Escipión
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Escipión tells of the painful process of a son overcoming the weight of his father's legacy, and of how his acknowledgment that they are more alike than he has ever cared to admit enables him, paradoxically, to distance himself from this hate figure, accepting him as a person as complex and fallible as the rest of us. The main theme in the book is both universal and age-old: Aníbal is fighting the same fight countless sons have fought with their fathers throughout history, the need of the son to be recognised and at the same time to oppose the father. It is written in a beautiful style, the protagonist's voice is comical and believable, and it gives a fascinating insight into one man's descent into and escape from a very personal madness.

After years of estrangement from his now dead father the renowned historian Wolfgang Brener, Aníbal (named after the famous Carthaginian warrior) goes to the paternal home to collect the three miserable boxes that are the sum of his inheritance. His smarmy sister Berta, herself a successful historian, has inherited everything of value. Inside an abridged copy of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, however, he discovers a note mentioning a second will which, if he fulfils certain conditions, will mean all his father's possessions will go to him. These conditions consist of nothing less than writing and publishing a book of contemporary history of at least five hundred pages, an apparently impossible task for the failed historian Aníbal, a jaded alcoholic barely fit for his depressing job of typing up students' awful theses in his stinking bedsit. Rather than one last insult from his father, however, the seemingly cruel conditions of the will are in fact what lead him to a greater awareness of his own pathetic condition and to discoveries about his father and himself that will save both his emotional and his physical life.

After a childhood lacking in love, if not in material comfort (Aníbal's mother left mysteriously when he was very young and his father was cold and distant), he then spent his youth working for his father as a research assistant and trying to follow in his footsteps. But Brener senior's constant put-downs of his son's work and the excessive attention paid to his girlfriend Selma became too much. He turned to drink and left academia for good in disgrace. The conditions of the will thus seem like one last turn of the knife from beyond the grave, but the larger-than-life figure of the lawyer Manzini reveals to him both a hitherto unimagined side to his father, as well as his possible salvation. An enormous jovial man, Manzini describes Brener senior as his dearest friend, a man who spoke constantly of his much-loved son, something Aníbal, bitter and still in the condition of rebellious child, cannot comprehend. Manzini then tells him of his own pet project, a book on Dogliani, a philanthopist, philosopher and educator of rural women, and says that he has all the preliminary research in the form of notes. If Aníbal can simply put this together into a book, a great man's name will finally be honoured, the conditions of the will will be met, and his father's house and possessions will be his. Aníbal agrees, feeling as if events are overtaking him, a feeling the reappears throughout the novel. He sees himself unwillingly entangled in more and more ridiculous situations from which

he finds it impossible to escape, in which everyone around him seems to be oblivious to the madness of events while he sinks into a kind of terrible paralysis.

At Manzini's country house, the plot thickens. Reading some of his father's diaries Aníbal discovers his father's secret disdain for the smarmy Berta and a reluctant admiration of Aníbal's own rejection of the world of History. He also finds out that his mother ran off with a Brazilian ice-cream man, and starts to understand and sympathize with his father. Then the testimonies of two old women seem to show that Dogliani sexually abused the girls he taught. Aníbal is thrown into yet more despair – if he follows his conscience and refuses to write the book, he will lose his inheritance forever. Manzini denies any wrongdoing and claims the old women are devious liars, but Aníbal decides to leave the whole debacle behind when, to his horror, celebrated Canadian historian Rolf Mainers turns up with his wife, Aníbal's first love Selma. Just then, the nearby river floods. Blind to the danger, Aníbal wades into the rising waters, deciding that rescuing his father's inner thoughts (and thus the key to his own identity) is more important than anything, but he is swept away.

Waking up in hospital, he is shown a brain scan that reveals he has a spreading tumour. Selma appears to tell him the reason she is there is to ask his permission to put his name on the work she is about to publish, in gratitude for helping her with an essay all those years ago. Having been successfully operated on and fulfilled the conditions of the will, Aníbal recovers from the events in the house that is now his, and prepares finally to go to Brazil and find his mother.

Told in the first person from the point of view of Aníbal, the book's narrative is made up of long, elegant sentences filled with the protagonist's innermost thoughts and desires. His lofty, pompous diction and melodramatic, self-pitying tone make for a very comical read, with his hysterical inner monologue frequently getting the better of him, running off on wild tangents and causing him to miss bits of conversations and things happening around him. There is an irony to Aníbal's scorn at his father's writing style, a homage to that of the famous historian Edward Gibbon in its lyrical flights of fancy about the psychological and emotional motivations of figures from remote past he cannot possibly have known, when Aníbal himself does exactly this with almost everyone he meets. Despite the scorn Aníbal feels at his father's world, ('History with a capital 'H'), History constantly interrupts unbidden into his mind, as he wildly compares his situation with that of various characters from antiquity, just as our own histories inevitably interrupt our lives. We learn later than this apparent madness, as well as the depression hanging over him, are in fact the result of the tumour in his brain, almost identical to the one that killed his father, and once it is removed, the narrative becomes calmer, more focused.

The author skilfully captures the ripple-like effects in one's mind a simple word, an object, or a glance can have, sending one off on tangents of imagination. The characters are skilfully drawn, and Aníbal's increasingly hysterical mind perhaps also adds non-existent flourishes to them, at times turning them into caricatures worthy of the 19th century novel : the fat, jovial lawyer with over-the-top gestures, the sweet, romantic Alicia, always at the point of weeping with joy, Matilde, the grotesque yet seductive, wheelchair-bound young wife.

I cannot imagine too many difficulties of rendering Escipión into English, although the translator would need to take care with rendering the protagonist's voice, employing just the right amount of Latinisms to achieve Aníbal's lofty diction without falling into overly archaic language. The book would work well in English and the theme is clearly a universal one. A very readable, yet intelligent book.