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http://machadodeassis.fflch.usp.br – Dossiê: *Machado de Assis e as literaturas de língua inglesa*

THE EDUCATION OF STUFFED SHIRTS: MACHADO'S RECEPTION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract: This essay discusses the reception of Machado de Assis in the United States. Focusing on the 1881 short story, "A Teoria do Medalhão", I argue that the real "medalhões" are in the North American academy, those readers and critics who, I predict, are going to have trouble appreciating the brilliance and originality of the Brazilian master.
Keywords: Machado de Assis; "The Education of a Stuffed Shirt;" comparative literature; Latin American literature; Brazil; Inter-American literature.

A "TEORIA DO MEDALHÃO" E A RECEPÇÃO DE MACHADO DE ASSIS NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

Resumo: *Este ensaio discute a recepção de Machado de Assis nos Estados Unidos. Enfocando no conto "A Teoria do Medalhão" (1881), argumento que os "medalhões" verdadeiros ficam na academia norte-americana, aqueles leitores e críticos que vão ter dificuldade em reconhecer o brilho e a originalidade do mestre brasileiro.*
Palavras-chave: *Machado de Assis; "Teoria do Medalhão"; literatura comparada; literatura latino-americana; Brasil; literatura interamericana.*

I take my title from Machado's great 1881 short story, the "Teoria do medalhão," known in the English-speaking world, thanks to Helen Caldwell's superb translation, as "The Education of a Stuffed Shirt."[1] Although Machado's story centers, sardonically, on the importance of hypocrisy to success in the world of bourgeois ethics and morality, my interest in

[1] This story has been translated by other translators and under other titles, but this is the one I prefer. Caldwell is one of Machado's most accomplished translators and is attuned to every nuance of his complex style.

it here is different. For me, and as emphasized by the Caldwell translation, the "stuffed shirts" are the members of the U.S.-American intelligentsia who are overly arrogant and who, even today, need to be "educated" about the excellence and originality of Machado de Assis.

Questions of influence and reception constitute one of the pillars of comparative literary study. And they have never been more important than they are today, when national literatures are losing some of their traditional isolation and entering into new relationships. This trend is proving to be advantageous for a rich but still egregiously ignored literature like that of Brazil, many of whose writers, Machado de Assis, for example, are now becoming staples of World Literature reading lists (JACKSON, 2015, p. 7). Defined as the "circulation and reading" of texts globally, David Damrosch believes new thinking about influence and reception is crucial to the development of this field, which seeks to engage national literatures long ignored, given short shrift, or relegated to the margins (DAMROSCH, 2003, p. 5). That is the case of Brazilian literature.

Historically, influence and reception studies have concentrated on the book or author that does the influencing; not so today. The times have changed. Now, the salient questions have more to do with the receiving culture. Why does one culture respond favorably to a given author while another culture does not? What are the social attitudes, cultural traditions, or historical experiences that determine whether the response is positive or negative? In the case of Machado's spotty but on-going reception in the United States, I see five points worthy of consideration.

I. Historical Bias in the United States

Historically, the United States has had a strong isolationist bent; in its rhetoric, at least, it has been chary of becoming involved with other countries. Perhaps this is due to its Puritan origins. The desire of the founding Puritans was, as the name suggests, to remain "pure" in their beliefs, to avoid being "contaminated" by contact with the outer world. In many respects, this was the exact opposite of the Luso-Brazilian experience, which was to engage with the rest of the world and to mix with it.

Nowhere was this more painfully obvious than in relations with Latin America. Rightly alarmed when, in the aftermath of the trumped up Spanish

American War, the United States began to expand its sphere of political and economic influence into the Caribbean, Spanish America found itself in a vulnerable position *vis-à-vis* its powerful and suddenly aggressive northern neighbor. Further removed from the United States, Brazil could chart a different course, one that would involve it presenting itself to U.S. Secretary of State, Elihu Root, and President Theodore Roosevelt, as the unofficial leader of Latin America. Historian Bradford Burns believes the U.S.-American leaders largely accepted Brazil's argument (BURNS, 1980, p. 329). Thanks to the efforts of the astute Baron of Rio-Branco, José Maria da Silva Paranhos, Júnior, Brazil enjoyed already by 1906 its own "special relationship" with Washington (BURNS, 1980, p. 329).

Limited to issues of statecraft, economics, and politics, this "special relationship" did not extend to the cultural arena. The rub was disdain. Our Puritan past once again holds the key. Puritan leaders such as Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall, who were virulently Protestant, detested Latin America for being Catholic – and for what they, and others, regarded as Latin America's racial impurity (PARKES, 1959, p. 56-57; BERCOVITCH, 1988, p. 33-37). These two qualities, being Catholic and either Black or of mixed-race, made them inferior – in the eyes of U.S.-Americans.

In literary terms, this means that, as early as 1620, when the English Puritans first arrived on American shores, they looked down on the people of Spanish America and of Brazil. They possessed a deeply rooted bias against them and everything that their cultures produced. This attitude would make it difficult, if not impossible, for Brazilian literature to be received positively in the United States. Indeed, until the opening years of the twentieth century it was all but totally ignored. Yet even by the 1960s, Yale professor, Emir Rodríguez Monegal, an Uruguayan critic who knew both Spanish American and Brazilian literature, could complain that "blind literary prejudice" was preventing critics in the United States from recognizing the brilliance of "the new Latin American literature" that was becoming available to them (RODRÍGUEZ MONEGAL, 1969, p. 3). Monegal was correct.

Machado de Assis first appeared in the United States thanks to Isaac Goldberg's collection of stories, *Brazilian Tales*, which was published in 1921. After some "Preliminary Remarks," which amount to a quick history of Brazilian literature up to the early twentieth century, Goldberg translated and briefly

commented on three stories by Machado de Assis (all from *Várias histórias*): "O Enfermeiro"/"The Attendant's Confession;" "A Cartomante"/"The Fortune Teller;" and "Viver!"/"Life"), one by José Medeiros e Albuquerque ("The Vengeance of Felix"), one by Coelho Neto ("The Pigeons"), and one by Carmen Dolores ("Aunt Zeze's Tears"). Interestingly, Goldberg also takes pains to praise the roles played by women in Brazilian life and literature, and it is this context that he celebrates Carmen Dolores.

The critical response to Goldberg's book was minimal and guarded. Known popularly as the "Roaring Twenties," an age of gangsters, "flappers," gin, and jazz, the 1920s were also a time of violent racism and acute xenophobia. Gilberto Freyre would have likely witnessed some of this while studying at Baylor University in Texas, a state that suffered a great deal of racial violence. Under such conditions, it is no surprise that Machado's U.S. *début* was greeted with less than wild enthusiasm. At the same time, it must be said that his early U.S. champion, Goldberg, was very much a cultural aesthete, a critic who had no time for an art's social importance. Samuel Putnam, another pioneer of Brazilian studies in the United States, likens Goldberg to José Veríssimo, who greatly influenced his (Goldberg's) views of Machado (PUTNAM, 1948, p. 198-199).

Goldberg's advocacy of Brazilian literature in general and of Machado de Assis in particular grows even more fulsome in his *Brazilian Literature*, published the next year, in 1922, just as Brazilian *Modernismo* was beginning to erupt. In this second book, Goldberg devotes more time and space to Machado and discusses his poetry as well as his narratives.

II. Machado and the Boom Era

In the United States, the phenomenon known as the Boom was almost 100% a matter of Spanish American literature. Even with writers like Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, and Clarice Lispector available in English translations, Brazil was never, from the perspective of U.S. critics, a part of it. In Spanish America, the situation was somewhat better, though even there Machado "se le conoce poco" (RODRÍGUEZ MONEGAL, 1972, p. 54). Describing Machado as "el más deleitable precursor de la nueva novela," no less a figure than Monegal could opine that the Brazilian "escribió por lo menos tres de las novelas más revolucionarias de las letras americanas: *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, 1881;

Quincas Borba, 1891 and *Dom Casmurro*, 1900," but it made little difference to U.S. readers (RODRÍGUEZ MONEGAL, 1972, p. 53-54).

In the United States, the national consciousness had been galvanized in 1960 by Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, and so all things Spanish came to dominate the media, the publishing industry, and even university discourse. Not even the U.S.-supported 1964 coup in Brazil could register more than a momentary blip on the great U.S. cultural screen of the 1960s. If people thought about it at all, Brazil was imagined to be somehow related to Latin America, which existed in the U.S. mind as only Spanish-speaking. Outside of the State Department, where Brazil was regarded as critical to U.S. interests (which explains why Brazilian Portuguese was officially declared a "critical language" for Americans to know), Brazil simply did not register; the times were all about Fidel Castro, Cuba, "Che" Guevara, and the allegedly "Communist" revolution in what was regarded, rather imperiously, as our backyard.

Writing in 1978, as he looked back on the Boom era, Robert G. Mead, Jr. lamented how literary critics in the United States, trained in U.S. departments of English, knew next to nothing about Spanish America and Brazil. He was right. To prove his point, he cites the case of John Leonard, who reviewed books for the *New York Times*. Trying, apparently, to be positive about what he (like most U.S.-Americans) thought of as "Latin American" literature, Leonard concluded by stating, emphatically, "We must learn Spanish!", – as if Portuguese and Brazil did not even exist (MEAD JR., 1978, p. 3)! Worse, this attitude simply elided such writers as Machado de Assis, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Guimarães Rosa, and Clarice Lispector! It was as if Brazil, along with its rich history and culture, did not exist, either.

If not even a sophisticated critic like John Leonard knew enough about Brazil and its writers to applaud them, what were the chances that lesser reviewers would do so? Such was the state of affairs in the United States of the Boom period as far as Brazilian letters were concerned.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not call attention to one critic who did recognize the importance of Brazil and its writers during this fecund if tumultuous period. I refer to John Barth, whose first published novel, *The Floating Opera* (1956), was directly influenced by the three novels of Machado de Assis that were translated into English during the 1950s: *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, *Philosopher or Dog?* (later retranslated as *Quincas Borba*), and *Dom*

Casmurro. Barth would later tell me, in conversation, that he was stuck, unable to complete the manuscript that would become *The Floating Opera*, and that, after reading Machado's novels he was set free (FITZ, 2009; see also BARTH, 1994). Machado, in translation, had shown Barth how to do what he had wanted to do but thought impossible – write about serious issues in a comic mode.

Although *The Floating Opera* had been inspired by Machado's work, by Barth's second novel, *The End of the Road* (1958), he had become enamored of Borges, who had become the Latin American writer the U.S. intelligentsia chose to follow. This was undoubtedly because of the Cuban Revolution, and all the attention it garnered for what was considered to be "Latin America" here in the United States. This explains a curious fact about Barth's advocacy of Machado; while he thought the Brazilian was brilliant, he did not mention him in either of his two famous and influential essays of the period, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980), both of which were devoted entirely to Spanish American writers Barth liked (FITZ, 2004).

The first of Machado's novels to become available to the English-speaking market in the United States was the *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, which William L. Grossman translated as *The Epitaph of a Small Winner*. Appearing in 1952, the reviews were generally favorable though not without criticisms. A common complaint was that *Epitaph* was derivative, a warmed-over version of *Tristram Shandy* (1759). Machado's novel was far more innovative than Sterne's effort, although U.S. reviewers did not see it. *Epitaph* was an open attack on traditional literary Realism, which, in the United States of the post-war era, was reasserting its traditional centrality to U.S. letters. In his 1879 essay "A nova geração," Machado stated what, for him, was the problem: "a realidade é boa", he wrote, "o realismo é que não presta para nada" (ASSIS, 1962, III, p. 830). In *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, Machado was showing the world what kind of narrative this iconoclastic theoretical position would produce. No one in the United States noticed that. Ahead of his time, Machado was a grand anachronism, a genius whose theories of narrative and whose technical innovations would not be appreciated until the 1970 (FITZ, 2019).

In his plumbing of the unstable relationship between language, which, pre-Saussure, Machado understood as a fluid system of symbols, and reality, he went much further than Sterne had. U. S. commentators failed to see this. Neither did they see that he had written a novel, or anti-novel, that epitomized the kind of

narrative Roland Barthes would later describe as *scriptible,* the purpose of which "c'est de faire du lecteur," whom Machado hectors constantly, urging her to consider various possible meanings, "non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte" (BARTHES, 1970, p. 10). This is exactly what Machado was doing in 1880; he wanted a new reader to accompany the new narrative he was now writing, and the U.S. critics of 1952, stuck in the old, for Barthes, *lisible* narrative tradition, did not appreciate what the Brazilian master was doing. The truly intriguing question is this: Could Barthes have somehow been influenced by Machado de Assis?

III. Brazilian Letters and World Literature

The importance of Brazil to World Literature grows steadily. And this has boosted Machado's reception, here in the United States and elsewhere. Brazilian literature's recognition received a major boost in 2003, when Harvard professor, David Damrosch, hailed it as exemplifying the World Literature movement's best principles (DAMROSCH, 2003, p. 27). Some nations, India, for example, consist of so many different languages and cultures that they can be considered their own systems of World Literature. In those areas, the pressure is centripetal. "By contrast," Damrosch writes, "world literature in Brazil has long been shaped by a very different set of forces: by complex relations between people of indigenous, European, or mixed descent; by inter-American relations within Latin America and vis-à-vis North America; and by lasting cultural ties to Portugal, to Spain, and to France" (DAMROSCH, 2003, p. 27). In Brazil, the pressure is centrifugal; it reaches out to other nations and other cultural, intellectual, and artistic traditions. This describes Machado's creative genius perfectly. Few writers of any nation have ever been as global, in their reading and in their appeal, as Machado is.

Focusing on Brazilian *Modernismo,* Damrosch then highlights its conscious commitment to merging the international with the national in the production of something altogether new – hybrid but new – that would then be exported back to the rest of the world. Brazilian Modernism, we can say, epitomizes the global process "of circulation and of reading" that Damrosch feels defines World Literature (p. 5). Building on the work of Beatriz Resende and Tania Carvalhal, Damrosch observes that "a number of contemporary Brazilian scholars are

moving beyond the paradigm of" Paris, London, and New York as their cultural models "to emphasize a two-way process, one that is grounded as much in Brazil's dynamic heterogeneity as in" the cultural influence of anyone else (DAMROSCH, 2003, p. 27; see also RESENDE, 2001 and CARVALHAL, 2001). Brazil, in other words, is fast emerging as a global cultural force itself. And leading this charge is Machado de Assis.

The problem, in terms of global recognition, is that while Spanish American literature has attained some measure of status, Brazilian literature is still in the process of doing so. Its struggle today is to distinguish itself from Spanish American letters and to gain its own identity and its own fame. It is succeeding in this effort. Readers around the world are learning to appreciate Brazilian literature and its writers. Though frustratingly slow, progress is being made here in the United States. The problem is ignorance. This applies even to Machado de Assis. As Princeton professor, Michael Wood, puts it, "Everyone who reads him thinks he is a master, but who reads him, and who has heard of him? When I talk to people about Borges, I often have to say the name carefully, but I don't always have to say who he is" (WOOD, 2006, p. 297). Fortunately, this is changing. People outside of Brazil are last learning who Machado is, and, like Wood, they see him for the master he is (JACKSON, 1998). When, in 1997, Yale's González Echevarría declared without equivocation that Machado "is one of the best of all time anywhere," he was correct (p. 95). And he was not exaggerating.

IV. Machado: A Writer or a Black Writer?

One of the most interesting things to happen to Machado and his reception in the United States of 2022 has to what is here regarded as the racial question. To wit: Will Machado be read here as a writer or as a Black writer? No less a figure than Harold Bloom has praised Machado as "an ironist of genius" who "never attacks his society directly," instead critiquing it "with sly comedy and a withering nihilism," and, finally, describing the Brazilian as "the supreme black literary artist to date" (BLOOM, 2002, p. 674).

Eventually, Machado will be read in other ways as well. There are too many major facets to his work for him not to be. As English departments come to admire him, he will become a staple of their course offerings. Already their interest in Machado is rising. A student in Duke University's department of

English, Damien-Adia Marassa, recently completed a Ph.D. thesis entitled, "Posthumous Persona(r)e: Machado de Assis, Black Writing, and the African Diaspora Literary Apparatus" (2018). The thesis, directed by two English department faculty members, seeks to move Machado out of the context of Brazil and into global letters, especially as these pertain to Black Writing. A new book considering Machado as a Black writer and his reception in the United States is slated to appear in 2023 (see VALDÉS, 2023 and FITZ).

While we are all pleased that Machado is gaining admirers outside the ken of Luso-Brazilian letters, this very process produces a vexing complication. There is what might be described as a complicated political aspect to having U.S.-based English departments take on the teaching of a writer like Machado de Assis. Although they have the power to do so, do English departments and their faculty have the training? Do they have the knowledge? To appreciate the seriousness of these questions, let us turn them around: Could a department of Spanish and Portuguese approve a doctoral dissertation devoted to Faulkner? Or to Shakespeare? Should it do so? Does it have the expertise?

If the answer is "yes," then what do such department designations (all based on the knowledge of certain languages) such as English, French, German, Chinese, Spanish, and Portuguese mean? Why bother to have them at all? Why not just have one, huge department of literature? The answer, of course, has to do with the language the literature is read, studied, and taught in and in enrollments; the greater your enrollments, the greater your power within the administrative structure of the U.S. academy. English departments typically have the largest enrollments in U.S. colleges and universities so they get the most resources. From an administrative point of view, the logic of this is sound; from an intellectual point of view, it is not. The problem is when, as is happening now in the United States, U.S. departments of English simply arrogate unto themselves all the world's literature, whether it is, or was, originally in English or whether it has been translated to English. Cornell University's English department has recently made exactly this decision, and others are sure to follow.

If the answer if "no," then why are English departments free to teach writers whom they work with in English translation when students and faculty in departments of Spanish and Portuguese are not allowed to teach authors who work in languages other than Spanish and Portuguese, authors whom, like Faulkner and Shakespeare, they can study in their original English? In the U.S.

academy, is there one set of rules for English departments and another set for other language and literature units? This is a question that, troubling to scholars who work with Portuguese and Brazilian literature, has yet to be resolved, and the resolution will have consequences for the reception of Brazilian literature here in the States.

What might these consequences be? The most immediate one is also the most likely. Brazilian writers will be taught by instructors who know very little about them or the literary heritage from which they come. Great works like *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, *Quincas Borba*, *Dom Casmurro*, "The Education of a Stuffed Shirt," "Midnight Mass," "Father vs. Mother," "The Blue Fly," "Vicious Circle," and "A Botany Lesson" will almost certainly be taught purely as texts (and translated texts at that), rather than as novels, stories, poems, and comedies written by late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Brazilian writer, Machado de Assis. No matter how well intended they are, English department personnel are not likely to understand all this means. This problem, of course, is not unique to Brazil and its writers; it is a basic weakness of World Literature and its study.

A second and also likely problem is that Brazilian writers will be commented on by people who will discuss them as if they are "Latin American," that is, as if they were products of the Spanish American tradition. That will be the one most English department teaching assistants, instructors, and even faculty will have heard about, and so that will the lens is used. Misinterpretations are all but certain to occur. Spanish America and Brazil are very different, but will English department faculty know how or why? I am doubtful.

A third possible consequence is that U.S.-trained English department teachers will find it very difficult to recognize the unexpectedly high levels of sophistication and excellence that they will be encountering with Machado's texts. In comparing him with his contemporary, Henry James, a yoking that will be made, Machado comes off as the superior writer; he is more innovative, more socially conscious, and more profound. And he is funny, something no one has ever accused James of being. For all his excellence as a writer, moreover, "James doesn't have the *sabedoria*, the great, deep life wisdom of Machado" (PUTNAM, 1948, p. 178).

But, I suspect, most of Machado's English department instructors will find this conclusion difficult to accept. In this scenario, a better writer, a more

talented artist, will, unjustly, be undervalued by U.S. evaluators not accustomed to having their writers come off as being second best – and especially not to a "Latin American" writer! Readers and critics in the U.S. must be open to the possibility that the texts from Brazil that they are reading are, occasionally, better than their own. Machado is the prototypical case. But there are others. It is easy, for example, for a knowledgeable reader to judge Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas* as the best novel in the Americas of the 1950s. But I think U.S. critics will have trouble with this.

As Brazilians know, and as U.S.-based Brazilianists also know, race is understood differently in Brazil than it is in the United States. Most readers, critics, and professors here in the States, however, will not be aware of this. The potential for a serious misreading of Machado thus looms large. The possibility that, on the racial question, Machado will be badly misunderstood is further complicated by the fact that Machado does not write as if he were Black, which he partly was. This has long been a point of controversy in Brazil, where Machado has long been made to appear whiter than he really was, and it soon will be here in the United States.

As far as Machado's reception in the United States of the 2020s and 2030s is concerned, much will depend on the critical introductions that accompany the texts that are published and presented to the U.S.-American critical establishment and reading public. If these explain Brazil's history of race relations and slavery, and if they position Machado de Assis in that context, then they will help readers in the United States to understand him better, his art as well as his political importance.

A crude reductionism will be the danger. Publishers know that anger sells books, and some of them will be tempted to exploit Machado's Blackness for this purpose. The critical establishment must be on guard to prevent Machado from being reduced to this simplistic and one-dimensional level. But if Machado is being read and taught in classes where neither the students nor the instructor know much about him, or about Brazil, its culture, history, and literature, how well will he be taught? How well will he be appreciated? This is where U.S.-American parochialism really begins to hurt the reception of a subtle, complex writer like Machado de Assis. *Vamos ver*.

V. Machado's Reception and Criticism in English:

Because here in the United States Machado will not be read in Portuguese but in English, the question of what critical studies will be available to his U.S. readers becomes very important. Fortunately, there are many good ones, though at the same time many will be missed because they were not written in English or do not exist in English translation. This is a handicap, though it is not a fatal one. I do think that, for the benefit of our English-speaking colleagues, one point should be called to their attention. I refer to the long-running debate about whether Machado is best read as a realist or as a modernist. This question has always seemed interesting, if not necessarily crucial, to me, and I think it is going to be particularly germane for U.S. scholars to be aware of. Here in the United States, many English-trained literary scholars view twentieth-century literature as moving directly from what they consider to be Modernism (Joyce, Eliot, Woolf, et al) to Postmodernism. A writer like Machado de Assis, who relates to both camps but also to Realism (which is how the English critic John Gledson reads him), will be a challenge.

Both sides in the debate have good, text-based arguments going for them. This is exactly what one expects with a writer as complex as Machado is; he can be read as a realist or as a modernist. Or, one supposes, even as a postmodernist. The essays included in Richard Graham's *Machado de Assis: Reflections on a Brazilian Master Writer* will be especially useful to the U.S. reader as she takes her own position with respect to this matter. Other studies of this type include Helen Caldwell's *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis* and *Machado de Assis: The Brazilian Master and His Novels*; Paul Dixon's *Reversible Readings and Retired Dreams*; John Gledson's *The Deceptive Realism of Machado de Assis*; David Jackson's *Machado de Assis: A Literary Life*; Roberto Schwarz's *Misplaced Ideas*; and the wide-ranging studies in *The Author as Plagiarist: The Case of Machado de Assis*, organized by João Cezar de Castro Rocha.

In closing out this section, I would like to proffer a suggestion: In order to assist our non-Portuguese-speaking colleagues to appreciate Machado in the most complete manner possible, I propose that scholars from Brazil and the United States join forces to create an annotated, on-line bibliography of critical works on Machado that exist in English. This bibliography could be open ended so that it could accommodate newly appearing materials. This way, it could grow

through time, just as Machado's reception in the English-speaking world will. *Machado de Assis em Linha* could be a good platform for it. My feeling is that such project would prove to be quite useful. It might even foster further comparative studies involving the United States and Brazil, and that would be a very good thing.

Some Concluding Thoughts:

A great writer, Machado de Assis is today making himself better and better known here in the United States. And he will continue to do so, for he has a great deal to say to the people of the United States. His reception will involve overcoming some obstacles, his place of origin, his style, his particular brand of social consciousness, and his uniqueness. Machado is a writer for the ages, but he is also one of us, a human being, that is, and if we can drop our preconceived notions and read him carefully, we will realize that. We will know that, with Machado de Assis, we are in the presence of greatness.

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