

Readings of Balzac in Twentieth-Century Brazil: The Case of Machado de Assis

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Abstract. Balzac, one of the most popular authors of the nineteenth century, developed themes (arrivism, the power of money) and a narrative mode (the reappearance of the same characters) that were relevant far beyond France. It is the contention of this essay that Machado de Assis was one of Balzac's finest and most perceptive readers.

I. Balzacian diffusion

Unlike Stendhal, whose greater number of readers arose only at the end of the nineteenth century, Balzac enjoyed enormous success in his own time. This brought him the displeasure of seeing some of his novels published without authorization or the payment of royalties, such was the extent of publishers' interest in benefiting from his success.

Because he was such a popular and prolific writer, always present in newspapers and magazines, he was considered for a long time as a literary figure of the same stature as Paul Féval (1817-1877), Paul de Kock (1793-1871), or Eugène Sue (1804-1857), all of whom were also widely recognized by the public. Time passed and the perspective of history allowed critics to evaluate the production of each writer more carefully, with Balzac reaching the level of a paradigmatic author. There is a natural interest in studying his reception in nineteenth-century Brazil, a time in which the presence of the author of *Gobseck* was intensely felt, contributing to the expansion and maturity of the novel among Brazilian writers and readers, as well as their familiarization with it.

In 1841, there was already present in Brazil a translation from Portugal, under the title *Algumas scenas da vida particular* (*Some Scenes of Private Life*) (Rodrigues 101). There is evidence of previous translations of his publications in Portuguese newspapers and Brazilian periodicals. Not coincidentally, the young Justiniano José da Rocha, a legally trained journalist who arrived from Paris a few years prior (one of the leaders of the 1833 *Revista da Sociedade Filomática* (*Philomathical Society Review*), a collective student work at the Law School in São Paulo), published an adaptation of *La peau de chagrin*, under the title *A luva misteriosa* (*The Mysterious Glove*), in 1836.

As we know, in this period the mystery novel was very successful both in Europe and in Brazil, via translations originals. This led to Justiniano José da Rocha's journalistic interest. As a matter of fact, one should not forget that Balzac was one of the authors who helped to create the serialized novel, as Marlyse Meyer points out: "The magical lure of 'continued next issue' is created along with the serialized novel. *Lazarillo de Tormes* was the first to undergo this treatment, in 1836, and, at the end of the same year, Girardin expressly requests from an author, Balzac, a novella to be released serially, *La vieille fille*" (31).¹

This is one of the reasons for the strong criticisms from commentators such as Sainte-Beuve, who classified the serialized productions as "industrial literature" and used them, as we know, to equate Balzac with his contemporaries, all of whom today have practically disappeared. However, in Brazil, throughout the nineteenth century, they became an obligatory reference, partly because the French novel, together with works on science, history, and philosophy, was part of the atmosphere of modernization in the country following independence.² It is worth remembering, moreover, that the study of middle- and upper-class reading habits in Brazil at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, published by Gilberto Freyre in his *Ordem e Progresso* (*Order and Progress*), shows that only the work of Balzac is continually remembered by those interviewed.³

Alencar, for example, in "Como e por que sou romancista" ("How and why I am a novelist"), tells us about his arrival at the São Paulo Academy and the fascination that Francisco Otaviano's library held for the academics: "My housemate was one of Otaviano's friends, and I was allowed to take advantage of his literary opulence. That was how one day I saw for the first time the volume of Balzac's complete works, in that loose-leaf edition that the Belgian typographers made available at a modest price" (35).⁴ The future

author of *Iracema* did not command French well enough to enable him to read the original fluently, but even so he did not get discouraged and, little by little, he penetrated the readings of Dumas, Chateaubriand, and Victor Hugo. The narrated facts take place in the mid-forties and foretell the vogue that Balzac will obtain throughout the century, becoming a constant in the concerns of authors and critics.

Take, for example, the case of the novel *O primo Basílio* by Eça de Queirós and Machado de Assis' criticism of it in 1878. In these, Balzac's presence is more than suggested. The work carries, as the author of *Resurreição* (*Resurrection*) indicates, the strength of the plot of *Eugénie Grandet*, when one of the characters, upon contact with the details of the lives of Luísa and Basílio, exclaims, "But this is the plot of *Eugénia Grandet*, Sebastian! You're describing Balzac's novel to me! This is *Eugénia Grandet*!" (Queirós 135).⁵

For the Portuguese and Brazilian public, therefore, the French text must have been widely known, given that the novelist, in an interesting intertextual turn, uses the public's memory as an integral part of his literary craft. Machado de Assis next discusses the "moral figure" of Eugénie Grandet and establishes clear-cut differences with relation to Luísa.⁶

This is the dialogue between Brazil and Portugal, passing necessarily through France, in a complex triangular relationship with varied effects, always connected to great literary figures. Of these, Balzac especially interests us, given that Machado is reflecting, while dealing with the novel, upon the possibilities of transplanting forms and themes. Brazilian criticism points out, moreover, that José de Alencar must have been inspired by Balzac in order to propose the summary of his work in the preface to *Sonhos d'ouro* (*Dreams of Gold*, 1872),⁷ which goes so far as to affirm that our author had found inspiration not in Balzac, but in the preface written by Zola for *Rougon-Macquart* of 1871.

We arrive then at other textual parallels, which seem original and fruitful especially because they appear in authors aware of the limits and intentions of Brazilian literature. Both José de Alencar and Machado de Assis reflected appropriately on Brazil's literary development, either in articles that may be consulted with great benefit (such as "Instinto de Nacionalidade" ["Instinct of Nationality"]) and the polemic around *O primo Basílio* mentioned above) or in the context of their own works.

We must not forget that in the letter-postface to *Senhora*, Alencar is perfectly aware of the social situation of the Court (with his expression, "tama-

nho da sociedade fluminense” [“greatness of Rio society”]) and of the lesson learned in Balzac, which is that of the “philosophical” narrative, which he gives up on—apparently—in favor of the “dramatic,” à la Shakespeare. Even so, Alencar insists on the connection between man and environment, clearly related to the manner of inserting characters in social life, a lesson also theorized by Balzac:

As for Fernando, you are even more unfair. The simple description of the living space draws its inhabitant, and when the author presents him, lying on the sofa, we already know him morally by the contrast of his external elegance and his domestic poverty. The details of clothing and furniture have no other purpose. You call this photography; it must be, however of the character, revealed more in these small accidents of intimacy than in the social apparatus. (Alencar, “Note to Senhora” 342)⁸

So, in Balzac, description loses its ornamental quality, integrating itself to the action in order to help portray the characters, as shown by an insightful critic of the relationship between literature and the representation of society:

to him every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same time the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieus. (Auerbach 473)

If we wish to gather a representative example, we should accompany the narrator into the paradigmatic Vauquer boardinghouse in order to observe its proprietor, whose description obliges us to anchor her deeply in the wretched and asphyxiating perspective of a typified world, because “toute sa personne explique la pension, comme la pension implique sa personne” (Balzac, *Goriot* 50).

Similarly, the reader’s encounter with Fernando Seixas, through the contrast between the brilliance of the clothes and the poverty of the environment, already establishes the drama that will follow and gets to the heart of the matter: the universe of money will have a dominant role in the plot, along with one of the most well-known Balzacian themes, that of the arriviste, one of the driving forces of Machado de Assis’ *Senhora* and of *A mão e a luva* (*The Hand and the Glove*), as critics have highlighted.

II. Thematic convergences and a shrewd reader of Balzac

The primacy of money disgusted José de Alencar, whose preferred character types end up avoiding the monetary empire, either by an escape through time or space or through spiritual redemption (as in the case of Fernando Seixas). In contrast, the Machadian oeuvre knows how to advantageously manipulate the introjection of power that economic life enables. It is time to take a closer look at Machado's creative work and his incessant struggle for the universalization of Brazilian literature, adapting and transforming foreign elements belonging to the novelistic tradition or recently suggested by popular novelists.

The power of money, or better, the triumphalism of economic power and its consequent social projection are part of Brás Cubas, a conscious beneficiary of its power, or Bentinho, whose narrative can also be seen as an encounter of classes. What to say about the banker Santos, an important figure in *Esau e Jacó* (*Esau and Jacob*), or about the disturbing and crafty politician Tristão, whose monetary activity—the basis for his return to Brazil—does not go unnoticed under the wise eyes of Counselor Ayres?

So that we can go a little further in this field of Brazilian fictional experience, it would be interesting now to work with an extraordinary dispute between two Machadian arrivistes and to try to determine how much Balzacian evocation there is in *Quincas Borba*. This book deals with the slow and gradual absorption of property by Cristiano de Almeida e Palha in relation to Rubião, who brings to Rio de Janeiro a fortune obtained in an unexpected way, thanks to the inheritance from Quincas Borba. All of this is enhanced, then, by the desire to shine in the big city, where he would find himself surrounded by “its enchantment, movement, theaters everywhere, pretty girls dressed in the latest French fashions” (*Quincas Borba* 24). His newcomer status, therefore, is of a socio-cultural nature, because he already possesses sufficient means for success as a “capitalist.”

Wealth and its accompanying new social position unleash a process of dismantling of provincial referents, making France supreme, decorating the narrative with its operatic brilliance, of course, but always in opposition to the “gauche” nature of Barbacena's unknown professor. Thus, even here Balzac interests us more narrowly, as a thematic source, given that we can, at first, verify the inverse connection to Rastignac, the poor country bumpkin who arrives in the metropolis, in this case Paris, following a torturous process of apprenticeship and social climbing. Another character, Lucien de Rubempré (*Illusions perdues*), in his first trip to the French capital, unaware of Rastignac's

moneyed end, finds himself in a world of theater and venal journalism. It is impossible not to remember at this moment a figure like Camacho (in *Quincas Borba*), the self-interested journalist, causing us to recall so many scenes from *Illusions perdues*.

In *Quincas Borba*, Brazilian social novelty is personified in the presence of the commercial arriviste (Cristiano). Machado abandons the more solid and tranquil terrain of the old bourgeois and landed nobility relationships. The world of the metropolis is enriched with behaviors distinguished in relation to Barbacena. We are dealing with something new and insidious, which escapes Rubião's distracted understanding. Differently from Rastignac, he will not undertake the apprenticeship necessary for life in a cosmopolitan, but savage, society.

The Rio de Janeiro depicted is far removed from the old patriarchal relationships. The controlling code will no longer impose sanctions and rewards based on respect for blood ties or the sworn word, but rather on the opportunism of the lucid vision of the true businessman, Cristiano, into whose wealth goes part of the money extravagantly spent by one who did not earn it, but who somewhat fortuitously inherited it.

III. A Balzacian suggestion

Such thematic readings gain greater consistency and appropriateness if we pay attention to an invaluable factor, found specifically in the preface to the third part of *Illusions perdues*:

Il y a trois causes, d'une action perpétuelle, qui unissent la province à Paris: l'ambition du noble, l'ambition du négociant enrichi, l'ambition du poète. L'esprit, l'argent et le grand nom viennent chercher la sphère qui leur est proper [...]. Il reste à faire l'histoire du bourgeois enrichi à qui sa province déplaît, qui ne veut pas rester au milieu des témoins de ses commencements et espère être un personnage à Paris. (Balzac, "Préface" 765)

As one can see, the suggestion was in the air. Parodically, Brazil found itself at a historic moment in which the self-image of Rio de Janeiro drew it closer to Paris, according to the accounts of many authors of the period.⁹ The countryside in our case was called Barbacena, just as the French capital comes to be called Rio de Janeiro, the stage of the Francophile Court. Here the name Pedro Rubião de Alvarenga might not ring true—notwithstanding its

reminder of the reigning emperor—because, according to Rubião, a French barber, Lucien, a resident of Rio de Janeiro, should return to him his original face, that of Napoleon III.

The parallels continue. In the Brazilian novel, the suggestive Lucien confronts us with the same name as the hero of *Illusions perdues*, recaptured to the last detail, transplanted in time and in space, helping to establish—onomastically—the connection with the French work. Balzac's presence then is between the lines, that is, in the suggestion that could have provided the foundation for the novel, constructed like a Brazilian version of the proposed theme. Thus the total lack of success and, at the same time, the need to raise himself higher than mere mortals: it is not enough to be in Rio/Paris, it is necessary to be emperor, not the Brazilian one, Pedro de Alcântara, but the French one, in turn a pale reflection of his uncle, the great Napoleon I.

The relationship between the country and the city, a Balzacian theme connected to social climbing, finds in this case a fatal application, because Machado's pen colors it with insanity, which surrounds Rubião from the beginning of the book.

IV. A narrative process

If the themes work together in an attempt to shape Brazil, starting from French elements, another very relevant part should be noted: Machado's second phase brings novels in which one sees the return of characters. This configures, in our way and according to the limits already foreseen with precision by José de Alencar with regard to the "greatness of Rio society," the continuum of our society with its own features, which owes a lot to the French author.

In Balzac, the relationship between people creates an intricate web, in which what stands out are the names, the positions occupied, the origin, in short that which helps to anchor the individual in the social net. With a number of characters so great that it competes with the civil registry, the author's intent is to create a broad and tormented picture of beings who debate each other in the so-called "Human Comedy." This "inferno" does not prove transcendent (as would be the case of its inspirational source, the Divine Comedy), but on the contrary offers itself as the evident reality of this public: Paris, the countryside, the newspaper, the Stock Exchange, the theater, the gaming tables, the amorous connections. Readers can no longer alienate themselves from the reality that surrounds them, changed into a painful and quotidian spectacle, in which the only notable lack is that of the

working class, still submerged as a theme by the bankers (Nucigen), attorneys (Derville), and great businessmen (Grandet), whose culture will correspond to a new code of conduct.

The narrative expedient of character reappearance allows us, therefore, to create expectations without, in truth, the author's having to spend more time on their characterization. Maxime de Trailles will always bring his load of opprobrium and affective exploitation, and Vautrin the disquiet of his condition as a profound connoisseur of vices and crimes, while still being an employee of the police.

Reproducing the preferably contemporary world, Balzac not only makes characters reappear, but also gives consistency to this world through the embodiment of figures gravitating around central plot elements, always with the intention of thickening and condensing the representation of social reality. The part and the whole answer each other such that the courtesan, the lawyer, the usurer, the young arriviste, the more or less successful entrepreneur, the banker, the venal journalist, the criminal, and the indebted nobleman are the solid bases of this immense fictional undertaking, which crossed the frontiers of his country and, with the export of French culture, radiated through the Western world.

In Brazil, this novelistic mixture will find in Machado de Assis a reader both attentive and—as we said—concerned with adapting foreign sources to Brazilian reality. In *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, the reader meets an eccentric figure, Quincas Borba, who leaves for Minas, crazy and philosophical, returning to die in Rio de Janeiro, at the home of the narrator.

Between the departure for Barbacena and the return to the Court, the next novel, *Quincas Borba*, begins. Here Rubião plays the role of friend, nurse, secretary, disciple, and, finally, unexpected heir to the belongings of a dog, also called Quincas Borba. As can be seen, we are dealing with the same fictional aspect present in the *Comédie humaine*, although varied by the fact that Brás Cubas is practically incidental, leaving us, however, with the eccentric figure of Quincas Borba, who enchanted and haunted our famous, defunct narrator as much as the poor provincial professor.

Not by chance, therefore, it occurred to Machado to continue the process, as he himself tells us in the prologue to the third edition (1899) of *Quincas Borba*, commenting on the possibility of establishing another extension and transposition of characters, in this case the beautiful and mysterious Sofia, along the lines of the French series:

An illustrious friend and confrère insisted that I follow this book up with another. “Along with *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, from which this is derived, you should make a trilogy, and the Sofia from *Quincas Borba* will have the third part all to herself.” For some time I thought that it might be possible, but as I reread these pages now I say no. Sofia is here completely. To have continued her would have been repeating her, and that repetition would be a sin. (*Quincas Borba* 3)

Following the interregnum of *Dom Casmurro*, Machado, however, does return to the same recourse, now more complex and embracing: this is the case of *Esau and Jacob* and *Memorial de Aires* (*Counselor Ayres’ Memorial*). In the former, we meet Ayres at two points in his life, at first young and later retired, having returned to Brazil. In contact with the Santos family, he observes the life of two twins, Pedro and Paulo, above all with regard to their passion for Flora and to concerns for the political beliefs that they hold, tied to monarchist and republican convictions.

Curiously, Machado’s last novel is made up of a diary written by the diplomat, covering a relatively short period (1888-1889), without any mention of the twins from the earlier novel, but only the growing and ambiguous interest in the widow Fidélia and the accompaniment of her passion for Tristão. As can be seen, this is a man who seeks companionship. The interest in others really is the result of a motivation that goes beyond the mere condition of solitary man.

V. Convergences

Ayres is interested in hearing the diverse characters around him, not only to register their opinions, but also to capture the changes that have occurred in the country during more than thirty years’ absence.¹⁰ This role places him in a narrative situation that is quite propitious to being an arbiter or confidant, in a historically singular period when Brazil abolishes slavery and, the following year, sees the birth of the Republic after more than three centuries of monarchy and slavery.

At a crucial moment for nationality, from the economic, political, and social point of view, the credibility of a chancellery worker became urgent. Here there might echo traces of Derville, Balzac’s lawyer and notary, the mindful retainer of secrets and counselor to French families. This is a thematic convergence, both coinciding with a certain institutional expectation.

In order to go beyond the localism of Derville, tied only to France, it is worth turning our attention to another character in an even more meaning-

ful way, because he is present specifically in *Illusions perdues* and fit for internationalist visions. Not by chance, we are dealing with someone connected to diplomatic life, the clever Sixte du Châtelet. The binomial Derville/Châtelet can help to better understand Counselor Ayres, who shows elements of both: from them he inherits the talent to listen and stay quiet, besides being invited—like Derville—to remake family peace (one of the functions of Ayres in *Esau and Jacob*).

The connection to diplomacy—as we have emphasized—becomes fundamental and leads us to some textual details indicative of the relationship. We see, in the case of Sixte du Châtelet, the true “portrait” à la Bruyère:

Monsieur du Châtelet, venu au monde Sixte Châtelet tout court [...] se prétendait fort en diplomatie, la science de ceux qui n'en ont aucune et qui sont profonds par leur vide; science d'ailleurs fort commode, en ce sens qu'elle se démontre par l'exercice même de ses hauts emplois; que voulant des hommes discrets, elle permet aux ignorants de ne rien dire, de se retrancher dans des hochements de tête mystérieux; et qu'enfin l'homme le plus fort en cette science est celui qui nage en tenant sa tête au-dessus du fleuve des événements qu'il semble alors conduire, ce qui devient une question de légèreté spécifique. (Balzac, *Illusions* 49-50)

We turn now to the Brazilian text, which like the French one minimizes diplomatic activity and transforms it into something related to curiosity and to dissimulation: “this too sharpened his gift for uncovering and for covering up. All diplomacy is in these two related verbs” (Assis, *Esau and Jacob* 242).¹¹ Moreover, Machado de Assis insists on elements connected to discretion and to the ability to not get involved:

[Ayres] did not play a prominent role in this world: he went through the steps of the diplomatic career and was pensioned off. (3)

You need only know that he wore the protective shell of his profession, the approving smile, the bland and cautious style of speaking, the air appropriate to every occasion, just the right amount of expression, all so well distributed that it was a pleasure to hear and see him. (38)

Ayres did not think anything, but he understood that the others thought something,

and he made an ambiguous gesture. When they insisted, he did not choose either of the opposing opinions, but found another, compromise opinion that satisfied both sides, a rare thing with compromise opinions [...]. Ayres gave this opinion of his with delicate pauses and circumlocutions, wiping his monocle on a silk handkerchief, letting drop profound or obscure words, turning up his eyes, as if in search of a recollection, which he found and used to round off his opinion. (39–40)

For such a festival of staging, however, there is one fundamental difference: Ayres has, for himself, the sympathy of the person narrating, even because he is the possible creator of the novel *Esau and Jacob*. Differently from the tangential nature that surrounds Balzac's creation, he sums up the great necessity of a country that is facing—as we have noted—two pivotal dates (Abolition and Republic), families split apart, and society in disagreement. It is necessary that the character inherit the French traits, without the bitterness of the Balzacian vision with respect to diplomacy and with the importance conferred by his privileged position, so that he can be elevated to the position of guarantor of confessions and equalizer of disputes.

Once again, Machado de Assis demonstrates that the use of foreign sources should be done in accordance with the pressing necessity of his narrative economy, that is, with the transformations that the Brazilian works demand. To the Counselor falls his own characterization, as well as the development of the story. There is nothing more appropriate for an international character, versed in the subjects related to secrets and confessions, than the diary form (*Counselor Ayres' Memorial*) or attribution to hidden authorship (*Esau and Jacob*).

The recording of facts in his personal notebook “hides” actions, just like the novelized form of the twins' narrative serves as framing and engine for the “double-edged” gestures. Carefully, Ayres' decorum and tact act in concert with the depicted political situation of the country. Diplomacy is linked to the family counselor as an indispensable complement. There is not, as in the French narratives, the stimulus of money lavishly spent, nor the scourge of adultery. Everything happens stealthily, as befits a narrator who—introduced into the inner circle of families—contemplates, observes, gains the confidence of those around him, and knows that his style should be reserved, almost nebulous.

This theme of a society in need of both help and counselors allows the connections we make. Derville, Sixte du Châtelet, and Ayres maintain an ineluctable similarity following on the “representation” of the country. That

is, each one in its own way and in accordance with the particular sense of each work “stages” the history of the country and the families it comprises, with Sixte du Châtelet being almost a magician. In France, the characters fulfill their role in the traumatic events of the Restoration, a period that unsuccessfully tried to put a stop to the conquests of the French Revolution. Society was obliged to incorporate social malcontents, bourgeois financial solutions, and the constant threat of regime change. In Brazil, Ayres’ time is the most complex from the point of view of sociopolitical institutions. For this, the two authors took advantage of types inclined to the dance of institutional about-faces of varied kinds.

One can say, without the shadow of a doubt, that the young Pedro and Paulo see their illusions lost with the advent of the Republic. One can affirm, with no fear of error, that Fidélia and Tristão destroy, once and for all, the illusions of the Aguiars, but everything is filtered through the meditative style of Counselor Ayres, the narrative choice of Machado de Assis, who did not care for emphasis, but who must have been pleased by translating, in Brazilian terms, readings of an author like Balzac.

Notes

¹ “Está criado o mágico chamariz ‘continua no próximo número’ e o *roman-feuilleton*. O *Lazarillo de Tormes* foi o primeiro a receber esse tratamento, em 1836, e, logo no fim do mesmo ano, Girardin encomenda expressamente a um autor, Balzac, uma novela para sair em série, *La vieille fille*.”

² See Hallewell 126-127. (Originally published as *Books in Brazil: A History of the Publishing Trade*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1982.)

³ See Freyre 181-260.

⁴ “Meu companheiro de casa era dos amigos de Otaviano, e estava no direito de usufruir sua opulência literária. Foi assim que um dia vi pela primeira vez o volume das obras completas de Balzac, nessa edição em folha que os tipógrafos da Bélgica vulgarizam por preço módico.”

⁵ “Mas isso é o enredo da *Eugênia Grandet*, Sebastião! Estás-me a contar o romance de Balzac! Isso é a *Eugênia Grandet*!”

⁶ See Assis, “O Primo Basílio” 156-157.

⁷ See Broca, *Românticos* 257. On the reception of the author of *Eugénie Grandet*, it is worth remembering Lima Barreto’s confession, cited by Broca, according to which one should not look for his sources of inspiration in Machado de Assis, but in others, including Balzac. See Broca, *Papéis* 165.

⁸ “Quanto a Fernando, ainda és mais injusta. A simples descrição do aposento desenha o seu habitante, e quando o autor o apresenta, recostado ao sofá, nós já o conhecemos moralmente pela antítese de sua elegância exterior com sua pobreza doméstica. Os pormenores do vestuário e mobília não têm outro fim. Chamas a isso fotografias; serão, porém do caráter, o

qual se revela mais nesses mínimos acidentes da intimidade, do que no aparato social.”

⁹ By way of example: “este Rio de Janeiro é o Paris da América” (“this Rio de Janeiro is the Paris of America”) (Macedo 42). Also see Passos, *O Napoleão*.

¹⁰ “Vi tudo por várias línguas.” With regard to other European elements, see Passos, *As sugestões*.

¹¹ The original reads: “Ihe aguçou a vocação de descobrir e encobrir. Toda a diplomacia está nestes dous verbos parentes.”

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