinions without necessarily being dishonest or deceiving.⁴

Esau e Jacó is the story of two individuals with extremely distinct views on politics that end up following a very similar path in life. The two protagonists embody Machado’s belief that opposite ideas are not as distinct as they might appear. The novel also suggests that opinions and affiliations—including political ones—are not definitive. Opinions and affiliations may (and often do) change, not necessarily because individuals are untrue or dishonest, but rather because human character is malleable.

FROM THE SYMBOLISM OF THE TWINS TO A LESSON IN POLITICS

The possibility of attributing the same discourse to political actors belonging to different groups is the topic of a chapter on Paulo’s political piece on the abolition of slavery in Brazil. In the novel, the republican Paulo believed his discourse was unmistakably the words of a republican, and in tune with his disagreement with the monarchist government. Paulo’s father, Santos, however, understood it differently. Since Santos wanted to see his son’s piece published in the newspapers, Paulo’s words become, for Santos, the work of a lib-

4 Another character who experiences duplicity in herself is Flora, with her wearying indecision and her feeling of being pulled in both directions that would stop her from choosing one brother over the other to marry.

eral monarchist. For the reader, it becomes clear that Paulo’s political piece could pass as both.

For Machado, there is no “truth” or “core” in events, ideas, documents, or discourses themselves. Opinion, or interpretation, is all that exists. When it comes to assessments of events, for instance, there is no puzzle to be solved. The narrator of *Esau e Jacó* clearly communicates to the reader that his own arguments are selected and emphasized according to his ulterior motives, an idea that can be applied to any political stance. Political discourse and fictional narrative are alike: they are composed according to personal goals, all the while maintaining an impersonal and neutral tone. In addition, even when one argument is used by two individuals to make a case, the same argument can be construed in a multitude of different ways, therefore leading to a diversity of plausible—possibly contradictory but comparably accurate—inferences.

As one learns from *Esau e Jacó*, it is only necessary to turn one’s eyes to different aspects of events for people to obtain a different take on matters, or to see a new facet of one’s political beliefs. In the novel, this concept is displayed in the episode when Flora’s mother, Claudia, attempts to safeguard her husband’s chances to be elected president of one of Brazil’s provinces in the newly formed liberal government. Claudia tries to convince her husband, Batista, a member of the recently defeated conservative party, that he had always been a liberal at heart. As Claudia explains to Batista, “[Batista] estava com eles [os conservadores], como a gente está num baile, onde não é preciso ter as mesmas ideias para dançar a mesma quadrilha” (2004: 1004). It does not take much effort to convince Batista, who himself was suffering from his loss of political power. Opinions, including political views, are presented in the novel as flexible, as the following passage reveals: “A sós consigo, Batista pensou muita vez na situação pessoal e política. Apalpava-se moralmente. Cláudia podia ter

razão. Que é que havia nele propriamente conservador, a não ser esse instinto de toda criatura, que a ajuda a levar este mundo?” (2004: 1005). Batista can easily see himself as a liberal, not only because he desires to join the winning party to regain political influence, but also because conservative and liberal principles are not that dissimilar. Conflicting groups and opposite political parties often share similar views, even though their members rarely notice it.

The novel’s episode concerning the spiritual cult headed by the eccentric leader Plácido also makes the argument for the deceiving nature of political transformation. A group of individuals, disagreeing with Plácido’s leadership, decides to form another church in a different part of town. The irony of this incident resides in the fact that the new church is based on exactly the same doctrine as the previous one, since the dissidents “pregavam que a correspondência exata não era antes entre as vogais e os sentidos, mas entre os sentidos e as vogais” (2004: 1050). This episode is another visible instance of Machado’s ironic and elusive way of criticizing the superficial nature of the transformations brought about by changes in the political party (or regime) in power in Brazil.

Looks deceive both in the realm of fiction and in the terrain of politics. Behind the appearance of a profound transformation, there may hide nothing more than a superficial change. In the novel, following the proclamation of the Republic, Counselor Aires states: “Nada se mudaria; o regime, sim, era possível, mas também se muda de roupa sem trocar de pele” (2004: 1031). It seems reasonable to read Aires’s disillusioned remark about the new government as a result of Machado’s disappointment with the political changes brought by the proclamation of the Republic in Brazil in 1889, rather than a definitive proof of the author’s radical disbelief in political involvement.

As the reader learns from *Esau e Jacó*, appearances deceive, and profound political changes rarely take place. But this realization does

not equal a defense of alienation from the realm of politics. Machado de Assis himself, despite his bitter view of Brazil’s socio-economic situation, remains politically involved by writing and publishing works of fiction that hold valuable information about political discourse. One can find the author’s analytical—and definitely engaged—understanding of political discourse and social involvement in Machado’s critical way of conceiving fictional narrative. His wary, if not skeptical take on political participation is a particular form of involvement, one that is extremely aware of the partial nature of narratives, including accounts that mostly aim at justifying one’s political positioning and actions. Opinions may be, indeed, like neckties. But, as we learn from Machado’s prose, in order to have agency and effect change, one cannot avoid putting on a necktie of a certain color before standing up in a political tribune. Or writing a novel, for that matter.

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ABSTRACT

Machado de Assis’s view of politics is a controversial topic. Since the late nineteenth century, critics have diverged on the degree and nature of the Brazilian writer’s political engagement, as registered in his *crônicas*, short stories, and novels. I begin my essay with a review of the most important critical works that touch upon this theme, and propose that Machado often comments on politics in his fiction, but that he does so in a subtle, indirect manner. In this essay, I focus on Machado’s novel *Esau e Jacó*, and argue that the metafictional observations that abound in this novel can be applied not only to fictional narratives, but also to political discourse. I interpret these metafictional comments as Machado’s strategy to highlight the partial and subjective quality of political discourse. Finally, I analyze the protagonists of the novel, the twins Pedro and Paulo, as symbols of the paradoxical nature of human beings and, by extension, the instability of individual political opinions.

Keywords: Machado de Assis; politics; *Esau e Jacó*; nineteenth century; metafiction; Empire; Republic

RESUMO

Não é tarefa simples definir a interseção entre literatura e política na ficção de Machado de Assis. Diferentes críticos têm interpretado de modo distinto o grau e a natureza da participação política do escritor brasileiro em seus contos, romances e crônicas. Partindo de uma revisão da fortuna crítica

sobre a visão política de Machado, proponho que o autor registra seu envolvimento político de forma com frequência indireta. Neste ensaio, focalizo o romance *Esau e Jacó*. Argumento que os inúmeros comentários metaficcionais presentes nesta obra se aplicam não somente à narrativa ficcional, mas consistem também em comentários disfarçados sobre a natureza da política, uma vez que servem para ressaltar o caráter parcial e subjetivo dos discursos políticos. Em seguida, analiso os protagonistas do romance, os gêmeos Pedro e Paulo, como símbolos da essência paradoxal do ser humano e, por extensão, da instabilidade da opinião política dos indivíduos.

Palavras-chave: Machado de Assis; política; *Esau e Jacó*; século XIX; metaficção; Império; República