

## How I betrayed Moacyr Scliar<sup>1</sup>

Philippe Poncet

When I boarded the ship named “Moacyr Scliar,” I was not yet a translator, or very little so. I was not yet a “traitor.” Does this word shock you? Be patient. I’ll come back to this in a few moments. You will understand.

First, let me tell you how this whole adventure, this “literary navigation,” began on both sides of the Atlantic, between Moacyr and me, between our two languages, Portuguese and French. When you are struck by the virus of literary translation, of bringing together or reconciling two languages, two countries, two civilizations, and two continents, you have to embark against all odds. It’s a solitary voyage, nearly without a compass, hardly without a dictionary, which must be treated like the plague. It is a voyage mostly “by dead reckoning,” as sailors say, knowing exactly what you are talking about, having intimate knowledge of the map of languages, wary of pitfalls and reefs, to reaching a safe harbor.

Before *Max and the Cats* was published in a new translation – mine – by Éditions Folies d’Encre, I was a tiny translator, an apprentice navigator. Just the year before, I had translated a (great) novel by Carlos Heitor Cony, *La traversée [Pessach, a travessia]*. The first voyage on this ocean that separates our two languages and two continents, with the intention of bringing the languages and continents closer together (not like Cortez, Pizarro, or Cabral. Heaven forbid!) A peaceful Atlantic crossing on these oceanic literary routes, taken long before me by the great translators and revealers of Brazilian literature in France (Jacques Thiériot, Alice Raillard).

I was there in 2008 when Jean-Marie Ozanne asked me to revise the translation of *Max et les chats*, the French translation of *Max and the Cats*, published by Presses de la Renaissance in 1991. I was exhausted.

Until that time, I hadn’t read anything by Moacyr Scliar.

You read that right: this one who talks to you today, who could define himself as Moacyr Scliar’s official translator into French, knew nothing about the work or the man. But beware; at that time, “*j’ai deux amours*,” as the song says, two languages and two countries: France and French, my language; and Brazil and Brazilian Portuguese, the other language I love.

At that time, take care; I had already done quite a bit of sailing on literary ships flying the flag of Brazilian literature: Euclides da Cunha, Machado de Assis, Graciliano Ramos, Jorge Amado, Clarice Lispector, Rubem Fonseca, and also the great poets in my eyes, Ferreira Gullar and Adelia Prado. And so many other writers and poets... It is impossible to mention them all.

And Moacyr? Moacyr Scliar, it's hard to admit it, but that's how it was. Moacyr had not yet appeared on my navigational charts.

By reading *Max* and then all (or almost all) of Moacyr Scliar, I would have the opportunity to redeem myself.

I first completely retranslated *Max and the Cats*. A title that was imperfectly translated into French in 1991 as *Max et les chats* (Presses de la Renaissance). Cats? That has nothing to do with the meaning of the title or the meaning of this great text. French readers can now read *Max et les fauves* [Folies D'Encre Éditions, 2009], a title and a new translation I lay claim to. Line by line. Moacyr (who read and understood French perfectly) approved this new translation.

Written during the military dictatorship in Brazil, *Max et les fauves* is a novel against violence, authority, and the wild beasts within us. It's not about cats; it's about wild animals. The misinterpretation was corrected, right, Moacyr? Moacyr's personal dedication: "*Para Philippe, uma fera na tradução*" [To Philippe, an amazing translator]. *Grande Moacyr*.

After that, I never stopped sailing through Moacyr Scliar's writings. I retranslated *Le carnaval des animaux* (*The Carnival of the Animals*). I retranslated *Le centaure dans le jardin* (*The Centaur in the Garden*) (for example, 80 lines were missing in the first translation), and I also translated a novel, this time never published in French, *La guerre de Bom Fim* (*The War in Bom Fim*).

This navigation through Moacyr's writings was a constant joy shared with my fellow editor, Jean-Marie Ozanne. Moacyr is not hard to translate, and yet I betrayed him, especially in the retranslations I mentioned.

Now do you understand why translating from one language, Brazilian, into another, French, is a betrayal? I have translated and "betrayed" Moacyr many times. I will continue to do so, and I will specify now: there is no comparison between *Max et les chats* and *Max et les fauves*. The translator is an author. In no case can he replace the author. In no case can he interpret the author's writing if this interpretation leads to a misinterpretation. Translators cannot do everything.

And how can you "betray" the authors you love?

Fellow editor Jean-Marie has said almost everything about the joy of navigating through Moacyr Scliar's texts. I agree and have just one small thing to add. With Moacyr, I have joyfully sailed through a very large area of his countless texts. With him, I crossed so many countries, but I still learned about Brazil; the boat needed guidance, rudder correction and course correction. But Moacyr was always there, if necessary, to find and mostly confirm that the course was the right one. The editor too.

The last time I saw Moacyr, a few months before his passing, was in Rio de Janeiro. I had been invited to visit the Brazilian Academy of Letters. I wanted to talk about that time, and make you laugh a little, but it's impossible. Maybe I'll talk about it later.

Right now, I am translating *Manual da paixão solitária* [Manual of the solitary passion].

I have to work hard on the maps. But for navigation, I am always ready to go with Moacyr. I hope you are ready too, dear reader.

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<sup>1</sup> The testimonials of Jean-Marie Ozanne, editor, and Philippe Poncet, translator of Moacyr Scliar, are the result of cross-interviews between them.