

The (Lack of) Feeling of What Happens: Machado de Assis' *Dom Casmurro*

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Abstract. This essay analyzes *Dom Casmurro* in the perspective of contemporary theories about feelings and emotions. Feelings like hunger, pain, and joy are basic forms of human self-awareness that must be encoded continuously into culturally communicative emotions. Emotions reach out into the world but can never connect to it directly. In its sketch of the role played by the arts (texts, plays, opera) as both personally and culturally relevant mediators in this process, *Dom Casmurro* displays a peculiar kind of theoretical sophistication. Within this framework, a trivial story about jealousy turns into a complex, if unreconciled exploration of what Martha Nussbaum has called the intelligence of emotions.

I.

Important areas of contemporary thought, from philosophy via systems theory to neurobiology, have been concerned for quite a while not only with the basic cognitive role of the emotions but also with a crucial, if perhaps at first sight counterintuitive, distinction between emotions and feelings. This distinction comes up in various forms. Let me adopt, for present purposes, a definition of feelings as the basic self-awareness of the human organism. Originating in the activity patterns of the somatosensory areas of the brain, feelings (beginning on levels such as the feeling of hunger, pain, or joy) represent the awareness, preceding everything else, of a certain bodily state in connection with the awareness of thinking/feeling in a certain way.¹ In our social existence, feelings are transformed all the time into emotions. That is, feelings are differentiated and encoded as emotions according to linguistic, situational, and cultural demands and criteria. We are then talking about, and

trying to come to terms with, the manifold forms of and words for love, hate, jealousy, pleasure, pity, humiliation, etc.

These are theorems, or perhaps insights, that have come to the forefront at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The older distinction between rationality and irrationality is not thereby abolished, but it is severely undermined. We are now allowed to see intelligence in the very emotions themselves and, conversely, to declare an intelligence, or rationality, severed from its permeating emotional coloring, to be an abstraction.² The twentieth century could not really take that step, caught as it was by the long, ongoing, and, indeed, owing perhaps also to its historical catastrophes, hardening distinction between reason or rationality and irrationality or emotions. Maybe the “felt thoughts” of English metaphysical poetry are having their comeback, or maybe the notorious “dissociation of sensibility” (T. S. Eliot) did never “really” take place.

Dom Casmurro, published as it was at the end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth century, can make us aware of that situation, and more, in rich and fascinating detail.³ It is more than a coincidence that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in analyzing Machado de Assis’ *Memorial de Aires* in this volume, should have had recourse to a related leading category—the notion of mood, or attunement (in German, *Stimmung*). *Dom Casmurro*, in a joint perspective, would then be a novel “about” vague feelings and unresolved, fragmented emotions to which a “reconciliation” by mood and atmosphere is not granted.

Steeped in the experience of reading mainly European, US, and Japanese literature, the present writer was struck first by Machado’s peculiarly uncommon handling of peculiarly common narrative layers. The novel *Dom Casmurro* delivers a very common, indeed banal story. Its longer part presents the process in which Dom Casmurro (Bento Santiago), that is, the “stubborn, headstrong” or, as he prefers to interpret the name himself, “the quiet person who keeps himself to himself” (I.4), gets to know, falls in love with and marries his next door neighbor, Capitu (Capitolina Pádua), in spite of the enormous social gap that separates them. A much shorter part summarizes Capitu’s dismissal after Bento has seen (or thinks he has seen) irrefutable evidence that “his” only son and child Ezequiel has been fathered upon Capitu by his best friend Escobar.

On this story level, in terms of a topic, we are dealing with one layer of the Othello-parallel that Bento himself sets up: the obsession with “ocular proof.” “Give me ocular proof,” Othello tells Iago; Bento thinks he has found that proof in the close resemblance between Ezequiel and Escobar, who con-

veniently either dies or kills himself before the discovery by swimming in the wild, “angry” ocean. This parallel has not only provided Helen Caldwell with a title for her book, *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis* (1960), but Brazilian critics with a guideline for their interpretations. It is insisted upon by Bento himself. After attending a performance of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, he describes himself “pleased at the coincidence” and finds out, during the last act, “that it was not I but Capitu that ought to die” (CXXXV.226).

This brings me to a second level—the relativistic way of telling the story. There will be more to say about this later. But from the vantage point mentioned above, one can say from the outset that the method is no less banal than the story itself. Or, at least, it has become so in the history of modern narrative, in which no stone of a story, reduced to a collection of aspects, remains unturned. The *Othello* parallel, obvious as it may appear, also strikes me as ridiculous, that is, as an indirect, ironic, and self-ironic comment on the relation between the banality of the event and the pressure to say something seemingly significant about it. It is an indirect comment exploiting the prestige and *pathos* of Shakespeare, but also keeping alive the suspicion that, even in Shakespeare, these qualities are threatened by the ridiculousness of behavior, that is, the lack of synchronization between act and emotion. Bento may really have learned about *Othello*’s story for the first time in the theatre at a very late period close to the end of the novel. But this is an unlikely matter, given his probably much earlier education by the Italian tenor Marcolini in the fields of opera and of Shakespeare the “plagiarist” (IX.20), to which I will revert in the end.

For the time being, let me just insist that the “sound and fury” (this is *Macbeth*) about Bento’s planned suicide, about the idea of murdering Capitu, or, turning into the horrible-grotesque mode, about the briefly contemplated killing of little Ezequiel, does not exert any relevant emotional hold on the protagonist, an emotion that would qualify as a motivation, intention, or prelude to action. In spite of *Othello*, he does not consider murdering Capitu for more than the brief sentence quoted above. The suicidal impulse, in its turn, gets lost in further considerations concerning Capitu, alleged parallels with the Roman Cato’s suicide, and Ezequiel suddenly hugging his knees (CXXXVI.227-229). For reasons unknown, as Beckett might have written, the “second impulse” (there would have to be three if Capitu’s murder had been a real option), the poisoning of Ezequiel, does not take place either. “But I don’t know what I felt that made me recoil.” Perhaps it

was because "the coffee [containing the poison] was cold" (CXXXVII.229). If this article were in German, the latter phrase would provide me with the occasion for a probably pertinent pun; "cold coffee" in German refers to a stale and worn-out idea.

The relativistic way of storytelling is thus linked, if still in unclear ways, with what turns into a third layer, namely, the topic of feelings and emotions that I broached in my introductory remarks. Can Dom Casmurro make sense of his feelings? Is there a logic, or several of them, perhaps only fuzzy ones, of his emotions in handling his admittedly tricky situation? Further, since emotions are, in my conceptual option, encoded linguistically and socially, what are the ways in which they are related to action and to the world at large? Or is it rather, as the repeated Othello-motif (see also chaps. LXII and LXXII), Machado's opera, Shakespearean chapter, and other suggestions might indicate, only the arts and the media in which we find their most attractive encodings, with little chance of projecting and "objectifying" them into the worlds called history and society? But also: Are there perhaps significant differences or frictions in the ways in which the arts and media themselves encode and enact emotions? And, to complete what may turn out not to be such a strange loop: might these differences have repercussions in so-called life at large itself?

II.

It might appear, to those who can reasonably claim either some realistic sense of "the way of the world" (unfortunately though the title of a British play by Congreve), or of "ways of worldmaking" (the title of a book by the philosopher Nelson Goodman), or more concretely still of Brazilian history, that my preceding remarks on the vagaries of emotional codes need to be curbed. After all, and this would be the fourth level, the novel is undoubtedly permeated by a massive presence of nineteenth-century Brazilian history. Let me touch upon this in an inevitably very amateurish way. First of all, the autobiographical chronological framework of the story, from the 1850s to the end of the century is so much insisted upon that its historical contextualization turns into an almost automatic necessity. Thus, we know, and are amply made aware of the fact, that Bento's family is a representative of the landowning aristocracy, which had made its money probably from sugar plantations, and that this society still thrives to a considerable extent on slavery. We know that the social gap separating the Santiagos and Capitu's Páduas is wide, and

that the gap, even if it can be bridged in interaction, especially between children (like Bento and Capitu), can even be enforced by those positioned somewhere between the interstices of the overall social structure. Thus, José Dias, who insists on distinctions being made, is not a slave, but a dependent (*agregado*, a form of not sexual but social *mantenuto*) who has worked his way into the Santiago family, starting out as a fake homeopathic doctor on the family plantation, until he has seemingly become indispensable. It is Dias, not Bento, who unpleasantly insists on the Santiagos', and especially his own priority in carrying poles, not only candles, in a religious procession (XXX, see also right at the beginning of chap. III, where Dias tries to prevent any closer relations between Bento and Capitu even as children, for fear of a later "flirting in earnest" that would make it hard to separate them). But Dias is or was also a self-repressed liberal who occasionally will incautiously allude to his earlier and perhaps still cherished convictions (III.8; XXXV.69-70). And, of course, he cannot prevent Capitu, who is at least as clever as he himself, from working her way into Dona Glória's, Bento's mother's, heart, into marriage with the only too willing Bento, thus climbing the social ladder (LXVI.124).

Bento, in the pole-carrying affair, speaks somewhat "feelingly" about the neighbor's "pain and humiliation" (57). It is unclear, however, whether in making this distinction between a feeling (pain) and an emotion (humiliation) he really means what he says. He too pays, like Dias, close attention to and appreciates those "whose demeanor (unlike Pádua's) suited their position" (58). He talks easily (perhaps also ironically) about all "these wonderful social institutions," like the city jail, the prison ships, the Barbonos barracks, and the reformatory (XLIII.84). And, quite in contrast to Escobar who must engage in various kinds of calculation in order to make his way, Bento takes the fortunes of his family more or less for granted. Since his father died, the family property has been largely transformed into real estate, that is, rented houses. Bento does not know about the income derived from them. The income is figured out by Escobar in one of his feats of mental arithmetic for which he—important for a businessman—is famous (XCIV).

Uncle Cosme sheds some further oblique light on the family fortunes. He lives off his capital since his income as a lawyer does not at all cover his expenses. The same is or will probably become true for Bento himself. He becomes a lawyer, working "for some important firms," but only after having been admitted, with a "great deal" of help from Escobar, to the office of "a famous lawyer" (CIV.181). Since he is liable to lose cases "out of carelessness"

(CVIII.188) and does not like "to write the briefs out" (CXV.199, concerning "third-party embargoes," see also chap. CXIII), he certainly also needs the income from the houses of which he is the only heir. Bento, in other words, is no man of the future; neither is he really one of the past.

There is no need here to go into the situation, mentioned more or less in matter-of-fact ways, of the slaves, or into the consequences, dimly foreshadowed in the novel, of the abolition of slavery and the continuing ownership of the land. Rather, if Escobar is indeed the father of Ezequiel (I am still not totally sure of it), Bento is surpassed by him in both the paternal and—doubtlessly—the economic domain. Escobar works mainly in coffee, that is to say, a more profitable future than sugar. Brazil, as we know, had become the biggest coffee supplier in the world in the middle of the nineteenth century.

On the political side, the retrograde drift associated with Bento is equally remarkable. The emperor, Dom Pedro II, is often described as an enlightened monarch. Even so, the positive results of his reign were overshadowed for many by the fact that Brazil remained the last country in the world with a slave economy. The emperor may have been personally in favor of its abolition, but, for fairly obvious reasons (for instance, the crucial alliance with the large landowners), did not push it through. In the context of the novel, it is rather the power over or, in Luis Costa Lima's words, the control of his subjects' imaginaries that is striking. Bento writes his story, living already in the republic (see, e.g., CXIV.198). But the most attractive images that he reveals of his mind's make-up are connected with the emperor. He even fantasizes about his personal visit to the family house in the Rua de Matacavalos (XXIX). The emperor, thus the fantasy goes, advises Bento's mother to send him to medical school rather than to the detested seminary in which, because of his mother's vow, he is supposed to be made into a priest.

In spite of his retrograde orientation, Bento is not, as he might well be, victimized by historical change. In principle, however, the novel exhibits a radical separation between the individual person and socio-historical forces. There is no hint of any possible coupling or, as some might want to say, "constructive relationship" between persons, politics, and profits. The impact of "history" and large-scale social trends on the individual is considerable, but also contingent. This may be the reason why the novels hints at them repeatedly but does not go into their analysis at all. Rather, it presents us with an almost allegorical chapter in which the factuality of historical facts and their possible significance fall apart in an almost absurd way. The chapter recounts

the “polemic” between Bento and another (meanwhile dead) boy Manduca. The two quarrel about the Crimean War (XC). Both the antagonists think their arguments are irrefutable. They are convinced about the relevance of (emotionalized) notions like justice. But all these “concerns” boil down to mechanically repeated absurdities like, “The Russians will never enter Constantinople.” // “They certainly did not, neither then, nor later, nor up to the present day. But will the prediction remain valid forever?” (160). Bento keeps on wallowing in pointless speculation: Turkey will die, like the boy Manduca, “because death spares no one” (160).

Indeed: But what do we know, now that Turkey is about to enter the EU, about its or any other socio-political death? Machado de Assis seems to take it sarcastically for granted that, massive as the weight of historical facts may be, they cannot really be integrated in our mental-emotional make-up. It is almost impossible not to go outside the novel here and mention the typicality of Machado’s situation, which Luis Costa Lima among others has analyzed: the academic, the writer who is also a civil servant and, in that very combination, acutely aware of the wide gaps between a culture of ideas and emotions on the one, politics on the second, and society/history on the third side.⁴

III.

I have devoted almost too much space to the skeletons of history and society, which gleam through the unfolding of the story. If, on the other hand, on the personal side, it is a trivial tale, of incipient, flowering, consummated, and disappointed or deceived love, what else is there to say about it? True enough, there are complexities on this level, too. Capitu, the woman with the repeatedly mentioned “undertow eyes,” may be one of Machado’s mistresses of (dis)simulation (a quality again relatable to a historical fact, the position of women in Brazil and elsewhere at this time), Bento himself a combination of high-strung sensitivity, perhaps also great sensibility, and monstrous emotional coldness, somebody who, after learning about “his” son’s death by leprosy near Jerusalem, dines well and goes to the theater (CXLVI). He displays a similarly “unfeeling” way of behavior in his contact with the ladies, the visitors to his house in Engenho Novo after Capitu’s banishment and death (CXLVII).

But such aspects, like the complexity of “character,” do not seem to be the reason why a trivial story, in spite of its triviality, should be told—unless they serve to illustrate a complexity of a less obvious kind. Here I am struck by what appears to me as Machado de Assis’ ingenious escape from a dilemma,

which has continued to haunt European narrative, from realism via naturalism to modernism and postmodernism. These movements first invested trivial stories with types of higher, and then of lower significance (realism, naturalism and the like). Then, after those kinds had been explored and exploited to full and fulsome degrees, modernism refused more or less to tell stories at all. Postmodernism went through this circle with increased speed. Meanwhile, the diagnosis that the novel is basically dead and yet miraculously resurrected once in a while has become as boring as most novels themselves.

It appears to me that Machado de Assis goes on to tell a trivial story with moderately complex characters, because it is replete with different non-trivial, highly complex implications. It will not come as a surprise any more if I propose the initial conceptual distinction between feelings and emotions as a tool with which I would like to open my way into these implications. Following Damasio, the distinction includes the ways in which consciousness and thoughts feel like a feeling and are embedded in emotions—for Damasio there is hardly any emotionally neutral object, a lack of neutrality particularly conspicuous in those objects about which one writes books of one kind or another. Feelings, to repeat (hunger, joy, fear, etc.), are signals by which the individual, in homeostatic processes, becomes aware of his or her overall physical and mental state. Our awareness of them may be vague, but they are not normally obscure. Given the multiplicity of personal interactions and social situations, their differentiation into interactively relevant emotions may, however, become highly problematic. Machado de Assis consequently unfolds a whole panorama of personal techniques with which people try to transform vague or well-defined feelings into the heterogeneity and the frictions of emotional codes.

The problem consists in not only having or feeling the encoded emotions, which is becoming aware of them by formulating them. This is a process for which narrative is particularly suitable, for which it may even have partly been invented. The problem also consists in managing them in different contexts and in competition with other codes brought into play in the interaction with other persons.

Escobar, Capitu, and José Dias appear to have peculiar abilities for managing emotions and handling codes. This is true both for their own emotions and those of others, where management comes close to manipulation. We could “explain” these abilities by pointing out that they need them, since all of them try to make their way up the social hierarchy or to at least maintain

a precarious social position. In Escobar and Capitu we are dealing with what clichés would describe as business or feminine prudence and restraint in making the codes they use explicit at all. In using codes in a more implicit way, they test out, anticipate and guide the code-sharing steps of others. Both businessmen and women would be exposed to relatively great risks if they did not handle emotions with cautious care. In the conservative part of Brazilian society, to which both Bento and Capitu belong on different levels, this is especially true for women's sexual behavior. This would make it plausible, in case we assume that Escobar is the father of Ezequiel, that Bento did not notice anything in the way of such intimacy—although the couples are “inseparable,” although Bento meets Escobar at his front door at strange hours, although there are various other “doubts” (including his mother's coldness towards the growing Ezequiel), and although he and Escobar's wife Sancha once come very close to mutual erotic attraction themselves (CXVIII.205–207; see also CXIII.196). As to the last item and Bento's handling, it is characteristic (see more on Bento below) that he cannot decide whether to describe the “attraction” as a feeling (“fleeting sensation”) or as an emotion, and if so which emotion (“fraternal enthusiasm,” “invincible urge,” “caprice,” “sexual intent,” “not passion or a serious inclination,” “disloyalty”; see also 205, 206, 207). The rest is “unsure” (206), “confusion” (207). One page and two chapters later, all of this is called first “abominations” and then, in the following line, “hallucinations” (CXX.208).

Dias is notorious for his use of superlatives. They are always applied to persons or things on the right side of the hierarchy. Only twice does he, as mentioned, forget his restraint and betray some moderate liberal leanings. The superlatives (the last one being “most beautiful,” applied to the sky in his dying hour [CXLIII.237]) are code-wise valuable because they cannot really be contradicted. In case of differing opinions, the judgment about a person or thing can always be additionally qualified in such a way as to take care of the dissent as well. Cousin Justina, the widowed aunt of Bento, does just the opposite. She always criticizes people directly first and then has difficulties of qualifying her criticisms in the face of objections. In spite of her talkativeness, she frequently therefore falls silent. But then, she can afford all that. Bento's mother, in her turn, has retreated, after the early death of her husband, into untouchable religious sentiments.

Bento's case is altogether different. Being born into a certain rank, he is shielded for quite a while from taking care of emotional management at all.

Accordingly, he does not develop the corresponding capacities either. Thus he is totally incapable, in spite of his very strong feelings against the church career planned for him by his mother, of talking her out of her vow that has destined him to become a priest. In fact, he is barely able to hint at the subject. That is why, in a fairly laborious process, he needs the combined help of Dias, Capitu, and Escobar, who formulate the efficient language of emotions for him. I probably do not exaggerate if I say that Bento, from his early life as a child in the 1850s to his role as autobiographical narrator in the 1890s, does not really find a style of both flexible and occasionally determined emotional management.

Thus, the themes of an identity not found, of a memory more failing than shaping, which would link this novel with many modern western novels ("I myself am missing, and that lacuna is all-important" [II.5], only seemingly contradicted by a Montaigne parallel about "mon essence" [LXVIII.128]) are also indicative of the feeling/emotion complex, which is more concrete and more complicated. His first kiss with Capitu is followed by the—as we could perhaps sarcastically say, somewhat premature, but thrice repeated—ejaculation ("these proud words"): "I am a man!" Certainly, in narrative distance, this exclamation is tempered by the phrase: "Perhaps I am making too much of these oscular recollections" (XXXIV.67-68). But it is difficult to say which kind of (self-)irony is operative here. It is difficult to see whether Dom Casmurro ever gets rid of what he himself calls ideas without legs and ideas without arms (see XXXVI), that is to say, emotional impulses not finding either full expression or their way to the addressee.

Thus, the fact that the second kiss with Capitu is not the result of his own laborious and incompetent efforts but rather comes, in the context of the scene depicted, as a surprising, seemingly (and probably just seemingly) spontaneous kiss of Capitu's at the very last moment, is highlighted with a somewhat cliché-like hyperbole: "The soul is full of mysteries" (XXXVII.72, 74). Hyperbole is a form of emotional helplessness, demonstrated by Bento more fully when he has to react to Capitu's proposal that he should baptize her first child in case he really becomes a priest and they cannot marry. Bento reacts with a very short chapter (XLV) and with a passage of a well-known disingenuous kind: the reader is told to shake his head and make all the incredulous gestures he likes. But whatever ironies are operative here, the fact remains that Bento also gives away his emotional helplessness: "I was at a loss for words and gestures: I was struck dumb" (89). To take another example

along the opposed, but equivalent hyperbolic lines: the assumption that Escobar in the seminary “opened up his whole soul” does not lose its naïveté even when it is followed by the ridiculously and therefore ironically spatial metaphor: “Our souls, as you know, are laid out like houses, often with windows on every side, lots of light and fresh air” (LVI.107).

The games Dom Casmurro plays with his “dear reader” varies from irony via sarcasm and even impertinence to downright grotesqueness. But the ironic, impudent, and grotesque undercutting of narrative units does not turn this narrative into just another example of metafiction (or something like that). Certainly, there are plenty of passages where we are told that the story, told as it is in mostly very short, almost cut-up chapters, could or should have been offered in a different way. The play with the reader turns into horseplay when we are told that we must remember certain things, which the narrator does not (CXL.233); that we might want to ask the narrator a question at a certain time, a question that we should have asked at the beginning (CXLIV.238). The last example might be important, because the narrator here proposes to answer the question of why he built the new house at all when it was intended, and indeed turned into, a mere replica of the old one. His answer is equally crucial, because it begs again the question of emotional codes: “the whole [old] house refused to recognize me” (238). The lack of recognition is extended to the trees in the garden—a discursive strategy that is as tantalizingly touching in its anthropomorphic implications as it is playfully enigmatic and brazenly begging the question.

Consequently, on the one hand, Machado de Assis’ (or rather Dom Casmurro’s) relativistic way of telling his story clearly makes him Beckett’s neighbor. The syntax carries all the marks of restriction, qualification, and negation of things just said. One could even grasp the German philosophical weapon of *Aufhebung* in order to characterize the narrative effect of the syntax. But this syntactical strategy is, in contrast to Beckett’s way of narrative impoverishment, still attached to a definite, more or less well fleshed-out, if trivial story. Therefore, the intertextual and metafictional layers are liable to rebound on the question of emotional codes. This would also apply to the hurried acceleration of storytelling, that is, the shortening of narrative time in contrast to the extension of narrated time. Event-wise, from marriage to separation, the important things are only taking place from chapter XCVIII onwards, that is, within the last one third to one fourth of the story. This part covers, in contrast to the at most (counting from Bento’s birth) 18 years before, a span of time of at least

about 30 to 40 years. (Escobar dies in 1871 when, we may assume, he and Bento are in their middle to late 20s. See CXII.210, with another factual but uninterpreted reference to politics, here “the recent Rio Branco ministry.”) In some sense, then, the question of how emotional codes are formed and applied, though looming, is more or less faded out by Bento himself.

It would not do for the reader to sum up the story with a mere comment of the “such is life” type. Bento may well try to preempt further questions by pointing out repeatedly that he simply nods his head “in matters on which I had no opinion one way of the other” (CXVII.204). His efforts to produce a sonnet (see below), to say nothing of his behavior, keep the urge for both subtler and more definite perspectives alive—as do his repeated remarks on his “diffuse and confused” but urgent thoughts, images of female temptation, and compromises between conscience and imagination (e.g., LVIII.110), his complaint about the lack of nostalgic expressivity, his thesis about the supposed bond between emotion and real experience (“without that everything is silent and colorless” [LX.113]), and his sweeping remarks on “dark days” and “storms,” “continuous and terrible,” between Capitu and himself in the later crisis (CXXXII.222). Bento’s “imagination,” he tells us, “has been the companion of my whole existence, lively, quick, [...] capable of covering huge areas in flight” (XL.78). His ability to formulate and flexibly handle intelligible codes does not live up, however, to this lively but non-transparent imagination: It is good, he tells us (self-)ironically, “to be emphatic from time to time, to make up for this *obsession* with accuracy that plagues me” (L.93, my emphasis, because the obsession is certainly not granted the fulfillment of accuracy, if that indeed were his goal!). Clearly, the ironic sentence, “I am not here to correct poets [like Dante]” (XXXII.63) is literally true with a vengeance.

Nowhere is the material importance of metafictional material more evident than in the way, masked again by a playful to sarcastic lightness of tone, in which Dom Casmurro tries to exploit literary codes in order to fill the gaps. First of all, and significantly, the label of Dom Casmurro is fixed upon him by an amateur poet, who is disappointed by Casmurro’s (lack of) response to a reading of his verses in the train (“it may be that the verses were not entirely bad. [...] ‘Go on,’ I said waking up. ‘I’ve finished,’ he murmured. ‘They’re very nice’” [I.3]). The same unfeeling response breaks through in Bento’s handling of “The Panegyric of Saint Monica,” produced by a fellow student at the seminary. When the poet, years later, asks Bento whether he has kept the copy he gave him, the latter cannot even remember the fact, to

say nothing of the assuredly bad poetry (LIV.101).

Bento's reaction functions like a two-edged sword: Not only does it highlight his lack of emotional competence; it also implies unpleasant questions concerning the value of literature, to which I will come back later. For the time being, let me continue with the topic of emotional competence, taking up the immediate sequence of the "Panegyric." Bento here tries to compose a sonnet himself. He pretends he cannot remember why: "it was an itch [a feeling, in my terminology] that needed scratching, and I scratched [i.e., went for an emotional code] enthusiastically." The scratching produces the presumable first line of a sonnet: "Oh, flower of heaven! Oh! Flower chaste and pure," a somewhat ridiculously poetic line clearly meant to initiate, however ironically, the handling of the feeling-emotional complex "Capitu." Other lines, necessary for an elaboration on that, however, will not come forth, save for the last line of the sonnet, a stereotype dragged in from another, far more general context: "Though life be lost, the battle is still won." The most one can say for Bento's ability to increase his code competence a little bit is his awareness that, if the sonnet, with himself in the seminary without apparent hope, is to encode the Capitu complex, that last line should read, somewhat unpoetically, the other way around: "The battle may be lost, but life is won!" (LV.102-105). Certainly, it is fun for the male reader to be told jokingly: "Well, gentlemen, nothing consoles me for the loss of that sonnet I never wrote" (105). Even so, it would have been "nice," to use Bento's commentary on the verses of the train poet, to have occasionally received more than two bungled lines or the gratuitous confession, made this time to the "lady reader," that indeed all "this is obscure" (LXIII.119). Bento cannot take the necessary "bath of inspiration," that is, an inspiration telling him how to formulate emotions. Instead, frustrated in his efforts for a sonnet (traditionally the most concise form for such formulations), something else happens: "Rage swelled up in me" (LV.104). That is precisely the point: He is aware of a powerful feeling, defining his own state, but otherwise incommunicative. The German distinction between *Wut* ("rage"), a feeling, and *Zorn* ("wrath"), an emotion, catches this crucial difference very clearly. We could, for instance, attribute wrath, but not rage to God.

IV.

"Well, and the Rest?" What "remains of this book" (CXLVIII.244)? As far as the story of Dom Casmurro is concerned, it is not granted the reconciliation,

the “beauty of sadness” or anything else; it remains mired in irresolution. “[W]hatever the solution, one thing is left”: Capitu and Escobar “ended up joining together and deceiving me” (244). The statement, far from being a subtle or even necessarily true one, cannot be taken at its face value, although it carries the weight of a final word. But it confronts us with a grating emotion that drives Bento from one incongruous activity to the next: receiving indifferent ladies (“passing caprices,” “capricious creatures” 243-44) and plunging into the writing of a *History of the Suburbs* (the last words).

Inevitably, however, Machado de Assis’ play with Bento’s mixture of literary effort and emotional fragments raises further and much more important questions about the uses and abuses of not just literary but also of other forms as tools of sophisticated observation, of suggesting, enacting, and, to be sure, dismantling emotional codes. Again, the Beckett parallel comes to mind, since hardly anybody was equally merciless in dismantling codes by showing the code-like implications of language. It might appear as a further ironic incongruity that the first image of literature that the founder of the Brazilian Academy of Letters presents us with is that of bookworms, which Bento consults after he has exhausted the informational treasures of the books in which the worms themselves live. Bento wants to write on the topic concentrated in the Biblical phrase: “He woundeth and His hands make whole!” The worms, however, confess that they know absolutely nothing about the texts they chew. As examples of an emotional neutrality that humans cannot achieve they neither love nor hate what they chew—“we just chew” (XVIII.34).

Later, there are the most heterogeneous references to literature, from passing mentions of Dante (XXXII, CXXIX) via alleged regrets about “not being a romantic poet, to recount this duel of ironies” (XLIV.87), to the one-book-author of “The Panegyric of Saint Monica.” That author clings desperately to the assumed importance of his text. But there is also the opposite type. Bento seems to be so much impressed by the early verses (in the manner of Junqueira Freire [1832-1855]) of another fellow seminarist that years later, when he meets him again, he wants to read his “latest verses.” Startled, the presumed poet asks back: “What verses?” and has a hard time remembering that he ever wrote verses at all. Bento speculates that one may be cured of the “itch to write” in one’s youth, but that this itch “never goes away” when “you catch it in your fifties” (LIV.99-100).

This play with the uses, or lack thereof, of literature, becomes semi-serious when Bento zooms in on *Othello*. Although life and literature never really

merge, *Othello* delineates the area where they meet. The order of life's events ("destiny") would be more intelligible if one could read them as a theatrical play in reverse. Starting with the last act (Othello killing Desdemona and himself), that act "would explain the dénouement of the first"; moreover, the spectator would "go to bed with a happy impression of tenderness and love"—in other words, with at least a well-formed image of emotions (LXXII.134).

Ideally, emotions would look both natural and staged. Capitu deploys considerable skill in conveying her "stupefaction" and "indignation" in this way when Bento accuses her of adultery (CXXXVIII.230). On the happier side, the honeymoon of the couple is like that; there is nothing that distinguishes it from the combined effect of words and music "in a Wagner opera" (CI.178).

It would appear, then, that the successful—and that could only mean temporary—encoding of emotions must mainly spring from somehow staged, that is, actively produced and arranged enactments. That would explain why literature in the sense of merely written and printed texts may well be a supreme means of observation but that it has difficulties conveying the encoding/staging of emotions and its dynamic changes. Emotions do not substantially reside in anything, whether words, persons, or things. As soon as one relies on the pseudo-substantiality of words and objects instead of a complex enacted semiotics, a hermeneutics, then, more often than not, the madness of suspicion sets in. This happens to Bento (and this is why some critics think the whole "tragedy" exists only in his head).⁵ He does not pay "attention to Capitu's words, to her gestures, to the pain that twisted her features, to anything at all" (CXXXVIII.231). Yet, in spite of his skepticism concerning his memory, he madly assumes that Capitu's "confusion," in looking at Escobar's picture, "became a pure confession," that he can retrospectively solve the puzzle (see, e.g., CXXXIX.232 and CXL.234).

This is where Marcolini's, the Italian tenor's theory of opera—and of Shakespeare—comes in. It is easy to forget it, since it is presented early in the novel (mainly in chapter IX, with extensions in chapters VIII and X.17-21), and hardly referred to explicitly later on. But there it is, and massively so. God is the poet, the librettist; Satan writes the music of life's destiny. The fact that God refuses to take part in the musical composition has brought some obscure and "awkward passages" into life as opera; certain motifs are repeated too often. The composer's friends assert that a better thing than opera is not to be found. The poet's friends, perhaps the theologians, maintain that the music distorts the meaning of the words, that it also pushes the drama (the "story") towards

the grotesque. Moreover, they contend that Shakespeare and his "farce" is a treacherously skillful transcription of God's original words. Shakespeare looks like the author of the composition, but "of course he is a plagiarist" (19-20).

Any interpretation of this appears silly; yet it must be undertaken. The theory is about opera and drama, both in the sense of "Life is an opera" (17) but also with respect to differences between the arts of opera and drama as far as their capacities of meeting life halfway are concerned—of enacting and representing life so powerfully that it becomes a real experience and as such, potentially, an experience of the real. God's story, the original drama of life, is a drama of suffering, but also of redemption. Shakespeare has provided us with dramatic images coming closer to that than anything else. He turns into a plagiarist once it is claimed (probably not even by himself but rather by his enthusiasts) that these images attain the fullness of the original drama—or, as the "satanists" (20) claim, simulates the fullness of operatic effect in the virtuoso use of words. (Incidentally, the theory that many Shakespearean passages should be systematically identified as arias has been seriously traded in recent studies. Richard Wagner, equally plausibly, opted for the other extreme and identified Shakespeare's dramas as novels because of the complex personal and historical issues they tackled. I cannot go into that here.)

Opera as life is veering towards the grotesque. In overemphasizing suffering, exemplified for instance by Abel and "the choruses of the guillotine and slavery," it sacrifices the original master design of God's libretto. Whereas the poet's, God's, conception is sublime (19), thus allowing for ultimate harmony, the "essentially tragic genius" (18) of Satan turns into the grotesque of "massed choruses" and the like. In other words, a tragic effect cannot be continuously sustained. A complete life, or a complete play, for that matter, cannot continuously illustrate tragic qualities.

This is illustrated by art, both by tragic drama, especially in Shakespeare (the pretensions of *King Lear* or the naïveté of *Othello* are really tragic?) and by opera. Further illustrations of this failure of tragic sustainment could be found in the eighteenth-century transitions from pathos to bathos or in the ridiculous aspects of Byron's Satanic tragic heroes. What then, finally, about opera as an art form? In opera, the grotesque, that is, the enacted form of the tragic, is not a form of disturbing meaning, but a mode of intensification. We pay attention not so much to the meaning of the guillotine or the tragedy of people dying, but to the beauty of singing, which overpowers the tragic frame.

Marcolini becomes furious when Bento calls his theory amusing. The fury—

perhaps an oscillation between a feeling (rage) and an emotion (wrath)—springs from the fact that Bento has not grasped his ultimate point: one day, “when all the books have become useless and been burnt,” people will see that “everything is music.” They will see that because maybe a tenor, “perhaps Italian,” will teach them to see it. “No doubt this is a lot of metaphysics for a single tenor.” But Bento at least seems to fathom that Marcolini’s “loss of voice” explains the latter’s emphatic theory of music (20). In other words, it is really the singing voice that carries the music, which is why “impartial observers” can agree that the “orchestral parts” are unobjectionable (“treated with great skill” [19]).

The mode of the musical staging of emotional intensity in opera could be turned, with the appropriate changes, into a model for life. The intensity of staged singing would then be transformed into an at least partly playful handling of emotions otherwise drowned in heterogeneity and threatened by dogmatism. This is what Bento does not understand, to say nothing of achieve. His own life, like Othello’s, resembles rather a tragic farce, reaching out dogmatically to both sides, but more or less collapsing in a resigned, but perhaps not quite self-assured relativism, in the neutral middle. Bento forgets Marcolini’s teaching. He ignores the performative intensity, the fusion of code and intensity in opera and falls prey to the meaning patterns of drama, that is to say not to God’s, but to Shakespeare’s libretto—and a very one-sided, merely Othello-like libretto of Shakespeare’s into the bargain. Since these patterns drive him into the madness of suspicion (which would be madness even if his assumption about Capitu’s adultery were correct), he must at some point put an end to that too. “Dom Casmurro” is the label more or less correctly, I guess, provided by others for the consequent course of emotional neutralization on which he embarks. He undertakes the *History of the Suburbs* without telling us anything about either his motivation (apart from the fact, small wonder, that he needs “a little variety”) or the potential “human interest” of his object (apart from the somewhat unmotivating prospect that the project requires “documents and dates as preliminaries, all of which would be boring and time-consuming” [II.6]). In this history of the suburbs, if he really writes it at all, he will meet the bookworms, not God, halfway.

Notes

¹ I am following here, more or less and also because of his connection with (the) philosophy (of Spinoza), the Portuguese-US neurobiologist Damasio and his *Looking for Spinoza. Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. Since I will later be concerned with "Shakespeare the Plagiarist," I had better admit right away that my title is plagiarized from another book by Damasio: *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Meaning of Consciousness*.

² See Nussbaum. Her book is replete with the whole philosophical history of the problem.

³ For the choice of dates as 1899 or 1900, see Gledson xx.

⁴ See Luis Costa Lima's *O Controle do Imaginário* (The Control of the Imaginary) and its section on Machado de Assis and Brazilian political-social theory.

⁵ See Hansen 245.

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