

Richard Rorty and Machado de Assis: Two Different Ways of Coping with Ironism*

Richard Rorty e Machado de Assis: Duas Maneiras Diferentes de Poder com o Ironismo

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Abstract: A comparison is made between Rortyan Ironism and Machadean Ironism. It is argued that the former does not cohere with the non-reductive physicalist model which is also defended by Rorty, and is inadequately used in the debate with contemporary thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Habermas, Foucault and Derrida. Machadean Ironism is also expounded. It is argued that Machado de Assis offers a life view which connects skepticism with some form of aestheticism, yielding an ironist approach which is consistent throughout and fully aware of its theoretical and practical consequences. It is also shown that Machadean Ironism has its own problems, which concern mainly the philosopher's attitude in face of life. But this does not affect the goal of the present paper, which is to offer the Machadean view as a valid alternative to Rortyan Ironism. The latter is evaluated as the result of a misleading metaphysical perplexity belonging to the skeptical strain which infects Rorty's philosophy and should be dropped without more ado, in order to preserve the remainder of his philosophy.

Keywords: Ironism. Skepticism. Aestheticism. Richard Rorty. Machado de Assis.

Resumo: É feita uma comparação entre o ironismo de Richard Rorty e o de Machado de Assis. Também se defende que o primeiro não é coerente com o modelo fisicalista não-redutivo que Rorty também defende, e é usado inadequadamente no debate com pensadores contemporâneos, tais como Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Habermas, Foucault e Derrida. O ironismo machadiano também é apresentado. Argumenta-se que Machado de Assis oferece uma visão da vida que liga ceticismo com alguma forma de esteticismo, resultan-

* Some parts of this text have appeared in Portuguese in "Pragmatismo, Ironismo e Ceticismo em Richard Rorty", published in Pinto, P. R. M. et al. (Orgs.). *Filosofia Analítica, Pragmatismo e Ciência*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 1998, p. 30-9. In the present text, the main argument has been altered in order to include a comparison between Rorty's ideas concerning ironism and Machado's. The whole argument has been developed in a different perspective and in a more detailed way, so as to constitute a totally independent text.

do numa abordagem ironista que é inteiramente coerente e completamente ciente de suas conseqüências práticas e teóricas. Também se mostra que o ironismo machadiano tem seus problemas, que dizem respeito fundamentalmente à atitude do filósofo diante da vida. Mas isso não afeta o objetivo do presente artigo, que é apresentar a visão machadiana como uma alternativa válida ao ironismo rortiano. Este último é avaliado como o resultado de uma perplexidade metafísica enganadora pertencente à corrente cética que influencia a filosofia de Rorty e que deve ser abandonada sem mais barulho, para se preservar o que resta de sua filosofia.

Palavras-chave: Ironismo. Ceticismo. Esteticismo. Richard Rorty. Machado de Assis.

I. Introduction

Richard Rorty is surely one of the major representatives of contemporary pragmatism. Being myself a pragmatist, I agree in principle with some of the main theses of Rorty's philosophy, such as antifoundationalism, non-representationalism, objectivity as intersubjective agreement, and so on. But I say only *some of the main theses* because it seems to me that Rorty's argumentative strategy involves certain flaws that lead him to mistakenly assume inconsistent positions. For example, his defense of *ironism* does not seem to chime with the non-reductive physicalist model.

In the present text, I shall try to show this inconsistency and explore its consequences with respect to Rorty's philosophy. In order to make a contrast, I shall expound the main features of the ironism involved by Machado de Assis's skeptical life view. By doing so, I expect to reveal more clearly the inconsistency which affects Rorty's world view.

In order to achieve my goals, I shall take the following steps. In Section *II*, I shall expound the main traits of Rorty's defense both of non-reductive physicalism and ironism. In Section *III*, I shall expose, by way of contrast, a variant of ironism which may be found in Machado de Assis's fiction, revealing the main features of the philosophical world view involved. In Section *IV*, I shall compare the two forms of ironism. Here, I shall attempt to show that Rorty's defense of non-reductive physicalism does not cohere with his defense of ironism. The consequences of such incoherence with respect to some aspects of Rorty's philosophy will be exploited. By contrast, I shall also try to show that *ironism*, as described by Rorty, is much more consistent with Machado's attitude towards life than with Rorty's pragmatist stance which also involves non-reductive physicalism. As a result, ironism will be described as a skeptical stance which contaminates Rorty's philosophy with a kind of metaphysical nostalgia he should better reject and which can be better used in the literary expression of a skeptical-pessimistic life view, as it occurs in Machado's case. In Section *V*, I shall state briefly the conclusions of my analysis.

II. Non-reductive Physicalism and Ironism in the Context of Rorty's Philosophy

Rorty's defense of Davidsonian non-reductive physicalism is an important aspect of his philosophy, because it sets the theoretical framework within which many of his philosophical claims may be located. According to Rorty, three important Davidsonian theses are to be interlinked in order to lay a foundation for non-reductive physicalism: i) reasons can be causes, that is to say, a given event may be described equally well both in physiological and in psychological terms;¹ ii) there is no relationship called *making true* between sentences and non-sentences, that is to say, things in the world do not make our sentences true;² iii) metaphors do not have meanings, that is to say, "creativity" and "inspiration" are merely cases of the ability of the human organism to utter meaningless sentences, which do not fit into old language-games and serve as occasions for modifying those language-games and creating new ones.³

The combination of the above theses would lead to a sort of physicalism in conformity with which one may simultaneously claim that every event could be described in micro-structural terms and that "reduction" is a relation merely between linguistic items and does not involve ontological categories.⁴

Rorty sees Davidson as the culmination of the holist and pragmatist strains in contemporary analytic philosophy. Such strains developed after a long struggle against Platonist and religious conceptions of the world.⁵ Non-reductive physicalism resulted from some radical alterations which were imposed upon the "post-Kantian" model of the relation between the human self and the world. Some of the basic concepts connected to this model are *representation*, *constitution*, *making true*, and *causation*. The transformation of the "post-Kantian" model into the non-reductive physicalist one is accomplished by discarding all but one of the above basic concepts. The concept of *representation* is discarded by interpreting a belief as a rule for action rather than as a kind of image made out of mental content. This task has been accomplished by Peirce and turns the belief into a tool for handling reality and eliminates its representation-of-reality character.⁶ The concept of *constitution* is discarded by blurring the distinction between necessary and contingent truths. This task has been accomplished by Quine and leads to the elimination of the distinction between a constituting "structure" and a constituted "empirical truth", as well as between transcendental "categories" and "empirical

¹ RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 113-114.

² RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 113; 116.

³ RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 113; 124-5.

⁴ RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 114-5.

⁵ RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 117.

⁶ RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 118.

concepts”.⁷ The concept of *making true* is discarded by claiming that if we have causal relations holding between the self and the world and also relations of justification holding internal to the self’s network of beliefs and desires, then no further relations are needed in order to explain how our beliefs are made true. The history about the progress of human enquiry in all spheres may be told by describing the continual reweaving of systems of belief and desire. The question whether there are things in the world which make our sentences true does not need to be raised. The task of discarding the concept of *making true* has been accomplished by Davidson.⁸ As a result, only causal interactions between the human self and the world are maintained. Thus, there are *causes* for the acquisition of beliefs and there are *reasons* for the retention or change of beliefs. But there are no causes for the truth of beliefs.⁹ In another important paper, Rorty claims, still following a Davidsonian line, that causation is not under description, whereas explanation is.¹⁰ Language is not an intermediary between the world and us: the worldly objects may cause us to hold beliefs, but they cannot suggest us what sort of belief to hold.¹¹

According to Rorty, the non-reductionist physicalist model is also able to include everything that is worth preserving of what the “transcendentalist” philosophical tradition has labelled *the realm of spirit*. The reason for this is that usually *naturalism* is identified with *reductionism*. This is connected with the attempt to identify *literal truth* with *scientific truth*, relegating *literature* to the domain of *metaphorical truth*, that is to say, to something which cannot be seen as real *truth* at all. But the Davidsonian view of *metaphor* solves this problem. In fact, if a metaphor does not have a meaning, then it may play an important role in the development of language. Introduced as a mere noise, the metaphor may cause modifications in the language-games at play. Such modifications may include the literalization of the metaphor and consequently an enlargement of the language-game’s logical space. Thus, the literal-metaphorical contrast, which sets the framework of the post-Kantian opposition between *science* and *art*, is overcome by the Davidsonian view of *creativity* and *inspiration*, which reveal themselves to be special cases of the human ability to utter meaningless sentences. Although they do not fit into the old language-games, these sentences may serve as occasions for modifying those language-games and giving birth to new ones.¹²

Rorty proudly describes the non-reductionist physicalist model as the culmination of a line of thought in American philosophy which aims at being naturalist without being

⁷ RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 120.

⁸ RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 120-1.

⁹ RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 121.

¹⁰ RORTY, R. Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 81.

¹¹ RORTY, R. Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 83.

¹² RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 124-5.

reductionist. The model is recommendable because it would enable us to treat both physics and poetry evenhandedly.¹³

As far as non-reductive physicalism is concerned, Rorty's mood is clearly optimistic and anti-metaphysical. The approach would include innumerable advantages. For example, it would contribute to the elimination of one of the obstacles which prevents communication between German and American philosophy. As already mentioned, Rorty also suggests that it would mean an important victory against Platonist and religious conceptions of the world. Human beings now would reach the ontological neutrality which would set them free from old metaphysical puzzles.

Now there is another aspect of Rorty's philosophy which seems to oppose his defense of non-reductive physicalism. By this I mean his ideas concerning *ironism*. In *Private Irony and Liberal Hope*, Rorty defines an *ironist* as someone who fulfills the following three conditions: first, he or she has radical and continuing doubts about his or her final vocabulary, because he or she has been impressed by other people's final vocabularies; second, he or she realizes that his or her final vocabulary cannot subscribe nor dissolve his or her doubts; third, he or she does not think that his or her vocabulary is closer to reality than others. So, the ironist philosopher sees the choice between vocabularies not as a result of comparing them by means of a neutral and universal vocabulary, but as a result of putting the new to compete against the old. The ironist knows that anything can be made to look good or bad by redescription.¹⁴ In this perspective, the opposite of *irony* is *common sense*, because to be commonsensical is to take for granted a certain final vocabulary in order to describe and judge people who employ an alternative final vocabulary.¹⁵ The ironist is a nominalist and a historicist. For this reason, the ironist is always worried about the possibility that he or she has been initiated into the wrong tribe and the wrong language game. He or she worries that the process of socialization which turned him or her into a human being may have turned him or her into the wrong kind of human being.¹⁶ In addition, ironism is a private matter. As opposed to Habermas, who sees the ironist line of thought which runs from Hegel through Foucault and Derrida as destructive of social glue, Rorty sees it as largely irrelevant to public matters. Ironism is invaluable in our attempt to create a private self-image, but useless when it comes to politics.¹⁷

Apparently, Rorty exhibits in *Private Irony and Liberal Hope* the same optimistic mood one may encounter in many of his other writings. But only apparently, because his mood concerning the subject of ironism becomes ambiguous and reveals an unexpected skeptical bias. In fact, Rorty describes the ironist as a person who *has*

¹³ RORTY, R. Non-Reductive Physicalism. In: *Philosophical Papers*, v. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1991, p. 113.

¹⁴ RORTY, R. (1989). Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, p. 73.

¹⁵ RORTY, R. (1989b). Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, p. 74.

¹⁶ RORTY, R. (1989b). Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, p. 74-5.

¹⁷ RORTY, R. (1989b). Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, p. 83.

radical and continuing doubts about his or her final vocabulary, who realizes that his or her final vocabulary cannot subscribe nor dissolve his or her doubts, who does not think that his or her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, who knows that anything can be made to look good or bad by redescription, and finally who is always worried about the possibility that he or she has been initiated into the wrong tribe and the wrong language game, thus having turned into the wrong kind of human being. As one may easily see, a certain pessimistic tone surreptitiously infects Rorty's description of an ironist. For my part, I intend to show that this is related to a form of skepticism which he should reject.

In adopting the above definition of *ironism*, Rorty is using an old word with a brand new meaning. This agrees, in principle, with his general argumentative strategy. In fact, he views the history of philosophy as a sequence of gradual and tacit replacements of old vocabularies by new ones.¹⁸ His preferred form of argument is dialectical, because he thinks the unit of persuasion is not a proposition, but rather a complete vocabulary.¹⁹ In this way, he cannot find much occasion to use the distinction between rational and nonrational methods of changing other people's minds. Since the self has no center, he only counts on different ways of weaving new beliefs and desires into previously existing webs of beliefs and desires.²⁰

The above exposition of some features of Rorty's philosophy is enough for the present discussion's objectives. We may now take a step forward in the direction of Machado de Assis's philosophical ideas.

III. Skepticism and Ironism in the Context of Machado de Assis's Life View

The contribution of Brazilian thinking to Western philosophy is rather dim. We are not known around the world for our deep philosophical works. Some thinkers among us are aware and pessimistic about this situation up to the point that they claim Brazilians lack a "philosophical mind". Now I don't agree with this. I think Brazilians do have a "philosophical mind", but one that reveals itself to be different from the mainstream of the European way of dealing with philosophy. This is so in virtue of our Iberian origins. By contrast with Northern Europe, Portugal and Spain have taken a different pathway towards Modernity, as it has been very well shown by Richard Morse.²¹ As far as Portugal is concerned, the country developed in the beginnings of Modern Age a world-view which might be dubbed *baroque Catholicism* and which is characterized by an eclectic mixture of skepticism, stoicism, and salvationism. According to such view, human beings

¹⁸ RORTY, R. (1989b). Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, p. 77.

¹⁹ RORTY, R. (1989b). Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, p. 78.

²⁰ RORTY, R. (1989b). Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, p. 83-4.

²¹ MORSE, R. M. *O espelho de Próspero*. Cultura e idéias nas Américas. Trad. Paulo Neves. S. Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 1988.

are nothing but pilgrims taking a journey along which they will be tested for their capacity to face temptation and prevent sin. In the spirit of *Ecclesiastes*, nothing is new under the sun and the search for worldly wisdom is seen as a form of vanity. Philosophical speculation is considered a waste of time, given the human incapacity to find truth without God's divine help. This perspective tends to develop in some people a sort of "intuitive understanding" of things, in which – adopting a Pascalian terminology – we may say that the *heart* is superior to *reason*. And such intuitive view is best expressed by literary works.

The world-view involved by baroque Catholicism found in Colonial Brazil a fertile soil for growing, prevailing among us for the first three centuries of our history. After that, mainly during the nineteenth century, our way of doing philosophy suffered a transformation which gradually led to the increasing academic production we are experiencing now. In spite of our originary "literary skepticism", some systematic works have already appeared and some important technical debates are now occurring. Even so, one may still find some traces of the Colonial world-view within our literary fiction, involving authors such as Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, Clarice Lispector, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and others. In my opinion, some important, although certainly not all, Brazilian contributions to philosophy may be found in the works of these authors.

Given the above contextualization, the choice of Machado de Assis as an author whose ideas are to be compared with Rorty's may be justified by the following reasons: Machado is an important Brazilian writer who lived mostly in the nineteenth century (1839-1908). He is famous for his skeptical attitude towards the ability of human beings to know anything with certainty and to live solidarily in society. As a result, he expresses through his fiction the skeptic and pessimistic part of our originary world-view. And this view is certainly connected with some sort of irony which might share some features with Rortyan irony. Although Machado is not a philosopher in a strict sense, he is an ironist, perhaps in a stricter sense than Rorty himself. In what follows, I shall try to show that this is the case and that the comparison is worthwhile.

First of all, I shall expound some of Machado's relevant ideas with respect to the present debate. In order to do this, I shall recur to Maia Neto's interpretation of these ideas in his interesting book, entitled *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*.²² According to Maia Neto, Pascal is the main influence on Machado's initial skepticism. This notwithstanding, Machado gradually moves away from Pascal's ideas. In his mature phase, the Brazilian author refuses Pascal's appeal to faith, thus "dechristianizing" the latter's skepticism. Machado's appeal to authorship and to an aesthetic-cognitive stance in life generates a life-view which, although consistent with ancient Pyrrhonism, is framed in terms of specific Machadean themes.²³ The short exposition above concerning the evolution of Machado's ideas contradicts Maia Neto's main claim in the title of his book, namely, that our Brazilian Author is a Pyrrhonian. In fact, Machado's skepticism may share some features with Pyrrhonism, but his approach draws away in many aspects

²² MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994.

²³ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 8.

from this Hellenistic philosophy. Given that Maia Neto himself has already conceded this point²⁴ and assuming that Machado's life-view clearly belongs to a skeptical breed, I shall not discuss the issue here.

In his analysis of Machado's fiction, Maia Neto makes the important claim that the main social categories Machado uses in his fiction are the following: i) *outward life* (*vida exterior*) – that is, social life as viewed by Pascal, the *locus* of *divertissement* and of precarious beliefs, of duality, strategy, and hypocrisy; ii) *domestic peace* – that is, the environment associated with marriage, set apart from outward life, the *locus* of truth, transparency, and morality. In addition, all of Machado's novels and most of his short stories are conceived on the basis of a sentimental triangle, which may be represented by the following three main characters: i) the *man of spirit* (*homem de espírito*), which is an ethical character, indifferent or hostile to the outward life; b) the *silly man* (*tolo*), which is an immoral character, well adjusted to the outward life; iii) the *woman*, which constitutes the main object of perplexity and the main source of disturbance for the man of spirit.²⁵ These characters are related to four life-views. The first is the *strategic life-view*, involving the beliefs exhibited by the *silly men* and by the majority of Machado's female characters. In accordance with this view, social success and fame are the most important goals for human beings in this world, and appearances are what matters in life. Thus, any strategy which contributes to the achievement of these goals is valid, regardless of ethical considerations. The second is the *naïve life-view*, involving the beliefs exhibited by the *man of spirit*. Such beliefs concern the possibility of living an authentic ethical life through the domestic peace of marriage, recurring neither to appearances nor to strategies. The third is the *problematic life-view*, involving the *man of spirit's* predicament when he eventually does not succeed in getting married or when he does not find domestic peace in marriage. The fourth and last is the *skeptical life-view*, involving the *man of spirit's* way of solving his problematic situation by suspending judgement and pursuing peace of mind in authorship and in an aesthetic-cognitive stance in life. The interactions between the characters in the sentimental triangle are as follows. Both the *silly man* and the *man of spirit* compete for the same *woman*, who corresponds to the observer's main preoccupation and cause of disturbance.

²⁴ MAIA Neto, J. R. The Development of a Skeptical Life-View in the Fiction of Machado de Assis. In: The Author as Plagiarist. The case of Machado de Assis. *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies*. Un. of Massachusetts Dartmouth: Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, 13/14, Fall 2004/Spring 2005, endnote 6, p. 276.

²⁵ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 9. Maia Neto translates *homem de espírito* as *spiritual man* and *tolo* as *vulgar man*. These translations are not entirely adequate, because both expressions are hard to translate into English. *Homem de espírito* refers to someone who has a tendency to see things with an eye which is simultaneously intellectual and authentic. In this perspective, *spiritual man* would not be an adequate translation by virtue of its religious connotations. I rather prefer *man of spirit* for doing the job. With respect to the word *tolo*, it refers to someone who adheres to common sense and which for this reason is a silly person. *Vulgar man* does not seem fitting and I am suggesting here the expression *silly man*, for it emphasizes the price of being silly that one has to pay in order to adhere to common sense.

According to Maia Neto, woman stands for reality in Machado's fiction. This gives reality an essentially volatile character. Unfortunately, the woman usually prefers the *silly man*. Her preference for *silly men* is attributed to the different personalities of *silly men* and *men of spirit*. In Maia Neto's words:

The *tolo* is self-assured, determined and stubborn in his approach to women. He does not hesitate to simulate qualities and to feign passionate feelings whenever these attributes and appearances are instrumental in accomplishing his projects. The *bomem de espírito*, however, lets himself be affected by strange illusions [...]. He thinks that special qualities are required to please women. Shy by nature, he exaggerates his own insufficiency even more when close to them.²⁶

Accordingly, the two types experience love in quite different manners. In the *silly man's* case, love is not an event that changes his life. As he is shallow and oriented to outward life, he continues to waste his time in games, salons and trips. In the *man of spirit's* case, love is seen as something quite important and serious. It is regarded as a matter of commitment, as the most serious thing in someone's life.

Given these differences, the female characters in Machado's fiction prefer the *silly man*, because the *man of spirit* does not compromise with the social patterns valued by women and thus disturbs them. By contrast, the *silly man* fraternizes with women, and does not intimidate them. Machado's description discloses a dramatic view of social life in which mediocre actors perform immoral roles. As a result, the *man of spirit* fails and becomes either a problematic character (mad, suicidal, or displaced), in the first phase of Machado's fiction, or turns into a reflective author and reaches peace of mind by means of a skeptical life-view, in the second phase.²⁷ In order to solve the problematic situation in which he encounters himself, the *man of spirit* adopts initially a contemplative stance which leads him to inward detachment and provides some protection against emotional troubles. This is a first step towards the aesthetic-cognitive solution which is fully embodied in *Conselheiro Aires*, Machado's last protagonist.²⁸ Thus, the skeptical life-view may be seen as the solution found by the *man of spirit* who is unable to lower himself to the level of the *silly man* or to change the nature of woman.²⁹ The skeptical stance is complemented in Machado's main characters of the second-phase novels, Brás Cubas, Dom Casmurro and Counselor Aires, by the appeal to authorship as an alternative position to their divorce from women and, therefore, from the world.³⁰ The evolution of Machado's second phase characters towards skepticism may be described as follows. Brás Cubas annuls his problematic situation by turning into

²⁶ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 21.

²⁷ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 9-11.

²⁸ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 25.

²⁹ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 27.

³⁰ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 44

an Author after his death. He is not an Author who is deceased, but a deceased who is an Author. Dom Casmurro does the same while still alive, by turning into a recluse. Aires enhances the latter's solution by adopting an aesthetic stance.³¹ Thus, Brás Cubas withdraws integrally from social life and Dom Casmurro lives nostalgically in exile, whereas Aires returns to social life in order to observe it with inward detachment. In this perspective, Aires exhibits an aesthetic-cognitive attitude which points to the possibility of obtaining some positive knowledge of woman (namely, the world) and enjoying it.³² Thus, Aires may be seen not only as Machado's last creation, but also as his most skeptical character.³³

It is worth noticing that most of the categories and characters abovementioned are introduced, although somewhat in a rudimentary way, in Machado's first published work, a Portuguese translation he made of a short 1850 essay by Victor Heraux entitled *De l'amour des femmes par les sots (On Women's love for silly men)*.³⁴ This allows interpreting the totality of Machado's fiction in an organic way which involves first the gestation and then the development of a skeptical life-view. The gestation is present in the first phase of Machado's fiction, whereas the development of a skeptical life-view is found in the second and mature phase.³⁵

One important consequence concerning the evolution of Machado's philosophical ideas towards a skeptical-aesthetic life-view is his criticism of Humanitas. This is an imaginary philosophy which is defended by one of Machado's characters, namely Quincas Borba, who appears in two important novels of his second phase: *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* and *Quincas Borba*. In the first novel, the reader is informed that Quincas's philosophy was expounded in four manuscript volumes, with one hundred pages each. The work was written in very tiny characters and with plenty of quotations in Latin. According to Quincas, Humanitas is the principle from which all things are originated. It is the same Human Being who is shared by all human beings. Humanitas's evolution comprises four phases: i) the *static phase*, which precedes all creation; ii) the *expansive phase*, in which things begin to exist; iii) the *dispersive phase*, which comprises the appearance of human beings; iv) the *contractive phase*, in which human beings and things will be reabsorbed by Humanitas. The phase of expansion, by initiating the universe, suggested to Humanitas the desire to enjoy it. This caused the dispersion, which is nothing but the personified multiplication of the original substance. Every human being

³¹ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 161.

³² MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 162; 164.

³³ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 184.

³⁴ In his book, MAIA Neto followed the critics who erroneously took this text as Machado's. The mistake had already been pointed and corrected by Jean Pierre Massa, in 1966. Anyway, the question of authorship does not invalidate the claim that Machado's life-view is based upon that text. See MAIA Neto, J. R. *The Development of a Skeptical Life-View in the Fiction of Machado de Assis*. In: *The Author as Plagiarist. The case of Machado de Assis. Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies*. Un. of Massachusetts Dartmouth: Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, 13/14, Fall 2004/Spring 2005, endnote 9, p. 276.

³⁵ MAIA Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 10; 21.

corresponds to a different part of Humanitas's body. For this reason, Humanitism is somehow related to Brahmanism. The difference between the two doctrines lies in the fact that for Brahmanism the distribution has a strict theological and political meaning, whereas for Humanitism the distribution involves the grand law of personal value. Thus, to descend from Humanitas's chest or kidney is to be a strong person, and this is not the same thing as to descend from Humanitas's hair or nose tip. This generates the need to cultivate and harden the muscles. Hercules is an anticipated symbol of Humanitism. The Ancient Pagans might have been able to reach truth, but they devaluated themselves by emphasizing the gallant part of their myths. Nothing like that will happen with the arrival of the New Church of Humanitism, in which there are no easy adventures, no falls, no sadness, no childish joys. Love will be seen as priesthood and reproduction as rite. Since life is the most important gift in universe, even a beggar will prefer misery to death. Therefore, the transmission of life, far from being a mere matter of gallantry, is the supreme hour of spiritual Mass. The only actual disgrace is not to be born. The human being is simultaneously Humanitas's vehicle, driver and passenger. The human being is Humanitas itself in a reduced form. Hence the need one has to worship oneself.³⁶

In order to show the superiority of his system over the competing ones, Quincas Borba evaluates the sentiment of envy. Everyone condemns it as immoral. Given that every human being is Humanitas itself in a reduced form, no human being is fundamentally opposed to another human being whatever the appearances may be to the contrary. Whenever a human being interacts with another human being in accordance with human law, it is substantially Humanitas that is interacting with Humanitas in accordance with Humanitas's law. Therefore, envy is just an admiration which struggles. Since struggle is the great function of humankind, all belligerent feelings are the most adequate to happiness. Therefore, envy is a virtue.³⁷

The goal of Humanitism is the elimination of pain. The latter is an illusion. Human beings must realize that they are Humanitas itself. Once this is done, the redirecting of one's thinking towards the original substance is enough to prevent any sensation of pain whatsoever. The alleged calamities which apparently torment humankind from time to time are nothing but external moves of the internal substance. They are not designed to influence human beings, but merely to disrupt the universal monotony. Thus, the existence of such calamities would not prevent the accomplishment of human happiness. Even though the disasters were taken in the future as actually capable of generating pain, this would not destroy Humanitism for two reasons: i) every individual human being would find it delightful to sacrifice himself or herself to the creating of absolute substance; ii) the spiritual power of human beings over the world would remain untouched. After all, the universe has been invented solely for their enjoyment.³⁸

³⁶ MACHADO DE ASSIS, J. M. Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas. In: *Obras Completas de Machado de Assis*. Rio – S. Paulo – Porto Alegre: W. M. Jackson Inc. Editores, 1959, vol. 5, p. 330-2.

³⁷ MACHADO DE ASSIS, J. M. Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas. In: *Obras Completas de Machado de Assis*. Rio – S. Paulo – Porto Alegre: W. M. Jackson Inc. Editores, 1959, vol. 5, p. 332-3.

³⁸ MACHADO DE ASSIS, J. M. Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas. In: *Obras Completas de Machado de Assis*. Rio – S. Paulo – Porto Alegre: W. M. Jackson Inc. Editores, 1959, vol. 5, p. 334-6.

It seems clear that Humanitism is a caricature of full-blooded metaphysical systems in general, although it refers particularly to the philosophies of history fashionable in Brazil during the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Comte's positivism and Spencer's evolutionism. Both these doctrines have impressed many Brazilian intellectuals by virtue of their scientificism and optimism with respect to human nature.

The above exposition shows that, mainly in the mature phase of his fiction, Machado is not only a skeptic but also an ironist in a sense which is close to the one involved by Rorty's definition. As a matter of fact, nearly all of Machado's men of spirit in the second phase exhibit a life-view which is consistent with having radical and continuing doubts about their final vocabularies, without realizing that their final vocabularies cannot subscribe nor dissolve their doubts, and without being convinced that each one of their respective vocabularies is closer to reality than others. Besides, although this feature is not explicit in Machado's characters, nearly all of them may be seen as considering the choice between vocabularies not as a matter of rational comparison, but of strategic competition. Thus, the Machadean ironist would also know that anything can be made to look good or bad by redescription. In this perspective, such an ironist would also oppose to *common sense*, which would be a prerogative of the silly man. The Machadean ironist may as well be described as sympathetic both to nominalism and to historicism. For this reason, such an ironist is also always worried about the possibility of having been initiated into the wrong tribe and the wrong language game.

The ways each of the Machadean characters of the mature phase deal with irony as defined by Rorty may be described as follows. Bras Cubas represents a man of spirit who is unable to cope with his radical and continuing doubts. For this reason, he tries to take refuge in the strategies of common sense, but always fails. He succeeds only after his death, for he then contemplates things without being involved by them. Dom Casmurro represents a man of spirit who is somehow able to cope with his doubts, but pays a high price for doing so. He withdraws from society, becoming a recluse, and imposes his suffering to himself and to other people. Conselheiro Aires represents a man of spirit who is able not only to cope with his doubts, but also to live an outward life, although in a contemplative and detached way. The only remarkable exception is Rubião, the character in the novel *Quincas Borba*, who is so unable to cope with his doubts that in the end he becomes a madman. Even so, the narrator of *Quincas Borba* is a skeptical ironist who, by telling the story the way he does, ironically warns the reader about the perils of radical and continuing doubts: taken too seriously, they may lead to sheer madness. I expect these considerations to be enough to show that, even though Machado is a novelist and not a philosopher, Rortyan and Machadean ironism have a number of affinities and share some important features which support a comparison between them.

The above exposition of Machado's philosophical ideas and its connections with Rortyan ironism is enough for a comparison of Rorty's and Machado's views. This task will be done in the next Section.

IV. Rortyan Ironism and Machadean Ironism: a Comparison

After exposing Rorty's and Machado's relevant ideas concerning philosophy and ironism, I shall turn now to a comparison between their views. First of all, however, I shall deal with an objection which might be made precisely at this point: given that Rorty and Machado represent quite different literary genders, respectively philosophy and literature, why should one compare their life views? What might possibly be the contribution that literary texts, such as Machado's novels, could offer to a better understanding of philosophical problems as expressed by academic texts such as Rorty's essays? Of course, these are important questions which would deserve a special text dedicated only to them. Unfortunately, this cannot be done in the present paper. Even so, I shall say some words in favour of the comparison.

The main point to be emphasized here is: I do not think that the distinction between philosophy and literature is clear cut. In fact, philosophy is something multifarious which may be expressed in a plurality of forms. In Ancient Greece, for example, one may find at least three different ways of coping with philosophy. One of them stems from Socrates, who simply lived his philosophy and for this reason did not write anything. He is worthy of consideration by virtue of his philosophical stance rather than his philosophical writings. Another way of coping with philosophy stems from Aristotle, who wrote probably the first academic texts ever. For some reason, his work became a sort of paradigm for philosophical texts, mainly in the Modern Age. Finally, there is Plato's way of coping with philosophy: he wrote his famous dialogues, which may be subsumed under the category of "mixed gender". Literature and philosophy are so interweaved in the dialogues that one is unable to interpret the "philosophical bit", such as, for instance, the Theory of Ideas, without taking into consideration the "literary bit", such as, for instance, the psychology of the characters. Plato's style finds its roots in the works of many Presocratic Philosophers. Parmenides, for instance, wrote a Poem about being. And Plato's style influenced many thinkers in the history of philosophical thought. Some of them wrote in the form of dialogues, such as Berkeley and Schopenhauer; others adopted the aphoristic form, such as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein; others wrote novels in order to express their philosophical thoughts, such as Sartre; and others wrote academic texts with an undeniable literary flavour, such as Heidegger. The academic texts, inspired by Aristotle, constitute only a part of the philosophical legacy we got from past thinkers. I expect these ways of coping with philosophy and the corresponding examples yielded by them are enough to show not only that literary texts may be used with philosophical goals, but also that a comparison between a literary text and an academic text with respect to a certain philosophical problem is not out of place.

We may now turn to the comparison between the two forms of ironism. Let us start with Rorty's ideas. The first point to be made concerns his definition of *ironism*: does it really fit the new pragmatist vocabulary concerning non-reductive physicalism he is fighting to offer as the best alternative for contemporary philosophy? In my opinion, it does not, because it involves a peculiar sort of return to traditional metaphysics. Initially, it should be remembered that the ironist is constantly worried about the possibility of being mistaken, by virtue of continuing and radical doubts concerning his or her final vocabulary. This is so because he or she has no criterion of wrongness. As a result, the more he or she tries to articulate a philosophical account of his or her situation, the more

he or she reminds herself of his or her rootlessness. But the ironist also knows that no final vocabulary will ever put his or her continuing and radical doubts to rest.³⁹

Now Rorty's account of ironism involves two features. On the one hand, the ironist is able to articulate philosophically his or her situation by means of his or her final vocabulary. By using it, he or she is able to cope with the world, although he or she is aware of its provisional character. Anyway, the important thing to note is that his or her final vocabulary somehow works. On the other, by using his or her vocabulary, the ironist is constantly reminded of his or her rootlessness. So, the other important thing to note is that, although his or her final vocabulary works, he or she has the constant feeling that it might be wrong. Now if I understood Rorty correctly, it seems to me that the constant negative feeling involved by his definition of *irony* seems to disguise some form of philosophical skepticism. The Rortyan ironist, in so far as he or she has radical and continuing doubts caused by the diversity of vocabularies and by the lack of a criterion of wrongness, seems to share some traces with a particular kind of skeptical philosopher. By this I don't mean the Pyrrhonian skeptic, who gives up the research for truth at a certain point by means of what he or she calls *epoché* or *suspension*. Given the great multiplicity of alternative philosophies on offer, he or she decides not to give any answer to the philosophical problems he or she is facing. The result is usually the obtaining of *ataraxia*, a certain peace of mind. The Pyrrhonian skeptic abandons the philosophical investigation and dedicates himself or herself to practical affairs, a domain where no radical doubts take place. The kind of skeptical philosopher I am referring to is not Pyrrhonian, but one which is always perplexed in the sense that he or she never gives up the research and continues stubbornly and indefinitely the investigation, hoping that some day he or she will be able to solve the tormenting problem of finding the correct philosophical alternative. Insofar as he or she refuses to appeal to *epoché*, he or she is not blessed by the relief of *ataraxia* and remains awkwardly perplexed. He or she might be properly described as a Cartesian skeptic who got stuck to the universal doubt without ever finding relief in the tranquilizing *cogito*. In terms of philosophical attitude, don't see much of a difference between the Rortyan ironist and the perplexed skeptic just described. Both have serious and radical doubts about all vocabularies, including theirs; both are awfully impressed by the diversity of alternative vocabularies and both are unable to subscribe or dissolve their doubts; both realize that their respective vocabularies are not closer to reality than any other; both have intellectual worries that preclude them from obtaining peace of mind. Thus, it seems that Rorty's description of an ironist is unexpectedly mixed up with the description of the perplexed skeptic.

The above discussion suggests that the ironist entertains radical doubts because he or she is still far too fascinated by the metaphysics he or she rejects. And the fascination seems to derive not from the theoretical perspective provided by the metaphysical system, but rather from the strong desire for the paradisiac experience of metaphysical safety. The Rortyan ironist fears to have been initiated into the "wrong" tribe, the "wrong" language-game, thus having turned into the "wrong" kind of human being. But, as already mentioned, he or she has no criterion of "wrongness": he or she knows there is no way

³⁹ RORTY, R. (1989b). Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, pp. 75.

of being absolutely certain about this. Thus, he or she fears what is not to be feared. Philosophically, he or she acts as someone who rejects a metaphysical system, but still longs for the feeling of metaphysical comfort that can be given only by the rejected system. This fairly describes the ambiguous *metaphysical feeling* which haunts the Rortyan ironist. He or she rejects metaphysics so much that he or she kills it mercilessly. But now he or she misses metaphysics so badly that life without it becomes unbearable.

This explains why Rorty uses the word *ironism* to refer to this particular kind of skeptical feeling. Consciously or not, he is trying to rhetorically take advantage of its positive connotations. The word *ironist* is fascinating enough to disguise the feeling of metaphysical skepticism that nourishes this aspect of Rorty's thinking. After all, he thinks the choice between vocabularies is made by playing one off against the other, and the dispute between alternative philosophies seems to be solved by some sort of Darwinian "natural selection". So, the way such vocabularies are presented and argumentatively buffered against the enemies' attacks becomes extremely important.

At this point, it may be replied that I am taking Rorty's definition of an ironist too literally. The non-reductive physicalist version of pragmatism involves acknowledging that our explanations are contingent and this hangs together with fallibilism. In this perspective, Rorty would be actually describing a variant of the fallibilist approach, seasoned with a romantically melancholic touch. So, Rortyan pragmatism would inevitably lead to Rortyan ironism. Against this I would argue that the appeal to radical doubts in the description of the ironist constitutes an exaggeration that cannot be mitigated by not being taken too literally. True, the contingency of our beliefs entails some form of fallibilism, but Rortyan ironism involves a skeptical feeling which goes far beyond the mere recognition that our beliefs may change. Rortyan ironism is *not* a mere romanticized version of fallibilism. Radical doubts are *radical* doubts, and they are much more akin to skepticism than to any form of pragmatism or fallibilism. To the ironist's attitude of entertaining such doubts, I would oppose the later Wittgenstein's claim that doubt presupposes certainty. It is well known that the grammar of the word *doubt* requires that the person who doubts be firmly based on some sort of solid ground. Only when standing upon this ground one may cast doubts on something that does not belong to that ground.⁴⁰ In this perspective, "radical and continuing doubts" about all final vocabularies seem to be a variant of the skeptic's universal doubts, because nothing is outside their scope. The ironist is here casting doubts everywhere, with no solid ground to stand upon and implying that there is no remedy for this. So, we may presume that Wittgenstein would very probably take the ironist's doubt as a sort of philosophical illness demanding therapy. Rortyan pragmatism does not seem to cohere very well with radical and continuous doubts.

It is worth observing here that I am not actually opposing to the entire web of beliefs Rorty assigns to the ironist. I am opposing to the ironist's skeptical attitude and to the skeptical beliefs his or her attitude generates. Many of the ironist's beliefs cohere and oppose to dogmatic *common sense* as defined by Rorty. For example, the ironist does not see the search for a final vocabulary as a way of getting something distinct

⁴⁰ WITTGENSTEIN, L. *On Certainty*. Ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Translated by D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1979, §§ . 115; 160; 310; etc.

from his or her own vocabulary right; he or she knows that the searches for a final vocabulary are not destined to converge; he or she is afraid that he or she will get stuck with his or her own vocabulary if he or she does not try to get acquainted with alternative vocabularies.⁴¹ Rorty also attributes to the ironist the desire for a self-created, aristocratic, Nietzschean-like autonomy.⁴² But as long as such beliefs and desires are separated from the tormenting and perplexing skeptical attitude, they are not the privilege of the ironist. They may be attributed to a non-commonsensical fallibilist pragmatist as well. As a matter of fact, the latter has all the beliefs and desires that result from being self-consciously historicist and nominalist, but, unlike the ironist, he or she is *not* subreptitiously tormented by radical and continuing doubts, that is to say, by skeptical doubts which involve the uncomfortable feeling of metaphysical rootlessness.

Another objection might be made against my analysis. Rorty might say to me, as he really did so, during a discussion we had on the subject in 1997, that we should drop the whole talk about *skepticism*, because this word belongs to an old vocabulary which is inadequate for the current state of philosophy. Appealing to such a vocabulary would only contribute to obscuring our ideas. To this I would reply, as I really did, that he connects *ironism* with *radical and continuing doubts* and this allows me to explicate its hidden connections with *skepticism*. So, I have no objection against dropping the discussion about *skepticism*, provided we drop at the same time the whole discussion about *ironism*. In this manner, we would be actually freeing ourselves from an old metaphysical tendency of which the main function has been to prevent us from finding our way about when confronting some philosophical puzzles.

The second point to be made concerns Rorty's claim that ironism is a private matter, a form of creating a private self-image which has nothing to do with public affairs. This conflicts with his use of ironism to discuss other thinkers's positions. In fact, if ironism is a private matter involving the lack of a criterion of "wrongness", then it should not be used to judge other thinkers' public philosophical positions. The Rortyan ironist should constantly recall that the word *ironism* belongs to his or her contingent vocabulary, about which he or she entertains radical doubts. By appealing to ironism in his debates with other philosophers, Rorty seems to implicitly assume the validity of the question *why should I be an ironist?* which is as very much metaphysical as the question he attributes to the traditional metaphysician (*why should I avoid humiliating?*).⁴³ The issue, however, is much more complex: it may be shown that ironism is *not* a private matter. More about this later. At this stage suffice it to say that Rorty improperly applies to public matters a concept he claims to refer only to private matters.

The third question to be raised concerns Rorty's loose application of the concept of ironism to philosophers of different breeds. Differently to Machado's case, who clearly exhibits affinities with Rortyan ironism, the list of ironists as presented by Rorty includes thinkers far too different among themselves, such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger,

⁴¹ RORTY, R. Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 75; 80.

⁴² RORTY, R. The contingency of a liberal community. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 65.

⁴³ RORTY, R. Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 91.

Foucault, and Derrida.⁴⁴ Given the variety of their intellectual trajectories, they cannot be considered ironists in the same sense, unless we turn the definition of *ironism* into something so generic that it will fit almost anything. It is true that they all criticize many aspects of the European Civilization. But Hegel and Nietzsche do not seem to have the slightest doubts about their own final vocabularies, as Rorty himself recognizes.⁴⁵ In Foucault's case, his cold description of the cruelty which we human beings are capable of and the impact it provokes upon the reader, as David Hall observes, would hardly qualify him for the Rortyan description of someone who attempts to be an ironist without being a liberal.⁴⁶ Derrida is described by Rorty as concerned less and less with the sublime and ineffable, and more and more with the beautiful rearrangement of what he remembers, thus extending the bounds of possibility,⁴⁷ and this does not seem to fit the description of an authentic Rortyan ironist either. What is worse, Heidegger, whose description of the *Dasein* is taken by Rorty as another version of his own description of the ironist, did not confine the discussion to the private sphere and revealed himself as a resentful and cruel person.⁴⁸ Even Rorty's attack on the flexible and fallibilist Habermas, who is described as attempting to be a liberal without being an ironist, is quite unfair.⁴⁹ For reasons of space, I shall not develop further this very extensive subject.⁵⁰

The above discussion allows the conclusion that ironism does not chime with the remainder of Rorty's philosophy, mainly with non-reductive physicalism. Ironism does not involve an actual change of vocabulary, as Rorty thinks, but only the use of a new word in order to refer to an old-fashioned attitude, namely, the skeptical one. Besides, Rorty's application of such a concept, which is connected with the private domain, to the analysis of philosophers who are discussing the public domain does not cohere with

⁴⁴ See RORTY, R. The contingency of a liberal community. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 44-72; RORTY, R. Self-creation and affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 96-121; RORTY, R. From ironist theory to private allusions: Derrida. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 122-40.

⁴⁵ RORTY, R. (1989c). Self-creation and affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. In: RORTY, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, p. 99; 100; 106.

⁴⁶ RORTY, R. Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 75. HALL, D. *Richard Rorty. Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*. Albany: State University of N. York Press, 1994, p. 155-6.

⁴⁷ RORTY, R. From ironist theory to private allusions: Derrida. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 136-7.

⁴⁸ RORTY, R. Self-creation and affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 113; 120.

⁴⁹ RORTY, R. The contingency of a liberal community. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 65.

⁵⁰ Another point that might be made concerns Rorty's notion of an *edifying philosophy*, which may be seen as a byproduct of his ironism. This may be inferred from Rorty's acknowledgement that the edifying philosopher is in an awkward situation, because he criticizes the notion of having a philosophical perspective on the basis of a philosophical perspective.

the previously given definitions concerning *ironism*. For this reason, his whole approach is not properly articulated and runs the risk of not surviving the “struggle for life” in the process of “natural selection” of philosophical ideas in society.

Let us turn now to Machado’s ideas. The first point to be made is that Machado adheres more or less explicitly to some form of skepticism, although there is some controversy regarding the exact nature of his philosophical stand. Maia Neto, for instance, argues that Machado’s skepticism belongs to the Pyrrhonic brand and explains the evolution of the characters in his fiction by means of the categories of *zêtesis*, *epoché*, and *ataraxia*. Although Maia Neto’s argument in favour of such a provocative thesis is very well formulated, I cannot agree with it. But the debate with Maia Neto will be developed elsewhere.⁵¹ For the sake of the argument in the present paper, I shall expound my own interpretation of Machado’s skepticism and use it in the comparison with Rorty’s approach. The Brazilian author, as I understand him, is ultimately a pessimist with respect to human life. He sees our existence in the same way as the *Ecclesiastes*, that is to say, he thinks there is nothing new under the sun and everything is vanity. This involves a moralist perspective in the evaluation of human life. The latter is seen negatively because it suffers from a radical lack of perfection. In this perspective, Machado does not propose a change in vocabulary, as Rorty does. He merely adopts a skeptical position as a result of his pessimism concerning the subject of study.

The second point is that Machado overcomes the suffering caused by his pessimistic and skeptical views by appealing to a very peculiar form of literary creation. As a remedy against our suffering, he offers the aesthetic contemplation of the beautiful form of human misery. This seems to reveal some affinities between Machado and Schopenhauer, but I shall not develop this point here.⁵² Now according to Machado’s skeptic life view, reality is opaque and enigmatic. Given that human misery is an important part of reality, it follows that human misery is also opaque and enigmatic. And the adequate literary expression of these features of reality requires a text which is simultaneously opaque and enigmatic. Machado accomplishes this task by not telling everything in his novels. As a result, the reader never gets all the information he or she needs in order to decide whether a certain interpretation is correct or not. This procedure applies to all Machadean characters, but mostly to the feminine ones. Women in Machado’s fiction are opaque and enigmatic, and for this reason they may be seen as metaphors for reality, as Maia Neto suggests. Now this involves a number of possible ways of interpreting reality and its metaphorical counterpart, namely women. They all present a sort of polysemy which gives to the Machadean novel a certain impenetrability. The final outcome is that all of Machado’s novels admit different readings at different levels, and sometimes such readings are mutually excludent. This is quite perceptible in the second phase of his fiction. Here, the narrators are always contingent, historically placed, and non-reliable. Even so, every level of reading is consistent with the skeptical-pessimistic view of human life. It is as if Machado wanted to show that our miserable condition has a beautiful form under any possible reading. In Machado’s case, the aesthetic contemplation of

⁵¹ See my text *Machado, o brasileiro pirrônico? Um debate com Maia Neto*, to be published in the near future.

⁵² See the previous footnote.

human misery is the only way out from our suffering in this world. He is not a religious man and therefore cannot provide any connection with a transcendent reality as a remedy for our misery. The only thing he offers to the reader is the fugitive moments in which he or she is able to abandon the contingency in this world and get in touch with beauty. In these moments, one is able to reach a domain which is “outside” time, although remaining within time.

Now ironism plays a crucial role in the achievement of the above goals. As a matter of fact, the skeptical-pessimistic view and its polysemic expression are better attained – at least in Machado’s case – by adhering to an ironist mood, in which all human attempts to transcend the worldly limitations are described as ridiculous and failed.

The third point is related to the fact that Machado’s fiction may be seen as offering a strong justification for my previous claim that ironism is not a private matter. True, this is not a claim explicitly made by Machado himself, but I believe it may be inferred from the discussion of the characters’s attitudes in the works of his mature phase. As I understand it, Machadean ironism cannot be conceived as a form of creating a private self-image which has nothing to do with public affairs. In fact, the skeptical features involved in the ironist’s attitude may contribute to other people’s suffering and humiliation even when it comes to allegedly “private” matters. I shall illustrate this by analyzing some aspects of Bento Santiago’s personality, one of the main characters in Machado de Assis’ novel *Dom Casmurro*. Bento narrates the story looking backwards into the past. As the plot develops, Bento reveals how suspicious he was of the fact that his fascinating and enigmatic wife Capitu had betrayed him with their common childhood friend Escobar. Bento experiences throughout the novel increasing doubts about Capitu’s fidelity. When the pressure to find out what really happened became unbearable, Bento decided that she had betrayed him. At this point in the novel, he starts talking as if she had in fact a love affair with Escobar, who had died recently. He finds confirmations for Capitu’s sin everywhere. But the problem is that some sort of subtle disconfirmation always follows every confirmation. As a matter of fact, the psychologically insecure Bento always found Capitu an opaque and ambiguous person since he met her for the first time as a child. For this reason, Bento ends up in a very odd situation: during the entire novel, he tries to convince the reader and himself that Capitu was unfaithful, but the only secure point he is able to make is that he decided to assume such an unpleasant hypothesis. The reader knows what Bento did, but the reader himself or herself is unable to decide on the basis solely of Bento’s narrative. Besides, in spite of Bento’s decision, the reader is also unable to decide whether Capitu’s child, named Ezequiel, was Escobar’s son or Bento’s. But Bento actually took a stand on the issue. For this reason, he punished both of them accordingly. He discreetly separated from Capitu, sending her to Europe, and treated Ezequiel in a very cold manner (although he never told his – alleged? – son the motives for acting this way). Bento retired from social life and became a *casmurro*, a Portuguese word for a person who is taciturn and withdrawn.⁵³ In this circumstance, he decided to write his memories. Helen Caldwell, an important critic of Machado’s work,

⁵³ MACHADO DE ASSIS, J. M. *Dom Casmurro*. Rio; S. Paulo; Porto Alegre: W. M. Jackson Inc. Editores, 1959, p. 5-6.

says that Bento's full name, *Bento Santiago*, meaning *Blessed Saint Iago* in English, involves a subtle reference to Shakespeare's *Othelo*. Bento's doubts are so radical and continuing because he is possessed by an inner Iago.⁵⁴ In Rortyan terms, we may say that, although he had chosen a certain vocabulary concerning betrayal, his private inner Iago led him to entertain radical and continuing doubts about that very same vocabulary. He was never able to take himself seriously as the betrayed husband because he was always aware that the terms in which he described Capitu, Escobar Ezequiel and himself were contingent and subject to change. As far as marriage and betrayal are concerned, Bento is an ironist.

Now is Bento's ironism a public or a private matter? Rorty argues that we must distinguish between redescription for private and for public purposes. For my private purposes, my redescription may be such that it has nothing to do with my attitude towards the suffering of other people. For my public liberal purposes, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to my public actions requires to take into consideration in my redescription all the various ways in which other people can be humiliated.⁵⁵ With respect to Bento's attitude, I cannot see the dividing line between public and private purposes. Ultimately, everything is public. Bento's redescription of his actions towards Capitu and Ezequiel is public, because it involves the consideration of their suffering. But his redescription of himself as Dom Casmurro is also public, because it involves the consideration of his and other people's suffering. Bento's suffering and humiliation causes him to humiliate Capitu and Ezequiel and make them suffer. But Bento sees his suffering and humiliation as caused by Capitu, Escobar and Ezequiel. As he is psychologically insecure, he may be even imagining things, Capitu may well have been always faithful to him and Ezequiel may be his real son. This does not matter at all: Bento's self is constantly haunted by the inner Iago. After condemning his wife and son on the basis of insufficient evidence, Bento retires from social life and the only thing left to him is to write his mistrustful memories. He ultimately becomes a spectator of human life, somehow paralyzed for action. The story shows that everything is interconnected by the public dimension: there is no way to distinguish between Bento's private self-image and Bento's public actions. If we recognize that the self is a web of beliefs and desires which originate from public interactions, we will never know which part of Bento's final vocabulary is *not* relevant to his public actions. This seems to apply to all similar cases in real life. As a result, we may say that whatever I choose in order to redescribe myself with private purposes will always be a public matter. As a self-conscious pragmatist, Rorty should be aware that a clear-cut distinction between *public* and *private* wouldn't do.

If this is correct, then sometimes what the ironist does will never be really worthy at any level. In Bento's case, the ironist's actions are bound to corrupt the social glue by the appeal either to social reclusion which leads to the abuse of spectatorship and social inactivity or to a form of ill-founded social activity which ultimately will humiliate other

⁵⁴ CALDWELL, H. *The Brazilian Othelo of Machado de Assis: A Study of "Dom Casmurro"*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Un. of California Press, 1960.

⁵⁵ RORTY, R. Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: RORTY, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge Un. Press, 1989, p. 91-2.

people and make them suffer. Rorty argues that there is no reason why the private ironist cannot be a public liberal, although there are differences between the liberal ironist and the liberal metaphysician. One of them concerns their account of the usefulness of redescription to liberalism. For the ironist, the *only* redescriptions which serve liberal purposes are those which answer the question *what humiliates?*, whereas the metaphysician, as already mentioned, also wants to answer the question *why should I avoid humiliating?* But Rorty's very description of an ironist implies that in some cases he or she will never know for sure what humiliates other people and for this reason is doomed to act like Bento Santiago, in a quite hesitating, suspicious, mistrustful, insecure way. As far as humiliation is concerned, we can foresee that the outcome of such an acting will be tragic. As a result, an ironist like Bento *cannot* be a public liberal, because he or she is unable to cope adequately with his or her own descriptions.

The fifth point concerns Machado's critique of Humanism. In consistency with his ironism, Machado expresses through this critique his pessimistic feelings and doubts concerning philosophical systems optimistically designed to explain human existence in our world. This is so because Machado's doubts apply to metaphysics in general. In contrast with Rorty's optimistic views with respect to non-reductive physicalism, Machado does not offer any philosophical approach which might in some way mitigate our ignorance on the subject. It is true that non-reductive physicalism is not a metaphysical system in the traditional sense. Rorty proposes it as a fallibilist conjecture, as a new way of looking at things, as a new approach of which the main consequence would be enabling human beings to deal more efficiently with the opposition between science and literature. But it is also true that Rorty tells the story of the evolution of humankind towards non-reductive physicalism in an optimistic spirit and that, even as a fallibilist conjecture, the Rortyan approach is still an attempt to explain the unexplainable. From the very beginning, it is an enterprise doomed to failure and disappointment. It is a mitigated version of the same traditional metaphysics. Although Rorty is not making metaphysics in the strong traditional sense, he is still making some sort of metaphysics – and in an optimistic mood. He sees stages in the evolution of mankind and claims that non-reductive physicalism is the best we can have at the historical crossroads we find ourselves. For this reason, Machado would include Rorty's views among the others which may be located under the big umbrella of Humanism.

The above discussion of Machado's ideas allows the conclusion that ironism is not only a crucial aspect of his skeptical-pessimistic life view but also coheres with it. In Machado's fiction, ironism emerges as an ethical-philosophical stance towards life, which helps to reveal the flaws in human behavior. Machadean ironism does not involve any intention to propose a new vocabulary, because, after all, there is nothing new under the sun. It is articulated with literary creativity, in a spirit which is recommended by Rorty himself, when he claims that novels are better fit than moral treatises as vehicles of moral education.⁵⁶ Thus, the final result of adopting Machado's ironism would be to put all philosophical systems – non-reductive physicalism included – on a par with Humanism, which is nothing but human vanity in disguise. This is the reason why, in

⁵⁶ RORTY, R. Introduction. In: RORTY, R. *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge Un. Press, 1998, p. 12.

another contrast with Rorty's views, Machado's fiction has no edifying goals. This may be inferred from the way the character Brás Cubas describes the intentions of his *Posthumous Memories*:

it is a work supinely philosophical, but of a philosophy wanting in uniformity, now austere, now playful, a thing that neither edifies nor destroys, neither inflames, nor chills, and that is at once more than pastime and less than preachment.⁵⁷

A final observation is due at this point. By comparing the above two life-views, I am not suggesting that Machado's ironism is the best philosophical solution to all our existential problems. I am just claiming that Rortyan ironism does not cohere with non-reductive physicalism and that, if someone wants to stick to one of these philosophical perspectives, the other is to be rejected. Machadean ironism was presented as a thoroughly consistent position, in which the adherence to radical and pessimistic doubts leads to the abandonment of metaphysical systems as represented by Humanitism, which was designed to optimistically explain our worldly existence. But this is all there is to it. Although offering a more consistent ironist perspective, Machado's skeptic-pessimistic life-view has to face its own problems. Although Machado's aesthetic attitude towards life may be regarded as a practical solution to our misery, it would most likely contribute to the disruption of social links. The result would be political and social inactivity. Machado's life view would be ideal for retired and contemplative old people who aspire to be, while still alive, like Bras Cubas, the deceased who became an Author. Machado's life view is well fit for someone who, like Counselor Aires, has already experienced too many things, has travelled all around the world and now is reaching the end of his life. At this point, one may be completely detached from worldly values and act as an "apprentice of the deceased".⁵⁸ Of course, such a life-view and its corresponding attitude towards the world would not be adequate for most of humankind. Perhaps for this reason no one is claiming to be an heir to Machado's philosophical legacy.

⁵⁷ MACHADO DE ASSIS, J. M. Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas. In: *Obra Completa*. Org. Afrânio Coutinho. Rio: Aguilar, 1962, vol 1, p. 514. *Apud* Maia Neto, J. R. *Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, appendix 44, p. 197.

⁵⁸ This suggestive expression is due to José Paulo Paes. See MONTEIRO, Pedro Meira. Absence of Time: The Counselor's Dreams. In: *The Author as Plagiarist: The case of Machado de Assis*. Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies, 13/14, Fall 2004/Spring 2005, p. 366.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to show that Rortyan ironism is not compatible with the non-reductive materialist model. The latter is connected with a pragmatist and fallibilist view which is described by Rorty in optimistic terms. By contrast, his concept of *ironism* is presented in an ambiguous, mostly pessimistic, tone, which seems to involve some form of skepticism inspired by a metaphysical nostalgia.

In order to illustrate this claim, I made a comparison between Rortyan ironism and Machado de Assis's ironism. This was justified by the fact that Machado is an Author which adequately fits Rorty's definition of an *ironist*, mainly in the mature phase of his fiction. The man of spirit, one of the characters which recurrently appears in Machado's novels, finds the solution for his existential predicament in an aesthetic-cognitive view of life, involving a blend of pessimism and skepticism. I argued that such a life view is very similar to the ironist's life view as defined by Rorty.

Although the two forms of ironism belong to different literary genders, the comparison between them was justified by arguing that there is no clear-cut distinction between philosophy and literature and that Rortyan ironism would be better expressed by means of a literary text.

The comparison has revealed that Rorty's definition of an *ironist* does not chime with the non-reductive physicalist model. In fact, the Rortyan ironist has no criterion of "wrongness", but is all too worried about the possibility of having been educated in the "wrong" tribe. By adopting such a perspective, the Rortyan ironist gets closer to a sort of a Cartesian skeptic which is constantly haunted by his radical and universal doubts. In addition, Rorty's claim that ironism is a private matter conflicts with his use of ironism in public debates. What is worse, he applies *ironism* to the discussion of so many different Authors that the concept becomes excessively generic.

By contrast, Machadean ironism belongs to a purer strain than Rorty's. In Machado's case, ironism adopts a free form which derives from the attempt to give adequate literary expression to a skeptical-pessimistic life view in the spirit of *Ecclesiastes*. Machado offers to the reader the aesthetic contemplation of the beautiful form of human suffering. As he is describing a reality which is fundamentally opaque, his texts do not provide the reader with all the information he or she needs. As a result, Machado's texts are polysemic. And ironism plays a crucial role in them.

Although this is my own claim rather than Machado's, it was also shown that the characters' attitudes in the novels of the mature phase allow the conclusion that ironism is not a private matter, but a public one. This has been made with the help of an analysis of Bento's attitude in the novel *Dom Casmurro*.

Finally, it was argued that in Machado's life view no philosophical system, no metaphysics at all, be it full-blooded or modest, is defended. As a result, non-reductive physicalism may be properly described as a variant of Humanitism which should be dropped without more ado, in spite of Rorty's optimistic defense of such an approach.

Machado's ironism was not presented as *the* philosophical approach which would solve all our problems. I just claimed that it offers a much more coherent alternative to Rortyan ironism, which conflicts with other parts of Rorty's philosophy. In other words, if one wants to be an ironist in a Rortyan sense, then one should stick to Machado's life-view rather than to Rorty's. But this would not free one from the accusation of adhering

to a philosophy which is ideal for old, retired, detached and contemplative people who aspire to achieve in life what Bras Cubas achieved only after his death.

To the guise of conclusion, one may say that Machado is an ironist who does not want to be a metaphysician and Rorty is a metaphysician who wants to be an ironist. The former task may be philosophically accomplished, although *via* the literary way, as Machado does. The latter may be philosophically accomplished only if one is willing to face the charge of inconsistency, as Rorty seems to do.

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Artigo recebido em 15/1/07 e aprovado em 17/5/07.