

## "The One With the Beard Is God, the Other is the Devil"

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I

José Saramago published *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* in 1991, when he approached his seventieth year. As Saramago's fierce critical admirer, I am reluctant to choose it over all his other novels, but it is an awesome work, imaginatively superior to any other life of Jesus, including the four canonical Gospels. It loses some aspects of irony in Giovanni Pontiero's fine translation, but more than enough survives to overcome the aware reader.

Saramago's audacity is triumphant in his *Gospel* (the short title that I will employ). God, in Saramago's *Gospel*, has some affinities to the J Writer's Yahweh and some to Blake's Nobodaddy, but it is important to see that Saramago resists giving us the Gnostics' Ialdabaoth. Kierkegaard in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* ironically observed that "to give thinking supremacy over everything else is gnosticism" (341). Yet Saramago's God scandalizes us in ways that transcend the intellect, since a God who is both truth and time is the worst possible bad news. Saramago's devil, delightfully named Pastor, is mildness itself compared to Saramago's God, who refuses Pastor's attempt to be reconciled, and who manifests neither love nor compassion for Jesus or for any other human being.

That must make the book seem sublimely outrageous, yet it is not, and I think that only a bigot or a fool would judge Saramago's *Gospel* to be blasphemous. Saramago's God can be both wily and bland, and he has a capacity for savage humor. No one is going to love this god, but then he doesn't ask or expect love. Worship and obedience are his requirements, and sacred violence is his endless resource. Baruch Spinoza insisted that it was necessary for us to love God without ever expecting that God would love us

in return. No one could love Saramago's God, unless the lover were so deep in sado-masochism as to be helpless before its drive.

God tells us in the *Gospel* that he is dissatisfied with the small constituency provided him by his chosen people, the Jews:

For the last four thousand and four years I have been the God of the Jews, a quarrelsome and difficult race by nature, but on the whole I have got along fairly well with them, they now take Me seriously and are likely to go on doing so for the foreseeable future. So, You are satisfied, said Jesus. I am and I am not, or rather, I would be were it not for this restless heart of Mine, which is forever telling Me, Well now, a fine destiny you've arranged after four thousand years of trial and tribulation that no amount of sacrifice on altars will ever be able to repay, for You continue to be the god of a tiny population that occupies a minute part of this world You created with everything that's on it, so tell Me, My son, if I should be satisfied with this depressing situation. Never having created a world, I'm in no position to judge, replied Jesus. True, you cannot judge, but you could help. Help in what way. To spread My word, to help Me become the god of more people. I don't understand. If you play your part, that is to say, the part I have reserved for you in My plan, I have every confidence that within the next six centuries or so, despite all the struggles and obstacles ahead of us, I will pass from being God of the Jews to being God of those whom we will call Catholics, from the Greek. And what is this part You have reserved for me in Your plan. That of martyr, My son, that of victim, which is the best role of all for propagating any faith and stirring up fervor. God made the words martyr and victim seem like milk and honey on his tongue, but Jesus felt a sudden chill in his limbs, as if the mist had closed over him, while the devil regarded him with an enigmatic expression which combined scientific curiosity with grudging compassion. (311-12)

God is restless and does not wish to be depressed; those are his motives for victimizing Jesus, and subsequently for torturing to death the millions who will die as sacrifices to Jesus, whether they affirm him or deny him. That God is the greatest of comedians we learn from his chant of the martyrs: "a litany, in alphabetical order so as not to hurt any feelings about precedence and importance" (321). The litany is quite marvelous, from Adalbert of Prague, executed with a seven-pronged pikestaff, on to "Wolgefotis or Livrade or Eutropia the bearded virgin crucified" (325). Four long pages in length, the catalogue of sacred violence has such delights as Blandina of

Lyons, gored by a savage bull, and the unfortunate Januaris of Naples, first thrown to wild beasts, then into a furnace, and finally decapitated. The gusto of Saramago's God recalls Edward Gibbon's in Chapter XVI of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, except that Gibbon, maintaining decorum, avoids detailing the many varieties of martyrdom by torture. But Gibbon again anticipates Saramago by observing that Christians "have inflicted far greater severities on each other than they had experienced from the zeal of infidels" (452-53). Saramago's God, his voice a little tired, speaks of the Inquisition as a necessary evil, and defends the burning of thousands because the cause of Jesus demands it. One blinks at the dustjacket of the American edition of Saramago's *Gospel*, where we are assured that defying the authority of God the Father "is still not denial of Him."

Though necessarily a secondary character in comparison to Saramago's Jesus, God demands scrutiny beyond his menacingly comic aspects. Primarily, the *Gospel's* God is time, and not truth, the other attribute he asserts. Saramago, a Marxist (an eccentric one), and not a Christian, subverts St. Augustine on the theodicy of time. If time is God, then God can be forgiven nothing, and who would desire to forgive him anyway? But then, the *Gospel's* God is not the least interested in forgiveness: he forgives no one, not even Jesus, and he declines to forgive Pastor, when the devil makes an honest offer of obedience. Power is God's only interest, and the sacrifice of Jesus employs the prospect of forgiveness of our sins only as an advertisement. God makes clear that all of us are guilty, and that he prefers to keep it that way. Jesus is no atonement: his crucifixion is merely a device by which God ceases to be Jewish, and becomes Catholic, a *converso* rather than a *marrano*. That is superb irony, and Saramago makes it high art, though to thus reduce it critically is to invite a Catholic onslaught. Of all fictive representations of God since the Yahwist's, I vote for Saramago's: he is at once the funniest and the most chilling, in the mode of the Shakespearean hero-villains: Richard III, Iago, Edmund in *King Lear*.

## II

Pastor, or the devil, has his own charm, as befits a very original representation of Satan. A giant of a man, with a huge head, Pastor allows Jesus to become his assistant shepherd for a large flock of sheep and goats. In response to Jesus' pious exclamation—"The Lord alone is God"—the non-Jewish Pastor replies with grand pungency:

Certainly if God exists, He must be only one, but it would be better if He were two, then there would be a god for the wolf and one for the sheep, a god for the victim and one for the assassin, a god for the condemned man and one for the executioner. (192-93)

This sensible dualism is not exactly Satanic, and Pastor remains considerably more likeable than God throughout the novel. In the dialogues between the devil and the younger Jesus, the devil's part clearly prevails, though honorably, unlike God's dominance of Jesus when father and son first meet in the desert. God demands a sheep dear to Jesus as a sacrifice, and Jesus reluctantly assents. Pastor, on hearing of this, gives up on Jesus: "You've learned nothing, begone with you" (222). And Pastor, so far, is right: Jesus' education as to God's nature will be completed only upon the cross.

What then are we to make of Pastor? Saramago's devil is humane yet scarcely a skeptic: he knows too much about God. If Saramago's God is a Portuguese *converso*, then Saramago's devil was never Jewish, and seems curiously unrelated both to God and to Jesus Christ. Why is Pastor in the book? Evidently, only as a witness, I think one has to conclude. Saramago seems to take us back to the unfallen Satan of the Book of Job, who goes to-and-fro on the earth, and walks up and down on it. And yet Job's Satan was an Accuser; Pastor is not. Why does Jesus sojourn four years with Pastor, as an apprentice shepherd? The angel, who comes belatedly to tell Mary that Jesus is God's son tells us that "the devil only denies himself" (263), which is extravagantly ambiguous, and could mean that Pastor resists playing the role that God has assigned him. Mary's angel, after telling us that Pastor was his schoolfellow, says that Pastor prospers because "the harmony of the universe requires it" (264). There is then a secret relationship between Pastor and God, a truth that dismays Jesus' disciples (302).

When God, dressed like a wealthy Jew, appears to Jesus in the boat, Saramago imagines a magnificent re-entry for Pastor:

The boat swayed, the swimmer's head emerged from the water, then his torso, splashing water everywhere, then his legs, a leviathan rising from the depths, and it turned out to be Pastor, reappearing after all these years. I've come to join you, he said, settling himself on the side of the boat, equidistant between Jesus and God, and yet oddly enough this time the boat did not tip to his side, as if Pastor had no weight or he was levitating and not really sitting, I've come to join you, he

repeated, and hope I'm in time to take part in the conversation. We've been talking but still haven't got to the heart of the matter, replied God, and turning to Jesus, He told him, This is the devil whom we have just been discussing. Jesus looked from one to the other, and saw that without God's beard they could have passed for twins, although the devil was younger and less wrinkled. Jesus said, I know very well who he is, I lived with him for four years when he was known as Pastor, and God replied, You had to live with someone, it couldn't be with Me, and you didn't wish to be with your family, so that left only the devil. Did he come looking for me or did You send him. Neither one nor the other, let's say we agreed that this was the best solution. So that's why, when he spoke through the possessed man from Gadara, he called me Your son. Precisely. Which means that both of you kept me in the dark. As happens to all humans. But You said I was not human. And that is true, but you have been what might technically be called incarnated. And now what do you two want of me. I'm the one who wants something, not he. But both of you are here, I noticed that Pastor's appearance came as no surprise, You must have been expecting him. Not exactly, although in principle one should always expect the devil. But if the matter You and I have to resolve affects only us, what is he doing here and why don't You send him away. One can dismiss the rabble in the devil's service if they become troublesome in word or deed, but not Satan himself. Then he's here because this conversation concerns him too. My son, never forget what I'm about to tell you, everything that concerns God also concerns the devil. (309-10)

As God and the devil are twins (we have suspected this), it is a delight to be told that we cannot live with God, and so must choose between our families and the devil. God speaks of his desire to be God of the Catholics, but this ambition I have glanced at already, and wish here only to ask: why is Pastor in the boat? His expression combines "scientific curiosity with grudging compassion" (312), but he is there because, as Jesus accurately surmises, extending God's domain also extends the devil's. And yet poor Pastor has his perplexities:

I'm staying, said Pastor, and these were the first words he spoke since revealing his identity. I'm staying, he said a second time, and added, I myself can see things in the future, but I'm not always certain if what I see there is true or false, in other words, I can see my lies for what they are, that is, my truths, but I don't know to what extent the truths of others are their lies. (318)



Saramago dryly calls this a “torturous statement,” but he means that it clearly indicts God, whose truths indeed are his lies. God’s account of the Catholic Church that will be founded upon Jesus is true only insofar as it is historically horrible, and the zest God manifests as he itemizes martyrs and sums up the Inquisition has unmistakable sadistic overtones. Most alarmingly, God (a good Augustinian, before Augustine) deprecates all human joys as being false, since all of them emanate from original sin: “lust and fear are weapons the demon uses to torment wretched mankind” (325). When Jesus asks Pastor whether this is true, the devil’s reply is eloquently illuminating:

More or less, I simply took what God didn’t want, the flesh with all its joys and sorrows, youth and senility, bloom and decay, but it isn’t true that fear is one of my weapons, I don’t recall having invented sin and punishment or the terror they inspire. (325-26)

We tend to believe this when God snaps in response: “Be quiet ... sin and the devil are one and the same thing.” Does it need God to say that? Wouldn’t the Cardinal-Archbishop of Lisbon do as well? Saramago’s reply is uncanny. God describes the Crusades, to be waged against the unnamed Allah, whom Pastor disowns creating:

Who, then, will create this hostile god, asked Pastor. Jesus was at a loss for an answer, and God, who had been silent, remained silent, but a voice came down from the mist and said, Perhaps this god and the one to come are the same god. Jesus, God, and the devil pretended not to hear but could not help looking at one another in alarm, mutual fear is like that, it readily unites enemies. (328-29)

Only here, in Saramago’s *Gospel*, do we hear a voice beyond God’s. Whose is it? Who could proclaim what God does not wish to say, which is that he and Allah are one? With a God as sly and unlovable as Saramago’s, both we and Saramago long for a God beyond God, perhaps the Alien or Stranger God of the Gnostics. But whoever that God is, he does not speak again in this novel. Very deftly, Saramago has just told us explicitly what he tells us implicitly throughout: God and Jesus pragmatically are enemies, even as Pastor is the unwilling enemy of both. Yet in what does that enmity consist? Reacting to God’s account of the Inquisition, Pastor remarks: “One has to be God to countenance so much blood” (330).

Pastor's great moment—and it is one of the handful of key passages in the book—comes in his vain attempt at reconciliation with God:

Pastor searched for the right words before explaining, I've been listening to all that has been said here in this boat, and although I myself have caught glimpses of the light and darkness ahead, I never realized the light came from the burning stakes and the darkness from great piles of bodies. Does this trouble you. It shouldn't trouble me, for I am the devil, and the devil profits from death even more than You do, it goes without saying that hell is more crowded than heaven. Then why do you complain. I'm not complaining, I'm making a proposal. Go ahead, but be quick, I cannot loiter here for all eternity. No one knows better than You that the devil too has a heart. Yes, but you make poor use of it. Today I use it by acknowledging Your power and wishing that it spread to the ends of the earth without the need of so much death, and since You insist that whatever thwarts and denies You comes from the evil I represent and govern in this world, I propose that You receive me into Your heavenly kingdom, my past offenses redeemed by those I will not commit in future, that You accept my obedience as in those happy days when I was one of Your chosen angels, Lucifer You called me, bearer of light, before my ambition to become Your equal consumed my soul and made me rebel against You. And would you care to tell Me why I should pardon you and receive you into My Kingdom. Because if You grant me that same pardon You will one day promise left and right, then evil will cease, Your son will not have to die, and Your kingdom will extend beyond the land of the Hebrews to embrace the whole globe, good will prevail everywhere, and I shall stand among the lowliest of the angels who have remained faithful, more faithful than all of them now that I have repented, and I shall sing Your praises, everything will end as if it had never been, everything will become what it should always have been. (330-31)

The irony of the humane Pastor and the inhumane God could not be better juxtaposed. God makes clear that he would prefer an even worse devil, if that were possible, and that without the devil, God cannot be God. Pastor, who has been persuasively sincere, shrugs and goes off, after collecting from Jesus the old black bowl from Nazareth into which the blood of Jesus will drip in the novel's closing words.

It is not sufficient to praise Saramago's originality in limning his wholly undiabolic devil. One must go further. The enigmatic Pastor is the only devil who could be aesthetically and intellectually appropriate as we conclude the

Second Millennium. Except that he cannot be crucified, this fallen angel has far more in common with Saramago's Jesus than with Saramago's God. They both are God's victims, suffering the tyranny of time, which God calls truth. Pastor is resigned, and less rebellious than Jesus, yet that is because Pastor knows all there is to know. As readers, we remain more akin to Saramago's uncanny devil than we are to his malevolent ironist of a God.

### III

The glory of Saramago's *Gospel* is Saramago's Jesus, who seems to me humanly and aesthetically more admirable than any other version of Jesus in the literature of the century now ending. Perhaps D.H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* is a near-rival, but Lawrence's Jesus is a grand Lawrencian vitalist, rather than a possible human being. Saramago's Jesus paradoxically is the novelist's warmest and most memorable character of any of his books. W. H. Auden, Christian poet-critic, oddly found in Shakespeare's Falstaff a type of Christ. I cite a paragraph of Auden to emphasize how far both Saramago's God and Saramago's Jesus are from even a generous, undogmatic Christian view:

The Christian God is not a self-sufficient being like Aristotle's First Cause, but a God who creates a world which he continues to love although it refuses to love him in return. He appears in this world, not as Apollo or Aphrodite might appear, disguised as man so that no mortal should recognize his divinity, but as a real man who openly claims to be God. And the consequence is inevitable. The highest religious and temporal authorities condemn Him as a blasphemer and a Lord of Misrule, as a bad Companion for mankind. Inevitable because, as Richelieu said, "The salvation of State is in this world," and history has not as yet provided us with any evidence that the Prince of this world has changed his character. (207-08)

Saramago's God, as I have said, neither loves the world nor does he expect it to love him in return. He wishes power, as widely extended as possible. And Saramago's Jesus is anything but an appearance of God "disguised as man"; rather his Jesus has been shanghaied by God, for God's own purposes of power. As for Satan, "the Prince of this world," we know that Saramago *has* changed his character.

The title of the novel is *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, where "according" matters most. Saramago's Jesus is an ironist, an amazingly mild



one considering his victimization by God. Before meeting John the Baptist, Jesus is told that John is taller, heavier, more bearded, is hardly clothed, and subsists on locust and wild honey. "He sounds more like the Messiah than I do," Jesus said, rising from the circle" (354).

Saramago's novel begins and ends with the Crucifixion, presented at the start with considerable irony, but at the close with a terrible pathos:

Jesus is dying slowly, life ebbing from him, ebbing, when suddenly the heavens overhead open wide and God appears in the same attire He wore in the boat, and His words resound throughout the earth, This is My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. Jesus realized then that he had been tricked, as the lamb led to sacrifice is tricked, and that his life had been planned for death from the very beginning. Remembering the river of blood and suffering that would flow from his side and flood the globe, he called out to the open sky, where God could be seen smiling, Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done. Then he began expiring in the midst of a dream. He found himself back in Nazareth and saw his father shrugging his shoulders and smiling as he told him, Just as I cannot ask you all the questions, neither can you give me all the answers. There was still some life in him when he felt a sponge soaked in water and vinegar moisten his lips, and looking down, he saw a man walking away with a bucket, a staff over his shoulder. But what Jesus did not see, on the ground, was the black bowl into which his blood was dripping. (376-77)

"Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done" testifies both to Jesus' sweetness and to Saramago's aesthetically controlled fury. No disinterested reader, free of ideology and of creed, is going to forgive Saramago's God for the murder of Jesus and the subsequent torrents of human blood that will result. Joyce's Stephen speaks of the "hangman God," as some Italians still call him, and that precisely is Saramago's God. This would be appalling enough in itself but is augmented by the long and loving portrait that Saramago gives of his Jesus.

The story of this Jesus begins and ends with an earthenware bowl, first presented to Mary the mother of Jesus by a beggar, an apparent angel. That bowl overflows with luminous earth, presumably unfallen; at the close it catches the blood of the dying Jesus. The beggar is God, rather than Pastor, and appears again to Mary in a dream-vision that is also a tryst. When Jesus is born, God manifests again as the third of three passing shepherds, bringing

bread of an occult kind. One supposes that this is subtly akin to God's seed resulting in the flesh of Jesus, but so nuanced is Saramago that supposition sometimes needs to be evaded, in this mysterious book.

The thirteen-year-old Jesus leaves home because the Romans have crucified his father Joseph, an invention entirely Saramago's own, just as Joseph's partial complicity in Herod's massacre of the innocents is also Saramago's rather startling suggestion, and is another trouble for Jesus that sends him forth on his road. But why does Saramago so alter the story? Perhaps this most humane of all versions of Jesus has to suffer the darkness of two fathers, the loving, unlucky, and guilty Joseph, and the unloving, fortunate, and even guiltier God.

When the boy Jesus disputes with the doctors of the Law in the Temple, I am reminded again of how Augustinian Saramago has made both God and the Law. One doesn't quarrel with this anachronism, because Saramago's God is himself so anxious to forsake Judaism (to call it that) for Catholicism. And besides, one grants Saramago his anachronisms in this marvelous book just as one grants them endlessly to Shakespeare. Still, guilt is not a concern of the only traditional Jesus who moves me, the Gnostic Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas. Yet I am a Jewish Gnostic explicating a beautiful book by a Portuguese who is no Catholic, anymore than Fernando Pessoa was. At just this point in his narrative, Saramago brings Jesus and Pastor together, and that curious sojourn I have examined already.

And yet Jesus' principal relationship in his life, as Saramago sees it and tells it, is to neither of his fathers, nor to the devil, nor to Mary his mother, but to the whore Mary Magdalene. Of all the splendors of Saramago's *Gospel*, the love between Jesus and the Magdalene is the grandest, and their meeting and union (231-43) is for me the summit of Saramago's achievement, up to the present time. Echoing the Song of Songs, Saramago is most the artist when he intertwines a reply to Pastor with Jesus' awakening to sexual life:

Jesus breathed so fast, for one moment he thought he would faint when her hands, the left hand on his forehead, the right hand on his ankles, began caressing him, slowly coming together, meeting in the middle, then starting all over again. You've learned nothing, begone with you, Pastor had told him, and who knows, perhaps he meant to say that Jesus had not learned to cherish life. Now Mary Magdalene instructed him.... (236)

We can void the “perhaps,” and Mary Magdalene is Jesus’ best teacher, eclipsing Joseph, God, Pastor, and Mary the mother. In what may be the book’s greatest irony she teaches him freedom, which God will not permit any man, but in particular not to God’s only son.

I myself have just turned seventy, and ask more urgently than before: where shall wisdom be found? The wisdom of Saramago’s *Gospel* is very harsh: we can emulate Jesus only by forgiving God, but we do not believe, with Jesus, that God does not know what God has done.

I find the epilogue to Saramago’s *Gospel* not in *Blindness*, a parable as dark as any could be, but in the charming *The Tale of the Unknown Island*, a brief fable composed in 1998, the year of his Nobel Prize, and translated a year later by Margaret Jull Costa. In the wonderful comic vein of *The Siege of Lisbon*, Saramago’s tale begins with a man asking a king for a boat which can sail in quest of the unknown island. The boat granted, the man goes off to the harbor, followed by the king’s cleaning woman, who will constitute the rest of the crew.

The cleaning woman, with superb resolution, vows that she and the man will be sufficient to sail the caravel to the unknown island, thus heartening the man, whose will cannot match hers. They go to bed in separate bunks, port and starboard, and he dreams bad dreams, until he finds her shadow beside his shadow:

He woke up with his arms about the cleaning woman, and her arms about him, their bodies and their bunks fused into one, so that no one can tell any more if this is port or starboard. Then, as soon as the sun had risen, the man and the woman went to paint in white letters on both sides of the prow the name that the caravel still lacked. Around midday, with the tide, The Unknown Island finally set to sea, in search of itself. (51)

Saramago names no one: I am critically outrageous enough to venture upon some experimental namings, as an antithesis to Saramago’s *Gospel*. Let us call the man Jesus Christ, try the cleaning woman as Mary Magdalene, and the king, who exists to receive favors, will do for God. Doubtless, Saramago would shake his head, but so audacious a narrative genius inspires audacity in his critic. No one will be crucified upon the masts of the Unknown Island, and the bad dreams of *this* Jesus will not be realized. Saramago’s happy tale is a momentary antidote to the most tragic of his works. Beware a God who is

at once truth and time, Saramago warns us, and abandon such a God to sail out in search of yourself.

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