

makes us wonder about how we relate to others and, in the process, are affected by this relationship.

I would have liked to have included other works in this collection (there are so many that deserve to be here!), but I am sure this is just the beginning of a task that can take students and teachers alike to many new projects of translation.

Rosalia Garcia
Professor of Literature and Translation
Instituto de Letras - UFRGS

Midnight mass

Machado de Assis

I never fully understood the conversation I had with a lady many years ago, when I was seventeen and she, thirty. It was Christmas Eve. Having decided with a neighbor that we would go to Midnight Mass, I preferred not to sleep; I said I would wake him at midnight.

The house where I was lodging belonged to Meneses, a public clerk, whose first marriage had been with one of my cousins. His second wife, Conceição, and her mother received me very well when I came from Mangaratiba to Rio de Janeiro, months earlier, for prep school. I lived peacefully in that two-story house on Senado Street, with my books, a few acquaintances, some outings. The family was small: the clerk, his wife, his mother-in-law and two female slaves. Old habits. At ten o'clock in the evening, we were all in our bedrooms; at ten-thirty the household was asleep. I had never been to the theater and, having often heard Meneses say that he was going, I would ask him to take me along. On these occasions, his mother-in-law would grimace and the slaves tried to muffle their giggles. He would not answer, got dressed, left the house and came back only the next morning. Later on, I found out that the theater was a euphemism in action. Meneses was carrying on an affair with a woman who lived separated from her husband, and would stay with her once a week. At first, Conceição had suffered with the knowledge of the concubine, but she forbore it all, became used to it, and eventually came to find it quite proper.

Kind, dear, Conceição! They called her "the saint" and she deserved the title, she bore her husband's neglect so well. In fact, she had a moderate temper, with no extreme emotions, no great sorrows, no great joy. In regards to the situation

* De Contos Consagrados de Machado de Assis, Edições de Ouro

I mentioned, she would have made a good Muslim wife; she would even have accepted a harem, as long as appearances were kept up. God forgive me if I am judging her ill. Everything about her was attenuated and passive. Her face was average looking, not pretty, nor ugly. She was what you could call a pleasant person. She was unable to speak unkindly of anyone and would forgive everything. She did not know how to hate; it is even possible that she did not know how to love.

On that Christmas Eve, the clerk went to the theater. This was around 1861 or 1862. I was supposed to have gone to Mangaratiba by then, for my vacation, but I stayed on for Christmas to watch the Midnight Mass in the Capital. The family went to bed at the usual time; I slipped into the front room, dressed and ready. From there I could reach the hall and leave the house without waking a single soul. The front door had three keys; one of them was with the clerk, I would take another, and the third stayed in the house.

"But, Mr. Nogueira, what are you going to do all this time?" asked Conceição's mother.

"I'll read, Dona Inácia."

I had a novel with me, *The Three Musketeers*, an old translation published by the *Jornal do Comércio*, I think. I sat at the table in the middle of the room and, by the light of a kerosene lamp, while the house was asleep, once more got on the back of d'Artagnan's thin horse and rode off on adventures. Soon I was completely drunk on Dumas. Time flew by, contrary to what usually occurs when you are waiting. I heard the clock strike eleven almost without noticing, a chance occurrence. However, a small noise coming from inside the house woke me from my reading. It was the sound of steps in the corridor. I raised my head and soon enough saw the figure of Conceição in the doorway.

"Haven't you gone yet?" she asked.

"Not yet, it's not midnight."

"How patient you are!"

Conceição entered the room, dragging her slippers. She was wearing a white robe, loosely tied at the waist. Being a thin woman, she had a romantic demeanor, in no way inconsistent with my adventure book. I closed it; she sat on a chair in front of me, next to the ottoman. When I asked if I had awakened her, with some accidental noise, she quickly answered:

"No! Really! I woke up for no reason."

I stared at her for a while and doubted her assertion. Her eyes were not those of a person who had just woken up, she seemed not to have slept at all. However, I quickly gave up this thought, which might have meant something in some other state of mind without realizing that maybe she could not sleep because of me and had lied so as not to concern or upset me. As I have already said, she was a good woman indeed.

"But it is almost time, I'm sure," I said.

"How patient you are, waiting awake, while others sleep. And waiting alone! Aren't you afraid of spirits from the other world? I noticed that you were startled when you saw me."

"I was a little when I heard footsteps, but then I saw it was you."

"What are you reading? Don't tell me, it's the *Musketeer* novel."

"You're right, it's wonderful."

"Do you like novels?"

"Yes, I do."

"Have you read *The Moreninha*?"

"By Dr. Macedo? I have it in Mangaratiba."

"I enjoy novels very much, but I read very little because I don't have the time. What novels have you been reading?"

I began to list some titles. Conceição was listening to me with her head lying against the back of the chair, gazing through half-closed lids, without taking her eyes off me. Once in a while, she slid her tongue over her lips to moisten them. When I stopped talking, she said nothing, and so we remained for a while. After that, I saw her straighten her head, cross her fingers and place her chin on them, with her elbows on the arms of the chair, without taking her large, clever eyes off me. "Maybe she's worried," I thought. Aloud, I said:

"Dona Conceição, I believe it's very late, and I ..."

"No, no, it's still early. I just checked the time, it's eleven-thirty. It's early. After having stayed up all night, are you able to stay awake throughout the day?"

"It wouldn't be the first time."

"Not me. If I stay up one night, I cannot bear it the next day, and need to take a nap at least for half an hour. But I am getting old, after all."

"Old, Dona Conceição? Never!"

The heat of my words was such that it made her smile. She was a woman of slow movements and calm attitudes; this time, however, she stood up quickly, went to the other side of the room, pacing from the street window to the door of her husband's office. In her candid disarray she caused a peculiar impression on me. She was thin, but there was some kind of sway to her movement, as if she had to make an effort to carry her body, and this had never seemed so clear to me as on that night. She stopped a few times, examining a section of the curtains, or changing the position of some object on the sideboard; she finally stopped before me, with the table between us. One thought kept coming back to her mind, and once more she mentioned her surprise at finding me waiting, awake. I repeated what she already knew – that I had never been to Midnight Mass in the Capital, and that I did not want to miss it.

"It's the same as mass in the country, they're all alike."

"I'm sure it is, but I think there is more luxury here, and more people too. You

know, Holy Week is more beautiful in Rio de Janeiro than in the countryside, though I wouldn't say the same of the feast of St. John or St. Anthony..."

Little by little, she had leaned forward. She set her elbows on the marble top of the table and kept her face between her open hands. Because they were unbuttoned, her sleeves naturally fell open, so I could see part of her arms, very white, and not as thin as one might imagine. This was no revelation to me, though it was also not a common sight. At that moment, however, I was overwhelmed. Her veins were so blue that, despite the poor light, I could count them from where I sat. Conceição's presence had awakened me even more than the book. I went on telling her what I thought about feasts in the country and in the city, and other things that came to my mind. I rambled on, without realizing why, skipping from one subject to another, going back to something I had said before, and laughing to make her smile so I could see her shining white teeth, all perfectly the same. Her eyes were not really black, but dark; her nose, plain and long, a little curved, gave her face an inquisitive air. When I raised my voice, she chided me:

"Speak lower! Mother may wake up."

And she did not change her position, which filled me with pleasure, for our faces were so close. There was really no need to speak in a loud voice. We both whispered, I more than she, for I spoke more. Sometimes she became serious, quite serious, her forehead wrinkled in a frown. Finally, she got tired; her attitude changed, and she moved to another place. She walked around the table and sat beside me on the ottoman. I turned to her and furtively caught a glimpse of the tips of her slippers, but this only lasted the time it took her to sit down. Her gown was long and promptly covered them. I recall they were black. Conceição whispered:

"Mother's room is on the other side of the house, but she is a light sleeper. If she awoke now, poor thing, it would take her a long time to fall asleep again."

"It's the same with me."

"What?" she asked, leaning over to hear what I had said.

I went and sat on the chair next to the ottoman and repeated what I had said. She laughed at the coincidence; she was also a light sleeper, we were three then.

"Sometimes I am like mother – if I wake up, it takes a while for me to fall asleep again. I toss and turn in bed to no avail. I get up, light a candle, walk around, go back to bed and it is no use."

"That is what happened tonight."

"No, no", she said quickly.

I did not understand her denial. Perhaps she did not understand it herself. She took the ends of her belt and slapped them lightly against her knees, that is, her right knee, since she had just crossed her legs. She then told me about a dream she had had, and said she had only ever had one nightmare in her life, as a child. She wanted to know if I ever had them. And so, the conversation picked up slowly,

leisurely, and soon I was no longer thinking about the time nor the mass. As I finished a story or an explanation, she would find another question or another topic and I would start all over again. Occasionally, she reprimanded me:

"Lower, lower..."

There were some pauses as well. Twice it seemed to me that she had dozed off, but her eyes, which had closed for a second, would soon open without a sign of fatigue or weariness, as if she had closed them in order to see better. On one of these occasions, I believe she caught me absorbed in her, and I recall she closed her eyes again, hastily or lazily, I do not know. Some impressions from that night seem fragmented or confusing to me. I contradict myself, I flounder. One of the impressions still clearly engraved in my mind is that, at a certain point, she, who had always been only pleasant, became pretty, became utterly beautiful. She was standing with her arms crossed. As a sign of respect for her, I moved to stand up; she would not allow it. She placed one of her hands on my shoulder and compelled me to remain seated. I thought she would say something, but she shuddered as if she felt cold, turned and sat on the chair where I had first been reading when she approached. From there, she cast a quick glance at the mirror, which was above the ottoman, and talked about two pictures that were hanging on the wall.

"These pictures are getting old. I have already asked Chiquinho to buy some others."

Chiquinho was her husband. The pictures represented the man's main interest. One of them was a picture of Cleopatra. I cannot recall the theme of the other, but both referred to women. They were both vulgar, but at the time, they did not seem ugly to me.

"They are nice," I said.

"They are nice, but stained. Besides, to be honest, I would prefer two images, two saints. These are more suitable for a young man's room or a barbershop."

"A barbershop? You have never been into a barbershop."

"But I can imagine the customers talk about ladies and courting while they wait, and the barber naturally pleases their eyes with beautiful pictures. I think it is not appropriate for a family home. That is what I think, but a great number of strange ideas go through my head. Be that as it may, I do not like these pictures at all. I have an image of Our Lady of Conceição, my patron, and it is very beautiful. It is a sculpture, though, and cannot be placed on the wall. In any case, nor do I want it to be, it is in my oratory."

The idea of the oratory reminded me of the mass. I remembered that it might be late and I wanted to mention it. I believe I even opened my mouth, but I promptly closed it to listen to what she was saying with such sweetness, such grace, such languidness that my soul filled with lassitude and I forgot the mass and the church. She spoke of her devotions when she was a girl and a young lady. Afterwards, she referred to some ballroom anecdotes, some outings, memories of Paquetá, all strung together, almost without interruption. When she got tired

of the past, she talked about the present, household chores, the burden of family life, which, she had been told were many before she was married, but which were really nothing. She did not tell me, but I knew she had gotten married at the age of twenty-seven.

She did not change places anymore, as she had in the beginning, and she almost did not modify her posture. She no longer stared with her big eyes, but started to look aimlessly at the walls.

"We have to change the living room wallpaper," she said after a while, as if to herself.

I agreed, if only to say something to awake me from that magnetic sleepiness, or whatever it was, that hindered my tongue and my senses. I both wanted and did not want to put an end to the conversation. I made an effort to take my eyes off her, and did so as a sign of respect. However, the idea of seeming to be bored when I was not led my eyes once again to Conceição. The conversation was dying out. The silence in the street was complete.

For a time – I do not know how long – we remained quite silent. The only occasional sound was that of a mouse gnawing away in the office, which woke me from the drowsiness I had fallen into. I wanted to mention it, but could not think how. Conceição seemed to be dreaming. Suddenly, I heard a knock on the window:

"Midnight Mass! Midnight Mass!"

"There's your friend," she said as she stood up. "How odd: you agreed to wake him up and he's here to wake you up. Go, it's time. Goodbye."

"Is it time already?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Midnight Mass!" were the words that came from outside.

"Go, go, don't make him wait, it was my fault. Goodbye. See you tomorrow."

And with the same swing of her body, Conceição made her way down the corridor, stepping lightly. I went outside and found my neighbor waiting for me. We went from there to the church. More than once during the mass, I found the figure of Conceição between the priest and myself. Blame it on my youth: I was only seventeen. The next morning at lunchtime, I talked about the mass and the people who were at the church, without exciting Conceição's curiosity. Throughout the day, I found her as always, natural, benevolent and without a sign that she recalled our conversation of the previous evening. At New Year's I went to Mangaratiba. When I returned to Rio de Janeiro in March, the clerk had died of apoplexy. Conceição had moved to Engenho Novo, but I neither visited nor met her. Later, I heard that she had married her husband's assistant clerk.

The man who knew Javanese

Lima Barreto

One day, at a coffee shop, I was telling my friend Castro about the scams I'd played on the great and the good in order to survive.

There was even a certain occasion, while I was in Manaus, when I myself forced to conceal my Bachelor's degree so as to gain the confidence of clients who flocked to my spells-and-fortune-telling office. I was telling Castro all about it.

My friend listened to me in silence, astonished, enjoying that Gil Blas life of mine, when, during a pause in the conversation, as we emptied our glasses, he said nonchalantly:

"You have been living quite an amusing life, Castelo!"

"It is the only way to live... This business of a regular job, leaving home at a certain hour, returning at another, gets you down, don't you think? I really don't know how I have coped at the consulate!"

"It's wearing, but that is not why I am amazed. What amazes me is that you have had so many adventures here, in this asinine, bureaucratic Brazil."

"No! My dear Castro, we can write the most beautiful pages of our lives right here. Can you believe that I was once a teacher of Javanese!"

"When? Here, after you came back from the consulate?"

"No, before that. In fact, that is precisely why I was named consul."

"Tell me all about it. Will you have some more beer?"

"Why not."

We ordered another bottle, filled our glasses, and I continued:

"I had been in Rio for a short time and was literally living in poverty. I kept running from boarding house to boarding house, not knowing where and how

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