

# Righting Wrongs, Re-Writing Meaning and Reclaiming the City in Saramago's *Blindness* and *All the Names*\*

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The two most recent novels by José Saramago to have appeared in English, *Blindness* (1995) and *All the Names* (1997), constitute the first two parts of a trilogy that was completed by *A Caverna* (*The Cave*, untranslated), published in November 2000. The author has gone on record as acknowledging the Platonic echoes of the title of this latest work, declaring at a conference in Spain in February of last year that in his opinion humanity has never found itself more firmly entrenched inside the Greek philosopher's cave than it is today.<sup>1</sup> Such declarations clearly place these more recent novels in a different context from the earlier works that established the novelist's success at home and abroad. Works such as *Levantado do Chão* (*Raised from the Soil*, untranslated, 1980), *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1982) and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984) are all firmly rooted in Portuguese history, whereas the two more recent novels are set in a vaguely defined present, in nameless cities,<sup>2</sup> and with characters who remain unnamed throughout, with the sole exception of the main protagonist of *All the Names*, Senhor José; even in his case, however, the text manages to avoid giving him a surname to accompany this most unremarkable of Portuguese given names.

This should not, however, be understood as a radical change in the author's essential vision of the world: the "radical break" that he mentions in an interview immediately after the publication of *Blindness* refers to the harrowing nature of the subject-matter of this novel and not necessarily, therefore, to the mentality that produced it.<sup>3</sup> Hence, I would argue that the change that the author's works have undergone during recent years should be seen as occurring more in style and emphasis than in underlying direction. A

common thread running through all of Saramago's major novels has been the need for a reappraisal of where humanity finds itself today, as well as of where Portugal has been in the past.<sup>4</sup> The value of the specific events recounted in a work such as *Baltasar and Blimunda* lies in the reflections that they prompt in the present-day reader (often stimulated by anachronistic allusions in the text to events subsequent to the period in which the novel is set). The novelist himself has recognized this, quoting Fernand Braudel: "History is merely a constant examination of the past, carried out in terms of the problems and the points of interest, as well as the fears and concerns surrounding and afflicting us in the present."<sup>5</sup> This allegorical tendency to write about something more than the immediate subject-matter in hand is therefore one that is not totally new to the author, even if it appears now in a purer form.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, the key difference between the earlier and the more recent novels in this respect is that, with the elimination of specific references to time, place and name, the reader's attention is drawn explicitly and immediately to considerations that are more universal in character than those prompted by works set in specific historical moments. More particularly, the Platonic context should lead us to see these texts as reflecting the imperfections of the world in which we live by comparison with a more ideal model (even if the author's pronouncements outside the literary arena on political and social issues make it clear that his ideal society would bear little resemblance to the hierarchical one proposed in *The Republic* and, in fact, no specific solutions for a better society are advanced in either of the novels under consideration here).

Setting this allegorical tendency to one side, it is not easy to see many other features in common between *Blindness* and *All the Names*; in the earlier of these two texts social order breaks down completely, while the world of Senhor José is one marked by a rigid and hierarchical respect for order. In terms of the reception given to the two works, Craig Nova wrote of *Blindness* that "by the way it is written, in the details that Saramago uses to such good effect, almost all of the horrors of the twentieth century are addressed,"<sup>7</sup> while *All the Names* prompted one reviewer (José Leon Machado) to criticise it for its blandness. Finally, whereas *Blindness* eventually sees the recreation of community from the bleak circumstances that bring its protagonists together, Senhor José remains an essentially solitary creature throughout *All the Names*. However, an analysis of the narrative structure of these two novels will reveal that they share as their defining narrative event a symbolic descent into the

underworld that brings profound changes in the lives of their protagonists and permits them to find the prospect of life where previously there was only death and a lack of real meaning. As part of the process of affirmation of the dynamic potential of human life that arises from this realisation, both novels stress the importance of a creative and imaginative response to the world as a mark of true civilisation, and in both novels the act of remembering and recording human experience acquires importance as their respective protagonists struggle to assert some control over the circumstances in which they must live their lives.

In the case of *Blindness*, the motif of the descent into the underworld exists in two separate forms: in general terms, all of the major characters of the novel might be said (to use a colloquialism) to go through Hell and back before emerging as stronger human beings with a greater bond to their fellows at the end of the text. More specifically, however, it is the doctor's wife (the one figure who retains her sight throughout the text while all others lose theirs) who has to endure most, in that she sees the misery that others can only imagine: "I am simply the one who was born to see this horror" (247). She is also the only character to willingly sacrifice her sight (when she descends into the unlit basement storeroom of a supermarket to find food for her comrades [204-08] and, again, when she goes, "Blind in the darkness" [248], to fetch water from the toilet in her home for the boy with the squint). It is her insistence on retaining contact with the notion of humanity as a civilised species that helps to bring the others through their period of greatest difficulty, as she insists on burying the dead body of the old woman (268), bringing her friends into her clean home in spite of the dirt on their bodies and clothes (243) and then washing (250-51) and dressing them in fresh garments (246). The concepts of Heaven and Hell recur in this episode, as her apartment—which has surprisingly remained unoccupied during the period of crisis—is compared to Paradise (242), so that the other members of the group (described here as "pilgrims") fear that their dirt will transform it from this Edenic state into a Hell similar to the one from which they have emerged (242-43). The real mark of civilisation on the part of the doctor's wife, however, is surely that she is willing to accept this contamination of her own space for the sake of the others.

The obvious specific problem in understanding this novel is that of the interpretation to be placed on a sudden and devastating epidemic of blindness that strikes an entire country. There are a variety of straightforward

explanations that it would be tempting to put forward, yet none of them proves adequate to account for the events recounted. There is an obvious temptation to see the mass blindness as a process of contagion, for some link can be traced amongst all of the early victims, who have either been present in the doctor's surgery during the first blind man's visit or who have had other direct dealings with the early victims before their incarceration. Yet this would not account for the fact that the doctor's wife remains unaffected by the condition throughout the novel, nor would it explain the sudden blindness of the first man at the beginning of the novel, an event that occurs in the most prosaic of circumstances.

Equally some readers might be tempted to place a moral judgment on the characters, and, once again, there is textual evidence that could be used to support such a view: the second person to go blind is the man who steals the first victim's car and he does so before he has moved thirty paces away from the vehicle (17), a fact that has been seen as an echo of Judas Iscariot's thirty pieces of silver in the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, on at least two occasions the narrator (21 and 219) brings into discussion the sexual behaviour of another of the first victims, the girl with the dark glasses, who is a prostitute and who loses her sight during an encounter with a client (23). Yet, as will become apparent on a closer examination of the passages that recount these events, it surely becomes unsustainable to argue that the novel seeks to impose any kind of exemplary judgment on these two characters; rather, I intend to argue that any such treatment of these two characters merely reveals that the figure of the narrator is as bewildered by the sequence of events that he narrates as we, the readers, and that explanations for events based on notions of superhuman moral retribution can exist only in the eye of the beholder and not in any objective reality.

Firstly, as regards the girl with the dark glasses, it is only narratorial insistence that brings the woman's profession into our consciousness at all (21), and, even then, the comments made about her are by no means filled with moral indignation; instead, the over-elaborate tone of the discourse adopted by the narrator here should remind us that this is merely a subjective perspective imposed upon events by one particular observer.<sup>9</sup> In fact, as the novel unfolds, it becomes evident that any such hasty judgment of this woman's sexual practices not only accords them an unjustified level of significance (certainly by comparison with some of the events that take place later in the text). Any such judgment would also mean ignoring all other

aspects of her character: her subsequent actions demonstrate that, in spite of her profession, she is no easy conquest (45-46), while she also possesses many traditional virtues, displayed most prominently in her repeated kindness to the young boy with the squint, in her voluntary act of washing the back of the old man with the eye patch (255), and in her remorse for having wounded the car thief (56 and 71).

Similarly, the thirty steps taken by the car thief can be related to the betrayal of Christ only if we care to read that interpretation into the words used by the narrator. It should be noted that the blindness strikes when the thief "had gone not even thirty paces" (17).<sup>10</sup> One wonders therefore how many paces he had taken: perhaps twenty-eight or twenty-nine? If the number of steps taken were counted more precisely here, or measured in metres rather than in paces, then there would be no significance readily visible in this event at all. There is a temptation to apportion blame here, then, but in fact this leads us as readers no further than it does the hotel maid who blames her blindness on seeing the girl with the dark glasses lying naked in bed, only in the end to find herself quarantined in the same ward as her (58-59). Both in regard to this character and to the girl with the dark glasses, therefore, any reader who might be tempted to leap to hasty morally based judgments of their affliction is, ironically, succumbing to the same kind of blindness as the chambermaid does in seeking a simplistic scapegoat for a much more deeply rooted problem; in fact, these incidents demonstrate no evidence of any real connection based on cause and effect and function rather as an ironically alluring invitation to the reader to perceive such a causal relationship while then subsequently revealing its essential irrelevance and over-simplicity when confronted with the complexities of modern life.

This type of portrayal of events has its precedents in earlier works such as *The Stone Raft* (1986), where the reader closes the text without becoming any wiser as to the causes of the strange events recounted in its pages.<sup>11</sup> In fact, both in that novel and in this one, it could be argued that it is the changing relationships amongst the various characters that give the text its real significance, rather than the events taking place around them. The real explanation for the epidemic in *Blindness*, therefore, is surely that we should not waste our time looking for rational explanations for it, as we would do if this were a real-world event; this is a literary work and the greatest importance of the outbreak of blindness may lie as easily in the plane of significance as in that of science. The key point is that the epidemic happens



and that certain consequences flow from it; any attempts that we may make to offer a logical explanation for the blindness indicate that we ourselves have failed to follow the lesson of the epigraph to the work (taken from Saramago's invented *Book of Exhortations*): "If you can see, look. If you can look, observe." As Maria Alzira Seixo writes, "What Saramago does not do is to tell an allegorical story where he implicitly suggests what is wrong and how that wrong can be put right; rather, Saramago *warns* us of a danger, the danger of not seeing, of not noticing" ("Os espelhos virados para dentro" 196; original emphasis).

Previous critics have seen precedents for *Blindness* in some of the author's own writing of the 1970s, notably in *O Ano de 1993* (*The Year 1993*, untranslated, 1975) and in the short stories "Embargo" and "Things," in *Objecto Quase* (*Almost an Object*, untranslated, 1978).<sup>12</sup> In the case of "Embargo," the story arises from a similar situation to that of this novel: an unnamed man, driving his car in an unnamed city, suddenly finds that he has lost all control over his own life as he effectively becomes a prisoner of his vehicle. This story (written at the height of the international oil crisis of the early 1970s) could be read as a satirical fancy based around our modern over-reliance on technology (as, indeed, could also be said of *Blindness* itself at times). What makes this story particularly interesting in the current context, however, is that the desperate conclusion, where the man is thrown out into the wilderness by the car once it runs out of fuel, is completely avoidable, for at one point the driver is able to stop outside his own house and summon his wife down to the street and explain the problem to her. He then becomes embarrassed at the situation in which the emergency services would find him and chooses to give himself up to whatever fate the car may have in store for him rather than wait to be saved and lose face in the process (16-17). Ultimately, therefore, it is a lack of faith in others and excessive concern with his own image that condemns him and not his situation itself, however unpleasant that may be.<sup>13</sup>

In the case of *Blindness*, Maria Alzira Seixo has pointed to this issue of trust, specifically discussing the hesitancy in the relationship between the first victim and the car-thief, which she sees as the commencement of the essential plot of the novel ("Os espelhos" 193),<sup>14</sup> and in general terms it seems appropriate to say that it is a lack of trust in others and generosity of spirit towards others that magnifies the impact of the epidemic here. This is true at two different levels. Firstly, in terms of the relationships between those who

have not been struck blind and those who have (and who are quarantined in a disused mental asylum), the victims are effectively treated by the authorities as undesirable aliens rather than as fellow human beings in distress. One of the most striking instances is the execution of the car thief, who approaches the edge of the compound to seek medical assistance, only to be executed instantly by a panicking soldier (69), an incident that recalls the summary elimination of the solitary sailor during a similar state of national emergency in *The Stone Raft* (184). However, the same principle also applies to relationships within the asylum itself, where smaller quarrels over food supplies and hygiene eventually escalate into bullying and exploitation of the whole community by the residents of one ward.

One of the key aspects of the presentation of the worst side of human nature in this novel, however, is the fact that this is no simplistic opposition of cruel oppressors and innocent victims. The lack of faith in others runs throughout this society, with the blind themselves calculatedly oppressing the blind, never more clearly than when those who have stockpiled the food supplies demand women in return for releasing rations to the other wards (150). What is equally alarming, however, is the response to this problem amongst the small group of characters on whom the text focuses, for one can see by their reactions that they, too, are in danger of ceasing to treat their fellow humans with the full respect that is due to them: some of the men callously expect that the women should do their duty towards the community as a whole by simply accepting their own rape as the price that must be paid for the survival of all (150). However, even the superficially honourable reaction of the first blind man, who wishes to forbid his wife to prostitute herself for food (152), proves, on closer examination, to be equally possessive in its implications for gender relations, as it implies not only that women other than his wife must accept their own degradation in order that they may eat (153), but also that he has not, as yet, succeeded in recognising and respecting his wife's ability to make her own judgments in a moral dilemma such as this one. This incident also briefly raises the question of homophobic intimidation, when one of the women raises the awkward question of what would have happened if the demand had been for men rather than for women, producing the reply "There are no pansies here" (151), a declaration impossible to confirm or to refute as a statement of fact and which merely indicates another potential path of suffering, one which is not, however, followed up later in the novel.

Essentially, the picture of humanity in *Blindness* is an abject one, with little left towards the end of the text to distinguish the human beings from the scavenging dogs around them in the streets of the city. It is therefore tenable to suggest that the author's decision not to name his characters is not only a choice intended to make this a novel of any city in any country but also a realistic reflection of the loss of humanity in a society that has lost its sense of compassion and solidarity. For not only are the characters themselves unnamed, but even other references remain anonymous: the artists whose paintings are mentioned as one character recalls going blind in a museum of art are identified only by nationality, even though the works referred to include such famous paintings as Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Constable's *Haywain* and Picasso's *Guernica* (116). Similarly, in the scene in the church in the final chapter of the novel, the references to all of the religious figures (including both Jesus and Our Lady, as well as various saints) are also reduced merely to physical descriptions, as if the narrator had lost his memory, as certainly appears to have happened to the characters themselves (284).<sup>15</sup>

More striking still in this scene is the fact that all of these images have had their eyes covered over (284). When the doctor's wife reveals this fact, all of the blind people who have been seeking shelter in the building abandon it in panic, surely an indication that they have been waiting for a miracle (286).<sup>16</sup> It is only after this incident (when hope for externally imposed solutions has been exhausted) that sight begins to be restored to the population, as mysteriously and as suddenly as it had been lost, and it is also this incident that prompts the doctor's wife to raise the issue of reciprocity in vision, commenting that the saints see through the eyes that see them (284). When taken together with her suggestion that her vision will eventually lose its worth in a world where nobody else can see ("I'll see less and less all the time, even though I may not lose my eyesight I shall become more and more blind because I shall have no one to see me" [284-85]), this implies that her solitary role as the custodian of values cannot be borne indefinitely: civilisation is a precious inheritance that we all have a responsibility to preserve.

This incident is reminiscent of the scene towards the end of *Baltasar and Blimunda*, where Baltasar and Blimunda go to see the statues of the saints that are to be placed on top of the Convent at Mafra (316-18). In that dialogue, Blimunda (said by the novelist himself to be the twin sister of the doctor's wife, a woman with greater powers of eyesight than the others



around her)<sup>17</sup> reaches the conclusion that the saints have been silenced and rendered meaningless as statues (317), and then goes on to stress the dynamic nature of human existence, with all people continually growing and changing, even Francisco Marques, who was killed earlier in the text (318). These puzzling remarks raise issues that are more prominent in *All the Names* than in *Blindness*, but before discussing these more fully it will be necessary to consider the former novel in more general terms.

In *All the Names* there is no breakdown of order as happens in the earlier work: the nightmare in this text lies rather in the all-consuming nature of the order that does exist. The archaic and hierarchical organisation of the Registry where Senhor José works effectively reduces his life to a function rather than an existence, and it appears that he has no friends, only colleagues with whom he maintains distant relationships of no real substance. He has no existence autonomous from his job; his home is part of the property of the Registry and can be accessed from it at any time (something that he does not dare to question when the deputy enters his home without invitation [104]). Senhor José himself appears to have no outside interests, other than collecting information about the lives of celebrities, a pastime that may add some taste of vicarious glamour to his existence but which in effect is merely an extension of his professional life. Furthermore, his sense of awe and intimidation in the face of the Registrar indicates a person who could not imagine himself either possessing or even wishing to possess any personal qualities other than those required strictly for his limited professional obligations. Significantly, in his first conversation with the old woman who lived downstairs from the unknown woman whom he seeks, he declares that by comparison with the Registrar he himself is not worth anything (49), a chilling reminder of the words repeatedly used by the willing servants of fascism in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* "We are nobody" (313, 314, 323 and 325). During the course of the narrative, however, he grows in stature, developing talents for deception and burglary and qualities of courage and endurance that make him unrecognisable as the meek functionary who is introduced to us at the beginning of the text, so that later on he is able to see an alarming vision of his own former self in the person of the clerk who serves him at the Cemetery with "the absorbed air of one who no longer expects anything more from life" (221).

As has also been seen in *Blindness*, the hierarchy here is not one of simple opposition, for Senhor José himself relishes even the limited powers that he

possesses as an employee of the Registry, threatening police action against the old woman if she does not cooperate with him in his investigation (47) and refusing to let her ask him any questions in return (48). Yet his use of authority can work only to a limited degree: the Registrar may be said to know all of the names ever used (49), but the knowledge possessed by his Registry does not pass beyond the level of the sketchiest biographical information, and when the old woman tells Senhor José some facts about her own past, she reminds him that this now makes his knowledge superior to that of the Registrar himself (49). The Registrar is therefore seen to be merely like a human version of the telephone book, which he seems to regard as a rival when Senhor José looks at it instead of him during one of their conversations (64-65). These gaps in the apparently encyclopaedic knowledge of the Registry, which are comparable to the failings of Borges' "Funes, the Memorious," the person who has a perfect memory for facts but who is unable to link them in a meaningful way, may also be related to Saramago's representation of historiography in some of his earlier novels, notably *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1989). There the conscious alteration made by the proofreader Raimundo Silva, who inserts the word "not" into a vital passage of an academic work of history, is seen to be no worse than the (presumably) unconscious incongruencies and anachronisms imposed on the text by its original author.<sup>18</sup> The telephone directory, the Registry and historical accounts of the past all contain a huge mass of potentially useful information, but these data need to be made meaningful in order to be of any use. Thus, Senhor José's search for the unknown woman whose details he unintentionally removes from the Registry becomes a search not for a handful of bare biographical details, but for the real human being who lies behind them, a search that, as has been suggested by Adrián Huici, is really a search for himself as much as for the other ("Perdidos en el laberinto" 457).

The fact that Senhor José's search ends in apparent failure (with the discovery that the woman whom he seeks is already dead) is not as important as the lessons that he learns in the course of his investigations. The most important of these is in his second conversation with the woman on the ground floor of the building where the unknown woman spent her childhood (162-73). Having used his professional role (both in this conversation with the older woman and in their previous one [48]) to elicit information useful to his own purposes (as well as to obtaining unsolicited

personal information about her past sexual history [48]), Senhor José withholds until late in their conversation the most important knowledge that he has about the woman whom he seeks and whom the old woman knew as a child: namely the unexpected fact of her death (167). The fact that in their first conversation he had reprimanded her for withholding information useful to him (52) indicates that up to this moment Senhor José has not been interested in building a reciprocal relationship with this woman (or with any other person), but only in gratifying his own desires. While his sin here is a relatively small one in degree, it should be clear that this is exactly the same assumption about others in kind as that made by the rapists in the asylum in *Blindness*.

In this novel, when the old woman reproaches Senhor José for having lied to her throughout their dealings with one another (168-69), he finally begins to build a genuine relationship with another person, admitting the whole story of his unusual preoccupation with an unknown woman, which has led him to tell lies, falsify documents, and break into the school that she attended as a child in order to satisfy his curiosity about her (170). In doing so, quite unexpectedly, he has stumbled upon something closer to the real sense of his quest, which cannot be to find out the simple biographical facts of the unknown woman (for it is clear from relatively early on in the text that any member of the public, including Senhor José, would be entitled to use the facilities of the Registry to seek information on any other person [7]). The fact that he chooses to go about his search by illegitimate means (as he cannot think of a logical reason to justify his interest in the unknown woman) demonstrates that he at least, if not this society as a whole, views the wish for genuinely human contact to be something suspicious. The Registry thus acquires a vaguely Orwellian aura that is also reminiscent of the large eyes made of mercury that keep the population under surveillance in Saramago's own *O Ano de 1993* (XI: 11-13).<sup>19</sup>

Senhor José makes a total of four expeditions that could be viewed as descents into the underworld: the night and day that he spends in the unknown woman's school (72-95); his nocturnal exploration of the section of the dead in the Registry (141-53);<sup>20</sup> the visit to the cemetery to seek out the grave of the unknown woman (184-211); and, finally, his visit to the woman's apartment in search of clues as to the reasons for her death, reasons that, in the final analysis, he comes to realise are as irrelevant to him as the physical causes of the blindness should be to the reader of the earlier novel (234-39).

Not all of the traditional elements associated with a visit to the underworld are present in all of these episodes, but the key component, that of the incursion into forbidden territory, is recurrent in all of them, and, as Huici demonstrates, many of the other formal features of the journey into the underworld are reflected in the details of these episodes ("Perdidos en el laberinto" 458-59).

The most interesting of these incidents in the current context is that of the visit to the cemetery. The design of the cemetery itself is reminiscent of the one outlined in the story "Reflux" ("Refluxo") in *Objecto Quase*, where a king tries to banish the prospect of death from his awareness by creating a hermetically sealed-off zone of the kingdom that will house all of the graves needed. As time passes, however, nature overcomes order and the force of death, represented by the graves themselves, creeps beyond the boundaries that have been artificially imposed on it and back into the life of the country. Similarly, in *All the Names*, what started out as a neat, geometrically organised and strictly delimited area of the city has slowly stretched out its tentacles into every available space of clear ground, so that, paradoxically, from the air the city of the dead is said to resemble what is normally a symbol of life, the shape of a tree (186). This description reminds the reader of the potential for renewed growth in the stick placed over Pedro Orce's grave at the end of *The Stone Raft* (263), and thus asserts that death is as much a part of the continually self-renewing cycle of life as the process of living itself, thus justifying Isabel Pires de Lima's identification of the cemetery as an allegory of life itself: "ever-changing, chaotic, uncertain, meaningless" (424).

Here Senhor José meets the enigmatic figure of a shepherd, whom cultural tradition might lead us to associate with the figure of Jesus if it were not for the existence of a character called Pastor playing the part of the Devil in the author's earlier novel *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991). In view of this fact it is hardly surprising that this shepherd turns out to be anything but a reassuring figure, as he informs Senhor José that, far from having succeeded in locating the grave of the unknown woman, he has only found one of many graves that might be hers, for he rearranges at random the numbers given to each grave by the cemetery personnel so as to make identification of their places of burial virtually impossible (208-09). He is therefore a spirit who replaces order with chaos, just as his namesake in the earlier novel is less a personification of evil and more an emblem of the inevitability of change and human growth, the same spirit that inspires



Raimundo Silva's minor but far-reaching act of rebellion in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*.

What is also striking in this episode is not only that the cemetery as a whole was originally designed on highly artificial lines but that the woman's grave is to be found in a section specifically reserved for suicides. This is not merely a reflection of the Roman Catholic tradition according to which suicides cannot be buried on consecrated ground, but also a reflection of sections of two previous literary visits to the world of the dead, in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* (185) and in the thirteenth Canto of Dante's *Inferno* (129-37). In both of these works suicide is presented negatively: in Virgil the souls of those who killed themselves suffer far greater torments in the afterlife than they did on earth, while in Dante they are punished by being reduced to the status of plants. In both of these cases, however, the souls of the dead can still give an example to those whom they have left behind in this life; by contrast, in Saramago's novel there is no suggestion of any existence beyond the grave; the only thing that bears witness to the past life of the unknown woman is a silent gravestone marked only with an anonymous number. Worse even than the suffering of the souls seen in Dante and Virgil, then, is the total non-being that awaits the dead in Saramago: this woman is simply no more, and the title of the novel, *All the Names*, which previously signified a pretension to omniscience, now takes on a new sense, since it no longer matters which one of all the names is given to any particular body.<sup>21</sup>

Senhor José decides to spend the night in the cemetery, sheltering in the body of a hollow tree, which may be seen to represent both the hollowness of his own life up until this point and also the coffin that will await him some day in the future (205-06).<sup>22</sup> When he returns to the land of the living, Senhor José, who earlier used his status as an employee of the Registry to declare the unknown woman to be still alive in ignorance of the fact that she had just committed suicide,<sup>23</sup> now returns to the house of the old woman to find that she has been taken away in an ambulance, and neither he nor we have any further sight of her (240-41). This is therefore a final reminder to him of both the fragility of life and yet also of its importance, as he is told by the mysterious shepherd: "It's life that's sacred, Mr Clerk" (209). Like Orpheus, Senhor José returns from the underworld having glimpsed the woman whom he has pursued into the kingdom of death but unable to bring her back with him. Unlike Orpheus, however, he does not succumb to despair over her loss but sets out to participate more actively in the world



than before, just as Francis of Assisi ultimately learns to do in his second life in Saramago's drama, *A Segunda Vida de Francisco de Assis* (*The Second Life of Francis of Assisi*, untranslated, 1987, 131).

The particular point of interest in the play's conclusion as regards a comparison with *All the Names* and *Blindness* is that its final words refer to Francisco's attempts to eradicate poverty from the world in terms of writing a book, for his mother declares "I'm going to help João write his first page" (132).<sup>24</sup> This metaphor is a recurrent one in the author's fiction (one might think, for example, of the renewed sense of purpose in life found by H. in *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* [1977] or by Raimundo Silva in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*), and it also reappears in the two novels under consideration here, in the form of Senhor José's diary in *All the Names* and in the figure of the blind writer in *Blindness*, who has continued to work in spite of his own condition and the chaos all around him.

This question is intimately related to the author's treatment of the realisation of the potential of the individual as an active participant in the world. One of the most frightening aspects of *Blindness* lies not in the brutal crimes that the reader sees perpetrated within the asylum, nor in the total degradation into which the city has fallen when the inmates escape from it, but in the passivity of their response to these horrors. This is highlighted at least twice in the narrative, firstly at the moment of escape from the asylum, when the inmates are reluctant to leave the familiar environment in which they have been held, however unpleasant that experience may have been: "Say to a blind man, you're free, open the door that was separating him from the world, Go, you are free, we tell him once more, and he does not go, he has remained motionless there in the middle of the road, he and the others, they are terrified, they do not know where to go" (195). The second instance occurs when the doctor's wife returns from her expedition to find food, only to discover her companions "dreaming they were stones, and we all know how deeply stones sleep, a simple stroll in the countryside shows it to be so, there they lie sleeping, half buried" (211). This section of the novel sees the sense of humanity of the main characters at its lowest ebb, for here not only do we see that people do not treat one another with the courtesy due to other human beings, but it is evident that the protagonists appear even to have accepted the loss of their own former status as self-sufficient creatures.

The mission of the doctor's wife from this point onwards lies not only in securing the short-term needs of herself and her companions but also in

reminding them of their own and others' humanity, in other words, in restoring meaning to human life, as emerges from the discussion in the home of the girl with dark glasses:

Then there is no future, said the old man with the black eyepatch, I cannot say whether there will be a future, what matters for the moment is to see how we can live in the present. Without a future, the present serves no purpose, it's as if it did not exist, Perhaps humanity will manage to live without eyes, but then it will cease to be humanity, the result is obvious, which of us think of ourselves as being as human as we believed ourselves to be before, I, for example, killed a man... (228-29)

These remarks follow speculation as to whether or not there can be a government in the land of the blind, a prospect that the doctor's wife dismisses as "a government of the blind trying to rule the blind, that is to say, nothingness trying to organise nothingness" (228), or, to use a linguistic metaphor, a signifier that has become vacuous because there is no longer a signified for it to represent. Indeed, even during the short time in which she explores the city, the doctor's wife finds that language is already losing all content of any real significance, as her fellow citizens are so bored that they can break their silence only to make cheap sexual innuendo (203). Equally, in the asylum, the only inmate other than her who has managed to preserve literacy is the blind accountant (who was already blind before the epidemic and who therefore has a system to keep records). He forms part of the group of hoodlums who hold the other wards to ransom over the food supplies; his function is therefore effectively similar to that of the Registry in *All the Names*, that is, to record bald facts of little or no real human content. With time, the doctor's wife knows that literacy will be lost and, along with it, language itself, which separates humans from the animal world; already, in her movements around the city, she has seen how others have been reduced to silent functioning, like ants, because they have nothing left to say to one another as they go about their aimless existences:

they were constantly bumping into each other like ants on the trail, but when this happened no one protested, nor did they have to say anything, one of the families moved away from the wall, advanced along the wall opposite in the other direction, and thus they proceeded and carried on until the next encounter. (202-03)

She therefore seeks to restore meaning to the slightest gesture, turning a simple matter such as drinking clean water into a ceremony akin to a banquet or a eucharist (249) and insisting on giving a decent burial to the old woman whose dead body they find in the street (268). As they bury her, the doctor's wife exclaims "She will rise again" (270), which leads the narrator to offer the puzzling remark: "note that she did not say She will live again, the matter was not quite that important, although the dictionary is there to confirm, reassure or suggest that we are dealing with complete and absolute synonyms" (270). Giovanni Pontiero's choice of words in translating this passage suggests that he at least understood it as referring to a symbolic resurrection of the dead, comparable to that of the workers who have helped to bring about the Revolution at the end of *Levantado do Chão* (364-66).<sup>25</sup> In other words, when a better society has been reconstructed from the ruins of what we see in this novel, it will be possible to say that her death was not in vain.

In order for this to happen, however, the survivors of this nightmare have to relearn the values that should never have been lost, and this is where we may find the significance in the encounter with the blind writer, who has been living in the home of the first victim and writing words (which he himself cannot read) by touch and guesswork in order to record the experiences endured by this society (259-63). The two significant points to note in this encounter are, firstly, that it leads the doctor's wife to reawaken the minds and the memories of her comrades by reading to them that evening (263), and, secondly, in that, by contrast with the predatory and opportunistic mentality that dominates the city, the writer and the normal inhabitant of the apartment come to a civilised arrangement over the occupancy of the property (261). In other words, this writer has succeeded in preserving not only the signifiers (the words that he writes) but also the values of communication with others and respect for others, which lie behind the use of language and which have been all but lost during the time of crisis. His experience represents therefore the recognition of the other as a subject of discourse, as a person of equal value to oneself.

Equally important, however, is what happens in *All the Names*, where it is the main character, Senhor José himself, who turns to writing, and, significantly, he does so as his sense of independence grows from the apparently iron discipline of the Registry. There can also be little doubt that it is his actions that lead to the change in practice in this institution, when the quasi-divine figure of the

Registrar announces that henceforth the section of the dead will be reunited with that of the living (181): unknown to Senhor José, his actions have been observed throughout, and, when he returns to his home for the last time during in the novel, it is to find the Registrar himself reading the journal that he has kept of his adventures (242). Senhor José's writing, therefore, becomes valuable in that it represents the legitimate expression of the *self* as a subject of discourse, as a person of equal value with others, so that by the end of the text he abandons his previously subservient attitude towards authority and challenges the Registrar's unexpected entry into his home (242).

Throughout the novel, in fact, Senhor José's behaviour has been dominated by signifiers devoid of their signifieds (for example, the biographical facts that he collects about famous people without knowing anything of substance about their lives or characters) or by meanings that are not of his own creation (the near-sanctity of the Registry and its hierarchical functions; the repeated references to decisions or ideas taking possession of him rather than him taking decisions or formulating ideas [30-31, 55-56, and 174-75]; and the revelations about his own behaviour made to him by the ceiling of his room as he contemplates it [135 and 214-15]). Even the pursuit of the unknown woman, the turning point in his life, comes upon him unexpectedly when he finds that he has accidentally removed her documents from the Registry along with those for one of the famous people in his collection (26). The important point here is that, having been presented with this opportunity to invest her file with meaning by finding out more about the real woman (the signified) lying behind the file (the signifier), he then pursues the matter doggedly, even after he is aware of her death, thus not giving in to the temptation of passive acceptance of the world, a possibility that crosses his mind during his time in the unknown woman's school:

And if, in order to get into each of those schools, he had to suffer as much as he had suffered breaking into this one, then it would be better to remain in the peace and quiet of his home, resigned to knowing of the world only what the hands can grasp without actually leaving the house, words, images, illusions. (89)

This refusal to submit to received truths then leads him to the discovery of a more satisfactory "truth" than that contained in the static and musty archives of the Registry, in that the school's records are progressive and

dynamic, containing files for each pupil for each year spent in the school, along with photographs, which record the pupils' physical development. Not only does Senhor José recognise the superiority of these records to those in his own place of work (95), but this leads also to an immediate change in the self that he sees in a mirror: "It doesn't even look like me, he thought, and yet he had probably never looked more like himself" (95). He will no longer be deceived by appearances, so that when he collects his trousers from the dry-cleaners after the damage done to them in the burglary on the school, he cannot help but see beyond the excellent repair job done on them ("you wouldn't even know there was anything there," he is told by the shop-assistant, prompting the narrator's ironic comment "that is how people who content themselves with mere appearances speak" [157]).<sup>26</sup>

Senhor José comes to realise that the only signified whose meaning is absolute is that of the dead; it is for this reason that it does not matter whose body lies under which gravestone. In terms of the living, however, all the names in the world cannot sum up the inexhaustible variety of any individual, who is constantly prone to change. As the unknown woman's former downstairs neighbour reminds him, knowing another person is not an absolute; it is a constantly self-renewing process:

And did it occur to you that, at the moment when she was actually there before you, you would know as much about her as you did on the day you first decided to look for her, that is, nothing, and that if you wanted to know who she was, you would have to begin looking again. (170-71)

This is essentially the same thought as Saramago expresses in writing about the value of travel in his own country at the end of his *Viagem a Portugal* (*Journey to Portugal*, 1980):

The end of one journey is merely the beginning of another. It is necessary to see what has not been seen, to see again what has been seen before, to see in the spring what was seen in the summer, to see in daylight what was seen at night, to see in sunlight what was viewed before in rainfall, to see the harvest when it is still green, to see fruit once it has ripened, to see the stone that has moved and the shadow that was not there before. It is necessary to retrace the steps already taken, to repeat them, and to make new tracks by their side. It is necessary to begin the journey all over again. Always. The traveller is going back already. (387)



Signifiers, then, do not have unchanging meanings assigned to them by some objective authority of the type of Olympian superiority that appears to surround the Registrar in this novel: their meaning exists only in terms of the needs of those who require them and is prone to constant change. This lesson is brought home to Senhor José by the disruptive actions of the shepherd in the cemetery, which lead him to dream of numbered sheep swapping their numbers in a way so bewildering that he is no longer able to tell whether it is the signifiers (the numbers) which are losing their signified (the sheep) or vice versa (212). In practice, of course, it does not matter which of these possibilities is true, since the effect in either event is the same, but the really frightening implication of Senhor José's dream is the reduction of the living creatures to indistinguishable sheep, which can be led to wherever their leader chooses.

The realisation that he can never even be sure of identifying the unknown woman's grave entails a definitive loss of the security that appears to surround Senhor José's life at the beginning of the novel: "Suddenly, the ground began to shake beneath Senhor José's feet, the one remaining piece on the board, his final certainty, the unknown woman who had at last been found, had just disappeared" (208). Yet it should be remembered that this movement of the earth beneath his feet recalls the experiences of Pedro Orce and José Anaiço in *The Stone Raft*: the former as he senses the movement of the Iberian Peninsula, which initially seems to be a catastrophe in the making but which later takes on more promising aspects, and the latter when he first meets Joana Carda (92), the woman who is to become his lover but whom he approaches with some suspicion before allowing the positive force of love to enter his life (113-14).<sup>27</sup> Put in this context, therefore, this loss also permits a greater freedom: the liberation from a monolithic certainty dictated from above, allowing the individual to move into a world where old constraints have been removed and one may make use of the past in whatever way is most fruitful for the present, as Orlando Grossegeisse acknowledges:

Saramago sees the past as a range of possible courses of the development of history, which can be sought out anew in memorials or in creative works, thus making them productive and meaningful... in terms of the present and in terms of actions directed towards the future. (*Saramago Lesen* 31)

This is why, at the end of the novel, Senhor José returns to the section of the dead in the Registry, with the "Ariadne's thread" tied firmly around his

ankle, to seek out the death certificate of the unknown woman: he is set on a course to retrieve something of value from the past, but with a commitment to using it for the benefit of the living, as the Registrar recognises in announcing that the records of the dead should be kept amongst the living to prevent their being forgotten altogether (181). This idea was already present in Saramago's first major novel, *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, where H. refuses to forget the dead because "To forget them... would be the first sign of death" (160).<sup>28</sup> In this way the death of the unknown woman, like that of the old woman in *Blindness*, may prove not to have been in vain: she has contributed productively to Senhor José's life and may continue to do so, provided that he himself is willing to live instead of merely existing. Senhor José is now capable of taking his own decisions—"After that time had passed, he realised that he had made a decision, and it wasn't just his usual decision to follow up an obsession, it really was a decision, although he couldn't have explained how he came to make it" (220-21)—and of facing the turning points and choices that need to be addressed in any meaningful existence.

After the inmates leave the asylum in *Blindness*, one of the first people whom they meet on the outside asks the doctor's wife who she is. Her reply ("I'm not from here" [199]) may at first seem a puzzling one, since she is within walking distance of her own home, until we realise that, with the events that have taken place since she was last there, this city can no longer be the place that she once called home, just as also happens to Romeiro in Almeida Garrett's nineteenth-century drama *Frei Luís de Sousa* (1843). Nevertheless the woman's reply is different from the one given by D. João de Portugal when he is challenged as to his identity in the play, for to give his reply—"No-one" (67)—would turn her into what Senhor José is before the adventure that transforms his life: a nobody. Instead, at the end of the novel, when she fears that she will go blind as others recover their sight, she discovers with relief that "The city was still there" (293). The city itself has, of course, been there throughout the novel; what has been lacking has been the "civitas," the Latin word from which the modern Portuguese and English terms "cidade" and "city" derive, but which primarily meant "society" rather than "city" and which has allowed us to develop the notion of "civilisation," of being able to live with one another in peace and mutual respect. This city (which could perhaps be considered a secular version of St. Augustine's City of God) is out there, but, like the unknown woman in *All the Names*, it

cannot be found only once: the struggle for democracy and the exercise of moral values in public life must be a continual one, and one in which we all have our parts to play, as the author himself has suggested in other contexts: "It seems indecent to talk about [democracy] in the abstract, without the stimulus given by the presence, the participation and the involvement of citizens in community life" (*Cadernos de Lanzarote—V, Lanzarote Journals—V*, untranslated, 1998, 219). Only when we all contribute positively to determining our own futures can a "utopia" (literally, a "non-place," such as that of these two novels) become a "eutopia" in the sense of a "good place," and only then will the doctor's wife be able once again to identify with the city where she lives.<sup>29</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Comments made at the Congreso Internacional "Literatura en Português: José Saramago," held at the University of Murcia, 8-11 February 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Saramago has conceded that the city in which *Blindness* is set is based on a vaguely transformed version of Lisbon, with the opening scene occurring "in the Largo do Rato, at those traffic-lights on the Rua de Alexandre Herculano" ("O escritor vidente" 17; in this passage and all others that were originally written in languages other than English, except those taken from works with a readily available published translation, the translation is mine). There are a number of other minor details of the text that place it in a recognisably Iberian context (e.g. the *chouriço* that the doctor's wife eats in the supermarket storeroom [208]), while the church described in the final chapter of the novel is clearly a Roman Catholic one. In the case of *All the Names*, Senhor José is said to live in a "small country," which could be identified with Portugal (17). Nonetheless, these relatively minor details, when placed alongside the total absence of toponyms and references to city landmarks, do not detract from the essential anonymity of the setting in either novel.

<sup>3</sup> "That is, I can observe myself continually and naturally adapting the manner in which I narrate my subject-matter. In this case, that is more noticeable because in terms of the content there has been an abrupt and radical break with everything that I have written previously" ("O escritor vidente" 17).

<sup>4</sup> "That new situation will have led us (and not only me)... to consider what we are and what we have been. I believe that that is what has characterised my books up to now and what I think will continue to characterise them in the future" (Interview with Molina 257).

<sup>5</sup> Saramago attributes this quotation to Braudel's *Le Méditerranée*; he does not offer any more specific bibliographical information than the author and title of the work ("História e Ficção" 20).

<sup>6</sup> Pires de Lima reminds us that the Greek etymology of the word "allegory" is "made up of *allos* ('other') and of *agoreuō* ('I speak'); or, in other words, when I speak about one thing, I am really speaking about another" (417).

<sup>7</sup> The reference here to the horrors of the twentieth century is not an inappropriate one; in an interview given shortly after the novel was published Saramago himself uses the phrase "final

solution," with its clear echoes of Nazism, to refer to the enclosure of the blind people in the asylum ("O escritor vidente" 16).

<sup>8</sup> This connection was made by Adsuar Fernández in her paper given at the conference devoted to Saramago held at the University of Murcia, 8-11 February 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Joanna Courteau, tracing a link to Padre Antônio Vieira's sermons on blindness, argues that there is an exemplary quality in the blindness of the girl with the dark glasses, but that this relates not to the act of prostitution as such but to the hedonistic, self-involved nature of the character's sexual self-expression (10). This line of argument would, at first sight, appear to contradict my suggestion that the blindness does not strike its victims as an exemplary punishment for their sins; however, the nature of Vieira's argument, as adduced by Courteau (8), is based not on specific sinful actions but on the internal motivation for them. I believe that in this sense my own conclusions are consistent with Courteau's and that the sexual behaviour of the character could therefore be viewed negatively, not in terms of prohibitive sexual morality, but as being empty of meaning, as using the act of love as an empty signifier without its corresponding signified (the feeling of love, which she does discover later in the work in her relationship with the old man with the eyepatch [274 and 291]). The question of the distinction between signifier and signified will be discussed more fully below.

<sup>10</sup> The translation here is mine. Pontiero renders this phrase as "He had gone no more than thirty paces," but I have preferred to offer my own more literal version of the original Portuguese ("Ainda não tinha dado trinta passos") in order to reinforce the point that I am making here.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of causality in *The Stone Raft*, see Daniel 539-40.

<sup>12</sup> Although there is no translation of *Objecto Quase* in a book form, all six stories in this work have been published individually in English; the bibliographic details of the stories discussed in the present article are listed in the Works Cited. For discussion of the aspects of *Blindness* derived from "Things," see Costa ("Alegorias da desconstrução urbana" 140-41). For a fuller discussion of the importance of *Objecto Quase* and *O Ano de 1993* in the development of the author's writing in general, see Costa (*O Período Formativo*) 319-49 and 214-53 respectively.

<sup>13</sup> The same could also be said of Saramago's Joseph and Jesus in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, where both characters give themselves up to what they perceive to be the inevitability of their own deaths rather than struggling to avert them. For further discussion of this point, see Frier ("Outline of a Newer Testament"), Grossegese ("José Saramago, *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo*" 129-32), and Kaufman (457).

<sup>14</sup> Note that the driver in "Embargo" may be seen specifically to be a forerunner of the car-thief in *Blindness*, in that both of them end up driving outside the city to a deserted place (that is, both of them symbolically turn their backs on the community) before leaving the vehicles in which they are travelling.

<sup>15</sup> Agripina Carriço Vieira makes what is essentially the same point about the characters of *Blindness* in different terms: "In order to 'give them a name' what the narrator chooses and selects is not an inherent quality but a characteristic that is external, ephemeral and casual" (387), that is, by reducing the characters to how they function in terms of perception by others rather than in their own rights as conscious subjects and actors in the world.

<sup>16</sup> Courteau also sees in this incident an allusion to Vieira's reflection that the greatest virtue lies in a good act that is performed for its own sake "as if God could not see it" (Courteau 11). Her reference to Vieira is to his "Sermon for the Fifth Tuesday of Lent" ("Sermão da Quinta Terça-Feira da Quaresma" [Vieira 82]).

<sup>17</sup> See "José Saramago: todos os pecados do mundo" 82.



<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of this point in relation to *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, see Huici ("Historia y ficción") 145-46.

<sup>19</sup> As *O Ano de 1993* does not have numbered pagination, I have followed the scheme of chapters and verses proposed by Costa to discuss this text (a scheme that he compares to that used in the Bible). See Costa (*O Período Formativo*) 234n.20 and 218.

<sup>20</sup> In this case the association with journeys into the underworld is made explicit in the text: "Senhor José will instead use an ordinary, rustic ball of string... and that string will lead back to the world of the living the person who, at this very moment, is preparing to enter the kingdom of the dead" (141).

<sup>21</sup> This is essentially the same point as is made by Ana Monner Sans, who writes: "What is to be gained by singling out the mortal remains of this person or that person? In the end all people ("hombres") are the same, and thus names ("nombres")—even *all* the names—are not enough to give any distinctiveness to our individual circumstances" (449; original emphasis). The words "homens" and "nomes" do not, of course, form a minimal pair in Portuguese as the words "hombres" and "nombres" (used by Monner Sans) do in Spanish, but this fact does not seem to me to weaken the essential point made here. It also finds an echo in the incident in *Blindness*, where the occupants of one ward, unable to determine which of various dead bodies came from their own group, decide that they will be doing their duty to the memory of their former friends by burying the correct number of corpses, regardless of their identities (82-83).

<sup>22</sup> Leyla Perrone-Moisés suggests that Senhor José's decision to seek shelter inside this tree might be seen instead as a symbolic return to the womb, but she is careful to remind the reader of the multiplicity of significances that could be read into apparently straightforward symbols in this novel: "For example, viewing the night spent in the bulging trunk of an olive tree, in the foetal position, as a process of rebirth... would be tantamount to reducing to a one-to-one correspondence something that is said in such a way as to highlight the gap between signifier and signified" (436). Although Saramago does use the word "berço" ("cradle") to describe this tree trunk, he does not, in fact, specify the posture that Senhor José adopts inside it (although it must be conceded that the foetal position would be the most likely one).

<sup>23</sup> Senhor José realises that the woman's death occurred while he was ill in bed after breaking into the school (154-55); it is only when he is given time off from work to recuperate after this illness that he tells a shop assistant that he has reason to believe that the woman whom he seeks is still alive (132).

<sup>24</sup> Note that in the closing stages of this drama Francisco changes his name to João to indicate the change in his outlook on the world. For further discussion of this aspect of *A Segunda Vida de Francisco de Assis*, see Frier ("In the Beginning") 222-23.

<sup>25</sup> In confirmation of Pontiero's translation, the dictionary Morais treats the two verbs as being near synonyms (and not exact synonyms, as declared by Saramago's narrator), but makes the sense of "restoring something to life from death" ("fazer voltar da morte à vida") a primary meaning in the case of "ressuscitar" (which Pontiero renders as "she will live again") and merely a secondary meaning (after that of "reappearing") in the case of "ressurgir," for which the translator uses "she will rise again" (Silva V., 9).

<sup>26</sup> Note the critical perspective implicit in this remark on the famous maxim of Ricardo Reis, "Wise is the man who contents himself with the spectacle of the world," which lies at the heart of the conception of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*.

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of this aspect of *The Stone Raft*, see Frier, "Agouros e Oportunidades."

<sup>28</sup> The original Portuguese places a greater emphasis on the effects of forgetfulness on H. himself than is conveyed here by Pontiero's translation, which renders "morte minha" ("my death") merely as "death." The idea of the continued exchange between the dead and their



survivors is also what Blimunda refers to in *Baltasar and Blimunda* when she declares that even the dead Francisco Marques is being reborn constantly (318). In describing *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* as the author's first major novel, I am, of course, acknowledging the existence of *Terra do Pecado* (*Land of Sin*, untranslated, 1947), while respecting Saramago's own distancing of this very early work from his mature production.

<sup>29</sup> I derive the distinction between "utopia" and "eutopia" from Ceccucci (211).

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