

Cruising Gender in the Eighties: From *Levantado do Chão* to *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*

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...for no journey is but one journey, each journey comprises a number of journeys, and if one of them seems so meaningless that we have no hesitation in saying it was not worthwhile, our common sense, were it not so often clouded by prejudice and idleness, would tell us that we should verify whether the journeys within that journey were not of sufficient value to have justified all the trials and tribulations. (Saramago, *The Stone Raft* 222)

One of the most textually productive aspects of Saramago's self-avowed essayistic penchant—"probably I am an essayist who needs to write novels because he does not know how to write essays"¹—is the revision of certain foundational myths of Western culture, first and foremost that of woman as subordinate and, hence, subservient to "Man." In line with the historians of the *Annales* and the "nouvelle histoire" of Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff, that revision entails calling attention to the particulars of everyday life of the anonymous lot traditionally left out of official history.² It is thus not incidental that, as the most obscured in that group, female characters assume decisive roles in the development of Saramago's fictional plots.³ The latter tend to privilege the instinctual, intuitive, relational and contingent character of the "feminine" acts and words characteristic of the so-called private sphere. Such a domain of experience implicitly questions masculine pretensions of reason, presence, autonomy and transcendence informing public exploits that go on record as part of a narrative of historical progress. Leading to an aporia of gender predicates, this argumentative confrontation is evinced in the five novels published between *Levantado do Chão* (1980) and *The History*

of the *Siege of Lisbon* (1989). They outline a fictional-essayistic inquiry responding not only to feminist appeals and debates in the wake of 1975, the first year of the UN-declared International Women's Decade, but, more specifically, responding to post-April 1974 revolutionary discourses of popular emancipation not necessarily open to women's voices or demands. In view of a historical and more broadly discursive context where the "question of woman" cannot be disassociated from the question of revolution or, better, the Revolution in question, Saramago's textual journey posits an imaginative term of struggle against the ever normative and oppressive effects of structurally persistent patterns of gender domination in socio-economic and symbolic orders.

I. Avoiding the Question

That the term thus pursued cannot be confused with simulacra of real women nor, much less, with some notion of the "eternal feminine" is perhaps the biggest theoretical-ideological challenge presented by Saramago's investment in figurations of gender difference. It is a challenge that perhaps can only begin to be met in the light of the decontextualized and isolated descriptions of feminine images promulgated by those intent on defining a model of Saramago's female characters. Thus, Maria da Conceição Madruga, for instance, ascribes paradigmatic status to characters whose design is strictly confined to the semantic economy of the fantastic functioning in two specific texts, *Baltasar and Blimunda* and *The Stone Raft*. Without even acknowledging this literary-generic fact as a condition for the characterization of either Blimunda or Joana Carda, Madruga presents both as exemplary figures on account of their simultaneously exceptional and realist attributes (85, 97). Although Beatriz Berrini detaches this model from the figures of Blimunda, Joana Carda and, eventually, the doctor's wife (from Saramago's novel *Blindness*)—the trio of "seers" into the commonality of women's experience such as it is epitomized in *Levantado do Chão*—she does not fare better by submitting all of Saramago's female characters to patriarchal ideals of womanhood.⁴ (Nevertheless, her assertion that they point to man's lack of understanding of "woman's interior face" [141] may be well founded.) Elsewhere the same critic in fact ends up extrapolating from one famous line in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* the inference that, in all of Saramago's texts, woman is nothing but "an enigma, a labyrinth, a charade" (*Year* 312).⁵ Here is yet one more atemporal cliché inherited from an essentially misogynist

tradition that even leads one to question the critical validity of defining an abstract model of femininity or of womanhood in Saramago's fiction.

As "fine and penetrating [an] understanding and respect for the feminine" as his novels may suggest,⁶ it is important to note that Saramago rejects any potential mystifications of the subject founded on unexamined critical assumptions. In an interview appended to Berrini's 1998 study, Saramago rejects the view that he "venerates" women, going on to denounce "certain commonplaces as 'the eternal feminine' or 'inspiring dreams'" redundant in "Marianist" claims (240). He asserts, on the other hand, that his "respect" for women does not translate into any pretension of knowledge, but is part of his awareness that woman, even more so than man, is always "*an other being*" whose distance is insurmountable (for "she is always on the other side of the sea..." [240; emphasis in original]). Hence his insistence, appearing for example in Carlos Reis's *Diálogos com José Saramago*, that his female characters are totally "imaginary"; they are neither projections of himself nor "copies of any woman" (135). Leaving aside for now possible counter-readings, such statements are useful to pull the matter of Saramago's female characters away from an idealist/idealizing and dangerously cooptative representational register, pushing it closer to the experimental material(ism) of language in the open, multi-layered and movable space of textuality.⁷

Such a turn to the text as a performative space of "imagination" is suggested by Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva in a study centered on how Saramago's feminine figures question the basic misogynous postulates of traditional Portuguese "marialva" culture. Contrary to other critics who fetishize such figures in reductive and decontextualized attempts to "chercher la femme," da Silva points out the need to keep in mind the post-April 1974 revolutionary context that informs the author's work and, consequently, his imaginings of women. It is in the liberating, emancipatory space afforded by Saramago's texts that women become full-blown actors of a revolutionary process that threatens to discount them, steeped as it is, both at the level of social relations and of partisan politics, in patriarchal (if not male chauvinist) beliefs (215). From *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* (1977) to *All the Names* (1997)—the latest novel published at the time of the study under review—this textual space would be inscribed therefore with the more radical implications of an otherwise imperfect revolutionary process by means of figurations of women and the feminine not limited to representations of female characters.

In view of the above, one should avoid neutralizing what appears to be a subversive, inherently dialogic textuality by relapsing into a linear, homogenous model of femininity or of textuality. As historically relevant and as seductive as either of these may be, revolutionary processes, textual and otherwise, are known to occur in leaps and bounds and to occur vis-à-vis the many differences—and deferrals—that haunt them.⁸ By critically appropriating Saramago's notion quoted above of woman as a totally foreign, "*other being*," a notion that echoes the second-wave feminist discourses departing from, if indebted to, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), the rhetorical-argumentative movement of the figure (and of the textual space) can be brought to light. Rather than simply woman or the feminine, what is at stake in various ways throughout the several texts is the historically dynamic and ever contingent term of gender difference. The author's creative-essayistic investment in women may be said, in fact, to probe the changing status of gender difference within a historical-materialist ontology of struggle and conflict that is played out textually. This probing locates itself discursively at a specific time and place, when the crisis of Enlightenment ideals encounters the crisis of the so-called Revolution of Carnations, opening the traditional Marxist "question of woman." What the series of five novels published throughout the decade of the eighties presents (at least to those interested in the issues of women, men and revolutions—all in the plural) is a textual journey illustrating the consequent search for an axiology of difference moving from the critique of the classic revolutionary model of woman, to the complex discursive webs of gender and, finally, to the deconstructive, "feminine operation" of language.⁹ The following will focus principally on the first of these experimental stages or debates in Saramago's fiction, attending to the premises and argumentative figurations that are at the basis of further textual incursions into the question of gender difference.

II. On the Horizon of Women's Struggle

We will continue to speak about men, but also more about women.
(*Levantado do Chão* 138)¹⁰

One of the most nagging issues confronting traditional, and not-so-traditional, Marxist thinkers has been the place and role assigned to women in revolutionary struggle. The unequal and hierarchical relation of the sexes

was recognized early on not only as the cause of women's oppression but also as the index of all forms of oppression in a stratified socio-economic order founded on the institution of private property. Following Engels's systematization of Marx's ideas in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1857), the discussion of women's inequality became attached to the family as a basic structure of, and pre-condition for, relations of domination based on the possession of private property. From this perspective, emancipation would depend first of all on woman overcoming her (biological) limitation to reproductive labor in the family and becoming an active producer alongside man in the public work force. Yet only with the liberation of the working class from the bonds of private property and economic exploitation would woman finally be able to rise from her subordinate position in the family.¹¹ The subsumption of women's struggle for complete subjectivity and independence, including sexual independence, to the struggle of the working class naturally would be the most contentious aspect of Marxist and socialist feminist agendas, even in recent times.¹² The *New Portuguese Letters* (1973), both as text and political event, would bring the conflict home in a dramatic form with well-known repercussions.

Although it could be argued that Saramago drew inspiration from this controversial theoretical context in several of his novels published in the eighties, the fictional exploration and the critique of revolutionary thought concerning woman and the family is put forward directly in *Levantado do Chão* and, in a more complex way, in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. These two texts complement each other in their respective temporal frames, with the diachronic panorama of the first and the synchronic focus of the second shedding light on interconnected histories of oppression and revolutionary resistance in 20th century Portugal. They also complement each other in their diverse social, cultural and regional locations, following the genealogical line of a family of landless wage laborers in a southern plantation in one case, and in the other presenting a cross-section of urban, very diverse working-class experiences centered on the life of a humble hotel servant. In either case, female figures are cast in typical conditions of subservience to male privilege in the private sphere, this being determined by the prevailing economic system. Their function in male-centered movements of popular emancipation is, as might be expected, an extension of their roles in that sphere. Within this frame, women's struggles for liberation emerge as metonymies for the concrete historical experience of a collectivity that transcends them.

In *Levantado do Chão*, the omnipotent economic law of the Alentejo “latifúndio” transpires in the deeply ambiguous but structurally indispensable hierarchical relation between men and women through four generations of family life, from the years just before the proclamation of the First Republic in 1910 to shortly after the 1974 democratic revolution. Even if one allows for the possibility of encountering a desirable sexual partner,¹³ women are traditionally passed on from father to husband as commodities necessary for the realization of their manhood as wage-earning providers for their families. The uncertain availability of paid work ultimately determines women’s dependant status both at home and, consequently, in socio-economic relations outside the home.¹⁴ Even if they move into the role of producers, working for wages on the plantation, the law of patriarchy, which is also the law of property, does not accord men and women equal pay (215). Women therefore seem fated to carry the ancestral burden of their biological sex as men’s obscure and silent, but fertile helpmates in face of a common, basic need for survival.

It is that need that prompts men to rebel against their own victimization at the hands of plantation owners, a male rebellion that depends upon as much as it perpetuates women’s being limited to “passing shadows or sometimes indispensable interlocutors, feminine chorus, normally quiet due to the weight of their work burden or of their bellies, or else suffering mothers for various reasons...” (183).¹⁵ Gracinda Mau-Tempo is, indeed, an example of a partly emancipated wife-mother taught how to read and write by the revolutionary Manuel Espada even before their marriage in 1948. But like other women of both her own and previous generations, she never assumes a direct, “productive” role in the underground workers’ movement.¹⁶ It is not until after the April Revolution that women born to her enlightened kind—namely, her daughter Maria Adelaide—are invited by their fathers, husbands and brothers to join them in what was to become the (albeit short-lived) historical event of Alentejo land reform. One wonders if Saramago’s choice for the masculine singular case in the title of the novel, *Levantado do Chão*, does not bespeak his critical awareness of the overriding economy of male-sameness to which the historical, finally victorious struggle of the Alentejo plantation workers here memorialized reverts. For beyond the supposed universal equality achieved by those implied in the passive verb form, “levantado,” remain “others” still lacking the social, economic and, above all, cultural space in which to raise/emancipate themselves on their

own, by their own means, and not merely as men's helpmates. Is woman irrevocably collapsed on the patriarchal ground of her reproductive physiology? Or, in becoming a revolutionary subject like Adelaide Espada for example will she be able or necessarily want to give up maternity? In what circumstances can maternity become a deliberate step in women's struggle?

Going back within the frame of male-centered historical time to *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984), set in the ever sinister year of 1936 in the Lisbon of Salazar's Portugal, one can determine the centrality of such (not merely rhetorical) questions in Saramago's textual journey. Their pertinence in expounding traditional Marxist thought on woman's condition as subsumed under that of the family under capitalism is all the more instructive inasmuch as this particular text directly engages the fascist ideology of family and motherhood. The picture is complex: what is at stake in those two radically different perspectives of collective redemption or national salvation, as any improbable "unity" before "two things opposed, divergent" (*Year* 51), is woman's difference as a sexually marked body relegated to the private sphere. Her status as economically dependent theoretically makes her available to being coopted for the moral support and sexual reproduction of the family-nation—as may be Marcenda's case—or, conversely, to find herself fulfilling an extension of the same functions in the horizon of the (all-male) movement of resistance against fascism and capitalist oppression—Lídia's case. It is at this juncture that Saramago's text leads one to intuit the potentially subversive historical-materialist meaning of Fernando Pessoa/Ricardo Reis's dictum, "woman continues to be more Eve than man Adam, [...], I say this because for all of us it should be so" (204).

Considering that Salazar's New State holds the family as the basic nucleus and moral guarantee of the corporative system, in this text family economics is shown to be the determining law of all identities and relations of social exchange. According to the New State's Constitution, in effect since April 1933, "the differences resulting from [woman's] nature and the good of the family" justify the exclusion of women from the supposed rights of citizenship, along with all those falling under the category of others due to "the diversity of circumstances and the nature of things" (*Constituição* 4-5). This exclusion in principle would require that women not work outside the home and that they become servants of the nation by being, first and foremost, servants of the proprietors of the family-home. It is thus not incidental that the text focuses on a moving, deconstructive simulacrum of

the desirable fascist family—not the privately owned family home (known as “*casal de família*”), but a sequence of two temporarily rented spaces, not a decorous marriage, but an illicit sexual relation that is the extension of a (licit) economic relation of female rented labor.¹⁷ In addition, it is not incidental that the class difference founding this relation spectrally figures a bygone monarchic/imperialist past, upon the image of which the economic and moral order of the family-nation is refracted. In other words, Ricardo Reis’s surplus material and symbolic capital vis-à-vis the destitute hotel servant, Lúdia, summons the seemingly eternal, yet always historically contingent, relation between man as king—his name is, indeed, “Reis”—and woman as his dependent people-vassals.

Every fascist corporative ensemble mirrors this pervasive patriarchal structure of class/gender relations. The distance between the private and the public, home economics and state economics, between man as king-master of his property at home and the dictator as paternal(ist) emperor of it all is, therefore, collapsed under the aegis of the primary moral order here in question.¹⁸ Everything, everyone, everywhere is exposed to scrutiny and vigilance in a “politics of the visible” (Pickering-Iazzi) hypothetically mobilizing all eyes to ensure that not a single gesture escapes that endless mirroring order.¹⁹

It is because the reproductive functioning of the corporative system makes itself so present in peoples’ lives that Lúdia can judge matter-of-factly, “[t]he people are like me, a hotel chambermaid who has a revolutionary brother and sleeps with a doctor who is against revolutions” (324). The birthing analogy she uses to explain her (Engels-inspired) historical-materialist comprehension of the class relation of dependency and, simultaneously, struggle between her and Reis is not to be taken lightly.²⁰ It is suggestive of the revolutionary appropriation of the supposed “natural” role that maternity plays within the seemingly endless reproductive, oppressive corporative system of the family-nation. Even if the nation’s feminized servants are compelled, out of sheer economic necessity—the paupers that Reis sees all over the city are a telling sign—to offer themselves as instruments of the family-based economy sustaining the nation, in a sense those servants have the power to subvert the politically desirable ends to which the products of their labor may be put.

Lúdia’s spring cleaning spree, following her decision to keep a pregnancy that Reis condemns, is a good example of how people-serfs can overturn not only the expectations of the fascist/paternalist reign but, along with it, the

historical and cultural tradition feeding its myths. Lídia not only foregoes the fiction of paternity upholding the family property system—"If you don't want to acknowledge the child, I don't mind, the child can be illegitimate, like me" (307)—more subversively, she performs mimically the quintessential act of ideal homebound femininity by cleaning and shining Reis's "abode."²¹ If, in recognition of the product of her labor, the master would exclaim "blessed be Lídia among women," comparing her favorably with the bourgeois, left-handedly crippled Marcenda (308), the servant is no asexual Virgin Mary or fascist woman "saint."²² In fact, she exploits the master's desire for her own physical, now compelling sexual fulfillment (309). It can be argued that her gratification is of paramount importance in leading her to recognize the revolutionary need to stop abetting her own class/gender domination: "Is she the doctor's maid, his cleaner, she is certainly not his lover, because the word implies equality, no matter whether male or female, and they are not equal" (338). Reis, from then on, is positioned as the class enemy, or "stranger," whom the proletarian, mutiny-identified, Lídia will refuse to sleep with and, someday hopefully, serve—even as she continues to work for paid wages as a hotel servant (349).

In view of the slow but sure change of fortune laying ahead for the class of men-kings left wanting continually abnegated, reproductive feminine or feminized serfs, it makes *historical* sense for them to see woman as "an enigma, a labyrinth, a charade" (312).²³ More pointedly, it makes sense that the "reis" of 1936 should feel threatened by women like Lídia, fraternally aligned with the (possibly communist) left, and who merely would use them to produce (not reproduce) a new kind of men and women free from their bondage. In the context of the Estado Novo, unsurprisingly breeding a new generation of women who resist its particular mandate for feminine "difference," men like Reis have reason to be more afraid of women than were the "pessoas" of the First Republic afraid before women of the kind perhaps represented by Marcenda's dead mother:²⁴ "You are as frightened of women as I was, Perhaps even more" (313).

The text leaves no doubt as to the familial relationship that enables Lídia's consciousness of political class (and ensuing class struggle). It is through her brother serving in the navy that the hotel/Reis servant learns both about his group's subversive activities as well as the resulting tragedies, the text ending after Reis finds out in the newspaper about Daniel's death in the failed insurrection (356). Lídia's relationship with her brother represents an

interesting foreclosure of paternal lineage—as if Lídia, along with him and his revolutionary friends, were all illegitimate children made kin through a commonly exploited, abandoned and now, symptomatically, invalid mother. This suggests a possible horizontal brotherhood different from the more hierarchical, father- and husband-dominated scene of the rural working class in *Levantado do Chão*. Yet it does not make for Lídia's active, direct participation in that brotherhood: she remains physically very distant from it—the revolutionaries are a group of marines. Further, she ends up, like Gracinda Mau-Tempo, performing a merely supportive, suffering, maternal role vis-à-vis her brother's ultimately tragic activities.

However, Lídia's insurgency against Reis's class/gender privilege, and the much broader historical context that it entails, is nothing less than an exemplary woman's struggle. It culminates in her leaving the emblematic figure of men-kings without a servant and, what is more, without an "other" in whose face he can recognize his self-sameness.²⁵ If Lídia's "mutiny" is parallel to and related in class and kin to that being carefully prepared by her brother and his comrades, it is also very different, because gender-specific. Her apparently silent, resigned, giving gestures of domesticity in the end mine the very basis of the economic-as-gender/class relation that sustains the family-nation. Before and beyond the overthrow of a whole patriarchal economic system inherited from a seemingly ancestral tradition, before and beyond the eradication of any one dictator or a few capitalists can be eradicated, there are—and probably will continue to be—many anonymous (or not-so-anonymous) "reis" to be dethroned. And these are likely to include men in the brotherhood of resistance, as may be the case of that other Ricardo Reis, in *Levantado do Chão*, who gives shelter and food to the ex-Caxias prisoner, João Mau-Tempo, in the humble home he shares with the maternal figure of Ermelinda (264).

Lídia's coming to revolutionary consciousness of *and* action upon her own condition is firmly rooted in her courageous (thought to be so matter-of-fact, so "natural") experience as a sexually embodied female human being. After all, she is the one who literally and not just figuratively makes the bed on which she sleeps with the doctor at the Hotel Bragança and beyond. Nor is her sexual decisiveness or arguably continued "availability" prosaic. It can be interpreted as an affirmation of feminine selfhood against a whole Christian-Judaic patriarchal tradition of thought that proscribes sexual pleasure as women's worst sin. Like her, the female wage-laborers in *Levantado do Chão*

welcome men's desire in response to their own, "maybe because the world is indeed going to be better" after their sexual fulfillment (105). Similarly, even a woman such as Manuel Espada's mother, apparently made of "granite stone," "sweetly overflows at night in her bed" (*Levantado* 218). Such a valorization of women's sexual enjoyment obviously confronts the fascist law against the moral "corruption of customs,"²⁶ with woman-as-asexual-mother being the "saintly" cornerstone of that law. More than that, Lídia's and, by extension, other female characters' uninhibited sexual expressions also offer an important corrective to the normative Marxist tradition regarding women's sexual liberation that perpetrates patriarchal control of women's sexualities.²⁷ This corrective does not aim to erase sexual difference in the interests of a hypothetical gender equality attainable only on condition that women become transcendental subjects through the sacrifice of the immanence of their bodies, as Simone de Beauvoir would propose following Engels. The privileging of sexual difference is, on the contrary, mobilized in the interests of a revolutionary struggle that should (ideally) take off from the forever historically and ideologically sedimented platform of oppressed feminine sexuality, including maternity as an essential part of that sexuality, against all types of oppression ensuing from the law of patriarchy, which first of all implies a law that, regardless of class, brands women as part of men's estates.²⁸

To understand that "the father"—as Ricardo Reis would have it—"is an accident [...], dispensable once the necessity has been provided" (313) is perhaps all that women would need in order to prompt a gender/class struggle with their quotidian gestures. This struggle is shown to be played out in temporally and spatially heterogeneous ways, according to a "woman's time" that intersects with but is not to be collapsed into the linear time of a class struggle enacted within a male-centered community or "brotherhood."²⁹ From submitting to their ancestral "fate" as "birthing canals and work animals" (*Levantado* 125) belonging to family property to expressing a choice for motherhood independently of the paternal seal or of family ties—"I am going to have the baby" (*Year* 307)—Saramago's figurations give reason for women to be increasingly discussed as regards the ancestral means and emergent ways of their common sexually embodied difference. In regard to this potentially empowering, not victimizing, difference, the two texts add to each other in presenting a complex panorama of the underground, anonymous and ever-conflicting quests for revolutionary change occurring

throughout the greater part of the 20th century in “a country of men” in constant strife, strife that is economic through and through, to prove to one another that they are indeed men (*Levantado* 75).

The Stone Raft (1986) picks up on that textual journey exploring gender difference, extending the historical frame to a time already far from any one short-lived revolutionary victory. This text may be said to illustrate graphically a rebellion against the patriarchy/private property dyad that is ultimately played out at the level of poetic language. Like women who walk out on or find themselves free from any master, language can escape the bondage of the Father's privileged reason and, thereby, privileged possession, to engender itself freely and thus recapture a long withheld impulsive fertility analogous to a “resurgence of the maternal spirit” (*Stone* 281).³⁰ This resurgence would eradicate, or at least subvert, the imposition of any one official account of public life that excludes the productive, and not simply reproductive, role of women's labor in the ups and downs and the many circular detours of human (or still man's?) history.

III. By Way of Conclusion: The Aporia of Difference

[T]he kingdom on earth belongs to those who have the wit to put a ‘no’ at the service of a ‘yes,’ having been the perpetrators of a ‘no,’ they rapidly erase it to restore a ‘yes.’ (*Siege* 296)

Precisely by virtue of the ideological and, yes, deconstructive/poetic, importance that the “question of woman” assumes in Saramago's contentious fictions, the issue of gender difference is batted around (cruised, if you will) in and out of the meanderings of class struggle in order to explode a discursive, cultural constructedness that pits women and men against each other as class enemies forever destined to be in a mutual state of siege. The story featuring the dialogue between a hermit and a queen in *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1982) is significant for the extent to which the question of difference is not positively, biologically determined but, rather, is the product of socio-economic locations and corresponding discursive conventions. The webs of identity take possession of each one's being in a necessary, though despotic way, inasmuch as they endow that being with human-social intelligibility. Hence, the hermit's reply to the rebellious queen, who is not happy being a queen and who would like to find out how she can be a

woman without being also a queen: "No one can be without being, men and women do not exist, all that exists is what they are and their rebellion against what they are" (232).

Since, however, "what they are"—man and woman, rich and poor and any other ensuing dichotomous, always relationally hierarchical, identity construction—is a story that seems to be always already written, the question again emerges as to what language has to do with it. More precisely, what does a cultural tradition inscribed in and handed down through books of supposed historical truth have to do with the various, interconnected relations of domination that give social meaning to those identities? In postulating a hypothetical case of an accidentally induced creative project of re-writing history, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1989) attempts to prove that words are not immovable stones, but rather discursive constructions that can be made malleable, interchangeable and provisional. If only those who use words could forego a patriarchal, phallogocentric or "macho" position of authority over their many possible pairings and meanings.

Saramago does not, to be certain, signal the female character as the one who carries out such a revolutionary task: Maria Sara, like Joana Carda of *The Stone Raft*, is much too steeped in the humanist/rationalist/enlightened system of thought that awarded her a university degree in the first place. She cannot do it, yet she can recognize a rebellious (feminine-intuitive) insurgence in the logic of linguistic truth when she sees it, as she does with respect to the mistake of her vassal proofreader, Raimundo Silva. Not only does she encourage the "mistake's" further unfolding/engenderment in creative practice but she also pushes for its conceptual underpinnings: "Your idea would never have occurred to me, to negate an incontrovertible historical fact. I myself no longer know what made me do it, Frankly I'm convinced that the great divide between people is between those who say yes and those who say no..." (296). Echoing in part the hermit's philosophy of negation ("men and women do not exist, all that exists is what they are and their rebellion against what they are") the proofreader's theoretical estimate goes right to the point of a post-structuralist Marxist "negative dialectic," according to which any revolutionary critique of culture or society can only take place within its oppressive structures—even while risking complicity with it (Adorno).

Such a theoretical perspective might explain Saramago's insistent experimentation with sanctioned scripts of gender and class divisions that go

all the way back to the story of Adam and Eve in order to subvert and, even, revert their pervasively tyrannical meanings. In the utopian space of artistic creation the operation may bear some revolutionary textual fruit, envisioning the “yes” of individual and collective lives without any masters’ chains. One might want to debate, however, the implications of a textual model of affirmative negativity that suspends in bliss the continued siege, the violence, and what lies beyond the “woman’s question” in the question of what love has to do with it. Or, perhaps not; perhaps the last three lines of this last text from the decade of the eighties summon it all up: “Forget it, we’re staying. Maria Sara’s head is resting on Raimundo’s shoulder, with his left hand he strokes her hair and cheek. They did not fall asleep at once. Beneath the verandah roof a shadow sighed” (*Siege* 312).

Notes

¹ In an interview with Carlos Reis, Saramago quotes himself as often stating: “Provavelmente não sou um romancista; provavelmente sou um ensaísta que precisa de escrever romances porque não sabe escrever ensaios” (Reis 46). Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are mine.

² In the interview with Reis, Saramago associates his attempt to represent a temporal “whole,” in order to understand the interconnection between what History reports and what it excludes, with the work of “uns quanto autores (os homens dos *Annales*, os da Nouvelle Histoire, como Georges Duby ou o Jacques Le Goff), cujo olhar histórico ia por esse mesmo caminho” (80-1).

³ In a very brief article, titled “Figuras de mujer: presencias femeninas en la narrativa de José Saramago,” Basilio Losada suggests that Saramago’s feminine figures corporealize the pain as well as the virtues of the common people, or those vanquished by history (36).

⁴ After pointing out how, in *Levantado do Chão*, woman is always shown to be morally superior to man, Berrini synthesizes Saramago’s representations of woman in the following terms: “Humilde, oculta, silenciosa, é contudo a força, a coragem, a paciência, a sagacidade, a intuição, tudo posto ao serviço dos outros, em especial do marido e dos filhos” (*Ler Saramago* 139). Noting, in addition, the beginnings of woman’s emancipation in the figure of Gracinda Mau-Tempo, the critic concludes: “As figuras femininas das ficções de Saramago podem quase todas espelhar-se nas personagens de LC [*Levantado do Chão*]” (140).

⁵ “Não é possível, também, esquecer que o ser feminino, nos textos de Saramago, nesse e nos demais romances, é qualificado por sua vez de enigma, quebra-cabeças, charada” (Berrini “O ano”: 81).

⁶ I borrow the phrase from Berrini (*Ler Saramago* 150).

⁷ This understanding of language and textuality, inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin and, more generally, by post-structuralist Marxist thought, appears to be more in tune with Saramago’s

creative practice, rooted in a historical-materialist worldview (see, for example, Voloshinov and Kristeva).

⁸ Twenty years of textual production, which is also twenty years of lived experience witnessing (among other things) the very different cultural and political contexts of the Portuguese eighties and nineties, would also likely have an impact on how the author figures the subject at hand.

⁹ This notion was coined by Jacques Derrida as part of his critique of the metaphysics of presence. It had a decisive impact on post-structuralist (French) feminist conceptions of language, difference and the “feminine.” See, for example, Derrida’s *Spurs* and “Choreographies.”

¹⁰ This and all subsequent translations of the text are my own.

¹¹ For the now classic feminist account of the well-known narrative here briefly summarized, see Juliet Mitchell, esp. 19-24.

¹² Besides Mitchell, see, for example, Millet, Hartman, McKinnon and Barrett.

¹³ A good example is found in the scene where, embracing her father who has just been released from prison, Gracinda Mau-Tempo sizes up Manuel Espada, who had also been suspected of subversive activities, and—with the matter-of-fact interpellation, “So, Manuel”—initiates what is going to be their life together: “[W]hoever thinks that much more than that is needed, is wrong” (162).

¹⁴ While the man is expected to go outside the home to get paid work, the wife is expected to account for and excuse the family provider from the debts incurred in buying food items. The anonymity of the couple discussing this situation in bed is telling: after the wife asks the husband how much he is going to earn, the dialogue evolves in the following manner: “I don’t know, don’t bother me, woman, and she would say, It’s not because of me, it was the baker who asked me due to the outstanding debt, oh those miserable dialogues” (196).

¹⁵ This is well illustrated by the narrative of underground subversive activity that takes off decisively when men find themselves without work. From women waking their husbands to go to meet their comrades (203-06), to the drama of looking for their whereabouts in the local prison (237-38) and, subsequently, to their emotional visits with the political prisoners in Caxias (257-58), wives and daughters are positioned in the indispensable but victimizing role of mothers of the revolutionaries.

¹⁶ See Barrada for an illuminating study of the “supportive” role to which women were limited in the underground activities of the Portuguese Communist Party in the forties.

¹⁷ That the hotel servant, Lúdia, refuses to accept payment for her continued services once Ricardo Reis moves into the furnished apartment is symptomatic of how it figures somewhat more closely, and more cynically, to what would be a family home. Would-be wives do not charge for domestic tasks, including sex.

¹⁸ One should perhaps remember that Article 14 of the New State’s Constitution leaves no doubt as to the extent to which the home (“*casal de família*”) is compelled by “State and local autarchies” to engender and maintain this order. Line 5 of the article reads thus: “Tomar todas as providências no sentido de evitar a corrupção dos costumes” (*Constituição* 10).

¹⁹ This is dramatized throughout the novel, not only by the PIDE agent popping up here and there to investigate Reis or, better, the latter's relationship with the sister of a revolutionary, but, most importantly, by the hotel servants and, subsequently, the women in Reis's apartment building, who keep constant watch of his movements, his relations, the "private" space he occupies.

²⁰ "Well perhaps in my case it is like having a baby, which grows without our noticing it and is born when the time comes" (324).

²¹ This point is indebted to Luce Irigaray's argument about the transgressive potential of feminine mimeticism.

²² The women pictured as "saints" by the cultural apparatus of national propaganda are those who would deter men from resistance activities, leading them to follow the fascist path into the so-called holy Portuguese family: "We Portuguese have also our share of holy women, two examples will suffice, Marília, the shining heroine of *Conspiracy*, and the innocent saint of *The May Revolution*" (326); "Only the other day we heard a simple Portuguese film producer say that on this side of the Pyrenees all women are saints" (327). Those "saints" would likely form the hosts of OMEM, the fascist organization of "Mothers for National Education" that Marcenda is thought to eventually join (314).

²³ See earlier in this essay my critique of the current decontextualized, atemporal reading of this statement.

²⁴ Marcenda's losing the movement of her *left* hand after her mother's death, three years before (1933), is suggestive of the crippling effect that Salazar's New State had on the (bourgeois) Republican Feminist women's movements.

²⁵ Ricardo Reis's losing his job is not as important as his feeling of losing Lúcia, since he has the means to maintain himself without work. "This face covered with lather is a mask that could fit any man's face, and when the razor little by little reveals what is underneath, Ricardo Reis is intrigued by what he sees, and disturbed, as if afraid some evil might emerge. He examines himself carefully in the mirror, comparing his face with the different, unknown face he once had" (299).

²⁶ See note 18.

²⁷ Lenin, for example, repudiates women's complete sexual liberation as being contrary to the interests of communism, since it poses a threat to the future of the Soviet family (Fauré 382; 388). Even Trotsky, an apparent sympathizer with women's liberation, does not broach the question of sexuality aside and apart from that of maternity.

²⁸ As the "three Marias" would put it, "Woman: man's wealth, his image, his land, his inherited estate" (*New Portuguese Letters* 105; my translation).

²⁹ I partly evoke here Julia Kristeva's argument in "Women's Time" (esp. 188-94)

³⁰ For a detailed study of this process using a Kristevan notion of poetic language, see my manuscript "As Mulheres de Saramago na 'Jangada' da Significação."

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