

Strategies of Deceit: Dom Casmurro¹

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Abstract. Dom Casmurro is a misleading narrator who uses all sorts of stratagems to manipulate the reader's reception. One such stratagem is the peculiar use he makes of quotations of (and allusions to) other literary texts, often partially or wrongly reproduced, in order to convince the reader that what he says is true. Behind him, every now and then, Machado the author seems to warn us against his deceitful narrator.

Among Machado de Assis' novels, *Dom Casmurro* is perhaps the book in which one of his most interesting narrative devices is best developed. This device is what I call the "strategy of deceit," by which I mean the narrator's ability to build, on every other page, a kind of *trompe l'oeil* that conditions the reader's eyes to see what is not there, and not to see what really is there to be seen.

Dom Casmurro is a misleading narrator from the very beginning of his book. He starts his narration explaining himself through deceit: he informs the reader that his nickname, "Casmurro," must not be understood as it is defined in dictionaries, that is, as "stubborn," "obstinate," "wayward"—which, in fact, he is; rather, according to Dom Casmurro, it should be understood as a "quiet person who keeps himself to himself" (4)—which he is not. After all, he owns the narrative voice; he is the only character whose story we hear, his wife Capitu being almost implacably silenced.

After his explanation of the fallacy of his name, he remains in the same key, as he explains the book itself as an attempt to bring back youth in old age. In fact, as early as the second chapter he inoculates the reader's unarmed mind with the first drops of suspicion, since three of the historical figures

whose effigies are used as decoration for his dining-room ceiling in Engenho Novo (reproducing that of his childhood days in Matacavalos) died as victims of betrayal. Together with Caesar, Augustus, and Nero, however, the narrator brings in the less known Masinissa, king of Numidia. A Roman ally, Masinissa is married to Sophonisba, a Carthaginian who was, as such, brought up to hate Rome. Forced by the victorious Scipio to hand out his wife to be submitted to public shame in Rome, Masinissa decides to spare her something that would be worse than death, and sends her a cup full of poison, which she willingly drinks. The episode is narrated by Livy and was the subject of tragedies (by Corneille, among others) and of several opera librettos. In some of these versions Masinissa poisons his wife because she has participated in a celebration in honor of Scipio. If this is so, it is only natural that the narrator, Dom Casmurro, includes the Numidian king among the other more famous effigies, because Masinissa may have been a betrayed husband. However, I think that what we see here is a more refined and elaborate process of deception. In the chapter where he is expected to explain his book, having already explained the title in a misleading way, the narrator mentions the four characters, adding that he cannot grasp the reason why they had originally been pictured at the Matacavalos house. The three Romans were indeed betrayed. As to Masinissa, he may have felt betrayed by a nevertheless impeccable wife. It is time for the reader to ask: like Desdemona, repeatedly referred to in the text, might Sophonisba have died innocent? Desdemona dies on account of a misunderstanding and of Othello's impulsive personality, himself a victim of his own vulnerability and of Iago's viciousness. Dom Casmurro knows this and says so in chapter 135. But, by inserting, in his second chapter, the relatively unknown Sophonisba, presented by her husband with poison not for having betrayed him but so that she does not betray her own beliefs—in other words, to preserve her integrity—would not Machado, the author, be warning us against his narrator? Would she not, like the innocent Desdemona, be a warning to the reader? If we believe that Sophonisba has betrayed her husband, we will realize that the insidious narrator is saying, from the second chapter of his book, in an oblique (but not less exemplary) manner, that wives who are (perhaps) unfaithful to their husbands deserve to be killed. If we believe Sophonisba is blameless and dignified (as Capitu's final attitude will be dignified), we realize that the author is telling us to beware of his narrator, for whose strategies of deceit he is, of course, ultimately responsible.

Up to this point (and we have only read three pages), the manipulation of the reader's reception is carried out on the semantic level, by means of the

equivocal meaning of “casmurro,” and on the level of historic allusion, by appealing to the reader’s encyclopedia. In the same second chapter, the narrator tells us that, encouraged by the historical characters depicted in his dining-room ceiling, he has decided to begin the narration of his life. To do so would be to conjure up shadows from the past—just like the poet of *Faust*. This is the first *literary* reference in the novel, and very convenient it is to the cunning narrator, capable of calling in spurious intertextual relations to serve his ambiguous aims. The famous apostrophe from *Faust*, “Ah, come ye back once more, ye restless shades?” (6), is made to the kingdom of the dead, which suits Goethe’s drama very well, in a play whose main character is a dissatisfied necromancer. But what use can it have in the account of a *carioca* bourgeois, committed—as he repeatedly states in the book—to the true narration of facts? It should be added that in *Faust*, the apostrophe appears in the poem’s dedication and therefore concerns the hero’s lyric (and, not as yet, dramatic) voice, inscribed in a romantic framework: the present is refused, the past is clearly favored. In fact, Faust’s lyric self does not ask, but makes an assertion: “Ye wavering forms draw near again as ever / When ye long since moved past my clouded eyes.” The Machadian narrator humbly, almost diffidently, asks a question, as if the arrival of the shadows from his past were independent of his own will, as if he were a defenseless victim of their approach. He uses Goethe to legitimate his narrative, which, in a way, would be certified by the dead—all *his* dead—a guarantee of a kind of stereoscopic, unbiased, overall view of the facts he narrates. In case the curious reader goes to Goethe’s text, she will verify that, at the end of the dedication, the poet states something that the narrator of *Dom Casmurro* omits but is perhaps the psychological situation that sets his narrative in motion: “What I possess, as if far off I’m seeing, / And what has vanished, now comes into being.”

This use of truncated citations, this picking up of a passage totally out of context, generally out of the macrotext of a classic or the Bible, serves the Machadian narrator in a particularly profitable way. Sometimes he will not even quote from other authors but merely allude to this or that poet in a vague and imprecise way, enabling the interested reader to choose between accepting the imprecision or attempt to precisely identify the allusion in order to try to understand why and what for such and such an author is occasionally summoned to the text. This is what happens in chapter 29, when, having seen the imperial coach, the young Bentinho suffers a kind of hallucination and imagines a totally unlikely dialogue with Pedro II, a dialogue in

which the Emperor pleads with the boy's mother to give up the idea of making him a priest. The narrator Dom Casmurro comments, immediately afterwards: "For Ariosto's imagination was no more fertile than that of children and lovers." Once more the reader's encyclopedia is put to use: he knows Ariosto, he is aware that the parameter with which Dom Casmurro compares Bentinho's imagination is formidable, intertwining prodigious action with prodigious action in the course of the 46 cantos of the *Orlando Innamorato*. What the reader may let go unnoticed is that the allusion is made to the author of an epic whose protagonist goes mad when he realizes his beloved has passed him by for the love of a Moor. The situation of the most relevant (though also misleading) intertextual reference of *Dom Casmurro*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, is inverted, and it is the European who goes insane with jealousy. If, like Boiardo's, Ariosto's Renaissance epic weaves what is conventionally called *intercciatura*, the interlacement of subplots that are embedded in one another along a narrative filled with elements of the supernatural, I dare propose that, in the text of *Dom Casmurro*, there is a sort of intertextual *intercciatura*, in which references are interwoven in multiple significant suggestions. Even if one does not believe my interpretative reverie, it is impossible to deny that, in chapter 29, Machado's authorial voice inserts a fundamental piece of information in the discourse of his narrator: there are men who go insane with jealousy.

Something similar happens in chapter 32, "Undertow Eyes," (the first of two chapters with the same title), in which Dante is mentioned *en passant*. The narrator describes how he is fascinated with Capitu's eyes, the way they are both enraptured during the minutes of mutual contemplation:

How many minutes did this game last? Only the clocks of heaven could have registered that space of time which was infinite, yet brief. Eternity has its pendula; just because it never ends does not mean it takes no cognizance of the duration of bliss and damnation. The joy of the blessed in heaven must be doubled by knowing the sum of torments their enemies have already suffered in hell; so too the quantity of delights their foes enjoy in heaven must increase the agony of the damned. This particular torture escaped the divine Dante's notice; but I am not here to correct poets. (Ch. 32)

In fact, he has already done so, and the knowing reader realizes that such is the situation in which the narrator finds himself, because by the time he writes, Bentinho/Dom Casmurro already is certain that he has been betrayed

by his wife and best friend. He has, therefore, experienced damnation while others reached heavenly pleasure. This is so true that, much later in the story, he asks himself, making use of a biblical passage (also truncated as we will see below): “When would the day of Ezequiel’s creation have been?” (ch. 146). In other words, what would have been the time of Capitu and Escobar’s bliss, the antithesis of his most profound despair? If Dante did not include in his *Inferno* the extra affliction resulting from the condemned being aware of the celestial bliss of their enemies, our Dom Casmurro does so, in a brilliant and subtle way, in order to inculcate something into the reader’s mind. The reader is thus gradually conquered to the narrator’s cause; that is, he was betrayed in a vile manner, and he knew it. And, what is worse, he could appreciate how happy those who betrayed him had been.

In the famous chapter entitled “Combing,” Capitu takes the lead in the love game and kisses Bentinho, leaving him dumbfounded. He describes himself as a chaste adolescent, over whom the whole scene has a staggering effect, while his companion (as will be seen in the following chapter) regains full control both of herself and of the whole situation when her mother enters the room unexpectedly. The naïve young man is compared by the adult narrator with Desgrieux, the male protagonist of *Manon Lescaut*, a novel that is familiar to the western reader and whose title character, Manon, is charming and vain, licentious to a certain extent, totally committed to pleasure, leading the poor, unworldly Desgrieux to perdition. It should be noticed that Dom Casmurro dares not compare Capitu with Manon, but, by comparing Bentinho with Desgrieux ...

Another author to whom Dom Casmurro briefly alludes is Lucian of Samosata (chapter 64), specifically to the Island of Dreams, an episode—our narrator fails to inform us—that figures in a book paradoxically titled *The True History*. “Paradoxically” because, despite the title, the whole narrative is a lie, as the author/narrator himself avows at the beginning of his text. What charms Lucian’s reader is not merely the strangeness of the subjects narrated but the fact that the author admits he has invented all sorts of lies: “as I have no truth to put on record, [...] I humbly solicit my readers’ incredulity.” It would be the case of asking oneself: “In alluding to Lucian, is not Machado also soliciting our incredulity and warning us against his narrator’s ‘lies’?”

The presence of *Othello* in *Dom Casmurro*, which I mentioned above, has been explored by critics (based on hints liberally scattered throughout the text), ever since Helen Caldwell’s pioneering study. More recently, Helder

Macedo (and even myself) have tried to stress that, in fact, a better homology can be found between Bentinho and Hamlet, the epitome of hesitation. Like the Danish prince, Bentinho is haunted by doubts, and the narrator describes him as “a well full of them” (ch. 115). Entangled with Othello and, possibly, with Hamlet, the reader hardly notices that the narrator briefly and artfully (and once again partially) quotes *Macbeth*, in the chapter where he describes his state of mind when he comes back from law school, bringing home his diploma and about to marry Capitu. He tells us he has heard a fairy announcing that he will be happy (ch. 100). It is he himself who murmurs the sentence (according to José Dias’ testimony), and adds that this inner fairy is “a cousin of the Scottish witches: ‘Thou shalt be king, Macbeth!’” But the Scottish witches, who indeed predict that Macbeth will be king one day, also predict, even if indirectly, that his is doomed to be a childless marriage, since they announce that Banquo’s children will be kings: “Lesser than Macbeth, and greater. [...] Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none” (I.iii). Well, if he, Bentinho, is the addressee of one prophecy, the reader is entitled to recall the following predictions and to remember, in addition, that in this tragedy the theme of guilt is of essence.

Another manner of appropriating other authors’ texts, explored more in *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* but also used in *Dom Casmurro*, is the disrespect with which the narrator treats them, taking them out of their original, often solemn context, and reducing them to banality, in an almost perverse way, in order to reach a comic effect. This is what happens in chapter 61, “Homer’s Cow,” in which he narrates a visit José Dias pays to the seminary where Bentinho is training to become a priest. At a certain point in a conversation with the boy, José Dias says something that he himself considers a rhetorical pearl: “and it’s no bad thing to enter the world anointed with the holy oils of theology” (ch. 61). Having said so, his eyes glitter, fixed on the patio wall, “as if absorbed in something: unless they were absorbed in themselves.” The adult narrator remarks: “I might compare him to Homer’s cow; it wandered and moaned around the calf it had just given birth to.” A little further, alluding to the same afternoon at the seminary, he remembers another of José Dias’ pearls: “This world too is a church for the righteous.” Dom Casmurro comments: “I thought it was Homer’s cow again, as if ‘this world too is a church for the righteous’ was going to be another calf, a brother for the ‘holy oils of theology.’” Let us look at the episode in the *Iliad*: with the help of Apollo, Hector has just killed Patroclus. Book XVII begins:

Brave Menelaus son of Atreus now came to know that Patroclus had fallen, and made his way through the front ranks clad in full armour to bestride him. As a cow stands lowing over her first calf, even so did yellow-haired Menelaus bestride Patroclus. He held his round shield and his spear in front of him, resolute to kill any who should dare face him.

This is perhaps Menelaus' most moving and heroic appearance in Homer's epic, as he paternally protects Patroclus' body while the other Greeks fight to chase the Trojans away so that they can rescue their dead companion's body and bury him. By applying the Homeric simile to a trivial episode or, more precisely, by using only the comparing element of the simile (the cow), Dom Casmurro, the narrator, degrades it and uses it to attain laughter rather than sorrow. Such insolence, far less usual in this narrator's pen than in the pen of Brás Cubas, gives us an idea of an aspect the reader should not let pass unnoticed: Dom Casmurro, for all his "obsession with accuracy" (ch. 50) is capable of distortions as immense as this.

If he dares make a parody of the founding narrative of the western tradition, perpetrating a kind of intertextual blasphemy, what else will this narrator do in order to manipulate his reader's reception? Among all names, Escobar's Christian name is Ezequiel. Among all names, this will be the name of Bento and Capitu's child. Among all names, this child, who would one day become an archaeologist, had to be named after a prophet. Among all prophets, he had to be called Ezequiel, the prophet who emphatically curses Jerusalem for adoring false idols and abandoning the true God, a prophet who compares her to "women who commit adultery" (Ezekiel 16:38). If this were not enough, when he is about to finish his book, Dom Casmurro is yet again sacrilegious, as yet again he uses the tactics of quoting partially, of not saying something that, should the reader detect it, would subvert or complete or clarify the meaning of what the narrator has actually expressed in the text. It is, precisely, a quotation from The Book of Ezekiel. The narrator tells us that his son's friends who buried him in Jerusalem (where he had died from typhoid fever) gave him an epitaph taken from Ezekiel: "You were blameless in your ways." The narrator adds that he looked it up in his *Vulgate*, and indeed the verse had a complement: "You were blameless in your ways *from the day you were created*" (his emphasis). So exact, at times, when quoting from the Bible, giving chapter and verse (as he does on the following page, when he quotes from the Ecclesiastes), here he omits both. If the reader is

curious enough to look the verse up, she will find, in chapter 28, verse 15 of The Book of Ezekiel, the desired passage, from which, however, the narrator has omitted the last bit: "You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, *till wickedness was found in you*" (my emphasis).

Why does Dom Casmurro not quote the whole verse? After all, it would serve to confirm the thesis of Capitu's wickedness (if not Ezequiel's), who would have conceived her child in adultery. If the narrator does not say so, it is because this would have been too obvious, too easy. A skillful wizard who delights in repeatedly surprising the reader, Machado de Assis creates a narrator who is almost as skilled as he, showing a new trick on every other page, proposing a new challenge to us every time we read his novel, the challenge of having, every time, strategies of deceit to unmask.

Like Camões' shroud (*Lusiads* II.37), with which he compares the material Capitu uses neither to entirely cover nor to entirely uncover her arms (ch. 105), intertextuality is yet another veil used by Machado, both to uncover and to cover the meaning of this novel, as attractive as Capitu's arms, as enigmatic as her eyes.

In the composition of his characters, in the weaving of his plot, in the attention to details he pretends to be carelessly registering, the crafty narrator construes his persuasive, biased, and lacunal narrative, as if expecting the reader to fill in the blanks. As I read the novel once again, it was with surprise that I detected a new stratagem of the astute narrator, a stratagem that had eluded me in my previous countless readings. It seemed to me that the narrator created a sort of logic of substitution, the effect of which would be to act upon the reader's reception in a subliminal way. By means of it the reader would also be conditioned to believe that Capitu was unfaithful to her husband. Let us see how this is done.

There is, in *Dom Casmurro*, an apparently superfluous episode, an episode without a visible function in the plot. Soon after he enters the seminary, Bentinho comes home to visit his family and, on the way back from Sancha's house, where he met Capitu, he passes by Manduca's doorstep. Manduca had just died of leprosy and his father insists with Bentinho to go to the funeral, which of course he does not do. Five chapters ahead, the narrator tells something that happened two years before: Manduca and he had entertained a long and eloquent written debate about the Crimean War.² The two boys had opposite viewpoints: Bentinho supported Russia's expansionist advances, Manduca supported the allies. The debate had an enormous importance to

the bedridden boy, who avidly replied to his contender (ch. 90). Manduca lives for the dispute and Bentinho, as could be expected, soon gets bored and starts delaying his replies, until he writes no more. When Manduca “received no replies, either out of exhaustion or so as not to be a nuisance, he stopped sending his arguments.”

In his study in the Engenho Novo house, where he writes his book in order to try and tie the two ends of life together, the narrator reflects about his past in a self-indulgent mood:

Now, on further consideration, I think that not only did I provide some relief: I even gave him some happiness. And this discovery consoles me; now I will never forget that I gave two or three months of happiness to a poor devil, and made him forget his illness and the rest. It's something when my life's accounts come to be settled. If there is some kind of prize in the next world for unintentional virtues, this one will pay for one or two of my many sins. (Ch. 91)

In the novel's structure, however, the episode has a far more important function than simply showing the charitable facet of the narrator as a boy, capable of “unintentional virtues.” Manduca figures in the story merely to die, to die and be replaced in Bentinho's affection by Escobar. In fact, chapter 93, significantly titled “A Friend for a Dead Boy,” narrates the very beginning of the friendship between Bentinho and his colleague at the seminary. And, should the title not suffice, the narrator gives an account of his colleague's sudden arrival at Matacavalos, and comments: “A friend thus took the place of a dead boy.” Besides being opportune and comforting, Escobar's arrival, such as it is verbalized by the narrator, provides me with the first premise of the syllogism on which this logic of substitution that I propose here is based: Escobar substitutes for Manduca.

A little further in the narrative (chapter 95), Escobar, whose friendship the narrator characterizes as “great and fruitful” (the second adjective should be noticed), presents Bentinho with the solution for the first serious difficulty he faces in life, that is, escaping the seminary in order to be able to marry Capitu. Very naturally, as if it were obvious, Escobar suggests that D. Glória may “take an orphan lad, get him ordained at her expense.” The Catholic Church would be given a priest, without sacrificing Bentinho's personal happiness. The chapter (96) is aptly titled “A Substitute.” Despite some initial hesitation on the part of D. Glória, Escobar's suggestion is accepted with the

Bishop's approval. The second premise of our syllogism can now be stated: an orphan lad is substituted for Bentinho.

The conclusion to be made from these premises is dangerous: Escobar substitutes for Manduca. An orphan lad is substituted for Bentinho. Therefore, Escobar is capable of substituting and Bentinho is liable to being replaced. The reader is not aware of it, but he is surreptitiously conditioned to accept the idea that, in the event of the next impasse in the plot development—the barrenness of Bentinho and Capitu's marriage—the solution may have been a substitution.

Let us see how this is processed. Bentinho and Capitu are happily married, "apart from the great disappointment of not having a child" (ch. 104). It should be noticed that, in the same chapter, the narrator informs us, *en passant*, that Escobar played a decisive role in the beginning of his career at the courts, having persuaded a famous lawyer to admit Bentinho to his office and arranging some letters of attorney³ for him, "all of this spontaneously." The way Escobar is diligent in the overcoming of his friend's problems is remarkable. Besides, he is only too often involved in some kind of substitution, or in the delegation of tasks or responsibilities.

In the same chapter (104), the narrator underlines the state of happiness of Escobar and Sancha, enhanced by the fact that they have a little daughter, although he says, also *en passant*, that he heard "talk of the husband having an adventure," pointing out, however, that the affair, if it really took place, "created no scandal." Scandal or no scandal, the reader is informed that Escobar would not hesitate to (perhaps) be unfaithful to his wife. And that he is discreet when (perhaps) being unfaithful to her.

Bentinho opens his heart to his former fellow-student, regretting the fact of not having a child: "A child, a son, is the natural complement of life," he complains, and his friend replies prophetically: "It will come if it's needed." Two chapters ahead, we read the episode of the ten pounds sterling, an insinuation that Capitu occasionally received money from Escobar. Four chapters ahead, the child has already been born. The narrative rhythm is accelerated, and the adult narrator takes a leap: "Ezequiel, when the last chapter began, had not been conceived; when it ended, he was Christian and Catholic. This one is designed to bring him up to the age of five" (ch. 109). It will not be long before Bentinho starts to suspect—at first in a confused, vague manner—he has been deceived. He will remember Escobar's equivocal presence at his doorstep one evening when he arrived unexpectedly early from the opera; he

will see physical and psychological similarities between his son and his friend.⁴ He will wonder about his mother's growing lack of warmth towards Capitu and Ezequiel. Then, during his dead friend's wake, he believes he captures a confession of adultery in the way Capitu looks at the deceased.

The rest is well known. From then on Bento Santiago's life is hell. One evening (ch. 135), going to the theatre on his own, the play he sees is *Othello*, which he "had never seen or read." He says he "only knew the subject" and adds that he appreciated the coincidence. It can be understood that the narrator identifies himself with Othello, although this identification is inappropriate, since their personalities are so different. What is intriguing is the fact that the play, which should lead him to admit at least the possibility of Capitu's innocence—since, despite all evidence brought about by Iago, Desdemona was blameless—instead seems to him like the "the most sublime tragedy ever written." He is blinded and does not realize how inconsistently he reacts. Let us hear him:

I saw the Moor's rage, because of a handkerchief—a mere handkerchief!—and here I provide material for the consideration of the psychologists of this and other continents, for I could not help observing that a handkerchief was enough to kindle Othello's jealousy and so bring forth the most sublime tragedy ever written. The handkerchiefs have gone, now we need the sheets themselves. (Ch. 135)

Sheets on which, the narrator is absolutely certain, Escobar had substituted him in Capitu's bed, in order to beget the son whom he, inefficient and timid, insufficient and inept, considers himself incapable of having begotten.

Notes

¹ This article combines parts of two other texts, originally published in Portuguese. This English version is not a mere juxtaposition of them but, I hope, a new contribution to the diffusion of Machado de Assis' fiction among English-speaking readers.

² The Crimean War (1853-1856) was fought between the Russians, who wanted to push their borders southwards, threatening Turkey's territorial integrity, and the Ottoman Empire and its allies (Britain, France, and Sardinia).

³ Gledson's translation ("and arranged some cases for me"), normally so accurate, here misses the idea of the "delegation of powers or authority" present in the original's "arranjando-me umas procurações."

⁴ Among the psychological similarities between the boy and Escobar, or, to say it better, the dissimilarities between the boy and Bentinho, one should notice the way the boy enjoys the

scene in which a rat struggles in a cat's mouth. Bento chases the cat away and Ezequiel is dismayed because he wanted to see the cat eating the rat. Skillfully, the narrator inserts, in the following chapter, his memory of a situation in which he was utterly incapable of killing street dogs that disturbed Capitu, who had a fever.

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