

ONCE AGAIN ON MAIA NETO, MACHADO, MONTAIGNE, PASCAL AND SEXTUS

RICHARD BETT

*Philosophy Department,
Johns Hopkins University,
347 Gilman Hall,
3400 N. Charles Street,
BALTIMORE MD 21218-2690,
U.S.A.*

BETT_R@JHUNIX.HCF.JHU.EDU

I am glad to have received Maia Neto's very careful and ingeniously argued reply to my review of his book, *Machado de Assis: The Brazilian Pyrrhonian*¹, in the April issue of this journal². And let me concede right away that it is true, as he points out there numerous times, that he never actually asserts, in the book, what I call his "main thesis" – namely, that Machado's novels exhibit a scepticism "of the ancient Pyrrhonian variety" (257). What I should have said, and what I am still prepared to say despite everything Maia Neto offers in reply, is that he is *in effect committed* to this thesis by the extensive use he makes of the writings of Sextus Empiricus. Though he frequently refers to Montaigne and Pascal – and I never tried to suggest other-

¹ West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994.

² José R. Maia Neto, "Reply to Bett", *Manuscrito* Vol. XIX, n^o 1 (April 1996), 269-84. My review appeared on pages 257-67 of the same issue.

wise in my original review – he refers just as frequently, and typically in more specific terms, to Sextus. Moreover, his whole picture of Machado's development in the latter part of his career – a development that occupies the majority of the book – is structured around concepts that, I still maintain, receive systematic exposition *only* in ancient Pyrrhonism. This last point is the crucial one, and deserves a little expansion.

The concepts in question are those of investigation (*zêtêsis*), suspension of judgement (*epochê*) and untroubledness (*ataraxia*). In ancient Pyrrhonism these three concepts are central and intimately connected. Maia Neto holds that *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (*Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*) exemplifies the first of these, *Dom Casmurro* the second, and *Esau and Jacob* and especially *Counselor Aires' Memorial* the third³. My first general objection to this account was that it seems to require a rather precise grasp of these concepts and their interrelations. One could achieve such a grasp easily enough by reading Sextus, and Maia Neto begins his book with a lucid exposition of the role of these concepts in Sextus. But Machado appears never to have read Sextus. He certainly did read Montaigne and Pascal, and this is where, according to Maia Neto, he learned about scepticism. Yet neither Montaigne nor Pascal provides any systematic treatment of ancient scepticism, or, in particular, any systematic discussion of these three concepts and the relations among them; though both are importantly affected by ancient scepticism, neither comes close to adopting it wholesale, and neither is anywhere concerned to give his readers a precise overview of its central elements. Montaigne's

³ Maia Neto objects (271-2) that I failed to note that he also holds that in *Dom Casmurro* *ataraxia*, and in *Epitaph of a Small Winner* *epochê* and *ataraxia*, are present in an "embryonic" form. I address this point below.

Apology for Raymond Sebond is not intended as such an overview, nor can it be used as such; neither Maia Neto's reply, nor the other book of his to which he there refers⁴, persuade me to change my mind on this issue. Indeed, Maia Neto's frequent recourse to Sextus as a point of comparison for the alleged Pyrrhonism of Machado seems to me to amount to an implicit recognition of this point. It is Sextus, not Montaigne or Pascal, who is again and again invoked to elucidate the three concepts, and this, I think, is no accident; it would be very difficult to find *elucidations* of the three concepts in Montaigne and Pascal.

Here, then, is the position. The concepts that, according to Maia Neto's interpretation, receive embodiment in Machado's later novels are concepts that he could only have learned about, in the way and to the degree that Maia Neto's own view of his literary strategy requires, from the ancient Pyrrhonist sources themselves; he could not have learned about them from Montaigne and Pascal unless those authors had adopted, or reported on, the ancient sceptical outlook to a far greater extent than appears to me to be the case. I suspect that this is a major point on which Maia Neto and I will continue to disagree. However, this is what I mean by saying that Maia Neto is in effect committed to Machado's having incorporated into his novels a scepticism "of the ancient Pyrrhonian variety" – even though it was admittedly misleading of me to claim that Maia Neto's "main thesis" was that Machado did so.

I also objected that it was inherently implausible to suppose that Machado would have chosen to introduce the three

⁴ José Raimundo Maia Neto, *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism: Scepticism and Faith in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Shestov* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995).

Pyrrhonian concepts gradually into his novels, fully including all three of them only at the end. The three concepts are intimately connected in scepticism, forming a single, global outlook; to offer *parts* of this outlook, without the accompaniment of the other parts, would seem a bizarre procedure. Maia Neto presents this as a development, the full sceptical position being gradually unfolded. But this, I suggested, would be a very peculiar kind of development. It cannot be that Machado gradually came to understand these concepts one by one; for none of them can be properly understood without a grasp of its relations to the others. But if he understood all of them from the start, it is hard to see why he would not give all of them their full importance until the end. Maia Neto objects that on his interpretation, all three are in fact present from the start, at least in “embryonic” form; for example, *Epitaph of a Small Winner* focuses on *zêtêsis*, but also contains “embryonic” *epochê* and *ataraxia*. I am not sure what this means – his discussion of the novels in question does not really make the point clear – and in the interests of simplicity, I omitted any reference to it from my original review. But even if we include this point, it does not make Maia Neto’s picture of Machado’s development any less peculiar; it remains true that we are being asked to suppose that Machado gave narrative life to the main concepts of Pyrrhonism one by one. I am quite happy to agree that ancient Pyrrhonism itself may have developed over the course of time (indeed, the ancient evidence seems to me to make very clear that it did so), and also that Machado’s fiction underwent various kinds of development. But I would find it extremely hard to fathom the psychology of an author whose

works underwent the *specific* development, in relation to Pyrrhonism, that Maia Neto attributes to Machado⁵.

I will not comment in detail on Maia Neto's reactions to my discussion of his interpretation of specific novels. It still seems to me that the view that *Epitaph of a Small Winner* exemplifies anything like the Pyrrhonist activity of *zêtêsis*, investigation, has the air of an *ad hoc* assumption. As for *Dom Casmurro*, I will make just two points. First, I argued that the final passage of the novel suggests, contrary to Maia Neto's interpretation, that the narrator does not merely *adopt* the belief that his wife and his best friend had an affair, but that he takes this belief to be *better supported* than its opposite. Maia Neto takes issue with this in his reply. But the context of the passage – and I did not stress this sufficiently in my previous discussion – seems to favor my reading. The narrator spends a paragraph discussing whether or not his wife's infidelity was an expression of traits of character which she already possessed as a child; he concludes that he believes that this is indeed so, and that the reader will also "have to recognize" this. He then says, "Well, whatever may be the solution, one thing remains...", and this is that his wife and his best friend "were destined to join together and deceive" him⁶. Now, since his belief that his wife's treacherous character existed in her from childhood is one which he

⁵ It is also true, incidentally, that if Pyrrhonism itself did develop, it was not in anything like this way. On the various different phases of Pyrrhonism, see my "Aristocles on Timon on Pyrrho: the Text, its Logic, and its Credibility", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 12 (1994), 137-81, and the Introduction to my translation, with commentary, of Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, forthcoming 1997).

⁶ 276-7, in the translation by Helen Caldwell (New York: Noonday Press, 1953).

thinks that the reader will have to agree to, it is clear that he does not take this belief to be without support; on the contrary, he thinks that the evidence furnishes it with support sufficient to convince others of it as well. However, the words “whatever may be the solution” clearly suggest that he takes this evidence to be of less than invincible strength. *This* belief, then, is one that he both holds and takes to have some respectable epistemological basis; yet it is a basis which, in his view, is not entirely beyond question. But the belief that his wife and his best friend had an affair is then placed in *contrast* with this other belief; even if the other belief turned out to be incorrect, he suggests, the belief that they had an affair would stand firm. The belief that they had an affair is thus represented as enjoying *definitely stronger* support than that possessed by the other belief, which itself is represented as having a basis that is by no means negligible. Thus I cannot accept Maia Neto’s claim that “The passage shows that he was persuaded that she committed adultery, not that this persuasion was supported, let alone well, sufficiently or conclusively supported” (277).

Second, I said that Maia Neto’s suggestion that the narrator may have *pragmatic* reasons for believing that there was an affair, whether or not this belief is adequately supported, was fanciful, since there was clearly much more to lose if he believed this than if he believed the opposite. Maia Neto disputes this, saying that “Each belief implies specific decisions and actions”, and that “the belief in the coincidence [i.e. that the physical resemblance between his friend and his son was a coincidence, and hence that there was no reason to suspect an affair] would determine staying with [his wife] Capitú, the source of [the narrator] Bento’s distressing doubts” (278). I agree that each belief carries with it further implications; but

Maia Neto does not pursue this line of thought far enough. If Bento had believed that the physical resemblance was merely a coincidence, then his wife would *not* have been a source of “distressing doubts”; the doubts only come into the picture along with the inclination to suspect an affair – in fact, that is precisely what the doubts themselves consist in. If he had believed that the resemblance was just a coincidence, he could have stayed with Capitú and they could simply have continued their happy married life. I therefore stand by my view that the pragmatic considerations are overwhelmingly *against* his adopting the belief that there was an affair.

Maia Neto wonders, at the close of his reply, whether “we have different views on the history of philosophy and ideas” (282). I do not think so. I entirely agree with him that Pyrrhonism can be “an extremely valuable tool for studying modern philosophy and ideas because of its great influence from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment” (282), and also that it can be worthwhile to compare and contrast the ideas of a modern philosopher (such as Hume) with ancient Pyrrhonism even if the modern philosopher was not directly acquainted with ancient Pyrrhonism. But we have to be very careful here. If we are talking about influences from an earlier period of thought on a later, we have to restrict ourselves to those specific figures from the earlier period who can reasonably be supposed to have *exerted* some influence on the later thinker; if, on the other hand, we are merely offering comparisons and contrasts between two thinkers, without trying to suggest that one influenced the other, then we have to make clear that this is the case. It seems to me that Maia Neto’s approach falls uneasily between these two. There may certainly be some point in comparing Sextus and Machado, even though Machado almost certainly never read Sextus. I myself think that this would in

fact be worthwhile only in the case of the novels featuring Counselor Aires, since the Pyrrhonism Maia Neto claims to detect in *Epitaph of a Small Winner* and *Dom Casmurro* seems to me to be non-existent; but I have absolutely no *a priori* objection to such comparisons. But it seems that Maia Neto wants to use Sextus as more than just an interesting point of comparison. He wants to suggest – if I understand him correctly – that Sextus (or ancient Pyrrhonism more generally) did exert a certain indirect influence on Machado, through Montaigne and Pascal⁷. At any rate, this is clearly what he needs to say, if the developmental thesis of the second part of his book is to hold water. Yet this is also precisely what I have maintained that he *cannot* say, given the philosophical distance between Montaigne and Pascal on the one hand, and ancient Pyrrhonism on the other.

⁷ In his reply (282), he also says that Machado “probably read Cicero and Diogenes Laertius”, and that this may have contributed to his knowledge of ancient scepticism. I am not competent to judge how probable this is; and Machado would, of course, have had to read precisely the right pieces of Cicero and Diogenes, since the vast majority of both authors’ writings have nothing whatever to do with ancient scepticism. But in any case, this suggestion is very different from the position in the book (5), where Maia Neto is quite clear that Machado learned about ancient Pyrrhonism via Montaigne and Pascal, also observing that his library contained none of the ancient sources dealing with scepticism.