

“The Fortuneteller” and “The Secret Cause”: Machado’s style in translation

“A Cartomante” e “A Causa Secreta”: o estilo de Machado em tradução

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ABSTRACT

A Cartomante (The Fortuneteller) and *A Causa Secreta* (The Secret Cause), by Machado de Assis, deal with the themes of adultery and betrayal, also recurrent in authors such as Henry James. The relation between translated works and the literary system is the starting point for studies in translation within the polysystems theory of Itamar Even-Zohar. The association of this aspect and the minute study of narrative technique and point of view are crucial to the translator’s task when working on Machado de Assis in order to lead the reader to comprehend Machado’s short story style.

KEY WORDS

Polysystems; Short story; Translation; Narrative.

RESUMO

A Cartomante e *A Causa Secreta*, de Machado de Assis, abordam os temas adultério e traição, temas recorrentes também em autores como Henry James. A relação entre trabalhos traduzidos e o sistema literário é ponto de partida para estudos de tradução, dentro da teoria de polisistemas de Itamar Even-Zohar. Associar essa visão com o estudo minucioso de técnica narrativa e ponto de vista é tarefa do tradutor de Machado, no intuito de levar o leitor a compreender o estilo do conto machadiano.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Polissistemas; Conto; Tradução; Narrativa.

Machado de Assis, Brazil’s foremost author of the XIX century, is cited as having perhaps written one of the first modern novels of the western hemisphere, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. The narrator

in the novel spins his story after death and his view of life is ironic, while, at the same time, invoking the reader to judge and participate throughout the reading. Machado de Assis' genius in novel writing is evident, but it is his contribution to the modern short story that is the subject of this article. It is undeniably true that he is the founder of the modern Brazilian short story; no other before him had experimented so widely with different narrative techniques, varying points of view and subject matter. His themes span the several conflicts of human existence, touching the issue of time's effects, human inadequacy, jealousy, love conflicts and more. He can also be associated, though this fact may not always be remembered, to the modern movement in the development of the short story, along with Chekhov and Joyce, thus, one can place his importance among the great universal literary geniuses. In these authors' perspective, the modern short story must represent human actions and decisions as a spectacle and the destiny of humanity is frequently depicted as some inexplicable game of sorts. Machado's take on this is done in a style all his own, one that he gradually developed throughout his writing career. His touch is ironic and, at times, comical – his manner of seeing this spectacle which is humanity is linked, as well, to his opinions about the Brazilian search for an identity. In several of his essays, he expresses his desire of seeing Brazil take steps towards becoming a mature and truly modern nation, both culturally speaking, as well as in the country's political actions. To Machado, a nation can show more external signs of its development in the political and economic areas than in the cultural arena. It is not as easy for a country to show the same level of development in its literature, which seems to reflect signs of progress at a slower rate. Regardless of his critical view of those literary works that defended "national" themes as a form of constructing a national identity, Machado did indeed defend the need to bolster the nation's literature, and this could be done more easily with the rise of serious criticism, one that could indicate a path to high quality in writing and prepare the way for the growth of a reading

public. Brazil's readiness for mature and rational criticism, at least in cultural terms, was a concern for this writer and he often questioned the slowness with which certain changes took place.

One might wonder how a "master on the periphery of capitalism", to quote Roberto Schwarz (2000), could achieve fame in the international literary market among foreign readers. His concerns as a writer and critic seem to echo those of so many other well-known writers of the XIX and XX centuries. Machado's work seems to echo in those of Henry James, his contemporary, an American of great literary talent and critical vision when it came to his nation's position in the world and the need to create a reading public. What joins these two writers, whose contact and knowledge of each other's work was highly unlikely, is their shared insight into the workings of human nature, of how men and women relate to each other in often peculiar ways, devising forms of contact that are often revealed to the observer (i.e. the reader) little by little, leading up to an often surprising end in their novels and stories. Both James and Machado were writers of a new world, XIX century nations in formation, both nations in their own manners seeking to invent themselves and find what their role in the world would be.

Nevertheless, Henry James' works would end up taking a central position in the universal literary system gradually growing in these two nations, while Machado's would take a peripheral one. When one considers the implications of this for translation, Even-Zohar's polysystems theory almost immediately comes to mind, for this scholar develops his work departing from several questions about the role of translation for the formation of national identities and about the relatively little research that has been done to study the relation between "original" works and those that have been translated for the general development of cultural in a country.

Though Zohar's theory has brought up some controversy – on the one hand, by those who defend his ideas and attempt to answer questions he made years ago and does not intend necessarily to answer; on the other,

by those who see flaws in his position and question certain terms used to describe literatures – it is a useful starting point in the discussion of Machado de Assis' translations to English and the significance of translating so-called peripheral literature into the languages that are mainstream.

The translations of Machado's works have allowed Brazilian scholars, especially those who have studied his texts closely, to evaluate the reception of his work abroad. Currently there are several translations of Machado into Spanish, English and other languages. It might be interesting to ask ourselves how Machado can be read by a foreign reader today and not be branded "exotic", or "art for export", as João Cezar de Castro Rocha mentions in his text "Introduction: Machado de Assis – The Location of an Author". Though national identity should play an important role in the reading of Machado de Assis, it can also be a limiting factor, if one takes the term "peripheral" employed by Zohar, to mean "less important". Evidently, if one reads Zohar further, we realize that he never meant to use "peripheral" with a value attached to it. It is clear that the term only serves to illustrate positions, in which the central one that certain literatures hold will be affected, to some extent or other, by the literature of another culture. In this case, for reasons that will not be the focus of this paper, English speaking nations hold a central position reflected in terms of their literature (we will not go into other areas of influence) if compared to literatures in Portuguese. According to Zohar, those cultures whose literature has already established itself as relevant in the general system will tend to resist a body of work that is foreign to them. The tendency then would be for the "foreignness" of this repertoire to be made more palatable, more natural to the reader who will receive the translation.

Studies in Brazilian literature in general have focused a great deal on the issue of themes, paying special attention to the social and historical questions that have been the concern of the nation for the last two centuries at least. School curriculums seem to attest to this fact. There seem to be fewer studies on style or narrative technique, on the details

that are so important in characterizing an author besides the themes he or she dwells on. A major problem for Brazilian literature today seems to be the ongoing struggle for readership, whether abroad or even internally. Translated works evidently have played an important role in the formation of a reading public internally and have also helped, to a certain extent, in the formation of the writers of a nation. Machado himself declared that a certain restraint in the use of the national themes in Brazilian literature would be wise, though he recognized that Brazilian authors used these themes in their works perhaps as a form of creating a more independent literature, one that could, at the same time, use the influences coming into the country either in the original languages (French, Spanish, German, Italian) or by translation, and develop as a literature in opposition to those influences. Nevertheless, in his essays, Machado calls our attention to the need to look beyond our frontiers, to the universal themes that are a part of our literature as much as the themes that refer to our so-called origins. Therefore, besides the question of the themes in Machado's works, it is interesting to pay special attention to how Machado de Assis experimented with language and story-telling and how this development in style became a trademark in his overall literary work. One must especially see the importance given by Machado to the narrator's point of view and to the subtle shifts in this point of view.

Often, as translators, we may ask ourselves whether, if Machado de Assis had written in English, he would have been as well-known as Edgar Allan Poe, James Joyce or Henry James himself, the latter being the one author who is more linked to Machado in terms of theme and style. The answer is obviously difficult to come by, but leads us to the question of translation and its effect on a worldwide reading public that has not had much contact with Brazilian literature. Thus, as we celebrated the author's centennial since his death, I decided to propose a project that would bring an assortment of Machado's stories to the English language. The basic premise of the project, which a group of

students at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) under my coordination worked on, was to focus on the importance Machado de Assis has in our literature through translations into English, with added reflections on the task of translation from a language such as Portuguese, not well-known outside the countries in which it is a native tongue. Some issues that came up in the translation of Machado's stories echoed Evan-Zohar's questions of how a translation could replace, change or add on to a literary system. In these terms, in relation to American literature (to which James belong, though he is also part of British anthologies), Brazilian literature would naturally assume a "weak" position, one in which certain conditions of compatibility must be met. The English speaking reader would therefore "resist" the reading of a translated work, especially one coming from a culture on the periphery.

Another aspect, however, in this reflection on translation would also approach the issue of the translation of style and narrative focus which plays such a crucial role in Machado's short stories. The approximation between Machado and Henry James can be more clearly seen in this approach. For, besides the question of themes (love, friendship, adultery and betrayal), the subtle play with words, the hidden gestures and secrets that are only insinuated between the lines are found in both these authors' works. Style is evidently individual, in regards to the work an author puts into creating his own special form, but the forms are often reflected in one and in the other. In relation to Machado, it is through his style that the author reveals many surprising elements to the reader. Not least important are the revelations, of course, about Brazil and its cultural peculiarities, but these extend to the act of reading itself. Machado reveals much about Brazilian society and its curious class relations, the relationship between men and women, how money is dealt with, beliefs, morals and urban life. If one agrees that translations contribute to literary systems, the translation of Machado de Assis represents a major contribution in that it presents the possibility of showing the reader the workings of the style of a superior writer, one that can align himself to a great author such as Henry James.

If one reads Machado's essays attentively it is clear that he was concerned about building a readership among Brazilians. He made comments on the lack, in Brazilian cultural and literary life, of the full development of forms such as drama, fiction (novel and short story) and poetry. He does not attribute this vacuum necessarily to the people's disinterest, for he defends the idea that people will flock to whatever is pleasing to their taste. However, it is a fact that, at the Machado de Assis' time, in 1872, more than 80% of the Brazilian population did not know how to read. In this scenario, to whom was Machado writing? Who would his reading public be? Besides the question of where his readers would come from, there was also the fact that Machado, in the years in which he develops into a mature writer, did not choose to write in the accepted style of the time, the Romantic style, which he saw as a movement of the past. His writings were provocative and he strived to disturb the reader, so accustomed to French novels and other works written in the same fashion. What Machado desired was a new reader and, with this purpose in mind, he wrote his novels and short stories. It is in this effort that lies much of his originality. As he directs his narrative to the reader, often speaking to him directly, he is challenging this reader's provincialism, accommodation and limitations.

Machado's reading experience also comes to mind as we read his stories – and he was truly a great reader. It is in relation to this that the network of literary works, either in their original language or in translations, affected the author's world. His readings permeate his stories at every point. Evidently, any of the first writers of fiction in Brazil had to necessarily be readers before they could write, and critical readers at that. Machado's private library will, therefore, naturally influence his writing. In a short story such as *A Cartomante*, for example, the opening lines of the story refers to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the famous words on what lies between heaven and earth. In many other stories there are references to the Bible, Greek classics and so much more. In other

words, the author never underestimates his reader – to a certain point, he is educating and encouraging the reader to move forward and look for the references he has made in his stories.

The writing edge that was to become a mark of his work, and which points to a watershed for Machado's career as an author, came, in fact, only after 1879 and it is exactly at this point that his stories become filled with references to his own readings. By never underestimating his reader, Machado wants us to fill in the gaps, to build ourselves as readers as well. He joins these references with touches of irony, a tone of humor that makes his work even more appealing. Having all of world literature at his disposal frees Machado de Assis from having to adopt any particular style or follow any special form. He becomes a creator of his own style and this, after all, is what genius is made of. Therefore, as Castro Rocha says, Machado reveals how a "creative author [can become] above all a malicious reader of the tradition." (ROCHA, 2008) After all, once Machado understood the autonomy a Brazilian writer should have in the definition of a national identity, being at the same time attached to national themes but not limited to them, he could freely explore not only the themes he desired, but also forms and styles that might express his art more adequately.

Therefore, the task of translating Machado's stories reveals several interesting and disturbing questions. Translating literature in general places the translator in a peculiar albeit privileged position, since he or she must read with the closest attention possible and face choices that can only be taken when a certain intimacy has been established with the text. The see-saw motion of the translator takes him or her from observing the whole picture of literary systems to the close attention given to the minutiae of the text, its subtle workings and tricks. At one moment we are asking ourselves, as Zohar does "What kind of relations might there be among translated works ... detached from their home contexts and consequently neutralized from the point of view of center-and-periphery struggles?" (EVEN-ZOHAR, p. 192), while at the other,

what shall be done at the linguistic level to reveal the art of fiction (James' concern, no doubt) of this writer?

In the case of *A Cartomante*, or *The Fortunteller*¹, though adultery is at the center of the story, what is actually being revealed goes beyond a mere love story. The reader must be made to realize, among other things, that one of the main character's position, socially speaking, is one that may be familiar to the Brazilian reader – Camilo is a civil servant for nothing better to do. Though opportunities have been given to him, his lack of any definite drive has brought him to this position. It is all quite accidental. And this seems to be his stance in life as well. His upbringing is remembered as having been filled with the teachings of a superstitious, god-fearing mother, but which in adulthood he soon drops for the vaguest outlook, one that is revealed as that of having no position at all. It is no wonder, then, that he becomes involved with his best friend's wife. It is not a particularly troublesome adventure to have this affair with Rita; it is seen as sweet and convenient.

The narrator in the story seems to take on the role of easygoing onlooker and invites us readers to do the same. The words “fair” and “young” to respectively describe Rita and Camilo are used very subtly, almost as if one could excuse them for their faults based on these qualities. In Camilo's attitude towards the “supernatural”, “religious matters” or any of these unexplained fields that require the elusive element of faith, one can visualize, on the one hand, the skeptical attitude a young person adopts with those things that cannot be understood, perhaps due to a lack of actual experience in life, and, on the other, perhaps a certain irreverence with mystical or religious matters. There is nothing intense or morally serious exposed in the opening of the story and this is equally transmitted by the narrative's light and easy tone. One is led to see no moral issues in this adultery – it might almost be another curious tale of the cuckolded husband who is blind to what is going on right under his very nose.

¹ The translations of *A Cartomante* and *A Causa Secreta* are part of a group of short stories by Machado de Assis translated by the members of the research group which I coordinate. Our translations have not been published yet and we are in the process of negotiating their publication.

Soon, however, the warning signs regarding this affair become direct, but tend to be misread by Camilo and, by the time he realizes what is happening, events are running their course, as they often do. Thus, in spite of the concrete existence, for example, of anonymous letters and, soon after, the curt note from Rita's husband saying he must show up at their house immediately, Camilo is too muddled by his feelings for Rita and ends up giving in to the same exact mystification which he criticized first in his mother, then in Rita. His intuition creates fear which, in its turn, only misleads him into giving into his impulse to listen to the words of a fortuneteller as if they contained the key to his fate. The words Rita pronounces at the beginning of the story are interpreted as meaning that there is a supernatural world us mere mortals do not know of. However, Camilo never asks why he should concern himself with this when perhaps the things between heaven and earth referred to in the lines of the original play may actually point to the mortal fears, feelings and intuitions which are enough to enrich the actions of any common man's life.

Is Machado jesting with what culturally is known as the Brazilian habit of trying to find the easy way out of things? From another perspective, shouldn't the affair between Rita and Camilo be taken seriously, not as just a passing affair, but enough to drive Vilela to an act of violence that will destroy their lives? The story describes Rita, in Camilo's eyes, as being "graceful and vivacious, her eyes warm, her mouth fine and inquisitive" (MACHADO, my translation), and in these words the reader feels almost a justification for Camilo's involvement with his best friend's wife. Still, the narrator indicates that Vilela has a "solemn mien", which makes him look older than the other two; and that Camilo was "naïve in both his moral and his practical life" (MACHADO, my translation), words that are specifically chosen to reveal to us readers the nature of these characters and what can be expected from them. At this point, certain wariness on the part of the reader might be needed – Vilela, for example, is shown to us as not taking

things as lightly as was presented initially in the narrative. At the very least, the use of logic and pondering should be the tools of Camilo and Rita when the letters begin to appear, but reasoning is revealed not to be the strong point of the pair.

The narrator presents himself almost as if he were a mere observer of the foolishness of the two lovers, especially Camilo's, for "how they went from [fondness] to love, *he never knew.*" (MACHADO, my translation, my italics). And in this light form, the narrative weaves the several justifications for the love affair, and who are we, as readers, to object? For, after all, Camilo seems to be right in feeling this attachment, since he "loved spending time with [Rita]." (MACHADO, my translation). At the same time, however, the narrator slyly tells us how Camilo, despite wanting initially to escape from the affair, found that it was too late: "Rita, like a serpent wound herself around him, enveloped him totally, snapped his bones in a spasm and dropped her venom in his mouth. He was dazed and vanquished." (MACHADO, my translation) And, still, immediately after this effective and vivid image, almost violent in its description of seduction, the casual listing of Camilo's feelings lifts the reader from the turmoil of danger: "Shame, frights, remorse, desire, he felt it all at once, but the battle was short and the victory delirious." (MACHADO, my translation)

The flow of the story leads the reader through the growing uneasiness Camilo feels as he passes from mere "longing" for his object of affection, without exactly suffering any moral pain, to fright when he is jolted into facing the fact that someone who knows of the liaison has sent him a note calling him "immoral". In general, the narrator continues to avoid any direct judgment, leaving the reader to his own conclusions. Nevertheless, he does not let Camilo off the hook – the vanity of the young fellow is subtly revealed in this phrase which might explain the reason for Camilo not visiting Vilela's house after receiving the anonymous letter: "Perhaps there was a share of self-esteem in all this, the intention of decreasing the husband's kindness

so the disloyalty of the act would be less taxing." (MACHADO, my translation). Thus, the narrator leaves the reader without any certainty as to what Camilo is really like: a vain young man who is after pleasure seems to be one conclusion with this interference of the narrator in the story. Or is he a guilt-ridden man wondering whether his affair with "fair Rita" is so innocent after all?

The movement of the narrator in relation to the reader is nowhere more evident than when Camilo is detained in his cab by an accident in the street and sees himself in front of the fortuneteller's house. He is amazed at the coincidence and is in great "turmoil" with the resurgence of the "phantoms of another time, the old beliefs" (MACHADO, my translation) that he had so easily discarded before. Now, however, he is at the door of the person who is tempted to believe could tell him what to do, if he should be afraid of attending Vilela's request to see him immediately or if there is nothing to fear. The push and pull of his conscience is made evident: he is struggling to find out what is the best action. The narrative leads us through his reasoning and we ourselves, as readers, seem to want to interfere in his decisions. When the driver of the cab reasonably suggests they take another path, Camilo replies that they should wait. As he observes the fortuneteller's house the narrator describes the machinations of his mind as he tries to discard the possibility of entering and placing his fate in the hands of an unknown woman. The idea is insistent, however, and: "... flew overhead at a distance, a great distance, on vast grey wings. It disappeared, reappeared and fell back into the shadows of his brain. It then moved its wings again, closer, circling in on him..." (MACHADO, my translation)

Thus is the movement of the narration, coming and going and leading us to almost believing, at this moment, that there is actually no better decision than to consult with the fortuneteller. And so, we enter the house with Camilo, going up a rickety flight of stairs to a "poorly-lit" room in the attic. Nothing is more appropriate than that at this point, for the narrative describes Camilo's surroundings as a reflex of his

own state of mind. The attic's darkness and untidiness is an adequate background, the fortuneteller sits in such a position so as not to be seen clearly by Camilo, while light falls directly into his face, allowing her to see him all too well.

The fortuneteller perhaps does nothing more than what any fortuneteller would do: she reads straight into the young man's heart (and eyes) while regarding him "not openly but askance" with "large, sharp, stealthy eyes." (MACHADO, my translation) She utters the generalizations about his passionate state that Camilo expects to hear, thus leading him to forget the concrete facts that should be the actual warnings. Still, as readers, we also tend to forgive Camilo for his naivety. It is the narrator's seemingly neutral tone that makes us ask who wouldn't want the reassurance of a witch's forecast. Who would not feel comforted by the blessing coming from the lips of a sorceress when the real world is being harsh and unforgiving? Thus the narrator plays us along just as Camilo is, and when the fortuneteller bizarrely touches his forehead with her index finger, we are as startled as the character. At this point, we ask ourselves: is this a sign? Is there reason lacking in him and in us?

Therefore, this subtle see-saw between lightheartedness and absolute seduction in the depiction of the lovers' affair, the comings and goings of Camilo's mind which must be also a part of the reader's constant doubt, is a narrative strategy that must be a part of the translator's concern. If the translator, as a close reader, is aware of his role in the construction of the meaning of Machado's story, he will be more prepared for the challenges these stories present. The nuanced form of the narration is an essential element in Machado's stories and must be given special attention.

The intensity of reading Machado is even more evident in *A Causa Secreta*, or *The Secret Cause*. The story is one of the most challenging narratives Machado wrote in terms of interpretation for a reader and, thus, the feeling of having the floor beneath your feet taken away is a constant. From the start of the tale, the narration places us face to face with three characters, a wife, a husband a friend of the family in

the midst of some uncomfortable circumstance. While one "clicks" his nails, the other "gazes up at the ceiling" and the lady finishes some needlework. If for the reader it is difficult to understand exactly why these characters are acting in such a curious way, for the translator this becomes equally intriguing. For example, whether in Portuguese or in English, a person's "clicking" of his nails is neither a common act nor quite understandable. The search for meaning to this unusual activity must be left to the actual reading of the rest of the story and, thus, as readers (and translators) we are left with the sensation of not completely understanding what is at the bottom of the story.

What young doctor Garcia eventually observes in his newfound friend Fortunato is a peculiar penchant for enjoying the suffering of others, be it animal or man. Garcia prides himself in being a keen observer of human character, and, since he sees in himself the love of analysis, he believes he is a superior doctor in many ways. Fortunato is a study in how far a human may go, but what Garcia does not foresee, as the bond between him, this strange man and his young wife, Maria Luisa, becomes more significant, is his transformation into the object of observation of Fortunato.

The role of benefactor, with its innumerable possibilities of creating special bonds of favor and subservience, is adopted right at the beginning by Fortunato, but not necessarily for these reasons. This in itself turns the man into an oddity, but the narrator describes him, for our benefit and understanding, as having eyes that were "clear, the color of lead"; while "his expression was hard, dry and cold." (MACHADO, my translation) To Garcia's (and our) observation, nothing in Fortunato's stance or attitude would make him the benefactor of a wounded man, but this is exactly what he becomes. Garcia's neighbor, having been stabbed by ruffians, is aided by Fortunato who becomes his nurse, helping Garcia, as young doctor ready to be at service, to restore him to health. However, the gratitude of the patient soon turns into feelings of humiliation and resentment when, after visiting Fortunato in order to thank him, he is scorned and made the

butt of a joke. To Garcia, it is more than amazing, but he can come to no other conclusion than that the “human heart was a deep well of mysteries” (MACHADO, my translation) indeed. As readers we are left with no clear feelings, only certain that we cannot count on Garcia’s so-called precision of interpretation, but neither is the narrator any help.

Garcia falls in love with Maria Luisa, but it is quite different from the love between Camilo and Rita. All feeling here is silenced and kept locked away. Thus, though the terror of Fortunato’s experimentations with animals is depicted clearly and brings horror to the reader, the greatest tragedy might actually be this unspoken love. Nevertheless, as Fortunato initially is depicted as a scientist whose main interest is the observation of the effect of cauterization on living beings, the reader is convinced of a reason for his experimentation. In any case, our reading is made through the eyes of Garcia. It is only in retrospect, after witnessing the curious perversion of Fortunato’s actions, that his “great faith in cauterization” (MACHADO, my translation) strikes us as the blackest of humors.

In this story too, the young lover wants to “push away” the feelings that begin to “stir within him” (MACHADO, my translation) in relation to the melancholic and solitary Maria Luisa, but Garcia’s apparent moral superiority (in comparison to Camilo) is made evident and he cannot express his affection explicitly. Maria Luisa, in the same way, understands Garcia’s feelings in silence, and, differently from Rita in the previous tale, keeps all sentiment under lock and key. Once again, this story leads the reader to realizing, in retrospect, that, while it is explicitly Garcia who observes everything that is going on, in truth, it is Fortunato who has been observing this whole time, and in a much more surreptitious way. Perhaps it is at this moment that the narrative point of view shifts, but it is uncertain, and so we become insecure as readers.

The observation of Fortunato’s torturing of the rat is made through Garcia’s eyes and ours as well. It is as at once fascinating, bizarre and horrendous as we go through the feelings that are taking place

in Garcia's mind. When it seems to Garcia, towards the end of the terrifying activity, that "Fortunato had completely forgotten he was there", (MACHADO, my translation) we ourselves, as readers, are not sure of what we have witnessed. If we are to rely on Garcia as witness, we have seen the actions of a cruel scientist who will stop at nothing to have his pleasure. As Garcia recollects all Fortunato's past actions, he sees in his friend "an odd dilettantism, Caligula in a minor key." (MACHADO, my translation).

Maria Luisa's fatal disease, observed in detail by her husband's watchful eyes, is a triumph in narrative technique where the reader is not sure whether he is witness to the cold observations of a madman or the sorrow of a husband who sees his wife dying before his very eyes – the most likely answer is that it is both. "[Fortunato's] cold dull, gaze on the slow and painful degradation of life", while he "drank each and every one of the beautiful creature's afflictions", (MACHADO, my translation) is a revelation of the husband's need to be a close witness to suffering. We wonder, however, about the mixture of pleasure and pain as "in his coarse egotism, hungry for sensations", Fortunato is "not spared a single minute of agony", nor does he "pay with one single tear" (MACHADO, my translation) the commotion of Maria Luisa's death. Can this be the depiction of a madman, perverse in nature? We are not given moral guidelines in this case and are left to our own devices to come to conclusions.

The fact is that we clearly perceive the story shifts only at the end: Fortunato's point of view takes over completely and it is through his cold but amazed eyes that we witness Garcia's ultimate suffering, one that is pure wonderment to his friend. The puzzle in the story is built gradually until the reader understands that the real scientific observer is not Garcia, but Fortunato. However, though he is a scientist, he is not merely logical and cold as might be expected of a man who dedicates his life to science. His vanity is revealed as he sees Garcia's sorrow over the loss of his love, and his pleasure, as Garcia sobs over the woman's corpse, is prolonged indefinitely. Our vanity, however, as savvy readers,

is put to the test – we must accept the fact that Machado has placed no moral safety net to fall back onto in this case. We can only wonder ourselves about what we have just read.

Machado's refinement and polish as a reader and writer cannot be overlooked in the translation of his stories. It is evident that the points that make these stories Brazilian must be brought to the foreground, without any intention of making them seem exotic or emphasizing them in any special form. The subtle observer of the human condition is present in the stories, very much in the same way that we can see with Chekhov and Henry James. In this aspect, as James is associated to Chekhov, so is Machado associated to both these great authors. This is the material that the translator, with a keen eye, must deal with. One aspect we can observe in these stories is the gap between what characters express verbally and what they actually do. More than this: because we rely on the narrator and believe he knows what he is doing, we are often stumped, left unsure of what we should think. On the other hand, Machado invites us to see this gap, to realize that there are things of great mystery in the heart of every man and woman, and to come to our own conclusions. He seems to be pointing out the nuances in his stories and provoking us to be alert readers. What a translator must be, first and foremost, is an attentive reader. Not only does the translator read with care, he or she connects the works of this extended literary system observed across nations. Be it at the narrative and linguistic level or at the polysystemic level, the role of translation is crucial in breaking through (or at least attempting to) supposed cultural barriers. This is certainly brought to full scale in reading Machado and translating his stories.

Machado de Assis brings to the forefront the very difficult task there is in writing and communicating controversial ideas in literature. This was true for his time and certainly remains the same for writers and readers today. Reading brings with it reflection, an experience that is important today as in the past. One can only hope that the effort of translating his stories can bring with it this reflection.

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