

READING MACHADO THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS: CASE STUDIES FROM THE TRANSLATIONS OF *MEMÓRIAS PÓSTUMAS*

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Abstract: For the past few decades, Anglophones have had access to three different translations of the *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*. Rather than muddying the waters, the divergences to be found between these versions of the novel may prove a fruitful entry into the text for scholars working in both languages. This paper provides a series of case studies from the translations of the novel, illustrating how a reading of the English versions allows us, the readers of Machado's readers, to map ambiguities and intertextual references.

Keywords: Machado de Assis; criticism by translation; *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*.

LENDO MACHADO ATRAVÉS DO ESPELHO: ESTUDOS DE CASO DA TRADUÇÃO DAS *MEMÓRIAS PÓSTUMAS*

Resumo: Nas últimas décadas, leitores anglófonos têm tido acesso a três diferentes traduções das *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*. Em vez de dificultar a compreensão do texto original, as divergências entre essas versões do romance podem oferecer uma abordagem produtiva para pesquisadores que trabalham nas duas línguas. Este trabalho apresenta alguns estudos de caso das traduções da obra, demonstrando como uma leitura das versões em inglês permite que nós, enquanto leitores dos leitores de Machado, mapeemos ambiguidades e referências intertextuais.

Palavras-chave: Machado de Assis; crítica via tradução; *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*.

This article seeks to examine *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* as seen through the translations of William L. Grossman (1952), E. Percy Ellis (1955), and Gregory Rabassa (1997). In a 1934 essay, Ezra Pound (1954, p. 74) referred glancingly to the practice of “criticism by translation,” failing to elaborate beyond the phrase – perhaps because he found it to be self-evident. Here, it may be understood as follows: it is in taking distance from Machado and *Memórias póstumas*, and in uprooting them from their language that we may hope to behold them once again – see them with *olhos livres*, free eyes, in Oswald de Andrade’s turn of phrase.

Isaac Goldberg (1922, 158-159), the first English-language translator of Machado, would say of the author’s mature novels: “In reality, the plots do not exist. They are the slenderest of strings upon which the master stylist hangs the pearls of his wisdom. [...] To read Machado de Assis’s central novels for their tales is the vainest of pursuits.” While there is an undeniable dose of exaggeration in the analysis, something about it rings true. Reading the translations of *Memórias* side by side reveals something similar: the passages where the translators diverge the least, and where they seem more at ease, might correspond to the “slenderest of strings,” elegant and functional transitions between beautifully intractable kernels of prose.

The points of friction in the text are where it is possible for us, the readers of the readers of Machado, to observe what Antoine Berman (1992, p. 6) referred to as the “hidden structures of the text,” duly unveiled in translation. Seeing multiple translators make their way through the novel unearths patterns, turns of phrase, and metaphors that produce a blossoming of synonyms and explanatory phrases, or perhaps inspire discreet omissions. The pearls of which Goldberg speaks may just as easily be seen as rocks in the stream, troubling the surface of each rendering. This paper will first briefly lay the foundations for this comparative approach, then proceed to examine how it can unfold – first through a look at the characterizations of several women in the novel, then in terms of the translators’ solutions for allusions to other works.

Each translation constitutes a different reading of the work – this is a truism, of course, but seems particularly urgent to note in the case of a prose so deliberately ambiguous as that of Machado de Assis. In *The Brazilian Master and His Novels*, Machado scholar and translator Helen Caldwell (1970, p. 159)

drew a parallel between Henry Fielding's habit of leaving "vacant spaces of time for [the reader] to fill in with his own conjectures" and Machado's construction of his own novels. At first he left gaps "fearfully and gingerly" but eventually created narrators who inform readers straight out of their duty to fill in these lacunae in the text, or box readers' ears when they are perceived (fairly or unfairly) to be interpreting poorly.

While readers are made aware of blank spaces in the text and invited to fill them in, we would be dangerously mistaken to think that this gives us the right to paint outside the lines. Luciano Tosta (2004), in a handy twist on Umberto Eco's "opera aperta," or open work, characterized Machado's prose as "entreatberta," half-open, or ajar. Somewhere between an open work and a closed one, these texts promise freedom of interpretation but constantly interfere with that interpretation, not willing or able to completely let go of the instinct to lead readers by the nose. Fill in the gaps, imagine what you will, they say: but here are the spectacles you must look through as you go about it. The polysemic nature of the text is not obviated, but rather conditioned significantly, circumscribed by the interpretations that the narrator informs us are unacceptable or wrong-headed.

If this is true for the reading, then it must be doubly so for the task of carrying the text into a new language. Paulo Henriques Britto (2012, p. 28) has written on the interpretive work of translation in terms that recall the restrictions to which the Machadian reader-painter is submitted: while the act of translation is necessarily a creative one, it is a creative activity subject to the rules of the game of translation. Here, the translator attempts to produce a text that may be read as the original – albeit with the awareness that the game of literature obeys the rule that texts are not stable repositories of meaning, and there is no single way to read.

Karen Sotelino's dissertation on Machado's ambiguous language of memory in translation intertwines these reflections. Caldwell had argued that "gaps" were present from the very first novels, growing in breadth and daring over the course of the author's career; Sotelino's analysis seems to verify this at the level of the text. She focuses on translations of two novels from different periods in Machado's career, namely *Ressurreição*, from 1872, and *Dom Casmurro*, from 1899/1900. The former is marked by unambiguity – Machado uses words whose lexical fields are fairly narrow, and the narration leaves little

doubt as to how certain gestures or descriptions ought to be interpreted, guiding the translation with a heavy hand. But just the opposite is true for the latter. Sotelino (2008, p. 195) concludes that the divergences in translation are not the result of any mistake on any translator's part – rather, "they are differences resulting from an open text, a text that allows for engagement."

Translation of Machado thus promises to shine a bit of a spotlight down into the Mariana Trench of his prose – by no means definitively illuminating its cavernous, shifting depths, but illustrating some of the many possibilities the text may contain. This is made most powerful with the construction of a tradition of translation, a record of different readings which may be apprehended both simultaneously, alongside the text they have in common, as well as at the time and place of each. Multiple translations can be put to the service of literary criticism, revealing both the places in which the text forces readers to do the heaviest lifting and giving a sense of the directions it may lead them. In the case of Machado de Assis, this may mean exposing that which is only partially or impressionistically perceived by a speaker of Portuguese. In Sotelino's (2008, p. 106) words, referring to a character sketch in *Memórias póstumas*: "the narrator in the original has not dictated a moral type. He merely sketches an individual through the use of lexical items with broad semantic fields, and the reader/translator must meet him half-way."

To demonstrate the interpretive possibilities latent in these descriptions, it may be helpful to examine the characterization of a few female figures in the novel, those sphinxes who continually baffle Brás and his peers. Gestures and looks are perennial sources of ambiguity. Machado casts a half-light on the scene, illuminating some small part of it with a polysemous adjective, and the translators are left to paint in the rest. For that matter, the word "gesto" itself, which may mean "gesture" or "look," is a sticking point: did the character make a sour face or gesticulate in a terse way? The text is concise and unforthcoming on this and other scores.

In the case of the seemingly simple sentence "Virgília teve um gesto aflitivo," (ASSIS, 2014, p. 213) for example, there are several interpretive possibilities, the range of which becomes evident in translation. We might translate term by term as "Virgília had an afflictive gesture/look," in which "to

have” is translated in the simple past, implying an abrupt or passing action. Here are the published translations:

Virgília made a worried gesture (ASSIS, 1952, p. 140)

Virgília gave a sign of pain (ASSIS, 1955, p. 182)

Virgília had an afflicted expression (ASSIS, 1997, p. 119)

There are significant degrees of difference between “worried,” “in pain,” and “afflicted,” which color a reading of the scene. Brás and Virgília have been going back and forth over whether to commit to their affair – flee, as Brás would have it – or accommodate it as quietly as possible within Rio society, as Virgília has preferred. Now, faced with separation lest they act to prevent Virgília’s husband from accepting a post in a far-flung province, the two have reached an impasse. If Virgília’s look is worried, we will probably recall the couple’s previous arguments, in which Brás is indignant over how fearful she is and sees her cowardice as causing him suffering. After all, her only response to the crisis is to *make a gesture*. But if a *sign of pain* crosses her face involuntarily, then Brás’s subsequent gesture – storming out of the house and leaving her to her own devices – is made even crueler. Having an “afflicted expression” would seem to be midway between the two; she is torn but passive, tormented but frozen. “Afflictivo,” meanwhile, is defined in Francisco Solano Constâncio’s (1836, p. 30) dictionary as “that which afflicts or causes affliction, torment”; so the affliction here resides less – or not wholly – in Virgília, but in the way Brás receives her expression. The divergence in the emotions interpreted by the translators serves to highlight this fundamental ambiguity, the product of a characterization which, while at first glance might seem to be describing the woman’s emotional state, actually reflects her partner’s. With that in mind, another solution would be the adjective “distressing,” which is a hair away from “distressed” but makes it clear where the emotional burden lies.

At times the divergences between translators definitively change the way a character comes off. Eugênia, upon hearing a word of praise from Brás, cannot hide a flush of satisfaction; but just as quickly, she masters herself and becomes “erecta, fria e muda” once more. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 120-121) Grossman has her “cold, erect, and silent,” (ASSIS, 1952, p. 80) which foregrounds her chilly air; Ellis renders the phrase as “upright, cool, silent”; (ASSIS, 1955, p. 95) and Rabassa goes for “stiff, cold, mute.” (ASSIS, 1997, p. 60) Not one of them uses all

three of the closest English-language equivalents for Machado's words – "erect, cold, and mute" – perhaps out of a sense of physiological discomfort with both "erect" and "mute," terms that may be taken quite literally. The accumulation of differences leads to a whole array of Eugênicas: one is aristocratic (cold, erect, and silent), one is at ease but aloof (upright, cool, silent), and one is seemingly cowed and turned inwards (stiff, cold, mute). One might argue that each of these Eugênicas makes an appearance at some point in the novel, either in reality or in Brás's perception: in her rejection of his alms at the end of her life she is imperious; in her womanly flirtation, refusing to turn her head as she rides away from him, she is self-assured; and yet, at least at this point, she is still a child, somewhat bashful and reserved in the presence of a stranger.

It is revealing to see how each of the translators reads Marcela, the Spanish lady so often cast under suspicion by both Brás the character and Brás the narrator. When she confesses that she misled her young lover about the origin of the cross around her neck – it was not a gift from her late father, but rather from a former beau – he is indignant, and she reacts as follows: "Marcela abanou a cabeça com um ar de lástima." (ASSIS, 2014, p. 81) For Grossman, she "shook her head deprecatingly," (ASSIS, 1952, p. 54) scornful toward his naiveté. Ellis renders this as "nodded her head regretfully," (ASSIS, 1955, p. 58) giving the impression that the Spanish lady is a sinner ripe for the saving. Rabassa strikes a bit of a middle road with "shook her head with a look of pity" (ASSIS, 1997, p. 38): the *lástima* (which may be compassion, pity, sorrow, lamentation, or pain) is thus directed at Brás, as Grossman would have it, and not inward, as Ellis believes. The ambiguity in the gesture is perhaps most keenly visible in the fact that it is translated as movements with opposite meanings: either she *shook* her head, indicating a negative, or *nodded*, which would indicate a positive. One option would be the less common *wag* – Marcela "wagged her head with an air of pity" – to preserve something of that vagueness.

Shortly thereafter, on the same page, another gesture must be interpreted by the translators. When given a stupendously expensive necklace, Marcela "tentou atirar o colar à rua." Grossman and Ellis translate this movement as "tried to" and "attempted to" throw the necklace out the window, but Rabassa, with a raised eyebrow, gives us "made as if to throw the necklace." Perception is all-important in these interactions. As Brás reflects when he meets Marcela later in life, the eyes with which he beheld her in 1822 were "first-edition" eyes.

A similarly ambiguous interaction comes in Chapter XXXV, where Brás claims that he “Quis retê-la” (ASSIS, 2014, p. 130) (the woman being Eugênia, stalking away from him after he tries to extricate himself from their romance). The Portuguese phrase is ambiguous, and can suggest that an action was either desired or effected. Here, Rabassa also differs from his peers, but this time errs on the side of trust: Grossman and Ellis render it as Brás “wanted to” (ASSIS, 1952, p. 87; 1955, p. 104) hold her back, but Rabassa gives Brás the benefit of the doubt and says that he “tried to” (ASSIS, 1997, p. 67) hold her back.

The humble Dona Plácida is another woman whom Brás does his mightiest to decipher, trying to gauge her trustworthiness as a secret-keeper and messenger. The narration references the *caras feias* she made in the early days when forced to interact with the sinning couple: “a resistência de Dona Plácida, as lágrimas dos primeiros dias, as caras feias, os silêncios, os olhos baixos, e a minha arte em suportar tudo isso, até vencê-la.” (ASSIS, 2014, p. 209) Grossman renders the phrase as “her sad face,” (ASSIS, 1952, p. 137) Ellis translates the “caras feias” closely as “ugly faces,” (ASSIS, 1955, p. 178) and Rabassa interprets them as “grim expressions.” (ASSIS, 1997, p. 117) Ellis’s literal-minded approach preserves the ambiguity of the original, albeit not in colloquial English; we don’t tend to say of someone that they are putting on an *ugly face* out of misery. Again, the placing of the emotion is interesting. In the first translation, what is ugly is Dona Plácida’s sadness as received by Brás; in the last, we may presume that the unattractiveness resides in the woman’s “grim” countenance. The sentence goes on to mention *a minha arte em suportar tudo isso, até vencê-la*. Grossman heightens the drama of the situation by describing Brás’s “Machiavellian tact” in response to the go-between’s resistance, adding in the Italian strategist; the effect is to underscore Brás’s callousness and Plácida’s victimhood. The interaction comes off slightly differently in Rabassa’s and Ellis’s versions, where Brás refers to his “skills at bearing up under all that until I could overcome it” and his “art in bearing with it all until I conquered her,” respectively: Plácida is more of an opponent, a gloomy or ugly weight to be borne. Ellis’s use of the verb “conquer” stands out as almost too violent, but it leads us back to the aggressive *vencer* in Machado’s Portuguese. While Plácida’s melancholy is undeniable, our hero uses an adjective that focuses on how disagreeable it is to him; once again, what matters is less the woman’s emotion and more how it affects Brás.

Having seen how broad lexical choices and concise descriptions cause divergences that may be productively used to examine the original, we can turn to another source of discord. Machado's text is visibly shot through with references to other works, few of them Brazilian or contemporary. Differences in translation can be traced back to an imperfect or incomplete understanding of the allusion, which serves as a key to unlock the recreation of the text. More often than not, these references are less than reverent: by the time the allusion makes it to the reader of *Memórias póstumas*, it has been twisted, modified, or undercut. It is then up to the translator, that ruminant reader, to untangle the text as best she can, only to tangle it back up again in the way she finds most fitting.

Tartuffe, or The Impostor, or The Hypocrite, by Molière, makes three appearances in the novel. On the first occasion, Machado alludes to the play as he puts these words into the mouth of Reason personified, expelling Folly from her abode.

Já o leitor compreendeu que era a Razão que voltava à casa, e convidava a Sandice a sair, clamando, e com melhor jus, as palavras de Tartufo:

La maison est à moi, c'est à vous d'en sortir. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 56)

The quotation has been condensed somewhat from the original – *C'est à vous d'en sortir, vous qui parlez en maître. / La maison m'appartient, je le ferai connaître* – albeit into an alexandrine verse in French, and one so convincing that R. Chadebec de Lavalade reproduced it wholesale in his translation of the novel (MAGALHÃES JÚNIOR, 1957, p. 261). Regardless, the thrust remains the same. What is relevant is that in the play these words are proffered by the titular hypocrite, Tartuffe, and that, crucially, he is not the rightful owner of the house, but rather a puffed-up usurper. Hence the narrator's observation that Reason quoted Tartuffe, "and with greater reason" (ASSIS, 1955, p. 32) (*e com melhor jus*) than he – in this case, the house is actually hers. Of the three translators, only Ellis has rendered the phrase correctly in this sense, perhaps out of familiarity with the play; Grossman says that she declaims the words "with justice," (ASSIS, 1952, p. 36) while Rabassa has her saying them "with perfect right." (ASSIS, 1997, p. 21) In both of these translations, the emphasis on the

contrast between Reason's rightful and Tartuffe's illegitimate claims to ownership is lost.

Tartuffe makes its second appearance in chapter XXXIII, when Eugênia has her first kiss with Brás and the two just barely escape being caught in the act by her mother:

Dona Eusébia entrou inesperadamente, mas não tão súbita, que nos apanhasse ao pé um do outro. Eu fui até à janela; Eugênia sentou-se a concertar uma das tranças. Que dissimulação graciosa! que arte infinita e delicada! que tartufice profunda! (ASSIS, 2014, p. 127)

Grossman translates the last phrase as "What profound hypocrisy!"; (ASSIS, 1952, p. 85) Ellis goes with "How like Tartuffe!"; (ASSIS, 1955, p. 102) and Rabassa mimics the Portuguese formation of *tartufice* with a coinage of his own in "Such profound Tartuffeanism!" (ASSIS, 1997, p. 65) Terms derived from Molière's character have been present in English since the period of the play; *Tartufism* or *Tartuffism* dates back to 1688, later joined by *Tartuffery* or *Tartufferie*; Laurence Sterne, in his *Sentimental Journey*, makes reference to a "tartufish aunt." (OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, on-line) Attempts to identify translation practices around the word *tartufice* revealed that *Tartüfferie*, as quoted in Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1913, p. 178) and rendered in Portuguese as *tartufice*, was translated at least once into English as "Pecksniffianism," in a cross-literary reference to the moralizing and hypocritical Dickens character. At any rate, it is difficult to justify Grossman's omission of such a deliberate literary reference in his translation.

The third and final explicit reference to *Tartuffe* comes in chapter XCVIII, "Suprimido," in which Brás confides in the reader that the sight of the young and lovely Eulália in an elegant dress "me dava cócegas de Tartufo" (ASSIS, 2014, p. 251) – literally, "gave me ticklings/itchings of [a] Tartuffe." Here are the translations: "guilty self-identification with Tartuffe" (Grossman), (ASSIS, 1952, p. 165) "awoke the Tartuffe in me" (Ellis), (ASSIS, 1955, p. 217) and "gave me the itching of a Tartuffe" (Rabassa). (ASSIS, 1997, p. 143) Rabassa has taken the most literal route, preserving the *cócegas*, and Ellis has transformed those ticklings into an awakening.

Once again, Grossman's treatment of the term stands out in the line-up, this time by virtue of the addition of guilt. There is no doubt that guilt itself –

culpa, or anything resembling it – is not present in the text of the original sentence. On the contrary, Brás is struggling to express to the reader just how fine he felt by the girl's side; and his lascivious awakening leads him to a reflection on the evolutionary function of fashion as a provocation to reproduction. Grossman might argue that guilt is present in the fact that Brás ultimately decides to *suprimir* the chapter ("delete," in his translation; "suppress," in Ellis and Rabassa's rendering); one might counter with the argument that while Brás declares he is going to remove the passage, he evidently has not.¹ We may consult the previous occurrence of *tartufice*, where Brás describes the experience of dissimulation as "charming" (*graciosa*) and as a "delicate art" (*arte delicada*), to provide further evidence of an unburdened conscience.

The conclusion may be that Grossman feels that Brás should feel guilty about his Tartuffism. Ironically, his description of Eulália's dress – "chastely covering [her knee] and yet suggesting its smooth roundness" – is, thanks to a complicated reading of the use of the adverb *redondamente*, the most leering of the lot: Ellis sees the girl as "modestly and suddenly covering her knee," while Rabassa has the dress "chastely and completely cover[ing] her knee." Grossman proceeds to translate "O declive é perigoso" (literally, "the slope is dangerous," which Rabassa adapts into the English "slippery slope") as "Some may find this chapter offensive," and subsequently interprets "leitor pacato" as "prudish reader" (against Ellis's "gentle reader" and Rabassa's "my peaceable reader"). The result is an aggressive back-and-forth of guilt, sensuality, prudishness, and offended readers, inserted into what was already a suggestive chapter.

While the Tartuffes in the text are quite visible, allusions are not always labeled so clearly. An odd term may catch the reader's eye in Chapter V, as Brás, on the brink of death, reflects on what might have been:

Não era impossível [...] que eu chegasse a galgar o cimo de um século, e a figurar nas folhas públicas, entre *macróbios*. (ASSIS, 2014, p. 43, italics mine)

¹ At least one person did, however. Raimundo Magalhães Júnior (1958, p. 263), upon examining the French translations of *Brás Cubas*, was shocked to discover that Adrien Delpech had taken the title's chapter as a deliberate instruction and removed it altogether. Delpech also followed other textual instructions, cutting and pasting other text as per the narrator's wishes.

Grossman: Until then, it appeared to be quite within my power to leap to the pinnacle of the age and to figure in the newspapers along with *other big men*. (ASSIS, 1952, p. 27, italics mine)

Ellis: It was not impossible that I might have topped the century and figured in the public press amongst *the long-lived*. (ASSIS, 1955, p. 18, italics mine)

Rabassa: It might not have been impossible, however, for me to have climbed to the heights of a century and figure in the pages of newspapers among *the great*. (ASSIS, 1997, p. 12, italics mine)

In the 1908 Michaelis (1908, p. 465), the definition offered for the word *macróbio* is "who lives a long time, long-lived person." Its origins may be found in Herodotus (1854, p. 526), who describes the Macrobian as an extraordinarily tall and handsome Ethiopian people who lived to be over a hundred and twenty. Ellis, whether fortunate enough to have a Michaelis on hand or out of familiarity with Herodotus, produces a translation clearly consistent with the historical context. This is only part of the equation, however; to render the term as carefully as possible, we should understand contemporary usage.

Searches of newspapers from the time (*folhas públicas*) in the Hemeroteca Digital reveal multiple instances of short news items about the existence (and often the recent demise) of the extremely aged, prefaced with the word in question:

Macrobios. – Informa-nos pessoa circumspecta, o seguinte: Falleceu no dia 11 do corrente, em S. José de Leonissa, nesta comarca, onde ha longos annos residia, Manoel José Affonso, homem branco, brasileiro, na idade avançada de 150 annos. Casara-se com cerca de cem annos, deixando a viuva e filhos desse matrimonio. Até á sua morte via bem, andava a pé facilmente e tinha em estado regular as suas faculdades mentaes, o que provava referindo factos muito remotos e de reconhecida veracidade. No dia 5 do corrente falleceu tambem, nos Dous Rios, freguezia de Ponte Nova, nesta comarca, Anna Maria da Conceição, mulher parda, brasileira, de idade de 120 annos, viuva de Felizardo Bernardo de Azevedo, de cujo matrimonio existem filhos, netos, bisnetos e tataranetos. Eram ambos paupérrimos. (MACRÓBIOS, 1875, p. 2)

While this contextual document may not eliminate objections to the fact that the term “Macrobian” is opaque in English, it does, arguably, invalidate the translations “big men” and “the great.” The news clippings that mention *macróbios* in Machado’s time are inevitably reports passed on from smaller newspapers or from questionable sources, reporting cases of extremely elderly people in rural areas, with most of them probably like Anna Maria da Conceição and Manoel José Affonso, *paupérrimos*. The use of the Biblical term is picturesque, then: these cases are a sort of News of the Weird, more gawking at than celebrating the subjects’ longevity. If Brás had survived for another forty-odd years, into the new century (we can only imagine what a posthumous narrative that would afford), he would almost certainly be afforded different press coverage.

Knowing what we now know, the decision to preserve “Macrobians” in the English-language translation is still not a simple one. The sheer obscurity of the reference threatens to blunt the joke; and yet none of the solutions presented above seem to have captured quite the quirky image that Machado is trying to convey. While the academically-minded translator who comes to the conclusion that a note is necessary should be regarded with well-deserved suspicion, this would seem a worthy exception – and an opportunity for Anglophones and Lusophones alike to familiarize themselves with this curious use of the term.

Some allusions are even more camouflaged, and only fully emerge in a reading of the translations. Amidst the stream of words that makes up chapter XCII, “Um homem extraordinário,” in which Brás and the reader are subjected to a fire-hose of discourse from the titular “extraordinary man,” Damasceno, one phrase troubles the surface: “despotismo temperado, não por cantigas, como dizem alhures” [despotism tempered, not by songs, as they say elsewhere]:

Neste ponto, conquanto trouxesse as ideias políticas um pouco baralhadas, consegui organizar e formular o governo de suas preferências: *era um despotismo temperado, – não por cantigas, como dizem alhures, – mas por penachos da guarda nacional.* (ASSIS, 2014, p. 240-241, italics mine)

Grossman: At this point, although the political ideas he expressed were somewhat tangled, I managed to formulate a notion of the sort of government he desired: it was *a dictatorship tempered – not, as some would have it, by the spirit of the people – but by the rifles of the National Guard.* (ASSIS, 1952, p. 159, italics mine)

Ellis: When he had got so far, although his political ideas were a bit mixed, I managed to arrange and formulate the government he preferred; it was *a mild despotism, tempered – not by lullabies, as they say elsewhere* – but by the plumes of the National Guard. (ASSIS, 1955, p. 209, italics mine)

Rabassa: At that point, even though his political ideas were somewhat muddled, I managed to get an organized and formulated idea of the government of his preference: it was *moderate despotism—not with sweet talk, as they say elsewhere*, but with the plumed helmets of the National Guard [...] (ASSIS, 1997, p. 137, italics mine)

Grossman, faced with *cantigas*, or songs, has taken upon himself to act as mind reader and find out what Machado – or really Damasceno, via Brás – had in mind. His answer, despotism tempered by the spirit of the people, is both vague and rather less witty than the original. Ellis has maintained the structure of the original and interpreted *cantigas*, not unreasonably, as lullabies; but the gist remains unclear, unless Brás is quite anachronistically making a joke about the nanny state. Finally, Rabassa leaves out the word “tempered” entirely to provide us with a “despotism [...] with sweet talk” – perhaps a dictator who hasn’t read his Machiavelli and is still looking to be loved. Shots are being fired in all different directions, and not without reason. The phrase is difficult to parse, and is clearly pointing to something else – *como dizem alhures*, or as they say in other parts.

In searching for those other parts, we eventually arrive at the French writer Nicolas Chamfort, and his epigram that France was “an absolute monarchy tempered by songs.” Here is a brief and entertaining explanation:

They sing, they will pay.

[Cardinal Mazarin’s] famous mot [was] “Ils chantent, ils payeront,” [...] The French received each new tax he laid upon them with satirical poems, hence called “Mazarinades.” Calm under an opposition which exhausted itself in songs, he used to say, “Let them speak, let us act” [...]

It was in reference to this singular form of opposition to Mazarin that Chamfort, in his “Characters and Anecdotes,” puts into the mouth of an anonymous wit the mot, “France is an absolute monarchy tempered by songs” (La France est une monarchie absolue tempérée par des chansons). Of the innumerable parodies of this saying, the best known is, “Russia is a despotism tempered by assassination.” (BENT, 1882, p. 380)

The reference provides us with a conclusion: it becomes imperative to maintain both the word *despotism* and the word *tempered*, as Ellis has done, but to substitute *lullabies* for *songs*, these being the instruments of the French people's protest and not the tools of an oppressive government used to lull the populace.

These examples will, with any luck, have shown how dynamics of gender, emotional interaction, and intertextual interplay – in the cases seen here – may be illuminated by an examination of the strategies and solutions of the translators. Not only is this extremely valuable for a translator preparing a new version, but dealing with multiple translations affords the reader the opportunity to be confronted with interpretations which either confirm their impressions or challenge them with an alternative path. In John Felstiner's (1980, p. 25) study of the translations of Pablo Neruda's *Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, he presents comparisons between previous translations that are used to inform and justify his choices; of one predecessor, he writes, "where now and then I take issue with his rendering, it alerts and returns me to the original, which is part of what any translation should do." Throughout this process we may see translations as not only works in their own right but also works with a privileged relationship to the original, the complicated intimacy only known to siblings. This is "translation as a new source of knowledge," in Berman's (1992, p. 182) words. In reading them we embark on the circular motion hinted at in Felstiner's comparisons – translation, original, translation, original – and enrich our relation to both.

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