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HUMOUR IN *THE POSTHUMOUS MEMOIRS OF BRÁS CUBAS* AND *TRISTRAM SHANDY*

SANDRA GUARDINI VASCONCELOS
University of São Paulo
São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract: This article explores Machado de Assis's and Laurence Sterne's recourse to humour and wit as a critical weapon to satirise society, while pointing out the differences of tone and mood in both novelists. Machado and Sterne belong to a long tradition of humourists whose 'acts of aggression' intend to shed light on the absurdity and incongruity of human behaviour and folly.
Keywords: Humour; wit; Machado de Assis; Laurence Sterne.

HUMOR EM MEMÓRIAS PÓSTUMAS DE BRÁS CUBAS *E* TRISTRAM SHANDY

Resumo: *Este artigo explora o recurso ao humor e à agudeza por parte de Machado de Assis e Laurence Sterne como armas críticas para satirizar a sociedade, ao mesmo tempo que destaca as diferenças de tom e ânimo em ambos os romancistas. Machado e Sterne pertencem a uma longa tradição de humoristas cujos "atos de agressão" pretendem jogar luz sobre o absurdo e a incongruência do comportamento e da insensatez humanos.*
Palavras-chave: *Humor; agudeza; Machado de Assis; Laurence Sterne.*

In a now classic essay about Machado de Assis, Antonio Candido characterises the nineteenth-century Brazilian novelist as 'enigmatic and Janus-headed', a writer who, 'looking to the past and to the future', makes an impression on the critic for the 'apparent archaism of his technique' and 'heedlessness of the [then] dominant styles' (CANDIDO, 1995, p. 106 and 109, respectively). This 'apparent archaism' has perhaps found no better materialisation than Machado's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (out in book-form in 1881), which marked a watershed in his novelistic production. As a matter of fact, in comparison with his more conventional

early novels, all published between the years 1872 and 1878, *Brás Cubas* represented a remarkable formal turnaround, mainly due to Machado's decision to give the voice to a capricious, voluble narrator who talks to the reader and writes from beyond the grave. This change of route would have far-reaching consequences in terms both of narrative structure and point of view, which flaunts an Olympian and aloof storyteller, whose superiority stems at the same time from his unconcern about the things of this world and from his class position and outlook when alive.

While in those early works Machado appeared to hesitate between several possibilities and combined psychological analysis, dramatic plot, *feuilleton* conventions, and realistic scenes, all presided over by an editorial omniscient narrative voice, in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* he seems to have found a course more congenial with his scepticism and disenchanted worldview. Now, romantic clichés and melodramatic scenes are made the butt of parody and derision; action and plot become secondary and are toned down to make room for the figure of the narrator, whose overpowering voice subdues and muffles his own life story. Events give way to opinions, comments, digressions, and philosophising; conflict is eroded by the narrator-protagonist's ennui and lack of emotional involvement; an empty life, devoid of projects or great ambitions, reduces Brás Cubas to inaction, in an absolutely undramatic existence. A self-conscious narrator, Brás Cubas tries to piece together the fragments of his life to finally come to the melancholy conclusion that he had achieved nothing. Opening his narrative with the episode of his demise and funeral, he sarcastically makes remarks about the eleven 'last-minute faithful friends' who accompany him to the cemetery, as if to underscore the pettiness of human motives and the purposelessness of his life. From then on, it is his whimsical, irreverent and chatty self that will stand out, as he sets out to write his autobiography, an account that will make twists and turns written in a style the narrator compares to 'a drunkard's gait' (*BC*, LXXIII, 113):

> You [reader] love direct and continuous narration, a regular and fluid style, and this book and my style are like drunkards, they stagger left and right, they walk and stop, mumble, yell, cackle, shake their fists at the sky, stumble, and fall... (*BC*, LXXI, 111)

On organizing these memoirs as a complex combination of fragments of Brás's life with digressions and a rich 'tapestry of allusions' (GRABER, 2011, p. 65), Machado de Assis was leaving behind the dominant tradition of the

sentimental and didactic novel that somehow informed his early work, with their structured plots and omniscient narrators, and looking to another line of development of the European novel, which had Miguel de Cervantes, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and William Thackeray as their exponents. Machado's critical essays on the novel, written before his turnaround in the 1880s, already show signs of disagreement over some of the tendencies that prevailed in the work of his predecessors and contemporaries. His first four novels are experiments wherein he tested possibilities and they already contain, in germ, trends that were fully developed in his later phase. Those limitations he criticised in his fellow novelists, and we might include here his own, were not only overcome but also ironized in the later novels. At some point, he must have turned his eyes and attention to that other tradition of the European novel that offered him alternative paths and narrative methods and procedures that seem to have met his own needs as a novelist. Self-reflexivity and its consequent display of the fictional nature of any literary work, irony, the reconfiguration of point of view – which becomes more problematic –, and a re-conception of plot would now have direct bearing on his grasp of the novel form.

It is not surprising, therefore, that affinities between Machado and that tradition should be suggested by Brás Cubas himself, in his address to the reader, wherein he defines his memoirs as a 'scattered work where I, Brás Cubas, have adopted the free-form of a Sterne', an assertion later retrieved by Machado in his prologue to the third edition of the novel. Machado's use of inverted commas and exact reproduction of Brás Cubas's words give us food for thought, and I will return to this later. In the wake of Sterne, there came a whole lineage of works and writers that included not only Cervantes and Fielding, but also Shakespeare,[1] and Robert Burton and his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, all of them crucial references for the author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. Another invocation of a brotherhood of writers would be made by the omniscient narrator of Machado's next novel, *Quincas Borba* (1892), who, on commenting on his narrative method, compares it to that 'used in so many other books – all of them old – where the subject matter is summed up: "How this came about and more to that effect"'. And he goes on:

> There's Bernardim Ribeiro, there are other wonderful books. Of those foreign tongues, without going back to Rabelais, we have enough with

[1] These authors are recurringly quoted or referred to throughout Machado's *oeuvre.*

> Fielding and Smollett, many of whose chapters get read only through their summaries. Pick up *Tom Jones*, Book IV, Chapter I, and read this title: *Containing five pages of paper*. It's clear, it's simple, it deceives no one. They're five sheets of paper, that's all. Anyone who doesn't want to read it doesn't, and for the one who does read it, the author concludes obsequiously: "And now, without any further preface, I proceed to our next chapter". (*QB*, CXII, 159-160)

These explicit references not only reinforce the centrality of those authors as matrices that inspired new directions but also substantiate Antonio Candido's claim about the appeal archaic techniques had for Machado. That he should look back to this old tradition in those two novels that are a turning point in his career as a novelist may be no sheer coincidence. Being familiar with *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, of which he held a copy in his personal library, in editions of 1849 and 1861, respectively, he must have found in Sterne and in those fellow novelists a more congenial vein to explore literarily, discovering in them that inclination to satire and wit, and narrative methods and procedures that would be so serviceable for him to deal with the Brazilian matters he was interested in probing.

Machado's biting satire, aimed at social climbers and hypocrites in general, is analogous to and echoes that of a gallery of writers other than Sterne who had preceded him in the comic or satirical tradition, some of whom are also found in Machado's library or references: Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and William Thackeray.[2] Thackeray's satirical sketches in *The Book of Snobs* (1848), written by someone who identifies himself as one of them, his treatment of the reader or his sharp, acid social portrayals in *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848) may have equally catered to Machado's interests.[3] His edition of the latter has no date, but Thackeray's

[2] The updated and revised catalogue of Machado de Assis's personal library includes Miguel de Cervantes's *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* (Paris: Librairie de Ch. Fouraut, no date); Henry Fielding's *The History of Amelia* (London: George Routledge, no date); Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (London: E. Moxon, 1849) and *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (London: E. Moxon, 1861); Jonathan Swift's *Opuscules Humoristiques* (Paris: Poulet-Malassair et de Broise, 1859); *A Tale of a Tub written for the Universal Improvement of Mankind* (Dublin and London: Reeve, 1889); *Polite Conversation in Three Dialogues* (London: Charles Whittinghan, 1892); William Thackeray's *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Charles Whittinghan, 1892) and *Vanity Fair, a Novel without a Hero* (New York: John W. Lovell, no date).

[3] Thackeray himself had established his own lineage in *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*, a series of seven lectures in which we find his selection and appreciation of a gallery of writers who had preceded him in the comic or satirical tradition, some of whom are also found in Machado's

books had been available in the circulating libraries in Rio de Janeiro, and also at the Biblioteca Nacional since at least the 1840s,[4] which substantiates Eugênio Gomes's claim that there are similarities in Machado's and Thackeray's characterisation and style (such as the use of interruptions, arguments over words, sentence structure, etc.) (GOMES, 1976). An 1880 edition of Charles Dickens's complete works[5] also offered a gallery of social climbers, snobs, and parasites – caricatures that were meant as the social reformer's criticism of a greedy capitalist society in the making. Moreover, Thackeray's and Dickens's London, with its hypocrites and upstarts,[6] must have seemed strangely familiar and similar to Machado's Rio de Janeiro.

Either more or less corrosive in their critique of the mores and social types of their own present, those writers shared a certain common outlook on the world and humankind. Machado, no stranger to any of them, will make irony a weapon he will consistently deploy in his work. It is Sterne, however, who looms large as an inspiration. Not his version as the sentimentalist, as construed by the eighteenth century, but as the novelist whose amalgamation of the playful and the melancholy must have looked rich in potential to Machado. He discerned all the parody and wit that undermine and problematise Sterne's proverbial benevolence and bonhomie. Comedy and laughter are a stratagem which allows for the contemplation of the asperities of life from a distance; humour is the strategy and the mirror which the melancholy resorts to in order to confront or react against suffering. But, as we know, it comprehends so much more...[7]

'Humor', has written Peter Gay, 'is a serious matter', arguing that it is 'in large part – an act of aggression', with a destructive and demolishing potential that assails 'accepted values, accepted ideals, accepted certainties with all [the] resources of disrespectfulness' (GAY, 1991, p. 327 and p. 330

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library or references: Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Oliver Goldsmith, and Laurence Sterne. An allusion to Thackeray features in *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*: '[January 20, six o'clock in the evening]. Spent the day leafing through books, in particular, reread some Shelley, and also some Thackeray. One consoled me for the other; the other freed me from the former's spell. Thus does genius complete genius, and the mind learn the various languages of the mind.' (ASSIS, 1982, p. 16).

[4] Together they held editions of his works in English, French and, in the case of *The Book of Snobs*, also in Portuguese.

[5] Charles Dickens. *The Works of Charles Dickens.* London: Chapman and Hall; New York: Scribner and Welford, 1880, 30 v.

[6] Peter Gay (1991, p. 330) describes him as 'a comic aggressor'.

[7] Henry Fielding (1915, p. 249): 'Of all kinds of writing there is none on which this variety of opinions is so common as in those of humour, as perhaps there is no word in our language of which men have in general so vague and indeterminate an idea.'

respectively). Gay compares humourists to physicians whose job is to cure societies that are diseased. They seem to be especially active at times of a general shift in social structures, using humour as a political weapon. It was thus in eighteenth-century England, which witnessed two combined cultural phenomena: the rule of the great satirists and the rise of the novel. 'The Age of Reason', as it came to be called, made the blend of wit and satire one of its dominant literary styles, with a number of its leading writers particularly engaged in the task of holding vice and folly up to ridicule in their effort to deal with a period of dramatic changes. The names of Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, John Arbuthnot, Daniel Defoe, and Henry Fielding stand out in that context. However, as Ronald Paulson remarks, by mid-century, the era of English satire had come to an end and the new genre that had contributed to its 'eclipse' had already spawned 'a series of masterpieces', some of which were infiltrated by some of its techniques and conventions (PAULSON, 1967, p. 3).

If Sterne retains some of the satiric vein of this generation of writers, for example in the characterisation of a Dr Slop, or in his handling of the tenets of what Ian Watt defined as the novel's formal realism, he has more of the amiable humourist, as Stuart Tave would phrase it, (TAVE, 1960) whose aim is not so much to sting or lambaste, like Swift's, but provoke comic-sympathetic laughter. *Tristram Shandy* is full of jokes and its comedy arises from the clash of his characters' ruling passions – the 'hobby-horses' which they ride and Sterne both ridicules and respects.

Sterne's and Machado's fusion of playfulness and melancholy, incongruous as it might seem, is nothing more than a materialisation of the ruling property of irony and wit. Not wit in its later sense, but in its still active eighteenth-century meaning, that is, as an adaptation of the Aristotelic '*asteion*' and of the Latin '*ingenium*', to refer not only to the innate capacity of establishing mental analogies, but also to the exercise of the imagination to generate sharpness of wit to express those analogies. As Samuel Johnson defined it, in his treatment of the metaphysical poets,

> [...] wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they [the metaphysical poets] have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly

> bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. (JOHNSON, 1832, p. 7-8)[8]

'*Discordia concors*', that is, the unity achieved by combining disparate or conflicting elements – 'things by nature most unneighbourly', in Cowley's words (LEWIS, 1976, p. 106). Is this not what we get in 'A Chapter of Hats'?

"Muse, sing of the vexation of Mariana, the wife of the lawyer Conrado Seabra, that morning in April 1879. What can be the cause of so much commotion? It's a mere hat, lightweight, not lacking in elegance, and flat." (ASSIS, 2008, p. 65).

The collision between muses and hats, the mythological and the absolutely prosaic, the high and the low seems nonsensical but the procedure recurs in Machado. Another example of this collision is the argument that ensues between husband and wife, when the former remarks:

> The choice of a hat is not an indifferent act, as you might suppose; it is governed by a metaphysical principle. [...] The metaphysical principle is the following – the hat completes the man, it is a complement decreed *ab eterno*; no one can change it without self-mutilation. This is a profound matter, one that has never yet occurred to anyone. Wise men have studied everything from stars to worms, or, to give you the bibliographical references, from Laplace onwards ... You've never read Laplace? From Laplace and his *Mécanique celeste* to Darwin and his curious book about worms, yet they've never thought to stop and look at a hat, and study it from every angle. No one has noticed that there is metaphysics in hats. (ASSIS, 2008, p. 68)

With the juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete, the movement of celestial bodies and earthworms, of philosophy and everyday life the facetious narrator flaunts not only his witticism but also his mocking disposition to not take anything seriously. The absurdity of combining such dissimilar elements produces the kind of laughter that Kant once argued to be 'an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing' (KANT, 1987, p. 203). The insolent display of superiority in his interpellation of the reader and the capricious twists and turns of his prose that will characterise the configuration of a point of view in most of Machado's late

[8] Although Dr Johnson is critical of the excesses of metaphysical wit, his definition is useful for it suggests this kind of assemblage of ideas implies a particular and uncommon point of view that carries with it the unexpected.

works are redolent of Sterne's 'nonlogical junctions between different kinds of discourse' and 'abrupt transitions' (WATT, 2002, p. 132 and 133, respectively). However, Machado's perspective is much less benevolent and harmless than Sterne's. To quote one of his favourite authors, there is none of the 'milk of human kindness' in his narrators. As Roberto Schwarz reminds us, the 'unexpected shift from humor to open aggression [...] is a key maneuver in the *Memoirs*, where it appears at every level' (SCHWARZ, 2001, p. 10).

In his exploration of the social implications of the use of irony in Augustan prose, Ian Watt suggests that the adjective Augustan 'evokes a special way of speaking – precise in syntax, elegant in diction, and very detached in its attitude to the subject, to the audience, and even to the self and its feelings' (WATT, 2002, p. 37). The mode of speech of writers like Swift, Addison, Johnson, Shaftesbury is predominantly ironical, notwithstanding the differences among them. Throughout the century, irony pervaded the literary scene 'from the philosophical heights of Berkeley and Hume to the polemic abysses of Grub Street' (WATT, 2002, p. 37). Having Swift as its precursor, irony became a mode of discourse adopted by many of the Augustans as a mark of social distinction between the elite and the mob, the latter being an abbreviation of *mobile vulgus* that had been incorporated into the language by the end of the seventeenth century. Watt argues, therefore, that irony acquires a social function in this particular use made to address 'the chosen few – the men of wit and judgment and learning' to whom 'you could speak as subtly and elliptically as you wished' while 'to the many – the mob – you obviously couldn't, and in any case wouldn't, use the same language' (WATT, 2002, p. 39). All these writers, Watt remarks, were engaged in a war against boorishness and vulgarity and employed irony as a gentleman's weapon without 'discomposing the serenity of [their] features either by anger or laughter' (WATT, 2002, p. 40).

If Machado's narrators come to mind, it is because a similar time of political turmoil and social change that would in a few years witness the abolition of slavery and the advent of the Republic, the period which comes under scrutiny in his later novels, gives Machado the materials to mobilize the incongruity, the surprise, the unexpectedness, and heterogeneity of the ideas typical of wit in its early eighteenth-century sense. Together with his narrators' raillery, mockery and witticisms, that explains in part what has been described as his 'humour', whose 'eighteenth-century English extraction' has been noticed by Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz when drawing attention to 'the contrasts between the carefully constructed

syntactic framework and the rough edges of reality′ in Machado′s works (SCHWARZ, 2001, p. 15).

Machado may have seen in the ironic voice something especially suited to the Brazilian situation, as a means to stylise ′a kind of conduct characteristic of the Brazilian ruling class′, in Roberto Schwarz′s apt description (SCHWARZ, 2001, p. 8). In the best comic tradition, Machado′s narrators engage in open aggression against those in their social circle. It is hard to miss the note of hostility and viciousness embedded in the sharp and acrid comment made about Viana, one of the characters in *Resurrection*, of whom the narrator says that ′he was born a parasite as other as born dwarves. He was a parasite by divine right′ (ASSIS, 2013, p. 30); or of Eugênia, ′the flower from the shrubbery′ (BC, XXX, 60)[9] and ′my Crippled Venus′ (*BC*, XXXIII, 65), which hardly disguises his cruelty and impudence. Also, about her he proclaims, without a shred of pity:

> The worst of it was that she was lame. Such lucid eyes, such a fresh mouth, such ladylike composure – and lame! That contrast could lead one to believe that nature is sometimes a great mocker. Why pretty if lame? Why lame if pretty? (*BC*, XXXIII, 64).

The impudent tone does not spare individuals, events, conventions, or institutions, and pervades his *oeuvre*. Mockery, cruelty and verbal aggression abound in his novels, short stories, and *crônicas* and are barely concealed by the polite and apparently amicable discourse of the narrative instance, which is a trap for unwary readers. The latter are also systematically derided with tart and disrespectful remarks. It also becomes palpable to what extent a feeling of superiority is implicit in the treatment of gender, class, and race. With his habitual boldness, Machado dissects Brazilian life in its several aspects. His third-person narrators take on the role of observers of men and human behaviour, analyse and anatomise their motivations, passions and inner conflicts, keeping the necessary critical distance from human beings and objects. Likewise, in the novels with a first-person narrator, his critical self-awareness backfires on him and widens the gap created by the coexistence between the narrating I and the narrated I.

[9] In the original, 'flor da moita', an epithet whose cruelty the translation misses entirely. John Gledson has translated it as 'flower of the bushes'.

In Machado's work, besides its habitual uses irony (be it verbal or situational)[10] is no longer just a figure of speech but acquires a new dimension as it incorporates one more sense – that of parabasis, the critical role that the self-reflexive narrator assumes on suspending the narrative to introduce his comments and analysis.[11] Examples include prologues, frequent interruptions to address the reader, discussion of the impasses of the fictional structure, comments on the materiality of the book or on literary tradition itself, all of them devices that lay bare the inner workings and the framework of the narrative, creating an ironic effect and intensifying the status of artefact accorded to writing. On these occasions, the inconsistencies, contrasts and unusual associations on the part of the narrator, contrary to expectation, invert the meaning and introduce a significant degree of uncertainty and indeterminacy that undermine any univocal interpretation by the reader. There is no validity, therefore in that advice from father to son in one of Machado's short stories:

> Only you must never make use of irony, that vague movement at the corner of the mouth, that thing of mystery, invented by some decadent Greek, caught by Lucian, passed on to Swift and Voltaire, a trait befitting sceptics and men of enlightenment (ASSIS, 1963, p. 121).[12]

With its meaning as *eirōneía*[13] – questioning –, irony moves beyond Rhetoric and comes to constitute an instrument of knowledge and

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[10] An example of situational irony is the episode involving Jacó, in chapter LXXXVII ('Geology') of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Described by the narrator as 'probity personified', Jacó is called on by dull Doctor B. and has his servant tell the visitor he is not at home, but his lie is found out and he is forced to receive the man. Witness to this scene, Brás Cubas comes to the following conclusion: 'Doctor B. left and we gave a sigh of relief. Once we got through with our sighing, I told Jacó that he'd just lied four times in less than two hours. The first time by contradicting himself, the second by showing happiness at the presence of the intruder, the third by saying that he was going out, the fourth by adding that it was with his wife. Jacó reflected for a moment, then confessed the accuracy of my observation, but he defended himself by saying that absolute veracity was incompatible with an advanced social state and that the piece of cities only be obtained at the cost of reciprocal deceits…'. (ASSIS, 1998, p. 131).

[11] Parabasis: '(in ancient Greek comedy) a direct address to the audience, sung or chanted by the chorus on behalf of the author; a digression in a fictional work in which the author addresses the reader' (*Oxford University Dictionary*). In Friedrich Schlegel's view, 'irony is a permanent parabasis' (Fragment 668, *Philosophische Lehrjahre, 1796-1806*).

[12] 'Men of enlightenment' does not really translate Machado's 'desabusado', which means in the original 'disillusioned men' or 'those without illusions'. I thank John Gledson for his comments and help with this excerpt.

[13] *Eironeía* (transliteration *eirōneía*): dissimulation; ignorance purposely affected to provoke or confound an antagonist, a mode of argument used by Socrates; generally, mock-modesty, sarcasm,

interpretation of the world, flaunting its contradictions and incongruous nature (SOUZA, 2006). The novel draws attention to its artifices and turns the narrative stance into a space of systematic exercise of anatomy, in the sense Robert Burton gives it in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and which Northrop Frye defines as 'a dissection of analysis [that] expresses very accurately the intellectualized approach of his form'. Sterne's successful combination of anatomy and novel made *Tristram Shandy* its paradigmatic and exemplary representative in the eighteenth century (FRYE, 1973, p. 311).

From this perspective, irony is a way of thinking that submits everything and everybody to scrutiny and whose character is essentially dialectic, since it sets in motion the principle of contradiction – between being and seeming, between reality and fiction, between man and world. In that interval, disparities and absurdities settle in, relativism and dialogism are brought into play. By resorting to parody, which stylises different types of discourse (law, science, philosophy, literature), and assuming several distinct guises, the Machadian narrator's attitude becomes substantially dialogic through the intersection of the voices that it favours (BRAYNER, 1979). In these allusions and in the profusion of echoes of thoughts and elocutions lies the material *par excellence* of the ironic perspective, which suspends the univocal expression of one single truth and one single point of view.

The stylisation of the discourses of other people, the citations and the references we encounter in the Machadian text are the ironist's common devices, and the appearance of politeness and moderation is just that – appearance. Beneath civility, good breeding and decorous behaviour, there lies the bite that Peter Gay has associated with humour, with its destructive power against well-established values. In the provincial Rio de Janeiro of his time, Machado had his insolent narrators lash the caste of flatterers, self-seeking neighbours, marriageable young women, rich or gossipy widows, on the one hand, but also the poor and the dependants, on the other, laying bare the workings of social relationships under the cover of the civilised man's elegant and learned prose. His narrators, famous for their mocking, corrosive and oblique style, all move in a very delimited social circle – that of the well born and fortunate who enjoy the prerogatives and privileges of their condition. They will show the same freedom of perspective, by means of the

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understatement; pretense; *assumption*. The noun derives from the verb *eírō*, to speak, to say. See H. G. Liddell; R. Scott; S. Jones. *Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement*. 9th ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. I thank Giuliana Ragusa for the clarification.

volubility 'that personifies the multiple roles available in the theatre of the socio-historical world'(SOUZA, 2006, p. 23).[14]

Brás Cubas's mode of speech is a mark of the character's social distinction and superiority, where the ironic stance, with its sophisticated use of raillery and understatement, is played against the uneducated, vulgar language of the people. His prose is, thus, an instrument of 'social characterization', and gives notice of the 'concerns of an enlightened gentleman' whose 'social prerogatives' are imprinted in his style, giving 'an aftertaste of class to [his] writing' (SCHWARZ, 2001, p. 9). This is one of the ways by which this representative of the Brazilian slave-owning oligarchy distinguishes himself as a member of the elite from the vulgarity of the slaves, of the dependents and of the poor that formed most of the Brazilian population at the time. To some extent, it would explain the 'open aggression' and 'affronts to the reader', so familiar to those who read Machado, 'a formal expression of the qualitative division in the reading public' (WATT, 2002, p. 39).

Irony, 'that mysterious little twitch at the corner of the mouth' (*CS*, p. 371), the sceptical and impudent posture, are the very weapons of the caustic humour and wit we apprehend in the narrator's sagacity in the construction of his discourse. His narrator's notorious effrontery in challenging truisms, suspending received truths, and creating ambiguity affiliate Machado with the actual lineage of the writers the father admonishes his son against, like Lucian, Voltaire and Swift, and inscribes them in the same tradition as Fielding and Sterne, of whom he borrows the technique of intrusions and digressions.

As early as 1880, when *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* was still being published in instalments in *Revista Brasileira* (1880), Artur Barreiros tried to account for the uniqueness of this 'extraordinary novel' by suggesting for the first time its affiliation to the English humourists.[15] A few years later, Sílvio Romero dedicated a whole chapter of his study on Machado to his 'humour', which Romero considered to be an affectation in the Brazilian novelist, something artificial, an unskillful imitation of several English authors, and an evident 'apery' of Sterne (ROMERO, 1936). The association between Machado, humour and the English, with critics arguing its national or foreign character, had in Alcides Maya the first consistent attempt to

[14] Roberto Schwarz (1985) argues that volubility is the style par *excellence* of the Machadian narrator, who from one sentence to another changes his personality, diction, literary genre or point of view.

[15] Artur Barreiros, review published in *Pena & Lápis* in June 1880. (Quot. GUIMARÃES, 2008, p. 39).

investigate and explain why the affiliation was at all plausible and what shape it took. Thus, he mapped a few procedures which, commonly found in Rabelais, Swift and Sterne, and also in Fielding and Thackeray, were likewise mobilised by Machado, all of them to the effect of comedy or satire. Maya mentions some of them, very familiar to Machado's readers, such as abrupt interventions, the interplay of contrasts, the clash between cause and effect, the lack of respect for the canonical, ridicule, the exposure of physical and moral deformities, the use of caricature and nonsense (MAYA, 2007). Later, Augusto Meyer would draw attention to Machado's acrobatic and malicious humour and stress his corrosive satire and constant appeal to the logic of the absurd (MEYER, 1952).

Machado's educated prose, always elegant and composed, acquires a sharp edge, as he gives the voice to a member of the elite and makes him the protagonist-narrator of his life story. With his capricious stance, this narrator can in a snap turn from the trivial and everyday to the heights of biblical, historical or literary references all in the same sentence. Brás's fixed idea to invent 'an antihypochondriacal poultice', Cavour's to unite Italy, the pyramids of Egypt, or the dead German diet are all yoked together in the same flow from his pen. The surprising and disparate juxtaposition in 'Marcela loved me for fifteen months and eleven *contos*, no more no less'[16] (*BC*, XVII, 38); the five gold coins that become a silver *cruzado* as reward for the muleteer that saves Brás from a serious accident; the words from the Scripture that justify his decision to go back to the city and put an end to his emotional involvement with Eugênia: in his downplaying of and disregard for conventions and traditions, Brás affronts his reader's expectations, shifts perspective, and flaunts the oscillating nature of his thoughts and feelings.

Similar is Sterne's 'comic syntax', characterised by Ian Watt as 'a much looser and less directed junction between units of meaning', with 'the abrupt transition from narration to direct address to the reader', 'the multiplicity of [...] narrative point of view', and the 'logically inappropriate conjunction of ideas for comic purposes' in Tristram's prose style, whose 'climactic comic twists' are meant to arouse the reader's 'sympathetic and risible faculties' (WATT, 2002, p. 133ff). Capricious transitions from one subject to another rule out linearity and coherence in his writing, which flaunts lack of deference for the body of knowledge available in his own his time in various fields, as in

[16] *Conto de réis*: phrase used in nineteenth-century Brazil to indicate one million *réis* (plural of the monetary unit, *real*), a considerable amount then.

Walter Shandy's love of hypotheses and theories always proven wrong in face of reality, and indulges in the free association of ideas, as in:

> I was just going, for example, to have given you the great outlines of my uncle Toby's most whimsical character; – when my aunt Dinah and the coachman came a-cross us, and led us a vagary some millions of miles into the heart of the planetary system: Notwithstanding all this you perceive that the drawing of my uncle Toby's character went on gently all the time (*TS*, III, XXII, 51)

Cubas's pirouettes, whimsicality and eccentricities have a lot in common with Tristram's. Machado seems to have detected all the parody and wit that undermine the image of Sterne as sentimentalist, which the eighteenth century had constructed by censoring his texts, cleansing them of their 'obscenities' and publishing compilations of his more popular and sentimental episodes.[17] There is undoubtedly a lot of benevolence and bonhomie in Sterne, the clergyman who sees in laughter a remedy for the tribulations of humanity: 'I live in a constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being persuaded that every time a man smiles – but much more so, when he laughs, that it adds something to this Fragment of Life.' (*TS*, Dedication). However, the oddity of his characters – Walter, Toby, Yorick, or even Tristram himself, for that matter – and situations is as much the butt of satire as of benign comedy. The apparent incongruity between the viciousness of the former and the amiability of the latter is resolved in Sterne by his tempering their follies and small obsessions with sympathy. Rather than abhorrence, which would make us laugh at the members of the Shandy household, therapeutic laughter is the counterpoise to the spleen and makes us laugh with them.

> If 'tis [my book] is wrote against any thing, – 'tis wrote, an' please your worships, against the spleen; in order, by a more frequent and more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the sucussations of the intercoastal and abdominal muscles in laughter, to drive the *gall* and other *bitter juices* from the gall bladder, liver and sweet-bread of his majesty's subjects, with all the inimicitious passions which belong to them, down into their duodenums. (*TS*, IV, XXII, 218)

[17] One of these, *The Beauties of Sterne*, first published in 1782, had had 'another dozen editions by the early 1790's'. (MULLAN, p. 1990).

One of the sources of Sterne's humour, the recurrent transition from the serious to the ridiculous is allied here with his irony against the wordiness of medical jargon, while simultaneously a prescription of a sceptical mode of laughter as antidote against melancholy.

Brás Cubas's acknowledgment in his address to the reader that he had adopted 'the free-form of a Sterne' and that he wrote his memoirs 'with a playful pen and melancholy ink' was too overt and tempting not to seduce a number of Brazilian critics to follow its trail (GOMES, 1949; CALDWELL, 1970). But it was Roberto Schwarz, in his investigation on how social structure is internalised as literary form in Machado's novel, who would observe that 'a decisive intuition told him [Machado] that Sterne's self-indulgent humour could be adapted to the universe of Brazilian class domination, which could thus be transposed into fiction in an elegant, pitiless manner, full of crucial meanings' (SCHWARZ, 2001, p. 144).[18] As Schwarz's suggestion makes it very clear, two major moves are central here and invite further specification: Machado's adaptation rather than simple borrowing of the Shandean form to deal with the specificities of the Brazilian context, and the difference in mood in the two novelists' recourse to humour, implied in the critic's qualification as self-indulgence, in one case, and pitilessness, in the other. This contrast has deep roots in the social and historical circumstances that underlay their work and found their way into it.

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[18] He goes on to assert: 'the English predilection for eccentric characters and for whimsicality, linked to the emergence of democratic culture in England, would be put to use to express the eccentric position [...] of our elite, linked to the modern bourgeois model but diverging from it in a scandalous manner on the level of sociological relationships.' (SCHWARZ, 2001, p. 144).

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SANDRA GUARDINI VASCONCELOS is Senior Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of São Paulo. She did postdoctoral studies at the University of Cambridge (1993-1994), at the University of Manchester (2008), was Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Brazilian Studies at the University of Oxford (2005), at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London (2021-2022) and at the University of Durham (May 2022). Over the past years, she has been carrying out research on the presence and circulation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novels in nineteenth-century Brazil. She has published articles and chapters both in Brazil and abroad, has co-edited *Books and Periodicals in Brazil 1768-1930, A Transatlantic Perspective* (2014), *Tropical Gothic in Literature and Culture: the Americas* (2016), *Comparative Perspectives on the Rise of the Brazilian Novel* (2020), and is the author of *Puras misturas: estórias em Guimarães Rosa* (1997), *Dez lições sobre o romance inglês do século XVIII* (2002), and *A formação do romance inglês: ensaios teóricos* (2007), for which she got the 2008 Jabuti Prize for Literary Theory and Criticism. At present, she is the coordinator of the Laboratory for the Study of the Novel (LERo). She is curator of the João Guimarães Rosa Archive, at the Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros and holds a CNPq Research Productivity Grant (Grade 1A). Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7222-5802. E-mail: sgtvasco@usp.br.

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