

REPLY TO BETT

JOSÉ R. MAIA NETO

*Departamento de Filosofia, FAFICH/ UFMG,
Caixa Postal 252,
31270-901 Belo Horizonte, MG,
BRAZIL*

JRMAIA@ORACULO.LCC.UFMG.BR or JRMAIA@BRUFMG

Bett's major objection to my book is that its "main thesis", namely, "that the scepticism exhibited in Machado's novels is specifically of the ancient Pyrrhonian variety" (Bett (1996), p. 257)¹ is wrong. Nowhere in my whole book do I claim that the skepticism exhibited in Machado's novels and stories is specifically of the ancient Pyrrhonian variety. I delineate in Machado's fiction what I call a skeptical life-view. This life-view is construed within the framework of Machado's fiction using typically Machadian categories such as "homem de espírito" ("spiritual man"), "vida exterior" ("outward life"), "paz doméstica" ("domestic peace") and others. Furthermore "my assessment of the skeptical life-view in Machado's fiction is enhanced by references to three other life-views that are counterpoints to the skeptical one", namely, the "naive", "strategic" and "problematic" (Maia Neto (1994), p. 10)². All of them are

¹ Subsequent references to Bett's review are by 'B', followed by page number(s).

² Subsequent references to Maia Neto (1994) are by 'M' followed page number(s).

intimately bound to specific types of characters in Machado's novels and stories. The main reason for this procedure is precisely to indicate that although there are elements of Pyrrhonism in the skeptical life-view, Machado finds "*in the skeptical authors of the seventeenth century... inspiration to develop his own - unique - skeptical position*" (emphasis added) (*M*, p. 8)³. What is most surprising is that Bett actually cites my true position to conclude that if early modern forms of skepticism are the relevant ones, "it is not Sextus who should be the main figure with whom Machado is compared" (*B* p. 260 n5). First of all, I do compare Machado with Montaigne and Pascal (just see the number of references to them in the index), indicating those features of their views that found their way into Machado's fiction which are not specifically of the ancient Pyrrhonian kind. Despite these differences, the skepticism present in Montaigne's *Essays*, in particular in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, is mostly influenced by Sextus. Skepticism is the philosophy most discussed by Pascal whose main source is Montaigne. So it strikes me as not only reasonable but even as necessary to use Sextus along with Montaigne and Pascal in examining the skeptical life-view exhibited in Machado's fiction, provided only that the features of this view specifically of the Montaignean and Pascalian types be indicated. I make

³ Here is a passage where I state my main thesis: "Putting it briefly, the hypothesis presented in this study is that Machado develops the skeptical life-view as the theoretical and practical alternative available to the *homem de espírito* when outward life becomes hegemonic, that is, when the alternative of truth and morality in the domestic peace of marriage is no longer available (this is the occasion of the character's skeptical crisis). The uniqueness of Machadian skepticism within the skeptical tradition lies, above all, in the solution he presents: to assume the stance of spectator and become an author of memoirs" (*M* p. 9).

the latter plain as Bett himself acknowledges (B pp. 259, and 266-7). Using Sextus is crucial for the further reasons that he is the only original source of ancient Pyrrhonism, and because I claim that Machado gets closer to ancient Pyrrhonism with his last major character, Aires. Bett says that perhaps Machado's skepticism "is [a] scepticism of a form derived from his reading of Montaigne and Pascal" (B p. 267) and that with Aires, that is, in Machado's final formulation of the skeptical life-view, he does have a character whose similarities with an ancient Pyrrhonian "are much more substantial" (B p. 267). These two claims made by Bett summarize my true position concerning Machado's relation to the skeptical tradition.

Bett's second major criticism is that the claim (which he attributes to me) that the basic components of ancient Pyrrhonism, that is, *zêtêsis*, *epochê* and *ataraxia*, "are introduced one by one into the later novels" (B p. 259) is "inherently somewhat difficult to credit" (B p. 261). Bett attributes to me the view that "*Epitaph of a Small Winner (Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas)* contains only [emphasis added] 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" (B p. 259). But he points out that "[a]ncient Pyrrhonism is a total outlook, in which the three main elements are intimately connected with one another." It makes no sense, he concludes, "to write novels illustrating *parts* of it, in isolation from the rest" (B p. 261). I am in full agreement with Bett's point about Pyrrhonism and regret he imputes such an error to me. I wished he had read more attentively the passage in my book where I say that "the characters that most clearly exhibit the skeptical life-view – Brás Cubas, Dom Casmurro, and Aires – go through *zêtêsis*, *epochê*, and *ataraxia*" (M p. 9). What I do say is that Pyrrhonism does not appear from the be-

ginning fully developed in Machado's fiction. I say that "Brás Cubas exhibits embryonic *epochê* and *ataraxia* and Dom Casmurro embryonic *ataraxia*" (*M* p. 9). Note that in all cases the three elements are there although differently developed. Besides the influence of Montaigne and Pascal, another reason I say quite explicitly that Brás Cubas's and Dom Casmurro's skeptical life-views *are not* specifically ancient Pyrrhonian (respectively, at *M* pp. 114-116 and 156-157) is precisely because the three elements are not fully developed in their views. I claim that Aires's skeptical life-view is the most similar to ancient Pyrrhonism, among other reasons, because it contains the three elements more fully developed. Bett says that this developmental view is unlikely, for if Machado had one element of ancient Pyrrhonism he would also have the others (for ancient Pyrrhonism is a total outlook) and it would make no sense to present each one at a time in each novel (*B* p. 261). I hold that Machado does not have a full Pyrrhonian outlook from the outset. He elaborates it during his second phase in response to particular problems generated from within his own fiction prior to *Epitaph*. I think I may still talk of Pyrrhonism because all its components are present in embryonic form and the final formulation of the skeptical life-view resembles ancient Pyrrhonism. I see no difficulty in this developmental approach. In fact I think it is the most plausible even in the case of ancient skepticism. Academic skepticism evolved through generations of Academics and there are no historical indications that ancient Pyrrhonism was made up all at once.

Another view Bett wrongly attributes to me is that I assume "ancient Pyrrhonism was simply adopted wholesale in early modern philosophy" (*B* p. 260). I do not make this assumption. When I review the history of skepticism from the Church Fathers to the 17th century I indicate its relation to

Christianity which introduces major transformations in the tradition *vis-à-vis* ancient Pyrrhonism. When referring to Pascal – the modern author who dealt with skepticism who most influenced Machado – I am quite emphatic in saying that "Pascal radically modifies the skeptical tradition" (*M* p. 7)⁴. Still, concerning the early modern revival of ancient skepticism⁵, Bett says that "Montaigne is not in any strict sense a Pyrrhonist" (*B* p. 252). I agree he is not strictly ancient Pyrrhonian, but he is much closer to ancient Pyrrhonism than Bett thinks. I argue this elsewhere⁶. I can here only state that Bett is wrong in claiming that "*ataraxia* gets very little attention" in Montaigne's exposition of Pyrrhonism in his *Apology* (*B* p. 260). Neither Machado nor Montaigne exhibit Pyrrhonism lacking such a crucial component. Montaigne's references to Pyrrho follow Diogenes Laertius who gives prominence to *ataraxia* in Pyrrho's life⁷. Montaigne's own diagnosis of some of the main human problems is clearly Pyrrhonian even when he is not di-

⁴ See Maia Neto, (1995). It is not misleading to speak of Pascal's Christianization of ancient skepticism for he interprets the latter in terms of Christian doctrines. Pascal holds that skepticism is epistemologically irrefutable (because of the Fall) but practically untenable (because man was originally created in certainty and truth). Although Pascal holds epistemological skepticism he is quite hostile to Pyrrhonism. I show in the Christianization of Pyrrhonism that he subverts the ancient skeptics' practical commitments, which he finds contrary to Christianity. It does make sense to speak of Christianization of skepticism or Pyrrhonism because the latter is the main philosophy which he transforms in constructing his own Christian position.

⁵ On this revival see Popkin (1979) (Portuguese translation, (1996)) and Paganini (1991).

⁶ See Maia Neto (1995), pp. 10-17.

⁷ Montaigne, "Apologie de Raimond Sebond", Montaigne (1965) II, chapter 12, p. 205.

rectly reporting Pyrrhonism⁸. When he follows Sextus's exposition of ancient Pyrrhonism more closely, *ataraxia* not only appears as the prominent feature of ancient skepticism but he even suggests an explanation of why *ataraxia* follows from *epochê*. Montaigne says that suspension itself entails tranquility because it means the end of the oscillations of the mind that at one moment believes *p* and at the next believes not-*p*⁹. The point is crucial in the progress of the skeptical life-view from Brás Cubas and Dom Casmurro (who suffered terribly from this specific kind of disturbance) to Aires. *Ataraxia* is therefore an instance of a crucial element of ancient Pyrrhonism that receives insufficient attention and analysis by Sextus Empiricus but which is elaborated by Montaigne. It is further expanded by Machado in the development of some of his main characters.

Bett also has objections to my specific interpretations of Brás Cubas, Dom Casmurro and Aires. He seems to find a contradiction in my saying that Brás Cubas's investigation (*zêtêsis*) concerns philosophical doctrines, in particular Quincas Borba's Humanitism, but later (*M* p. 116) I say that it concerns social life. Humanitism stands for philosophical doctrine in general in *Epitaph*. It is a caricature of what Machado takes to be the determinant aspects of such doctrines. I show below that its examination by Brás Cubas is intimately related to his inquiry into social life. Bett then says (*B* p. 262) that Brás Cubas actually does not investigate either of them. I argue that Brás Cubas, the living character, has no reflective stance, but that the deceased writer does carry out a critical examination.

⁸"L'agitation de notre esprit nous apporte de maladies" (Montaigne, (1965), p. 206).

⁹Montaigne, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

He carefully examines the hidden perverse motives that give rise to social actions and institutions (just see chapters such as "Equivalência das janelas" [Equivalence of Windows], "A ponta do nariz" [The Tip of the Nose], "A solda" [The Solder], etc.) In these and other chapters he presents philosophical views quite similar to those held by Erasmus, Montaigne, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Bayle and Mandeville¹⁰. It is this very examination of human life – first of all, of his own life while alive, but also of those with whom he related – that amounts to an empirical refutation of Humanitism. Brás Cubas has a philosophical criterion to select the facts to be included in his autobiography. The episodes related are clearly inconsistent with the basic tenets of Humanitism¹¹. I therefore totally disagree from Bett's view "that Humanitism is not by any means a central theme in the novel" (B p. 263).

But granting that Brás Cubas does carry out inquiry, is his investigation *zêtêtic*? Bett says that the skepticism exhibited in the novel "has no particular connection with the first stage of the ancient Pyrrhonist's scepticism" (B pp. 262-3). That Brás Cubas's *zêtêsis* is not specifically of the ancient Pyrrhonian type I make plain in the book: "Brás Cubas's *zêtêsis* is not typically Pyrrhonian" (M p. 116). His investigation is – as I say throughout the chapter – "more Augustinian-Jansenist and Pascalian"

¹⁰ Brás Cubas, the living character, made Dona Plácida the mediator of his adulterous love by giving her an endowment, which saved her from poverty. The deceased narrator concludes from this and other episodes that "o vício é muitas vezes o estrume da virtude. O que não impede que a virtude seja uma flor cheirosa e sã". Machado de Assis (1962), Vol. 1, p. 585, ("vice is often the fertilizing manure of virtue. Which does not prevent virtue from being a fragrant and healthy flower" (1952), p. 137).

¹¹ I show this in the section "From the Naive to the Skeptical Life-View" of Chapter Five, M pp. 94-116.

than Pyrrhonian (*M* p. 116-117). Not being typically or specifically Pyrrhonian it does have a connection with ancient Pyrrhonism. I show that Brás Cubas's skepticism is above all a skepticism about values, and that this skepticism has some striking similarities with Sextus's¹². Following up his trajectory we see that as a living character he earnestly pursued what he believed was the supreme good: fame. From his perspective as a deceased writer he has a clear sense that - as I put it in the book, paraphrasing Sextus - the "dogmatist gets disturbed and worried during his efforts to attain or maintain what he believes is good and in avoiding or in trying to be released from what he believes is evil" (*M* p. 115). Skepticism about values is Brás Cubas's, and Sextus Empiricus', solution to this problem¹³.

With respect to my interpretation of Dom Casmurro as having full awareness of the lack of satisfactory evidence for his own belief concerning Capitu, I grant that I depart from most critics. My view is that Dom Casmurro does believe the adultery, but that he not only knows he has no decisive grounds for his belief but even purposely shows the equipollence of evidence for and against the supposed adultery. His belief is a blind act of faith. Unfortunately I cannot reproduce my argumentation here for it requires following up carefully his narrative in order to indicate his construal of equipollence. I limit myself to Bett's objections.

Bett argues that if Dom Casmurro had no good reasons for his belief he would not have acted upon it immediately. He would instead have looked for further evidence (B p. 264). But one must distinguish Bento's from Dom Casmurro's, the nar-

¹² See *M* pp. 114-116 and Maia Neto (1990), pp. 26-35.

¹³ See Sextus's (1987) 11: 110-67.

rator's, position. Bento might indeed have thought he had sufficient and good evidence and acted immediately. Dom Casmurro, who writes many years after the facts, exposes Bento's naive beliefs, showing that they lack sufficient justification, as would be the case of any other relevant belief he might have had, for instance, the belief in Capitu's innocence. The pieces of evidence and thoughts Dom Casmurro cites or muses upon that go against his belief in the adultery are considered by Bett as "a momentary lapse in his generally confident view that he does have conclusive evidence" (B p. 265). But read the book with my hypothesis in mind and you will see that in fact he is constantly balancing the scales. At one point Dom Casmurro says something that seems to incriminate Capitu. But right after he either cites something else that goes in the opposite direction or indicates a circumstance, condition, etc. that subverts whatever epistemic value the "evidence" might have. Bett cites the closing passage of the novel – "that my first love and my greatest friend... were destined to join together and deceive me" as evidence that Dom Casmurro did think his belief was better supported than its negation. (B p. 265) The passage shows that he was persuaded that she committed adultery, not that his persuasion was supported, let alone well, sufficiently or conclusively supported. That the physical resemblance is not sufficient evidence for Dom Casmurro is clear from the episode cited by Bett (B p. 264) in which Dom Casmurro mentions the portrait of the woman unrelated to Capitu but strikingly similar to her and claims that "there are these inexplicable resemblances". The other passage cited by Bett – "Pell-mell, there rushed to my mind vague, remote episodes - words, meetings, etc." (p. 264)– is not decisive either. Dom Casmurro gives many examples of the perspectival way he saw things. Each mood, condition, etc., makes things appear to him in

certain ways. When he is in love, and at certain places, Capitu appears as the most dedicated of wives. When he is jealous, and at other places, Capitu appears as the most deceitful of women¹⁴. Bett further says that even if my interpretation is correct, Dom Casmurro's final position is not ancient Pyrrhonian for he ends up with a belief. But again, as Bett cites me (B p. 265), my claim is that Dom Casmurro's final position is similar to skeptical fideism. In saying this I do not abandon my case, for my thesis is not that Dom Casmurro's skeptical life-view is ancient Pyrrhonism. In fact, I do agree with Bett that Dom Casmurro's blind faith in the adultery differentiates him a good deal from the ancient Pyrrhonians. I say or imply this throughout the chapter (*M* pp. 127, 148, 154, 157).

Bett's perhaps stronger argument against my interpretation of Dom Casmurro is that it is "an elementary matter of psychology [that] 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" (B pp. 263-4). Bett rejects my pragmatic reason for Bentinho believing the adultery rather than the fidelity. He says that granted the pragmatic criterion of avoiding discomfort and distress, the belief in the adultery lead to much greater disadvantageous results (for Bento's life was wretched without Capitu). I disagree. Each belief implies specific decisions and actions. The belief in the coincidence would determine staying with Capitu, the source of Bento's distressing doubts. The belief in the adultery implied getting rid of this source. I think Bett misses one of the main Pyrrhonian points of the novel when he says it is psychologi-

¹⁴ Dom Casmurro's procedure exemplifies Aenesidemus' fourth and fifth modes. See Sextus Empiricus (1990), I. 100-123.

cally implausible that one might pay such a high price for a decision based on a belief deprived of sufficient justification. Staying with Capitu would mean to continue being exposed to "Dúvidas sobre dúvidas" [Doubts upon doubts]. Doubt is such a terrible evil that Dom Casmurro decided for a retired, "casmurro" life without Capitu, instead of a life occasionally happy, always exciting, but full of ambiguity and contradiction. I find this a powerful statement to the effect that *ataraxia* is human beings' supreme end.

With respect to Machado's last skeptical character, Counselor Aires, although Bett agrees that "the similarities between Aires and an ancient Pyrrhonist are much more substantial than in the case of the other novels Maia Neto discusses" (B p. 267), which is precisely my thesis, he raises three objections to my interpretation. "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" (B p. 266). According to Aires's own view, his years as a diplomat favored his skeptical disposition: "A diplomacia tem este efeito que separa o funcionário dos partidos e o deixa tão alheio a eles, que fica impossível de opinar com verdade, ou, quando menos, com certeza¹⁵". [Diplomacy has the effect of separating its functionary from the parties and keeping him so far from them that it is impossible to express an opinion with verity, or at least with assurance¹⁶]. "Opinar com verdade" means not that he says things he knows are not true, but that he does not know if they are true. This interpretation is corroborated by his saying "at least with assurance," which indicates that Aires may

¹⁵ Machado de Assis (1962), vol. 1, p. 1016.

¹⁶ Machado de Assis (1965), p. 139.

consider some of his opinions as probable but not as true (a position consistent with Academic skepticism). Second, Bett argues that it is not obvious we should believe Aires's claim "that his final attitude towards Fidélia is mere disinterested aesthetic appreciation" (B p. 266). Indeed, we have to rely on what he says because he is the fictional author of the narrative. I argue extensively (*M* pp. 12-17) for this hermeneutic position and against the view of an implied real author (Machado) who transcends the limited perspective of the fictional authors, conveying the true facts of the matter. My approach is the most appropriate for dealing with the skepticism exhibited in Machado's novels.

Bett's most serious objection to my interpretation of Aires is that "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." (B p. 266) First of all, and once more, my thesis concerning Aires's skeptical life-view is not that it is identical with ancient Pyrrhonism, but that it is much closer to it than Brás Cubas's and Dom Casmurro's. The criticism of Aires's *ataraxia* not having a philosophical origin is similar to that concerning Brás Cubas's *zêtêsis* not being philosophical to which I replied above. But this same critic complains that I should have taken "more seriously the implications" of my remark that Machado is not strictly a philosopher! (B p. 267). I indicate quite clearly in the preface, and it remains quite obvious throughout the book, that the philosophical dimension of Machado's work is intrinsically embedded in fictional form, above all characterization and narratology. The restricted point of view of the narrator peculiar to Machado's second phase novels is what makes possible the skeptical life-view and represents the solution to

the problematic and naive characters of Machado's first phase. The object of the skeptics' investigation in Machado's fiction is not Stoic or Epicurean physics but women. The latter are progressively characterized by Machado as a skeptical object of cognition. Most female characters of Machado's stories written between 1862 and 1871 are quite transparent and sincere. Then they begin to deceive (Guiomar), and later to systematically deceive (Virgília and Sofia). In a third – more skeptical – stage one can no longer tell if they deceive or not (Capitu). In the final and more Pyrrhonian stage, subjective hidden intentions and motives become beside the point: the narrator keeps to appearances (Fidélia)¹⁷. So the fit with ancient Pyrrhonism is not especially tight, first, because the skeptical philosophical themes are translated into fictional motifs, and, second, because at least one crucial element of Aires's skeptical life-view is not specifically Pyrrhonian. Along with *ataraxia*, phenomenal *zêtêsis*, and conformation to appearances, Aires also exhibits an aesthetic attitude. Granted these differences, I do claim that *ataraxia* and *epochê* are not unrelated in Aires. His keeping to appearances is related to his *ataraxia* through the disinterested nature of his attitude. It is precisely because *epochê* about that which is not evident implies disinterest that the source of one's worry disappears (one does not get disturbed by something

¹⁷ Bett says I identify life with woman in Machado's fiction (B p. 258 n2). I say that "woman stands for reality in Machado de Assis" (*M* p. 26). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "stand for" means "be the symbol of", not "be identical with." Now, because I wrote a book about a fictional writer and some times tried to give the reader a sense of the skeptic character's own perspective, I occasionally take the poetical license of saying things such as "Capitu, that is, life, is obscure to Bento." I do not mean these are identities. I just indicate the fictional main terms of the cognitive skeptical relation that takes place in the novels.

towards which one is indifferent) and *ataraxia* supervenes. Aires's final position is one in which he is no longer interested in finding out whether that which appears outwardly in Fidélia's behavior corresponds or not to her supposed true hidden intentions and motives. He keeps to appearances in a aesthetic-cognitive attitude.

Why was Bett so disturbed by my use of Sextus to the point of saying that my thesis is that Machado's skepticism is specifically of the ancient Pyrrhonian variety? Maybe we have different views on the history of philosophy and ideas. I do not think Pyrrhonism only makes sense – and can be considered – as it flourished in antiquity. I, and many other historians of philosophy, find it an extremely valuable tool for studying modern philosophy and ideas because of its great influence from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. For instance, in discussing Hume's skepticism, it is quite appropriate to compare and contrast it with ancient Pyrrhonism, pointing out similarities and dissimilarities, even if Hume's knowledge of ancient Pyrrhonism did not come directly from Sextus (what is probably the case), and his skepticism differs in fundamental ways from ancient Pyrrhonism (what is certainly the case). I think that any treatment of any kind of skepticism can only profit from reference to ancient skepticism. This is particularly the case of the skepticism exhibited in Machado's works. Of course, granted he did not read Sextus, the precise formulation of the doctrine would be impossible. But Machado probably read Cicero and Diogenes Laertius, and certainly read Montaigne and Pascal. All these writers deal with different aspects of ancient skepticism. Because ancient skepticism was above all an attitude and way of life, it is not a miracle that a philosophically minded writer of genius such as Machado could progressively recover from his readings the main ele-

ments of Pyrrhonism and exhibit some of this attitude and way of life in his fiction.

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