

REVIEW OF *THE ALIENIST AND OTHER STORIES OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRAZIL*, BY JOHN CHASTEEN

RESENHA DE *THE ALIENIST AND OTHER STORIES OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRAZIL*, DE JOHN CHASTEEN

ASSIS, Machado de Assis. *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil*. Edited and Translated, with an Introduction by John Charles Chasteen. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2013. 152p.

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Where does nineteenth-century Brazilian literature find new readers? If the recent burst of new translations into English is any indication, there is a Machado for everyone.¹ *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil* edited and translated by John Charles Chasteen is an engaging entry point for students, readers who enjoy a well-crafted short story, or anyone interested in the legacy of slave-holding society in the Western Hemisphere. I attribute the success of his volume to the way Chasteen highlights points of personal identification for an English-speaking readership, especially students, and the way he frames these short stories by Machado as relevant sources for a comparative history of racial politics in Brazil and the USA.

Chasteen's historical frame is a part of a recent re-evaluation of Machado as a fiction-maker whose work is relevant to the fields of history and sociology. Previous translations have presented his stories primarily as psychological parlor dramas,

¹ The recent publications of works by Machado de Assis in English translation include: *Stories* (Dalkey Archive: 2014) translated by Rhett McNeill; *Ex-Cathedra: Stories – A Bilingual Edition* (New London Librarium: 2014) edited by Glenn Alan Cheney and including the work of 15 translators; *Resurrection* (Latin American Literary Review Press: 2013) translated by Karen Sherwood Sotelino; *The Alienist* (Melville House, Art of the Novella: 2012) translated by William L. Grossman; *A Chapter of Hats* (Bloomsbury: 2008) translated by John Gledson; *The Wager* (Peter Owen: 2005, 1990) translated by Robert L. Scott-Bucclough; *Quincas Borba* (Oxford UP: 1998) and *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas: A Novel* (Oxford UP, 1997) translated by Gregory Rabassa.

philosophical investigations into the human experience (Borges 247). In many ways, *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil* replaces the translation collection by Helen Caldwell and William L. Grossman, *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories* (1963), which is representative of the previous approach.² The two volumes share the title story "O Alienista," and half of the stories in Chasteen's collection are re-translations of the Caldwell and Grossman versions. From the very title, *The Alienist* indicates the different kinds of translation choices Chasteen favors. By choosing the archaic term "alienist" as his translation for "O Alienista" rather than the anachronistic but more communicative "psychiatrist," Chasteen historicizes instead of naturalizing the work into contemporary categories of scientific knowledge. Unlike the Grossman translation, Chasteen avoids the assimilating choice that mistakenly aligns Machado's critical parody of positivism with 20th century psychiatry. He also labels the stories with the time and place of "Nineteenth-Century Brazil," creating a historical frame in addition to a literary frame. Yet in the process of creating this historical frame, Chasteen *does* choose to naturalize the vocabulary of race and subjugation into words more palatable than in nineteenth-century Brazil—or even 1960s USA.

Chasteen introduces Machado from his field as a cultural historian, titling his introduction "Brazil's Machado, Machado's Brazil" where he uses a historical context to frame the stories as much for what Machado's works include as for what they omit.³ The introduction shows a particular interest in the Brazilian legacy of slavery and the process of democratizing the public sphere, depicting Machado as an unusually free thinker and an example of the achievement of a Black or mixed-race individual possible in a country where the social construction of race differs from that of the USA. He touches on the major points of Machado's biography and provides a narrative of Brazil's gradual abolition of slavery, inviting comparison with the USA while warning against easy parallelisms. He also makes clear what does *not* appear in the fictional works of Machado, arguing that what is absent may be as important as what is present. For

² Other English-language collections of Machado short stories are *Brazilian Tales* (1921) translated by Isaac Goldberg and *The Devil's Church and Other Stories* (1977) translated by Jack Schmitt and Lorie Ishimatsu.

³ Conversely, the introduction Grossman writes for the 1963 volume places each of the stories within the rest of Machado's works and traces connections to better-known literary and philosophical voices, including Gustave Flaubert, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, C.S. Lewis, Soren Kierkegaard, Blaise Pascal, and Jonathan Swift.

example, Chasteen outlines the possible paths Machado does *not* take in crafting his fictions: he does not describe Rio in naturalistic detail⁴ and "neither race nor slavery is a major topic of his fiction,"⁵ which Borges cites as a source of disappointment for some.⁶ Instead of passing judgment because of these lacunae in his stories, Chasteen asks his readers to fill in the gaps to consider how the racial politics of the day provided a key context for Machado as a writer and for the Brazilian society he wrote for.

These frames are choices, and in his introduction Chasteen implies that it is valuable to read these fictional works as both "psychological puzzles to be resolved" and as informative reports on "the lives and attitudes of people in nineteenth century Brazil"⁷. There is a tension between these two factors, between the universal and the national, as Efraín Kristal and José Luiz Passos have analyzed, because Machado did not populate his stories with stereotypes,⁸ nor did he write within the genres favored by his contemporaries working in a Romantic or Naturalist vein.⁹ Chasteen supports his perspective with particular translation choices and his paratextual commentary makes these choices clear. He also writes paragraph-long introductions to each story, which convey salient points of reference in a tone of excitement about the genius of the storyteller – and the genius of the short story genre as a form of slippery but potentially

⁴ "Machado de Assis does not paint detailed word pictures of Rio de Janeiro ... Machado rarely describes the city streets through which he and his readers moved every day. Machado's fiction often leaves the context implicit" (ASSIS, *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, p. viii).

⁵ ASSIS, *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, p. x.

⁶ "Although Machado did write often about slavery, and about the ramifications of oppressive powers throughout a slave society, he never wrote directly about race. This disappointed black radicals of his day, and it continues to disappoint those intellectuals who are trying to get Brazilian society to confront racial discrimination and the denial of black identity" (BORGES, *The Relevance of Machado de Assis*, p. 243).

⁷ ASSIS, *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, p. xxi.

⁸ "A tension has always resided between Machado's forceful attempts to avoid types and stereotypes and one's will to find, in Machado's plots and characters, straightforward allegories of Brazilian nationalism. Abel Barros Baptista has pointed out that many Brazilian literary critics have attempted to force Machado into interpretative frameworks of various types, into simplistic representations of the nation" (KRISTAL and PASSOS, *Machado de Assis and the Question of Brazilian National Identity*, p. 20).

⁹ "Other Brazilian novelists — his elders and his contemporaries — seemed more obviously engaged with national problems, more daring in exploring modern social reality. Others catalogued the hills, forests, and waterfalls of the Brazilian landscape; others invited patriotic allegories of the encounter between Indian women and Portuguese man; others attacked social problems like tenement buildings or dissected unusual urban social types. Machado did not write much criticism, but in one of his critical essays, he distanced himself from the 'scenic' patriotism of Romanticism, and in another he distanced himself from the deterministic psychology of Naturalism, saying in both essays that what a writer needs for verisimilitude is characters with depth and plausible motivation, characters worth studying because they cannot be reduced to their context" (BORGES, *cit.*, p. 237).

effective truth-making. Compared to the historian's voice in the introduction, these introductory notes to the stories are in the voice of the translator. They provide translation details, such as the English translation of proper names or the Portuguese titles for the stories. They also reflect the admiration that translation tends to inspire. "Why all this distancing and whimsy? Because Machado is about to do something very serious. He is about to question the unquestionable. What happens when Science is wrong?".¹⁰ In this introductory note to "The Alienist," Chasteen prepares the reader to feel the "whimsy" as "something very serious" – the lightness of Machado's language is reconstructed in a contemporary light idiom, in order to maintain the serious critiques embedded within the playful fable about a community embracing collective insanity under the aegis of curative science.

In my evaluation of Chasteen's translations, I am drawing from student reactions to their first exposure to Machado through this volume in a course about Brazilian Culture taught at the University of California, Los Angeles.¹¹ In short, they loved Machado and quickly made him their own. I credit this immediate embrace with the way Chasteen has selected, ordered, and framed the collection with a young student audience in mind. He introduces the world of Machado with selections that reflect the concerns of an educated class through the eyes of the young university student. "To Be Twenty Years Old!" opens the collection with a cynical representation of the dissolute university student, reliant on family money and more carefully observant of peer-group fashions than of the content of his privileged education. This same character type is represented in the two stories that follow, "The Education of a Poser" and "The Looking Glass," where the student's reliance on external indicators of value are shown to be at the heart of the elite Brazilian family, the father who educates his son to avoid all understanding, philosophies, or politics in order to preserve the status of the "poser" who can be safely mediocre. That familiar perspective helps students establish a connection with the milieu of Machado's stories. Even a reader new to Brazilian history will have a framework to understand the multiple demands, expectations, and ironies

¹⁰ ASSIS, *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, p. 74.

¹¹ Professor José Luiz Passos teaches "Portuguese 46: Brazil and the Portuguese Speaking World," a required course for undergraduate majors in the Spanish & Portuguese Department, but more students take the course to fulfill the UCLA general education requirement in "Literary and Cultural Analysis" or "Historical Analysis."

inherent in the life of a university student. Especially the student in today's USA academy will be entirely familiar with a system where the acquisition of cultural capital has become monetized to the point where the content of cultural forms can be jettisoned in favor of course credits, displays of wealth and experience, and a few buzzwords to perform erudition. Chasteen's translation shows students that Machado's problems are their problems too.

Translating Machado into a contemporary idiom shows up most in the keyword in the story "The Education of a Poser." The Grossman and Caldwell title was "Education of a Stuffed Shirt." The use of the word "poser" does more than approximate the title "Teoria do medalhão" in a contemporary idiom of the age group represented in the story. "The Education of a Poser" also interpolates the titles of other works such as Flaubert's *Éducation sentimentale* (1869) or Erasmus's *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516). This intertextual addition expands Machado's critique to the humanist endeavor and the bildungsroman. It also constructs an amusing proximity between a term at home in pop music (poser) and a nineteenth-century sense of self-fashioning. Chasteen is not afraid to take full advantage of the charm of his updated vocabulary:

So much for easy, inexpensive, everyday publicity. There is more. *A poser has not really arrived until he's had his portrait done, whether in painting or sculpture.* Whatever one's ideas about art, it is beyond question that family sentiment, friendly regard, and public esteem demand a portrait of worthy and beloved individuals. And why shouldn't you be the recipient of such a distinction, especially if your friends can tell you want it?¹²

This is constant, low-price, easy, everyday publicity; but there is another type. Whatever may be the general opinion of the arts, it is beyond all doubt that family feeling, personal friendship, and public esteem demand the reproduction of the features of a loved or distinguished citizen. Nothing can keep them from being the object of such an honor, especially if the discernment of your friends finds no reluctance on your part.¹³

¹² ASSIS, *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, p.13 (emphasis added).

¹³ ASSIS, *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories*, p. 119. "Essa é publicidade constante, barata, fácil, de todos os dias; mas há outra. Qualquer que seja a teoria das artes, é fora de dúvida que o sentimento da família, a amizade pessoal e a estima pública instigam à reprodução das feições de um homem amado ou benemérito. Nada obsta a que sejas objeto de uma tal distinção, principalmente se a sagacidade dos amigos não achar em ti repugnância". ASSIS, "Teoria do medalhão". *Romances e contos em hipertexto*.

In the added sentence, which I have highlighted, Chasteen connects Machado's insight about the formal genre of the portrait with the contemporary terms of the "poser" who "has arrived". The complicity between a false pose and an official portrait understood as true is made more direct in Chasteen's free translation. Given the ubiquity of photography in students' self-fashioning, this translation made Machado's parable on mediocrity in the public sphere even more relevant to their world.

After these first three stories oriented around the perverse vacuity of a ruling class and its effects on the education and coming of age of young people, Chasteen's collection moves to domestic life and romantic relationships with "Chapter on Hats" and "A Singular Occurrence." Both stories depict women in relationships defined by the parameters of fathers, husbands, lovers, in a public sphere that can only tolerate women in the functions of display or servitude. In his introduction, Chasteen writes that Machado wrote in genres and publications with women as primary readership: "Machado's women are often strong and resourceful figures, especially when compared with his feckless and spoiled men".¹⁴ This invites readings of his story within a gender studies mode of analysis, citing the sociological reality that in nineteenth-century Brazil widows would inherit money and therefore represented feminine autonomy.

In the story "Father Against Mother" the legacy of slavery is explored from a perspective that begins as distanced and sociological but quickly adds a layer of affect that demonstrates the disturbing complicity of many sectors of society in the maintenance of race-based slavery. In her essay "Machado in English," Daphne Patai takes note of the struggle translators have with rendering the vocabulary of race relations in a way that appropriately recreates the original context in a manner that can be understood by the readership.¹⁵

"Já lhe sucedia, ainda que raro, enganar-se de pessoa, e pegar em *escravo fiel* que *ia a serviço de seu senhor*; tal era a cegueira da necessidade. Certa vez capturou *um preto livre*; desfez-se em

¹⁴ ASSIS, *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, p. xix.

¹⁵ Patai draws attention to but does not analyze this dynamic; scholars and translators of Machado will continue to work on this question. "There is, in fact, some residual awkwardness, in both translations of *Dom Casmurro* [by Helen Caldwell (1953) and by Scott-Bucleuch (1992)], in rendering references to *pretos* and *escravos*. This thorny subject requires an entire analysis in itself, and I must pass over it in the present essay. Without question, however, it causes the translators some discomfort, as Scott-Bucleuch's introductory comments underscore" (100).

desculpas, mas recebeu *grande soma de murros* que lhe deram os parentes do homem."¹⁶

"It even happened, though not often, that he made a mistake and grabbed *a faithful slave* who was going about *his master's business*: such was the blindness of necessity. On a certain occasion, he seized *a Negro who was free*; he melted into a thousand apologies, but did not escape *a pommeling* at the hands of the man's relatives."¹⁷

"Blinded by the necessity, he now occasionally grabbed *the wrong person, a faithful servant doing an errand for his master*. Once he captured *a free man of color*. He apologized a thousand times but the man's relatives *left him black and blue*."¹⁸

This is a key moment in the story for demonstrating the changing and confusing conditions of institutionalized slavery giving way to institutionalized indentured servitude. The history of slavery in the Western Hemisphere has joined the USA and Brazil through economic and sociopolitical interdependencies, and this legacy has marked the loanwords between the two languages. Robert Stam and Ella Shohat in *Race in Translation* write that "[t]he word 'Negro' comes to English via Portuguese, as does 'pickaninny' (for black child, from Portuguese *pequinhinho*)"¹⁹. Chasteen updates the language to use a more contemporary and socially acceptable term than in Helen Caldwell's translation. He writes "free man of color" instead of "a Negro who was free," which may have been socially acceptable in 1963, but no longer is. Chasteen also uses the descriptor "black and blue" to describe the result of the beating Cândido gets for capturing the wrong man; although this is a common expression, it also attributes "blackness" to the character of Cândido the slave-catcher, an important insight of the story, that the proximity between social types is a part of constructing race described in terms of color.

In a recent article about this story, scholars Alex Flynn, Elena Calvo-González, and Marcelo Mendes de Souza have argued that while the family of the slave catcher Cândido and Clara Neves are not described, their names insist on "whiteness" that the

¹⁶ ASSIS, "Pai contra mãe". *Romances e contos em hipertexto*.

¹⁷ ASSIS, *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories*, p. 106.

¹⁸ ASSIS, *The Alienist and Other Stories of Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, p. 67.

¹⁹ STAM and SHOHAT, *Race in Translation: Culture Wars around the Postcolonial Atlantic*, p. 38-39.

individuals may not possess. Using an anthropological approach to race, they demonstrate that "the details that embellish Cândido's life and his socioeconomic status point toward a set of prejudices current at the time about nonwhites".²⁰ Far from erasing race, this story makes race highly visible by putting the slave catcher in the position to have to mediate between an understanding of slavery based on phenotype to one based on something much more difficult to define. Perhaps in a new translation the language with which race is described should become a part of the conversation. Flynn *et al* argue that the way Cândido and Clara have been considered white has been a way of measuring the extent to which whiteness is embedded in scholarly perspectives.²¹

In the Chasteen translation, the language of race is updated to a conventionally acceptable idiom: "person of color" is what mainstream media would use today. The 1963 Caldwell translation approximates more closely the nineteenth-century term that would be offensive today, in the US and in Brazil respectively. The question remains what it means to craft a translation that fits the sensibility of the source culture, a translation that makes it more comfortable for students to discuss the story because it does not contain language they find offensive or outdated. There are ethical reasons to preserve the offensive historical terms, in order to demonstrate the underlying dehumanization of the social milieu in this story. Yet there are also ethical reasons to avoid putting offensive terms into circulation in the classroom today; in a university population that is not as diverse as it should be, creating a safe conversation about race is a challenge, and could be made more difficult with incendiary terms.

Chasteen's conversational tone of admiration helps bridge the gap for students who are in the process of learning how to value and evaluate literature as an aesthetic product or as an historical artifact. The debate continues about which aspect of Machado should take precedence, with historian Dain Borges affirming that to read Machado primarily as a document of historical socio-cultural realities is to miss the aesthetic

²⁰ FLYNN, CALVO-GONZALEZ, SOUZA, "Whiter Shades of Pale: 'Coloring In' Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil", p. 14.

²¹ "[A]ssumptions about the racial identities of the characters in 'Pai contra mãe' are not direct textual readings but rather proof that a naturalized category of whiteness has firmly embedded itself into the Brazilian imagination of hierarchy. The inextricability of racial categories from other social classificatory systems such as class and prestige is an obvious corollary (DaMatta 1991; Fischer 2004; McCallum 2005), and in recognition of this we develop below an anthropological reading of whiteness that demonstrates how such schemes of binary configuration have not only historically influenced the Brazilian public sphere but continue to do so" (FLYNN *et al*, cit., p. 17).

achievements of his works, to be uncritically seduced by his "realism." Although his choices to naturalize vocabulary around race are debatable, Chasteen's translation is ideal for bringing new participants into this conversation.

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