

The Skeptical Paradox in Machado de Assis

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Abstract. This article discusses the issue of skepticism in Machado de Assis' work. The difficulty of dealing with the skepticism of our "greatest author" persists as long as one assumes that Machado was great in spite of having been a skeptic. This is because it is not convincing to attribute Machado's skepticism to the fact that he never had children, nor that he was epileptic and mulatto: these explanations cheapen the author and his skepticism. Our hypothesis is, as Cândido Mota Filho said, that "the form of Machado's doubt, more often than not pointed and cruel, is an initial expression of his fight for acknowledgement." We assume that Machado is one of the most important Brazilian writers precisely because of a skepticism that does not imply disbelief but which does imply a suspension of common sense and therefore of reason, obliging the reader to also leave his interpretation unconcluded.

"If a thing can exist in opinion without existing in reality and exist in reality without existing in opinion, we can conclude that, of these two parallel existences, the only necessary one is that of opinion, not that of reality, which is merely convenient."

The speaker in the above quote is the narrator of the short story "O segredo do bonzo" (*Papéis* 125) and his words prepare the skeptical terrain for the characters of the best known Brazilian writer, Machado de Assis. According to the narrator, opinion, which we assume to be contingent, is necessary; reality, which we assume to be necessary, is merely convenient. Machado's skeptical and ironic perspective already seems clear.

The Marxist critic Astrojildo Pereira observes that Machadian skepticism is not subjective, but rather critically objective because it translates the doubt of the writer vis-à-vis the liberal and progressive discourse that surrounds him (Pereira 273). Thus, the myth of Machado's omission is broken, revealing how Machado's work attacks the main bourgeois institutions of his time. Machado achieves this without obeying realist conventions, instead structuring his work according to the ancient perspective of the tragedian, which affords him a glimpse of "the irreparable nature of things and the fragility of everything" (Barreto Filho 11).

For this reason, in the words of Dirce Côrtes Riedel, "Machado's work is a search for the meaning of a life without meaning: it is the expression of meta-physical anguish" (104). Nevertheless, it would be most accurate to define Machado as a modern tragedian because he does not follow the Aristotelian model: instead of privileging action and peripeteias, his narratives emphasize reflection and even reflection upon reflection itself. According to Cecília Loyola, literary critics have tended to minimize the importance of Machado's theatre because they have traditionally evaluated him by Aristotelian standards. The non-Aristotelian character of his theatre is what makes it original, insofar as the conventions of theatre are replaced by the theatre of conventions. Indeed, Machado's theatrical works foreshadow Brechtian distancing and display the theatrical condition of the social action (Loyola 60).

The presence of skepticism can be detected as early as Machado's first novel, *Ressurreição*, beginning with the ironic title: the resurrection of a love relationship, alluded to several times throughout the novel, never actually occurs. On the contrary, the protagonist, a doctor named Félix, is a skeptic in the derogative sense of the term—that is, in its usual sense—because he mistrusts his lover's character as a matter of principle. His name is also ironic: although he jealously guards his happiness like a miser, the more he tries to protect it, the more it slips away from him. The bitterness of the novel is apparent from the first paragraph, in which the narrator comments on the first day of the new year: "Everything seems better and more beautiful to us—fruit of our illusion—and our joy in celebrating the arrival of the new year makes us forget that it also takes us one step closer to death" (*Ressurreição* 55).

This bitter reflection opens the first novel of a writer who dared to construct such a complex character on the first try:

Of his character and spirit one will learn more by reading these pages and accompanying the hero through the twists and turns of the very simple event that I'm

endeavoring to narrate. I'm not talking about a mature character nor a logical spirit, but rather a complex, incoherent, and capricious man in whom opposing elements, exclusive qualities, and irreconcilable defects are united. His spirit had two faces and though they formed but one countenance, they were nonetheless distinct, one natural and spontaneous, the other calculating and systematic. Both, however, became blurred in such a way that it was difficult to tell them apart and define them. In that man made of sincerity and affectation everything became confused and jumbled. (*Ressurreição* 56)

The description refers to Félix, but it could very well apply to any Machadoian protagonist. For Machado, sincerity is not disassociated from social affectation, nor does he perceive truth as completely disassociated from lies. He constructs his protagonists out of contrasts, representing them not only in conflict with others, but mainly in conflict with themselves. Machado's characters experience the impossibility of recognizing themselves as they truly are: their reflection in the mirror of literature is blurry and indistinct. Time—and more precisely, history—affects subjectivity to the point of transforming it into dramatic internal duplicity.

Little by little Félix falls in love with Lívia, and his love is returned, but it is a love that has little to do with romantic clichés: though Lívia is beautiful, she is a widow with a son. During Félix's first conversation with her, he feels comfortable by her side, but suddenly he blurts out "some phrase of melancholic skepticism that made the girl shudder" (72). The writer's first major character is more melancholic than skeptical, tending more toward the narcissistic observation of his disillusionments, at times foreshadowing them, than toward serene contemplation of the world. The narrator does not portray him as evil, but recognizes in him a skepticism that is "disdainful or hypocritical," depending on the circumstances. The character distrusts people not because of the disappointments he suffers, but because he is weak and voluble (110). After a few encounters, Félix wants to tell Lívia he loves her, but both he and the narrator know, cynical one moment and skeptical the next, that love is a manner of speaking—that love is also an "as if":

The afternoon was truly lovely. Félix, meanwhile, paid less attention to the afternoon than to the girl. He didn't want to lose the opportunity to tell her, as if it were true, that he loved her like crazy. (85)

The moment the lovers act out the love they believe they feel, love triangles arise, suggesting to the reader a possibility—and to the protagonist a suspicion—of betrayal. For whatever reason, Félix distrusts Lívia and writes her accusatory letters. Lívia struggles to make the relationship work and even visits Félix at home, which could cause tongues to wag. The reticent young man asks if she doesn't "fear society's eyes. . .," but she responds, trying to smile, that "society is having tea" (100). In that single ironic phrase, "society is having tea," the author summarizes social morality.

The crisis passes but others surface. While the couple is still hiding their courtship, a character by the name of Meneses seeks out Félix to tell him of his own passion for Lívia. "It would only take one word from the doctor to eliminate this new rival from his path," but Félix rejects the idea out of pride and strategy. His strategy is diabolical: he wants to use Meneses to test "Lívia's faithfulness and sincerity." From that point on, the narrator sees Félix as solely responsible for his own future doubts and disappointments:

Thus he was the author of his own misfortune; with his own hands he brought together the elements of the fire in which he would burn, if not in reality, then at least in fantasy, because the evil that didn't previously exist, he himself would create out of nothing, giving it life and action. (116)

Because he is the "author of his own misfortune," the ending of the novel is not a happy one for Félix, nor is it for Lívia. But there are no deaths or abrupt tragedies either. Félix's doubt is so great that Lívia can never forgive him and, with painful dignity, she opts for a life of solitude at her son's side. "In a time when monasteries were common in novels," the widow would end her days in a convent, but since this is a secular novel, "the heroes that need solitude are obligated to seek it in the midst of tumult" (165). Lívia grows old alone and with few friends; she is soon forgotten. Félix suffers somewhat, but it does not take long for him to have more doubts despite the ample proof of Lívia's honesty. A coward, he feels relieved at the outcome, an attitude that authorizes the narrator's final judgment:

Having at his disposal all the means that society deems necessary for a man to succeed in life, Félix is inherently unhappy. Nature made him part of that class of pusillanimous and visionary men who illustrate the poet's reflection: "they lose out on what is good in life for fear of seeking it out." Unable to content himself

with the exterior happiness that surrounds him, he wants something more, a different kind of intimate, lasting, and comforting affection. He will never achieve it because his heart has forgotten how to trust and hope. (166)

Machado de Assis' first protagonist is more narcissistic and cowardly than he is skeptical.

Though Félix's façade of skepticism can be disdainful or hypocritical depending on the circumstances, *Ressurreição* reveals that Machado's skepticism of humanity lacks neither humor nor tenderness. Although the feminine character is somewhat idealized, the foundation of society is weakened for having a man like Félix as a doctor. The other novels and short stories are written with a sharper pen and cut even deeper, but from the beginning Machado proves that he is a mature writer by revealing himself as both skeptical and serene. Indeed, the plot and the characters of *Ressurreição* return twenty-eight years later, in 1900, in what is considered to be Machado's masterpiece, *Dom Casmurro*.

The American critic Helen Caldwell, who in 1953 translated *Dom Casmurro* into English, considers the book to be the greatest novel ever written in the Americas (Caldwell 17). In 1960, she published a bold analysis of the novel entitled *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis: A Study of Dom Casmurro*, which was not translated into Portuguese until 2002. Caldwell sees the return of the elements from the first novel not in the perspective of the omniscient narrator but rather in the character who believes himself to have been betrayed and who, in reality, is the agent of his own misfortune: Félix the doctor is transformed into Bento Santiago the lawyer, who narrates his woes and advocates on his own behalf. Lúvia becomes Capitu, described only through her "cunning and shifty" eyes.

Both *Ressurreição* and *Dom Casmurro* reprise the story of Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* in a Brazilian context, but the latter takes a different approach because the protagonist is a blend of two contradictory and conflicting characters. Bento Santiago is at the same time Othello, the Moor who is tricked by Iago into believing that Desdemona has been unfaithful, and Iago himself. Not coincidentally, the duality inherent in the name "Bento" is duplicated in the surname "Santiago," or Saint Iago (Caldwell 41). As the "manufacturer of his own dishonor," to borrow Cervantes' expression, Bentinho becomes one of the most complex characters in Brazilian literature. More than an Othello, he incarnates a Brazilian Hamlet who doubts whether he is or is not loved (Caldwell 168).

Caldwell is surprised that the majority of Machadian scholars assume that the heroine is guilty of adultery even though the story is told entirely from the viewpoint of the one person who has the greatest interest in portraying himself as a victim. Although there is no conclusive evidence in the novel that Capitu betrayed her husband Bento Santiago with his friend Escobar, critics—from José Veríssimo, who critiqued the novel soon after its publication, to Massaud Moisés at the end of the twentieth century—reveal their partiality by taking sides with the narrator. Moisés, in an article entitled “Em busca dos olhos gêmeos de Capitu,” states that while he has read Caldwell’s study, he still considers Bentinho an incurable innocent and Capitu “the very incarnation of a female Machiavelli, to say the least” (*Jornal da Tarde*, 7/19/1997).

Caldwell suggests that the author continues to set his ironic traps for his critics, forcing them to expose their own prejudices, perhaps their secret fear of the cunning eyes of fictional and real-life Capitus, as well as their theoretical limits by compelling them to deny the work’s literary and Machadian ambiguity in the name of a moralist interpretation. Nevertheless, Caldwell falls into the same trap herself by defending Capitu so passionately. There is no way of knowing if adultery was committed or not—and, even if there were, there is no way of knowing if the betrayal caused Capitu’s love for Bentinho to diminish, stay the same, or even grow. The genius of the novel lies in its manipulation of the unreliable narrator, which appears to guarantee the suspension of all judgment (*epoche*). This indeterminacy or undecidability suggests that the betrayal itself is irrelevant. What matters is something else. As Abel Barros Baptista argues,

the question of Capitu’s guilt or innocence is a question that has no single correct answer from the moment in which it is assumed that Machado leaves the matter up to the reader, if by that one means leaving the reader of Dom Casmurro’s narrative without something else that completes, confirms, or contradicts it, something else that purports to speak in the name of the author himself. (*Autobiografias* 369)

The author’s ironic sleights of hand resurface in the story of another doctor with a simian first name (reminiscent of Darwin) and a bellicose surname (alluding to the backfired revolution that he promotes in the name of science). In the small town of Itaguaí, near Rio de Janeiro, we meet the illustrious doctor Simão Bacamarte, who founds the Casa Verde sanitarium in order to define the boundary between reason and madness. The town council

authorizes him to intern any resident who does not meet the established criteria for mental health: “reason is the perfect equilibrium of all the faculties.”

The experiment results in tragedy for the community: four-fifths of its members are locked up in Casa Verde. Reviewing his theories in the light of the new data, Dr. Bacamarte modifies his criteria for mental health and eventually admits that the disequilibrium of the faculties is normal and exemplary. As a result, all cases in which that equilibrium is uninterrupted come to be considered pathological. All of the patients are freed, and the *crème de la crème* of the town is then incarcerated, meaning that the most balanced and reasonable people are interned. But, since even these individuals demonstrate some disequilibrium, there is only one person in the entire community who satisfies the new criteria for madness: Simão Bacamarte himself. In the name of scientific rigor, the illustrious doctor checks himself into the asylum, where he will perish alone.

This is the story of *O alienista*. The novella was published for the first time in serialized chapters in the periodical *A estação*, from October of 1881 to March of 1882. Around this time, Machado’s bureaucratic work consisted of dealing with topics relating to slavery, especially debates about the applicability of the Law of the Free Womb, decreed in 1871. Machado composed some administrative texts that demonstrate his pro-abolition stance during a time in which the campaign was only in its early stages. The opposition between sanity and madness in *O alienista* is a metaphor for the opposition between freedom and slavery. Casa Verde is above all a space of containment in which individuals are deprived of their freedom in the name of the arguable and fickle power of science and politics. In this way, the metaphor fulfills its destiny and says more about the analogy on which it is based, emphasizing the relationship between politics and the mentality that prevailed at the time.

Six months after the publication of *O alienista*, Machado wrote the short story “O espelho,” which questions the role of identity through the supposed existence of two souls in the same person—in this case, the protagonist Jacobina. As the twentieth-century writer João Guimarães Rosa would later attempt in his short story with the same title, stating, “yes, we should be afraid of them, mirrors,” Machado represents the mirror as a sign and agent of psychic dissociation that blurs the reality that it reflects. Jacobina discovers his two souls when he finds himself alone soon after the slaves flee the plantation. The protagonist sees himself in the mirror as a figure that is “vague, blurry, diffuse, the shadow of a shadow” and backs away from the reflection, fearful that he will go insane (*Papéis* 161).

In *O alienista* and “O espelho,” as in his work as a whole, Machado discusses political and social questions in an indirect and ironic way. Jacobina paves the way for one of Machado’s main protagonists, the Counselor Aires. Jacobina refuses to argue, affirming that debate is a polished form of the war instinct that “lies buried in man like a bestial inheritance.” Pressed by his friends to give his opinion, or at least a conjecture about the nature of the soul, he retorts that he will give them neither because both can lead to disagreement, which does not interest him. Still, on the condition that his companions listen to him in silence and without arguing, Jacobina agrees to tell them about an episode of his life in order to prove the existence of two souls living together in the same person (*Papéis* 154).

In visual terms, the mirror shows that where there seems to appear one image, there are in fact two. In terms of language, metaphor is a kind of mirror that shows that where there appears to be only one meaning there is, at least, one additional meaning. In the same way that the image of a face is not the same as the face itself, the underlying meaning of the metaphor is not the same as the apparent meaning of the word. With time, however, the metaphor is worn out by catachresis, concealing once again its transverse mirroring effect. As Nietzsche points out, truths are “illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power” (Nietzsche 47). The exhaustion of metaphor occurs on a daily basis, especially in literature due to the successive interpretations that can end up reifying a single sense for what, in its origin, has multiple meanings.

For this reason, André Rios expresses dismay at how one interpretation of *O alienista* has practically become official, to the point of excluding other possible meanings. According to the traditional interpretation, the novel is seen as a criticism of “scientific despotism,” as the barber Porfírio states in the text. This critique leads to a discussion of the totalitarian pretensions of medicine and psychiatry. Rios observes, however, that this interpretation already exists within the narrative and is even ridiculed by it: “whoever reads *O alienista* as a criticism of psychiatry is in effect identifying himself as Porfírio’s ally and would have to explain what keeps him from following the same path of connivance” (Rios 12).

To Rios’ observation I would add that the dominant interpretation of the novella also serves another purpose: that of attempting to avoid seeing Simão Bacamarte as a devastating metaphor of the realists and of realism. By not acknowledging this metaphor, textbook authors can keep categorizing Machado as a realist. It is a type of voluntary blindness: critics and professors

act as if they have never read *O alienista*, much less *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, a novel in which the dead narrator left romanticism and realism by the wayside. Machado himself made the following categorical statement: “reality is good, it’s realism that’s worthless” (qtd. in Castello 34).

In her article “Machado de Assis e a nota monocórdia,” Teresinha Zimbrão speculates that the author’s constant interferences in his stories represent ironic declarations of war against realist conventions. Zimbrão’s observations go hand in hand with studies by José Guilherme Merquior and Enylton de Sá Rego, for whom Machado’s fiction is greatly indebted to classical satire (most notably to Menippus and Lucian). Luiz Costa Lima makes a similar argument when he recognizes Machadian poetics as being couched in the primacy of the allegorical, which alone keeps his work from seeking a single meaning of the “real” (Barbieri 27). Instead of creating the maximum illusion of reality, the writer denounces the illusion through the voices of different narrators. This seemingly self-referential denunciation ends up ricocheting off reality itself. By casting suspicion onto the reality effect so sought after by the realists, Machado plants the seed of doubt in the reader.

In *O alienista*, the writer misleads the reader into accepting the barber’s viewpoint through the use of irony, demonstrating just how strong our tendency to follow Porfírio really is. This tendency is so strong that even competent literary critics fail to appreciate this achievement. Rios suspects that the central theme of the novella is not madness, but rather mediocrity: the writer ironizes the mediocrity of his readers and critics. Based on this suspicion, Rios hypothesizes that Machado’s fundamental dialogue is not with critics of science and medicine, but rather with Erasmo de Rotterdam and his *Elogio da loucura*, in which Rotterdam writes:

According to conventional wisdom it is a great evil to be deceived; I, on the contrary, maintain that not being so is the greatest of all evils. It is a great extravagance to want man’s happiness to consist in the reality of things, when that reality depends exclusively on the opinion that one has of it. Everything in life is so obscure, so diverse, so opposite, that we cannot be sure of any truth. (Rotterdam 72)

In a *crônica* dated 1804, Machado wonders whether the Hospício Nacional de Alienados should remain under the auspices of the state or return to the Santa Casa da Misericórdia. He concludes that neither option is desirable, suggesting that the madmen themselves should administer the establishment.

Few suggestions could be more subversive. In support of his thesis, he invokes Rotterdam: "The great Erasmo (oh Lord!) wrote that chasing after fortune and distinctions is a kind of tame madness; the institution, founded by madmen, should go to the madmen—at least because of their experience... To each his own" (qtd. in Rios 28).

Taking for granted the dialogue between Machado and Erasmus, Rios then questions the translation of *Elogio da loucura*—in the Latin original *Laus stultitiae*. The translation lends itself to one possible meaning, but proves insufficient because Erasmus does not speak of madness in the same terms as we see it, that is, as an illness. Among the Latin words that designate madness, *amentia* and *dementia* are synonyms, with a more technical and specific meaning; *insania* and *stultitia* imply a broader meaning, but *insania* is closer to the medical usage, whereas *stultitia* also connotes the social meaning of licentiousness, excess, absurdity, vanity, foolishness—in a word, mediocrity (Rios 14). In order to combat mediocrity, Machado resorts to the power of irony, using the narrator as his mouthpiece. The narrator himself is not ironic; rather, he is a scrupulous researcher of old *crônicas* who is hardly critical and not at all creative. In Itaguaí, everyone would be considered mediocre not because they are provincial but because the entire world is mediocre. In fact, "all the references to the world beyond Itaguaí corroborate the assertion that it is universally characteristic of the human condition to wallow in mediocrity" (Rios 15).

The novella heaps one irony on top of another: its victims are medicine, science, politics, reason, poetry, provincialism, rhetoric, lawyers, evolution, the reader, statistics, the elite, historiography, the function of the narrator, and patriarchal society. Its peripeteias, its twists and turns, are ironic. From the beginning of the text, patriarchal society is tinged with a particular irony that until recently has gone unnoticed. Forty years old, Dr. Bacamarte marries Evarista, who is twenty-five years old, neither pretty nor good-natured, the widow of a local magistrate and who, viewed in scientific terms by her husband the doctor, "united physiological and anatomical conditions of the first order, digested with ease, slept regularly, had a good pulse and excellent eyesight; she would thus be able to give him robust, healthy, and intelligent children" (*Papéis* 17).

The first question to be addressed is how Bacamarte could have overlooked the fact that his mate is childless despite a previous marriage, a sign that she is probably infertile (Rios 16). The scientific criteria are ridiculed and shown as incorporating two pre-scientific considerations, both patriarchal and leading to at least two miscalculations. On the one hand, a wife is cho-

sen because of the progeny that she can give to her husband; on the other, she is selected based on aesthetic criteria that are the opposite of those used to select a mistress. In other words, the wife's sole purpose is to bear children and take care of them.

Curious hyperboles emphasize the couple's mediocrity. One moment Evarista is able to give him "robust, healthy, and intelligent children," the next she is completely sterile. At one point Bacamarte tries to cure his wife's sterility by researching Arabic writers and consulting foreign universities; later he tries to treat her ailment with the most ridiculous and inefficient medication: the tried and true pork meat of Itaguaí.

The second question that arises is why most readers and commentators of *O alienista* seem to overlook this irony right from the start of the novella. One possible answer could be that the irony is both sophisticated and bitter, touching not only Bacamarte, who fails to see what is right under his nose, but also the reader, who does not fully appreciate Machado's craft. Evarista's behavior refutes the patriarchal structure that underlies science. Evarista rebels by not bearing children, refusing to follow her diet, and complaining about her husband's lack of libido. She rebels by spending money on clothes and jewelry, or rather, on baubles and trinkets. Machado's irony cuts both ways: the foolish austerity of the man of science and the no less foolish frivolity of the married woman. This does not escape anyone's notice—not the narrator's nor the reader's (Rios 25). Thus, it makes perfect sense that another of Machado's protagonists, the skeptic Counselor Aires, is celibate by vocation, making him the ideal vehicle for criticizing the patriarchal bourgeois order of his time.

In her book entitled *A razão cética*, Kátia Muricy shows how Brazilian Realist literature easily lends itself to the medicalization and psychologization of society, presenting a parade of hysterics and neuropaths: "[the works of] José de Alencar, Júlio Ribeiro, and, above all, Aluísio Azevedo, are full of hysterical characters to whom the hygienic prescription of marriage could be applied, as occurs in the case of the heroine of *O homem*" (Muricy 15). Machado de Assis, however, breaks with tradition by criticizing the myths that implant the mechanisms of social normalization: the dogmatic belief in science and the assumption of enlightened thought. Muricy reasons that "skepticism seems to have provided the author with the inflection necessary for elaborating his criticism" (16). Machado, who once said that realism in itself was not important, saw nature as "strong, impartial, and skeptical" (qtd. in Castello 54). Machado's skepticism is bitter but good-humored, as illus-

trated by an 1872 *crônica* published in the *Semana Ilustrada*, in which he questions the fanciful etymology of the word “medicine” (qtd. in Muricy 21):

It is said that during Numa’s reign the medical corps was composed solely of gravediggers and led by a chief gravedigger named Cina—the grandfather, it is said, of Corneille’s tragedy. One Roman (eternal Roman!) became ill and the gravediggers went to his house to open the grave.

— Did you measure him, Caio? — asked the chief.

— I did, Cina — responded the official grave digger.¹

The anecdote paints doctors as gravediggers who measure sick people before they are dead—the act of healing is secondary, perhaps irrelevant. Voltaire demonstrates a similar irony when his character Zadig suffers a wound from an arrow close to the eye:

They sent for the great doctor Hermes in Memphis, who arrived with a large entourage. He visited the patient and declared that Zadig would lose the eye; he even predicted the day and hour in which this sad event would occur. “If it had been the right eye,” he said, “I could have cured it; but wounds to the left eye are incurable.” All of Babylon, lamenting Zadig’s fate, admired the profoundness of Hermes’ science. Two days later the abscess closed by itself; Zadig was completely cured. Hermes wrote a book in which he proved that Zadig should not have gotten better. Zadig didn’t read it. (Voltaire 7)

Hermes’ book, cited by Voltaire, is reminiscent of the story of the naturalist who, upon being presented with a live duckbilled platypus, pretentiously affirmed: “This animal doesn’t exist.” Or of the director of a school where I worked in 1984, when Brazil was beginning to emerge from a military dictatorship. Worried because I had adopted the novel *1984* by George Orwell in my middle-school classes, the director explicitly ordered me not to use the work due to its dangerous and subversive content. Without entering into the merits of censorship, I argued that the book had already been adopted, that the students had already read it, and that an exam on it had already been given and corrected. Unperturbed, the conscientious director said that I would then have to “un-adopt” the book, informing the students that the exam had been cancelled and that they did not have to read the book. He said all of this calmly, as though it were not absurd.

I think that this director, whose name remains unimportant, was a reincarnation of Simão Bacamarte.

The narrator of *O alienista* indirectly criticizes the insanity of the doctor's project when he complains of the villagers' resistance; to him they appear unenlightened because they insinuate to Evarista that "the idea of putting madmen in the same house, living together, seemed in itself a symptom of dementia" (*Papéis* 19). It becomes clear that, as usual, Machado disagrees with his narrator, anticipating by a century the anti-psychiatry movement, according to which the internment of the mentally ill only worsens the condition or causes dementia in people who were never sick in the first place. Machado lays out this opinion in a *crônica* from 1896, which appeared alongside reports of the country's financial instability and the escape of some mentally-ill patients from the sanitarium Hospício dos Alienados:

As this century draws to a close, it is not always easy to distinguish a madman from one who is sane; on the contrary, some of the latter give the appearance of being the former and vice-versa. You who are reading this might be a lunatic and might laugh at what I'm saying, such is the understanding that you have of your own sanity. It is also possible that I'm the lunatic. On the trolley, indoors, out on the street, wherever and whenever I came upon someone willing to tell me extravagant stories and extraordinary opinions, it has been my habit to listen to them quietly. It never occurred to me that the person talking to me could be demented. All stories are possible, all opinions are worthy of respect. (Muricy 49)

Machado jokes that thanks to the escape of those deemed crazy he can no longer distinguish one from the other and that it is therefore better to suspect all of them. As there is no "certainty in these matters" it is better to not intern anyone or to make a law that simply decrees the end of mental internments. In the end, sanity is merely "a probability, an eventuality, a hypothesis." Or, as Machado writes in *Quincas Borba*: "we don't have any proof of the world that surrounds us except for the proof that results as a reflection of the world in us" (qtd. in Castello 68).

In an article on *O alienista*, Luiz Dantas observes that the narrative of the illustrious doctor defines insanity with words. If "the world is nothing but a word," as Shakespeare said, insanity is born from (or is found in) the word. The act of defining insanity is accompanied by a continuous reflection about the ambiguous and slippery weight of words: "the word, as an instrument of knowl-

edge, is precarious, sinuous, corruptible, and moldable" (Ribeiro 146). Not without reason, the first to be singled out for internment in Casa Verde are those that suffer from the evils of rhetoric. The first patient to be committed is a young man who, though coarse, was wont to enter into an ornate academic discourse on tropes, antitheses, and apostrophes every day after lunch. Any ironic similarity to professors, critics, and politicians is surely not a coincidence.

The coarse young man is followed by an eloquent citizen who tries to praise the psychiatrist's wife, saying that "God outdid himself." When the man is immediately interned, the reader suspects jealousy as the cause without considering its legitimacy as a motive. In truth, the praise is excessive. Hyperbole is punished, even if the narrative itself oscillates between contradictory hyperboles.

There are several other cases of verbal dementia, as shown by the schizophrenic discourse of the barber Porfirio. The word is portrayed as both all-powerful and precarious at the same time. Bacamarte's experiments, at the very core an experiment with the word, conclude with his own isolation and death in Casa Verde. As Luiz Dantas remarks, the psychiatrist "manipulates and suffers the effects of this servile and treacherous word. A prisoner of his own theories, incapable of reaching his objectives, he finds a solution to all these dilemmas by locking himself up alone, in silence" (qtd. in Ribeiro 152). Machado de Assis' skeptical posture and self-irony remain obvious.

While the author accepts everything—"all stories are possible, all opinions are worthy of respect"—the medical conventions of the time condemned the celibacy of those who were not priests for fear it would encourage licentiousness and a lack of hygiene. However, Machado's most famous alter ego, Counselor Aires, who appears in two of his final novels, defends celibacy: this condition allows him to play a role equivalent to that of the Greek chorus, contemplating the marital tragedies that surround him without becoming involved in them. Characters similar to Counselor Aires had already appeared in "O espelho," with Jacobina, and in the novel *Iaiá Garcia*, in which the narrator refers to one of the main characters in the following terms: "Thus lived this skeptical man, austere and good, foreign to strange things, when a letter dated October 8, 1866 arrived to call him into the drama that this novel intends to narrate" (qtd. in Castello 106). For Machado de Assis, the three adjectives—"skeptical, austere, and good"—reinforce each other.

In *Esau e Jacó*, it is known that Aires is a widower who married only because his job as a diplomat required it. He lived with his wife as though he were living alone; when she died, he was not affected by the loss because he

"had a bachelor's disposition" (45). This disposition permits him to better observe Natividade's drama. Natividade, mother of the twins Pedro and Paulo, suffers with the obvious discord between her two sons. They began fighting in the womb: in their youth, one defends the Monarchy, the other the Republic. After the proclamation of the Republic, they again place themselves in separate camps. Pedro, who had been a monarchist, accepts the new regime, but Paulo, a staunch Republican, surprisingly declares himself for the opposition, deciding that the Republic has not lived up to his ideals.

Why do they alter their positions, changing their opinions? This is what their mother asks Counselor Aires. Aires takes a while to answer. After a few minutes, he ventures in a low voice: "It appears to me that an unquiet spirit lives in Paulo, and a conservative one in Pedro. One is content with the way things are, while the other is never satisfied and wants to go where no man has gone before" (227). Still, he admits that it could just as well be for some other reason. Aires cannot be accused of putting too much stock in his own opinion. The Counselor is not bothered by whether he is right or wrong; in truth, it is not important to him whether his advice is accepted or not. He responds to the questions that are asked him simply out of kindness, without identifying himself with what he says.

Natividade accepts his explanation, but is still concerned; the discord continues between her children, who simply change weapons in order to continue the same duel. Aires agrees, but calls Natividade's attention to the color of the sky, which is the same before and after the rain. The twins' mother searches for the occult symbolism in Aires' image but cannot find it. Maybe what he is asking is for her to look at the whole picture, to broaden her perspective. Counselor Aires advises her to have faith: "count on the circumstances, which are also destined to be. Count more on the unpredictable. The unpredictable is a kind of strange god, to whom it is necessary to pay tribute; it could have the decisive vote in the assembly of events (228).

The advice is strange because it is not very helpful. At first glance, it appears to merely say: relax. Or: whatever is meant to be, will be. Or better yet: give time some time. The Counselor's skeptical paradox is revealed, since the advice of the skeptic cannot be good advice if he lacks truths to defend, to focus on, or to distribute.

It is Aires' skepticism, however, that gives him the attributes of a counselor. He listens more than he speaks and, as he speaks, he suggests that the interlocutor follow his instincts, accepting destiny as guide. The Counselor

obeys the stoic maxim: "destiny guides those who consent and drags those who refuse." This maxim, furthermore, had already been pronounced by the philosopher, Quincas Borba, when he admonished Brás Cubas: "you should know that the worst philosophy is that of the whiner who sits on the riverbank crying about the incessant flow of the water. The water's job is never to stop; accept that, and try to take advantage of it" (*Memórias* 200).

In *Esau e Jacó*, the narrator describes Aires' character in the following way: "he had a heart disposed to accept everything, not because of an inclination towards harmony, but rather due to the desire to avoid controversy" (*Esau* 45). Aires critically weighs every opinion and finds in all of them more or less the same value. His motto could very well have been: "everybody is right, at least a little." He comes to tolerate the intolerable: "diplomacy teaches me to patiently endure an infinite number of intolerable things that this world nourishes for its own secret ends" (*Memorial* 124). To the accusation of incredulity he responds that, on the contrary, "being tolerant, he professed virtually all of the beliefs in the world" (*Esau* 88). He tends to agree with his interlocutors, even when they refute him. He does not do this out of disdain, but rather to avoid disagreements and fights: "it has been observed that convictions, when opposed, discompose the face of the person, and he didn't want to see the faces of others in such a way, nor give himself an abominable aspect" (*Esau* 182).

Aires suspects that words speak to us before we speak them. In Machado de Assis' final novel, *Memorial de Aires*, published in the year of his death, the protagonist comments on how the books that he has read both annul and complete one another. Rereading Shelley and Thackeray, he remarks: "one consoled the distress caused by the other, this one disabused me of that one; in this way ingenuity completes ingenuity, and the spirit learns the languages of the spirit" (*Memorial* 23). The Counselor hopes that the paper will not collect everything the idle pen writes, that it will somehow make its way off the table and escape through the open window, because truth can become lies and vice-versa (44). Chance, another name for the strange god of the "unpredictable," proves itself to be a vehicle for lies: "a man who begins by lying in a disguised or blatant way ends up many times being exact and sincere" (51).

Such skepticism is so unsettling that one can only try to neutralize it. Textbooks and many critics of Machado de Assis aver that he is indeed the greatest Brazilian writer, in spite of his skepticism and his bitterness. As early as the nineteenth century, Sílvio Romero referred to Machado's skepticism as "cheap pessimism" and his irony as "almanac humor." Augusto Meyer, in

1935, coined a drastic oxymoron in order to identify what he thought to be an absolutely negative philosophy:

for all that he uses words with incomparable grace, full of delicate sophistries and unpredictable jumps, he doesn't know how to disguise the nihilistic pyrrhonism that forms the foundation of his thought process. We can compose a somber face from the various masks that are superimposed on this abundance of humorous acrobatics—the face of a man lost in himself and who doesn't know how to laugh. Lost in himself, that is, caught up in the self-destruction of his own nihilism. (Baptista, *Formação* 117)

Augusto Meyer's oxymoron lies in the expression “nihilistic pyrrhonism” because these two ways of thinking contradict each other: the nihilist has a dogmatic certainty that he can not know anything, while the Pyrrhonian suspects the same thing; that is, he has serious doubts about his own doubt. More recently and taking into consideration the fact that Machado's narrator transforms philosophy in order to belittle philosophy, Ivo Barbieri argues that “the application of labels such as skeptic, nihilist, idealist, monist, dualist, etc. to Machado de Assis without first doing the work of methodically and systematically studying the historical meanings of these concepts is no longer a passive act” (Barbieri 12). Professor Barbieri's warning is legitimate because simply saying that “so-and-so is a skeptic” implies the mechanical application of a concept that requires more thought.

Time has proven Romero's and Meyer's evaluations to be erroneous, but the difficulty of dealing with the skepticism of our “greatest author” persists as long as we assume that Machado was great *in spite of* having been a skeptic. This is because it is not convincing to attribute Machado's skepticism to the fact that he never had children, nor that he was epileptic and mulatto: these explanations cheapen the author and his skepticism. On the other hand, to detect a nihilist variant in his skepticism is equally problematic. As Cândido Mota Filho correctly notes, “the form of Machado's doubt, more often than not pointed and cruel, is an initial expression of his fight for acknowledgement” (Riedel 188). When Astrojildo Pereira affirms that Machado is as much national as international, we assume that Machado is one of the most important Brazilian writers precisely because of a skepticism that does not imply disbelief but does imply a suspension of common sense and therefore of reason, obliging the reader to also leave his interpretation unconcluded.

I say “we assume” less out of rhetorical modesty and more to align myself with the arguments of José Raimundo Maia Neto. In his *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian* (published only in English at present), Maia Neto considers Machado’s perception of the world to be necessarily Pyrrhonic and defends the author’s right to be included among the great modern skeptics. In this fundamental work, he examines how illusions reveal themselves to Machado not in the form of an error, but rather as a fundamental tie that articulates the relations between people and makes a common existence possible.

Finding a new use for the division of Machado’s work into two stages, Maia Neto views the shift from the omniscient narrator of the first phase to the first-person narrator of the second as a fundamental stylistic trait of Machadian skepticism. Moreover, he disagrees with critics such as Helen Caldwell who view this type of narrator as unreliable. The first-person narrator’s perspective is no more trustworthy than that of any other character, creating contradictions that cannot be resolved and thus remain indeterminable. Though the indecision is essential, the assertion that the narrator is not believable assumes that the critic is qualified to unmask the truth of the author. Brás Cubas, Bento Santiago, and Aires are one-dimensional because they cannot avoid being that way, and not because they do not present the whole narrative truth, which would be “implicit or hidden in the novel” (Maia Neto 13). From the skeptical point of view, that kind of truth does not exist. The fact that Machado’s narrator loses his omniscience and his epistemologically-privileged status does not imply a transference of these elements, first to the author and second to the astute critic. If Maia Neto is correct, it would mean that even when critics detect the essential undecidability that characterizes Machado’s works, they still keep monumentalizing him as an author, either to increase their own stature or to resist recognizing the author’s skepticism.

In his book, Maia Neto traces the skeptical trajectory in three novels from Machado’s second phase. *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* represents a *zete-sis*, in which the deceased narrator in search of the truth discovers that Nature is not harmonious, but rather chaotic, a realization that fails to drive him crazy only because he is already dead. Brás Cubas exhibits a Pascalian skepticism, understanding human reality to be only “a brief spasm of being in the immensity of the infinite universe” (Maia Neto 87).

Dom Casmurro represents an *epoche*, in which the curmudgeon and misanthropic narrator, faced with the impossibility of proving Capitu’s fidelity or infidelity, removes himself from the world, becomes aphasic, and conse-

quently suspends judgment. More than simply trying to convince the reader that Capitu was unfaithful, Bento Santiago exhibits “the groundlessness of any belief whatsoever” (Maia Neto 144).

Memorial de Aires represents an *ataraxia* because from the moment the narrator assumes a skeptical perspective (partly out of a dread of controversy), he is finally able to reconcile life and tranquility, proving himself to be both a participant in the world and indifferent to it. The diplomat Aires recognizes the world as a fraud, which permits him to act as an aesthete: by avoiding the search for truth and thinking only of the aesthetic quality of the game of illusions that surrounds us, he is able to achieve the desired tranquility. The characterization of Counselor Aires is Machado de Assis’ positive solution to “the problem of whether the skeptic can live his skepticism” (Maia Neto 160).

Machado himself, however, would have perhaps disagreed with that refutation of skepticism, as some commentators have noted. In a frequently quoted *crônica* dated 28 February 1897, the author seems to distance himself from the posture of the skeptic:

You won’t find a single skeptical line here. If you come upon one that could be called pessimistic, nothing could be further from skepticism. To think that something is awful is not to doubt it, but rather to affirm it. The true skeptic doesn’t believe, like Dr. Pangloss, that noses were made to hold up spectacles, nor, like I do, that spectacles were made for noses. The true skeptic rejects both views. If only I could be of that opinion! (Castello 70)

But it only seems that way; what we have here is yet another irony. The author correctly distinguishes between skepticism and pessimism, which is a negative variant of dogmatism, suggesting that at the end of his life he had proven himself to be a pessimist. Whereas the optimist believes that noses are made for eyeglasses (we are in the best of worlds, or, what is virtually the same, the world conforms to us and to our desires), the pessimist believes that eyeglasses are made for noses (we are in the worst possible world, where eyeglasses do not have anything to do with noses but have to be used anyway). Since, according to common sense, the skeptic always sees everything in a negative light, Machado deceives the reader by identifying himself as a pessimist, the skeptic being something else altogether: someone who suspends his beliefs, neither appearing to be a pessimist nor an optimist. The author’s supposed pessimism amounts to nothing more than a rhetorical trick, or rather,

another beautiful irony: his view of narrators, characters and readers is, above all, compassionate.

The final sentence of the *crônica*—"if only I could be of that opinion!"—makes it clear that Machado would have liked to have been a skeptic, as if he had not been.... As if he had not suspected all opinions, in spite (or precisely because) of the fact that he considered them to be more necessary than reality itself: "If a thing can exist in opinion without existing in reality and exist in reality without existing in opinion, we can conclude that, of these two parallel existences, the only necessary one is that of opinion, not that of reality, which is merely convenient" (*Papéis* 125). Thus, the author defends himself from the recurrent accusation of skepticism, responding: "I wish I could...."

Notes

¹ There is an untranslatable pun here. In Portuguese, one reads: "— Mediste, Caio? — Medi, Cina."

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