

MACHADO DE ASSIS AND EUCLIDES DA CUNHA, INTERPRETERS OF AN INEXPLICABLE NATION

David Mittelman

United States Air Force Academy

Abstract: The texts of the growing canon of *intérpretes do Brasil* are frequently seen as offering firm interpretations of national development, promoting determinate categories of analysis, defending Brazil's virtues, and implying specific corrections for the nation's faults. Yet some notable works of the genre seem to reject the notions that interpreting the past may usefully inform the future and that the nation may be in any substantial way explained. This article shows how "interpretations" of Brazil as disparate as Machado de Assis's *Esaú e Jacó* and Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* arrive at a skeptical suspension of judgment about the nature, condition, and future of the nation.

Keywords: Intérpretes da nação; Machado de Assis; Euclides da Cunha

Resumo: Os textos do crescente cânone de *intérpretes do Brasil* são lidos frequentemente como oferecendo interpretações firmes do desenvolvimento nacional, promovendo categorias de análise fixas, defendendo as virtudes do Brasil e sugerindo correções específicas para as faltas da nação. No entanto, algumas obras notáveis do gênero parecem rejeitar as suposições de que interpretar o passado possa dar forma ao futuro e de que a nação possa ser explicada de maneira significativa. Este artigo mostra como "interpretações" do Brasil tão díspares quanto *Esaú e Jacó* de Machado de Assis e *Os Sertões* de Euclides da Cunha acabam na suspensão cética do juízo no tocante à natureza, condição e futuro da nação.

Palavras-chave: Intérpretes da nação; Machado de Assis; Euclides da Cunha

Introducing his classic anthology of canonical *Intérpretes do Brasil*, Silviano Santiago writes that the works of these writers have served as beacons rather than mirrors for Brazilians thinking about the nature and condition of their society, shaping discourse and illuminating pathways to action. Authors including Joaquim Nabuco, Paulo Prado, Gilberto Freyre, and Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda, to mention just a few of those whose writings appear in Santiago's original collection, offered ambitious interpretations of Brazil's development (or underdevelopment) and supplied determinate categories of analysis with which they defended the nation's virtues and advanced specific corrections for its faults.

Taken historically, the category of *interpretations of Brazil* collects writings that have profoundly shaped the intellectual and political discourse in and about the country, particularly prior to the modernization of the university system in the second half of the twentieth century. Given the breadth and importance of this historical canon, however, it is productive to apply the term analytically and expand the corpus to include other works that promise to characterize Brazil and shed light why the nation is as it is. Literary critics, often preoccupied with questions of national identity and history, have shown how fictional works participate in interpreting the nation, as when Willi Bolle reads João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas* as a novel of the formation of Brazil and an indictment of a false social contract at the founding of the nation; or when Roberto Schwarz reads Machado de Assis's *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* as exposing the Brazilian elite's cavalier and contemptuous attitude toward their subaltern compatriots. But some efforts to interpret Brazil introduce challenging and even painful ambiguities. Although these writings boldly face the fundamental question *why is Brazil the way Brazil is?* they may reject the notion that interpreting the past usefully informs the future and they may even undercut the hope that, in the end, the nation might be in any substantial way explained. In short, having attempted to explain something important about how and why Brazil is as it is, they fall, frustrated, into a skeptical suspension of judgment.

Though there are many varieties of skepticism and much debate about its nature, development, and importance in both antiquity and modernity, for our purposes we can conceive of a skeptical challenge or argument as one that questions a familiar supposition

and that, if unanswered, seems to force the thinker to abandon her commitment to fundamental convictions or apparently obvious truths:

How can I trust what my senses tell me about my surroundings, if I cannot rule out the possibilities that I might be suffering a delusion, a vivid dream, or the intervention of some powerful being that manipulates my mind and my perceptions?

What right do I have to insist on my dearest intellectual, political, and moral convictions, when I know that there are plenty of people who are just as smart as I am, who have similar access to the same evidence and argumentation as I do, and whose views contradict my own?

Have I any good reason to believe that other beings are mentally conscious at all – how can I be certain that I am not surrounded by automata whose behavior resembles mine, but who have no mental life of their own?

Why should I be confident that the sun will rise tomorrow, if my expectation is not based on any reasoning beyond my observation that it has risen before? What real basis could I have for presuming that future events will be similar to past ones?

Each of these challenges has been raised and debated among philosophers. In each case, although the challenge offers an outlandish position, reflection – and much spilled ink – shows that it is not a simple thing to respond without engaging in circular reasoning. And in each case, we seem to face the choice between defending our familiar practice (though it is unclear if this is possible), carrying on in our usual way without answering the skeptical challenge (though this would apparently be irrational), or succumbing to the challenge and suspending judgment regarding crucial matters or perhaps everything we took for granted before (possibly at the cost of being able to do anything or live at all).

What might it mean to interpret the Brazilian nation as inexplicable or beyond understanding? We begin with the somewhat less controversial example of Machado de Assis, long associated with one or another interpretation of skepticism, and continue with the more challenging case of Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*.

There is little doubt, ironically, that a certain philosophical skepticism roamed among Brazilian intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century: a certain preoccupation with the instability of opinion, a peculiar worry about the fragility and baselessness of factual and moral convictions, a suspicion that human reason should seek only to suspend judgment rather than grasp at conclusions. Although critics and readers have not always distinguished clearly this attitude from a broader or even pathological pessimism, the fiction of Machado de Assis has long been read as expressing, developing, or otherwise enacting some form of skepticism. Where some have understood Machado's attitude as a flat refusal to endorse the trendy ideas of the time, others have argued that the author created a series of characters whose progressively deeper skeptical attitudes permit them to attain increasing levels of psychological and social salvation, and still others have contended that Machado's fiction poses the suspension of judgment as a painful, if inevitable, condition.¹ While some have associated the novelist with the ancient Greek tradition of Pyrrhonism – taking skepticism as a way of life eased by the balm of suspending judgment – others have made much of his reading of Montaigne and Pascal, and still others have shown the ways in which Machadian skepticism echoes the anxieties of much modern European philosophy in posing the apparent limitations of human knowledge as a disturbing dilemma: either give up on our convictions and live without endorsing any position regarding any question great or small; or somehow shore up our situation by answering questions, long-vexed and still perplexing, that have resisted satisfactory resolution for decades, centuries, or millennia.²

But if we take Machado as an *intérprete do Brasil*, what role will his interest in skepticism play in his interpretation?

Machado's most flatly political novel, *Esau e Jacó* famously follows the meteoric trajectory of a pair of twins, the innately conservative Pedro and the instinctively rebellious Paulo, through the turbulent later years of the Brazilian monarchy and the tumultuous

¹ See Muricy, Maia Neto, and Nunes.

² See Maia Neto, Krause, Coutinho, Reale, Gai, and Mittelman.

early years of the first Republic. Like their biblical ancestors whose names supply the book's title, the twins struggled before birth "no ventre de sua mãe" and their infancy is marked by a vague prophecy of future greatness (12). As children they paper the walls of their bedroom with warring images of Louis XVI and Robespierre; they invent contradictory interpretations of the auspiciousness of their birthday, 7 April 1870: for the traditionalist Pedro, the anniversary of Dom Pedro II's ascent to the throne, but for the reformist Paulo, the anniversary of Dom Pedro I's fall from it. As they grow up, the twins vie for the affection and attentions of the unusual Flora, who, unable to fuse the twins into one being and unable or unwilling to choose one over the other, falls ill and dies without choosing either.

Drawing repeatedly on the Bible and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and making clear reference to significant dates and events during the waning years of slavery and the Segundo Reinado, Machado's interpretation of Brazil easily seems to take the form of allegory. As Stephen Hart summarizes critical approaches in this vein, the novel can be taken as "an allegory of the failed political experiment of both republicanism and monarchism in nineteenth-century Brazil. Flora's death, according to this formula, would be interpreted as the outward manifestation of this internal, political failure" (321). Yet as Jobst Welge has written, "*Esaú e Jacó* is a 'historical novel' that is skeptical of the possibility of historical narrative" (28). Similarly, Earl Fitz has recently argued, the reader of Machado's novel must "reproduce, through the same language system that gives rise to her initial thoughts about the text she is reading, more possible interpretations, more explanations about what seems to be happening in the novel and what it means" (136). If an allegorical reading is at some level inescapable, we need not oversimplify Machado's interpretation of Brazil by taking the novel's national allegory to consist of a series of simplistic associations such that (a) Pedro = political conservatism, (b) Paulo = political radicalism, (c) Flora = the nation of Brazil, (d) Flora's refusal to choose one of the twins = the equivalence of elite conservatism and radicalism in the Old Republic, and finally (e) Flora's death = Brazil's utter impasse and probable or inevitable failure. Although the rivalry between the twins and their relationships with Flora are of central importance in the novel, the triangular drama unfolds within a web of relations among other characters,

whose contrasting attitudes are equally important to an analysis of Machado's possible allegory.

The characters who populate *Esau e Jacó* are largely distinguished by their contrasting intellectual attitudes or how they might answer the question: *on what basis should one hold an opinion?* The young people at the center of the drama – the dogmatic twins and their indecisive darling – are joined by a slate of characters marked by weak or suspect intellectual attitudes and who, like the twins themselves, are set in fairly obvious symmetrical opposition. The twins' parents, Natividade and Santos, each ground their views and expectations by appeal to dubious authorities: Natividade seeks out the fortune-telling Cabocla of the Morro do Castelo, while Santos consults the Spiritualist master Plácido. Though the parents choose different guides – the mother turns to a momentarily notable mystic emerging from the popular classes, while the father prefers a fashionable medium associated with a supposedly more modern and certainly more European form of spirituality – each receives similarly vague advice and predictions that do little but reinforce predictable parental concerns regarding their young twin boys. Will they attain success? (Almost certainly yes, considering the social position they are born into.) And will they get along? (Almost certainly not, apparently for the same reason: as sons of the bourgeois Santos, they must distinguish themselves through competition.)

Flora's parents, for their part, illustrate quite familiar forces in Brazilian politics that have little to do with ideas or arguments. Batista enters the novel as a previously influential Conservative whose partisan alignment is based on personal loyalties rather than ideology or policy. Dona Cláudia, the more calculating and ambitious of the pair, convinces Batista to switch parties and thereby reinvigorate his political career. Compared by Machado's narrator to the Macbeths, Batista and Cláudia represent an approach to politics and governance that has no need of intellectual commitment of any kind, but functions strictly through the ebb and flow of opportunistic bonding and betrayal – an approach we recognize as readily in contemporary Brazil as in past ages.

As for the twins themselves, each is moved by an innate and unchanging attitude of conservatism or radicalism. Though their specific positions shift with time, as when, late in the novel, Paulo “entrou a fazer oposição ao governo, ao passo que Pedro moderava o

tom e o sentido, e acabava aceitando o régimen republicano, objeto de tantas desavenças” (210), their commitments are driven only by their respective embrace or rejection of the present status quo. If there is anything capable of affecting the underlying sensibilities that govern their particular views, it might be the conflict itself: since the brothers define themselves in opposition to one another, any position that appears alluring or even palatable to one must become anathema to the other. Their attitudes are mutually reinforcing and, in the end, seem to have little to do with any notion of intellectual responsibility or any real effort to come to correct conclusions about what is or what should be, and redound instead on instinct.

But while the novel follows the twins most closely, Flora is most directly associated with the Brazilian nation, or at least a possible future for it. Not only coming of age, as do Pedro and Paulo, with the abrupt shocks of the Lei Áurea of 1888 and the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889, but also, crucially, born with the Law of the Free Womb of 1871 – which foretold the eventual end of slavery in Brazil while stopping well short of immediate abolition and any form of reparation – Flora seems to embody the possibility of a reborn Brazil constituted by the paradigmatic modern values of liberty, equality, and justice. And though the triangular courtship story would suggest that her situation should be analyzed in relation to twins’, the specificity of her attitude becomes clear only in comparison to the figure of Conselheiro Aires. Unlike the other major characters, who adopt and abandon opinions for dubious reasons, Aires and Flora avoid committing to specific views, though they do this in different ways and with quite different results. Aires, the easy-living ex-diplomat, goes by the title of ‘Conselheiro’ while claiming that the honorific “é um título que o imperador me conferiu, por achar que o merecia, mas não obriga a dar conselhos” (107). Describing himself as having “o coração disposto a aceitar tudo, não por inclinação à harmonia, senão por tédio à controvérsia” (33-34), Aires agrees readily with his interlocutors or, confronted with a dispute among others of his acquaintance, delicately proffers a conciliatory middle ground. Facing a dilemma, he chooses neither horn and when unable to endorse a given opinion, he consigns his own reflections to his private *Memorial*, safely removed from the realm of interpersonal discourse and action. Like Aires, Flora does not arrive at fixed views, but where the retired diplomat will assent to nearly

any proposition in order to avoid conflict, the contemplative young artist eschews superficial accord, having an “inclinação natural por defender os ausentes, que não podiam responder por nada” (167). Indeed, the two characters come to discuss this divergence of attitude, noting Flora’s apparently contradictory habit of defending each twin when in the presence of the other and Aires’s practice of agreeing with one and all, which leads him to endorse incompatible points of view at different points in time.

What are we to make of these attitudes? What effects do the conciliatory Aires and contradictory Flora have in *Esaú e Jacó*’s interpretation of Brazil? It is tempting to take Aires and Flora as, respectively, heroic and tragic players in the drama. José Raimundo Maia Neto has argued that Aires manifests Machado’s interest in Pyrrhonian skepticism by living out the suspension of judgment and thereby avoiding conflict and strife. And if we think, as some have, that Aires appears as an approximation of the author’s own subjectivity, “o *alter ego* mais evoluído do escritor” (Gomes 1120), we might take some satisfaction in the Conselheiro’s nonchalant position as an observer of events and relationships, who goes about leisurely from beginning to end “apalpando a botoeira, onde viçava a mesma flor eterna” (Assis, *Esaú de Jacó* 221). Similarly, we might take Flora, the thoughtful, serious, fair-minded young woman, as tragically incapable of making an evidently essential choice between the twins Pedro and Paulo because, as Luiz Costa Lima argues “Ela não se decide porque os partidos que se lhe apresentam não são partidos, i.e., os pretendentes não são de fato diferentes. Optar entre Pedro e Paulo seria escolher apenas um nome diferente” (*Dispersa Demanda* 110). Following Eunice Piazza Gai, we could then take Aires as an allegory of skepticism, a beneficial attitude of intellectual dispassion, and poor Flora as an allegory of life-crippling doubt, unsuccored by the suspension of judgment (*epochê*) and incapable of attaining the redemption of Pyrrhonian tranquility (*ataraxia*).

Yet too many considerations weigh against this schematic. Though Aires appears to practice the suspension of judgment and, in so doing, seems to avoid suffering, consideration reveals some distance between ‘esse Aires’ and the paradigmatic Pyrrhonian described by Sextus Empiricus in his *Outlines of Skepticism*, likely the most influential source on the subject to survive antiquity. Sextus defines skepticism in contrast with two competing approaches to philosophy: Dogmatic and Academic. Dogmatism encompasses

any philosophy that claims to have found some truth, while Academic thought includes any claim that truth cannot be attained. “The Skeptics,” Sextus continues, “continue to search” (89). There is some uncertainty among philosophers regarding this claim, since it appears to impute to the skeptic an ongoing effort to arrive at firm or fixed conclusions – a strange requirement for an intellectual attitude characterized by the suspension of judgment. Though there are various possible interpretations of the skeptic’s commitment to ongoing investigation, Benson Mates helps considerably in pointing out that “If Sextus himself is a typical Pyrrhonist, it appears that the principal way in which Pyrrhonists ‘search for truth’ is to raise questions about assertions purporting to be true” (224).

Whether taken as the narrator of *Esaú e Jacó* or the character within the novel, and though somewhat Pyrrhonian in contenting himself to comment on how things appear (phenomena) and avoiding any commitment as to how they are in reality (noumena), Conselheiro Aires harbors little interest in any search for truth, however defined. Above all, his habit of easily agreeing with the assertions of others diverges starkly from Sextus’s skeptic, whose attitude of continual questioning must lead him to challenge the claims and convictions of his fellows. Aires seems to escape the strife exemplified by the twins Pedro and Paulo and the misery suffered by Flora, but his apparent contentment does not result from the Pyrrhonian’s careful weighing of opposing views, suspension of judgment via recognition of the equipollence of contradictory arguments, and the tranquility that, according to Sextus, naturally results “as a shadow follows the body” (93). Instead, far from this model of intellectual responsibility, Aires is merely detached, disinterested in the questions, doubts, and struggles that motivate others around him. His moral conformism is not the pragmatic refuge of the skeptic who has reflected and found no stable criterion of ethical judgment, but the disengaged complacency of the incurably privileged. Aires, then, must either be taken as a quasi-skeptic who on inspection fails to fill out the Pyrrhonian mold or else as a cutting caricature of the skeptical figure. In either case, his attitude in the end seems no more admirable than those offered by the rest of the intellectually irresponsible characters populating the young Brazilian Republic.

Flora is the only exception. Flora, whose birth coincides with the passage of the Lei do Ventre Livre and associates her with the dream of liberty; the same Flora whose sense

of fairness allows her to balance the merits of each twin against the other's and who engages with each of the suitors by defending his brother as his equal in merit. This Flora who is defined, prophetically, by Aires as 'inexplicável', a claim he adumbrates by comparing her to those artists who, never satisfied,

pintam sem acabar de pintar. Botam tinta, mais tinta, outra tinta, pouca tinta, nova tinta, e nunca lhes parece que a árvore é árvore, nem a choupana, choupana. Se se trata então de gente, adeus. Por mais que os olhos da figura falem, sempre esses pintores cuidam que eles não dizem nada. E retocam com tanta paciência, que alguns morrem entre dois olhos, outros matam-se de desespero (69).

Flora-Brasil, Flora the inexplicable. Aires's characterization betrays, despite his affection for the young woman, an impatience with what he evidently takes to be simple indecision, but which, in fact, turns out to be a more apt approximation of skepticism than any assayed by the aging Conselheiro himself. Tempting as it is to explain away Flora's refusal or inability to choose one twin over the other, as Luiz Costa Lima does, by insisting that the twins are indistinguishable because they are ultimately equivalent, it is not clear that Machado's text supports this interpretation. In the chapter titled "A Grande Noite," Flora, in a half-waking vision, penetrates the soul of each twin and finds in each one an indefinable essence that is not found in the other. Though on the surface the twins may appear interchangeable and though others might struggle at times to tell them apart, Flora perceives their profoundly different natures: Paulo's ambition, his drive to remake the world into what it ought to be; Pedro's moderation, his promise of preservation and stability. As Antonio Candido recognized, Flora – the skeptic, the inexplicable – perceives that "evidentemente as duas possibilidades são legítimas" (26). On what basis shall she choose one over the other? Flora finds no criterion that would allow her to choose between the twins' ethical proposals. Eunice Piazza Gai might see this as an allegory of doubt, but here Mates again shows the way, reminding us that "the characteristic attitude of the Pyrrhonian skeptic is, as we have said, not doubt but rather *aporia*, that is being at a loss, baffled, perplexed, puzzled, stumped, stymied" (30). Flora, not Aires, practices the ongoing questioning of the skeptic and demonstrates the equipollence of Pedro's patience and Paulo's temerity, falling finally into *aporia*.

Despite what some have argued, Machado's novel will not serve as a Pyrrhonian playground. Flora's skepticism will not save her; quite the opposite. She will be the only

character to take significant care in developing views and opinions, but she will find herself terminally ‘at a loss, baffled, perplexed, puzzled, stumped, stymied.’ The Pyrrhonian promise will not avail her; she will find no tranquility in declining the choice, but remain tortured by the need to choose. Compare Aires’s analogy of the perfectionist painters with a strikingly similar tale from Sextus:

Indeed, what happened to the Skeptic is just like what is told of Apelles the painter. For it is said that once upon a time, when he was painting a horse and wished to depict the horse’s froth, he failed so completely that he gave up and threw his sponge at the picture – the sponge on which he used to wipe the paints from his brush – and that in striking the picture the sponge produced the desired effect. So, too, the Skeptics were hoping to achieve *ataraxia* by resolving the anomaly of phenomena and noumena, and, being unable to do this, they suspended judgment. But then, by chance as it were, when they were suspending judgment the *ataraxia* followed, as a shadow follows the body. (93)

Unlike Apelles and the ancient skeptics, Flora cannot take solace in avoiding the choice before her – she cannot throw her sponge at the picture. Or perhaps she can try – as when she turns over to Aires her drawing of the twins as one figure and stands silently by as he tears it to pieces – but she won’t feel any better for having attempted it. Machado’s interest in skepticism is a thoroughly modern, post-Cartesian worry about our apparent inability to properly ground or defend our convictions, while we are condemned to hold positions and takes sides. This, in Machado’s allegory of the young nation at the threshold of modernity, is the situation of Brazil. The rising nation must be free to make a just choice of its future. But on what basis could it do so? Flora’s death in the 1890s, as Floriano Peixoto turned the might of the state against the people and pitted the young Republic against the maturing nation, comes to signify the ruin of her moment of promise. The flowering of the nation founders “inexplicably” on the shoals of skepticism: unable to decide among conflicting views and values, unable to avoid deciding. Not being one thing or another, inexplicable.

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In an essay on Machado’s realism, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht contrasts the author’s approach with that of one of his notable contemporaries and friends. While Machado’s

novels are characterized by “changing configurations of narrative instability” (33), Euclides da Cunha employed “discursive techniques and techniques of documentation adopted from the contemporary state of the natural sciences to describe a revolt of masses excluded from Brazilian society and its brutal repression by the national military” (34). His opus *Os Sertões*, an “attempt at an objective description, turned into a manifesto of compassion and a pledge for political change” (34-35). For Gumbrecht, “Nothing could have been further from Machado’s playful instability than this gesture of objectivity and the pathos of existential seriousness with which Euclides was writing” (35). There can be little doubt about the depth of divergence in tone and narrative attitude in the best-known works of these two writers. Where Machado’s discourse constructs the realm of the fictional and his frequently ironic and humorous narration offers oblique representation and criticism of contemporary and historical reality, Euclides commits to describing, portraying, discussing, and narrating the realm of science, facts, and truth, albeit artistically. Euclides’s bombastic style and his bluntly structured, deterministic account of the Canudos campaign contribute to the reception of his work not only as a paradigmatic effort to interpret Brazil, but also as a paragon of scientific, naturalistic, positivistic dogmatism.

But what are we to make of his conclusion? Euclides closes his colossal effort with an utterly characteristic, but frankly bizarre chapter of “duas linhas,” which depending on the edition actually fit quite comfortably on just one: “É que ainda não existe um Maudsley para as loucuras e os crimes das nacionalidades” (781). There might be no more typical or more pedantic element of Euclides’s style than to start a sentence, or here a chapter, with a synthetic “é que,” a conjunction that belies the author’s apparent decision to offer a conclusion by logically subordinating his ‘duas linhas’ to the preceding five or six hundred pages (again depending on the edition). To get to this point, one must follow Euclides’s report of the atrocities of the Canudos campaign, his anthropological survey of the people of the sertão, and his portrait of the eco-geological conditions underlying ways of life in the region. One might think it plain, having slowly and sometimes painfully trudged through the book’s sweeping exposition and grandiose narration, that the final lines express the author’s grim satisfaction in producing a monument of both Western science and Brazilian cultural development with a frankly immodest, if indirect, claim of Maudsley-

like greatness. If you have read my enormous book, Euclides seems to say, then all is explained – not just Canudos and not just Brazil, but the natural laws that govern the psychoses and the sins of all the nations of the earth. You know all you need to know. There has been no Maudsley for the faults of nations – *until now*...

But it is not clear that this is correct. Certainly, Euclides thought of his work as building upon, correcting, and completing European scientific discourses with which he engaged. Just as the conclusion and meaning of *Os Sertões* will ultimately be bound up in the missing Maudsley of national psychology, Euclides seems to relish other opportunities to expose the inadequacy of European thought for an analysis of Brazil, as when he describes Northeastern Brazil as subject to “uma categoria geográfica que Hegel não citou” (133). But in order to take *Os Sertões* as an attempt to produce a “Pathology of Nationality” or “Responsibility in Mentally Diseased Nations”, we would have to assess not only whether Euclides succeeds in explaining national crimes and insanities, but also what kind of explanation might be on offer *and* whether or not the book is really committed to delivering it.

Though it is not unusual for critics to note the peculiarity of these final lines, detailed comment on their importance is uncommon and readers of Euclides are divided as to what to make of them. Curiously, Adriana Michéle Campos Johnson, who studies how *Os Sertões* “sentenced” the subaltern community of Belo Monte by closing the book on the significance of the Canudos campaign and its victims, sees little of interest in how Euclides closes his own book, stating simply that “da Cunha’s book ends with the end of Canudos, the corpse of the Conselheiro, and a lament that there is no Maudsley for ‘acts of madness and crimes on the part of nations’” (165). But other critics have found these puzzling words significant and useful in drawing out lines of interpretation. Luiz Costa Lima, arguing that *Os Sertões* almost completely subordinates its aesthetic project to an incomplete, even sloppy pretention of scientific authority, takes the concluding reference to Maudsley as both an indication of Euclides’s poor reading or misrepresentation of the British psychiatrist and as a sign of his inability to live up to his own ambitions as an exponent of the scientific mentality. Costa Lima understands Maudsley (or at any rate the Maudsley he supposes Euclides to have read) as primarily concerned with pathology and

criminality in individuals and little interested in social or cultural factors relating to mental illness and unlawful conduct – anything approaching a notion of national crime and insanity. Consequently, on this reading, Euclides's second and final reference to Maudsley underscores an apparent carelessness about the domain of investigation and a lack of self-awareness regarding the empirical and theoretical difficulties raised by the author's own work. According to Costa Lima, "Euclides da Cunha faz da ciência um campo de crença e de absoluta autoridade. Ao mesmo tempo, hesita e recua ante a necessidade de examiná-la e não só de aplicá-la. A ciência então se torna um mecanismo a ser manipulado" (*Terra Ignota* 121). Euclides's final reference to Maudsley becomes not only symptomatic of the author's cavalier or disingenuous exploitation of the supposedly authoritative texts he cites, but also, more broadly, an indication of his intellectual limitations as a theorist or interpreter of Brazil. For Costa Lima, the overall aesthetic disappointment of *Os Sertões* is supplemented by its failure as a scientific project capable of interrogating its own suppositions, biases, and parameters.

Costa Lima's provocative assessment of *Os Sertões* has been met with an equally interesting rebuttal by Leopoldo Bernucci, who defends Euclides on a number of grounds. Against the charge of misreading his sources, Bernucci points out that the Maudsley text most likely consulted by Euclides, the French edition of *Responsibility in Mental Disease* (*Le crime et la folie*), and other works by the British psychiatrist do in fact address, if in limited degree, communal and national dimensions of mental illness and the social construction of criminality and madness. More substantively, however, and while allowing that Euclides's text seems to present multiple contradictions, Bernucci argues that these are only apparent, "na medida em que estas deixam de ser *antinômicas* para serem *aporísticas*" (31, my emphasis). For Bernucci, the tensions of *Os Sertões* remain in the realm of aporia (rather than outright, antinomic, contradiction) because its discursive attitude does not univocally commit to either conflicting position, let alone to both. Discussing as an exemplary case Euclides's dismissal of phrenology in the middle of *Os Sertões* and his recovery of the approach in the final pages, Bernucci contends that the author is not to be criticized for falling into aporia or apparent contradiction, since this was simply the situation of psychological theory at the time: "Para questão tão complexa e assistemática

como os estudos sobre a loucura realizados no século XIX, tanto para Euclides, Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, Maudsley, quanto para outros que se debruçaram sobre o problema, era impossível evitar as aporias, os paradoxos e as situações aparentemente contraditórias na descrição dos fenômenos psicopatológicos” (38). Returning us to the idea that the missing Maudsley of national madness and misdemeanor is supposed to be Euclides himself, Bernucci concludes that

Para compreender corretamente a enigmática e última frase de *Os Sertões* é preciso reler atentamente e uma vez mais os estudos do psiquiatra inglês. [...] Euclides [...] certamente pensou naqueles ‘mercenários inconscientes’ que, como aqueles loucos criminosos que estuda o psiquiatra, e que segundo este deveriam estar legalmente isentos da punição máxima, não sabiam o que estavam fazendo. Chegou a entender também que Maudsley, em perspectiva sociológica, estava bem aparelhado e talvez muito próximo de teorizar sobre as insânias nacionais. Restava saber quem mais e com semelhantes qualificações, além, é certo, do próprio Euclides nessas seiscentas páginas, estaria gabaritado para o desafio de lidar com as loucuras e os crimes das nacionalidades” (38-39).

Bernucci’s defense – that Euclides’s narrative-treatise avoids incoherence by eschewing commitment to the incompatible possibilities and perspectives he contemplates – is both too strong and too weak as it stands. Too strong, because it implies that the discursive voice of *Os Sertões* is not fully committed to the truth of its assertions – as Bernucci himself puts it, “muitos dos enunciados em *Os Sertões* não podem ser nem refutados, nem assegurados, porque pela própria natureza de sua articulação discursiva não são passíveis de afirmação, nem de negação” (32) – a claim strikingly at odds with the tenor of the text. This is plainly seen by consideration of the most emblematic apparent contradiction of *Os Sertões*, and which is perhaps the question in greatest need of a Maudsley at the end. Within the first lines of his “Nota Preliminar,” before even beginning in earnest, Euclides offers us the characteristic conundrum by declaring first that the violence of the Canudos campaign was an inevitable phase of historical development, requiring the “esmagamento inevitável das raças fracas pelas raças fortes,” but within a page insists that the same events constitute a violation that must be condemned: “E foi, na significação integral da palavra, um crime. Denunciemo-lo” (66-67). The difficulty of explaining how an inevitable conflict could be a crime will not be resolved by contending that the conflicting propositions cannot be affirmed or denied – since, patently, they can be – or by supposing that the text withholds full assent from each of the contraries –

because, evidently, it asserts each one loudly and clearly. But the defense is too weak as well. If we suppose, as Bernucci does, that Euclides wrote and thought carefully and therefore that his apparent contradictions represent his use of aporia to avoid committing to propositions worth considering but not ultimately meriting avowal, we will be left with little to say about what, in the end, *Os Sertões* is supposed to reveal, explain, or illuminate. For in what sense could Euclides emerge as uniquely “gabaritado para o desafio de lidar com as loucuras e os crimes das nacionalidades” (39), if, despite his preoccupation with scientific explanation by reference to natural laws, his claims are not to be read as truth-aspiring affirmations?

Nor can the problem be avoided by minimizing Euclides’s commitment to scientific explanation, which is evident not only in the organizational structure of the work (beginning with an ecology, which then supports his anthropology, which then supports his military history) and his references to scientific theory (meteorological, social-evolutionary, psychiatric, etc.), but in his language. The rhetoric of *Os Sertões* is shot through with claims of explanation and references to laws of nature. Among the many things that Euclides considers explained or explainable:

- (1) Por um contraste explicável entre as disposições orográficas, rodeiam-no, contudo, paragens exubertantes. (344)
- (2) Todas as manifestações complexas de religiosidade indefinida, são explicáveis. (239)
- (3) É que por um efeito explicável de adaptação às condições estreitas do meio ingrato, evoluindo penosamente em círculos estreitos, aquelas mesmo que tanto se diversificam nas matas ali se talham por um molde único. (116-117)
- (4) Ora, nada mais explicável do que este permanente contraste entre extremas manifestações de força e agilidade e longos intervalos de apatia. (214)

Euclides is likewise free with his appeals to laws of nature:

- (5) Toda a climatologia, inscrita nos amplos lineamentos das leis cosmológicas gerais, desponta em qualquer parte adicta de preferência às causas naturais

mais próximas e particulares. Um clima é como que a tradução fisiológica de uma condição geográfica. (157)

- (6) As leis naturais pelo próprio jogo parecem extinguir, a pouco e pouco, o produto anômalo que as viola, afogando-o nas próprias fontes geradoras [...] É que são invioláveis as leis do desenvolvimento das espécies. (201)
- (7) Homens de todas as cores, amálgamas de diversas raças, parece que no sobrevir dos lances perigosos e no abalo de emoções fortíssimas lhes preponderam, exclusivas, no ânimo, por uma lei qualquer de psicologia coletiva, os instintos guerreiros, a imprevidência dos selvagens, a inconsciência do perigo, o desapego à vida e o arremesso fatalista para a morte. (451-452)

If Bernucci's defense will not go through – if *Os Sertões* is built of contradictions that cannot be neutralized by denying that the text makes assertions of fact – are we left only with Costa Lima's option, that the book is an interesting failure? Can we only read it as an attempt at a grand explanation of Canudos, Brazil, and History that is entirely undone by its internal messiness? Despite the difficulties we have seen in applying his reading, Bernucci hints at an alternative: we can read *Os Sertões*, despite its apparent dogmatism, as a work of skeptical aporia, a realization of the fragility of our claims of knowledge and a frustrated uncertainty about whether our best explanations teach us what to do.

As much as Euclides claims to explain, it is clear that he is just as preoccupied with what is unknown or inexplicable. The sertão itself and its inhabitants are scandalously unknown to the national center:

- (8) As nossas melhores cartas, enfeixando informes escassos, lá têm um claro expressivo, um hiato, *Terra ignota*, em que se aventura o rabisco de um rio problemático ou idealização de uma corda de serras. (80)
- (9) Para obviar este inconveniente, levaram uma bomba artesianana, como se fossem conhecidas as camadas profundas da terra pelos que lhe ignoravam a própria superfície. (433)

- (10) aqueles lugares estão, como vimos, entre os mais desconhecidos da nossa terra. (344)
- (11) E como aquele povo desconhecido de matutos lhes devolvia, dia a dia, mutilados e abatidos, os companheiros que meses antes tinham avançado robustos e alteneiros, não havia ânimo varonil que atentasse impassível para as bandas do sertão misterioso e agro... (678)

But these are not the only lacunae. It is not merely incidental that the Republican center, the regional elites and urban population of the national and state capitals, had no acquaintance or understanding of the sertão. For as many times as Euclides claims to have explained the phenomena of the sertão, on as many occasions he declares them inexplicable (sometimes even while simultaneously trying to offer an explanation!):

- (12) Aparecem [os cabeças-de-frade] de modo inexplicável, sobre a pedra nua, dando, realmente, no tamanho, na conformação, no modo por que se espalham, a imagem singular de cabeças decepadas e sanguinolentas jogadas por ali, a esmo, numa desordem trágica. É que estreitíssima frincha lhes permitiu insinuar, através da rocha, a raiz longa e capilar até a parte inferior, onde acaso existam, livres da evaporação, uns restos de umidade. (124)
- (13) A natureza não cria normalmente os desertos. Combate-os, repulsa-os. Desdobram-se, lacunas inexplicáveis, às vezes sob as linhas astronômicas definidoras da exuberância máxima da vida. (135-136)
- (14) Os jagunços em desordem, contudo, depois do primeiro arranco da fuga, volveram ainda ao mesmo resistir inexplicável [...] Como sempre, os sertanejos tornavam incompleto o sucesso, ressurgindo inexplicavelmente dentre os estragos de um combate perdido. (562-563)
- (15) E quando, afinal jugulados, eram conduzidos à presença dos chefes militares, iam conformados ao destino deplorável. Revestiam-se de serenidade estranha e uniforme, inexplicável entre lutadores de tão variados matizes, e tão discordes caracteres, mestiços de toda a sorte, variando, díspares, na índole e na cor. (731)

Not only is the sertão itself inexplicable, but it “naturally” induces inexplicable actions on the part of the Republican military: “É natural que não fossem as operações concertadas com a indispensável lucidez e que as inquinassem, desde o primeiro passo nos caminhos, todos os erros e inexplicáveis descuidos e inexplicável olvido de preceitos rudimentares, já rudemente corrigidos ou expostos com a maior clareza nos desastres anteriores” (431). And not only does the encounter between the rest of Brazil and the sertão erode the apparently solid bedrock of military training and principles, but news of the “inconceivable” defeat results in a fevered search for explanations that convince the nation of immediate danger to the Republic itself:

Foi a princípio o espanto; depois um desvairamento geral da opinião; um intenso agitar de conjeturas para explicar o inconcebível do acontecimento [...]. Era preciso uma explicação qualquer para sucessos de tanta monta. Encontraram-na: os distúrbios sertanejos significavam pródromos de vastíssima conspiração contra as instituições recentes (497-498).

This dubious explanation, held with utter conviction by defenders of the Republic across Brazil, would justify the fourth expedition and ultimately the extermination of the rebellious sertanejos.

In retrospect, from the vantage of his narration, Euclides can condemn this confusion and its terrible outcomes, but he cannot dismiss the question that it raises: are we justified in the certainty with which we explain the world around us, our history, our compatriots? Having been so profoundly wrong about what was happening in Canudos in the early stages of the conflict, as a member of the Republican elite, can Euclides now affirm his account of what happened and why? It seems not. The sertão will remain a realm that is not merely unknown but unknowable, where even the inviolable laws of nature do not apply. Euclides cannot give up his attempt to explain the events of the campaign, the people of the sertão, and the land they live on, but as much as he strains to explicate, he will find as much that is inexplicable, and which lands him in aporia: “at a loss, baffled, perplexed, puzzled, stumped, stymied” (Mates 30). Things will become muddled, not because Euclides didn’t think through what he was doing or because he lacked a sense that important events and phenomena require explication, but because his impulse to explain,

driven by his sense of horror, is counterbalanced by a worry that even the most obvious-seeming explanation might go wide off the point.

It is telling that in her recent translation of *Os Sertões*, Elizabeth Lowe deemed it necessary to supplement Euclides's summary remark in order to render his final lines: "It is truly regrettable that in these times we do not have a Maudsley, who knew the difference between good sense and insanity, to prevent nations from committing acts of madness and crimes against humanity" (465). While the notion of a crime against humanity may have been alien to Euclides, Lowe recognizes what may be the most important difference between Euclides and Maudsley, and the reason that *Os Sertões* cannot ultimately carry an implicit subtitle along the lines of "The Crimes and Madness of Mixed-Race Nations." The British psychiatrist described and theorized about many dimensions of mental illness. He explained a great many phenomena, as Euclides also attempts to do. But Maudsley, as a physician, was also prescriptive. His explanation of how psychological ailments arise led him to recommend specific attitudes toward and treatments for those afflicted by them. Euclides makes no such attempt as he concludes his book. His criticisms of Brazil's formation or current state of affairs, its system of governance and its racial composition, his observations of fact and conjectures on the laws of nature lead him to no recommendation or prediction for the nation and its *sertões*.³ He will fall into a final ellipsis of aporia...

3

If it is too much to say that Flora inspired Euclides, not least because *Os Sertões* was published before *Esaú e Jacó*, it might not be too much to say that Euclides inspired Flora. Not in the sense that Machado in any deliberate way designed his ill-starred maiden as a portrayal of his friend the engineer – there is no evidence for this. But if we take Machado seriously as an artist and an intellectual, then we do well to consider whether his oft maligned and sometimes celebrated pessimism was not in fact an expression of an astute

³ It might be objected that Euclides famously includes some prescriptions in his book, as when he advocates irrigating the sertão on the model of the ancient Romans. However, the point is that by the time we arrive at the tragic denouement of the conflict and the frustrated concluding lines of the book, Euclides's aporia seems to have sapped whatever prescriptive energy or attention he might have shown earlier.

appreciation not only of the condition of Brazil and not merely of his own position within it, but also of a malady afflicting fellow intellectuals like Euclides. In *Flora*, Machado characterizes those peers who attempted to dance what José Murilo de Carvalho has called the “maxixe do republicano doido,” who tried to make sense of a troubled nation at a time marked by “grande movimentação de ideias, em geral importadas da Europa [...], mal absorvidas ou absorvidas de modo parcial e seletivo, resultando em grande confusão ideológica” (24, 42). *Flora*’s illness is Euclides’s. It is not the skepticism of an Aires or a Pyrrho; it is not a rejection of judgment and conviction that might provide solace by avoiding conflict and the exhaustion of constantly revising one’s views. It is the agony of apprehending an inability to reconcile the conflicting views one cannot relinquish and a powerlessness to choose between alternatives – not because they are one or equivalent or indistinguishable, but because one lacks a defensible basis for determining which would be the just choice, the best choice, the greatest expression of freedom. For Machado and Euclides, interpreters of Brazil, bearers of half-lit beacons, “tudo se mistura, à meia claridade” (*Esau e Jacó* 162).

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David M. Mittelman is Assistant Professor of Portuguese in the Department of Foreign Languages at the United States Air Force Academy, where he teaches courses in Portuguese language and the cultures of the Luso-Afro-Brazilian world. A specialist in Brazilian literature and culture, his work has appeared in *Rocky Mountain Review*, *Transmodernity*, *Chasqui*, *Brasil / Brasil*, and *Pessoa Plural*. His current research includes a book project on skepticism and the suspension of judgment in Brazilian writing from the nineteenth century to the present.

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