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The Machine in the Machine: Deconstructions of Social and Narrative Structures in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and Machado de Assis's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*

A máquina na máquina: desconstruções de estruturas sociais e narrativas em "Bartleby, o escrivão", de Herman Melville, e em Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas, *de Machado de Assis*

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ABSTRACT
This paper reflects on the mechanicality of machines produced by advances in industrialization in the 19th century and its turn on human subjectivity, considering the Cartesian relationship between body and mind translated by Gilbert Ryle as "the Ghost in the Machine" (1966). Concerning the lieu of the narrator in literature, the premise of this paper is to propose a reading of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and Machado de Assis's novel *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881) as a precursor to the deconstruction brought by 20th-century scholars such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. The aim is to show how the narrativity proposed by Machado and Melville is a way of dismantling the very narrative as well as producing social criticism.

KEYWORDS: Machado de Assis; Herman Melville; narrativity.

RESUMO
Este artigo busca refletir sobre a mecanicidade das máquinas produzidas pelos avanços da industrialização no século XIX e de que modo isso provocou uma mudança na subjetividade humana, considerando a relação cartesiana entre corpo e mente traduzida por Gilbert Ryle como "o Fantasma na Máquina" (1966). No que se refere ao lugar do narrador na literatura, propõe-se uma leitura de "Bartleby, o escrivão" (1853), de Herman Melville, e do romance *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881), de Machado de Assis, como precursores da desconstrução trazida por teóricos do século XX, como Michel Foucault e Roland Barthes. O objetivo é mostrar como a narratividade proposta por Machado e Melville é uma forma de desmantelar a própria narrativa, bem como de produzir crítica social.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Machado de Assis; Herman Melville; narratividade.

One of the 19th-century's main obsessions was to know what happens inside one's mind. Throughout the realms of medicine, philosophy, and literature, human behavior began to be scrutinized in an unprecedented way, culminating in the advent of psychology as a discipline and the comprehension of its subject and mechanisms in the general popular repertoire—and, at the very end of the century, in the self-scrutinization, through one's own speech, of psychoanalysis. Theoreticians such as Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), situates the consolidation of psychology and the human sciences in general as a response to—and a product of—industrialization, by affirming that "the new norms imposed by industrial society upon individuals were certainly necessary before psychology, slowly, in the course of the nineteenth century, could constitute itself as a science" (2001, p. 376); that is, the consolidation of psychology as a science is intrinsically related to the implications that the period which we slippery call modernity brought to society not only in a collective level but a personal one.

Almost two decades before Foucault, the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle had also reflected on human subjectivity and industrialization when comparing the organicity of nature to the mechanicality of machines in a virtually negative way, by defining as "the Ghost in the Machine" (1966, p. 22) the Cartesian division between the mind and the body in *The Concept of Mind* (1949). According to Ryle, "the human body, as any other parcel of nature, is a field of causes and effects, so the mind must be another field of causes and effects, though not (Heaven be praised) mechanical causes and effects" (Ryle, 1966, p. 18). Hence, Descartes's anxiety around the binomial mind (or soul) and body could be translated in modernity as one caused by the relationship between the man and the machine, but with a fundamental difference: in modern times, the anxiogenic elements are technological systems created by humanity itself.

This paper proposes a reading of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and Machado de Assis's novel *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881) as both narratives are embedded, in their own way, with this modern anxiety, questioning perhaps the new intellectual and aesthetical paradigms that were being consolidated on studies of the human mind. One of the fundamental aspects of these paradigms is the scientific search for "truth," which is not an external and nearly divine feature, but rather, as Foucault states:

> … a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980, p. 131).

What seems to be at stake, in both Melville's and Machado's works, is the dismantling of these regimens of truth through their own means; that is, producing discourses, or narratives, that put in motion the solid structures of power where the Cartesian subject founds its apex. And through this mechanism, consolidating the success of its functioning, the narratives dismantle *themselves*, as

an auto-destructive—and auto-discursive— machine.[1] If from the early 20th century onward (but especially in the 1960s aesthetic and theoretical productions) this movement, more or less radically, started to be widely used by the *avant-garde* and by theoreticians such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, this paper argues that "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and *The Posthumous Memoirs* inaugurated it many decades before—using it in a more effective and even rupturing way.

One could argue that the stories of Brás Cubas and Bartleby are opposites. On one hand, we have a complete narration of a man's own life—and death—, "crafted here from the otherworld" (Assis, 2020, p. 3); on the other, a lawyer's struggle to tell the story of his inaccessible and strange clerk, of whom it would be impossible to write "a full and satisfactory biography" (Melville, 2016, p. 17). Already at this point, however, a similar movement is presented. There is a "real-life" author (Machado or Melville) writing about a fictional author (deceased Brás or Bartleby's narrator) who writes about a fictional character (live Brás or Bartleby). If at first sight Brás's—a Brazilian portrait of the rational Western (*i.e.*, white, male, and bourgeois) subject—posthumous account of his life could be taken as the ultimate autobiography, the very first sentence of the prologue, addressed "To the Reader" (Assis, 2020, p. 3), hints how fictionally inflicted his self-narrative is through the mention of Stendhal—one of the main exponents of psychological approaches and Realism in literature, of whom one of the most known phrases is "the truth, the harsh truth".[2] The narrator's voice starts a mechanism that keeps working throughout the novel in which Brás's narrative construction *deconstructs* the idea of the Barthian 19th-century Author-God (1977), as well as the possibility of revealing a hidden truth in mankind through psychological scrutinization.

The narrative also destabilizes Brás's self-construction as a hegemonic subject, dismantling, through his own words, the legitimacy of his privileged status in the Brazilian 19th-century society. The aristocratic legacy of the Cubas, for instance, is apocryphal—their actual ancestor was a cooper, Brás explains—, whereas Brás's Law degree from the University of Coimbra was achieved "in quite a mediocre fashion" (2020, p. 60): "I was a wastrel, a superficial, troublemaking, and petulant student, given to adventures, following romanticism in practice and liberalism in theory … I had acquired knowledge that was, in truth, far from rooted in my brain." (2020, p. 60) Here, besides Brás's, the legitimacy of traditional institutions of knowledge and power—the detainers and producers of the Foucaultian "régime of truth" (1980, p. 131)—is put into question as well.

His accounted relations with women, non-white people, and natural elements—and, before Freud, with the narrative itself, as that which escapes from one's conscious control—, instead of reaffirming his rational, and therefore hegemonic, character, also function as a destabilization of the very notion of rationality. An example is Brás's typically Western relation with death, where he recognizes

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1 This movement is similar to the concepts of "Auto-Destructive Art" and "Auto-Creative Art," elaborated by the German artist Gustav Metzger from 1959 onward. Metzger defended a form of art in which the artworks would create and destroy themselves through technical and scientific means—both physically and metaphorically, for the destruction would be inherent to the artistic character of the piece or performance. As expounded in the three manifestos around the concepts (from 1959, 1960, and 1961), it is a critique of mass-destruction technologies such as nuclear weapons and the advances of the industrial society: "Auto-Destructive Art is an attack on capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation" (Metzger, 1961). It is also directly related to the Nazi "machine-like" aesthetics that Metzger witnessed during his childhood in Nuremberg (Jeffries, 2012).

2 The sentence is itself a simulacrum of truth, being used as the epigraph of the first volume of the Bildungsroman *The Red and the Black* (1830), apocryphally attributed to Danton.

his subordination while being terrified of it; as seen in his deathbed delirium, when he encounters his unconscious version of Nature, or Pandora, who calls him a "worm," and in front of whom he felt "the feeblest and most decrepit of all beings" (Assis, 2020, p. 21). The following chapter, "Reason and Folly," clearly shows this conflicting relation with death; Folly's will is to solve "the mysteries of life and death" (2020, p. 26) while Reason laughs and shoos her away. However, in the narrative, it is Virgília—Brás's lover—who plays the part of the rational one: "Die! All of us must die; that's what comes of being alive" (2020, p. 17).

Another example can be found in Brás's dedication "to the worm that first gnawed at the cold flesh of my cadaver" (2020, xli). The rational subject, himself nothing but Nature's worm, now becomes its nourishment; yet his voice can still be heard. The machine is off, dissolved into nature and nothingness—"Life floundered in my chest like the surging of an ocean swell, my consciousness melted away, I was drifting down into physical and moral immobility, my body becoming a plant, a stone, loam, nothing at all" (2020, p. 7)—, but the ghost—literally—is still there, giving us an account of himself. However, if this sounds like an ultimate victory over Nature, it can also be read in the light of Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), following their dialogue with Foucault:

> "Must I suppose that, in my discourse, it is not my own survival that is at stake? And that, *by speaking, I do not exorcise my death, but establish it*; or rather, that I suppress all interiority, and yield my utterance to an outside which is so indifferent to my life, so neutral, that it knows no difference between my life and my death?" These rhetorical questions mark a sense of inevitability in the face of the fact that *one's own life cannot be redeemed or extended through discourse* (even though they tacitly praise discourse as that which finally has a life that is more robust than our own). For those who believe that language houses an intimate subjectivity whose death is overcome there as well, Foucault writes, ''they cannot bear—and one can understand them a little—to be told: discourse is not life; its time is not yours." So the account of myself that I give in discourse never fully expresses or carries this living self. *My words are taken away as I give them, interrupted by the time of a discourse that is not the same as the time of my life.* (Butler, 2005, p. 35-36, emphasis added).

Brás's narrative would not be his redemptive survival to Nature, but rather that which consolidates his death. In fact, at the very end, he seems to recognize that, underscoring the pointlessness of his life, and, perhaps, of his narrative:

> What with one thing and another, anyone might imagine that there was neither want nor surplus, and consequently that I came out even with life. And he would imagine wrongly; because, upon arriving at the other side of the veil, I found myself with a small sum, which is the final negative in this chapter of negatives: I had no children; I did not bequeath to any creature the legacy of our misery. (Assis, 2020, p. 291).

By bequeathing to us, readers, "the legacy of our misery," Brás's ghost disappears, and what is left are the gears of the machine: "the final negative in this chapter of negatives." *The Posthumous Memoirs* shows that there is no ghost in the machine, no ultimate truth that overcomes the body: there are narratives, and they are themselves mechanisms of producing oneself or an Other—which also applies to social constructions of hegemony and alterity. Consequently, Brás, being a fictional author, is both the producer and the product of this mechanism, a gear in Machado's narrating machine and the inventor of his own—and *vice versa*, for the narrative also produces those who narrate it. But, most

importantly, these mechanisms *dismantle* themselves as they are constructed, expounding the means that make them function, which are as artificial as their products.[3]

An analogous movement can be found in Melville's short story, a *mise en abîme* of auto-destructive/auto-discursive narrating machines in which, if Bartleby would be the final product, he is also the narrator's producer—and dismantler, exactly through his machine-like character. Right at the beginning, the narrator explains the functioning and the limitations of his mechanism:

> But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener the strangest I ever saw or heard of. *While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done.* I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small. *What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him*, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel. (Melville, 2016, p. 17, emphasis added).

Lacking raw material for an Author-God-like account of Bartleby's life, the reader is left with the narrator's restricted narrative of the scrivener. However, if the acknowledged limitation discards any promises of being the inner truth about the scrivener in a psychological or biographical sense, the narrative is situated as truly what the narrator's "own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby"—which is in itself a dismantling function of the machine, for it shows the artificiality of supposedly true narratives, inscribing them in the realm of fiction. By making explicit the impossibility of narrating or accessing the truth of oneself or an Other, the narrative puts *itself* in motion, destructuring its mechanism through its own means. And by putting into question the very existence of a "truth," because of this impossibility, it justifies its existence; the narrative is not a means to expound the truth—or the ghost—, but rather it is the creator of infinite ghosts, themselves mechanisms able to produce other ghosts: machinery ghosts in the machine, machines in the machine, and the other way around.

Bartleby himself describes this movement. At first sight, he is the perfect employee, copying "silently, palely, mechanically" (2016, p. 24), as if he were starving, in a faster and better way than the other eccentrical—or simply human—copyists. Bartleby seems to feel the necessity to feed on the uselessness of language, on the dead words that fill documents of the law, and, shortly after, he begins to regurgitate the words, giving them another use, one that destabilizes his employer. The scrivener starts his deconstructing mechanism by "preferring" not to compare his copies, with a "wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me [the lawyer], but unmanned me, as it were" (2016, p. 33). By saying "I prefer not to," Bartleby confronts one way of life and affirms another, breaking precisely "with common usage and common sense" (2016, p. 27), to use the lawyer's own words in his request for Bartleby to comply with the orders given. The narrator ends up accepting this refusal—already a dismantling one, for its tangentiality, since he does not say that he *won't* do what is asked, he only *prefers not to*—, thinking of Bartleby as a "valuable acquisition" (2016, p. 31) after all. Nonetheless, the dismantling mechanism continues, culminating in the narrator's discovery that Bartleby was living in the office and the subsequent substitution of Bartleby's incessant production by a complete

3 A biological referent of this movement can perhaps be found in the chemical compound of the carbonic acid (H_2CO_3), formed by the encounter between the H_2O of the water and the CO^2 present in the air while at the same time decomposed by this very encounter, as in the formula $CO_2 + H_2O$ H_2CO_3. It exists as long as it is destroyed, infinitely.

lack of action other than him staring at the "dead brick wall" (2016, p. 34) outside his office window, preferring not to leave when the narrator tries to make him do it. The walls that rise between them become continually bigger; first a screen, then the office's locked door, until they finally become the four walls of a prison where Bartleby's life ends.

With minimal or errant movements that are almost not actions, as well as with a speech that barely communicates, Bartleby seeks to distance himself from a subservient discourse. His words and gestures are detached from their usefulness in a capitalist order, causing discomfort due to their apparent passivity and inertia. We argue that Bartleby's refusal right in the middle of Wall Street can be read as a political movement or a revolutionary act that leads ultimately to his death. In the light of Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), the scrivener puts himself in a position of a dead end with his "… radical passivity [which] may signal another kind of refusal: the refusal quite simply to be" (p. 139-140). Still, something remains of this impossibility to be, allowing literature to bring this resistance into writing, using the lack of meaning and repetition, already present before Bartleby's arrival, to subvert the system as an effect of reading, which feeds the machine.

Bartleby becomes a ghostly presence from whom the narrator—comforting himself with the thought that it was God's mission for him to carry this burden—cannot escape. The scrivener's presence causes insecurity in a man who values what is safe. For the lawyer, busy with work, social events, and going to church, living peacefully means not having a critical reflection of his position. It is disturbing and destabilizing for him not to know clearly what Bartleby wants. However, there is no self-reflection of what he—the lawyer—wants. Thus, the narrator places the responsibility on the new employee for the lack of structure and chaos that gradually takes over the office. Triggered by the realization that his reputation was endangered by the scrivener's constant occurrence at the office, the narrator's dismantling process sets off again, now with the menacing thought that Bartleby would finally overcome himself:

> And as the idea came upon me of his possibly turning out a long-lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and denying my authority; and perplexing my visitors; and scandalizing my professional reputation; and casting a general gloom over the premises; *keeping soul and body together* to the last upon his savings (for doubtless he spent but half a dime a day), *and in the end perhaps outlive me, and claim possession of my office by right of his perpetual occupancy.* (Melville, 2016, p. 45, emphasis added).

By stating the indivisibility of Bartleby's "soul and body," the narrator hints at what has been at stake since the beginning: that the ghost in the machine, or the ghostly idle presence in the capitalist office, is nothing but another machine—as himself, as the narrator, also is. The anxiety is exactly that of the sci-fi narratives: that the product would overthrow the producer—here translated as the employee and the employer, and in *The Posthumous Memoirs* as the subaltern and the hegemonic subject; in both cases, as the narrated and the narrator. But mostly, the narrator's anxiety comes from *not knowing* Bartleby's reasons, as if he were the one staring at the dead brick wall, unable to see through it. The lawyer seeks reason when Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" is precisely intended to empty reason. Melville's short story plays with this irony as the scrivener mocks the lawyer by repeating the same saying and arguing that the reason is obvious, or by declaring that he "would prefer not to be a little reasonable" (2016, p. 37). The clerk's repetitions are so maddening because they ridicule the position of being the boss and the cleverness on which the lawyer prides himself. It is through humor that Bartleby survives in literature and maddens the norm of language and narrative.

At the end of the story, the one fact that could offer the least explanation for the scrivener's passively active behavior, his previous position at the Dead Letter Office, comes as a rumor whose legitimacy the narrator questions—again underscoring his own narrative as the truth.

> There would seem little need for proceeding further in this history.
>
> Imagination will readily supply the meagre recital of poor Bartleby's interment. *But ere parting with the reader,* let me say, that if this little narrative has sufficiently interested him, to awaken curiosity as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to *the present narrator's making his acquaintance,* I can only reply, that in such curiosity I fully share, but am wholly unable to gratify it. Yet here I hardly know whether I should divulge one little item of rumor, which came to my ear a few months after the scrivener's decease. Upon what basis it rested, I could never ascertain; and hence, how true it is I cannot now tell. (2016, p. 53, emphasis added).

While recognizing once more the impossibility of giving an account of Bartleby, and right after his death—which comes with an interruption in the text, followed by the quoted passage—, the voice of the text suddenly changes; the narrator himself acquires an alterity, and the narrative reveals its gears as it is addressed, namely for the first time, to the abstract reader, the same to whom Machado de Assis's Brás addresses in his prologue. Unlike Bartleby's burning dead letters, however, these narratives survive, exactly because of the indeterminacy of the recipient. The machine keeps working, producing yet another auto-destructive/auto-discursive one: his majesty, the reader.

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