

**LAUGHTER IN THE DARK:
POSTHUMOUS NARRATION AS NARRATIVE CONCEIT IN
MEMÓRIAS POSTUMAS DE BRAS CUBAS AND *IL FU MATTIA PASCAL***

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Abstract: This article presents a comparative study of *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* and *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, arguing that posthumous narration operates as a philosophical and structural device in both novels. Through the defunct narrator, Machado de Assis and Luigi Pirandello construct positions of detachment that permit reflection on the absurdity of life. Comparing Pirandello's theory of humourism to Maia Neto's interpretations of Machado as a Pyrrhonian skeptic, the essay contends that digression, irony, and metafictional self-awareness are inseparable from the novels' philosophical projects. While Pirandello stages a tragicomic negotiation between self and society, Machado advances a more radical skepticism grounded in complete posthumous distance. In both works, narrative form and style become the mediums through which existential inquiry is enacted.

Keywords: posthumous narration; humourism; metafiction; irony

1.

Memorias postumas de Braz Cubas. An attention-grabbing title if there ever was one. From this title alone, which is evocative indeed of much of what is remarkable about this novel, several pertinent questions are raised. First of all one notes that the front cover of the book bears the names of two authors: those of Machado de Assis and Braz Cubas. Furthermore, the title describes the nature of the work at hand; these are memoirs, autobiography, the record of a life. What is more, they are 'posthumous'. Whether in the sense that they are somehow composed after the death of the author--whose life must have been interesting enough, surely, to warrant a reappraisal--or in the sense that they were somehow composed after the death of the author, from the title alone it remains to be seen. It is certain, however,

that the truth of the matter will have crucial consequences on the content of the novel; the way it has been written as much as the way it is read.

Braz Cubas is not Machado de Assis; Braz Cubas is the implied author of the memoirs; but the memoirs as framed by Braz Cubas' narration make up a novel which is written by Machado de Assis. But it is true that the most remarkable qualities of Braz Cubas—pessimism, humour, self-reflexiveness, an awareness and conscious adaption and subversion of literary tradition—may just as well apply to Machado de Assis. When Braz Cubas is joking and jesting with the reader, somewhere, unignorably, there is Machado de Assis lurking in the background. When Braz Cubas refuses to explain how he is writing from beyond the grave, it is also somehow Machado de Assis refusing to explain how he justifies a character writing from beyond the grave. It is hard to draw boundaries, hard to point that it would seem like the 'real' author Machado de Assis calls him, seems to be playing with these ideas quite wilfully. Dixon sets out the paradox: "by maintaining the line of plausible productivity, and yet looping between two distinct dimensions, the text seems to resemble Escher's impossible staircase [...] which turning back upon itself, both maintains and defies the norms of realistic representation." (Dixon 46). To draw on the ideas of Wayne C. Booth (1961), there is a difference between the 'implied author' here (who also happens to be the narrator), and the 'real author'.

Dixon takes to task readers who seem not to realise the pitfalls of assuming authorial intention on any level; as well as those who do not take care to disambiguate this implied author from the real author. He nevertheless concedes that indeed Machado de Assis is actively playing games with these concepts, drawing attention to a prologue of a later edition of the novel in which he responds to a question from a reader by quoting Braz Cubas, thus deferring authority. Dixon observes: "we have a situation where the author invents a dead man who writes, and who, by so doing 'kills' or removes from play the very author who invented him". An interesting and pertinent observation indeed, and so is Dixon's conclusion that this is all a ploy for the readers, in their confusion, to 'seek coherence in the [real] author, an 'authority at a higher level – the death of the author leads to the author's immortality' (55).'

I am inclined to agree, but it is possible to go further. Monteiro (2022) identifies that Machado de Assis was influenced by Charles Lamb, so much so that he included his name in the list of writers that Braz Cubas draws his 'free form' from, along with Sterne and de Maistre. However, he was later to take this name out. Why so?

The suggestion seems to be that Machado de Assis derived his most notable innovation—that of the dead author, who is deceptive, ironic and autobiographical, and writes in a style influenced by

periodicals. Perhaps this was not a case of plagiarism as such; it is impossible to have the final say. But it does suggest that Machado de Assis was acutely aware of what he was doing in playing these authorial games, and indeed Monteiro's argument is corroborated by Susan Sontag's observation that 'the reader is invited to play the game of considering that the book in hand is an unprecedented feat' (31).

Much of Machado de Assis' technique is determined by the desire to involve the reader in his narrative game, including techniques derived from sources he does name, such as Sterne. Here is John Gross writing on Joyce, that other great disciple of Sterne, drawing attention to the idea that the 'jokes, interruptions, false clues, marginal erudition, Rabelasian catalogues, tricks after the fashion of *Tristram Shandy*' are employed with an intention to highlight the 'artificial nature of the fictional medium itself' (62). These gimmicks are decided meta-fictional; what he says is also true of Machado de Assis, and is the main distinction between him and Braz Cubas, whose use of digression as an 'implied author' is a means for him to explore his pessimistic philosophy, which I will elaborate in due time. Of course, what is true for Braz Cubas as far as writing techniques, is also largely true in a way for Machado de Assis; through the author defunct he does these two things simultaneously. It is for this profoundly meta-fictional, self-aware ethos that he has been described as a 'proto-post modernist' (Fitz 45).

2.

Let me now turn to another proto-post modernist fiction. The curious tale of *Mattia Pascal*, narrated digressively, and which ends with the character contemplating his own gravestone, is the story of a man burdened by inheritance, a disastrous marriage, and private grief, flees abroad and wins a small fortune at the gaming tables. On returning home he discovers he has been mistakenly declared dead. Seizing the opportunity, he assumes a new identity, Adriano Meis, and fashions a second life in Rome. Yet freedom without legal or social recognition proves hollow: threatened, robbed, and unable to defend his honour without exposing himself, he stages a second death and reclaims his original name. Returning home offers no restoration; his social roles have been filled in his demise. He remains, absurdly, a living man who must consent to being socially dead.

Starkie (102) draws attention to how Pirandello 'cultivates a jerky, disconnected style that lacks beauty as our fathers understood it'. It is possible to see, with much squinting, what Starkie means when he argues that "the dialogue in *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* does not read like the dialogue of a novel: it has none of that sensitive rhythm that we hear in Proust" (102). While it is necessary once again to

hedge (what exactly does this ideal ‘dialogue of a novel’ sound like; is Proust really the paradigm?”), we can at least see feel the jerky, staccato quality in this passage where Pascal-Meis’ rival Papiano tries to exculpate himself after he is discovered with Pascal-Meis’ stolen money:

He broke off, as if he felt his breath fail him; he wanted to turn towards me, but lacked the nerve to look me in the eye.

“I...I couldn’t, believe me, I couldn’t even say no...when they came after me here...I fell on my brother...in his foolishness...his illness...irresponsible, I thought...who knows? It was possible that...I dragged him here...A brutal scene! I had to strip him...search him...everywhere...his clothes, even his shoes...And he!...ah!”

At this point, his throat was choked with tears; his eyes filled and as if stifled by his anguish, he added: “So they saw that... But now that you... After this, I’m leaving!”(195)

Jerky indeed, but while not the ‘sensitive rhythm’ of Proust, there is a sensitivity of a different kind. That is to say; a dramatic sensitivity to the rhythms of natural speech, incoherent and elliptical as it often is and to psychological states—in this case, the agitation is convincingly rendered, the grasping for words recognisable and realistic. The dialogue is not thrown in just for the sake of dialogue—the speech could easily be described instead—but rather to contribute to the dramatic rendering. This is unsurprising, surely, in a novel by a writer who is better known for being a master dramatist. In fact, an awareness of dramatic convention pervades and informs the entirety of the narrative.

For instance, in the episode where Mattia Pascal’s aunt engages in a domestic squabble with his reviled mother-in-law, the mother-in-law, the widow Pescatore, ends up covered in dough; a farcical culmination that results in Mattia Pascal’s laughter. Pascal begins the account saying: ‘this scene deserves to be narrated in full’ (37). He is aware of the dramatic and potentially entertaining values, and of the fact that it is a ‘scene’. Later on, after the incident, which is pivotal for the story in a manner I will discuss later, he drives home the point: “At that moment I saw myself as an actor in a tragedy that could hardly have looked more comical” (38).

As Hughes (37) observes somewhat fulsomely, “it is a scene worthy of Moliere”. That said, *The Late Mattia Pascal* is not a play afterall; it is indeed a work of prose fiction, and somewhat more nuanced than Starkie suggests. Bassanese places Pirandello’s early fiction firmly within the verismo tradition, coming through Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga. Pirandello, Bassanese suggests, derives

the naturalism in his writing from his engagement with this movement, which valorised empirical observation and description, as well as a suppression of the authorial voice and viewpoint (22–23). Verismo demanded “objective presentations of events” and an impersonal, photographic narrator; Pirandello later outgrew these limits, seeking greater psychological depth. Even his use of dialect exceeded mere realism, serving “comic, ironic, and mimetic functions” (Bassanese 25).

Interesting still to consider is Pirandello’s variation of tone throughout the novel. Bassanese points out that while the opening section is a blend of ‘idyllic, grotesque, and comic registers’, the gambling scenes are redolent of the style of Dostoevsky, while the resolution of the novel takes on a more sombre, resigned note. This, Bassanese argues, is a reflection of the fragmented psychology of Mattia Pascal, one of the novel’s major themes, of course.

Notwithstanding, for Starkie’s relative lack of nuance, he does hit upon a crucial aspect of Pirandello in his relationship to Laurence Sterne (and actually makes several insightful critical insights, similar to what Bassanese says about the deliberateness of Pirandello’s style, which may very well also apply to Machado de Assis):

Sterne has often been taken to task by professional critics for loose syntax, slang and slovenly style. His style, however did not drift into dashes and stars out of mere trickery to puzzle his readers: they stood for real pauses and suppressions in a narrative which aimed at reproducing the illusion of his natural speech, with all its easy flow, warmth and colour [...] In Pirandello, we see a return to the Sterne method of novel construction. A sudden remark, sudden epigram, leads the author off in a long digression involving metaphysical issues [...] Compared with Sterne’s humour...Pirandello seems arid in the novels. He leads us on, nevertheless, fascinated after him, and his path is always an ascent to some bare mountain-top whence we may look down on the dwellers in the plain. (111–12)

Some elements mentioned here are true. Pirandello is less jocular than Sterne or even Machado de Assis (though he is certainly not ‘arid’). And it is indeed true that pauses and digressions on philosophy abound in the novel, and that while they seem the products of distraction, they are somehow relevant to the fabric of the narrative. (One wonders, though, what to make of Starkie’s sensibility with what he calls a ‘jerky, disconnected style’ in one place and characterises as possessing an ‘easy flow, warmth and colour’ elsewhere). Whatever the case, this comparison with Sterne is fruitful because it allows for a segue into the next portion of the discussion; having satisfied the

importance of style, we may turn back to content and try to identify the rationale behind the telling of this story and telling it in this digressive way.

Pirandello famously mentions Sterne in his essay *On Humour (L'umorismo)*, which was published in 1908, four years after *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* was published. Sterne's name appears several times in the essay, but perhaps most indicatively here:

Reflection, engaging in its special activity, comes to disturb and to interrupt the spontaneous movement that organizes ideas and images into a harmonious form. It has often been observed that humoristic works are disorganized, disconnected, interrupted by constant directions [...] It is enough to mention Sterne's Tristram Shandy, which from beginning to end is a tangle of divergencies and digression, in spite of the autobiographer's intention to narrate everything ab ovo, point by point, beginning with his mother's womb and with the clock that Mr. Shandy, Senior, was in the habit of winding punctually. (119)

The essay is divided into two parts, as he undergoes a historical, culturally comparative survey of the pesky concept of humour and then proceeds to set out his own modern conception of it. As Pirandello (Pirandello ix) argue, it is 'not an essay in the strict sense, the work is rather a lively mosaic of argumentation and polemics, critical insights, penetration analysis and finally a profound poetic exposition of life, all of which clearly establish an organic relationship between the essay itself and the rest of Pirandello's works.' It is thorough-going, and for all its insights, weighed down by exhaustive argumentation almost to be point of being ironically boring; it is above all interesting for its revelations of Pirandello's preoccupations, and for what they reveal about his world-view as expressed in his creative work. (Indeed Hughes (175) suggests that 'Pirandello is too much an artist to define his humor adequately anywhere except in his stories and plays', and one is inclined to agree with this assessment.)

In any case, we may examine the concepts that Pirandello sets out in his personal theory of humour. There is first the *avvertimento del contrario* (perception of the opposite); simply defined as the base comic effect that arises from the discordance of things not being as they ought to or usually are. What comes after this perception of discordance, is the *sentimento del contrario* (feeling of the opposite); the feeling of sympathy that arises in the moment of reflection which results in true *umorismo*. Reflection is the transformative tool, that which Pirandello identifies in Sterne in the passage I quoted above. Sterne's digressive style, what becomes Pirandello's 'jerky, disconnected style' is the key what allows Pirandello express humourism in his novel. And it is not surprising that Starkie

would find Pirandello relatively 'arid'; laughter as such is not the goal; it is clear that Pirandello sees the tragic and the comic as twinned elements, and with every joke there is a sobering catch. The tragic and the comic coexist within the humorist; the humorist is a man who is capable of living within this contradictory duality. Pirandello's novel is thus legible as a sustained exercise of profound, wilful pessimism.

The coherence of Pirandello's worldview and his actualization of it through his writing is readily visible in *Mattia Pascal*. In a sense, the novel is an illustration of the theory set out in the essay; or vice versa, the essay is codification of the themes explored in the novel. Either way, Pirandello provides readers with an accessible rubric on how to read the novel.

It is possible to read the novel as charting the development of Mattia Pascal/Adriano Meis as humorist. At the end of the novel, outside life as he is, Mattia Pascal is able to observe from a point of distance the absurdity of life as well as the oppressive structures of family and society. As he says himself: 'I am now in such an unusual condition that I can consider myself already outside of life and therefore without any obligations or scruples of any kind' (4).

But indeed, while his 'death' denotes the acme of his humorism, the development can be tracked throughout his story. He describes himself early on before marriage as 'impetuous, I made light of everything' (Pirandello 26). This is at least before the miseries of his married life. But even after then he is able to find cause to laugh. In the aforementioned episode where the widow Pescatore ends up covered with dough, a truly farcical set piece, even as she attacks him, he laughs 'in a kind of convulsive hilarity'. A few sentences later, he says that 'from that day on, I have made a habit of laughing at all my misfortunes and torments' (38).

Mattia Pascal is the ideal candidate for exploring humorism because he deals with the vicissitudes of life in an instinctively humourist manner. Of course, it is not quite true that he 'makes a habit of laughing at all [his] misfortunes and torments', we see him in emotional crises and fits of depression and angst in various contexts after this statement. But it is his latent humourism which allows him to weather such absurdities as he does.

Pirandello, like Machado de Assis, is highly conscious of the meta-literary elements of his novel, and seems to signpost authorship as an inherently humoristic endeavour. This is of course most obvious with the narrator-author, as well as in the relationship of the narration to dramatic tropes and considerations which I highlighted previously. But even more than this, within the narrative, the character Mattia Pascal performs authorial acts.

For instance, the mere creation of the character of Adriano Meis, from the careful construction of his appearance to his fictional identity, to the construction of his biography; these are the domain of the imaginative writer. It might well be Pirandello speaking when Mattia Pascal says:

his pursuit, this imaginative construction of a life that had never really been lived but had been pieced together gradually from other lives and from places until it was made mine and felt mine—all this process brought me a new, strange joy {...} Witnessing the lives of others, observing them minutely, I saw their infinite ties, and at the same time, I saw all my own snapped threads. (88)

This is an accurate description of the process of writing fictional characters. Mattia Pascal goes on to describe how he follows people around in order to pick attributes to create composites of Adriano Meis's young self as well as his imagined grandfather, reminiscent of apocryphal tales of Balzac walking behind people to copy their gaits; and not surprising for Pirandello as a writer who came through the verismo tradition. All of this is more pertinent when we realise that Pirandello derived the absurd premise for this novel, the misidentified drowning and resulting bigamy, from a story in a newspaper. Indeed, humourism is applicable to life. As much as Machado de Assis is not Braz Cubas, Pirandello is not Mattia Pascal. Yet there is an obvious identification; to reiterate, like Machado de Assis, Pirandello seems to be playing consciously with meta-narrative tropes. I would suggest that this serves to emphasize the humorist overtones of the novel.

3.

Conceptually, this application of humourism to a reading of *Mattia Pascal* is strikingly similar to what Jose Maia Neto describes in his fascinating monograph *Machado de Assis: The Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. Maia Neto outlines in his introduction the philosophy of Pyrrhonism; that is, the skeptical tradition dating from Pyrrho of Elis (365-275 BC). Maia Neto identifies Pyrrhonism as 'an ability or mental attitude which opposes appearances to judgments', the effect being that 'we are brought firstly to a state of "unpertubness" or quietude' (Maia Neto 1).

In other words, the skeptical attitude which refuses to take things merely as they seem to be, but yet refuses to settle on an alternative view is a producer of a kind of ataraxia in the individual possessed of such a sensibility. Maia Neto proceeds to set out his process. 'The Pyrrhonian-to-be begins like any "man of talent" disturbed by conflicting appearances'. The example of conflicting appearances which he gives is the taste of honey, which may taste sweet at one time and sour at

another juncture. This discordance instils a desire in the curious person, this ‘man of talent’ to determine the ‘true nature of honey’. There is a difference between the Pyrrhonian and those who would become ‘dogmatic philosophers’. Both start off with a perception of discordance, and are inspired to resolve this. However, while the dogmatic philosopher rushes to judgement, and presumes to set forth a theory of what he believes in the true nature of honey, the Pyrrhonian rests assured, realizing that there is no unequivocal ‘true nature’ of things that cannot be further debated. Thus ‘unable to choose one doctrine or its contrary, he suspends judgement (epoche) and unexpectedly attains the tranquility (ataraxia) he initially hoped to achieve by finding the truth’ (Maia Neto 2).

Maia Neto argues that this strain of skepticism figures strongly in the work of Machado de Assis and suggests it to have come down through ‘Montaigne—and above all, Pascal’, though who compensated for the novelist’s lack of access to the ancient source material (5). The Pascal here of course is the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who appears to believe that a Christian leap of faith, a divine wager, is the ultimate solution to the dilemma of either being a ‘frustrated dogmatic’ or a frustrated skeptic’ (7), Machado de Assis develops his view away from Pascal through his defunct authors: “By refusing Pascal’s leap of faith and by pursuing ataraxia in authorship, and in an aesthetic-cognitive stance in life, Machado “dechristianizes” the skepticism that Pascal had Christianized” (7). Thus he, through Blaise Pascal, comes to a re-distilled version of ancient Pyrrhonism, showing characters who dwell in the tragicomedy of a skeptic who is removed from life.

How does he do this? It is necessary to elucidate some critical terminology that Maia Neto employs. He sets them out:

1. Vida exterior (“outward life”): Social life as viewed by Blaise Pascal, locus of divertissement and precarious beliefs, of duality, strategy, and hypocrisy
2. Paz domestica (“domestic peace”): the environment associated with marriage, set apart from the outward life, locus of truth, transparency, and morality;
3. Homem de espirito (“spiritual man”): ethical character, indifferent and/or hostile to the outward life; and
4. Tolo (“vulgar man”): immoral character, well adjusted to the outward life. (9)

The implication is the *homem de espirito*, when faced with an untenable *domestica* and social situation, solves the anxiety brought upon himself by his skepticism not by taking the Pascalian leap of faith or building a hermetic theory of life. Rather he seeks resolution in his decision to “assume the stance of a spectator and become an author of memoirs.”

Is this not a concise description of the figure of Mattia Pascal? Mattia Pascal's *vida exterior* and *paz domestica* are singularly, irrevocably destabilized by his outrageous fortune; he does not become a *tolo*, 'well adjusted to the outward life', however. He is in fact a misfit through and through, right from the start, unable to fit in with his social situation at any point. When he does try duplicity in his transformation into Adriano Meis, he is tortured by moral and existential anxieties. It takes two deaths but at the very last, accepting his fate, he resolves to write his memoirs and thus take the opportunity to reflect on his life and take control of his fate for once; notwithstanding the fact that with him being 'dead', his reflections will have no bearing on his life; there is no resolution really to be had.

The ease of the application of this theory is not surprising if we pay attention to Mattia Pascal's name. Indeed, the allusion to Blaise Pascal in the naming of the character seems to have been deliberate as critics like Farafonova, who explores Pirandello as a reader of Blaise Pascal, have suggested. Blaise Pascal is mentioned just once in *On Humour*, but it is a crucial cameo. Pirandello draws attention to Pascal's observation that 'there is no man who differs from another man more than he differs, with he passing of time, from himself' (Pirandello 136).

This points us directly to several of themes explored in *Mattia Pascal*: the fragmentation of the self, the multiplicity of psychological states; what reflection upon this breeds, the constant fixation eyes on the mortal clock. Existential anxiety stems from man's realization that he can never really know himself; he can never glimpse his own true nature. Farafonova elaborates, quoting from Pascal's *Pensées*

questa ignoranza "ambigua", perché consapevole di se stessa, consiste il tormento dell'uomo, mai appagato nella sua ricerca della verità: «Notre raison est toujours deçue par l'inconstance des apparences, rien ne peut fixer le fini entre les deux infinis, qui l'enferment e le fuient». (136)

A decidedly Pyrrhonian, a decidedly humorist perspective. It is possible to go on, but this essay is not necessarily concerned with an explication of Pirandello's thought through Blaise Pascal's. I merely wish to establish and emphasize this genealogy which may serve to illuminate the uncanny philosophical similarities between Pirandello and Machado de Assis and thus to engender further direct comparison between their novels.

Let us examine Pyrrhonism in *Braz Cubas*. As I have said, *Braz Cubas* is of this vein of spectator-authors who reflects on life through his memoirs. From his position, as we can tell from his

‘peevish pessimism’ and his commitment to write with ‘Mirth and Melancholy’, he is acutely aware of the tragicomedy of life and content to revel in it. More than this, he is really and truly dead, unlike Mattia Pascal—there is not even the chance that his reflections will have any bearing on his life; Braz Cubas the author is completely separated from Braz Cubas the man. He is thus in prime position to be described as *homem de espirito*. Maia Neto underscores this: ‘at this point, where Machado’s pessimism is at its highest, the *homem de espirito* has no place in real life’ (Maia Neto 79). Although a writer before his demise, his only ‘meaningful authorship is that of the autobiography itself, an authorship that is only born with his death’ (Maia Neto 82).

His view on life, away from the disturbances of life, allows him to reflect in a more or less objective way, and allows him to select the events he portrays for his narrative by a philosophical criteria (again there is this conscious marriage of form with content). His narrative of his life is a conscious sketching of his growth from relative ignorance to his posthumous pessimism through his catalogue of failures. His failures come as a result of his inability to achieve his ideals—the things he dogmatically believes make life worth living, from his failed political career to his various failed romances. Ultimately, his skeptical outlook grows the more he is disappointed and disillusioned with the realities of life.

Two passages are relevant to an understanding of this budding Pyrrhonism as related to Braz Cubas’ death. To begin with, the matter of the ‘fixed idea’. Braz Cubas dies from pneumonia, but he suggests that he dies instead from an idea that takes hold in his mind:

This idea was nothing less than the invention of a great cure, an anti-melancholy plaster, designed to relieve the despondency of mankind. In the application for registration that I then prepared, I called the attention of the government to this truly Christian purpose of the plaster. (21)

This is markedly antithetical to the Pyrrhonian ideal. Rather than resolve himself to the misery of the world, Braz Cubas seeks to relieve mankind in a way that will make him rich and famous as well. It is of course a silly idea, but it reveals that Braz Cubas is not fully mature yet. The concept of a ‘fixed’ idea as well drives the point home; it is a mark of anti-pyrrhonian dogmatism. Reflecting on this, the narrator offers a potted history of great men who have died from fixed ideas, and signposts his distance from this previous frame of mind:

However, I must advise him that this book is written leisurely, with the leisureliness of a man no longer troubled by the flight of time; that it is a work supinely

philosophical, but of a philosophy wanting in uniformity, now austere, now playful, a thing that neither edifies nor destroys, neither inflames nor chills, and that is at once more than pastime and less than preachment. (24)

His leisurely style, as I have suggested so many times already, is emblematic of his acceptance of the ironies of life, one who is no longer bothered enough to offer solutions. This is Braz Cubas 'now', after his death. But at what point does this full transition come? As we discover soon after this passage, it may be argued to happen just before his death, in the infamous Delirium episode, which is as close as Machado de Assis comes to magical realism. In a fugue brought on by his illness, Braz Cubas dreams up a vision which is not relevant to the plot of the book as such. Indeed he invites the reader to skip the chapter, which incidentally is one of the longer ones in this book full of brief chapters. It is interesting in its entirety, as Braz Cubas imagines himself metamorphosing into various things; eventually in human form who mounts a hippopotamus who takes him backwards through time to meet the personification of Nature, who reminds him of his pending mortality and shows him a condensation of time and the universe, with all the suffering contained. Afraid, at first, then simply bewildered, he bursts out laughing, rather humouristically. And then:

And I fixed my eyes on the ages that were coming and passing on; now I was calm and resolute, maybe even happy. Each age brought its share of light and shade, of apathy and struggle, of truth and error, and its parade of systems, of new ideas, of new illusions; in each of them the verdure of spring burst forth, grew yellow with age, and then, young once more, burst forth again. (33)

This quite ecclesiastical passage underscores a profound epiphany. Able to glimpse the passing of time, the ups and downs, the antipodal vicissitudes of life throughout history from a Tiresias-like vantage point, he realises the futility in struggling against life and death, and grasping for meanings. He says 'after a time the last century of all will come, and then I shall understand'. For now, understanding is beyond his grasp. The recognition of this breeds ataraxia: 'now I was calm and resolute, maybe even happy'.

Reading this, it is possible to note, one also feels a certain sense of calm. There is a consolation in being reminded, after all that life is vanity and that all our worries are infinitesimal in the grand scheme of things. In sharing his glimpse of peace, is the posthumous Braz Cubas doing what he failed to do with his ill-fated plaster? Does he perhaps offer a similar service as Mattia Pascal does in converting the reader to humourism? I will return to the importance of this question.

In any case, it is now possible to essay more direct comparisons between the two novels. From the above analyses, we are presented with two philosophically informed novels which foreground narrative style as insubtractable from the philosophical matter of the books. It is clear that the styles the authors adopt drive the plot and the ideas; the ideas in the novel suggest the style.

I have come this far without making much reference to Braz Cubas' social context. The possibility of this comes for two reasons. The first is that he is dead and thus evocatively removed from the *vida exterior* in a way that Mattia Pascal is not, being still alive in a literal sense. The second reason, a development of the first, but perhaps even more important, is that Braz Cubas' life as such is not remarkable. He dies, afterall, a small winner. It would have been more interesting if he were a big loser—there would be more tragedy to narrate. Indeed, the only thing that makes him interesting, as he seems to be aware of, is that he is in the unique position of a man writing from beyond the grave. Mattia Pascal, on the other hand, has an obviously more interesting run of things. His life is already remarkable, however painfully, before he accepts his metaphorical death.

These distinctions may be illuminating. For one thing, it confirms Pirandello's insistence on some level of naturalism; even with absurdities there is nothing in the novel that is completely unexplainable. His focus is on the fate of the individual in an absurd society. His theory of humorism, although published after the novel, suggests an author on a mission to dramatize his fixed ideas; even the authorial games he places he plays serve further to elucidate his philosophical ideas and establish writing as a humourist act. Meanwhile, Machado de Assis seems more interested in playing games for their own sake. His plot is more wildly digressive and asynchronous. It flits more between levels of reality, teases the reader more.

Whatever the case, this sensibility of relative levity does reveal something crucial about Humourism and Pyrrhonism. The former requires a certain level of dogmatism and empathy; the later rewards egotism and ludic indifference and detachment (however feigned). It would be oxymoronic to adhere to pyrrhonism dogmatically; one can only exhibit; it is a matter of attitude. On the other hand, humourism calls for conscious adoption. Thus, while Mattia Pascal can be described as a pyrrhonian by the end of the novel, Pirandello cannot in the full sense of the word; he is too interested in building a grand narrative. On the other hand, Machado de Assis may be described as both a pyrrhonian and humourist; and so can Braz Cubas.

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