ALTERNATIVE PROTAGONISM
AND NARRATIVE DISRUPTION IN
BRÁS CUBAS: A RECONSIDERATION OF
ROBERTO SCHWARZ'S VOLUBLE
NARRATOR

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Abstract: This article examines the question of narrative form in Brás Cubas by considering the alternative protagonism of intermediary chapters, the majority of them errata and reflexive commentary on the book's composition. It examines the manner in which Roberto Schwarz, in his A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism, lowers the aesthetic value of these sections while constituting them as formally necessary for his notion of the voluble narrator. Ultimately, this article argues that these in-between sections are less formally constitutive of the novel's mimetic intention than they are demonstrative of a little-known side of Brás Cubas, in which he reflects nervously, and at times philosophically, on the question of time.

Keywords: Brás Cubas, Roberto Schwarz, narrative form, plot, time.

O PROTAGONISMO ALTERNATIVO E A PERTURBAÇÃO NARRATIVA EM
BRÁS CUBAS: UMA REVISÃO DO NARRADOR VOLÚVEL DE ROBERTO SCHWARZ

Resumo: Este artigo analisa a questão da forma narrativa em Brás Cubas através da leitura do protagonismo alternativo de capítulos intermediários do romance, a maioria deles erratas e comentários sobre a própria composição do livro. Examina
a maneira como Roberto Schwarz em seu Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo considera menor o valor estético dessas seções do livro, embora as constitua como formalmente necessárias para o seu conceito do narrador volúvel. Finalmente, o artigo lê essas seções menos como formalmente constitutivas da intenção mimética do romance do que reveladoras de um lado pouco conhecido de Brás Cubas, em que reflete nervosamente, e às vezes filosoficamente, sobre a questão do tempo.

Palavras-chave: Brás Cubas, Roberto Schwarz, forma narrativa, enredo, tempo.
Introduction: What is the plot? – if there is one...

If anything can be taken seriously in Brás Cubas and avoid the specter of irony outlining its narrative contours, it may be found in its first few pages, in which Brás Cubas presents his “ideia fixa,” to produce and patent a pharmaceutical invention known as the “Braz Cubas Plaster,” which ultimately kills him. The reader gets the sense that the plotting of the original plot as an “ideia fixa” defines the plot to come: unmethodological, careless, sporadic. The protagonist Brás’s obsession with patenting and winning fame and riches from his invention causes him to neglect his poor health; he announces to the reader that he died from this ill-orchestrated plot, and we suddenly realize that we are already a step into the novel. But where are we in the plot? What remains to be set in place is like a plaster cast, which, had it been given time to settle, would have served as a veritable structure, a hermetic container, or a profitable novelty. Machado’s inaugural gesture is thus to provide us with a figure for the unfulfilled plot of a narration and to suggest that inaction breeds action, in some form or another.

The renown Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz’s study of Brás Cubas, A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism,\(^1\) centers on the irony of the novel’s inaugural gesture of radically challenging its own claim to represent a life.\(^2\) It is, he suggests, by way of deformation that the novel ironically achieves its historical

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\(^1\) SCHWARZ, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*: Machado de Assis.

\(^2\) One cannot begin to consider Schwarz’s discussion of narrative irony without taking into account the affinities between his theory, Machado’s novels, and Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*, first published in book form by Berlin, P. Cassirer, 1920. Affinities between Schwarz’s project and Lukács’s work include their mutual interest in the relationship between the novel and the speculative philosophical tradition as well as the correlation between literary form and material history, worked through for both in the concept of narrative irony.
and mimetic accuracy. How Schwarz mimes the novel's irony in his own critical operation by simultaneously demoting and giving agency to that which we might call narrative inaction or alternative protagonism is a question that merits some consideration. As I will proceed to argue, Schwarz's reading implies identifying and partitioning parts of the narrative that are simultaneously relegated to a lower level of aesthetic value and said to be constitutive of the novel's production of mimetic form. Schwarz's formalism denudes the narrator of subjective depth and thus turns him into a proxy for his class. Before beginning to address how interpretation takes shape in Schwarz's reading of Brás Cubas, I would like to briefly rehearse a wider critical debate concerning Machado de Assis's writing in general.

In his article “Uma filosofia buissonnieuse”, ou de como o narrador desce as escadas: Como ler a questão da ‘filosofia de Machado de Assis’ na contemporaneidade,” Pedro Schacht Pereira recalls the history of an intellectual debate concerning how to read philosophical content within Machado's obra.³ Among the intellectual moments he highlights is a short article from 1893 by Araripe Júnior, published in Rio de Janeiro's Gazeta de notícias,⁴ where the critic identified Machado's unprecedented critique of trending positivist scientific and philosophical discourses of his time,⁵ including the reception of Darwinian thought, Auguste Compte's positivism, materialism and eugenics, etc. Pereira also identifies Benedito Nunes, whose article “Machado de Assis e a filosofia,” written more than a half-century later censured the frequently earnest interpretations among commentators and critics of Machado's realistic portraits of philosophers and wannabe-philosophers, for example, Quincas Borba, inventor of the fictional monistic movement Humanitismo in Brás Cubas, who some critics naively took to represent Machado's own philosophical views.⁶ In his essay Pereira suggests that both these critics share an understanding of the characteristic irony of Machado's narrative structure and the often dissonant layers of narrative counterpoint that should invalidate any claim that his

³ PEREIRA, Uma filosofia "buissonnieuse", ou de como o narrador desce as escadas: Como ler a questão da "filosofia de Machado de Assis" na contemporaneidade, p. 87-116.
⁴ JÚNIOR, Ideias e sandices do Ignaro Rubião.
⁵ In the chapter of A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism entitled "The Rich on their Own," Schwarz discusses Machado's reaction to these discourses in his prose and fiction writing. Schwarz writes: “we can say that Machado was setting against the vulgar materialism of some of the ‘advanced’ thinking of his time, tailor-made for Brazilian racial dilemmas and the vastness of the tropics” (SCHWARZ, cit., p. 87).
⁶ NUNES, Machado de Assis e a filosofia.
characters express their author’s views. He goes on to suggest that notwithstanding the importance of all efforts to reassess how philosophy enters Machado’s fictional worlds, skeptical critics often end up taking their arguments too far, inevitably claiming that not only is Machado critical of trending philosophical discourses but that he also produces strictly non-philosophical works. Distinguishing these critics from the more recent work of Abel Barros Baptista 7 with whom he aligns himself, Pereira opts for a critical approach that seeks to deconstruct hermeneutics and identify how the text “performs” signatures and troubles the unstable relationships between literature, history and philosophy.

Roberto Schwarz, however, does not easily fall within either the category of naive reception of philosophical pyrotechnics, 8 or that of total negation of philosophical content, although he seems to suggest that he follows the latter. Indeed, his reading of Brás Cubas seeks to characterize the novel as anti-philosophical. The justification for his foreclosure of philosophy requires further consideration, especially given the fact that he dedicates a great deal of attention in his A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism to describing Machado’s prose critiques of trending scientific and philosophical discourses of mid-nineteenth-century Brazil. For example, he admits that Brás’s blind adherence to the doctrine of Humanitismo in the novel is an achievement in that it evidences Machado’s ridicule of the anachronistic and self-aggrandizing intellectual elite. In passages that seem cursory Schwarz offers shrewd remarks concerning how the novel itself philosophizes, like when he notes the “swings between spiritualism and materialism” within the narrator’s writing. 9 Related to this point, Schwarz asks, “what could be more materialist than the ‘necessity of the conscience’ (ch. 70), as strict as the laws of motion or the need to eat, and what could be more spiritual than observing the refined fluttering of the instincts as they look after their own

8 Schwarz is critical of studies that have not picked up on the irony of Machado’s philosophical references, including Miguel Reale’s A filosofia de Machado de Assis, on which Schwarz writes, “it is no accident that, even recently, a reputable specialist should have published a book about Machado de Assis and philosophy, in which, at the end, the meditative sallies of the author-character are part of an anthology of serious thoughts, when all that would be necessary would be to extend the quotations by one or two sentences to see the evidence of their self-regarding, mocking, or crazed dimension” (SCHWARZ, cit., p. 116).
9 Idem, p. 140.
instincts. With this statement, he alludes not only to Machado’s examination of materialist debates, but his acknowledgement that Machado might truly be saying something about the paradoxical ontology of a dead author who refers to his bodily functions and ponders metaphysical debates. However, he follows up this question with a conclusive and silencing caveat: “having said this, the relevance of the debate in this case is not philosophical, for it owes its literary importance to another ambiguity, which really is central and gives it its ironic resonance.”

The ambiguity to which Schwarz refers concerns power and knowledge, Machado’s skillful juggling of erudition and supremacy. Brás’s world, according to the critic, doesn’t allow for intellectual pursuits; Schwarz concludes that Machado’s interests in philosophical materialism unambiguously exceed the epistemological limits of the “nineteenth-century [philosophical] demand for constancy, objectivity, and reason,” and those of Brás as well.

Like Pereira, I sympathize with efforts to move beyond tendencies to read too much and too earnestly into Machado’s recurrent ventriloquism of “bad philosophy” in his characters’ words and actions. To the extent that Schwarz rejects this approach and engages in a theoretic reading of the novel that questions – by way of the effect of irony on the narrative form – the relationship between form and historical referentiality, he may fit somewhere within the critical tendency in which Pereira aligns himself. Indeed, by highlighting a doubling within the plot – “a narrator behind the narrator” – Schwarz posits an undecidability of authorial intention that discredits facile discussions of Machado’s philosophy. At the same time, however, we might pause to ask what is at stake in the critical act of negating philosophical content – which in the novel is akin to self-expression and experience – all together. As I will proceed to argue, Schwarz’s caveat that Machado’s writing is unphilosophical recalls his consistent efforts to denude the narrator of subjectivity. In this way, Brás’s lack of depth becomes equal to the excessive greed of a collective nineteenth-century Brazilian subject. Philosophical “subjectivism” as well as the “narrator’s specific rhythm, whose implications, in time, or for time, are the quintessence of the novel,” are relegated to an unproductive nothing, even though they shape the novel in ways

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10 Ibidem.
11 Ibidem, p. 140-141.
12 Ibidem, p. 141.
we will soon consider. We might question, in the terms of Anne-Lise François, in what ways Schwarz’s study dispenses of “merely parenthetical experience,” yet ends up rehearsing “the post-structural theme of erupting a nonconvertible (non)value incapable of contemporaneousness, presence, or manifestation except as excess or lack.” My aim for this paper is to trace Schwarz’s process of exalting and limiting components of the narrative that refract episodes of the plot but in themselves are said to communicate little historical content. I will then proceed to argue that these episodes, which lie between the plot, offer up Brás Cubas as a taciturn, self-conscious, and occasionally philosophical man, who is obsessed with time.

The Plot

Let us recall what Roberto Schwarz writes regarding the function of the "narrative procedure," – what I am calling "plot" – in the novel:

[...] the cadence of the narrative procedure, which assures the novel its cohesion (a structural fact) and verisimilitude (a mimetic fact), as well as its formal originality in the proper sense of these words: that is to say, an artistic design produced on the basis of pecu liar historical circumstances, which find in it their logical (though not at all obvious) form and causal sequence.

He will use the term "artistic" throughout his study to mean a value of mimetic accuracy; in broad strokes, the formal presentation of the universalizing trait of "volubilidade" is also the novel's achieved result: "the representation of contingent reality, characteristic of the novel as a form, has no continuity, or, better, never fulfills itself."

Peter Brook’s Reading for the Plot argues that our common sense of plot "has been molded by the great nineteenth-century narrative tradition that, in history, philosophy, and a host of other fields as well as literature, conceived certain kinds

15 FRANÇOIS, Open Secrets, p. 49-50.
16 SCHWARZ, cit., p. 42.
17 Idem, p. 31. I prefer not to use Gledson’s translation of "volubilidade" as "volubility," which he himself recognized is problematic. In his translator’s note he explains that the English cognate is understood as "talkative," which is not the sense meant here, which is ‘changeable’ (Idem, p. xxxvi).
of knowledge and truth to be inherently narrative, understandable (and expoundable) only by way of sequence, in a temporal unfolding.”¹⁸ According to Brooks, plot is a manner of representing and acting out negotiations with reality in and through narrative. Like the authors Brooks studies – including Balzac, Dickens, Flaubert, and Conrad – Machado de Assis’s Brás Cubas maintains a vital relation to plot even as it subverts it, and, as an alternative to one of the “novels of the great tradition,” offers “models for understanding its use of plots and its relation to plot as a model of understanding.”¹⁹ These texts, moreover, do not only have plots but also doubly thematize and mimitize the process of plotting, which, Brook’s argues, is a central concern for the nineteenth-century realist novel and its modernist extensions.

The “impossibly speculative task to say what narrative itself is,” becomes immediately apparent in the multilingual attempts to define the “interconnectedness and intention” of “discrete elements” in narrative.²⁰ Plot, in Portuguese, has many definitions with varying degrees of semantic difference: enredo, trama, entrecho, intriga, nó, etc. These are all terms that John Gledson might have struggled to put in English in his translation of Schwarz’s Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo, such that he exclusively resorted to the English abstract term “plot.” I too impose the word “plot” on this paper not unaware that its definition delimits modern Portuguese’s complex treatment of the concept of plot and its polyvalent forms. It is suggestive that the etymology of each of the Portuguese words listed above all pertain to the figure of a woven design, even more so that plot, according to the The American Heritage Dictionary, has four definitions that are not so easily contained or assimilated:

1. (a) A small piece of ground, generally used for a specific purpose.  (b) A measured area of land; lot.
2. A ground plan, as for a building; chart; diagram
3. The series of events consisting of an outline of the action of a narrative or drama
4. A secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose; scheme.²¹

¹⁸ BROOKS, Reading for the Plot, p. xi.
¹⁹ Idem, p. xii.
²⁰ Idem, p. 4.
²¹ THE AMERICAN Heritage Dictionary, p. 11-12.
While the Portuguese terms above share the English word plot’s third and fourth definitions, the other delimiting meanings of “plot” sharply contrast with the figure of a knot. As Peter Brooks notes, “from the organized space, plot becomes the organizing line, demarcating and diagramming that which was previously undifferentiated.” It is appropriate that the imposition of “plot” should define a word and a concept that presents its own myriad challenges to the delimitation.

Brás Cubas’s original curtailing of the narrative’s ontological status – that is to say its ability to validate the fictive by reference to extra-fictive criteria23 requires that plot be understood as an inherently distortive form. Since we are presented with chapters unveiling a biography of sorts, readers may desire – under the hermeneutic directives of plotting – to put these episodes in dialogue with a story.24 However, Brás Cubas’s narration against the odds (of death) presents us with an interpretive challenge from the very beginning. Even before introducing the figure of the plaster, the metaphor of the problems of plotting to come, the novel offers the ironic gesture of inaugurating an unpredictable representational space. Schwarz denotes these opening paragraphs before chapter ten an ”affront” to the reader (desrespeito), an aggressive interregnum before the plot even begins, which, as Gledson translates beautifully, “pushes paradox to its limits.”25

The literary method of caprice is for Schwarz analogous to an extra-literary universal condition: “it is, literally, the universalization of the forms of conduct of the Brazilian ruling class, or in other words, the working out of its – disastrous – effects on the dominant patterns of contemporary civilization, beyond its immediate empirical context.”26 ”Context” here has been given a radically new meaning. Machado’s constructions render a dizzyingly mediated textual space, in which the narrator capriciously ”never stays the same for more than a short paragraph, or, better, changes subjects, opinions, or styles with

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22 BROOKS, cit., p. 12.
23 I take this definition of narrative ontology, specifically suitable to a study of narrative in fiction, from Alexander Gelley’s chapter ”The Pragmatics of Exemplary Narrative”, included in his Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity, p. 142-162.
24 See Brooks’s useful reference to the distinction proposed by the Russian Formalists between fabula and sjužet. In broad terms, the fabula – ”what really happened” – is a mental ”construction” that the reader derives from the sjužet, which is all that he ever directly ”knows” by what is ”referred” to by ”the narrative” (BROOKS, cit., p. 12-14).
25 SCHWARZ, cit., p. 36.
almost every phrase.” The short-circuiting by fits and starts contaminates the plot’s development, which could otherwise serve to provide episodes with naturalist description of social caricatures. Take for example, the meaningful episodes with Eugenia, Brás’s impoverished and “lame” neighbor, the only “authentic character” in the novel, Schwarz argues, which are radically curtailed by Brás’s descent from Tijuca and return to the city. His aborted romance with the girl fits accordingly with the formal tendency of Brazil’s élite to betray the false liberal values that they pretend to uphold. Schwarz writes, “at every turn the narrative interrupts it [the plot] and transforms it into a jumping-off point for a move toward self-satisfaction, whether it be for the narrator, the characters, or the reader, and this happens therefore at the expense of reality.”

Schwarz’s argument thus sees form as mimetic of a social structure: “mimetic accuracy has become the effect of the rigor of the construction.” To achieve the results demanded by this accuracy – “a technical necessity” – Machado employs episodes that “invade the scene” and “perturb” the course of the novel. Narrative interruptions – spaces between anecdotes of events that take place as if outside narrative time – provide the outline of abstracted bits of a narrated life, or social interactions dispossessed of immediate worldly context. Schwarz defines these moments as “interruptions, which always infringe some rule or other.” Stylistically, they consist principally of deviating asides and errata, and as mediating segments containing their own content, they are composed of intimate moments of self-reflection, principally memories of Brás’s childhood and notes on the composition of the autobiography itself. Paradoxically, they are also non-signifying material – according to Schwarz’s mimetic model – that slow volubility down and disorient narrative progression. In this sense, they pose a grave obstacle to narrative verisimilitude, disrupting any semblance of normal human life or chronology. Schwarz writes, “quite differently from what one would expect, it is the constant breaks in the novel’s texture that establish the relationships by means of which the characters’ realist fate and the immanent presence of the fictional universe are completed and

27 Idem, p. 16.
28 Idem, p. 31.
29 Idem, p. 35.
30 Idem, p. 7.
31 Ibidem.
rounded out.” Indeed, despite their exceptionality, they form the rule of infringement that is the norm of ironic representation.

Conceiving the novel as a difficult, fragmented totality, Schwarz asks the reader to exert a hermeneutic effort to determine a stable relationship between form and material history. He writes, “the composition of the whole is less apparent. But if it does exist, and if we keep a certain distance, we can begin to see the outlines of a social structure...Though difficult to define, this underlying unity is one of the secrets of Machado’s work. After pinning it down, we will try to interpret it, a process that will lead us to its Brazilian circumstances.” At many points throughout his study, Schwarz refers to backgrounds and foregrounds, appearances and shadows, visibility and concealment, and outlines and shapes. This phenomenological approach posits the existence of a latent form that solicits the reader to forge her own way along the text’s already volubly mediated surface. Moreover, Schwarz’s reading demands a skeptical reader always alert and ready to ‘flagrar’ the dissimulated mood that characterizes the text since its inaugural gesture of self-sabotage. The antinomial character of this structure asks that readers approach form and content with pre-knowledge of a social lie. This “context” brings us semantically closer to knot than to fence; indeed, etymologically, to ask “what is the context?” is not far from asking “what is the plot?”

Although Schwarz bases his argument in A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism on the formal importance of in-between sections, or impositions on the story, he shies away from plotting their own meaning. In one of his sharpest critical moves, he identifies the novel’s alternative protagonist: “one must assume that there is a narrator behind the narrator, a narrator interested in consequences and thus the opposite of the voluble narrator.” However, he also continuously empties this double’s personality. Indeed, the moments in which the representation of the ostensive plot is disrupted are also moments when the fictional system puts its own integrity at risk, and as we have seen, when the constructive principle that underlies the form becomes explicit. These are moments in which “nothing happens,” when the narrator’s inertia imposes itself on the otherwise capricious narrative movements between then and there.

32 Idem, p. 122.
33 Idem, p. 18.
34 Idem, p. 54.
in-between moments take on various forms: sometimes errata – an obstacle to the reader’s construction of plot – other times sparse reflection on a previous scene. Moreover, far from being en abyme, that is, intentional crystallizations of formal design, they tend to resist formal integration with the whole. It is important to note that Schwarz characterizes these “intrusions” as Machado’s conscious efforts to “reify narrative freedom and subordinate it to a system of constrains that lowers the prestige of its narrative world.”

The following section explores why Schwarz demotes these scenes to a lower category of aesthetic value. As we will see, these sections have a tendency to write their own history of an opposing kind. Whereas the problematic plot we identified is characterized by a volubilidade that affronts temporal order, these in-between sections have an altogether dissimilar relation to the problem of time and temporal experience.

Between the Plot

There is perhaps no subject less likely to earn Schwarz’s critical attention than the question of typography in Brás Cubas. From the point of view of his formal approach to narrative irony, the material and visual display of words in themselves have virtually no value. The critic Abel Barros Baptista’s essay “In-12 Versus In-folio” takes up this topic, not in relation to Schwarz, but rather as a critique of a wider phenomenon he calls, following Genette, the “typographic regime.” Baptista’s essay hinges on a discussion introduced in Chapter XXII of Brás Cubas, entitled “Volta ao Rio,” in which the narrator abruptly ends his chapter and defends its brevity on the basis that “long chapters are better suited to ponderous readers; but we are not an in-folio public, we are an in-12 public, preferring little text, large margins, elegant type, gilt-edged pages, and illustrations [vinhetas]... especially illustrations...” The narrator then closes the short chapter with, “no, let us not prolong the chapter....” In this passage, Brás promises to keep his blabbing to a minimum to conform to the reading and

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35 Ibidem, italics mine.
36 BAPTISTA, In-12 Versus In-Folio, p. 173-189; first published as a chapter in Autobiografias: solicitação do livro na ficção de Machado de Assis.
38 ASSIS, Epitaph of a Small Winner, p. 69.
editorial practices of his time. From the point of view of the "chapter's protagonism"39 – a concept I borrow from Baptista – which I take to mean a chapter's expression of non-narrative content, one identifies a rationale for Brás's brevity: his variations of narrative technique become concretized in the "context" of white space. Baptista notes the myriad other chapters perform attitude by way of typography and graphic space. For example, Chapter XXIII, entitled "Sad But Short," whose brevity and immersion in white space concretizes what Baptista calls "the very space of the interruption of the series."40 Perhaps there is no other example that emphasizes the material dimensions of the novel like Chapter CII, entitled "On Rest," in which the author begins to discuss the challenges of his love affair only to immediately halt: "No, I won't talk about it on this page; let this chapter serve to let me rest after my humiliation [...] I repeat, I will not recount the matter on this page."41 As Baptista notes, the editorial decision – in the Nova Aguilar edition, among many others – to omit white space following the words of this aborted chapter and others demands that "page" be read figuratively; the book renders ineffective a graphic element that might otherwise "reinforce the autonomy of the chapter, by typographically reaffirming the suspension of the relation between the sequence."42 Baptista argues that the editorial decision to economize the ratio of spent ink and white page is metonymic of the "typographic regime," or a mode of analysis that insists on undermining the material and graphic implications of these short chapters, "cutting down the space between chapters as much as possible, the graphic autonomy of the short chapter and this visibility of the sudden interruption."43

Brás's off-the-cuff confession of the pompous intellectualism of Brazil's élite in Chapter XXII should interest Schwarz. Baptista asserts the historical implications of the passage when he writes that "the opposition to the in-folio suggests that the in-l2 reader is not exactly a man of letters, that he is against or does not pay much attention to prolonged contact with books."44 Yet, it is not only for the reason of Brás's defiance of his class's dilettantism that Schwarz might consider the passage relevant. As Baptista recalls, the historical movement from

39 BAPTISTA, In-12 Versus In-Folio, p. 173.
40 Idem, p. 178.
41 My translation. ASSIS, Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas, p. 224.
42 BAPTISTA, In-12 Versus In-Folio, p. 178.
43 Idem, p. 181.
44 Idem, p. 182-183.
in-folio to short formats reflected the growing number of readers who desired portable books; a fact that in the European context indicated the increasing democratization of literacy, but in the context of the chapter was a sign of Brazil's characteristic 'backwardness'. The irony of Brás's statement should interest Schwarz, were the chapter not expressive of a disqualifying protagonism. Ultimately, Schwarz is unlikely to consider the potential of graphic design to make cultural critique. He would dismiss these sections, in which the materiality of the writing becomes a sign of agency.

In proposing a hypothetical scenario in which Schwarz resists Baptista's reading, my point is not to suggest that he ignores the materiality of Brás Cubas in fact, his discussion of form in the novel is itself a rigorously materialist and moreover groundbreaking contribution to Machadian criticism. Rather, I am arguing that Schwarz errs by mistaking one form of materialism for another. Baptista is careful to distinguish his approach from the tendency of hyper-materialists to believe that "the essence of the meaning of a work is revealed in the detail of its formal presentation."\textsuperscript{45} Hyper-materialists, who tend to efface the distinction between constitutive and contingent properties of textual production, end up fetishizing the irreducible, the perfunctory and the informe.\textsuperscript{46} This could not be further from Schwarz's Hegelian kind of materialism, for which form conditions meaning and is, by way of irony, history's image. The scenario in which Schwarz rejects these passages, in which Brás reflects on the materiality of his work is in fact realized at other moments in his study, in which the critic expresses his disdain outright. We may thus understand the thematic of materiality I have briefly explored above as a kind of limit example whose relation to other sections with equally opposing forms of protagonism we must still work out. In what follows, I would like to further consider chapters in which the reader encounters an opposing protagonism; sections that do little to move the voluble narrative along, consist of the narrator's reflection on his miseducation and display his obsessive preoccupation with time.

Kenneth D. Jackson and more recently Zephyr Frank have described Brás Cubas as a kind of anti-Bildungsroman. For Jackson, Brás's memoir "documents his faults and failure to educate himself at every step in life...The very success of

\textsuperscript{45} Idem, p. 185.

\textsuperscript{46} For a broad-ranging discussion of the ideology of hyper-materialism and aesthetics see TAFURI, Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development.
Machado’s novel is posited in its failures.” Frank, responding to Franco Moretti’s attempt to turn the genre on its head by stressing the non-organic and anti-teleological symbolization of development in European modernity, poses the question, “if the purpose of the Bildungsroman is to reconcile the individual to the world, what were the terms of this reconciliation in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s imperial capital?” He goes on to ask,

[... ] following the lead provided by literary historians, is it possible to read novels as answers to conundrums of historical structure and change, viewed through human-scale hermeneutics of plot and language. How to live and how to fit in? Imperatives posed as questions. Thus, as the literary historian Joshua Esty argues, the Bildungsroman in societies undergoing change takes on a particular cast. It becomes the vehicle for exploring failed development, the impossibility of fitting in. Or to extend Roberto Schwarz’s metaphor: misplaces lives in addition to misplaced ideas.

Frank’s inclusion of Schwarz here is understandable, given the latter’s belief in the ironic symbolization of historical phenomena in narrative form; like the unfulfilled project of Brás Cubas’s plaster cast invention, the novel becomes an ironic double of the nation’s unfulfilled modernization. It is however, I believe, a stretch to characterize Schwarz’s reading as a “human-scale hermeneutic,” principally because Schwarz himself resists reading Machado’s novel as a story of human development. In doing so, he risks denuding the protagonist of depth and rendering him as an empty form.

In a section titled “Brás’s Miseducation,” Schwarz describes a self-conscious narrator reflecting on his destructive formação. The critic recalls that Brás explains his vulubility as the “natural consequence” of the environment in which he grew up, declaring, “from this soil and from this manure was this flower born.” We may wonder why Schwarz rejects this lyric moment, why he characterizes it as “without irony” that “interrupt[s] the course of the vulubility.” He degrades these passages, “in which the author forgets his basic

47 JACKSON, Machado de Assis: A Literary Life, p. 225.
50 Idem, p. 3.
51 SCHWARZ, cit., p. 68.
52 Idem, p. 124.
principle that the form disqualifies the matter and tries to show his authority as a witty, cultivated writer in a direct fashion.”53 In Chapter XI, for example, Brás recalls with a “regretful tone”54 his uncle’s lecherous behavior, specifically his sexual advances towards his brother, as well as his religious upbringing, to which he gives a somber hue by calling his mother’s instruction of prayers empty formulas. Schwarz describes these sections as “weak moments at the level of the composition of the book as a whole.”55 He goes on, “it is true that this faulty education plausibly explains the volatile character of the author-narrator. But it also clearly identifies him as inferior, something which, given the ambiguity with regard to values inherent to the form of the Memoirs, represents an artistic mistake and, consequently, a loss of tension.”56

Schwarz’s rejection of these scenes closely recalls Lukács discussion of the Romantic “novel of disillusionment” (Desillusionsromantik) in his Theory of the Novel.57 As a kind of anti-Bildungsroman avant la lettre – Lukács follows up this section with a reading of the foundational Bildungsroman, Wilhelm Meister – the Romantic “novel of disillusionment” is both a formal failure and the unfulfilled attempt of the interior self to realize synthesis with an absent outside world.58 Recognizing the hopelessness and humiliating consequences of facing the world, the novel turns inward, mirrors itself in the protagonist’s pessimism and becomes psychological. “Life becomes a work of literature; but, as a result, man becomes the author of his own life and at the same time the observer of that life as a created work of art,” Lukács writes.59 The fundamental danger of this type of spectral novel is also what is the matter with Brás Cubas. These works, Lukács writes, have a tendency “towards passivity, a tendency to avoid outside conflicts and struggles rather than to engage in them, a tendency to deal inside the soul with everything that concerns the soul.”60 However, one is not limited to Brás’s fits of

54 Idem, p. 124.
55 Idem, p. 88.
56 Ibidem.
57 It is worth considering two possible ways of translating “disillusionment” in Portuguese: desilusão or decepção. The second of the two options captures well Schwarz’s sense that Brás Cubas’s alternative protagonists is on the one hand an aesthetic ‘disappointment’ and, on the other, a ‘deception’ of the reader into believing that Brás is more than a proxy for his class.
58 On Lukács’s and the inaccessibility of outside worlds, see the memorable opening of the preface to his Theory of the Novel, p. 11-29.
59 LUKÁCS, Theory of the Novel, p. 117.
60 Idem, p. 113.
moodiness when examining how the impossibility to project onto the social world and the interior self plays out in Machado’s fiction. Indeed, one might recall the unnamed decorated soldier of “The Looking Glass” (O espelho), a text that we will turn to shortly, whose reflection turns blurry as he loses touch with an outside world that serves to confirm his social status.

However, if Schwarz shares Lukács’s distrust of inward-gazing novels and his championing of outward-oriented heroism, he is even more closely aligned with his position on the question of time and the novel. It is, however, partly on account of this close alliance that Schwarz’s argument loses its original order and becomes itself ironic. For Lukács, time saves the novel from its dreary pessimism by providing it with “a positive thing”\(^{61}\) the “fullness of life”\(^{62}\) that emerges from “the form-giving sense of comprehending a meaning.”\(^{63}\) He famously comments on time and Flaubert’s L’Education sentimentale, which serves as the prototype of how time, the “unrestricted, uninterrupted flow of time,”\(^{64}\) saves the modern novel from itself. Indeed, if previously Lukács had argued that it is irony that saves the novel from itself, here time is understood as an unironic outpouring of temporal experience.\(^{65}\) As Lukács puts it, “time brings order into the chaos of men’s lives and gives them the semblance of a spontaneous and organic entity.”\(^{66}\)

Schwarz describes the function of time in Brás Cubas in a very similar manner: “the volubility undoes the rule of the clock, of conventionally sequential chains of events, of the ordering that is indispensable to active existence, but it does so in vain, for time reemerges inside the movements of volubility itself, which are impregnated (impregnados) with a complex, differentiated temporality, only to be found in the greatest literature.”\(^{67}\) As if turning full circle on his early repudiation of a non-narrative, non-voluble, transcendental subjectivity, Schwarz follows the previous statement up with another Lukácsian move, claiming that “the focus of the mimesis and of the search for the historical quidditas is moved from what is narrated to the narrator’s specific rhythm, whose

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\(^{61}\) Idem, p. 123.

\(^{62}\) Idem, p. 126.

\(^{63}\) Idem, p. 124.

\(^{64}\) Idem, p. 125.

\(^{65}\) As Paul de Man has argued, “on the level of true temporal experience, the ironic discontinuities vanish and the treatment of time itself, in Flaubert, is no longer ironic”. MAN, Blindness and Insight Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, p. 58.

\(^{66}\) LUKÁCS, cit., p. 125.

\(^{67}\) SCHWARZ, cit., p. 135, italics mine.
implications, in time, or for time, are the quintessence of the novel.” 68 In this sense, it appears that time has become one with its own syntactical or rhythmic function and materiality has been split and given two meanings: one historical and another protagonistic. However, immediately following these rare and significant comments on time, Schwarz offers a rapid and sweeping caveat: “it would be wrong to talk of subjectivism, since, as we have seen, volubility belongs to everyone. Putting it another way, the achievement does not lie in the premeditated defiance of chronology...but in [its] adaptation to the Brazilian social structure and in the imagining of its consequences for the individual subject.” 69 We may pause here to question the stakes of ultimately reducing the protagonism of time to just a “further aspect of the narrator-character’s domineering class attitude.” 70 And ask, what are the consequences of leveling the “individual subject” and “everyone,” when considering human temporal experience? Before concluding, I would like to point out a section within the plot in which Brás obsessively thematizes temporal experience. Chapter LXI, entitled “A Project,” falls between two chapters, “The Embrace” and “The Pillow.” Let us consider it in correspondence with the chapter directly preceding it, in which the narrator reencounters his old schoolmate Quincas Borba after years since he had last seen him.

Finding Borba filthy and in tatters, Brás offers him five thousand reis and more reluctantly an embrace. He discovers as soon as his old friend departs that he has been robbed of a watch. The simultaneity of the embrace – an event that serves as the title’s referent as well – and the robbery, produces a feeling of temporal integrity: we are in one of those moments in which we feel like we are truly in the plot. Then comes in the interruptive project. Another metaphor for a problematic plot, not unlike Brás Cubas’s Plaster, the chapter’s title gestures towards a pretense to action that is unfulfilled, Brás’s “absolute necessity” to reencounter Quincas Borba in the city square. Having been robbed of the ability to tell the time, time emerges as the dominant theme in a manner that contrasts with the previous chapter’s eventful equation of time and action. Our narrator, waiting for his meal to arrive at a restaurant, suddenly becomes neurotic, obsessing over the chronology of past events and those to come. Occupying the

68 Idem, p. 135.
69 Idem, p. 136.
70 Idem, p. 135.
space of a single meal, the following temporal acts unravel: Brás reflects on the theft; his soup arrives; a memory "of Chapter 25 began to open within [him]"; he eats rapidly; remarks that "Virgilia represented the present" and that he desired to take "refuge in it from persecution by the past"; declares that the meeting with Quincas Borba has brought before his eyes a deformed version of the past; leaves his house "too early"; goes back to the Passeio Público; asks a guard "at what time" Quincas Borba is usually at the square; the guard responds that "he has no regular time"; and finally, "night had fallen." 71 The interregnum continues exactly five minutes into the following chapter, "The Pillow," at which point Brás rids himself of the disturbing memory of the previous two chapters: 'Five minutes sufficed to put Quincas Borba entirely out of my mind; five minutes of mutual contemplation, with her hand in mine; five minutes and a kiss. And out went the memory of Quincas Borba..." 72 Out goes time, in comes the next event. Out goes the time-obsessed interruption, in comes the action.

As we conclude, we might consider further the notion of alternative protagonism by briefly considering another related example, Machado's short-story "The Looking Glass: Rough Draft of a New Theory of the Human Soul" ("O espelho: esboço de uma nova teoria da alma humana"). I will only mention a few ways in which this celebrated story relates to Brás Cubas. It begins with a narrator's ironic description of a group of men, "metaphysical bloodhounds" sitting around a table "amicably solving the most thorny problems of the universe." 73 The "fourth or fifth," otherwise silent participant declares, as if a warning to the others, a statement concerning the duality of the soul, and begins to explain his philosophy by way of a personal anecdote. "Two. Every human being is born with two souls: one that looks from the inside out, another that looks from the outside in... [...] The exterior soul may be a spirit, an invisible aura, a man, many men, an object, an activity. There are cases, for example, in which a simple shirt button is the whole exterior soul of a person." 74 The ambiguity of this unnamed character's place at the table may be read as a symptom of his disillusionment in the Lukácsian sense. Indeed, the first sign of this internal absence concerns his missing name; only later in the short-story is the protagonist

71 ASSIS, Epitaph of a Small Winner, p. 118.
72 Idem, p. 119.
73 ASSIS, Psychiatrist and Other Stories, p. 56.
74 Idem, p. 57.
given the title – and not a proper name – “Senhor Lieutenant” (senhor alferes)\textsuperscript{75} by his family’s slaves. The protagonist recounts his anecdote, an episode from his twenty-fifth year, when he, still a poor man, returns home to the country to celebrate his new rank in the army. Like Brás Cubas, whose mood is regularly propped up by actions that confirm his status, the protagonist’s “exterior soul” is internalized by the privilege bestowed upon him by family and slaves. For example, as the result of their insistent designation of his title, “the lieutenant eliminated the man,” the narrator reports,\textsuperscript{76} “What happened was, the exterior soul, which before that time had been the sun, the air, the countryside, and young ladies’ eyes, changed in nature […] The only part of the citizen that was left me was the part that related to the exercise of military privilege; the other part had melted into the air and the past.”\textsuperscript{77} Indeed, it is not quite “privilege” that makes the man, the word is patente, which more precisely means patent, which may recall to you Brás failed “Brás Cubas Plaster,” a metaphor for the unfulfilled plot. And this is where Schwarz might begin to protest the story as if it were entirely an in-between passage: when left alone for days in the house, the protagonist’s external soul eviscerates, leaving him bare, like an “automaton”\textsuperscript{78} or “mechanical toy.”\textsuperscript{79} At the story’s denouement, the protagonist faces a mirror and encounters his reflection “vague, misty, diffuse, a shadow of a shadow.”\textsuperscript{80} During these days in which he languishes over his soft image he obsesses over time. He reports, “my solitude took on enormous proportions. Never had the days been so long, never had the sun burned into the earth with such tiresome obstinacy. The hours were sounded from century to century by the old clock in the parlor, and the tick-tock, ticktock of its pendulum flicked my inner soul like a constant fillip of eternity.”\textsuperscript{81} Like for Brás, time becomes the unhappy sign of an absent external world whose purpose is to confirm his status and privilege. And even though the unnamed protagonist returns to his proper form when he dresses himself in his uniform again, this prior unheimlich episode prevails into the present time of his narrating to the group of “philosophers.” Suddenly, his anecdote is over, and before the

\textsuperscript{75} Idem, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{76} Idem, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{78} Idem, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{79} Idem, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{80} Idem, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{81} Idem, p. 62.
guests know it, the fourth or fifth man had already left the room. His absence collides with the "real-time" narrative present. Was he ever there in the first place? Who is the author and who is the narrator?

Much like the alternative protagonist Brás Cubas, the unnamed narrator of "The Looking Glass" is a Woody-Allen type, a neurotic narrator, who leaves the reader puzzled and wondering whether indeed his work is "supinely philosophical, but a philosophy wanting in uniformity, now austere, now playful, a thing that neither edifies nor destroys, neither inflames nor chills, and that is at once more than pastime and less than preaching." As readers of these in-between chapters, we might to a certain extent be relieved of our duty of mending plots, for they are there, present as a cast feels on a limb, though one cannot readily assign them a meaning or a place within the plot. Whether this neurotic inactive Brás is plotting another story – have we not spoken of the possible polyphony of plots? – is a question that persists. Such an answer would no doubt mean beginning at the very beginning, before the "real" narration has begun, and following a story that hovers close by like a ghost. Even without having begun that reconstructive effort, the little pieces of this narration we have before us reveal another Brás. Not only voluble; he is neurotic, obsessed with time, and deeply concerned with the crafting of his autothanatography.

Works cited


82 Of the many features that Woody Allen’s film Deconstruction Harry and Machado’s “The Looking Glass” have in common, the most evident is that of the male character Mel’s out-of-focus mirrored reflection. In Allen’s film, Harry Block’s psychoanalyst interprets his patient’s fictional double Mel’s “soft” mirrored image as a reflection of Harry’s demand that the world “adjust to the distortion” and honor him (Deconstructing Harry, Dir. Woody Allen, 1997). In an interview with The Guardian, Allen listed Brás Cubas as one of his top five favorite books. ALLEN, Woody Allen’s Top Five Books.


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