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MACHADO DE ASSIS AS PHILOSOPHER

Machado de Assis como filósofo

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Resumo: Pretende-se apresentar argumentos para a inclusão de Machado de Assis no cânone da filosofia. Os argumentos são agrupados em quatro ordens: biográfica, contextual, estilística e sistemática. Cada um dos argumentos desafia um pressuposto da matriz colonial de poder. O argumento biográfico busca traçar a trajetória intelectual de Machado de Assis, considerando a filosofia como um de seus “projetos de vida”. O argumento contextual recupera a forma pela qual a circulação de ideias filosóficas ocorreu no Brasil. O argumento estilístico mostra como o autor expressa certo “pensamento ficcional” que incide sobre a própria tradição ocidental. O argumento sistemático busca localizar em sua obra análises filosóficas significativas e o reconhecimento pela comunidade de filósofos e historiadores da filosofia.

Palavras-chave: Ceticismo. Ficção. Machado de Assis. História da filosofia.

Abstract This paper argues for the inclusion of Machado de Assis in the canon of philosophy. The arguments are divided into four categories: biographical, contextual, stylistic, and systematic. Each of them challenges an assumption of the colonial matrix of power. The biographical argument traces Machado's intellectual trajectory in order to consider philosophy one of his "life projects." The contextual argument traces back the way philosophical ideas spread in Brazil. The stylistic argument reveals how the author expresses a certain "fictional thinking" that is based on the western tradition itself. The systematic argument seeks to locate in his work significant philosophical analysis of questions, and his recognition by the community of philosophers and historians of philosophy.

Keywords: Skepticism. Fiction. Machado de Assis. History of philosophy.

Introduction

Since Helen Caldwell translated and interpreted Machado de Assis' novels, there has been a growing interest in his works on the part of international literary criticism. Despite the limited audience of his literature, which was written in Portuguese, and the fact that it deals with the picturesque issues of Rio de Janeiro in the 19th century, Machadian fiction expresses original characteristics both in its hybrid narrative structures, in which diverse genres constitute a kind of textual assemblage and meta-narrative, and in the ironic intentions with which the narrators address philosophical themes and human dilemmas. Literary criticism identifies the development of a literary perspective from which Machado's narrators express skeptical judgments about human behavior and contradictions.

The reasons for not considering him within the philosophical canon are mainly political. Walter Mignolo argues that the western canon is anchored in the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality: “one constantly named and celebrated (progress, development, growth) and the other silenced or referred to as problems to be solved by

the former (poverty, misery, inequities, injustices, corruption, commodification, and dispensability of human life)¹. This colonial matrix of power creates geo-historical spaces that define who are the thinkers and how knowledge is constructed, that is, who belongs to civilization and who should be civilized. Machado could not see his work translated into German or French during his lifetime because his French publishers, the Garnier brothers, adopted capitalist methods of publishing exploitation, even disdaining Machado's potential to become international². Nowadays, U.S.-American intelligentsia feeds a certain literary prejudice against Machado de Assis, according to Earl Fitz³.

By proposing a new approach to analyzing Machado de Assis, presenting him as a philosopher, I intend to challenge the strength of the colonial matrix of power, which Machado himself challenges by being black, poor, unschooled and peripheral; nevertheless, he is a master storyteller. I also intend to make sense of the basic intuition that there is something deeply explanatory about human life there, allowing us to consider him not just as a philosophical author, but as a philosopher. It is all about an alternative explanation to the traditional philosophical canon, somewhat due to Machado's sociocultural and geographical location. My interest is not so much in the dispute over Machadean's hermeneutic texts. Furthermore, this study is not intended to examine in depth the philosophical status of each phase of Machado's writings. Ultimately, Machado's philosophy also needs to be inferred from his literature, which interpreters have done. Rather, my focus is on a special type of comparative literature study that seeks to identify a "life project" with traces of humanity and intercultural references to justify the provision of a place for the fictionist in the compendia of the History of Philosophy.

It is quite evident that historians of philosophy adopt a variety of criteria to write their compendia, and also adopt different methods for the exposition of the systems and the articulations that link the authors to the historical context and other intellectual manifestations. Nevertheless, a range of arguments should be necessary to at least recognize an author as an important representative of the Brazilian Philosophy – the philosophy made in or from Brazil or by Brazilians. For instance, an analysis of the different criteria used by the historiographical compendia will reveal that few of them give some credit to the Brazilian fictionist. This neglect is closely linked to the colonial matrix of power and its consequences, including the "negative self-image" of Brazilian intellectuals, as Margutti Pinto⁴ points out.

The reasons for considering him a philosopher go beyond observing the philosophies declared by narrators and characters in novels and short stories. Above all, the philosophical themes and their modes of exposition can be related both internally, among Brazilian peers, and externally to the European history of philosophy. This is why we can treat him as an outsider-insider. My arguments are divided into four categories: biographical, contextual, stylistic, and systematic. The biographical argument seeks to trace Machado de Assis' intellectual trajectory and his relation with philosophy beginning with his first essays, relating his literary, philosophical, and political projects to "life projects". Part of the theoretical context of reception and transformation of philosophical ideas around the thesis of spiritualist eclecticism will be covered. The stylistic argument has to do with the distinction between narrative categories and genres. In Machado's works, it expresses, according to Nunes⁵, a certain "fictional thinking". The use of humor, ironic imitation, and the technique of problematizing philosophical discourses are

¹ MIGNOLO, Walter. *The darker side of western modernity: global futures, decolonial options*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, p. xvii.

² GRANJA, Lúcia. "Três é demais ou por que Garnier não traduziu Machado de Assis?" In: *Machado de Assis em Linha*, v. 11, n. 11, dez. 2018.

³ FITZ, Earl. The Education of Stuffed Shirts: Machado's reception in the United States. In: *Machado Assis em Linha*, n. 15, 2022.

⁴ MARGUTTI PINTO, Paulo. The history of XIX century Brazilian Philosophy as an unfortunate fable. In: *Revista de Filosofia Aurora*, Curitiba: Editora PUCPRESS, v. 35, 2023, p. 14.

⁵ NUNES, Benedito. "Machado de Assis e a filosofia". In: NUNES, Benedito. *No tempo do niilismo e outros ensaios*. São Paulo: Ática, 1993.

skeptical devices with which the author crafts this fictional thought. The most striking discussion is around the problem of the canon in philosophy, because it needs metaphilosophical tools rather than exegetical ones. The argument in favor of the insertion of an author in the history of philosophy presupposes that his work proposes significant philosophical answers and that it is recognized by the community of philosophers and historians of philosophy; at the end of the paper, a general picture of reception suggests that these requirements are met.

The biographical argument

This section intends to challenge the claim that the young Machado de Assis did not establish a philosophical project for himself; as he did not intend to be a philosopher, nor did he write philosophy books, considering him a philosopher would be inconsistent. Indeed, the interpreters consider that the relevant philosophical aspects arise after the publication of *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas, 1880-81) and are revealed mostly in novels.

Machado's youth takes place in the period before he wrote novels, between the mid-1850s and the end of the 1860s. During this period, Machado participated in some intellectual circles, around the publisher Paula Brito's group (Petalógica) and the literary meetings in Caetano Filgueiras's office. It is possible to make inferences on the intentions he projected on himself by collecting clues, for instance, from the library book cards in the libraries Machado used to frequent; in his own personal library (where about 100 out of the 700 books deal with some philosophical theme); in biographical comments of friends, particularly Joaquim Nabuco, whose biography emphasizes Machado's philosophical-professorial profile; in the writer's few remembrances of that period, for example, in the chronicle *O velho Senado* (The Old Senate, 1896); in some tales about stories of poor men who intend to rise socially through literature, for example, the tale *O programa* (The Program, 1882-1883) and so on. Combining these indications with the incipient production, we can at least trace an intention to acquire philosophical competencies that would provide theoretical support to works he would write later, whether artistic or not. The main point is that Machado intentionally seeks philosophical support for his activities from the very beginning. That involves firstly the adoption of a philosophical perspective: the spiritualist eclecticism.

Machado wrote poetry, essays, translations, imitations, dramas, theater reviews, and parliamentary chronicles until the early 1860s. This is a period before he actually engaged in writing fiction. It is a formative period oriented toward competition and intellectual success. From this standpoint, becoming a great novelist was not a possibility with the greatest advantages for Machado. As he did not attend formal education, the gaps in his cultural capital were filled through the help of Priest Silveira Sarmiento, a "modest preceptor" who probably reinforced in Machado's mind the eclecticist-spiritualist philosophy of Victor Cousin, Chateaubriand, Eugène Pelletan, and Monte Alverne. The French eclecticist was transformed and adapted to local issues. Adopting this worldview, he developed an eclecticist thesis on the political functions of journalism and a thesis on theater.

The essays *O jornal e o livro* (The Newspaper and the book) and *A reforma pelo jornal* (Reformation through the Newspaper), both published in 1859, express progressive theses regarding history. Both essays assume there is a movement of the human spirit throughout history toward perfectibility. The press would express the spiritual moment that replaces books as a means of transforming and moralizing consciences. Machado resorted to Pelletan's theses presented in *Le Monde Marche* (1857), a book that had become, in Machado's words, "the Gospel of a religion."

Pelletan intended to reconcile the Enlightenment program with the dogmas of the Christian tradition, in order to conceive a divine law that drives industrial progress. The reading of this gospel and the finding of a liberal God will have effects on poems of the young Machado, such as *Esperança* (Hope), *A missão do poeta* (The poet's mission),

and *O progresso* (The progress), dedicated to Pelletan. Poetry and politics were "two very different faces of civilized society." The main difference was that the journalist's mission coincided with the last turn of the wheel of progress. In comparison to the book, the newspaper suited the popular emancipation better because it was read and discussed in the marketplaces and on the trolleys. The laws of the market would determine the tasks of the newspapers, according to the principle of free enterprise and the invisible balancing of supply and demand: "the development of credit wants the development of journalism because journalism is nothing but a great intellectual bank, great monetization of ideas"⁶. The originality of these essays consists of testing the hypothesis on the local case. The underlying question was to know if the Brazilian spirit was moving at the same pace as the European one, or rather, if it had what it took to share and enjoy the achievements of civilization⁷.

Considering that Machado's later fiction would deal in several ways with a set of liberal ideals, it is essential to understand the roots and the routes of these ideals in his intellectual development. His theoretical roots lie in the eclecticist philosophy, which combined economic ideology and religious doctrine or, in Cousin's terms, modern sciences and spiritualism. According to Antonio Paim⁸, eclecticism "was a type of official philosophy during the Second Reign". This philosophy provided a dialectical method of understanding the history of philosophy as well as elements for understanding human nature beyond materialistic limits.

During the 1860s, Machado also mobilized this philosophical capital for voicing his opinions in the Drama Conservatory and for the constitution of a criterion by which he could conceive and judge literary pieces of work. The Conservatory itself was an eclectic institution, in the sense that it had censorship power while aiming at the moral emancipation of people. This apparent contradiction appears in several of Machado's reflections about freedom. He believed he possessed "philosophism swing", that is, he intended to place himself in a conciliatory position between the conflicting cultural movements:

My opinions on the theater are **absolutely eclectic**. I do not subscribe to the maxims of the realistic school, nor do I fully accept the school of romantic abstractions; I admit and applaud the drama as the absolute form of the theater; nevertheless, I do not condemn the admirable scenes of Corneille and Racine. I take from each thing a portion and make my ideal of art, which I embrace and defend.⁹

Consider the prevailing theme of his first poems: there is a theological-metaphysical content that aims to touch the sensitivity of the unbeliever (reader, listener) from a set of Christian motifs, such as the creation of an atmosphere of agony, the use of eschatology, pessimism due to human weaknesses in a devastated society, and the idea of redemption in the savior. In these poems, Machado circumscribes the dogma of original sin, whose remedy depends on Grace. The thesis of spiritualism was that metaphysical truths could be described by the philosopher-poet, as a manner of sublimating personal anguish, poverty, blackness, marginality, bereavement (for the dead mother and sister) and, above all, of transcending human disputes and sharing a higher truth.

Machado himself would disguise or hide some of the biographical indications of his philosophical background. Most of the metaphysical poems from his youth would be replaced in the book *Crisálidas* (Chrysalides, 1864). About forty years later, when publishing *Poesias Completas* (Complete Poetries, 1901), he changed the dedication to his

⁶ ASSIS, Joaquim Maria Machado de. *Obra completa em quatro volumes*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 2008, v. 3, p. 995.

⁷ MARTINS, Alex Lara. *Machado de Assis: o filósofo brasileiro*. Porto Alegre: Editora Fi, 2017.

⁸ PAIM, Antonio. *História das ideias filosóficas no Brasil*. 5. ed. Londrina: Editora UEL, 1997, p. 70.

⁹ ASSIS, Joaquim Maria Machado de. *Obra completa em quatro volumes*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 2008, v. 3, p. 1020, emphasis added.

"modest preceptor" and eliminate from his first book the few poems with philosophical-theological features.

As biographers Jean-Michel Massa¹⁰ and Magalhães Júnior¹¹ demonstrate, the acquisition of philosophical eclecticist capital was as important as crony relationships to Machado's literary rise, first as a journalist and theatrologist, and then as a fictionist. Ignoring the way he acquired and used this philosophical capital is the major cause of a common misunderstanding: that *The Posthumous Memoirs* is at the beginning of his journey into philosophy, even though this novel may mark the consolidation of an original philosophical perspective.

The contextual argument

This section intends to challenge the thesis that there were neither material conditions nor a group of writers and readers able to create the conditions for the emergence of original philosophers in Brazil, especially self-teaching philosophers, in the mid-19th century. This is a thesis defended by Silvio Romero, an obstinate critic of Machado de Assis, and reaffirmed by eminent historians of Brazilian philosophy, such as Cruz Costa and Leonel Franca, who incorporate criteria from the western matrix of power in their judgment¹².

By previously sketching the intellectual circles, we find an outline of the shared philosophical capital (or the intellectual atmosphere, if you like) that must have provided the opportunity for a peripheral young black man like Machado, without financial resources, to stand out. Now, the point is: How was this cultural capital transmitted and capable of forming a philosophizing community?

In the first place, it would not be possible in that context to acquire philosophical capital independently of other cultural fields. The acquisition of philosophical capital was the result of investing in artistic skills, political engagement, scientific, literary and historical knowledge, and so on. The environment where this knowledge was produced was cultivated by literary-scientific associations, where general culture magazines were published. Besides Paula Brito's *Petalógica*, Machado associated with other groups, all eclectic in the sense of congregating representatives of various cultural areas, including philosophers.

Secondly, the contact with philosophy occurred in several ways in Brazil, and not only in the formal school environment. It is true that humanities were a subject taught in the royal classes; it was possible to apply for an isolated course in Pedro II Imperial School, and in the state High Schools, or join a religious organization; with resources, anyone interested in philosophy was able to travel directly to Europe, bringing back with them, besides the theoretical learning, some printed volumes on philosophy. After the middle of the 19th century, the consolidation of law and medicine colleges and state schools gave rise to the debate about the choice of better and newer philosophy compendia. There were many eclectic textbooks, by authors such as Edme Ponelle, Salustiano Pedrosa, and Count of Irajá, on whom Machado will depend during the religious debate against the moral disorders in society in which he took part in the 1860s.

These compendia expressed the most important ideological struggle of the 19th century in Brazil between the spiritualist eclecticism and its antagonists, first opposing spiritualist empiricism, then Christian traditionalism, and finally against scientism (positivism and evolutionism). Machado must have found translations of many lessons on the history of philosophy in local periodicals. He knew that the newspaper was revolutionary in terms of the democratization of knowledge and he may have taken advantage of it. Foreign magazines and newspapers, such as the *Revue des Deux Mondes*,

¹⁰ MASSA, Jean-Michel. *A juventude de Machado de Assis*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1971.

¹¹ MAGALHÃES JUNIOR, Raimundo. *Vida e obra de Machado de Assis* 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2008. 4 v.

¹² MARGUTTI PINTO, Paulo. « The history of XIX century Brazilian Philosophy as an unfortunate fable ». In: *Revista de Filosofia Aurora*, Curitiba: Editora PUCPRESS, v. 35, e202330410, 2023.

which was the nest of the eminent eclecticists, were referenced, translated, or transcribed on the pages of the local newspapers. Translations of entire philosophical works were also available in these periodicals, such as the *Course of the History of Modern Philosophy*, by the eclecticist Victor Cousin, the theological works of David Strauss and of Ernest Renan. In addition, a vast literary collection was at hand at the National Library and Museum. Machado had in his library several books and magazines with philosophical content. Moreover, Pedro II, the Emperor, encouraged scientific institutions and practices, which provided knowledge of the themes and debates occurring in Europe almost instantaneously. Reading rooms were opened all over Rio de Janeiro, where foreign newspapers were available for readers. These rooms were established in private homes, bookstores, publishing houses, typographic stores, locksmiths, warehouses, and even in mental hospitals¹³.

Thirdly, these places of transmission of philosophical capital were made accessible through cronyism, which was more or less structured as a mirror of the guild associations. According to Cunha¹⁴, the teaching of trades, directed to free or freed poor people, had a strong philanthropic character and the professional practice was controlled by corporate groups. That is the case of Machado de Assis' father, a painter and craftsman probably linked to a corporate store that required the apprentice to be trained by an official, qualified through exams and linked to his brotherhood. Although the corporations were extinguished by the Constitution of 1824, some apprenticeship practices remained under the control of workers' organizations. The work category of typographers, in which Machado had been initiated, is a significant example. He learned typography art in Paula Brito's company, at the same place and with the same friends that allowed him to start his intellectual work as a writer.

From these three considerations, one can conclude that it was possible to have a consistent philosophical education without the university system, which did not exist at all. In the mid-19th century, an intellectual was able to discuss and publish in journals associated with literary clubs, which constituted a real teaching-learning relationship. There was an atmosphere of competition among associations and young intellectuals. José Veríssimo is credited with saying that there were then "as many writers as there were readers or even more". Leaving aside the influence of genius, the contextual conditions were not favorable for Machado. He won largely because he acquired relevant philosophical skills with which he survived the struggle of emerging intellectuals.

Let us now consider the second non-artistic texts by Machado de Assis: *Os cegos* (The Blind, 1858), a set of rejoinders in the form of a philosophical essay on a topic proposed by Paula Brito, the "master of trade". The question to be answered was: Who was happier? The one who was born blind or the one who acquired blindness? Several young intellectuals ("apprentices or officers") wrote to the periodical answering the challenge. It referred to the modern debate between the empiricist and rationalist doctrines, presenting a variant of the so-called "Molyneux problem". The Brazilian variant added a moral characteristic by asking who was unhappier: the congenital blind man or the one who became blind later in life.

At the age of 19, Machado wins the philosophical debate by arguing that the congenitally blind is unhappier for three reasons: without one of the senses, this blind person will poorly explore the world; therefore, he will acquire less knowledge. Moreover, by producing fewer simple ideas derived from the senses, the combination of complex ideas will be impoverished and the work of imagination will be more difficult. Because the world is an effect or manifestation of God, being deprived of one of the senses means knowing less about divinity.

By analyzing his arguments, we realize that Machado de Assis has relatively up-to-date philosophical knowledge. He builds his argument on epistemological and

¹³ MARTINS, Alex Lara. *Machado de Assis: o filósofo brasileiro*. Porto Alegre: Editora Fi, 2017.

¹⁴ CUNHA, Luiz Antonio. *O ensino de ofícios artesanais e manufatureiros no Brasil escravocrata*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2005.

theological bases from the arsenal of arguments of modern philosophy, shared within the scientific-literary association which he had joined. Some Brazilian philosophers at the time had already published theses within this perspective, such as Gonçalves de Magalhães. Remember that the young Machado considers himself an "eclecticist" philosopher, capable of reconciling disparate concepts and theories; for example, the proof of the existence of God based on the physical reality, the adjustment of the rationalist thesis of innate ideas, and the empiricist thesis of the acquisition of ideas through the senses. The relevant point of the argument is that this philosophical development had allowed Machado to improve other capabilities since the beginning of his intellectual life, and not only when the positivist "bunch of ideas" mentioned by Romero arrived in Brazil in the mid-1870s.

The stylistic argument

The stylistic argument challenges the thesis that philosophical elements are secondary to the understanding of the worldview expressed in literature. Machado de Assis' fiction, for which he became known, is philosophical in several ways, especially because it expresses, according to Nunes¹⁵, a certain "fictional thinking", transmitting a type of knowledge capable of transforming the understanding we have of reality, of ourselves as truth-bearers, and of the very linguistic relationship that exists between our beliefs and the world. Indeed, if the literary form were exclusive to fictional genres, then we would have to remove from the philosophical library Plato's dialogues, Augustine's autobiography, and Montaigne's essays. What allows us to include Machado in this group that works on the boundary between genres is the intentionally reflective character of his texts – whether they are chronicles, short stories, or novels – which brings a narration of situations and a reasoning about the possibilities of storytelling and the limits of language itself.

The list of selected philosophers who can express themselves through literary means is made to privilege canonical western authors. For them, the literary characteristics are seen as an advantage to their philosophical insights. Mignolo¹⁶ developed the thought-provoking notion of "rhetoric of modernity" in order to discover the hidden logic of coloniality. The devices of the colonial matrix of power are structured in a network of control over language, memory, and knowledge itself. The permanent reproduction of "coloniality" imposes a single thought, giving advantages to those who belong to the colonizing lineage.

Furthermore, the condition to be a philosopher in the late nineteenth century was quite different from what it is today. Today, philosophy is shaped by the academy and by the expertise of scholars who publish papers, expecting, at best, some interlocution. Even if this philosopher can be described as a public intellectual, there are clear differences between this mode of operation and the staging of the *philosophes* in Machado's century, when the Enlightenment mode and scene still resonated¹⁷. There was a general program to spread rationality about various aspects of human life, including against reason itself. To a large extent, Machado is a polymath. He shows an acute awareness of the political role of intellectuals, although his public engagement dwindles throughout his life as he moves to the political theater backstage.

In Machado's context, the philosophical theses gathered meaning by guiding the reader-spectator to the mode of composition and to the literary form. The originality of self-reflection suggested by the Renaissance and demanded by the Enlightenment context focuses on critical reflection on the human condition; it is also measured by stylistic innovation, which brings readers, followers, commentators, and critics together.

¹⁵ NUNES, Benedito. "Machado de Assis e a filosofia". In: NUNES, Benedito. *No tempo do nihilismo e outros ensaios*. São Paulo: Ática, 1993.

¹⁶ MIGNOLO, Walter. *The darker side of western modernity: global futures, decolonial options*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

¹⁷ DOMINGUES, Ivan. *Filosofia no Brasil: legados e perspectivas*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2017.

Examples of that are Montesquieu's critical letters to the political structure, Voltaire's philosophical short stories, Nietzsche's aphorisms.

Machado would belong to this lineage of polymaths interested in creating new genres, in other words, expressions that explain the wide variety of human ways of being. The difference is that as a Brazilian man he is an *outsider-insider*, as described by Haroldo de Campos¹⁸, in the sense that his fictional thought is not marked by identity nor by a certain European origin, "but rather as difference, as an opening, as a dialogic movement of the difference, against a background of the universal"¹⁹. Like Gregório de Matos, Machado reconfigures the so-called universal codes by combining and inscribing them with the social markers of a poor, peripheral, black Brazilian. Understanding this epistemic turn is important to reveal the mechanism of the dialectical relations between the particular critiques of his society and the universalist cultural legacy.

Let us consider the radical example of the chronicles *Notas Semanais* (Weekly Notes, 1878), in which Machado searches for an adequate philosophical point of view to express the duality and the human inconstancy. He finds it by making the chronicle, as a literary genre, an imitation of human/carioca life. In a sense, the chronicler's style emulates the anthropological thesis on human volubility and duality. Roberto Schwarz²⁰ verified that the volubility of Machado's fictional form mimics both human features and ideological conflicts, but Schwarz did not see in this strategy more than "insipid metaphysics". It is as if Machado's ideological narrators produced the ideologies to be discovered and reformed by the sociological interpreters. However, by detaching the fictional pieces from the historical-sociological approach, one can have the possibility to encounter new ways of interpreting important aspects of Machado's thought.

From the standpoint of a Eurocentric perspective, the various philosophical theories presented in novels, short stories, and chronicles are nothing but a naive and ideological pastiche. From an outside-inside standpoint, however, one can highlight the recourse to plagiarism as an appropriation and transcription of the philosophical and literary canons themselves. As Rocha states,

Machado seems to write (also) in order to think about literature. He narrates in order to propose narrative problems; his oeuvre thus embodies a form whose content is the problematization of literature itself, its conditions of readability and the status of interpretation in the age of printing press²¹.

The deliberate use of this narrative strategy provides innovative weaponry for the arsenal of the skeptical tradition: it destabilizes the hierarchy of thought by promoting equivocal, often obscure, incoherent, and contradictory interpretations. Reading that set of chronicles indicates a certain turning point in thinking that would later produce *O Alienista* (The Alienist, 1882) and *Dom Casmurro* (Lord Taciturn, 1899). The very form of composition becomes voluble, imitating life and filling human gaps with sayings of the imagination, witty jokes, and believable hypotheses. This combined volubility, even when expressed in a fictional apparatus, reveals the theoretical intention of becoming a philosopher, or even better, it is maximized by the reception and the impact of the work on us, humans. When it comes to Machado, the anti-philosophical way of opposing tradition turns out to swallowing it and regurgitating it, just as in the Machadean metaphor of a brain that ruminates. In doing so, the author also moves into the baroque literary lineage of Gregório de Matos and Oswald de Andrade.

¹⁸ CAMPOS, Haroldo de. Tradition, transcreation, transculturation: the ex-centric's viewpoint. In: *TradTerm*, v. 4, n. 2, 1997, p. 11-18.

¹⁹ CAMPOS, Haroldo de. Tradition, transcreation, transculturation: the ex-centric's viewpoint. *TradTerm*, v. 4, n. 2, 1997, p. 12.

²⁰ SCHWARZ, Roberto. *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

²¹ ROCHA, João César de Castro (Org.). *The author as plagiarist: The case of Machado de Assis*. Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, 13/14 Fall 2004, Spring 2005. University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, Dartmouth, 2006, p. xxi.

The systematic argument

This is the most relevant argument for the discussion about the problem of the canon in philosophy. It requires the support of a hermeneutics that recognizes the existence of epistemic colonization, in which the predominantly European worldview is considered itself universal, unique, and indisputable. Historians assume that works are considered philosophical when: (1) it is recognized by the community of philosophers and historians of philosophy - *criterion of reception*; (2) it has significant philosophical analyses - *criterion of relevance*; and (3) it answers and proposes solutions to questions of a philosophical tradition - *criterion of reciprocity*. Facing this challenge, we would have to adopt the hermeneutic principle of tolerance and deal with the interpretations according to which the Brazilian philosophical text should avoid ethnocentric or anachronistic approaches²².

It seems that, regarding reception, the question is well settled, given the profusion of philosophical analyses in recent years. Concerning Machado de Assis, international recognition has affected the domestic community: Samuel Putnam considered *Lord Taciturn* the greatest American novel produced; Harold Bloom saw in Machado a "great ironist," elevating him to the level of a master of universal literature; Helen Caldwell provoked a revolution by launching doubts about the narrator's authority; Paul Dixon wrote about the problem of reference in Machado's fiction and proposed a theory of mind; Mary Louise Pratt discovered in Machado's novel a paradigm for the theory of speech acts in literary discourse; José Raimundo Maia Neto²³ brings together the development of Machado's fiction and the stages of Pyrrhonism. Maia Neto²⁴ also wrote the entry "Machado de Assis" in the Brazilian Encyclopedia of Philosophy. David Jackson²⁵ treats him as a keen moralist and observer of the local customs while devouring and altering western literary traditions, taking the place of an inventor of a modernist novel and of a philosopher who observes human decay. Recently the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry "Skepticism in Latin America" has mentioned the effort of scholars to insert Machado de Assis in the history of philosophy, especially in the history of skepticism.

Regarding the criterion of relevance, certainly Machado does not build a complete and consistent theoretical system; however, it is possible to recognize persistent themes (the mockery of nihilism, the dualistic anthropological perspective), coherent analyses (the way he approaches the relationship between madness and reason), and a logic of development of his fictional thought, which not only varies from a pessimistic worldview at the time of *The Posthumous Memoirs* to an aesthetic worldview in *Memorial de Aires* (Counselor Ayres' Memorial, 1908), but also between the metaphysical poetry of early youth and the adoption of spiritualist eclecticism in the 1850s and 1860s. It is possible to see the nuances between the adoption of a moralistic perspective linked to character analysis and reflection on theater during the 1860s and in the first four of his novels. Maia Neto also alludes to the crisis of spiritualism and the presence of evolutionist ideas in the novels of the 1870s, and criticism of social Darwinism in the following decade.

Machado's persistent philosophical themes are more than barroom wisdom, although they confirm the reader's intuition of a "philosophizing" author. In this respect, Antônio Candido²⁶ argues that Machado's style possesses a "tone" of leaving unresolved

²² MARGUTTI PINTO, Paulo. *História da Filosofia do Brasil* (1500-hoje). 2a. parte: A ruptura Iluminista (1808-1843). São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2020.

²³ MAIA NETO, José Raimundo. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. Purdue University Press, 1994.

²⁴ MAIA NETO, José Raimundo. Machado de Assis. (sept. 2022), Enciclopédia da Filosofia Brasileira. Grupo de Trabalho em Pensamento Filosófico Brasileiro (Ed.). <https://www.editorafi.org/enciclopedia-da-filosofia-brasileira> (último acesso em 22/08/2024).

²⁵ JACKSON, K. David. *Machado de Assis: a literary life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

²⁶ CANDIDO, Antônio. "An outline of Machado de Assis". In: CANDIDO, Antonio. *On literature and society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

perplexities in the air, especially about the following themes: the relationship between identity and the unfolding of personality into otherness and madness, the relation between real and imagined facts, the meaning of human actions and life in general, human impotence and persistence in the face of perfection; moral relativity and the reification of the human being.

As far as the development of a fictional thought is concerned, there are three interpretations that point to skepticism as the "propulsive mechanism": the skeptical-pessimistic interpretation (by Barreto Filho and Coutinho in the 1940s and 50s), the Pyrrhonian-skeptical interpretation (by Nunes and Maia Neto in the 1990s and 2000s), and the aporetic view which identifies humor and the technique of problematization of philosophical discourses as skeptical expedients with which the author launches himself to a self-reflexive and ironic level that makes the text a game of revealing and concealing the truth²⁷. In general, skepticism is a questioning mental attitude or a doubtful disposal about the criteria that justify beliefs. When it comes to Machado, it is a disposition to view and address those chosen themes which match some subjects of the skeptical tradition through a new lens.

When dealing with questions of the philosophical tradition, Machado showed remarkable capacity of remodeling what Michel Foucault called the "crisis of representation" of modernity, which are derived from the human cognitive intention to "mirror the world" that would serve to justify a true belief. Machado deals with the modern problem of representation in an antirepresentational way, by the means of a literary reconstruction, distrusting the correspondence theory of truth, for instance, by exterminating linear narrative and verisimilitude, establishing a reflexive flow over narration, talking about nothing or the nothingness, as it occurs in his last novels. According to Gumbrecht²⁸, this mood of narrative volatility creates an atmosphere of distancing. On the one hand, the subject becomes the subject of an uncertain memoirist, that is, the subject of knowledge becomes an object. On the other, there is the detachment from the European world as being the guardian of the epistemological criteria of truth.

Machado also deals with inner issues from the way Brazilian intellectuals and the nation suffered the impacts of the crisis of modernity. It is a broad phenomenon that includes the crises of (a) political representation: the clash between liberal demands for rights and the patriarchal slave structure — this is the main theme of his parliamentary chronicles, especially in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro Daily); (b) identity representations: the concern with the construction of a set of customs and beliefs that distinguished the country which had just recently become independent, as a social group, especially in the debate about the moral and utilitarian function of drama; (c) religious-moral representation: managed from the perspective of the Protestant Reformation about the authority of the Catholic Church in relation to the criteria of faith and conduct, especially in the quarrel with the newspaper *A Cruz* (The Cross) in the 1860s, which became stronger during the 1870s with the advent of the "Religious Question" in Brazil; (d) anthropological representation: from the 1870s, when Machado started to see the human being through the key of contradiction and volubility. "Neither an angel nor a beast" would be the anthropological formula taken from Pascal, repeated, contorted, and disseminated in several excerpts.

The relation with Pascal allows us to look further at the criterion of reciprocity, that is, how Machado receives and repays the influences of the canon. It's not just a parodic relationship, as in the case of Machado's saying that between life and death there is a "short bridge" in reference to Seneca's *On the Shortness of Life*. According to Barbieri²⁹, Machado's narrators, especially Brás Cubas and Dom Casmurro, purposely distort Pascal

²⁷ MARTINS, Alex Lara. *Machado de Assis: o filósofo brasileiro*. Porto Alegre: Editora Fi, 2017.

²⁸ GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich. "Machado de Assis and realism: a literary genealogy". In: AIDOO, I.; SILVA, D. (Ed.). *Emerging dialogues on Machado de Assis*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 27-36.

²⁹ BARBIERI, Ivo. "Pascal atravessado por um olhar oblíquo: o jeito machadiano de ler um clássico". In: MOREIRA, Maria Eunice (org.). *Histórias da literatura: teorias, temas e autores*. Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto, 2003, p. 24-38.

and attribute to the Jansenist improper theses. The thoughts that were highly philosophical and serious become ridiculous when they take on a fictional form. The famous *pensée* about the "thinking reed" leads us to meditate on the dual grandeur and frailty of human nature. The metaphor of the "thinking errata" used in *The Posthumous Memoirs*, for instance, dismantles the equipollent dualism expressed by the *pensée*, either by stressing only the negative aspect of the human being, or by correcting the Jansenist's anthropological dualism. Brás Cubas concludes by highlighting the advantage of his description: "The Jansenist did not admit the simultaneity of the two natures"³⁰. Now, the Pascalian text should be read in contrast with Machado's. On the one hand, the narrator undoes the Pascalian reconstruction of skepticism, finding a skeptical perspective (from a deceased author) that, paradoxically, cannot be lived³¹. On the other hand, this subversive machinery disrupts this message of the western canon, emphasizing the need to correct it. Then it is necessary that the history of philosophy be decontextualized or reconfigured to be corrected. As mentioned earlier, this hermeneutics needs calibration to rebalance the power relations which remain in the rhetoric of modernity.

Conclusion

More than an exegesis of a literary text, this article uses Domingues' theoretical tools and builds an analysis "between metaphilosophy and intellectual history"³², through which I was able to identify the material, institutional, and contextual conditions, the social and biographical composition of a literate man like Machado de Assis, as well as his own systematic way of thinking. From this metaphilosophical perspective, we still have to deal with the colonizing role of philosophy in relation to literature because we do not intend to value a writer just because he or she is considered a philosopher. However, we recognize that Machado's philosophical perspective is quite original. He realizes that the dilemmas and the "modern crises of representation" can best be addressed through a fictional platform that calls into question the crisis itself. He stands on an outside-insider's perspective with a new lens. The inescapable underlying theoretical frame is skepticism, insofar as the skeptic's methodological procedure consists of being ready to evaluate the conflicting positions, rather than proposing a position.

Machado created an alternative space and platform to the classical metaphysical systems to describe the multiple domains of life, offering insights that explain, hypothetically and temporarily, the state of facts in the world. This platform is fiction itself, whose contract between author and reader is made without the exclusive use of rationality such as it is understood in the development of western philosophy. From the outside perspective, it could be said that this platform is consistent with the skeptical method of dealing with the aforementioned philosophical dilemmas. However, as Margutti Pinto³³ points out, skepticism was shared for a long time in the worldview of Brazilian intellectuals. Machado's skeptical procedure focuses on the conflict between liberals and conservatives (political crisis), between romantic spiritualists and positivist realists (aesthetic-identity crisis), between Christian values and secular values (religious crisis), and between Enlightenment reason and pessimistic unreason (anthropological crisis). From this inside standpoint, Machado is to Brazilians a little like Montaigne to the French, Shakespeare to the English, Goethe to the Germans, Kierkegaard to the Danes, Dostoyevsky to the Russians; but in his place, he will not stand alone; he will also be accompanied by Gregório de Matos, Oswald de Andrade, Carlos Drummond, Guimarães Rosa, and Clarisse Lispector. It is worth getting to know them.

³⁰ ASSIS, Joaquim Maria Machado de. *Obras completas em quatro volumes*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 2008, v. 1, p. 719.

³¹ MAIA NETO, José Raimundo. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. Purdue University Press, 1994.

³² DOMINGUES, Ivan. *Filosofia no Brasil: legados e perspectivas*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2017, p. 296.

³³ MARGUTTI PINTO, Paulo. *História da Filosofia do Brasil (1500-hoje)*. 2a. parte: A ruptura Iluminista (1808-1843). São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2020.

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