

# Brás Cubas's Playful Nihilism: Machado de Assis Laughs at the Voluptuousness of Nothingness

---

## *O niilismo galhofeiro de Brás Cubas: Machado de Assis ri da voluptuosidade do nada*

Vitor Cei\*

Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo - Ufes

313

---

**ABSTRACT:** It has become commonplace to portray Machado de Assis as a preeminent pessimist or nihilist. This reading, however, is highly questionable, since he used to use humor as one of the main principles of literary composition in his works. In fact, writing with a playful pen, he used to ironize the pessimism and nihilism of his time. This paper is an attempt to explicit the concept of playful nihilism as it appears in the novel *The posthumous memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881). This paper focuses on the following issues: Brás Cubas narrative, with a playful pen, combines philosophy and literature in such a way that philosophical content and literary form become inseparable; Machado also laughs at the death of God, as a confrontation of metaphysical seriousness. A comparison is made between Nietzschean nihilism and Machadean playful nihilism.

**KEYWORDS:** Machado de Assis - *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Machado de Assis - Nihilism. Machado de Assis - Playfulness at Death of God.

**RESUMO:** Tornou-se um lugar comum caracterizar Machado de Assis como um proeminente pessimista ou niilista. Essa interpretação, no entanto, é altamente questionável, pois ele usou o humor como um dos princípios de composição literária em suas obras. Escrevendo com a pena da galhofa, ele ironizou o pessimismo e o niilismo de seu tempo. Este artigo é uma tentativa de explicitar o conceito de niilismo galhofeiro, tal como aparece no romance *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881). Enfatizamos os seguintes tópicos: a narrativa de Brás Cubas, com a pena da galhofa, combina filosofia e literatura de modo que o conteúdo filosófico e a forma literária se tornam inseparáveis; Machado ri da morte de Deus, confrontando a seriedade metafísica. Comparamos o niilismo nietzschiano e o niilismo galhofeiro machadiano.

---

\* Doutor em Estudos Literários pela Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG).

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Machado de Assis - *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*. Machado de Assis - Nilismo. Machado de Assis - Galhofa da morte de Deus.

## Introduction

*The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, published by Machado de Assis in 1881, is a novel where the supernatural realm blends with the natural world, before the concept of magical realism exists. The fictional autobiography, written from beyond the grave, is in a borderline position between fiction and philosophy - philosophical thought in an extremely uncommon literary form.

It is reasonably common knowledge that Machado de Assis was a key contributor to Brazilian philosophical thought. Some scholars, such as José Raimundo Maia Neto (1994) and Alex Lara Martins (2017), considered the nineteenth-century Brazilian writer a kind of philosopher and his work a great example of philosophical questions embodied in fictional style. Although Machado is not a philosopher in a strict sense, he is an ironist, and the analysis of his rhetorical procedures, especially humor and irony, offers us clues about the philosophical thinking underlying his fiction. Thus, the reflection on the methods and instruments of composition indicates what could be called the playful philosophy of Machado de Assis. Contrarily, scholars like Afrânio Coutinho are convinced that there are no Brazilian philosophers or a Brazilian philosophy: “We have not even a philosophical mind [...] As regards philosophical independence, we never have had any” (COUTINHO, 1943, p. 186).

Over the past decades, the Brazilian scholars have been discussing the problem of a national philosophy, taking into account the need to establish our own philosophical style, which could allow us to speak about a Brazilian philosophy, just as we speak about an Italian philosophy, a German, English or French philosophy. The great majority of the Brazilian scholars involved in the discussion, generally deny the existence of a Brazilian philosophy. However, according to Paulo Margutti (2013), author of a book on the history of the

philosophical thought in the first centuries of Colonial Brazil, the discussion is usually conducted in a dogmatic way. Most of the scholars did not study the Brazilian Philosophy in order to reach their conclusions.

According to Margutti (2014), we must recognize that philosophical activity is not reduced to a single standard and can be expressed in a variety of ways. That is why Brazilian philosophy must be sought in our own cultural history, with all its specificities and peculiarities, without being evaluated based on Western European criteria.

Margutti (2007) argues that some important Brazilian contributions to philosophy may be found in the literary fiction of authors like Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, Clarice Lispector and Carlos Drummond de Andrade. In opposition scholars such as Antonio Candido (2006) and Paulo Arantes (1994) affirm that philosophy has always occupied a subordinate place in the overall evolution of the Brazilian cultural history. According to Candido and Arantes, literature is the central phenomenon of the intellectual life in Brazil.

It is not my purpose here to follow the “mongrel complex” of the alienated intelligentsia and bemoan our alleged underdevelopment as the antithesis of a superior occidental culture. Instead of demonizing the incongruities our post-colonial situation and subaltern experience, I would like to assess the tension between the hegemonic European philosophy and Brazilian non-hegemonic culture in order to transform the peripheral condition into a potentially productive factor, as Machado de Assis did.

When a “bunch of new ideas” (ROMERO, 1910, p. 359) arrived in Brazil in the 1870s - Materialism, Positivism, Evolutionism, Darwinism and nihilism - Machado de Assis became a master in ironizing the ideological comedy of the “misplaced ideas” (SCHWARZ, 1980), mocking the persistent gap between European intellectual repertoire and the reality of Brazil. The writer provided readers

with an astute perspective about this, assuming such indigence to make fun of it, as we read in “How to be a bigwig” [“Teoria do Medalhão”], a satirical dialogue between a father and a son:

“And no Philosophy?”  
“Let’s be quite clear: a smattering perhaps when writing or speaking, but in reality, none. ‘Philosophy of History’, for example, is a phrase you should frequently employ, but I forbid you to arrive at any conclusions that have not already been reached by others. Avoid anything that has about it so much as whiff of reflection, originality or the like” (ASSIS, 2018, p. 365).

While the latter part of the nineteenth century is generally characterised by philosophical pessimism and nihilism, Machado was a master of philosophical playfulness, deconstructing the philosophical tradition seriousness. Accordingly, in the present text, I shall try to show that nihilism is a leitmotif of Machado’s novel, presented in a playful perspective. The fundamental claims are: Brás Cubas narrative, with a playful pen, combines philosophy and literature in such a way that philosophical content and literary form become inseparable; Machado de Assis had an acute awareness of the complex and multifaceted nature of the presence of nihilism in his time; he also laugh at the death of God, as a confrontation of metaphysical seriousness. This paper also seeks to problematize well-established assumptions that Machado was a pessimist.

To be convinced by my claims, the first thing a reader needs to know is that my own previous research (CEI, 2016, which Martins cites in his study) indicates that Machado’s laughter prevents philosophy from taking itself too seriously by persistently destabilizing any claims to a totalitarian knowledge, undermining positive theological and metaphysical commitments.

In order to achieve my goals, I shall take the following steps. In the next section, I will explain the Nietzschean concept of Nihilism. In the later section, I shall examine the main characteristics of *The posthumous memoirs of Brás Cubas*

playful nihilism. Subsequently I shall expound the main features of the playfulness involved by Machado de Assis's view about the death of God.

### **Nietzsche and Machado on nihilism**

The concept of nihilism, which comes from the Latin nihil, “nothing”, has no univocal definition and receives different meanings, referring both to the view that considers traditional values to be unfounded, denying any meaning to human existence, as to the ideology of a Russian group of the second half of the nineteenth century, who preached the terrorist or revolutionary destruction of political and social institutions to pave the way for a new society.

The discussion of this problem, which has a strong influence on contemporary philosophical debate, goes back to the eighteenth-century philosophical debate, when it designates doctrines that deny or refuse to recognize metaphysical, moral, or political realities or values. Authors as Friedrich Lebrecht Goetzius, Anacharsis Cloots, Daniel Jenisch, and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi were involved in such polemics, that apparently did not influence the history of the concept and the problem (see CEI, 2016, p. 115-122).

In the nineteenth century, “nihilism” began to be a term of frequent circulation among European authors such as Ivan Turgenev, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolai Leskov, and Friedrich Nietzsche. The German philosopher and the Brazilian writer were contemporary authors and didn't know each other. Nevertheless, there is, as we will see, a strong similarity in what they wrote about nihilism. And I will try to show how these similarities hide a nuance of difference.

Nihilism and death of God seem to point directly at Nietzsche's work, because he was the first philosopher to think of nihilism as one of the central concepts of his work. The central motivation of his philosophical project is a response to

the crisis of nihilism in late modern European culture, a direct consequence of the death of God. This lack of normative guidance spawns the conviction that life is meaningless, or not worth living (REGINSTER, 2006, p. 07-09).

When the nothingness prevails, the emerging nihilism promotes and accelerates the process of destruction of existing values, generating uncertainty, resentment, regression, decline, disorientation and inability to move forward and create new values. In this bad air atmosphere:

Today we see nothing that wants to expand, we suspect that things will just continue to decline, getting thinner, better-natured, cleverer, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian - no doubt about it, man is getting 'better' all the time... Right here is where the destiny of Europe lies - in losing our fear of man we have also lost our love for him, our respect for him, our hope in him and even our will to be man. The sight of man now makes us tired - what is nihilism today if it is not *that?*... We are tired of *man* ... (NIETZSCHE, 2007, p. 25).

Nietzsche does not understand nihilism as an exclusive phenomenon of the nineteenth century, because all values that predominate in the West since at least the time of Socrates and Plato are nihilistic values. And not even as just a phenomenon of Western culture, because all values generated under the ascetic ideal - the single ideal that humanity has had so far - are nihilists.

The German author wrote about European nihilism, Buddhist nihilism and Russian nihilism. I ask if it is possible to think about a Brazilian nihilism. Whereas European nihilism tends toward the theoretical and philosophical, Buddhist nihilism to asceticism, and Russian nihilism is associated with anarchism and revolutionary political movements, what defines the Brazilian nihilism, if it exists? The Brazilian Nietzschean scholars have some publications about nihilism, but none about nihilism in Brazil or Brazilian nihilism (a bibliographic review is offered in CEI, 2016). Is it possible to talk about a Brazilian nihilism? Maybe we can find some provisory answer in Machado's work.

Nihilism, as the cultural dominant of modernity, is registered in the works of the greatest writers of the nineteenth century, among whom this paper emphasizes Machado de Assis, the Brazilian writer whose work registered the nihilism with greater consistency. I argue in favor of the thesis that Machado had an acute awareness of the complex nature of the nineteenth century nihilism, as we can attest in a chronicle of the series “The Week”, published in the newspaper *Gazeta de Noticias* on June 1892:

Nihilism has the advantage of killing faster. And it is mysterious, dramatic, epic, lyric, all forms of poetry. A man is dining quiet, between a lady and a joke, tells the joke to the lady, and when going to raise a toast... explodes a dynamite bomb. Goodbye, quiet man; goodbye, joke; goodbye, lady (ASSIS, 2008, p. 899).

Brazilian writers and journalists started to write about nihilism after the assassination of the Emperor of Russia in March 1881. Alexander II was killed in the streets of Saint Petersburg by a bomb thrown by a member of the revolutionary group “People’s Will”. After this fact the word nihilism was used as synonym of Terrorism and Anarchism. Nietzsche (2008, p. 205) called it “Petersburg-style nihilism (meaning *faith in unbelief* to the point of martyrdom)”. 

---

According to Bruno Gomide (2004, p. 54), five days after the assassination of Alexander II, a popular Brazilian newspaper of the time, *Jornal do Commercio*, published for ten days a series of reports about “Nihilism and Russia”. The journal was horrified with the fact that in the nineteenth century a Christian country had witnessed terrorist attacks of mysterious rebels. In contrast, Machado, as a journalist, was playful in his chronicles:

There is a batch of dynamite that seems to characterize the end of this century. This week came news of explosions from everywhere, and even here there was an attempt. [...] Put me into the grave, if I’m dead. No, the grave will be hot as thirty thousand devils. The cold earth that will eat my bones, as the proverb says, will not be so cold in these days that everything burns (ASSIS, 2008, p. 1048).

In another chronicle Machado wrote about a donkey that he found dying at Praça Quinze de Novembro, a square in the city center. I quote Machado's playful conclusion about the animal's death: "Without exaggerating the merits of the deceased, it must be said that if he didn't invent gunpowder, he also not invented the dynamite. That's something in the end of this century" (ASSIS, 2008, p. 1063). "Invent the gunpowder" is an idiomatic expression that means he didn't invent anything new or important. On the other hand, the donkey didn't invent the dynamite, weapon of the nihilists: "Dynamite doesn't build, only destroy. With the dynamite, anarchism dispenses all the arts, doing only violent and destructive action" (ASSIS, 2008, p. 1066).

Nihilism is ambiguous: "part destructive, part ironic" (NIETZSCHE, 2003, p. 148). Machado de Assis, accordingly, used playfulness as a strategic writing technique, for its vitality and corrosive power. The humorous effect often points to the failure of social norms, provoking reflection. Therefore, attentive to the rise of nihilism in nineteenth century, he approached the problem in a critical and comic tone, contrasting his approach with the philosophical tradition seriousness. "It is first of all a thought that laughs of philosophy, something rare among philosophers of vocation and profession", advise Benedito Nunes (1993, p. 132).

### **Brás Cubas's playful nihilism: laughing at the voluptuousness of nothingness**

In the last hundred years most of the scholars insisted in stating that Machado de Assis was a pessimist, sometimes a nihilist (a bibliographic review of the literature from 1897 to 2016 is offered in CEI, 2016, p. 27-41). To trick some critics, the narrator Brás Cubas himself - narrator and author must never be confused - acknowledges in the prologue "To the Reader" that he wrote his book with a playful pen and melancholy ink, and has "adopted the free-form of



a Sterne or a Xavier de Maistre”, but “may have put a few fretful touches of pessimism into it” (ASSIS, 1997, p. 05).

Maia Neto (1994) endorses that Brás Cubas adopts a pessimistic view of the human condition, contrary to the optimistic philosophies of the time. The narrator’s philosophical anthropology is inspired by Pascal, but devoid of the religious dimension that, in the work of the French author, restores the meaning of the human condition. Nevertheless, the fretful touches of pessimism cannot be overestimated, since there is a playful pen and a free form. A blend of laughter and seriousness defines the horizon of death and nothingness that drives *The posthumous memoirs of Brás Cubas*. “Certainly, he did not take his pessimism seriously”, advise Caldwell (1970, p. 112).

Brás Cubas’s memoirs are the first Brazilian novel in which nihilism assumes decisive philosophical and literary relevance in a playful perspective, including the diagnosis of the death of God. The discrediting of the cultural and ethical values of our culture (nihilism), appears as the very disturbing question that arises on the horizon of this novel, being experienced in the form of various playful metaphors: “fretful touches of pessimism” (prologue to the third edition), “drop of Cain’s drivel” (chapter VI), “the bread of pain and the wine of misery” (chapter VII), “the sensuality of boredom” (chapter XXV), hypochondria, “that yellow, solitary, morbid flower with an intoxicating and subtle odor” (chapter XXV). The subtitle of this section refers to the metaphor “voluptuousness of nothingness”, formulated by the character Pandora in “Delirium”, the seventh chapter of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*, to mock the vital and existential emptiness of the novel’s narrator.

Riding a hippopotamus, the delirious narrator travelled to the origin of the centuries, where he finds a huge shape, the figure of a woman, staring at him with eyes that blazed like the sun. Stupefied, after a time, which was brief, he asked who she was: Pandora.

Pandora, in Greek mythology, was the first woman. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, after Prometheus had stolen fire from the gods and bestowed it upon mortals, Zeus determined to counteract this blessing. He accordingly commissioned Hephaestus to fashion a woman out of earth, upon whom the gods bestowed their choicest gifts. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Pandora had a jar containing all manner of misery and evil. Zeus sent her to Epimetheus, who forgot the warning of his brother Prometheus and made Pandora his wife. She afterward opened the jar, from which the evils flew out over the earth and hope alone remained inside. Therefore, according to the misogynist version of the poet, Pandora was created as a curse to men.

According to Cubas's delirium, Pandora is the nature, mother and enemy, the personification of a negative and destructive force against which a man cannot fight. I quote a part of the delirious dialogue between Cubas and Pandora:

"Don't be frightened", she said, "my enmity doesn't kill, it's confirmed most of all by life. You're alive: that's the only torment I want". "I'm alive?" I asked, digging my nails into my hands as if to certify my existence. "Yes, worm, you're alive. Don't worry about losing those rags that are your pride, you're still going to taste the bread of pain and the wine of misery for a few hours. You're alive. Right now while you're going crazy, you're alive, and if your consciousness gets an instant of wisdom, you'll say you want to live".

"Did you understand me?" she asked me after some time of mutual contemplation. "No, I answered, "nor do I want to understand you. You're an absurdity, you're a fable. I'm dreaming most certainly or if it's true that I went mad, you're nothing but the conception of a lunatic. I mean a hollow thing that: absent reason can't control or touch. You Nature? The Nature I know is only mother and not enemy. She doesn't make life a torment, nor does she, like you, carry a face that's as indifferent as the tomb. And why Pandora?"

"Because I carry good and evil in my bag and the greatest thing of all, hope, the consolation of mankind. Are you trembling?"

"Yes, your gaze bewitches me".

"I should think so. I'm not only life, I'm also death, and you're about to give me back what I loaned you. You great lascivious man, the voluptuousness of nothingness awaits you.

When that word, “nothingness”, echoed like a thunderclap in that huge valley, it was like the last sound that would reach my ears. I seemed to feel my own sudden decomposition. Then I faced her with pleading eyes and asked for a few more years.

“You miserable little minute!” she exclaimed. “What do you want a few more instants of life for? To devour and be devoured afterward? Haven’t you had enough spectacle and struggle? You’ve had more than enough of what I presented you with that’s the least base or the least painful: the dawn of day, the melancholy of afternoon, the stillness of night, the aspects of the land, sleep, which when all’s said and done is the greatest benefit my hands can give. What more do you want, you sublime idiot?”

“Just to live, that’s all I ask of you. Who put this love of life in my heart if not you? And since I love life why must you hurt yourself by killing me?”

“Because I no longer need you. The minute that passes doesn’t matter to time, only the minute that’s coming. The minute that’s coming is strong, merry, it thinks it carries eternity in itself and it carries death, and it perishes just like the other one, but time carries on (ASSIS, 1997, p. 17-18).

Pandora is an ambiguous figure, because she carries good and evil in her bag. Mother and enemy, she personifies life and death; she has eyes that blazed like the sun in a face of glacial expression. She considers the human world a chaos and human existence a suffering, where she concludes that it would be best not to be. Indifferent to the deeds of men and unable to humanly conceive the human world, she will never understand men’s eagerness to live and overcome a fundamentally painful condition.

This conception of nature as mother and enemy and of life as a perpetual struggle devoid of any purpose has already been considered by many to be an Machadian version of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. It is in the delirium of death, when the individual Will annihilates itself in the universal Will, which reveals itself to Brás Cubas as the essence of the world, as pain. If every path in life soon or later leads to death, nothing would distinguish living from dying. We should accept and live in a world devoid of meaning or purpose. It’s what the dying Brás Cubas can’t tolerate.

Nevertheless, it is worth to say that Machado's tragicomedy does not comprehend life as understood by Schopenhauer. It strikes me that Brás Cubas narrative is usually considered a pessimistic work, given that it is a tragicomedy, with comic characters and actions. Although it has a few fretful touches of pessimism, it is just a few - his death and his life receive humorous treatments. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas* do not endorse the pessimism of *The World as Will and Representation*, but rather reinterprets with playfulness.

Brás Cubas's playful nihilism ends in chapter CLX, "On Negatives", where the dead narrator says his last words with the contemporary feeling that everything is meaningless. Yet playful, he lists the things he was not, boasting about he never needed to work and celebrating that he had no children, converting a total of deficits into a small balance:

This last chapter is all about negatives. I didn't attain the fame of the poultice, I wasn't a minister, I wasn't a caliph, I didn't get to know marriage. The truth is that alongside these lacks the good fortune of not having to earn my bread by the sweat of my brow did befall me. Furthermore, I didn't suffer the death of Dona Placida or the semidementia of Quincas Borba. Putting one and another thing together, any person will probably imagine that there was neither a lack nor a surfeit and, consequently, that I went off squared with life. And he imagines wrong. Because on arriving at this other side of the mystery I found myself with a small balance, which is the final negative in this chapter of negatives—I had no children, I haven't transmitted the legacy of our misery to any creature (ASSIS, 1997, p. 203).

If the narrator's speech is taken seriously, it can be considered a systematic denial of all the values that bind man to life in society - a will of nothingness. The pride of not having children, would put him in the same perspective as Pandora: it would be best not to be born. The fact that he did not earn his bread by the sweat of his brow is an obvious advantage in a slave society, but from the point of view of the bourgeois virtues (which values meritocracy), or even from the Christian perspective ("By the sweat of your face you shall eat

bread”, Genesis, 3:19), “it is yet another minus sign, another way of not being” (SCHWARZ, 2001, p. 136).

The chapter CLX mocks the narrator’s nihilistic perspective. To the nihilist Brás Cubas, if we all die, there is only the voluptuousness of nothingness. His playful pen corrodes all hope - heritage of Pandora, mother and enemy - by intensifying the ink traces of melancholy. Roberto Schwarz (2001, p. 138) acknowledges the difficulties of defining Brás Cubas’ uncommon nihilism and describes that it is a kind of *eclectic nihilism*: “And indeed, Brás leaves no stone unturned to decipher and reduce to nothingness the movements of volubility, which makes for a kind of *eclectic nihilism*, not without its element of comedy”.

Does anyone laugh with philosophy? Machado certainly does. Nietzsche also does. There is one feature of Nietzsche’s thinking about this matter which is of great importance for our considerations about nihilism. I quote a *Nachlass* from Fall 1885-1886 (2 [33], KSA. 12.79):

It seems we know ourselves to be too brittle, perhaps already broken and incurable; it seems we fear that hand of life, that has to shatter us, and we take refuge in its appearance, in its falseness, and its colorful trickery; it seems we are cheerful because we are terribly sad. We are serious, we know the abyss: *that’s why* we defend ourselves against all seriousness (NIETZSCHE, 1999a, p. 79).

By writing with a playful pen, Machado used humor as one of the main principles of literary composition in his works. He enriched this feature using it as a kind of centerpiece to criticize and deride the spirit of his time, demonstrating that the problem of nihilism maybe be responded to with an attitude of playfulness.

### Laughing at the death of God

“God is dead” is a well-known Nietzsche’s (2008, p. 120) sentence, yet he says little about it. In sum, he simply recognizes that the belief in God, and in a metaphysical world beyond this one, has been discredited, as the inevitable consequence of various intellectual and cultural modern developments he takes to be already widely acknowledged. Although the faith was not, strictly speaking, refuted, it become unworthy of belief (REGINSTER, 2006, p. 39-40).

Nietzsche was part creator, part beneficiary of a more generalized erosion of traditional Christian belief and dissatisfaction with the established Church which characterised European spiritual life from the nineteenth Century onward. But, of course, for many, this dissatisfaction stimulated renewed impetus, regenerating the religious impulse rather than obliterating it. The growing of a multitude of reformist tendencies, the creation of several alternative religious conceptions and occult societies took place within a wider setting (see ASCHHEIM, 1988).

It is noteworthy that most people are still believing in God’s shadow after His death. There is still a dependence on an entity that guarantees security and meaning for their existence: “God is dead, but given the way people are, there may still be caves for millennia in which his shadow is displayed. -- And we -- we must still defeat his shadow as well” (NIETZSCHE, 2008, p. 109).

When is a belief discredited? To answer this question, we must establish whether there is room for a stance between suspension of belief and disbelief. Disbelief results from the refutation of a belief, or the demonstration of its falsehood. A belief is suspended, by contrast, when neither its truth nor its falsehood has been established. A belief is discredited, it would then seem, when neither its truth nor its falsehood has been established, but also when the possibility of its truth can no longer be taken seriously.

Machado de Assis has never written the sentence “God is Dead”, however, in many texts the Brazilian writer evidently endorses the death of God. Machado’s own contribution, I suggest, begins with a crucial observation that I quote from a chronicle: “‘The Gods must go away’ is a wrong sentence in this year of 1883. No; the Gods are gone, they vanish without a trace” (ASSIS, 2008, p. 489-490). Nine years later he mentioned the death of God in another chronicle, with different word: “I fear that mankind, God’s widow, remember to enter a monastery; but I also fear the opposite. Depends on my humor” (ASSIS, 2008, p. 942).

Machado’s comedic novel provides new ways of accounting for the death of God. Since Brás Cubas refused to “recount the extraordinary process” through which he undertook the composition of his memoirs, put together in the “other world”, because it would have been “unnecessary for an understanding of the work” (ASSIS, 1997, p. 05), we can only suppose that he lives in a universe in which the highest divine values are devaluated, the supernatural realm disappear, the belief in the Christian God has been discredited and cannot be taken seriously anymore.

Discarding all theological and transcendent principle, the dead narrator stresses that sovereignty belongs essentially to the profane universe, and therefore the essence of life belongs not to heaven but to earth. The selfish and isolated individual would be at the origin of all that has value and therefore of all that would be worthy of respect.

Since God is dead, the initial strangeness of the dead narrator who writes his memoirs is accepted as plausible and certain within the narrative. Exemplary of this desecrating naturalization is the deadling humor of the selfish dedication:

To the Worm  
Who

Gnawed the Cold Flesh  
of My Corpse  
I Dedicate  
These Posthumous Memoirs  
As a Nostalgic Remembrance (ASSIS, 1997, p. 02).

The dedication parodies the traditional honors to esteemed people, friends, family, loves, patrons or protectors (kings, princes, religious authorities), rejecting social conventions. The dedication also indicates immodesty and contempt for humanity, as it suggests that no human being deserves the author's admiration or gratitude. So, instead of creating sympathetic bonds with the reader, it works like a "snap of the finger", revealing a sarcastic, selfish and obnoxious narrator.

Three years later, in a chronicle of December 12, 1884, the worms themselves narrate, implying a disqualification of mankind: "César or João Fernandes are the same dinner. [...] We have no enrolment or baptism sinks ... We do not distinguish names, faces or opinions [...] Down here, as no one opines, all are equally devoured, and the taste is the same" (ASSIS, 2008, p. 564).

328

---

In this sense the dedication to the worm forces a kind of complicity between narrator and reader, the dead and the living, because in the face of the voluptuousness of nothingness we are all equal - rich and poor, black and white, strong and weak, Brazilian and European, wise and ignorant, all succumb to death and are equally devoured by the worms. If everyone is going to die, only the voluptuousness of nothing remains.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that nihilism is a leitmotif of Machado's *The posthumous memoirs of Brás Cubas*, presented in a playful perspective. The fundamental claims were: Brás Cubas narrative, with a playful pen, combines



philosophy and literature in such a way that philosophical content and literary form become inseparable; Machado de Assis had an acute awareness of the complex and multifaceted nature of the presence of nihilism in his time.

In order to illustrate these claims, I made a comparison between Nietzschean nihilism and Machadean nihilism. This was justified by the fact that the Brazilian writer, as the German philosopher, understands that the event of nihilism affords us the opportunity of rethinking the aims and goals of our existence. Thus, for both authors the particular attitude we should achieve towards our life is the affirmation. To affirm life, we must create life-enhancing values. And the artistic domain allows the creation of the non-nihilistic values. As Nietzsche defines in the *Nachlass* from 1887/88 (11[415], KSA 13.193): “Art and nothing but art. It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life” (NIETZSCHE, 1999b, p. 194).

We can see Nietzsche and Machado returning again and again to the thought that art might be an antidote or a response to the threat of modern nihilism, because the artistic practice of creating values is a countermovement to the devaluation of values. Both authors acknowledge that art is the great stimulant of life, which opposes every kind of life-negating will: “Let’s Breathe, my friends; poetry is an eternally breathable air” (ASSIS, 2008, p. 979).

Machado de Assis never proposed any kind of overcoming of nihilism. Nevertheless, the Brazilian writer, likewise, more than once wrote that “Art is the medicine, and the best of them” (ASSIS, 2008, p. 1418). Art is the best medicine for nihilism, because “Where art begins, cease the fatigue of this world” (ASSIS, 2008, p. 1083).

In this paper, I also tried to show that Machado and Nietzsche say little about the death of God, nevertheless, both claim that the belief in God has been discredited and the possibility of its truth can no longer be taken seriously. And

the Brazilian writer laughs at the death of God, as a confrontation of metaphysical seriousness.

By writing with a playful pen, Machado de Assis used humor as one of the main principles of literary composition in his works. Therefore, he enriched this feature using it as a kind of centerpiece to criticize and deride the spirit of his time, demonstrating that the problem of nihilism may be responded to with an attitude of good humor and playfulness.

## References

ARANTES, Paulo Eduardo. *Um departamento francês de ultramar: estudos sobre a formação filosófica uspiana*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1994.

ASCHHEIM, Steven E. After the death of God: Varieties of Nietzschean religion. *Nietzsche-Studien*, v. 17, n. 1, p. 218-249, 1988.

ASSIS, Machado de. *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson. New York: Liveright, 2018.

ASSIS, Machado de. *Obra completa*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 2008. 4 v. v. 4.

ASSIS, Joaquim Maria Machado de. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa. Oxford: Oxford University, 1997.

CALDWELL, Helen. *Machado de Assis: the Brazilian Master and his Novels*. Berkeley: University of California, 1970.

CANDIDO, Antonio. *Literatura e sociedade*. Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2006.

CEI, Vitor. *A voluptuosidade do nada: niilismo e galhofa em Machado de Assis*. São Paulo: Annablume, 2016.

COUTINHO, Afrânio. Some Considerations on the Problem of Philosophy in Brazil. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, v. 4, n. 2, p. 186-193, Dec. 1943.

GOMIDE, Bruno Barretto. *Da estepe à caatinga: o romance russo no Brasil (1887-1936)*. 2004. Tese (Doutorado em Teoria e História Literária) - Programa de Pós-graduação em Teoria e História Literária, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, 2004.

MAIA NETO, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette: Purdue University, 1994.

MARGUTTI, Paulo R. A tarefa da Filosofia brasileira: entrevista a Vítor Cei. *Outramargem: Revista de Filosofia*, Belo Horizonte, n. 1, p. 05-14, 2. sem. 2014.

MARGUTTI, Paulo R. *História da Filosofia do Brasil: o período colonial (1500-1822)*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2013.

MARGUTTI, Paulo R. Richard Rorty and Machado de Assis: Two Different Ways of Coping with Ironism Cognition. *Revista de Filosofia*, v. 8, n. 1, p. 115-140, jan./jun. 2007

NIETZSCHE, Friedrich W. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff and edited by Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008.

NIETZSCHE, Friedrich W. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Carol Diethe and edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007.

NIETZSCHE, Friedrich W. *Writings from the Late Notebooks*. Translated by Kate Sturge and edited by Rüdiger Bittner. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003.

NIETZSCHE, Friedrich W. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*. Edited by Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: Gruyter, 1999a. v. 12.

NIETZSCHE, Friedrich W. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1887-1889. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*. Edited by Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: Gruyter, 1999b. v. 13.

NUNES, Benedito. *No tempo do niilismo e outros ensaios*. São Paulo: Ática, 1993.

REGINSTER, Bernard. *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2006.

ROMERO, Sylvio. *Provocações e debates*. Porto: Chardron, 1910.

SCHWARZ, Roberto. *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*. Translated by John Gledson. Durham: Duke University, 2001.

SCHWARZ, Roberto. Misplaced Ideas: Literature and Society in Late Nineteenth-Century Brazil. *Comparative Civilizations Review*, v. 5, n. 5, p. 1-19, 1980.

Recebido em: 31 de julho de 2019  
Aprovado em: 20 de dezembro de 2019