

# Presences

# Joaquim Nabuco, the memoirist<sup>1</sup>

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To Laura Gouvêa Vieira Gonçalves

IN THE centenary of Joaquim Nabuco's death, everything invites us to reread *My Formative Years* (*Minha Formação*). It is a book of memories of a lifetime, although it does not follow the traditional linear structure of works of the genre: birth, childhood, youth, adulthood ... the composition resembles more an archipelago than a continent. The chapters are islands that the seemingly infinite sea of the memory sometimes brings closer, and others pushes away. Like in the movements of our subjective life, there are memories so far and frayed that they seem to have already left us, and it takes some effort to recompose them and tell them; and there are others that take us by storm, invade the deepest recesses of our mind, leaving signs, sometimes scars in our character and perhaps in our own destiny.

Nietzsche was convinced that "experiences last a long time in profound people. *My Formative Years*" is an archipelago of these experiences that hermeneutics has taught us to call "Erlebnisse", life experiences, a term rarely used today, but still essential when one wants to talk about a link between feeling and memory. In other words, the memory of what one has lived.

According to the reconstruction of the history of Erlebnis' concept developed by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, the word only entered the philosophical vocabulary from Schleiermacher's biography written by Dilthey in 1870. Within the meaning of lived experience, the expression denotes something that survives in us individually and persistently. We remember because we continue to experience the strength and quality of the feeling that once pierced through a given situation and that memory preserved. Forgetting means, etymologically, pushing whatever it may be out of our minds.

The term was enriched by Gundolf's differential analysis in his biography of Goethe. It should be noted, by the way, how much the method of life stories has contributed to the development of the concept. The experience can coincide with an original, unrepeatable (*Ur-Erlebnis*) emotion, or extend over time in the form of a network of family, cultural or political experiences: in other words, formative experiences (*Bildungserlebnisse*).

When Nabuco wrote *My Formative Years*, just shy of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, he had stored in his memory both a dramatic event of his childhood and some images of intellectuals and politicians of the Second Reign, who had contributed to the construction of his *persona* as a writer and public man.

"Massangana" is the title of one of the last chapters of *My Formative Years*.

I do not think it plays a random role in the body of the book: it lies between the chapters “Election of a Congressman” and “Abolition”, i.e., between memories of 1878 and 1888, a decade deeply marked by the campaign for the abolition of slavery. To narrate the crucial hours of the activist, the memoirist had to interrupt the account of the political struggle, go down into the well of memories and bring up to the surface of writing an image submerged by time. Not loose and erratic images, but only one bright, coherent, striking image, as Gestalt psychology would refer to it. And this is precisely what the opening chapter says: “the entire stroke of life is for many a child’s drawing forgotten by man, but to which he will always have to cling ... without knowing it.”

These words, which generations of readers have kept as a family heirloom, bring together metaphors that are very dear to us: “the entire stroke of life” is the very image of the path the work treads faithfully; the “child’s drawing forgotten by man” speaks of the primary form of an experience that the adult has pushed out of everyday life made of concerns for the here and now; but is a drawing “to which he will always have to cling to without knowing it”, because even hidden in the shadow of the unconscious, it will serve as a compass in time of important decisions.

The first eight years of my life were, in a sense, those of my definitive instinctive or moral development ... I spent this initial period, so distant and yet more present than any other, in a sugar mill in Pernambuco, my hometown.

We know that those “last distant days of my life” were present not only by virtue of memory, but also nourished with the sap of compassion the work of the future abolitionist.

### **The picture and the scene**

Reliving the spirit and letter of the reminiscences of Massangana requires choosing between two paths: either start from evoking the natural and social landscape of the sugar mill and only then come upon the scene of the young fugitive slave who so painfully hurt the sensitivity of the child; or, in the opposite direction, bring to the foreground the memory of that encounter of the boy from the mill with the outrageous face of slavery to then gaze at the green sugarcane plantations “crossed by the winding promenade of old ingo trees laden with mosses and vines shading from side to side the small Ipojuca river”. And contemplate in the center the main house between the bordering slave quarters and the chapel dedicated to St. Matthew.

I have chosen the first alternative, which is closer to the perspective of the text.

The description preceded the narration, but not in a linear and well concerted way: the scene will break out, abrupt and disconcerting, in the setting.

The landscape is still and silent. In this small realm lost in the Cape area, which the memoirist describes as “entirely closed to any outside interference, like all other feuds of slavery,” even Nature seems withdrawn to itself. Groups of sleepy cattle sought protection under the impenetrable shade of lonely trees.

And the water of the Ipojuca, which we already know to be scanty, is “almost dormant on its broad sand banks.” Through this stream, Nabuco recalls, sugar was transported to Recife. See how the movement toward society, which has so much to do with the economy of the Northeast during the Second Reign, flows out of nearly still water. What is inside only slightly and slowly communicates with what is outside.

But, if between the sugar mill and the rest of the world the vital pace is erratic, the same does not happen between the lands of Massangana and the sea. “Farther down lay the mangroves that reached the coast of Nazareth ...” the view of the sea adjacent to the mill conveys the same sense of original, indelible experience:

Many times I have crossed the ocean, but if I want to remember it, I have always before my eyes, instantly still, the first wave that rose before me, green and transparent like the emerald screen in a day when, crossing a grove of coconut trees behind the hut of the raftsmen, I found myself by the beach and had the sudden, striking revelation of the liquid and moving land ...

The picture, both the island and the oasis, is outlined in a language that stems from the great romantic landscapers Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, the precursor of all, Chateaubriand and our Alencar. In remembering the mill, the crucial feeling is that of a cosmic harmony that permeates and involves all things:

During the day, asleep because of the scalding heat, breathing in the aroma, scattered everywhere, of the big pots where honey was boiled. The sunset was dazzling, whole pieces of plain transformed into golden dust; the mouth of the night, time of daisies and night birds, was nice and balmy, after the majestic and deep silence of the starry skies. Of all these impressions, none will die in me. The children of fishermen always feel under their feet the brush of the beach sand and hear the noise of the wave. I sometimes believe I am treading the thick layer of reeds fallen from the mill and hear the distant creaking of large oxcarts ...

If the author of the pages of Massangana had lingered in this revival of the landscape, we would have an evocative Joaquim Nabuco charmed by life in the small mills of the Cape, a poet from a world whose dissolution would be the subject matter of a narrative by José Lins do Rego and the anthropological source of Gilberto Freyre. But the memory of the setting surrenders, at a certain point, to the outbreak of the scene:

I was sitting one afternoon on the landing outside the house, when I see rushing up to me an unknown young black man, about eighteen years old, who threw himself at my feet begging me, for the love of God, to have him bought by my godmother to serve me. He came from the neighborhoods, looking for a new master, because his, he told me, punished him, and he had fled, risking his life ...

The story suddenly enters that little old world that some time before the memoirist had shown us as closed in itself, forming one single body with Nature in an eternal pace of return. No: slavery hurt from all sides the very core of human life, and it would not be possible to take refuge in the maternal warmth of Massangana without facing, sooner or later, its cruel reality. Reading the journals of Nabuco, scrupulously annotated by Evaldo Cabral de Melo, we learn that the old name of the mill was Massangano, a toponym of Angolan origin (if you say Angola you are saying slave), but Nabuco, over time, eventually chose the feminine gender - Massangana. The historian attributed to the astuteness of Lelia Coelho Frota, who organized the edition of the journals, a psychoanalytic 'decoding' of the gender change: the mill was the maternal bosom, and the boy, like so many of his faithful slaves, had no father, only mother, or rather, a godmother-mother. Nabuco said: "My first Mother, Ana Rosa Falcão de Carvalho, from Massangano, whom until the age of eight, not having known my mother, I called godmother-mother." It is known that the parents of newborn Joaquim moved from Pernambuco to Rio de Janeiro, where Nabuco de Araújo was elected representative to the Courts, having left the boy with the godmother for most of his childhood. But the African Massangano, perhaps repressed, would re-emerge in the figure of the fugitive slave seeking shelter in the womb of Massangana.

Back to the narrative, one hears the reflective countermelody of the memoirist: "It was this unexpected trait that led me to discover the nature of the institution with which I had lived familiarly until then, without suspecting the pain it concealed." What follows is perhaps the most representative evidence of the ambivalence that has permeated the interpretation that the Brazilian intelligence seeks to give to the master-slave relationship as established among us.

On the one side is the image of the "paradise lost". Under the kind rule of the godmother, the generous matriarch to whom the slaves devoted faithful affection, Massangana could be the place of refuge for those abused by the owner of a neighboring sugar mill. Nabuco visibly exalts the feelings of gratitude and veneration that to him seem typical of most of the Africans brought to Brazil. They would have a capacity for sacrifice that apparently freed them from hatred and revenge. Bloody retaliations would be very rare and triggered by the ferocity of some masters and foremen who had internalized but the perverse nature of the system. Not by chance, the young black boy begged Joaquim to have him bought by her godmother, so that he could change masters.

But there is the other side. Massangana is just an island, an oasis, images that imply the existence of another world that extends beyond its confines. This hostile world, from which the young slave had escaped, needed to change. And change urgently. Let us not forget that the episode would have occurred in the mid-1850s, when only the law banning slave trade had been enacted, as it would take nearly another twenty years for the battle around Rio Branco's bill - which would lead to the *Ventre Livre Law*<sup>TN</sup> - - to be won.

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<sup>TN</sup> Law passed in 1871, freeing the children of slaves born thereafter.

It is necessary to compare Nabuco's two discourses: the one found in some passages of *Massangana* and reaches the limit-expression "I miss the slave" ("a singular nostalgia, which would astonish Garrison or John Brown"), and the other that openly condemns the institution and represents the ethical core of his whole abolitionist campaign through the enactment of the *Áurea Law*<sup>TN</sup>. Would these discourses be contradictory in absolute terms? I would say that they are distinct, and that the burden of interpretation lies with us.

To the memoirist Nabuco, the slave seems to be as sublime as perverse is the institution of slavery. Once slave was abolished, the system would fortunately be extinct, but taking with it the human and truly noble figure of the servant incapable of hating his master. Let us temporarily interrupt, at this point, the progressive and democratic judgment that certainly would not tolerate ideological reasoning that remind us of the sacrificial myths recreated by Alencar in the figures of voluntary servitude represented by Peri, Iracema and the black mother in the drama *Mother*. What led Nabuco to idealize the sugar mill of his childhood was probably the climate of kindness ensured by his godmother: from his own condition as a boy separated from his father and mother, he extended his grateful feeling of parentage to all the slaves in *Massangana*. These, according to the testimony of the memoirist, grieved deeply the death of Dona Ana Rosa, felt orphaned and saw with horror the arrival of new owners. This recurring opposition between *Massangana* and other places where the same slave system prevailed is significant. If Nabuco had taken this antagonism to its ultimate consequences, the sugar mill of his childhood would be to him only an exception, perhaps the only one, preventing his discourse from drifting towards rash generalizations. The switch sometimes imperceptible from the unique case to the general rule is, as we know, one of the risks from which not even an extremely keen social observer like Gilberto Freyre would escape.

In any case, it is the consistently sustained practice that ultimately matters to evaluate the sum of all acts that define the character of a man. Therefore, one must consider the project that resulted from the vital experience of Nabuco with the slaves of *Massangana*. Twelve years after the death of Dona Ana Rosa, the young twenty-year old man returned to the chapel of St. Matthew's where his godmother was laid to rest beside the altar, "and through the small abandoned sacristy I entered the area where the slaves were buried ... Crosses, which perhaps no longer exist, lying on piles of rocks hidden by nettles was all that remained from the almost majestic *factory*, as the sugar mill was called during the slavery era... ". The mill was sold and transformed into a plant. No trace remained of the old house. "Free labor" - notes the memoirist - "had largely replaced slave labor." Under his feet laid the bones of the old black men and women who had loved him in his childhood. Like in the scene of the slave who threw himself at his feet, Nabuco has a new epiphany: "That was how the moral problem of slavery first took shape before my eyes, with its perfect clarity and mandatory solution."

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<sup>TN</sup> Law passed in 1888 abolishing slavery.

But the revelation of iniquity would have lasted just the short time of an epiphany if it hadn't triggered in the young Nabuco the certainty of an irreversible decision. Before those abandoned but sacred graves,

Right there, at the age of twenty, I made the decision to devote my life, if so allowed, to the service of the kind race amongst all which, for the inequality of its condition generated compassion instead of bitterness and for its sweetness in suffering lent, even to the oppression of which it was a victim, a reflex of kindness...

Nabuco could have anticipated the sentence that would become the motto of Mahatma Gandhi: "I love the beauty of commitment."

### **From the vital experience to the first step in the abolitionist's career**

Shortly after, the law student in Recife had the opportunity to deliver on his solemn promise. A slave named Tomás killed an official that had ordered his flogging in a public square; arrested and convicted, he punched to death the guard who had prevented his escape. Found guilty on two counts of murder, he was defended by our fifth-year law student. The case was lost from the outset, but for Nabuco it was the first test of the oath he had taken over the bones of the slaves of Massangana.

In preparing the defense, Nabuco, then a novice in the dealings of the courtroom drafted the defendant's pleading, which he titled *A escravidão* (Slavery). The text remained unknown until 1924, when the author's widow, Evelina Nabuco, handed it to the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute, which would only publish it in its journal in 1951. The reasons for the uniqueness of this juvenile work are unknown. In *My Formative Years* he outlines the memory of those fruitful years that preceded the drafting of the *Ventre Livre* Law, highlighting the legal work of his father, Senator Nabuco de Araújo, and his contacts with the anti-slavery society, whose publications he translated and which would serve as ammunition for abolitionist discourses. But he did not stop in the history of the text of *A escravidão*, although it already raised fierce arguments against slavery. Nabuco was well acquainted with the history of slavery from ancient times, and presents a remarkable wealth of data on slave trade, probably taken from the book he would later call "the great source", *A escravidão no Brasil* (Slavery in Brazil) by Perdigão Malheiro. The book, then recently published, was already known among the members of the Bar Association, to which Senator Nabuco de Araújo belonged.

The defense pleading by itself would merit a thorough analysis that is not within the scope of this study. It conveys a juvenile impetus that moves us even today. The essence of the arguments is daring: if there is a crime that deserves to be punished before convicting the slave Tomás, it is slavery itself. The notion of captivity as a *total social phenomenon* that degraded Brazil and all slave societies would be resumed by Nabuco in his most important book *O Abolicionismo* (Ab-



olitionism), in speeches he delivered at the House of Representatives and in election rallies. From the outset, the defendant's defense turned into attack, which is known to be the best of strategies. Apparently, as remarkable as his opening speech was our passionate student's creativity to reverse the main argument of the advocates of slavery - *absolute right to property*- sanctioned in the Charter of 1824 which, in turn, mimicked the Napoleonic Code. The decision to free the slaves in the French colonies that came out of the Revolutionary Convention in 1794 was overturned but Napoleon in 1802, and the ownership of man by man was once again legalized and remained in force until the permanent abolition of slavery by the 1848 revolution. Liberalism in Brazil is not that different from European liberalism. Here and there...

What does the defense attorney of the slave Tomás do? Considering up front slavery as a crime, Nabuco qualifies it in terms of double violation of the property law: *the slave had been illegitimately deprived of the right to his own body by being sold to his master, and of the right to life by being sentenced to death in his first trial*. "So," proposes Nabuco, "let us see how slavery hinders the right to property." The violation of this sacred right had already begun with a crime: the slave trade that began with Brazil's discovery and spanned three centuries of colonization. Trafficking had ended, but its perverse effects lingered. Nabuco quotes one of his favorite poets, Lamartine: "Happy will be the day the day when the law sees banned before the divine light these two great scandals of nineteenth century reason: slavery and the death penalty."

Of particular interest to understand Nabuco's early counter-ideological manifestations are the pages dedicated to Quilombo dos Palmares. The sources then available were meager: in fact, the only one was *História da América Portuguesa* (History of Portuguese America), by Rocha Pita, in the 1730 edition mentioned by our amateur historian. It is understandable why he speaks of a "legend of Pernambuco", which does not prevent him from reporting the facts with accuracy of names, places and dates. And not only that: talking about the value of the quilombolas and highlighting Zumbi and his warriors, he points out their heroic character, which he holds against "the historians who slandered" that desperate attempt to live free in the land of slavery. Destroying Palmares required an alliance among the greatest powers of the colony: the Portuguese hired by the viceroy João de Lancastro and the slave hunters and prospectors led by Domingos Jorge Velho. Half a century later, a similar composition of forces would tear apart the Sete Povos (Seven Peoples) missions.

### **Individual memory and social history**

Using the term "life experience", reminded me of its dual dimension: experience of a decisive moment and experience of a network of encounters extended in space and time. Sheer memory, in Bergson's sense of sudden outbreak of a scene that seemed to be dormant in the silence of the unconscious, may determine a new perception of reality and fuel for some time our imagination



and our desire: the episode of Massangana and the return of the young Nabuco to the mill would have been responsible for his pledge to devote his life to freeing the slaves.

Another thing is the memoirist's reconstruction of his journey as a public man: here we see the scaffolds of the *persona*, the work of ideas, the shaping of moral and doctrinal convictions; in a word, the development of the individual who belongs to time, the memory that becomes history.

The cultural and political biography of Joaquim Nabuco could be understood as a constellation: people and places he found at different times and that his open mind and kind heart brought into his life like someone who draws around himself a family circle. *My Formative Years* is a book that can bewilder for the richness of characters and situations evoked, but that is read like a unique melody, because unique is the voice that modulates it and unique is its pure, clear, warm and affectionate tone.

### The father

Those who read *Um Estadista do Império* will need no other proof of the lasting influence of the father figure in the moral and political development of Joaquim Nabuco. In the book of memories, the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter starts with the following solemn testimony:

However, wherever I went and whatever influences of the country, society, art, authors, exerted on me, I've always been entirely influenced by another more powerful action which although strange, in a sense, seemed to operate in me from the inside, from the hereditary depth, and through the best impulses of the heart. This influence, which was always present regardless of how far from it I was, dominates and changes all the others that are invariably under it. And this is the time to talk about it, because it was not exactly an influence of childhood or the first breath of youth, but rather the growth and maturity of the spirit, and destined to significantly increase over time and achieve its full development when posthumous. That was my father's influence...

I leave to psychoanalysts the task of untying the existential knot: a *somewhat weird* influence, but which seemed to operate from inside the hereditary depth; an influence that dominates everything even *from afar*, but which emerged neither in childhood (Nabuco saw his father for the first time when he was eight years old), nor in the first years of youth, and *that only reached its peak after his father's death* ... A weird, late, distant, posthumous, and yet powerful blood legacy, which increases with age and is only ubiquitous at the time of orphanage.

To the scholar of ideas and values, what remain from this reverential memory are the political roadmap and the wisdom of the jurist and counselor of the Empire. In the first chapter of *My Formative Years*, Nabuco focuses on his transition from the conservative to the liberal side in the mid-1860s. The story of this party switch

was told in details throughout *Um Estadista do Império*, and exhaustive survey of data in which the historian Joaquim Nabuco uses thousands of notes from his father and contemporary testimonies (sometimes favorable, sometimes critical), a true second degree memory, which is often the raw material of historiography.

Perhaps a brief digression would be appropriate on the political beliefs of Nabuco de Araújo, because the picture also interests the doctrinal development of his son and biographer.

To clear the land, it seems necessary to distinguish between two types of liberalism, valid not only for Brazil during the Empire but also for most of the West during the nineteenth century. People are acquainted with conservative liberalism, which was codified under the rule of Napoleon, deepened in the years of the Restoration and refined under the bourgeois reign of Louis-Philippe. Among its greatest ideologues were Benjamin Constant and Guizot, closely followed by Brazilian politicians who adopted, during the Regency period, the banner of the so-called Regressivism. It is a proprietary, exclusionary ideology, anchored in the censitary vote, always defensive about the ideals of the French Revolution. It prevailed until the Revolution of 1948.

The resonances of this rebel movement spread throughout Europe and finally reached us, though with some delay. A *new liberalism*, with democratic features and capable of challenging the still hegemonic slave policy, emerged in the 1860s. As a severe judge of the leaders of the Praieira Revolution and an influential member of the Conservative party, Nabuco de Araújo was a follower of the first liberalism - monarchical and entirely subject to the principles of authority and hierarchy - until he finally abandoned the coryphaei of the Saquarema oligarchy. By pledging his support to the reconciliation policy of Paraná's cabinet and to the Progressivist current, he somehow approached the Liberal Party, which would gain ideological consistency throughout the political crisis of 1868. The young Nabuco, whom we saw defending the slave Tomás in 870 before a society dominated by sugar mill owners, recognizes himself in that second liberalism his father had joined precisely in those decisive years in which the abolitionist emerged.

*My Formative Years* takes us to the chapters of *Um Estadista do Império*, in which the son shows the father striving to put into legal words the pioneering proposals of freeing the unborn children of slave women, which eventually resulted in the Rio Branco bill. With no intention to underestimate the academic and insightful work revealed in Senator Nabuco de Araújo's texts (used in the State Council bill he drafted in 1868), we cannot, however, refrain from comparing it to the contemporary pages of the defendant's pleading titled *A escravidão* written by court novice Joaquim Nabuco. This vehement defense was only briefly mentioned in *My Formative Years*, and does not appear even in the author's bibliography listed in Aguilar's thorough 1975 edition of *Um Estadista do Império*. But when we first read it what we immediately see is, on the one

hand, the far-reaching and radical nature of young Nabuco's arguments, and on the other the constant moderation of the experienced counselor.

*A escravidão* gives the institution of slavery its true name of *crime*. But the bill that emancipated the unborn, but maintained the parents as slaves kept intact the legality of the institution.

The young Nabuco challenges the right of ownership of man by man; the text of the State Council's bill, on the contrary, recognizes it, in that it proposes ways to indemnify the slave owner by forcing freed slaves to work for free for their former masters until the age of twenty. The Rio Branco Law would go further: it offered the owner the option of receiving 600,000 reis as reimbursement for costs incurred in raising the freeborn. These procedures were inspired by similar laws enacted in England, France and Portugal. Here and there ...

We should go back to the distinction between unique, unrepeatable life experiences, and cumulative experiences. The first are beams that suddenly shed light on the souls of those who experience them: so was the story of the young man thrown at the boy's feet asking for the godmother's protection, and so was the view of the shallow graves over the bones of old slaves in Saint Mathew's Chapel. Therein we see the moments when everything changes, and changes forever; therein lies the embryo of the radical nature of the future leader of the cause. As for the others, of cultural and political nature, they work slowly, gradually settling in the spirit of those who internalize them the values that will guide their words and actions. This is the case of the son who contemplates the long ascending career of the father, a counselor open to the philanthropy of anti-slavery society and to the liberal politicians of Europe who fought for the abolition of slave trade and then for the abolition of slavery.

Focusing on the figure of the Counselor his own development as a public man, Nabuco does not forget the constellation of politicians who, in the years of his youth, set the tone for democratic liberalism:

At home I saw Tavares Bastos a lot, who showed me kindness, all the political groups of the time; as a student, I was proud to walk up and down Ouvidor street arm in arm with Teófilo Otoni; the pleasure of talking with Saldanha Marinho At *Diário do Rio* newspaper, of listening listen to Quintino Bocaiúva, who to me was the young Hercules of the press and whose attack against Montezuma on the rendition of Uruguaiana gave me the first glimpse of a fearless polemicist.

Those who are familiar with the biography of the young Machado de Assis recognize the leading figures of this constellation that helped him in his early years in journalism. Here the interest is in showing the affinity of the group with the position of Counselor Nabuco Araújo in his transition to new liberalism.

The unique moment of emotion had been the engine that warmed and transformed everything; but it was the years of political sociability and reflection that prevented him from losing enthusiasm.

## Readings

Joaquim Nabuco had been a passionate reader since his teen years. The references to books and authors found in *My Formative Years* may, at first glance are misleading, due to the variety and eclecticism of the references. But a careful examination reveals two recurring sources of his choices: the French literature, whether still romantic or already penetrated by realistic veins, and the English political writings of the first half of the nineteenth century. The French and English cultures will be the daily bread of Nabuco throughout life. We all know how well he mastered the two languages, having written directly in French since his early youth, as attested by the drama *L'option*, written shortly after the defeat of France and, in adulthood, his religious and moral maxims, *Pensées détachées*, that led a respectable critic, Émile Faguet, to believe that Joaquim Nabuco was the alias of a French writer in disguise ... In English, which he perfected during his sojourns in London, he delivered literary and political lectures in various American universities as our first ambassador to Washington. His reading of chant 9 of *The Lusiads* accompanied by versions of Camões' octaves is an example of this mastery.

But what interests the interpreter of culture is to know what touched the reader Nabuco so deeply, to the point of remaining alive in his memoir. I believe that only what has some meaning remains. The French Romanticism gave him the taste of the harmonious lyricism of Lamartine, the magic of Chateaubriand's prose (which can be recognized in his charming descriptions of Nature on Paquetá Island), but mostly the élan of a fervent, personal religiosity, which in his youth bordered on the heterodoxy of Lamennais: *Words of a Believer* was one of his bedside books. And there were also the rebel Victor Hugo and Edgar Quinet, the now forgotten author of a tragic poem about the Wandering Jew, Ahasverus, summary of a liberation theology *avant la lettre*. The passionate preacher of the abolitionist campaign kept the heat of this romantic legacy. And I would venture to say that not even the confessed influence of Renan, with his ironic skepticism, succeeded in extinguishing in Nabuco's heart the flame of the religious feeling that the last years of his life would rekindle with great intensity.

In a rhythmic counterpoint, from reading the English publicists he took the unshakable conviction of his parliamentary and monarchy liberalism. It is possible that Nabuco idealized the traces of an English national character in a pure state, impervious to external influences. To understand this perspective, nothing better than reading the passage about the "English spirit", which is in the essence of *My Formative Years*. His first History teacher at Pedro II School, the Baron of Tautphoeus, to whom he dedicated pages of veneration, had already taught him that the English uniqueness and detachment from continental fashions would not be an isolationism defect, but rather proof of the soundness and vitality of their own traditions. The backbone of the Nabuco's parliamentary was taken from a law manual titled *The English Constitution*, by Bagehot.

There is a chapter in *My Formative Years* called precisely “Bagehot”. I have no legal competence to discuss either the book or the feasibility of its application to our political system. Maybe I should rely on the opinion of a master, Afonso Arinos de Melo Franco who, in the Foreword to *Um Estadista do Império* describes as “completely unrealistic” Nabuco’s undeniable faith “in the possibilities of adapting the English parliamentary monarchy in Brazil”. And I am inclined to endorse Afonso Arinos’ thesis that *My Formative Years* and *Um Estadista do Império* would be not only biographies of the author himself and his father, but monuments to the Empire that the republican coup brought down mercilessly. If so, the Republic, by straying Nabuco from public life would have unintentionally encouraged him to turn yearningly to the fallen regime. The irony of the story does not stop there: when reading *Um Estadista do Império*, President Campos Sales became such an admirer of the author that he decided to invite him to rejoin the diplomatic corps and defend Brazil in the issue of the borders with British Guiana. Thus, the book that had condemned him to years of ostracism was the same that opened up the way for him to serve the new regime ... That history is always and somehow a contemporary of the historian, is a thesis by Benedetto Croce, whose pertinence I never tire to recognize.

#### **From travels to fight: “another provision of inner sun”**

It has become commonplace to speak of Nabuco’s cosmopolitanism and suggest that he would have been an exile in his own country, in the wake of an anthological (and in my view debatable) statement by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, who believed he was able to interpret what would be the uprooting of Brazilian intellectuals. That Nabuco traveled extensively through Europe and the United States before and after the crucial moment of the abolitionist campaign is a known fact, and *My Formative Years* describes in details his fascination with unforgettable cities like Paris, London, Florence, Rome, and New York. But to put into perspective the image of restless cosmopolitanism of the traveler Nabuco, there is nothing like reading the thoughts found in the passage “Attraction of the World.” The matter is the quest for knowledge that gripped the young man barely in his twenties. To summarize it all, he makes a drastic but inspired distinction: “the feeling in us is Brazilian, the imagination European.” The context explains: that is the cultural education that Brazilians (and not only Brazilians) received in the nineteenth century and still receive today, albeit at a rather reduced level. Europe was the universalizing matrix of the entire history of civilization that reached us through unforgettable characters. Characters which from ancient Greek-Roman times to the French Revolution - to set a time limit - have become icons of humanity itself. But Brazil represented the homeland, affective bonds with family, friends, masters, slaves, landowners, struggle, and people. Its call eventually becomes the strongest, the final one. Describing himself as a “wanderer” in his youth, the memoirist concludes:

When, however, between my homeland, which is feeling, and the world, which is thought, I saw that imagination could break the narrow pan in which my small sketches of souls, *Ustedes me entienden*, were baking under the tropical sun, I let go of Europe history, art, keeping of what is universal only religion and letters.

I draw attention to Nabuco's eminently Brazilian political roots. This is not about rhetorical nationalism, which he always strongly opposed. It is about a relentless endeavor to free the slaves and at the same time raise the level of the poor man from the countryside and the city. The time has come to relegate to a certain reckless pseudo-journalism disguised as historiography the task of exploring the image of the *dandy*, handsome Joaquim Nabuco, showing off in the salons of European aristocracy and American elite. The futile stereotype threatens to hide the complexity of the person. In his last years as ambassador, affected by more than one disease and deeply experiencing his religious conversion, the demands of social life were almost an unbearable burden: the journals that make us hear his weakened, although public spirited voice, as he felt it was his duty to sustain it, are out there. The diplomat cannot stop representing, it is his duty, but how often it is painful for him to fulfill this noblesse oblige ritual! I read a poignant note written in Washington, dated November 23, 1906: "Organizing papers. I felt a little nauseated after breakfast. I could not eat lunch and so I felt weak in the evening. I am quite a tottering house."

But let us get back to the memories. The evocation of Massangana lies between the chapters "Election of a Congressmen" and "Abolition". The feeling of roots penetrates both moments of the political struggle as an underground liquid that will someday emerge to offer the most beautiful bloom. In the 1870s Nabuco traveled through Europe and North America with intermittent returns to Brazil, and he himself understands these years as those of a curious amateur, tying them together with the quaint expression "intellectual Lazzaronism phase". But after his father died in 1878, Nabuco enters partisan politics: he runs for Parliament and is elected in Pernambuco thanks to the prestigious name of the old senator.

I'd need another provision of inner sun; I no longer needed diletantism, but human passion, the live, throbbing, absorbent interest in the fate and condition of others, in the fate of the unfortunate; [...]. The interest needed to be human, universal; the work needed the character of finality, the certainty, the inerrancy of the absolute, of the divine, like in the great redemptions, the revolutions of charity and justice, the auroras of truth and conscience about the world. In Brazil there was, back in the year I started my public life, an interest of that sort, with all this power of fascination about feeling and duty, equally impulsive and unlimited, capable of the fiat, whether it was the fate of isolated creatures or the character of the nation ... Such interest could only be that of emancipation, and because of the joy of my time, I brought from my childhood and adolescence the interest in and the compassion and feeling for the slave – the seed that should bloom into the single flower of my career ... [...] However, as I have recently said, I brought



from my childhood the interest in the slave ...

I believe that Habermas would be pleased to have read this text, in which the word “interest” is so often rescued, always carrying a dual dimension of ethical idealism and political realism. Interest leads to knowledge, and knowledge compels to action. Nabuco will be, in its first parliamentary experience, the voice that reopens the issue of slave freedom, a burning topic that had remained virtually silent since the enactment of the Law of the unborn.

“Massangana” precedes the chapter on abolition, a true assessment of the movement and a tribute to those directly responsible for it. It starts by recalling the situation that the Parliament novice set himself to address:

When the abolition campaign was initiated, there were still nearly two million slaves, while their children less than eight years old and all those who would be born, though freeborn, were subject, up to the age of twenty-one, to a system virtually equal to slavery. It was this huge block that we tackled in 1879, believing that we would spend our lives without ever carving it. At the end of ten years nothing was left of it but dust.

Two million slaves, inter-province trade still in action bringing to Minas Gerais, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro slaves from the Northeast, and coffee supporting a large part of our export economy! What a challenge for the resumption of the abolitionist ideal that had been numb since the 1871 Act!

Looking back at the reasons for the movement, Nabuco contemplates in a generous, and I would say even optimistic way, the factors related to the context: abolition would be in tune with the spirit of the time and the moral progress that humanity was experiencing in that last quarter of the nineteenth century. Alongside this credit to dominant evolutionism, he once again praises the “sweetness of the national character”, to which the kindness of Africans would have contributed. He also credits to these traits the different situations in Brazil and in the United States. The cattle breeders of Kentucky and the farmers of Louisiana lynched the abolitionists, while among us more than a few farmers were beginning to free their slaves by the hundreds. A petulant individual could ask why this sweetness and liberality took so long to emerge.

Then, as a witness to the movement, he lists “five different actions or events that contributed to the end result.” In short, these are:

- The role of intellectuals, parliamentarians, journalists, teachers, in short, of opinion makers;
- The bold action of the activists who favored the escaping and defense of slaves;
- The attitude of some slave owners who freed their compulsory workers;
- The political action of statesmen who negotiated government concessions;
- Finally, the will of the Emperor and his family.

Our historiography has made amends to this assessment. For my part, as I am not a historian, I would say that not always the criticisms seem well founded to me. The main and most serious criticism concerns a sin of omission: a reference to the



movement of the slaves themselves, their escapes and riots, which had become so frequent in the 1880s, is missing from the list of forces that contributed to May 13<sup>TN</sup>.

Nabuco defends himself in advance from the acrimony of his posthumous judges by crediting to parliamentary action not only the priority in starting the struggle, but also its most appropriate locus. Encouraging the slaves to open rebellion against their masters had always seemed an irresponsible, if not coward behavior to him. Far from the Legislature, the newspapers, the clubs and the schools, the campaign would become “a gathering of factions”, a “race war” in which the weaker side would be ruthlessly crushed. The liberal-democrat Nabuco firmly believed in the principle of political representation. Slaves should be represented by abolitionists, from a parliamentarian like himself or José Mariano to a bold and incorruptible shyster like Luis Gama, a spirited journalist like Patrocínio, a clairvoyant statesman like Dantas and an apostle of all times like André Rebouças. At that point, which was actually essential, it seems to me that the abolitionist leader acted consistently, following his conscience. What obviously should not stop the work of historical research on the movement of the slaves themselves. Escapes, riots in slave quarters and the multiplication of quilombos played a major role in disaggregating labor system still prevailing in the coffee economy; to what extent is still an open question.

But to say everything without the veil of fetishism, I confess that I am a bit disappointed by the undeserved recognition that Nabuco gives some politicians of the 11<sup>th</sup>, maybe 25<sup>th</sup> hour. Conservatives with a sense of opportunity, men like counselor Antonio Prado and João Alfredo perhaps should not appear in the honorable mentions that Nabuco lavishly offers them when naming some politicians who provided a late contribution to the success of the movement. Counselor Prado had voted against the *Ventre Livre* (Freeborn) Law and, as denounced by Patrocínio, as minister of Agriculture he wanted to bureaucratically reestablish the registration of slaves in the provinces that had already freed them, like Amazonas and Ceará. Like other politicians linked to the coffee oligarchy, his main objective was to ensure the support of the government to finance the European immigration; hence his interest in the abolition in the eve of the *Áurea* (Golden) Law.

Anyway, we do not see in the memoirist Nabuco any shadow of resentment or party bias. If he was mistaken in his judgment, it was due to excessive benevolence, which to me seems always better than the opposite excess. And without deifying him, I prefer to reiterate here my testimony of admiration by quoting an unsuspected Marxist historian, Luiz Felipe Alencastro: “How I miss the abolitionists!”

### **Conservative modernization or democratic reformism?**

The *conservative modernization* label, coined by leftist historiography, has been used to describe some initiatives of the imperial and republican governments. It refers, in general, to reform proposals that did not change the balance of power

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<sup>TN</sup> On May 13, 1888, slavery officially ended in Brazil with the signature of the Golden Law - *Lei Áurea* - by Princess Izabel.

in a society marked by obvious economic and political asymmetries. An example of that is the electoral reform known as Saraiva Law which, by establishing direct election while excluding the vote of the illiterate, drastically reduced the electoral body of the Empire. What was modernized on the one hand was delayed on the other, hampering the effective democratization of the nation's political process. A less typical and ambivalent example is the *Ventre Livre* (Freeborn) Law: a “giant step” in the words of Joaquim Nabuco, which, according to his own assessment, ultimately became the banner of more reluctant slave owners who opposed any extension of its scope, and led him to the almost unbelievable extreme of vetoing the proposal to free the sexagenarians in 1884. A controversial application of the same formula would be that concerning the republican regime: established by a Jacobin military movement, it was widely enjoyed by the coffee oligarchy during the Old Republic.

This unfortunate combination of progressivism and conservativeness has been attributed to the Brazilian political praxis or, more broadly, “peripheral”, in my view, with a certain degree of historical myopia. One needs to see both near and far. The violent ideological regressions seen in bourgeois Europe in the Nazi-Fascist years and throughout the long ordeal of American blacks after the abolition, show us the dark side of the history of modern capitalism. *Mutatis mutandis*, what happened in the Soviet Union under Stalin and in Maoist China, countries where revolutions of a broad popular and progressive spectrum marked a setback to bloody bureaucracies, do not leave room for us to blindly believe in the democratic potential of vicious state solutions.

Going back to the case of Brazil, what we sometimes indistinctly call “bourgeois revolution” entails recurrent contradictions that should not be interpreted in strictly national terms alone.

The abolitionist struggle of Joaquim Nabuco is part of the modernization process that followed the end of slave trade in 1850. This general proposition must be seen from a dialectic perspective. The abolition of slavery among us took four decades to materialize. In the English and French colonies and in the United States there was also a time lapse between the prohibition of trade and the final abolition of slavery: about thirty years in England (1807-1838) and forty in France (1807-1848); in the case of the metropolises, the government compensated slave owners. The temptation is to create a new concept, which would apply to the West: delayed modernization. *Allegro ma non troppo*, or rather *adagio adagio*.

This heavy slowness, this inertia of structures, to borrow an expression from Lévi-Strauss), outraged Nabuco, and we have seen that his libertarian impetus came from his early youth, from the defense of the slave Tomás drafted a year before the *Ventre Livre* Law. His correspondence with British abolitionists, recently exemplarily published by José Murilo de Carvalho and Leslie Bethell, the pages of *O Abolicionismo* and the electoral campaigns in Recife form the links of a chain of ideas and values whose aim is the institution seen in terms of total social phenomenon. Here lies the heart of our theme: modernization, yes, but in a progressive and democratic sense.

The modernization proposed by Nabuco would abolish not only compulsory

labor, but all their economic constraints. “Ending slavery is not enough. The work of slavery needs to be destroyed.” Modernization anchored in employment contracts, but without adhering to the panacea of ‘immigrationism’, which was the exclusionary solution adopted by the oligarchs eager for labor, but totally alienated from the appreciation of the Brazilian worker: the former slave was left adrift; the poor, so-called rural man remained subjected to an iniquitous agrarian structure or was forced to become an urban pariah in the filthy shelters that began to mushroom in the outskirts of large cities. Nabuco understood everything at a glance when he asked for votes in the humble districts of Recife and spoke to the workers, then known as “artists”, calling upon them to join forces to demand a decent level of human life:

You are the great strength of the future; you must be aware of that, and also that the way to further your strength is only through association. To learn, to decide, to move up, we need to associate. Outside of association you should have no hope.

Nabuco saw it clearly when, following in the footsteps of his brotherly friend André Rebouças, he proposed a land reform as a precondition for giving dignity to the rural workers and staunching the exodus that would result in the pathological urbanization, an evil that today seems to be chronic. Rebouças talked to him about the urgency to promote “rural democracy” in Brazil.

Reading the summary of what was left of his forays into politics, the memoirist convinced me, once and for all, that no bill and no doctrinal option could have grown inside him without the thrust of a personal experience that moved him into action.

This evocation describes the candidate’s visit to a poor neighborhood in Recife:

I doubt I have had a greater revelation or exterior impression that would be acting upon me in a more permanent way than these elections 1884-1887 elections - [...] They put me in direct contact with the poorest part of the population and in more than one poor household I learned such a poignant and suggestive lesson about the disinterest of those who have nothing, that just the memory of what I have seen will have over me the power, the effect of soul-searching ... I visited the voters from house to house, knocking, in some streets, on all doors...

The poverty of some of these interior towns and the intensity of the political religion fed upon them, sometimes stopped me from going further ... It hurt to see how much their political devotion cost these trusting people. Several of these events are engraved in my heart. Once I entered the house of a worker, employed in one of the arsenals, to ask for a vote. His name was Jararaca, but the only terrible thing about him was his name. He was willing to vote for me, the cause appealed to him, he told me; but if he voted for me he would be fired, losing the family bread; he had received the coffin ballot (a ballot marked with a second name, which served as a sign) and if it did not show in the ballot box, his fate would be settled at once.

“Look, Sir,” he told me, showing me four small children who looked at me in-

differently, perfectly unaware that it was about themselves, about who would feed them the next day ... And then, turning to a little child lying on the holes of an old dismantled couch: “and to top it all, two months ago my wife found this kid on our doorstep, almost starving to death, gnawed by ants, and today we have another child! However, I am ready to vote for you, he continued, yielding to his liberal temptation, if you bring me a request from Brigadier Floriano Peixoto.” That was perhaps Floriano’s first fan in the country ... “It can come by telegram ... He is in the sugar mill in Alagoas ...

And what he asks of me, whatever it takes, I will do ... Send him a telegram ...». «No, it's not necessary,» I replied, vote as the Government wants you to, be sure to take your coffin ballot... Do not risk starving all these little ones looking at me ... The time will come when you will be able to vote for me freely; until then, it is as if you had ... I should not give you an excuse to do what you want by invoking the intervention of your protector. And I left, urging the woman, pleading with her for fear that he would repent and vote for me.

In other houses the head of household had been unemployed for years because of a vote given to the opposition party; it was total poverty, almost indigence, but everyone there was proud to suffer for their loyalty to the party.

Commenting on a statement by Pascal, it would only be fair to say that where one tries to find Nabuco the politician, what one actually finds is Nabuco the man, who transformed feelings into ideas and ideas into actions.

It is time for us to remember the men who deeply marked our identity as Brazilians. Euclides yesterday, Nabuco today. And since it is time to remember, I go back to a text that I read, as a teenager, in the National Anthology by Carlos de Laet and Fausto Barreto, a book that accompanied so many of us in our school days: Castilho’s famous comparison between Vieira and Bernardes, which put an end to a decisive period: “One admires Vieira, but one admires and loves Bernardes.” I ask the permission of Euclides’s fans and especially of my dear colleague Alberto Venancio Filho, to say with the utmost frankness: one admires Euclides, but one admires and loves Nabuco.

#### Note

1 Text of the speech delivered at the Brazilian Academy of Letters on April 13, 2010.

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