

José Raimundo Maia Neto, *Machado de Assis: The Brazilian Pyrrhonian*, Purdue University Press, 1994.

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Machado de Assis is clearly a novelist of a somewhat philosophical bent. That the philosophy expressed in his novels is in some loose sense sceptical has been remarked before¹, and is also clear enough; its most obvious aspects are perhaps a deep-rooted suspicion of dogmatic and optimistic social theories, and a powerful sense of the inscrutability of human motives and reasons for acting. Since Machado is known to have been an avid reader of Montaigne, this scepticism is not especially surprising. What is much more surprising is the main thesis of Maia Neto's book: that the scepticism exhibited in Machado's novels is specifically of the ancient Pyrrhonian variety, represented in the surviving literature by Sextus Empiricus.

¹ Afrânio Coutinho, *A Filosofia de Machado de Assis* (Rio de Janeiro, 1959); see particularly 93-5. See also Octavio Brandão, *O Nihilista Machado de Assis* (Rio de Janeiro, 1958), in which Machado is violently denounced, from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, for his sceptical tendencies (see esp. 147-9).

Maia Neto's treatment is chronological. The first part (roughly one third of the main body of the book) examines Machado's early fiction and essays, identifying some central recurrent themes and, in particular, a central problem to which his later scepticism is to be argued to be the solution. Men's relations with women are in the forefront of nearly all Machado's writing, and especially the difficulties experienced by men of refinement – as opposed to those whose interest is simply in vulgar sexual conquest – in relating in a satisfactory fashion (that is, in a fashion satisfactory to themselves) to the women to whom they are attracted. For a while in Machado's early period it seems that marriage and domestic tranquillity, safe from the pretence and uncertainty of social life, is an ideal both desirable and achievable. But this picture becomes untenable when marriage itself comes to be portrayed as just a further locus of pretence and uncertainty. It is above all in response to this crisis that "the skeptical life-view" comes to be progressively elaborated, according to Maia Neto, in Machado's later novels; the most satisfactory attitude towards life in general, and towards women in particular², is one of sceptical detachment. This thesis is developed in the longer, second part of the book, on which I will concentrate from now on.

The ancient Pyrrhonist outlook has three main components: 1) investigation (*zêtêsis*) of the many rival dogmatic philosophies, 2) suspension of judgement (*epochê*) concerning the

² Maia Neto has a tendency to speak as if women and life in general amount, in this context, to the same thing; we are told, for example, that "Woman stands for reality in Machado de Assis" (26). Men's relations with women are certainly a central – perhaps even *the* central – *aspect* of life in Machado's fiction; but I see no reason to believe that Machado's women *stand* for life in general, or indeed for anything else.

reality that is the subject-matter of those philosophies, brought about by the equal persuasiveness of all their various competing claims, and 3) the untroubledness (*ataraxia*) that is supposedly the result of this withdrawal from definite beliefs about how things really are. In three long chapters, Maia Neto argues that these components are introduced one by one into the later novels. *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (*Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*) contains only the first stage of *zêtêsis*; *Dom Casmurro* exemplifies the second stage of *epochê*; and the third stage of *ataraxia* is represented by the character of Aires, who appears in both of Machado's last novels, *Esau and Jacob* and *Counselor Aires' Memorial* – though it is the latter of the two in which the skeptical outlook is most developed and most explicit³.

This developmental story strikes me as thoroughly implausible, both on general grounds and as an interpretation of at least two of the novels in question. First, Maia Neto's account, according to which the three central elements are clearly distinguished and treated individually, seems to require that Machado had a rather precise grasp of the main features of ancient Pyrrhonism. But Maia Neto concedes (5,187) that Machado is very unlikely to have had first-hand knowledge of Sextus. It is, rather, from Montaigne and Pascal that he is supposed to have got his knowledge of Pyrrhonism. Yet though both of these authors of course refer to Pyrrhonism, neither is in the business of offering a systematic exposition of the Pyrrhonian outlook. The closest thing in either author to such an exposition is Montaigne's *Apology for Raymond Sebond*. However, while this does mention all three central elements, the discus-

³ This sequence omits *Quincas Borba*, which was written between *Epitaph of a Small Winner* and *Dom Casmurro*. Maia Neto does not discuss this novel because, as he admits (11-12), it does not contain any of the sceptical elements in which he is interested.

sion is in Montaigne's usual discursive and unsystematic style; and the third stage, *ataraxia*, gets very little attention⁴. The nature and extent of Machado's contact with ancient Pyrrhonism is therefore somewhat unclear. This point is brushed over by Maia Neto, who speaks as if ancient Pyrrhonism was simply adopted wholesale in early modern philosophy – so that Machado's contact with it through his reading of Montaigne and Pascal might be just as close as if he had read Sextus⁵. But this is not so. Montaigne, though clearly heavily influenced by his reading of ancient scepticism, is not in any strict sense a Pyrrhonist. And Pascal is not a sceptic, Pyrrhonist or otherwise, in any sense; to speak of "Pascal's Christianized form of ancient skepticism" (8) is highly misleading. Though Pascal sees a certain value in scepticism, if it is handled properly, he sees it as pernicious if adopted as a philosophy in its own right; and in any case, it is not clear that what he calls "Pyrrhonism" is really the scepticism of the *ancient* Pyrrhonists, rather than the loosely-named "Pyrrhonism" of Montaigne and other early modern writers⁶.

⁴ Maia Neto might justifiably reply that Montaigne himself *exemplifies* something like the ancient *ataraxia*, stemming from the avoidance of dogmatism – even if he does not give prominence to it as a feature of ancient scepticism. But in that case the main comparison should not be, as it is in this book, between Machado and ancient Pyrrhonism, but between Machado and Montaigne.

⁵ At one point (189) he actually says that "The skepticism Machado deals with is the revived skepticism of early modern history". If so, again, it is not Sextus who should be the main figure with whom Machado is compared.

⁶ To judge from the *Entretien de M. Pascal et de M. Sacy sur la lecture d'Épictète et de Montaigne*, it is Montaigne (there described as "pur Pyrrhonien"), rather than any ancient thinker, whom Pascal regards as paradigmatic of the sceptical attitude.

But even apart from this historical difficulty, it is not at all evident what would be the *point* of this separate, piecemeal focus (in novels in some cases decades apart from one another) on the three main elements of Pyrrhonism. Ancient Pyrrhonism is a total outlook, in which the three main elements are intimately connected with one another. If Machado was acquainted with and attracted to this outlook, it might well make sense for him to write a novel illustrating it. But it is very hard to see (and Maia Neto does not explain) what sense it would make for him to write novels illustrating *parts* of it, in isolation from the rest. Maia Neto appears to view the progression from one novel to the next as a development in Machado's thinking on the recurring problems his writings address. But unless the resemblance to ancient Pyrrhonism was pure coincidence – which is certainly not Maia Neto's position – the presentation of *parts* of the Pyrrhonist outlook would require that Machado already had knowledge of the outlook *as a whole*. In this case it is not a question of Machado's thinking undergoing a development, but of his deliberately withholding crucial elements of the thinking he had already arrived at. If we think of Machado's fiction as driven by the attempt to develop a satisfying philosophy of life – and this is the main perspective Maia Neto adopts – this would be a very strange procedure indeed. Even if we reject this view of his work as excessively one-sided – as I think we probably should – it is still difficult to see why any novelist would adopt the procedure here attributed to Machado.

Maia Neto's thesis is thus inherently somewhat difficult to credit, both for historical reasons and for literary or psychological reasons. But there are also serious difficulties in his readings of the novels which, in his view, contain elements of the Pyrrhonist position. *Epitaph of a Small Winner* is supposed to exemplify the first stage of *zêtêsis*, investigation. But what is it

that Brás Cubas, the narrator, is supposed to be investigating? At first (80) Maia Neto seems to suggest that it is philosophical doctrines – or, specifically, the philosophical doctrine of Brás Cubas’ friend Quincas Borba, called “Humanitism”. But later (116) he tells us that “Brás Cubas’s *zêlésis* is an inquiry into social life”. Neither answer is convincing. The deceased narrator tells his life story, and social life is indeed a prominent feature of that story. But neither the living character nor the deceased narrator can be said to be *inquiring into* social life. The deceased narrator, through the ironic and frequently pessimistic tone of his narrative, projects a certain *view* of social life, but that is not the same as investigating it; and the living character is simply living it – in a not particularly reflective frame of mind, one might add. As for Quincas Borba’s Humanitism, it is certainly the object of some ridicule in the novel. But it too can scarcely be said to be the object of any *investigation*. In life Brás Cubas appears to accept it uncritically, while as deceased narrator he portrays it (again through the ironic tone, not through direct statement) as plainly absurd; in neither case is it “subjected to critical examination” (80) as Maia Neto suggests⁷. To return to my point at the outset, the author’s attitude towards this philosophy – a kind of hodgepodge of 19th-century theories of natural evolution and social progress – is certainly in a broad sense sceptical; but this scepticism has no particular connection with the first stage of the ancient Pyrrhonist’s scepticism. And in any case, Humanitism is not by

⁷ Maia Neto draws attention to the fact that Humanitism has certain elements in common with Stoicism – “determinism, rationalism, a providential view of nature, and an optimistic view of human nature” – and that Stoicism “was historically the main target of the Greek skeptics” (80). But it does not follow, nor is it the case, that Brás Cubas’, or Machado’s, sceptical view of Humanitism has any notable similarities with the Greek skeptics’ critique of Stoicism.

any means a central theme in the novel; it only appears near the end. To single out *Epitaph of Small Winner* as an exemplar of *zêtêsis*, then, seems arbitrary and unmotivated.

Maia Neto's interpretation of *Dom Casmurro* is still more questionable. The crisis in the final part of the novel is as follows. The narrator conceives the idea that his wife, Capitú, has been having an affair with his best friend Escobar, and that Escobar, and not he himself, is the father of their son Ezekiel; this idea is based in the first instance on the physical resemblance between Ezekiel and Escobar. As a result he separates from Capitú (whom he never sees again, and who subsequently dies in Europe) and Ezekiel (who eventually returns to Brazil to visit him, but who later dies on an archaeological expedition in the Middle East). As has often been remarked, Machado leaves it ambiguous whether this affair really occurred, or was a figment of Dom Casmurro's imagination; all we are given is Dom Casmurro's highly charged conception of events. But Maia Neto departs from other interpreters in arguing that Dom Casmurro himself "is fully aware that the main assertion he utters in his book – namely, that Capitú, his former wife, was unfaithful to him – is totally unsupported, that is, totally deprived of epistemological justification" (126). Hence he claims that the narrator in this novel exemplifies the Pyrrhonist *epochê*, suspension of judgement; Dom Casmurro "exhibits a sharp consciousness of the frailty of judgements or beliefs in general" (127) – and, in particular, of the groundlessness of his own all-important judgement about his wife.

At least as regards his belief in Capitú's infidelity, this reading is extremely difficult to accept. The whole point about Dom Casmurro's judgement and behavior is that he *does* think he is justified. First of all, as an elementary matter of psychology, one does not destroy one's happy marriage, and separate from the woman with whom one has been desperately in love

since one's early teenage years, on the basis of a belief which one is aware is groundless; if Dom Casmurro really did think he had no good reasons for his belief, he would have gone to a good deal of trouble (at least, if Machado is a remotely convincing depicter of character) to discover whether *there were* any good reasons for it – not acted upon it immediately⁸. But in any case, he takes himself to have lots of good reasons. The reason which is explicitly discussed is the physical resemblance, and he apparently regards this as sufficient by itself; but a great many more pieces of (what he regards as) evidence are mentioned – “Pell-mell, there rushed to my mind vague, remote episodes – words, meetings and incidents, in all of which my blindness saw no wrong ... Now I remembered all this, which then seemed nothing” (265-6)⁹. It is true that his belief wavers – he recalls seeing a portrait of a woman unrelated to Capitú who nonetheless resembles her, and muses that “there *are* these inexplicable resemblances” (265). But this need not be read, as Maia Neto suggests, as a recognition that there are equally powerful arguments on both sides of the

⁸ Maia Neto suggests (148-9) that there may be *pragmatic* reasons, independent of its truth or falsehood, for Dom Casmurro to adopt this belief. “For example, the undeniable physical resemblance of his son to Escobar would constitute an ever-existing discomfort and would make the reappearance of distressing doubt an always-present possibility”. But this is a very unpromising move. For the pragmatic reasons, also having to do with the avoidance of discomfort and distress, which he would have had for adopting the opposite belief – that the physical resemblance is a coincidence, and that there was never any affair with Escobar – are quite obviously of incomparably greater weight; his life would thereby not have been destroyed, as it is by his adopting the belief that he does.

⁹ The pagination is that of the translation of Helen Caldwell (New York, 1953). Maia Neto mentions this passage (155), but strangely does not see the difficulty it poses for his interpretation.

question; it may equally well be seen as a momentary lapse in his generally confident view that he does have conclusive evidence. The book ends by saying that whether or not Capitú's infidelity was already prefigured in her demeanor as a child, "one thing remains [*uma coisa fica*] and it is the sum of sums, the rest of the residuum, to wit, that my first love and my greatest friend ... were destined to join together and deceive me" (277). These are not the words of a man who takes the assertion that his wife was unfaithful to be no better supported than its negation.

Of course, even if Maia Neto were right on this issue, we would still not have anything closely resembling the ancient Pyrrhonist *epochê*. As he admits (127), "Dom Casmurro is ... not, strictly speaking, a Pyrrhonian skeptic, since he *believes* his wife to be guilty of adultery" (my emphasis). But this is no minor difference; awareness of the groundlessness of one's judgements is very different from *suspension* of judgement. Maia Neto continues that "he is as much a skeptic as are the skeptical fideists because he is aware that his belief is not supported by epistemological grounds". But to say this is in effect to abandon the case. For whether or not one wants to call the fideists "skeptical" – I would prefer to say that they make use of scepticism for profoundly non-sceptical ends – their outlook is at any rate quite distinct from that of the ancient Pyrrhonians; and the most obvious aspect of this, again, is that *epochê*, suspension of judgement, is emphatically not what they are interested in. The idea that Dom Casmurro displays the second component of the ancient Pyrrhonian outlook thus seems quite baseless¹⁰.

¹⁰ Maia Neto tries to connect the character's nickname Dom Casmurro, "Lord Taciturn", with the Pyrrhonian stance of "non-assertion" (125-6); he is "taciturn" because he understands the un-

That the character of Aires, especially in *Counselor Aires' Memorial*, achieves something resembling the Pyrrhonian outlook, including its *ataraxia*, is far more credible. Aires does studiously avoid committing himself in any political or other debates. And though he is initially drawn to the young widow Fidélia, this powerful attraction, with its accompanying turmoil, is said to be gradually modified into an attitude of detached, aesthetic admiration. But even here, there is room for questions. First, it is not clear whether Aires' refusal to affirm definite positions is due to an *absence* of any definite beliefs, or to his years as a diplomat, in which the habit of not *revealing* his own beliefs became ingrained. Second, we have only Aires' own word for the fact that his final attitude towards Fidélia is mere disinterested aesthetic appreciation; it is not completely obvious that we should believe him. Third, even if we do accept both of the previous points, Aires' *ataraxia* is not the *result* of his *epochê*, as in ancient Pyrrhonism; the two attitudes are quite unrelated, and the *ataraxia*, in particular, has no *philosophical* origin at all. The fit with ancient Pyrrhonism is therefore not especially tight. Maia Neto draws a number of parallels between Aires and Montaigne, and these seem reasonable enough. Again, he does not seem to appreciate that these parallels undercut his main thesis, that the scepticism of Machado's novels is *ancient* Pyrrhonism specifically; Montaigne's scepticism is not identical with ancient Pyrrhonism, and Aires'scepticism does not appear to be that of an ancient Pyrrhonian sceptic *rather than* that of Montaigne. Nevertheless, the similarities between Aires and an ancient Pyrrhonist are

availability of conclusive arguments on either side of a question. But "taciturn" surely refers instead to the character's gloomy and morose mood – as befits someone who has lost all sources of joy in his life.

much more substantial than in the case of the other novels Maia Neto discusses.

In conclusion, I do not want to give a wholly negative impression of the book. I have concentrated on the central thesis, because this is the aspect that is potentially of the greatest philosophical interest. But there is much in the detail of Maia Neto's argument that I at least – as a newcomer to Machado's complex and many-faceted novels – have found insightful and illuminating. However, this illumination is achieved despite, and not because of, Maia Neto's main thesis. Scepticism of some sort is certainly prevalent in the pages of Machado. But it is not ancient scepticism, and it would have been very surprising if it had been. It is perhaps scepticism of a form derived from his reading of Montaigne and Pascal; but that is not the same thing. Most obviously, it is far less systematic than the scepticism of Sextus – as one would expect from a novelist. Maia Neto would have done well to take more seriously the implications of his remark in the Introduction, that "Machado de Assis is not a philosopher *stricto sensu*" (8).

