

Through the looking glass: subjectivity in *My formation*, by Joaquim Nabuco*

Ricardo Benzaquen de Araújo

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at examining the different ways through which Joaquim Nabuco shapes his personality in *My Formation*, choosing travels as the leitmotiv, especially travels to Europe, as the conductor thread for the investigation. Having always as a reference the way through which political and literary values intertwine in his reflections, we intend to suggest that his subjectivity seems to be elaborated at least at two distinct, though tightly articulated, levels. The first corresponds to the author's youth, marked by a melancholic curiosity that implies, on the limit, a fast and superficial contact with the objects he purports to know; the second entails a relation with the level of tradition, especially British tradition, whose permanence, extension, and variety will promote an environment of serenity and freedom that turns out to be one kind of axis around which Nabuco conceives his biography.

Keywords: Joaquim Nabuco; Melancholy; Subjectivity; Travels to Europe.

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Rome shows everybody his place.

Feuerbach, cited by Simmel

This article intends to investigate the different ways through which Joaquim Nabuco modeled his personality in *My Formation*. Published in 1900, although including works written since at least 1883, this book is one of the earliest and most relevant works in an autobiographical vein in the tradition of Brazilian thought. I would like to make clear from the start the incomplete and exploratory character of this analysis, that I consider as an incursion into an unknown domain, for I never dealt before with the intellectual debates of the period. The incursion was only authorized by the high quality of a series of recent studies on Nabuco, both those that deal with his reflection as a whole, like those by Mello (2000), Salles (2002), Alencar (2002) and Costa Lima (2002), and those as, for example, by Jaguaribe (1994) and Carvalho (2001) that deal specifically with *My Formation*.

However, in spite of the already mentioned high quality of most of the recent contributions on Nabuco's intellectual production, I shall rather begin my discussion with an old and well known evaluation of his subjectivity, that suggested by Mario de Andrade (1982, p. 15) to Carlos Drummond in the second of their letters. There, referring another of his works, Mario says that "Dr. Chagas discovered that a disease raged the country, Chagas' disease. I discovered another and more serious disease, that infects all of us: Nabuco's disease".

Such a disease seemed to grow, in Mario's opinion, to epidemic proportions, and implied fundamentally the habit, presumably shared by Nabuco and by young Drummond, of constructing a personal identity in a process that at the same time belittles Brazilian traditions and finds itself in the consolidation, in the synthesis, in one word, in the *copy* of European, above all French, models.

This position, taken in various manners in the body of Nabuco's critiques (see Moriconi, 2001), is often based in chapter 4 of *My Formation*, "The world's attraction", particularly in a passage where he says that "All the New World's landscapes, the Amazon forest and the Argentine *pampas*, are not worth for me a section of the *Via Appia*, a curve of the road from Salerno to Amalfi, a piece of the Sena quay at the Louvre's shadow" (1999, p. 49). It is a really significant quotation, for he reasserts the same values in the next paragraph, emphasizing that "the *human mind*, that is only one, and terribly centralist, is on the other side of the Atlantic; the New World, for all aesthetic or historical imagination is truly a solitude" (*Idem*, p. 50). What is at stake, then, is not the

transformation of Mario's comment into a straw man, emphasizing its importance in order to destroy it better, but its qualification, that is required and that will transform it, from a somewhat peremptory and moralist conclusion, into a point of departure for this investigation.

Such qualification must incorporate at least two new arguments in order for us to understand in a more complex and nuanced manner our author's bonds with Europe. The first has to do simply with the fact that the raconteur in *My Formation* is Nabuco at his maturity, explicitly dissociated from his youth, dissociation that, as we will see later, will be made into a perspective, into a point of view that will end up orienting the make up of his memoirs. In addition to this, and perhaps more relevant, one must remember that, even when he refers specifically to his youth, our author never ceases to nuance that preference for European culture, counterbalancing it with so intense a concern with his homeland's destiny that he effectively seems to be associated, in Costa Lima's formulation (2002, p. 344), to "the existential drama of those who feel themselves committed to the country, but at the same time are not integrated to it". To establish the point I think it is worth to take a look at the same paragraph of the last quotation, before and after it, when he says that

So we are fated to the most terrible instability [...]. The instability to which I refer comes from that in America the landscape, life, horizon, architecture, all that surrounds us, lack historical ground, human perspective; and in Europe we lack our home land, that is, the form in which each one of us was cast at birth. At one side of the sea we sense a lack of the world; at the other, we sense a lack of the homeland. Our feeling is Brazilian, the imagination, European [...]. [Thus], in the midst of the luxury of theatre, fashion and politics we are always squatters, as if we were still tearing down the virgin jungle (Nabuco, 1999, p. 48).

As can be seen, the way in which Nabuco accounts for his personality at 24 – 1873, when he took his first trip to Europe – greatly stresses his pendulum-like and inconstant character, and points to a kind of permanent oscillation that, widening the scope of our analysis, gives the sensation that it is articulated to the idea of *curiosity*.

In 1873 my ambition to know all kinds of famous men was limitless; I would go to the end of the world to find them. The same thing with regard to places. What I wanted was to see all the *views* of the world, everything that has attracted the cries of admiration of an intelligent traveler. In this quality of photographic camera I only lamented not being ubiquitous (*Idem*, p. 47, author's emphasis).

It is worth observing that this kind of curiosity does not seem to refer solely to a rapid and superficial relation with what is being visited: the obsession to know *all* famous men, to see *all* world views, gives the impression of locating all of them in the same plan – horizontal – preventing one of finding a criterion to establish a hierarchy among them, of allowing the choice of one of them instead of others, what ends up generating an astonishing indecision climate.

Instability, curiosity, indecision: these characteristics define not only his personality but also the relationship that, around his age of 20, Nabuco will develop to politics. In effect, despite his initial adhesion to British constitutional monarchy, brilliantly synthesized in the well known second chapter of *My Formation*, “Bagehot”, he clearly shows in the next chapter, “In the Reform”, that that choice was not founded in solid bases, displaying the same inconstancy already examined in previous passages. Thus, commenting in 1871 what was to be the first trip of the Emperor to Europe, two years after having read Bagehot’s *The English Constitution*, Nabuco does not shun to advise that he should change course and visit North America, for there

[..] when he sees the United States leading industrial and moral progress, he would understand that kings can be a hypothesis, a luxury, an excessive presumption [...] Seeing the avant-garde of progress occupied by a republic, the Emperor would loose the monarchic cult shared by kings (*Idem*, p.40).

But what was the true nature of the criticism the mature Nabuco addresses to himself at twenty? To answer this question, we need, before everything else, to go back to the travel theme, through which he reflected on the sterility to which he was led by all that inconstancy and curiosity. We must remember that: “In no case can we sense a work of art *in passing*, that is, without a vibration corresponding to the effort, to the sensation the author had at its creation” (*Idem*, p. 55, author’s emphasis). However, more interesting still than this quotation is a passage in the following paragraph, where Nabuco, trying to give an idea of the climate surrounding his 1873’ European trip, tells us that:

How could I in minutes enter the artist’s impression, an artist that spent years to actualize his thought, and died still excited by it? I *looked*, for instance, to the Reims Cathedral, with Rodolfo Dantas, in one day we *stole* from Paris, *boulevard’s* language; passed to see the Amiens Cathedral; *stole* another day from Paris to do the round of the Rouen Cathedral [...] did a tour of the Loire historical castles:

Chenoncaux, Amboise, Blois, Chambord. Hours for all this! (*Idem*, p. 56, author's emphases).

“Hours for all this”: behaving as if he had the gift of ubiquity, trying to see the most in the lesser possible time, young Nabuco passes swiftly, his heart jumping, from one city to the next, from one attraction to the next, ending up by transforming his first contact with some of the most famous monuments of western culture into an infernal sequence of impacts. Our author's choice of words 27 years later to describe the rhythm of his early incursion through France – “looked”, “passed”, “stole” – clearly shows the anxious atmosphere that characterized it, marked by discontinuity and urgency.

Portraying himself as someone that shifted places in a seemingly erratic manner, as if he only glimpsed, or still better, collided against the places he wanted to visit, Nabuco thus seems unable to sketch a sharper and more systematic frame for his travel impressions. He was dangerously close, at that time, to the so-called “man of the crowd”, title of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe (1981, p. 392) (##conferir o título em ingles, e adequar a tradução, se necessário##) and main character in an experience that deeply marked the spirit of some metropolises of the nineteenth century, an experience that, interpreted according to Simmel's suggestions, involved an intensification of emotional life as a function of a continuous and quick change of stimuli, and that is often summed up in the expression “shock experience”.¹ Dominated by inconstancy and by that, say, morbid curiosity, Nabuco in his twenties shared with the “man in the crowd” even what we could call a *blasé* attitude, attitude that, according to Simmel:

Consists [precisely] in the blunting of the discriminating power. This does not mean that objects are not perceived, as is the case with the feeble minded, but rather that the meanings and differential values of the things, and hence the things themselves, are experienced as lacking substance. They appear to the *blasé* person in a tone uniformly flat and dull; no object deserves preference over any other (*Idem*, p. 16)

(##falta citação anterior de Simmel que justifique o *Idem*##).

This way, Paris, Rouen and the Loire valley, as well as – let us recall – monarchy and republic, were deployed exactly in the same plane; they became object of a fluid and distracted attention that, defined by fancy, could not in the least understand what fascinated it. This convergence of the

¹ This point is developed in depth in Waizbrot's (2000) fine work.

young Nabuco and the “man in the crowd”, however, may still be explored in another manner, to the extent that some recent works call attention to the possibility that the latter may be understood as a kind of re-actualization of one of the major characters of ancient philosophy and medicine, the melancholic. For this, as Agamben (1993, chaps. 1 and 2) argues, the re-appearance of melancholy during the Renaissance should incorporate the medieval notion of *acedia* (= despair) or, in a more precise way, heart inertia and, with it, all the procession of its “children”, as, for instance, *pusillanimitas*, *desperation* and especially in what relates to this discussion, *evagatio mentis*, manifested through figures like *instability* and *curiosity*.²

As it is not the case of reviewing, within the limits of this article, such a complex debate, it may be worth simply to recall that this bond between despair and melancholy implies a series of assumptions and consequences that we cannot fail to mention. Thus, on the one hand, we must consider that the medieval sin of *acedia* is not to be confused with its modern translation that commonly associates it to the idea of indolence or laziness. And this can be avoided precisely recurring to categories as the above mentioned instability and curiosity that inculcate it with movement, although an horizontal movement, unable to redeem it, that is, to elevate it, in the direction of virtue. On the other hand, the link between this conception of *acedia* and the notion of melancholy has repercussions in the latter’s meaning, even if they only widen and deepen a suggestion already present in Aristotle’s *Problem XXX*, one of the founding texts in the classic theory of humors, namely, that the melancholic, far from being defined just by sorrow and disinterest, is also characterized by *inconstancy*.

That is the reason why that *Problem XXX* approximates the black bile, the corporeal fluid associated to melancholy, to wine: both, as suggested by Jackie Pigeaud (1998, p. 13) are capable of making that each man experiences the most different states of mind, if in entirely distinct chronological registers. That way, the melancholic, “essentially polymorphous” (*Idem, ibidem*) would be throughout his life a prisoner of the typical instability of his condition, while the drunk could be considered a kind of “pocket melancholic”, capable of knowing in a concentrated manner, in one night’s time, for instance, all the varied and instable range of sensations bore by the black bile.

Well, from this perspective, I believe melancholy may be effectively used to characterize “man in the crowd” and, through him, allow us to reach a better understanding of the way mature Nabuco

² Agamben (1942, p. 5) explicitly approximates the melancholic character to the experience of mass society in Heidegger, while Deroche-Gurcel (1997, p. 212-241) uses the same argument in his discussion of Simmel’s work.

evaluated his youth. Now, however, I believe we need to move a step further, for, even if our author presents his youth as “under Saturn’s influence”, this is only, as was said before, because he has no difficulty, no hesitation in removing himself from it, a removal bound to the cultivation of serenity that he will find in England, particularly in London. Let us see, then, how he describes his arrival to the English capital in chapter X of *My Formation*, plainly and fairly named “London”:

When for the first time I arrived in Folkestone, entering England, I had stayed for months in Paris, I had crossed Italy, from Genoa to Naples, had stopped for some time at the shore of Lake Geneva, and could not forget the fair perspective, seen from the Tagus, of Oeiras and Belem, whose sweet and cheerful tone no other horizon repeated. I had passed through all places as a traveler, at times staying the time required to get the impression of places and monuments, the intimate cast of landscapes and works of art, but detached from everything, in a continuous inconstancy of imagination. When I saw, however, from the flatcar’s window, in a summer afternoon, the grass tapestry covering the clean soil and the pleasant Kent hills and, the next day, leaving the small apartment reserved for me near Grosvenor Gardens, I began discovering one by one the rows of West End palaces, crossing the large parks, encountering, in St. James Street, Pall Mall, Picadilly, the season’s tide, that aristocratic crowd that, on foot, riding a horse, in open coach, twice a day heads to the *rendez-vous* at Hyde Park and, for days in a row, I entered other regions of the endless city, knowing the people, the whole English countenance, race character, habits, manners – I can say I felt my imagination surpassed and subdued. The pilgrim’s curiosity was satiated, changed into a desire of staying there forever (1999, p. 84-85).

I am sorry for the length of the quotation, but I have the impression it is an imposition, for it not only sums up what was discussed to this point but also introduces the second part of this article by contrasting Nabuco’s melancholic inconstancy to the tranquility of London’s soul. Given this, I believe that what is now of interest is precisely to question the identity of the peculiar characteristics that, giving form to the well known English phlegm, allowed our author to move in so sudden a manner into maturity. It must be noted, in order to account for this question, that one of the earliest London images Nabuco presents to us is that of the capital city of an enormous and powerful empire:

London was for me what Rome would have been if I had lived between the second and fourth centuries and, one day, had been moved from my trans-alpine village or from the depth of Roman Africa to the heights of the Palatine, and had seen at my feet the gold and brass sea of the roofs of the basilicas, circuses, theaters, baths and palaces; that is, for me, a native of the provinces of the nineteenth century, it was, as Rome for those of the times of Adriano or Severo: *the City*. This *universal* impression, of the city that hovers above all others, mistress of the world by the *milliarum aureum*, which in the nineteenth century had to be sea oriented; I had this *sovereign* impression so distinctly as if the whole humankind was still fully centralized (*Idem*, p. 86).

Universal and sovereign city, center of humankind, London sees its enormousness reflected and confirmed in the very dimensions of its architecture that includes:

[...] the *wide* strip of the Thames, with the *colossal* bridges that cross it and the monuments placed on its margins from Chelsea to the London Bridge, especially the *throng* of Westminster buildings, the *vast* line of the Parliament houses, the *grandest* shadow that civil construction casts on the earth (*Idem*, p. 87, my emphasis).

It is worth recalling, at this point, that the interpretation modern western cultural tradition usually gives to phenomena defined as gigantic or colossal often links them to a given idea of movement, a movement that implies not only destruction and transgression but also, as in Rabelais and E. Burke, fertility and fecundity (cf. Stewart, 1993, chapter 3). Nothing of the kind is to be found, however, in Nabuco's London, where what he calls the "English mind", "the tacit behavior that the whole England seems to follow, the moral inspiration center that rules over all its movements" (Nabuco, 1999, p. 104), seems to distil a sensation of order that frames monarchy, empire and all its institutions in the same "sea of tranquility". This mind merges with tradition, which implies that

The worship should lend to precedents an almost sacred authority, and should take away, from everything that has an historical character or national function, an individual semblance [...]. Queen Victoria is more than the *august*, whose image is venerated by each family in its inner *lararium*; it is the Norman, Plantagenet, Tudor royalty. As the queen, so the Constitution [...]. No great jurist has written it, no

statesman imagined it: it was spontaneously and unconsciously formed as the English language, perpendicular architecture, nursery songs (Nabuco, 1999, p. 105).

We must observe that the emphasis given at this point to the ideas of order and tradition, taming what could have been out of control in English gigantism, is very far from stimulating any immobility or stagnation. Much to the contrary, the emphasis here is on the importance of a kind of permanent transformation, but a transformation that operates following an up to a point well defined script, precisely concerned with improving, actualizing and thus *reinforcing* the forerunners' heritage. As a consequence, it would be good that one may be sure that:

Reforms, changes shall be governed by some elementary rules. One of them shall be to keep of what exists everything that is not an insuperable obstacle to the required improvement [...] another, to replace, to the limit of possibility, provisionally, leaving to time the task of experimenting the new material or form, to consecrate or forsake it [Thus:] from these rules derives the duty of destroying with the same love and care with which other periods built. No explosive is legitimate, because action cannot be beforehand known; it is necessary to demolish with level and compass, removing stone by stone, as they were disposed (*Idem*, p. 106).³

It should come as no surprise, then, that this atmosphere ends up with the footing of London's inhabitants, even with "billions of sterling pounds" in their pockets, should occur in "streets paved with planks in order to dampen noise (*Idem*, p. 87), or that the *metropolis*' "imperial tone" should be due to

Its gigantic mass, the endless perspectives, the eternal, Egyptian, reliance of buildings, the enormous squares and parks that suddenly emerge at the encounter of streets, to the shadows of old trees, at the edge of lakes that seem to belong to the natural landscape. The latter is for me London's dominant trait: a foreigner should assume he was in the countryside, in suburbia, when he is at the city's heart (*Idem*, pp. 86-87).

³ This aspect of Nabuco's reflections is well discussed in Carvalho's text (2001), where she uses, in another direction, intelligent and carefully examined arguments developed in her book on André Rebouças (Carvalho, 1998).

Transformed into a bucolic scene, London becomes a kind of modern *Arcadia* where spatial extension and historical depth – “Egyptian eternal reliance” – join silence and tranquility to form this imperturbable order that leads Nabuco to forsake these erratic walks that marked his youth. However, that exchange of melancholy by phlegm, to persist in the domain of the classical theory of humors, is not enough to deplete the point being here examined, for our author insists that he does not find only tradition and serenity in England: “order [no doubt] is the true social architecture” but “to the Englishman [...] freedom is man’s great attribute [...] he senses it as personality’s development” (*Idem*, p. 105).

Following this passage, it must be noted that some of the most famous evaluations of western reflection suggest that, at least from the seventeenth century on, it was stabilized as a function of a principle that opposed the notions of order and freedom, totality and fragmentation, as if a weakening of the ability for individual action immediately and automatically derived from the affirmation of any solid cultural system. Now, the image Nabuco conveys of the English mind points precisely to the opposite, that is, to the fact that the larger the tradition’s authority the larger the stimulus for each one to expand his personality.

Assessed in this way, London as described in *My Formation* seems once again, although in another key, comparable to Rome, for, in an almost unfolding of parallelism and symmetry of the two (anti?) metropolises already indicated by Nabuco, Simmel (1989) points out that Rome, as a function of its sovereign and universal nature, ends up promoting a kind of deepening of the individuality of those that have a contact with it. This way, instead of crushing its visitors under the weight of its historical and spiritual gigantism, Rome would precisely set them free of their daily constraints, of their concern with their minimal and trivial affairs, allowing that each one, in view of what was fundamental, condensed in fact in the “Eternal City”, earned conditions in order to recast and perfect its own subjectivity, thus making it richer and more nuanced.

Consequently, the universal joins what is the most singular: it is as if, before the sublime, men had the opportunity of developing precisely what is sublime in themselves, their will, their free will, that is, to recall the classic text where Pico della Mirandola (1989), during Renaissance, establishes one of the paths of modern subjectivity, its own dignity.

By the way, it is precisely for this reason, that is, because of the link between the “English mind” and its inner freedom, that Nabuco, in spite of the widely known influence that French culture

always had in him, categorically asserts his preference for London over Paris. It is not, let me say it at once, that in the latter he ran the risk of meeting again, as if he was Poe's "man of the crowd", studied by Benjamin (1989) in the wake of Simmel, those shock experiences that harassed his youth. On the contrary, what disturbs him most is simply the fact that life here seems to be styled in the opposite direction, becoming a kind of work of art, perfect and finished, rigidly framed by etiquette rules and, therefore, located in a dimension far from any spontaneity, any naturalness, in one word, of any respect for the autonomy of human will and dignity.

It is not that he does not know that:

To the artist that needs to be inspired in forms of edification, to live in the midst of beauty resulting from human genius, London is to Paris what Khorsabad was to Athens [...]. This way, there is no comparison [...] to the man of spirit and of salons, Paris is the first residence, for it adds to art the pleasure of living in its most delicate and elegant forms. There is nothing in London corresponding to the French aspiration, nowadays decadent and evanescent, of making life into a work of art, aspiration whose masterpieces were the seventeenth century's politeness and the eighteenth century's spirit (Nabuco, 1999, p. 88).

In truth, however, although "evanescent", that French obsession of "making the whole life into a work of art" gives the impression that it is a major difficulty in Nabuco's way, for he takes his time to explain that:

What there is in London, as pleasure of life, is not art, it is well-being; it is not rule, measure, the manners' tone, it is freedom, individuality; it is not décor, it is space, solidity. Paris is a theatre where everybody, in all professions, from all countries, lives representing for the curious crowd around; London is a monastery, in form of a club, where those who meet in the great library's or dining room's silence do not acknowledge each other, and each feels indifferent to all others. In Paris, life is a restriction; in London, an expansion; in Paris, a captivity, art, spirit, etiquette, society's captivity, a pleasant captivity may be, but always a captivity, requiring constant vigilance of the actor over himself before the public that observes and perceives everything; in London, it is independence, naturalness. *Ceci tuera cela* (*Idem*, p. 89).

As we see, the relationship of Nabuco with Paris points to a distinct configuration, a very different picture, even opposite to that that presumably characterized his personality at youth, which, as was discussed previously, implied a permanent but horizontal movement, in a kind of blind curiosity, for, willing to see everything, he was not able either to establish criteria or to define priorities to orient his route in a constant and secure way. But his evaluation of the “nineteenth century capital” communicates, contrariwise, a sensation that it implies an absolute immobility, changing the urban scene into a kind of display where men, irredeemably transformed into dummies, follow a line of behavior imposed on them by codes of etiquette, spirit and politeness. Both, however, seem to make the individuals captive to determinations external to their personalities, dependent on experiences that act in the direction of lessening their free will, by either reducing them to erratic viewers before the world wonders or fastening them as mere characters of the theatre continuously staged in Paris.

In closing, I believe it may be worth sketching a last comparison, a comparison now opposing the two poles mentioned and approximated above to Nabuco’s maturity conception in *My Formation*, even if only to repeat that in England he both incorporates tranquility to his subjectivity, overcoming his melancholic youth, and finds the conditions to expand and enrich his inner life. It is as if, between that bewildered horizontal mobility and French “paralysis”, he had developed a kind of individual assertiveness, in such a way as he became capable of lending to his movement a *vertical*⁴ direction, clearly distinguishing what looks right from what would be wrong, including finally an ethic orientation to his judgment and thus associating his maturity conception both to phlegm and to wisdom. As can be seen, here we are not dealing with a pure, simple and anachronic recovering of the classic theory of humors, for we are apparently before an effort to translate it and consequently to change it with the incorporation of the typically Christian and Renaissancist theme of human dignity.

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⁴ This contrast between horizontal and vertical mobility, in the context of the debate on Renaissance subjectivity is suggested in Greene’s work (1968) and developed in Greenblatt’s book (1980).

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