

MACHADO DE ASSIS'S EPILEPSY

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SUMMARY — Machado de Assis (1839-1908) is considered the most important Brazilian writer and a great universal literary figure. Little is known about his medical, personal and family history. He hid his «disease» as much as possible. Machado referred to «strange thing*» having happened to him in his childhood. He described seizure® as «nervous phenomena*, «absences», «my illness». Laet observed a seizure and described it as: «... when Machado approached us and spoke to me in disconnected words. I looked at him in surprise and found his features altered. Knowing that from time to time he had nervous problems,... and only permitted Machado take the Laranjeiras Street car, when I saw that he was completely well». A photographically documented seizure is shown. Alencar wrote, «The preoccupation with health was frequent: either he was having the consequences of a fit or was foreboding one». It is clear that Machado presented localized symptomatic epilepsy with complex partial seizures secondarily generalized of unknown etiology. The seizures which began in infancy or childhood had remission in adolescence and then recurred in his thirties and became more frequent in his later years. His depression got markedly worse with age. In our opinion, the greatest consequence of Machado's epilepsy, was his psychological suffering due to the prejudice of the times. Despite this Machado showed all his genius, which is still actual and universal.

A epilepsia de Machado de Assis.

RESUMO — Machado de Assis (1839-1908) é considerado um dos mais importantes escritores brasileiros e uma grande personalidade literária universal. Pouco se sabe sobre sua história médica, pessoal e familiar. Machado referiu ter tido na infância crises epiléticas, caracterizadas como «coisas esquisitas». Ele descrevia suas crises epiléticas como «fenômenos nervosos», «ausências» ou «minha doença». Carlos de I^aet assistiu a uma crise e descreveu-a «... quando de nós se acercou o Machado e dirigiu-me palavras em que não percebi nexos. Encarei-o surpreso e achei-lhe demudada a fisionomia. Sabendo que de tempos em tempos o saltavam incômodos nervosos, despedi-me do outro cavalheiro, dei o braço ao amigo enfermo, fi-lo tomar um cordial na mais próxima farmácia e só o deixei no bonde das Laranjeiras, quando o vi de todo restabelecido, a proibir-me, que o acompanhasse até casa». Mostramos uma fotografia de Machado durante uma crise no Caes Pharoux no dia 1^o de setembro de 1907, documentada pelo fotógrafo Malta. Mário de Alencar escreveu: «A preocupação com a saúde era freqüente: ou havia os efeitos de um acesso do mal terrível ou a iminência dele. Falava-me como a seu próprio médico, confiando-me tudo, consultando-me sobre minúcias da moléstia e o que havia de dizer ao seu facultativo». Parece-nos tilaro que Machado apresentava epilepsia localizada sintomática com crises parciais complexas secundariamente generalizadas, de etiologia desconhecida. As crises iniciaram na infância, tiveram remissão na adolescência e recidivaram na terceira década, tornando-se mais freqüentes nos últimos anos. Machado apresentou episódios de depressão que se «acentuaram na última década. Em nossa opinião, a maior conseqüência da epilepsia de Machado de Assis foi o sofrimento psicológico devido ao preconceito vigente. Apesar disto, Machado foi capaz de mostrar toda a sua genialidade, que ainda é atual e cada vez mais reconhecida universalmente.

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Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (MA) was born in 1839 in Rio de Janeiro where he lived and died in 1908^{2,12}. He is considered the most important Brazilian writer and a great universal literary figure. This universality does not come from the curiosity which his works sometimes arouse due to exotic themes, reflecting the Brazilian spirit and atmosphere. It comes rather from deep and subtle adventures into the human psyche and brings to light the universal values and nuances in man. All this was done in classic Portuguese, showing his perfect style and dominion of his mother tongue²¹. He was the author of a large number of novels, short stories, plays, essays, poems, critiques, political essays, besides being a reporter, magazine editor, government employee and candidate for a public office^{1^}

MA's life was closely linked to the city of Rio de Janeiro. He wrote not only of the conflicts of the human soul, but also of life in the streets and burroughs of that famous city on his excursions through the life there. He questioned the traditions and objectives of the common man^{i*}. In 1897, he founded the Brazilian Academy of Letters and was its first President. "Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas" (1880) translated as "Epitaph of a Small Winner" is considered to be his masterpiece.

REPORT

Little is known of the medical, personal, and family history of MA's life, making* the study of it difficult. However, we do know that he was mulatto, and came from a humble family²¹. He hid «his disease* as much as possible. MA referred to «strange things» having happened to him in his childhood. This difficulty in talking about his disease was well known. It is said that he never even confessed to Carolina, his companion and confidant, that he was epileptic. He married her without warning her of the problem. Pereira⁷ refers to a convulsion that he had «same time after the marriage» on a boat which was taking them from the Pharoux Dock to Maua, from where they would take the train to Petrópolis. She questioned him after watching this first attack. He described the seizures as «nervous phenomena», «absences», «my illness»[^]. Alencari wrote «The preoccupation with health was frequent either he was having the consequences of a fit or was foreboding one».

Laets observed a seizure and described it as «One day I was talking with someone on Gonçalves Dias Street, when MA approached us and spoke incoherently. I looked at him in surprise and saw his features altered. Knowing that from time to time he suffered nervous problems, I said good-bye to the other gentleman, took MA by the arm, and guided him to a nearby pharmacy where I urged him to take a medicine. I only left him on the streetcar going to Laranjeiras when I observed that he had fully recovered. He prohibited me from accompanying him home». Laet^S added, «In solitude he daily registered the symptoms of his disease: sleepiness, absence, ire, bilious taste in his mouth, nervous crises, and loss of memory».

According to Vianna Filho^P, MA on September 4, wrote: «Absence in Garnier's house where I drank water and Lansac gave me smelling salts. It was afternoon. They made me sit down and I answered in Portuguese to his questions in French». Probably he had had an alteration of consciousness at this episode. A photographer in Rio de Janeiro named Malta, documented MA having a seizure (Fig. 1) during an afternoon at Pharoux Dock^{io}.

There are references which say that MA consulted Doctor Miguel Couto and that he took bromides. It seems that the drug was not efficient and caused some unpleasant side effects. We suppose that because of this a friend advised him to discontinue the treatment and try homeopathy⁹. Grieco⁷ refers to an occasion when MA feeling an epileptic crisis coming on he approached the desk of a colleague, his friend Villas-Boas, inhaling smelling salts. If the crises became generalized they would take him to Paço Square where a coachman (always the same one) was in charge of taking him to his home in Cosme Velho.

MA's seizures began in infancy or childhood, had remission in adolescence and then recurred in his thirties and became more frequent in his later years.

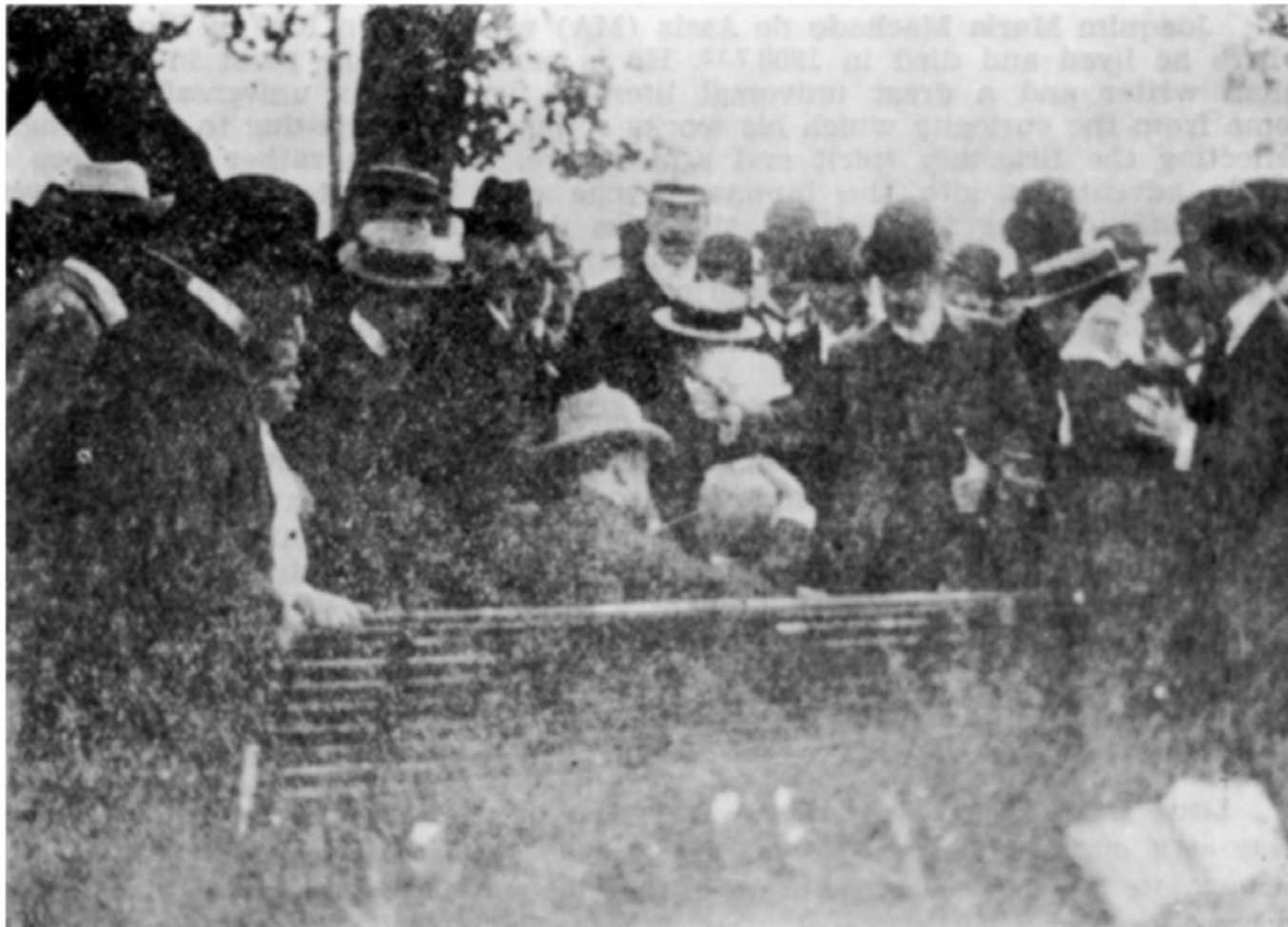


Fig. 1. The Malta's photographic documentation of Machado de Assis having a seizure: he is seen fallen down, reclining on a bench; a man is fanning him, trying to alleviate the seizure. In: Peregrino Junior 1938 (16). · Reproduction authorized by the publisher: Livraria José Olympio Editora S/A., Rio de Janeiro.

COMMENTS

It is clear that MA presented localized symptomatic epilepsy with complex partial seizures⁴. The presence of aura, the alteration of consciousness, the postictal confusion, the frequency, the random distribution during his life suggest the temporal lobe origin of the seizures⁵. We can presume, when interpreting Laet's description of MA "spoke incoherently", that probably the epileptic focus was in the right temporal region. According to Williamson et al.²² the occurrence of comprehensible spoken language during a seizure, despite being incoherent, has the tendency to lateralize the origin of the crises in the non-dominant temporal lobe.

There are occasional descriptions which permit us to deduce that MA had fits of depression. But, MA's depression became important only in his later years. He had periods of emotional instability and after his wife's decease was constantly melancholic and thought of death. Several studies have found that depression occurs frequently in people with epilepsy¹⁹. Predisposing or provoking factors are, among others: genetic endowment, patient's fear, social stigmatization, and limbic pathology. The relation between depression and epilepsy is complex and controversial. In the present case we cannot come to any conclusion.

MA complained of his intestines. He probably had chronic colitis. He admitted, however, that this was a small complaint in relation to epilepsy. In his later years, he had a visual deficiency. He needed the help of Carolina to read to him and write down what he dictated¹⁷.

In 1938, Peregrino Junior¹⁶ in his book on the illness and constitution of MA interpreted the author and his works according to the epileptic personality

concepts of Mme. Minkowska. Nowadays, in spite of the continued controversy about the epileptic personality and psychiatric aspects of epileptics 3,6, the ideas of that time do not carry much weight.

The greatest suffering of MA seems to have been related to society's prejudice of epilepsy. It seems that the word "epilepsy" was never used or pronounced. In the first edition of "Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas" he described a scene which portrays Virgília's suffering at her lover's death: "I do not say that she rolled on the floor, epileptic...". From the second edition on it was corrected "...that she rolled on the floor, convulsive..." 16.

Once he excused himself for having difficulty in talking because of the bites on his tongue after a fit, "These aphtas! These aphtas!" So, MA denied his "disease" as much as possible".

As far as we know, MA did not show any personality disturbance usually attributed to some epileptic patients, such as: hyposexuality, hyperreligiosity, viscosity, prolixity and hypergraphia. Despite being a prolific writer he cannot be classified as hypergraphia. We have not enough information about MA sexuality; we do know that he left no children; the feminine sexual image that he portrays in his works argues against hyposexuality. Possibly, MA had a Christian upbringing; for sure, he was never deeply involved with religion".

The importance of this paper, besides describing some of MA's seizures, according to the present classification of epileptic seizures and epilepsy, is to confirm the deep impact that epilepsy had on his life. MA, like all geniuses, is an important social paradigm. Like MA, thousands of people in Brazil and all over the world, suffer from the prejudice in relation to epilepsy. Despite it, at a time when no satisfactory treatment was available, MA was able to use all his genius in his works. Even now, many scholars *5.20 discover the universality and the profound psychological and social analyses contained in MA legacy to humanity.

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