

The Development of a Skeptical Life— View in the Fiction of Machado de Assis

José Raimundo Maia Neto

Abstract. In this article I review my interpretation of the development of a skeptical life-view in Machado de Assis' fiction. This view is presented as originating and developing within the fictional framework of Machado's work, though some of its relations to ancient and modern skeptical philosophers are also remarked. I also react to some reviews of my work and briefly discuss some aspects of the relation between philosophy and literature in the specific case of Machado's work.

In this paper I review my work published in 1994 (*Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*) on the skepticism exhibited in Machado de Assis' novels and short stories. I begin with some introductory methodological remarks on philosophical approaches to Machado's literature. I then outline my interpretation of the development of a skeptical life-view in Machado's fiction, pointing out some of its main connections to ancient (mostly Pyrrhonian) and modern (mostly Pascalian) forms of skepticism. I conclude with a brief consideration of what is probably the most polemical aspect of my work: the absence of *Quincas Borba* from my examination of a philosophical or reflective dimension in Machado's work.

To the extent that my book relates Machado's fiction to a philosophical tradition,¹ the question arises of how an interpreter can claim a philosophical content in works that are not philosophical but fictional. Of course, this question can be raised about any attribution of any philosophical content to any literary work. Because I am neither a literary critic nor a philosopher with expertise in literature and aesthetics, I restrict my position on this issue to the

specific case of Machado's fiction.² At this point I wish to retract what I said in my preface to my book since it does not correspond to my work on Machado. There I claimed that I took the main novels I examined there as works written by skeptical thinkers rather than by literary authors and, accordingly, that my approach was that of a philosopher and not that of a literary critic. Now I think that this distinction makes no sense in Machado's fiction as I interpret it. A number of reviews of my book made me realize that the strongest point of my interpretation is that the "philosophical content" I indicate in Machado's fiction—skepticism—is not—and I would now add—cannot—be extracted or abstracted from the literary form in which it is conveyed.³ This very distinction between form and content seems inadequate in my view, according to which there is no philosophical doctrine in Machado's fiction but rather a skeptical life-view indistinguishable from the literary form of the novels in which it is exhibited. My book does not portray Machado maintaining philosophical doctrines the pieces of which are extracted from the speeches of characters and commentaries of narrators, but presents an analysis of Machado's fiction from a skeptical standpoint, a standpoint wholly elaborated and developed from within the fictional universe itself. Such skeptical philosophy can therefore exist nowhere but in Machado's novels and short stories. In Machado's case I would find it wrong to abstract the philosophical content from its literary form in order to analyze the literary form in abstraction from its skeptical philosophical content.

Two consequences of this methodological position are worth mentioning. First, there is the decision I made to focus exclusively on Machado's fiction. Except for one or two references, I did not use Machado's critical essays, chronicles, or correspondence to corroborate my interpretation. This contrasts my work with most studies that have dealt with the philosophical aspects of Machado's literature.⁴ Most of these critics assume that Machado holds some philosophical doctrine—Pascal's, Montaigne's, Schopenhauer's, Spencer's, or some sort of eclecticism—that he then illustrates or has some character or narrator mouth in his novels and short stories. Non-fictional statements of Machado's have in this approach a privileged status as revealing Machado's true views.⁵ In my approach, Machado's own view is really beside the point and the approximations with philosophers—with the ancient skeptics and the modern ones, Montaigne and Pascal—are completed once the concepts and problems intrinsic to the fictional universe are independently construed, that is, construed entirely in terms of fictional elements. I present

the development of the skeptical life-view that arises and develops within Machado's fiction through the articulation of Machadian concepts. I bring out this specific Machadian variety of skepticism in order to outline philosophical forms of skepticism so that Machado's specific variety can then be clarified by pointing out similarities and differences.⁶

A second related consequence is the apparently little attention I give to what is often considered the major philosophical statement in Machado's works: Humanitism.⁷ I think the source of the mistake of taking Humanitism as the cornerstone of Machado's philosophy is its detachment from the literary context of the novel where it is introduced, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (*The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*). The skeptical life-view developed there is a thorough empirical refutation of this doctrine. Humanitism represents the dogmatic kind of philosophy attacked by the skeptics (more on this below).

In order to trace the origin and development of the skeptical life-view in Machado's fiction I subscribe to the traditional division of Machado's work into two phases—before and after *Posthumous Memoirs*—and locate the preconditions of the view in the first and its origin and development in the second. This means that, despite the division of the phases, which points to a major innovation in Machado's fiction beginning with *Posthumous Memoirs*, which is, precisely, the appearance of the skeptical life-view, I claim that there is also continuity since the appearance of the skeptical life-view and its development through the second phase is the solution—and the refinement—to problems that arrive in the very first short stories written by Machado. I further divide each phase into sub-phases. The first is subdivided in two: short stories written between 1861 and 1871, and novels and short stories written between 1872 and 1878. The second phase is divided into three sub-phases, each presenting a further elaboration and refinement of the skeptical life view. Each of these corresponds to the novels that have restricted narrative points of view: *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, *Dom Casmurro*, and *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*. The coincidence of the philosophical skeptical life-view and the restricted point of view renders impossible the separation of form and content indicated above. Skepticism is the very formal structure of these novels.

Of the two ancient schools of skepticism, Pyrrhonism, given its moral and practical thrust, is the most relevant in the context of Machado's fiction. According to the ancient Pyrrhonians, the motivation of any philosophical inquiry is to get rid of the disturbance caused by the perception of conflict in

things. For example, at one point it appears that the world is ruled by providence, at another—an earthquake has just caused the death of hundreds of innocent people—that it is mere chance. Disturbed by this contradiction the inquirer begins to examine the issue hoping to find out the truth of the matter and thereby attain tranquility. The specific difference of the Pyrrhonians is that their rigorous inquiry leads them to equipollence between the conflicting things examined—one alternative does not appear as more true or false than the other—and therefore to the impossibility of giving assent to any of them—*époché*. This situation unexpectedly brings forth the tranquility pursued—*ataraxia*.⁸

Machado's stories—all his novels and most of his short stories—are structured by a triangular love affair: a woman is disputed by two men. The two men exhibit contrary life-views. Following the categories given in Machado's first publication, "Queda que as mulheres têm pelos tolos" ("Women's Preference for Vulgar Men"),⁹ I call these two ideal types of man "tolo" ("vulgar") and "homem de espírito" ("spiritual man"). The former is entirely committed to achieving personal and social success and does not hesitate to lie and deceive in order to achieve his goals. He exhibits a strategic life-view. The spiritual man is committed to truth and sincerity and either does not know or refuses to act in the morally questionable way required to succeed. He exhibits a naïve life-view.

In Machado's first short stories, written between 1861 and 1871, the spiritual man is disturbed by the contradictory appearances exhibited by women. On one occasion the woman seems interested in him, on another this same woman seems to ignore him. The condition of the spiritual man is analogous to the "man of talent" described by Sextus as the initial position of a trajectory which will eventually lead him to skepticism. This initial situation of perplexity evolves to one of deep, heartfelt disappointment since the triangular embroilment of love usually is resolved in favor of the vulgar man. As the title of Machado's first published work indicates, most women prefer the vulgar rather than the spiritual man. This preference of women means to the spiritual man that falsity and dissimulation prevails in the world. He thus becomes misanthropic. However, what is most characteristic of the short stories of this early period is that there is a minority of women who do prefer the spiritual man. Through marriage with these women the spiritual man recovers from misanthropy and finds happiness. So, whereas social life—Machado calls it "*vida exterior*"—is the locus of strategy, falsity, and dissimulation, there is in Machado's early fiction an alternative to it: marriage, char-

acterized by him as “paz doméstica”—domestic peace. Though hard to achieve given the power of “exterior life,” the spiritual man can avoid the disturbance caused by women by finding “domestic peace” in marriage. We thus find a clear distinction between truth—marriage—and false appearances—social life—and although hard to achieve—since most women prefer vulgar men—the spiritual man can attain tranquility by finding the truth.

Paradigmatic of this situation is the short story “Felicidade pelo casamento” (“Happiness through Marriage”). In this story, narrated in the first person by the protagonist, an initially disillusioned spiritual man relates his pessimistic worldview, with references to Pascal and Ecclesiastes. But then he tells that everything changed when he met and married Angela, with whom he left the city of Rio de Janeiro. Because she was from the countryside, unlike the metropolitan women of Rio de Janeiro, she did not exhibit false appearances. Another example is “Anjo Rafael” (“Raphael Angel”). Antero, the converted spiritual man, announces his suicide. But he is not literally dead. He is dead to the social “exterior life” he lived thus far. This change in his life coincides with his marriage with Celestina—which in Portuguese means “from heaven.” Because this woman was raised by a crazy man—Raphael Angel—she had never left her father’s home and consequently, although from Rio de Janeiro, she was completely pure from the corruption of social life. By marrying her, Antero is dead to falsehood and born to the truth. The main upshot in both short stories is that because the spiritual men have their problematic situation—disturbance and unhappiness—caused by a relationship resolved through marriage with these “spiritual women,” the incipient reflective stance they begin to exhibit is aborted by finding the truth. We therefore do not find a reflective, philosophical life-view in the short stories of this period.¹⁰

The fictional situation changes in the short stories and novels written between 1872 and 1878. The main innovation is that marriage is integrated into social (exterior) life, which thereby becomes hegemonic. We no longer find women interested in spiritual men. They adjust to the vulgar men as gloves to their hands. Corresponding to this shift, spiritual men become weak characters and vulgar men much more sophisticated. The social appearances they manipulate are seemingly much more true than the grotesque ones of the earlier short stories.¹¹ To cite a short story of the period, Angela, a retired and quiet widow in “Antes que cases” (“Before You Get Married”) becomes a completely different person when she marries the protagonist. That is, rather

than an alternative to exterior (deceptive) life, marriage becomes the primary access to it. Truth is thus rendered problematic together with the character committed to it. The spiritual men become exotic crazy characters such as the protagonists of "Capitão Mendonça" ("Captain Mendonça"), "Sem Olhos" ("Deprived of Eyes") and "Um Esqueleto" ("A Skeleton"). The type vanishes from the center of Machado's fiction together with the incipient reflective dimension they exhibited in the earlier short stories, but which did not develop because of their attainment of happiness and truth.

The second phase of Machado's literary work begins with *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. The main novelty is the appearance of a skeptical life-view. The appearance of this life-view coincides formally with that of the restricted narrative point of view. This view—skeptical authorship—is the first solution to the problem of the spiritual man who disappears—or becomes a marginal character—in the period from 1872 to 1878.

As in the previous period, "exterior life" is absolute and not only has marriage been integrated into it, it has also become its center. The spiritual man loses the woman for the pragmatic one. Brás Cubas loses Virgília to Lobo Neves, who promises and gives her a higher social status. While in the period from 1861 to 1871 the spiritual man cured his unhappiness by wedding the truth—for there were some spiritual women—after the 1872-1878 period this dogmatic solution is no longer available, social life taking over the whole reality—marriage becomes part of it. In philosophical terms, that which was the truth, the alternative to false appearances, has become the irradiation center of false appearances. This sets up the condition for the appearance of the skeptical life-view. The spiritual man, who had been displaced from the center of the plot, finds a central position, not as a character engaged in the plot—since there is no longer a place for him in this world of appearances—but in a kind of withdrawn skeptical reflection upon it, which is rendered formally possible by his occupying the narrative point of view of the story. The woman—who from now on, since an observer has been born, becomes the object of observation and analyses, i.e., she represents the world—exhibits the duality and deceitfulness of social life. The observer is the former lover who denounces this duality: he knows that human beings deceive. As a deceased observer and writer, he freely and objectively denounces the vanity of human life and the world since he has no longer any interest in it—be it sentimental, social, or political. The philosophical view exhibited by Brás Cubas the narrator—who shall not be confounded with that of Brás Cubas,

the living character, who exhibits a naïve life-view—is the Pascalian one of the misery of man without God but—unlike Pascal—without any indication of any possibility of attainment of happiness with God. The disturbance suffered by the living Brás Cubas and philosophically exposed by the deceased author is the contradiction between “fixed ideas” and the fragility of life. “Fixed ideas” are basically value beliefs: projects, goals, and attempts to achieve them—basically, celebrity. The fragility of life appears in the novel as decay—a beautiful woman, Marcela, becomes old and deformed—misery—the poverty of Dona Plácida and others—tyranny—young Bras’ relation to his slave Prudêncio—lust—his love affair with Virgília—madness—Quincas Borba—and death—his mother, his father, his love affair, his political projects, his opposition newspaper, his fiancé Eugênia, himself. He focuses in particular on the contradiction between the fixity of his values and plans and the precariousness and changeability of reality. This contradiction that disturbs the man of talent—the spiritual man—already points to what shall be the solution: the suspension of judgment, in the case in point, precisely about a meaning of life, value beliefs. This is what happens to Brás Cubas at the moment of his death, which is, as he says, his birth as an author, that is, as a skeptic who no longer holds any value beliefs. Value beliefs were what disturbed Brás Cubas while still alive for they moved him to act, causing the disappointment of not acting successfully.¹² This philosophical skeptical position is quite contrary to Humanism, according to which the only evil is not to be born. Humanism is a kind of secular theodicy designed to avoid the problem of evil and misery, which is precisely what Brás Cubas retains in his autobiography. The autobiographical genre is perfect for conveying this skeptical life-view since it contains a philosophical criterion of what is to be retained in the account of one’s life: that which shows the misery of man. Brás Cubas’ life, as told by the skeptical deceased writer Brás Cubas, is an empirical refutation of Quincas Borba’s Humanism.

Brás Cubas’ skeptical life-view is not fully skeptic because the very claim that there is no place for truth in the world—corruption and misery being everywhere—presupposes an ideal notion of truth, although it has no determination except the denunciation of falsity itself. Brás Cubas’ position partially resembles that of Pascal’s reply to the problem of misery. The very denunciation of misery by man indicates man’s greatness, namely, the capacity of thinking and denouncing and not conforming with this misery, which, however, human beings cannot avoid—for Pascal, deprived of supernatural

grace—for Brás Cubas, human beings cannot avoid at all.¹³ Because there is no place in the world immune to corruption—we are far away from the naïve view of Raphael Angel—the world must be abandoned and rejected. The Jansenists shared Pascal's view and therefore retired from the world, which is what Brás Cubas did in a quite radical and literal way.¹⁴ Brás Cubas' authorship is therefore just a first and still unsatisfactory solution to the problematic character of the spiritual man. Because the spectator's stance in his case required the death of the character, Brás Cubas is a skeptic who not only cannot live his skepticism but who cannot live at all.¹⁵

The skeptical life-view progresses in *Dom Casmurro*. As in *Posthumous Memoirs*, withdrawn authorship continues to be the solution to the problem of the spiritual man, but the author in this case is no longer deceased, just retired. He is a skeptic who can live but still not live his skepticism since he too does not reconcile his reflective point of view with a living, acting engagement in the plot. So although he represents progress in the constitution of the skeptical life, the final solution appears only with Conselheiro Aires. The novel also advances the skeptical life-view from the point of view of its content. It exhibits a more skeptical analysis of the problem of the truth. The woman in this case, Capitu, does not express duality as Virgília does—whose lies and dissimulations were attested by the narrator—but opacity. The restricted narrator has no access to the true subjective intentions and actions of Capitu. He and the reader—since he is the narrator—does not and cannot know if Capitu deceived him or not. Putting this new situation in general skeptical terms, the inquirer cannot make any claim about the reality of things, independently of how things appear. His withdrawn perspective is not that of the former lover—as Brás Cubas'—but that of the former husband. So, unlike Brás Cubas, who as a former lover could assert that Virgília deceived her husband—Lobo Neves—Bento does not know if Capitu deceived him with Escobar.

In *Dom Casmurro*, what was in the beginning of Machado's fiction "domestic peace" (marriage) continues to be the locus of disturbance. Capitu is the supreme expression of the variability and contradictoriness of appearances that disturb Bento. In narrating her, Dom Casmurro uses the metaphor of the sea and its movements, which is a traditional skeptical metaphor whose origin lies in the Heraclitean flux doctrine as stated in Plato's *Theaetetus*, and which is explored by early modern skeptics, in particular by François de La Mothe Le Vayer.¹⁶ Everything changes continually so no knowledge—which

requires some stability of being—is possible. *Dom Casmurro* intensifies this image since the world—represented by Capitu—appears to Bento not just as a moving sea but as a stormy one. The novel also emphasizes the effect of this moving world on the man of talent—spiritual man—who is attracted and carried away by the flux. The disturbance of the spiritual man is more skeptical in the case of Bento than in that of Brás Cubas. The precariousness now is not metaphysical—of the things in the world—but epistemic: of belief. Beliefs—and crucial beliefs such as the belief that one's wife betrays—change continually, radically, and wholly groundlessly, leaving the spiritual man deeply disturbed in this flux.

Bento is Machado's character who most experiences a skeptical crisis. When he becomes an author, the point of his narration is precisely that one cannot transcend the appearances of Capitu—the world—to ascertain a reality independently of what appears. Accordingly, the literary genre he chooses is no longer a philosophical autobiography but a memoir, a genre fitter to express the subjective impressions of the author. Compared with Brás Cubas, who still holds a metaphysical point of view, albeit a negative one, Dom Casmurro's narrative comes closer to the Pyrrhonian, who relates only what appears to him and not the reality of things.¹⁷ All that can be said is that the world appears such and such and that these appearances seem contradictory. Occasionally, Capitu appears as the manipulative and deceiving lover of his best friend, occasionally as a faithful and sincere wife.¹⁸ We can trace in Dom Casmurro's memoir the employment of Pyrrhonian *tropoi*, through which Pyrrhonian *zetesis* (investigation) is carried out, both those regarding the object—related to Capitu and her mutability and opacity—and those regarding the subject—things appear differently to Bento depending on his mood, his location, etc.¹⁹ This *zetesis* ends up in a clear situation of equipollence, which cannot but leave the narrator with the clear conscience that the matter cannot be decided.²⁰ Bento however chooses to believe the adultery in order to flee the flux of phenomena incarnated by Capitu, for this is the belief that implied separation from her. I argue that his judgment that Capitu betrayed him is—at the moment he writes his memoirs—consciously groundless, exactly like a leap of faith.

The reappearance of ancient skepticism in Renaissance and early modern philosophy was associated with fideism.²¹ Skepticism—*époché* about any merely human knowledge claim—was presented as propaedeutic to the acceptance of religious faith in the absence of any justification. Given that demon-

strative rational theistic arguments could not be given according to these skeptics, some of them proposed pragmatic kinds of justification such as the one I attribute to Bento—to avoid the disturbance of remaining with Capitu. Pierre Charron, for instance, and most notably Pascal, though he is not quite a fideist, argue that although belief in God is as groundless as disbelief, the former has more utility to human beings—given the possibility of eternal happiness it opens—than the latter. I think Bento made a similar calculus. Life with Capitu—that is, real life—was full of pleasure and enjoyment but also full of distress. This distress was so terrible—such is the grip that wholly groundless beliefs have over us—that retirement from the flux of phenomena—from the world—was the pragmatically justified option.²² Were I prone to speculative interpretations, I would say that Bento in a way does fulfill his mother's promise of devoting his life to God, though not in the way she envisaged. Not going to the seminary, his way was not that of Aquinas' rational justification of faith, but a fideist embracement without any rational justification. But again it must be pointed out that Bento's fideism is secular and not religious. Like Brás Cubas', Bento's withdrawal from the world has no religious motivation. It is not a way to be closer to God. What interests him is this very world, with its ambiguities, opacity, and variations, which, as a retired author, he recalls and describes, immune from the disturbance caused by the flux of phenomena that leads him to his retirement. Like Brás Cubas, Dom Casmurro is a retired author—a "casmurro" writer—and he expresses a kind of philosophically suicidal rejection of the world, though in his case the grounds are more thoroughly Pyrrhonian than in Brás Cubas', given that truth is no longer presupposed in some ideal and negative way but something completely opaque.

The last and final stage in the development of the skeptical life-view is the character of Counselor Aires. In *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*, the spiritual man finally finds his proper place: the stance of a living observer and writer. The narrative describes Aires' realization that his vocation is not that of a husband but that of an observer and writer. He writes about contemporary events, to which he attests. From Brás Cubas to Aires, through Dom Casmurro, the skeptical observer is gradually construed. In the case of Brás Cubas, the condition requires an absolute break from life. In that of Dom Casmurro, a radical retirement and withdrawal is required. Aires finds the way by which a skeptic can live his skepticism. This is through his assumption of an aesthetic-cognitive attitude. In the love triangle of the novel, he substitutes an aesthetic-cognitive attitude for the love/passionate one of his antecessors. He is neither a former

lover as Brás Cubas nor a former husband as Dom Casmurro but someone who during the first part of the novel sublimates his initial interest in trying to conquer Fidélia. He takes instead an aesthetic-cognitive attitude with respect to her. Cognitive: is she going to remain a widow or to marry Tristão?²³ Aesthetic: Fidélia is beautiful and Aires wants to enjoy her as we enjoy works of art.²⁴

The literary form he chooses is the fittest for his position: a diary in which he lays down his aesthetic impression and makes his cognitive observations about Fidélia's behavior. Of all Machado's characters, Aires is the one who most exhibits Pyrrhonian traits, notably the tranquility (*ataraxia*), searched and achieved for by the mature Pyrrhonian.²⁵ Being the most accomplished skeptic of all of Machado's characters, he also exhibits in the most developed form the other preceding two stages of the Pyrrhonian trajectory, but in an original way. His investigation is, of course, of women—which in Machado's fiction stands for the world or reality. But the woman appears to him differently from how she appears to Brás Cubas and Bento. The conflicting appearances of things—in Machado's fiction, of women—are there but, except for the initial moment when Aires entertains the possibility of trying to engage in a love affair with Fidélia, they do not disturb him as he assumes the observer's stance. And most interestingly, Fidélia does not appear to him as dual and deceitful—as Virgília, his former lover, appeared to Brás—or as opaque and mysterious—as Capitu, his former wife, appeared to Bento—but just as a beautiful and interesting object of observation.²⁶ What now gets the attention of the observer are the beautiful and changeable appearances themselves: the pretty and young but sad and faithful widow in black at the tomb of her deceased husband; her playing at the piano and giving the observer the aesthetic enjoyment of the art performed and of the performing artist; her being happily engaged with Tristão. Conflicting appearances from the point of view of the naïve spiritual man—Fidélia as a sad and faithful widow and Fidélia as a happy and engaged fiancée—no longer appear contradictory to the skeptical observer. For he is no longer concerned with some immutable essential truth standing behind the appearances—which Brás found impossible to be exhibited by living human beings and which Dom Casmurro found impossible to perceive and possess—but with the appearances themselves. Aires enjoys these appearances as an aesthete and investigates them as an empirical scientist, not as a metaphysician. He makes hypotheses based on what he observes and on what his sister reports, and revises them in the face of new data. As I say in my book, skepticism has, besides its better-known negative side, a positive one: by blocking metaphysi-

cal discourse about nature or reality, skepticism opens up and legitimizes discourse about appearances.²⁷ Fidélia's fidelity to her deceased husband and her wedding with Tristão are contradictory only within a dogmatic system of beliefs that assumes a unique true essence. From Aires' standpoint, truth is neither problematic, as it is for Brás Cubas, nor obscure, as it is for Dom Casmurro. It is a meaningless metaphysical notion cooked up by unhealthy dogmatic minds.

I wish to conclude by quickly addressing two criticisms that have been raised against my work. The first is the objection that I moved too quickly to criticize those who have raised the problem of the reliability of Machado's fictional narrators.²⁸ I admit that I may have simplified my account of this position by considering it as a dogmatic one unfit to account for a skeptical fiction.²⁹ The problem is that any appeal to a real author's meaning implied by the statements of the fictional authors disqualifies the restricted focus of the latter, compromising the skeptical stance both from the philosophical and the formal points of view. The crucial distinction to be made is, I think, not that between a real and fictional author but that between the acting/engaged character and the reflecting/withdrawn narrator. The living Brás Cubas' life-view is different from the deceased writer's life-view, just as that of Bento is different from Dom Casmurro's. Both begin holding a naive life-view and the story they tell relates how they evolved from this life-view to the skeptical one they hold as authors. The change required that a skeptical crisis take place, affecting the spiritual character whose downfall is overcome by his assumption of a skeptical point of view. This happens in the development of Machado's fiction as a whole and in each character that becomes a skeptical observer in the novels. Aires is the only one who does not go through this trajectory, being a skeptical observer from the beginning, though he too has to transform his initial interest in Fidélia into an aesthetic and cognitive indifference. The general tendency of Machado's fiction is towards skepticism, which appears as the only acceptable philosophical position, although its tenability is hard to achieve. Machado gives a positive and original answer to the polemical question of whether a skeptic can live his skepticism. A plain skeptic must be someone like Aires with the previous experience of a Brás Cubas and Dom Casmurro. Someone who has experienced the conflict in things, who has experienced the flux of the world, in order to finally be able to couple with it in an aesthetic-cognitive position whose possibility is given by authorship.

A second and related criticism that has been raised to my work is the exclusion of one of Machado's novels of the second phase because it does not

present a restricted narrative focus, namely, *Quincas Borba*.³⁰ I have always thought that the novel could be integrated into my work, but not as advancing the skeptical life-view, which I considered absent from it. Of course, the novel may exhibit some sort of skepticism and it is only natural that it does given that Machado is its author. But this would be a kind of skepticism different in form and probably also in content—for I have indicated the meaningless of this distinction in Machado's fiction—from the skeptical life-view that I trace in Machado's fiction. What I think *Quincas Borba* does advance is the pragmatic and naïve life-views. With *Quincas Borba*, Machado paused for a moment in his development of a skeptical life-view and decided to explore again the problematic character typical of the period of 1872-1878. A move backwards according to my view to be sure, although not deprived of interest since the characterization of the problematic character—Rubião—is much more refined than that of Raphael Angel and other madmen from the first phase. Rubião certainly helps to clarify the skeptic by means of contrast. As a spiritual man who did not become skeptical, he suffers the fate of those spirits who are not strong enough to conquer the stormy sea of the world and to acquire the internal stability and integrity that, contrary to another popular view of skepticism, is quite the opposite of madness.³¹

Notes

¹ The book is a revised translation of my Master's thesis: *A Condição de Observador na Obra de Machado de Assis*, directed by Eduardo Jardim de Moraes and presented to the Graduate Program in Philosophy at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica in Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RJ) in 1987.

Skepticism is a Hellenistic philosophical school whose origins are traced to Pyrrho of Elis (c365-c275 B.C.) and further back to Socrates (469?-399 B.C.). There were two schools of ancient skepticism: Pyrrhonism, whose only original remaining source is the writings of Sextus Empiricus (beginning of 2nd century A.D.), and Academic skepticism, the main exponents of which were the leaders of the Academy found by Plato Arcesilaus (3rd century B.C.) and Carneades (2nd century B.C.). Both schools suspended judgment (*époché*) about any knowledge claims.

² For the relationship of literature with skepticism in general, see Krause.

³ Klobucka writes: "While Maia Neto discusses Machado's novels and short stories as 'works written by a skeptical thinker rather than a literary author' and accordingly, employs the critical vocabulary and method 'of a philosopher, not of a literary critic' (xiii), his readings of the Brazilian writer's fiction are detailed, thorough, and revealing, and deserve to be read attentively also by those whose interest lies precisely in the complex literariness of Machado's works" (69). Moraes: "O livro se destaca ainda pelo modo como expõe o seu argumento. Nele nunca acontece, como é usual no tratamento que os profissionais de filosofia dão aos textos literários, de estes serem tomados como simples ilustrações de teses filosóficas, como se só as idéias e não a própria forma literária pudessem constituir a matéria de interesse filosófico. No caso deste livro faz-se um metódico trabalho de descrição do ceticismo de Machado de Assis, considerando-o como o ponto de chegada

de um percurso que se inicia com a composição dos personagens-chave dos primeiros contos e romances ... até chegar ao Conselheiro Aires do *Memorial*, quando se encontra a perspectiva cética plenamente elaborada" (206). Palti adds: "El esquema de interpretación que propone Maia Neto en *Machado de Assis, The Brazilian Pyrrhonian* resulta, sin duda, sumamente sugerente. En definitiva, es un intento novedoso de aproximación al universo machadiano buscando un principio articulador que permita dar cuenta de los modos de composición formal de la obra sin reducir su ambigüedad inherente ni remitirla exclusivamente a una racionalidad—o a una racionalidad-irracionalidad—extrínseca a la instancia textual, como son los enfoques literário-sociológicos del tipo de los intentados por autores como Roberto Schwarz (quien lee a la obra de Machado como expresión de la ambigüedad de Brasil en tanto que nación periférica)" (193-194).

⁴ See, for instance, Coutinho, and Reale.

⁵ This is not to say that these studies are of little worth. Quite the contrary, they have traced the main philosophical influences in Machado's thought. No serious philosophical approach to Machado's fiction can dismiss these studies.

⁶ I now regret the choice of the title of my book for it may give the impression that I identify the skepticism exhibited in Machado's work with a specific kind of skepticism, namely ancient Pyrrhonism, although I quite clearly in the body of the text state that such is not the case. This misunderstanding lies at the root of the only negative review of the book of which I am aware, that by Richard Bett. See his review in Bett (257-267) and my reply in the same issue, Bett's reply to my reply in the following issue of the journal, and my second reply in the same issue. I was led to the unfortunate title by my eagerness to distinguish my approach from the usual treatment of Machado's "skepticism" by critics who mean by the term not the philosophical concept but the popular one of "disbelief."

⁷ This complaint was registered by one of the referees at Purdue University and is implicit in Klobucka's complaint that I "do not include [...] what is arguably the most 'philosophical' among Machado's novels, *Quincas Borba*" (69). The criticism of my exclusion of *Quincas Borba* is fair enough (I return to it at the end of this article). But I disagree that this is the most philosophical novel of Machado's. I suspect that this view derives from the belief that the work somehow illustrates the doctrine of Humanism, the philosophy held by *Quincas Borba*, which supposedly somehow expresses Machado's philosophical ideas.

⁸ This story is told by Empiricus in the first chapters of his book: I.8-10, 12, and 25-27.

⁹ In my book I followed the critics who take this work as Machado's, attributing to modesty and shyness the young Machado's self presentation as translator. I was not aware of Massa's work, in which he indicates the original French text by Victor Heraux, *De l'amour des femmes par les sots* (1850).

¹⁰ The ancient skeptics, as Socrates before them, claimed that philosophical inquiry can be carried out only while truth is not assumed to have been discovered, for it is precisely its search. "Skeptic" means, etymologically, "inquirer."

¹¹ A good example is Luis Batista of *Resurrection*, Machado's first novel, published in 1872. This novel dramatizes the end of the optimistic situation of the earliest short stories. It relates the downfall of the spiritual man—Félix—who is not strong enough to conquer the deceptions of the vulgar man—Luis Batista—being therefore incapable of wedding the truth—Lívia.

¹² For the problem of how the suspension of judgment about values may affect action, see Annas 3-29.

¹³ This Pascalian doctrine that there is an aspect of greatness in humanity, namely, thought, is alluded to and "corrected" by Brás Cubas, who defines the human being as an "erratum thinking being," one whose last edition is given to the worms—rather than to God or to the devil.

¹⁴ But it must be kept in mind the crucial difference that, whereas the Jansenists fled from the world in order to be able to think only of God, it is this very corrupt world that Machado's

skeptical narrator takes as his object of inquiry. “Jansenist” was a pejorative name attributed by the Jansenists’ adversaries, mostly the Jesuits. They preferred to be called the “Messieurs Solitaires de Port-Royal de Champs.” Pascal himself did not retire in this way because he thought he had to fight the cause of God in the world.

¹⁵ See Burnyeat 20-53. One of the main challenges for a skeptic philosophy is its tenability in ordinary life.

¹⁶ See Giocanti.

¹⁷ See Epicurus I.3, 13-14, 19-20.

¹⁸ The Pyrrhonian says that because honey appears sweet at some circumstances and sour at others we cannot claim that it really is one or the other.

¹⁹ There are Pyrrhonian modes related to the subject judging and to the object judged, see PH I.38.

²⁰ The chapters “The Portrait” and “Photography” exactly represent the equipollence established by Dom Casmurro in his narrative. Whereas the first claims physical resemblance as the ground of kinship, the second argues precisely the opposite.

²¹ Montaigne is probably the main skeptical author to present this connection.

²² Richard Bett has criticized my view that Bento suspends judgment. He touches here on one of the main polemical claims in my work. Indeed, even those readers of *Dom Casmurro* who would agree that the issue of Capitu’s fidelity has no possible solution in the novel would attribute this position to Machado, the real author, not to Bento, the fictional author. I agree that Bento’s position is not exactly that of *époché* since he does believe that Capitu betrayed him; I should have made this clearer in my book. But since Bento’s belief is like a leap of faith, *époché* is in a sense maintained, for the leap is subsequent to the awareness of the groundlessness of the belief. In fideism, faith does not quite suppress *époché*, which is maintained in its proper domain of evidential grounds, but transcends it by introducing new criteria or motivations for belief, in the case in point, pragmatism. See my polemic with Bett referred to in note 6 above.

²³ This apparently silly question has a “philosophical” dimension in the context of what woman represents in Machado’s fiction—the world.

²⁴ In his review of my book, Eduardo Jardim de Moraes (209) points out that this aesthetic feature of Aires indicates a limitation of the skeptical model precisely at the final stage of Machado’s development of a reflective standpoint. The philosophical reference to this aspect would not be skepticism but the disinterested attitude that, according to Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, characterizes aesthetic judgments. I agree that Machado’s fiction contains a reflection on art which develops continually up to *Counselor Ayres’ Memorial*—as has been pointed out by Machado scholars—and that consequently Kant’s aesthetics can be a quite relevant model to access this aspect of Machado’s fiction. However, skepticism can also be brought out in this regard. To the extent that the skeptic suspends judgment about natures, essences, and true reality he recognizes and states what appears. This valorization of appearance is stated in terms of aesthetic enjoyment by one of the main skeptics of the seventeenth century, François de La Mothe le Vayer. “Le Sceptique porte sa consideration et donne atteinte à tout, mais c’est sans pervertir son goust, et sans s’opiniâtrer à rien, demeurent juge indifférent de tant de mets, et de tant de saulces diverses, comme la plus notable personne du convive, au milieu d’une table qu’elle trouve esgalement bien servi par tout. C’est en ce beau milieu que l’ataraxie se rend maîtresse de toutes nos opinions, et que la metriopathie donne le temperament à toutes nos passions par le moyen de nostre divine *Epoche*” (386). See the passage in *Esau and Jacob* in which Aires describes his skeptical position in contradistinction to that of the dogmatists Pedro and Paulo at his dinner table.

²⁵ Even such a critic of my proposal of affinities between Machado’s fiction and Pyrrhonism as Bett recognizes that Aires, “achieves something resembling the Pyrrhonian outlook” (266),

although he denies that his tranquility is the effect of a suspension of judgment. I think that *époché*, although present—see below—is not particularly emphasized in *Counselor Ayres' Memorial* but in the two preceding novels *Esau and Jacob*—where Aires himself is the skeptical character—and *Dom Casmurro*. I take Machado's fiction as if it were a single work written—and reworked—over and over again: in the first phase as a pre-skeptical work, in the second as a skeptical work that achieves its most elaborated form with Aires. It is as if Aires could retain not only his fictional skeptical experience from *Esau and Jacob* but also that of his predecessors Brás Cubas and Dom Casmurro.

²⁶ The aesthetic value of women does not appear with Fidélia. We note a continuous elaboration of this aspect from Virgília through Capitu to Fidélia.

²⁷ The ancient skeptics did not develop this positive side but some of the moderns such as Pierre Gassendi did. For the compatibility of skepticism with one of the models of modern science that unfolds during the seventeenth century, see Popkin. For a philosophical analysis of this compatibility, see Pereira 235-295. For this positive side in ancient Pyrrhonism, see Caujolle-Zaslowsky 371-381.

²⁸ Klobucka 69.

²⁹ But note that "dogmatic" has the technical sense given by the Pyrrhonians of holding positive doctrines or dogma. Those I criticize are in the company of the greatest philosophers of the western tradition. "Dogmatic" in my work does not have the popular meaning of simple-minded and tough-headed. Let me say by the way that I find the analysis of those critics who have challenged the fictional narrators insightful and imaginative.

³⁰ This gap was regretted by a number of reviewers, for instance Gregory Rabassa: "All in all, I find this study a major contribution to Machadiana, valuable for both those familiar with his work and for those who will be goaded into familiarity by this book. My only regret is that Mr. Maia Neto did not relax a bit and include a detailed analysis of *Quincas Borba* along with the other novels. Even though it does not fit his limitation to protagonist-narrator, I think that there is a great deal of material in the novel that falls within the purview of his study" (626).

³¹ The association of skepticism with madness may have had a philosophical origin, namely, Descartes' appropriation of ancient doubt to his own metaphysical purposes.

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José Raimundo Maia Neto is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (Brazil). He has published *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian* (Purdue UP, 1994) and *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism: Skepticism and Faith in Pascal, Kierkegaard and Shostov* (Kluwer, 1995). His recent work is on the history of early modern skepticism. E-mail: jrmaia@ufmg.br