O Ateneu: A Singular Masterpiece about the Nineteenth-Century Civilizational Crisis

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O Ateneu [The Athenaeum], the only novel written by Raul Pompeia (1863−95), draws together and integrates at the aesthetic level several elements of the powerful transformations that made the latter decades of the nineteenth century a period at once riddled with conflict and very rich in both Brazil and the wider world. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 may be taken as a political result of these transformative contradictions, just as the placidly prosperous European belle époque was an earlier moment during which only certain groups experienced and bore witness to those intense contradictions. One such group included writers, among them Raul Pompeia, who demonstrated both his political combativeness and his restlessness in the aesthetic field. As well as pursuing for his only novel a high-flown and eloquent prose at odds with the naturalistic vogue of the time, he wrote some prose poems after the manner introduced by Aloysius Bertrand, a leading light in the aestheticization of the cultural crises of the nineteenth century.

One way of broadly encapsulating the transformations that affected the European literary field over the years 1856−7, which saw the publication of Les fleurs du mal [The Flowers of Evil] and Madame Bovary, would be to highlight the exhaustion of the promise of both the Enlightenment and romanticism. In the Brazilian context, such general cultural frameworks had been at the basis of the formation of nationalism, positivism, republicanism, abolitionism and much else. Such were the various currents of thought that made up the fabric of polemics with which writers, politicians and intellectuals had to deal, especially from the 1870s, as
movements in favour of the Republic and the abolition of slavery overlapped. Moreover, they found themselves in a milieu where scientism and the technologization of daily life were bringing about large-scale aesthetic reactions (for example, art nouveau and impressionism), which emerged as ways of integrating the visual arts – architecture, interior design, clothing and so on – to take advantage of a new and crucial opportunity as capitalist industrial activity gathered momentum. In the case of impressionism, for instance, there is an implied response to the invention of photography.

It is in this larger context, Brazil being on the cultural periphery of capitalism, that various facets of O Ateneu should be understood. It is a novel that for many decades was seen critically as close to realism or even naturalism, which shows the centrality Brazilian critics accorded such limited concepts when evaluating diverse and unconventional literary works of the nineteenth century. In 1941, the leader of the Brazilian modernist movement, Mário de Andrade (1893−45), recognized the hyperbolic (‘work in which traits are voluntarily exaggerated’) and highly rhetorical style of the novel (‘there is in the book less of poetry … than of the ardent eloquence of sonorous verbalism, images and dazzling rarities’). For Andrade, these styles do work, despite their excesses: ‘But he got what he wanted: an artist’s writing, artificial, original, personal.’ He concludes the essay with a contestable critical position, holding up the novel as the high point of naturalism.

In the same year that O Ateneu appeared, the critic Araripe Júnior (1848−1911) became fascinated by what he called the transposition of the decadent movement in Europe to Brazil, and similarly of parnassianism (in poetry) into symbolism – all this, of course, in open aesthetic opposition to naturalism. In a show of enthusiasm to embrace the new theoretical and poetic waves emanating from Europe, Araripe sees in the novel an amalgam of René Ghil’s thesis (the fusing of music with language), the experiments of Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé and Francis Viellé-Griffin and the aesthetic of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt (écriture artiste), by way of the ‘morbid realism’ of Charles Baudelaire’s hero, Edgar Allan Poe. He also refers to German Wagnerism and English pre-raphaelitism. There is here a somewhat chaotic effort to characterize a singular prose. And yet this evidence of the poor assimilation of the novel’s impact (but with anti-naturalism as a common denominator) is in tune with assessments by later critics, from Eugênio Gomes (1897−1972) to José Paulo Paes (1926−98). The former, in 1958, saw in O Ateneu Parnassianism tempered by literary impressionism. The latter, in 1985, brought it closer to art nouveau in the visual and decorative arts.
In 1959, Antonio Candido (1918–2017) echoed the synaesthetic concerns voiced by Araripe. Commenting on an excerpt from the novel, he writes, ‘Sounds are described here by how they affect sensibility … The movement of the sentence is due to the impressionistic characterization of rhythm … The resulting sensorial density leads him to move from the description to the effect of sounds.’ The mixture of aestheticization and a subjectivism that imploded realism’s objectivist agenda is obvious. In 1965, Roberto Schwarz would highlight a ‘superseding of Realism by the narrator’s emotional presence’, that is to say, the new subjectivism alone would distance the novel from realism and explain the ‘hyperbolic and metaphorical tone. … Language loses, in part, its function of indicating the processes of the real; it is dramatized to the point of being a pure expression of the rise and fall of emotion.’

Two years later, Silviano Santiago would use this subjectivism represented by the split between Sérgio the character and Sérgio the narrator (Sérgio, already old, is narrating his childhood schooldays). Furthermore, he would call attention to two facts. Firstly, the possibility of subjectivism turning into allegorization of the political context (the Athenaeum as a microcosm of Brazil). Secondly, he would highlight the two lectures by Dr Claudio, the only teacher, or the only man (besides his father, who is absent) whom Sérgio respects ethically and intellectually. They are lectures on aesthetics and ethics, with an implied political dimension. They are pseudo-theoretical or pseudo-philosophical interventions in the course of the novel’s action; they highlight that the aestheticization of the environment and the self is the sole positivity in the face of the predatory and agonistic negativity of the action of men against men, inside and outside institutions. We can hear echoes of the pessimism of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The former was an author known to Raul Pompeia and his contemporaries; the latter would only become known a few years later, through readers attentive to international currents, such as Araripe Júnior.

In 1979, Sonia Brayner approached O Ateneu from two standpoints: the satirical aspect (a characteristic that pervaded the output of the first writers in Brazil, from Joaquim Manuel de Macedo and Manuel Antônio de Almeida to Machado de Assis) and that of the political allegory, reaffirming the label of ‘impressionist novel’. Heightened sensation, vision as the prime sense of a ‘sensationalistic vitalism’, satire, irony – the critic links all these elements to modern thinkers from Schopenhauer to Bergson and Freud. There is no reference to satire (from the Latin *satur* as a genre that originated in Roman antiquity, or to rhetoric as pre-modern knowledge, although it still dominated the curricula of Brazilian schools during the nineteenth century.
In 1988, in line with an approximation made between Raul Pompeia and Isidore Ducasse, the author of the anti-civilizational *Les chants de Maldoror [The Songs of Maldoror]*, Alfredo Bosi highlighted the traumatic aspect of Sérgio’s socialization at school, the institution that is the entry-way to literate civilization. He refers to an ‘internalization of the work of writing’ that would serve to ‘replace, in a tentative, experimental, but intense way, the certainties of the neoclassical poetics still scholastically alive throughout the nineteenth century’. In 1995, Roberto de Oliveira Brandão, pointing to this neoclassical and rhetorical backdrop, noted Pompeia’s ironizing of this traditional framework: ‘this genuine libel on rhetoric is situated at the very core of its innermost redoubt – the school’. The critic consigns this (self-)criticism based on his own presuppositions (rhetoric against rhetoric) to an anti-institutional and hypercritical view of discursive and action frameworks that seem moribund in the eyes of the boy as he suffers under the yoke of these social and institutional structures; literal destruction ensues when the school is consumed by fire at the end of the novel.

**A Negative Bildung: Against the Institution**

In *O Ateneu* it is Sérgio in adulthood who narrates the memories of Sérgio as a child. This temporal distance implies a doubling-up of memory to include emotional and resentful (or vengeful) remarks about the injustices suffered. The very first paragraph shows that this looking back tends to unveil the idealizations that ought to support the positivity of the cultural and emotional (subjective) grounding that civilization offers the boy. The father says that he will ‘enter the real world’, and that he ought to ‘be brave’ because it will be ‘a struggle’. In the present, the narrator says that this warning ‘stripped me, with one swift gesture, of the illusions I carried as a child nurtured, like an exotic plant, in the loving hothouse of domestic affection. … Let us remember, then, with hypocritical nostalgia, those happy school years.’ The indignation even reaches as far as the mother and the ingrained cultural way of pampering the child with affection without preparing it for (or at least warning it about) ‘disappointments that still offend us’.

From the beginning of the novel, the Athenaeum (the school) shows itself to be an unhealthy environment, where the principal, Aristarco, exhibits two facets: that of the self-eulogizing speaker lacking in character and ideas (symbolic of the speakers and politicians of a country pervaded by overblown and hollow oratory) and that of the businessman
whose love for the Athenaeum and for teaching appears to be a disguise for his taste for profit. 'The chair swiveled back ... and the paternal figure of the great educator dissolved into the simplified, dry, attentive slyness of the manager ... The speculator and the miser inhabited him in an intimate camaraderie, arm in arm.'\textsuperscript{16} Aristarco\textsuperscript{17} will come to symbolize the corruption and degradation of the very foundation of the institution’s (male) authority. The entire description of him holds an ambiguous tone of hostility towards his empty artificiality. ‘That expansiveness overcame us; he irradiated himself over students, spectators, over the magnetism of battle pennants. ... A consummate actor, he embodied, almost literally, the diaphanous, subtle, metaphysical role of spirit of the feast and soul of his institute.’\textsuperscript{18}

The other male authority figure, Sérgio’s father, absent for most of the novel, does at last resurface in a letter. At this point, Sérgio is languishing in the college infirmary, under the care of Aristarco’s wife, Ema; this, his last emotional relationship (and his only one with a female), is obviously Oedipal and vindictive in relation to Aristarco. From Paris, the father, also unwell, advises his son to ‘save the present’, in line with the Latin maxim \textit{carpe diem} (‘seize the day’ in order to enjoy the present moment), for ‘the future is corrupting and the past is a solvent’.\textsuperscript{19}

From the outset of the novel, among the classmates the climate is one of extreme violence and cruelty, both of which are often endorsed by the institution itself, indicating the political backdrop of this bitter satire (broad and objective, all-encompassing, Lukács would say). It is no coincidence that the boy who serves as the laughing stock of the class, wizened and sickly, is called Franco. ‘It’s Franco. ... On his knees like a penitent expiating the guilty of an entire race. The headmaster calls him a dog ... The father ... sent him here with a letter that describes him as incorrigible,’ says Rebelo, the teacher’s best disciple and Sérgio’s first trusted friend.\textsuperscript{20} As we have already seen, the character’s rectitude and stoicism in his studies are represented in a style that some critics have called impressionistic and others sensorialist, somewhat lost in the translation:

\begin{quote}
The curved lenses of his spectacles hid his eyes completely, concentrating his attention fully on the teacher’s desk. As if that were not enough, the zealous student covered his temples with his cupped hands to impede any stray glance escaping from behind his glasses.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Some lines further on, Rebelo himself becomes a scathing satirist when describing his classmates. As in the case of Aristarco, the
narrator describes a self that transmutes on the phenomenal level: ‘I then saw, sprouting from within the patriarchal mildness of Rebelo, a kind of unexpected Thersites, uttering insults and curses.’ In the students’ recreational bathing, Sérgio experiences both eroticism and cruelty. Eroticism when, seeing and playing with the boys from afar, Angela, the beautiful Spanish girl who works in the school – and will be the cause, as an object of disputed desire, of the gardener’s assassination of one of Aristarco’s servants – is shown ‘opening like a flower through her white teeth’. Cruelty when Sérgio is pulled by the ankles and almost drowns. In that ambiguous and dangerous moment, his saviour, whom he now considers to have been the tormentor himself, becomes his first great companion. Consequently, the description of three of these friendships mixes the precariousness typical of childish relations with insinuations of homosexuality.

The novel can be read as a Bildungsroman, where the Bildung is a rather traumatic and negative formative experience in contrast not only to the family ‘hothouse of domestic affection’ (a level of Freudian analysis limited to Oedipal relations) but also to pre-institutional precepts. The work is thus a radical critique of the oppressive powers of the institution (scholastic, but political too) which is based on an idea of justice linked to a pre-civilizing vitalism: the bodily free, and pre-moral, boy who must fit in as an obedient student in the face of authorities that do not convince him (or do not convince his body, not just in biological terms but as a physical, spiritual, emotional and phenomenal whole with a pre-logical and even a pre-linguistic existence). The language and codes of the school as the first human institution (after that of the family) are irreconcilable with the child’s vitality and its emotional, pre-rational and pre-linguistic being.

Throughout the novel, a variety of figures represent the openly decadent public culture (institutional and political in that microcosm that allegorically represents other human institutions). As we have seen, there is a repeated focus on the deterioration in the public rhetorical language of several characters, not just that of Aristarco. This refers to the immediate draining away of the legitimacy of any position of power in the eyes of the protagonist. According to the subjectivist doubling of Sérgio as narrator versus Sérgio as character, if in adulthood he recognizes and defends as righteous that pre-institutional vitality of the boy who suffered the trauma of entry into civilization, in his boyhood Sérgio only felt oppressed, sick and scared at the degree of hypocritical artificiality that his own culture presented to him at school.
The gap is always painfully clear between, on the one hand, violence, eroticism and the cruelty of the clash of young bodies full of vitality (a line of thought linked to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) and, on the other, the postures and speeches the establishment lays down to try to conceal and, ultimately, to destroy that original vitality, which may be cruel but at least it is intense and does not suffer from the degradations that civilization wants to impose.

Two comic examples may illustrate this point. One day, model student Nearco da Fonseca appears in the school to positively offset – from the institution’s standpoint – the murderous crime of passion that has just occurred in the schoolyard. He is the son of a famous politician from the Northeast, a less economically developed region of Brazil renowned for its nepotism and political oligarchism known as coronelismo. For a start, he is a champion of acrobatic gymnastics, a regimented and institutionalized way of dealing with (and neutralizing) original bodily vitality. The end of his presentation is striking: ‘Nearco stretched as much as he could his lamentable lack of musculature and gave us … a siren! The siren is the most elementary, the most contemptible, the most stupidly ostentatious of all the apparatuses. … we looked at each other stupefied, stupefied, in the dispirited posture of those who had been conned.’

The hollow spectacle of power always results in a slump in morale for the onlookers. Nearco is also a champion orator. Aristarco, with an eye to the money and prestige of the boy’s father, makes a point of presenting the newcomer to the other students as an example, and one who is not necessarily inspiring and is certainly oppressive to the students. Rhetoric, moreover, is the ornamental gymnastics of discourse: ‘In the first session after the triumph of the trapeze, I had occasion to appreciate him in verbal gymnastics.’ Nearco is soon made a member of the Grêmio Literário Amor ao Saber [Love-of-Learning Literary Guild], dedicated to rhetorical activities apparently originating from a single source:

Elocution was represented in the Guild by a number of categories. Cicero tragedy – cavernous voice, gesturing with dagger, which seems to cry from within the tomb … Ciceronian modesty … Ciceronian circumspection … Ciceronian storm (verborrheic … fluency precipitating him down the stairs … a sweaty, breathless, disheveled, deafening eloquence punctuated by jabs as in a boxing bout); Ciceronian candor … Ciceronian priesthood, – priestly, solemn … lifting his forehead like a miter, requesting a cathedral for each statement, on his feet two rostrums instead of shoes … Nearco introduced another type, not then represented: Ciceronian penetration.
It can be seen that the singular rhetoric integrated into Pompeia’s poetics, full of archaisms, refined tropes and erudite references, taken from the very oratory he wants to criticize, aims, even when this is not immediately obvious, to vituperate against the vices of the community, whether serious or comical; this makes the very laborious and seemingly (sometimes comically) hermetic verbal constructions pleasing to the reader. The attack on the degradation of institutional verbalism comes to a head in the final homage to Aristarco. During the encomium, Aristarco will be transformed. It is worth quoting at some length:

The orator patiently gathered all the glorifying epithets, from the rare metal of sincerity to the vibrating, ductile copper of adulation. He fused the mixture in a fire of warm emphases … Aristarco forgot himself in the delight of a metamorphosis. Venancio was his sculptor. The statue was no longer an aspiration: it was forged right there. He felt his flesh turning into metal as Venancio spoke. … an iron coldness was freezing his limbs; on his skin, his hands, his face, he saw or guessed unknown glimmers of polish. The folds in his clothing were as if welded into a fixed mold. Inside, he felt strangely massive, as if he had drunk plaster.31

In the end, Aristarco will be jealous of the bust that the students reveal as a surprise tribute, since all the homage was directed at the bronze and not at him or his ego. The comic situation raises the (serious) issue of the splitting of the self, which is fundamental to the novel: the division between Sérgio as adult narrator and Sérgio as child character is central to the work. This is the subjectification of narrative that will mark fictional prose in the twentieth century. Like Machado de Assis, born 24 years earlier, and several writers in Brazil from the 1860s onwards, Raul Pompeia had read of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of will, one of the foundations of the novel’s psychologism. Each writer mixed the influence of Schopenhauer with the new vision of the individual subjective domain. Let us take a particular passage that sheds light on this. After showing how, as a boy, he assumed a haughty air at school, the narrator reflects,

And that was the character I settled on, after all those oscillations. For it seems that it is only tentatively that we arrive at the outlines of character, like a sculptor molding the flesh of his own face in accordance with some ideal; or perhaps it is because, before moral individuality can manifest itself, it will try on different costumes, available
in the psychological wardrobe of possible manifestations. ... The middle [environment], let us say, is a reversed hedgehog: instead of the centrifugal explosion of darts, we have a convergence of spines toward the center. Caught in the stinging mass of spines, it is necessary either to find a duct toward the exit or accept the unequal contest between the skin and the quills. Generally, one chooses the duct. The maxims, the headmaster, the inspections by the beadles, for instance, were three such quills ... Youth transgressed them as best it could, under the circumstances.

The moment of synthesis indicates that the choice, or conflicted decision-making of hyper-individualized will, in the context, can be very dangerous, because nothing guarantees its victory. Nor is advancing by the ‘duct’ (meato, an archaic Portuguese word signifying a narrow channel) guaranteed, a reference to the urgency of the present and to the potential abyss of misfortune in upbringing that Freud (the famous disciple of Schopenhauer) would call ‘structural masochism’ some years later: the morbid taste for the ‘prickles’ that spike the skin. This danger hangs over young Sérgio from the beginning; his classmate Franco, ‘always doing penance’ and the target of every punishment, is his first living example. The same happens in the field of sexuality, where nothing guarantees the so-called normal course of events amid a supposed threat of deviation from the normality of the time, namely homosexuality, in an entrenched society.

**Vitalism and Sexuality: Against the Degradation of Bodily Energy**

High-flown language and hyper-rhetoric establish an expressive contrast to the content they must represent – the low, violent world of bodily strife and seduction, disputes, imminent ridicule, or vexation, the unstable sexuality of an environment that Freud would soon expose by putting forward the intrinsically scandalous theme of ‘Infantile Sexuality’, a famous chapter in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Note the fundamental paradox: hyper-rhetoric is serving purposes that are not just political and ideological by highlighting the emptiness of the master orators, but also philosophical and psychoanalytic amid the thinking (yet to be called ‘drive theory’) on will (Schopenhauer), will to power (Nietzsche) or drive (Freud), namely the vital and spiritual will anchored in the body.
On the other hand, the hyperbolic lists (very common, from the description of the classmates through to the parading of Aristarco’s manias) often serve to show the prodigality and exuberance of that (agonistic) life of the lower body (Bakhtin). In *O Ateneu*, a Rabelaisian cornucopia may appear at a picnic lunch in the open air or at a party full of school pomp – of course, it will always be threatened by artificialism and institutional interests. In listing the apparently harmless stamps from various countries, which stoked price disputes among students in a veritable black market, the narrator concludes, ‘all the colors … with which states [countries] set the rate for sentimental or mercantile correspondence, indiscriminately exploiting a minimal discount on gigantic speculations and the blood tax on the homesickness of the émigrés of hunger’. We see that the prodigality of the children’s activity here and in other cases is an image that grows to represent not only wide-ranging economic and geopolitical activities but also the suffering behind those activities, which the institutions treat as having no human or emotional dimension.

In a few episodes, such as the picnic outing, the cornucopia of bodily vitality opens up small gaps in the control that the institution must maintain. Faced with the ebullient joy of the students, Aristarco ‘roughly’ asks ‘if we wanted life to now become a perpetual picnic of degeneracy. Tacitly we deny it and normal tranquility has fallen into place’. Pages later, faced with a revolt about the endless repetition of the same desserts at meals, Aristarco says, ‘But why, my friends, did you not convene a delegation? A delegation is a mutiny in its orderly and paper-based form!’ The headmaster is relieved to learn that the insurrection had a concrete motive that could be refuted by his discursive ability and authoritative performance: dislike of banana compote. Could this relief denote fear of a widespread insurrection that could marshal all the motives of oppression and revolt and would be much more difficult to neutralize? Raul Pompeia was connected with a movement branded as radical and Jacobin in the politics of the day, along with abolitionists like his friend Luiz Gama (1830–82), an ex-slave who succeeded in becoming a lawyer and achieved the release of more than 500 black men and women from slavery. Among other things, in writing *O Ateneu*, Pompeia created one of the most important novels of nineteenth-century Brazil: a political and psychological novel where the school is portrayed as an allegory of human institutions. Hence this work is a powerful critique of a civilization that girds the body of the child with language and sacrosanct rules of conduct in order to control and direct its original vitality.
Notes

1. Ateneu is the name of the school in the novel. It is a literary representation of Abílio, a school founded in 1871 in Rio de Janeiro, whose students were the children of the city's elite. At that time, Rio was the capital of Brazil. Brasília, constructed on the central plateau, became the capital in 1960. Pompeia 1995; Pompeia 2015.
2. Aloysius Bertrand (1807–41) is known as the poet who introduced prose poetry into French literature.
6. Gomes 1958, 224–47; Paes 2008, 75–95. The concept of literary impressionism is quite vague, as is art nouveau in literature. In my view, these concepts demonstrate the difficulty of classifying the multiple literary styles of a transition period, after the triumph and crisis of romanticism and realism and before the true modernist experiments: the transgressions of the avant-garde mix with a new subjectivism to explore the radicalization of the narrative focus of the solipsist self.
7. Antonio Candido 1992, 149.
17. Referring to Aristarchus of Samos, the astronomer and mathematician who first proposed that the Earth revolves around the Sun. Throughout the novel, characters’ names are never gratuitous.
24. Pompeia 2015, 3. As a genre that focuses on the emotional and intellectual (and thus scholarly) formation of the protagonist, the *Bildungsroman* in eighteenth-century Germany flaunted the same type of figuration of the tensions between the desires of the young protagonist and the demands of the institution as representative of the adult world. Since Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship (Goethe 2007), the clash between the young individual and the collective, formalized rules of established institutions has been a common narrative path to structure the inner formation of the young character. Marcus V. Mazzari (2010, 159–96) includes *The Athenaeum* in his study of the *Bildungsroman* and novels that have the school as a central setting in the German tradition. He compares Raul Pompeia’s novel with *The Confusions of Young Törless* by Robert Musil (2001).
25. In ancient Greece, Nearco of Elea was the tyrant who tortured the philosopher Zeno, accused of participating in a conspiracy against him, and had him executed.
26. Coronelismo [colonelism] is a socio-political practice that flourished in rural areas and small towns in the interior of Brazil during the First Republic (1889–1930) and operates as a form of top-down local autocracy, in which the elite, embodied by the rural landowner, despotically controls the means of production, concentrating and wielding local economic, social and political power.
27. Bergson 1998; Deleuze and Guattari 2009. Although this bodily vitality can be approximated to what I call here the ‘vitalism’ of Henri Bergson’s concept, I prefer to treat it as a way of designating pre-institutionalized body intensity, i.e., before it gets captured in the controlling and sense-making networks of public or private institutions. It can be seen as following on from...
the conceptual framework Deleuze and Guattari proposed in *Anti-Œdipus* (2009). Another path of interpretation of this vitalism, linked with the cultural moment in which the novel was published, is proposed in the very interesting essay ‘Darwinism, Max Nordau, Raul Pompeia and the Struggle for Existence’ by César Braga-Pinto (2015).

29. Pompeia 2015, 98.
32. Pompeia 2015, 82–3. The word meio has been translated as ‘middle’. The meaning here is ‘environment’.
35. Theophrastus 1998. There is an article that links the descriptions of the students in *O Ateneu* to the tradition of Theophrastus, author of *The Characters* (Teixeira 2010, 72–3).
38. Pompeia 2015, 152.

Bibliography


