

RESENHA REVIEW

Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Translated and with an introduction by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux. New York: Penguin Books, 2020. 324 p.

Midway through Flora Thomson-DeVeaux's new English translation of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, we read the following: "My good living sirs and madams, there is nothing so incommensurable as the disdain of the deceased" (69). These words—penned by the book's defunct narrator, Brás Cubas—are indicative of the prevailing tone of Machado de Assis's brilliant 1881 novel, in which Cubas offers biting critiques of Brazilian society, of his contemporaries, and of himself. Widely considered to be the inaugural work of Brazilian Realism, the novel contains the reflections of a spoiled and self-absorbed man, who was (by his own account) a particularly lackluster individual.

As hinted at above, Cubas's post-mortem narration is one of the most memorable aspects of the work; indeed, he famously dedicates it to "the worm that first gnawed at the cold flesh of my cadaver" (xl). What follows is a meandering narration of Cubas's life and his relationships with a series of women, most notably his complicated and illicit relationship with the beautiful Virgília. This storyline, which itself is fairly straightforward, is peppered with a host of digressions that include philosophical musings; explicit asides to the reader about boots and butterflies; and a psychedelic vision that includes a talking hippopotamus, the "living condensation of all time," and the end of all humanity (23). These various elements of Machado's classic text are expertly maintained (and explained) in this translation.

Flora Thomson-DeVeaux, currently the research director at Rádio Novelo (Rio de Janeiro), holds a BA in Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Cultures from Princeton University (2013) and a PhD in Portuguese and Brazilian Studies from Brown University (2019). The author of various articles on Machado de Assis and translator of numerous scholarly

books, she regularly translates for *Revista Piauí*. Her translation of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, arising from her dissertation project, is a meticulous rendering of one of the most acclaimed Brazilian novels and is chock-full of contextual information that English- and Portuguese-speaking readers alike will find useful.

Hers is the fourth translation into English of the original *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. Previous translations include William Grossman's *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (1952), E. Percy Ellis's *Posthumous Reminiscences of Braz Cubas* (1955), and Gregory Rabassa's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1997). (A fifth translation was published by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson just a few weeks after Thomson-DeVeaux's translation was released.) Throughout her extensive notes, the translator provides instructive comparisons to her predecessors, highlighting similarities and contrasts between her translation choices and theirs. The description of her initial experiences translating Machadian passages (for her translation of João Cezar de Castro Rocha's *Machado de Assis: Toward a Poetics of Emulation*) surely applies to this undertaking: it was a process of reading, rereading, and "threeread[ing]" Machado's own words and then examining the various translations, "not against the original ... but rather *with* it and with one another" to enhance her own rendering (xxvii-xxix). This approach to her predecessors is gracious and refreshing; while it is clear that she is dedicated to preserving the wit and beauty of Machado's prose in painstakingly accurate detail, she does so without disparaging previous translators' efforts.

This volume is a welcome tool for both first-time readers and established scholars of Machado, who will doubtless learn much from her careful and meticulous notes. These include descriptions of nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro geography, information about the approximately 80,000 enslaved individuals living in Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1800s, and observations about Machado's possible and proven literary influences. It also includes translations of portions of the author's 1880 serial edition that were removed when it was published in book form in 1881, providing enlightening glimpses into "how Machado's thought process worked" (xxxii).

Thomson-DeVeaux's translation does not recast Machado's work into 21st-century English; what shines through her translation is a commitment to presenting Machado's novel using the words he would have employed if he had written the text in 1880s English. This does

not always make for light reading (who today uses words like *wastrel* or *gadabout*?), but—as happens with the Portuguese original—the further the reader progresses through the text, the easier it becomes. For phrases with multiple meanings, the translator is careful to use wording in English that reflects the various connotations. When this is not possible, she explains the alternate interpretations in her notes. This slows down the reading process but also mirrors the experience of reading Machado in Portuguese in the twenty-first century—his prose is full of words, phrases, and allusions that can disorient readers if they do not have a reference at hand. Thomson-DeVeaux’s notes are crucial in this regard, as she clarifies elements of the text that would be overlooked in a cursory reading. If anything, the translator errs on the side of providing too much information, rather than too little. However, because she uses endnotes rather than footnotes, readers retain control over how much they engage with her careful research and decision-making process.

This translation will be helpful to those wishing to familiarize themselves with the works of Machado de Assis (including, as stated earlier, those who can read Portuguese, who will benefit immensely from Thomson-DeVeaux’s notes), as well as aspiring and established translators, who can use this work as a reference when thinking through the myriad decisions that must be made when translating a given work. Thomson-DeVeaux’s dedication to uncovering the origins of each word and phrase penned by Machado reflects a commitment to the highest standards in translation work, as well as to expanding the reach of one of Brazil’s great authors, who (lamentably) is still understudied and unknown in much of the English-speaking world.

The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas is a seminal work of Brazilian literature and remains surprisingly modern, despite its having been published almost a century and a half ago. With this translation, Thomson-DeVeaux joins a distinguished list of translators and scholars who have helped spread Machado’s work throughout the world, and her work represents an important step forward in bringing visibility to Portuguese and Brazilian studies in English-speaking communities around the world.

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