

## 'Once but no longer the prow of Europe': National Identity and Portuguese Destiny in José Saramago's *The Stone Raft*

Mark J. L. Sabine

It seems paradoxical when a self-professed Marxist produces novels evincing deep scepticism about the viability of the "scientific" Marxist project of materialist historical analysis.<sup>1</sup> José Saramago and his fiction have presented such a paradox since *Baltasar and Blimunda* (*Memorial do Convento*, 1982), a paradox seemingly most acute in *The Stone Raft* (*A Jangada de Pedra*, 1986). Saramago's earlier novels merely questioned the accessibility of objective truth about the past. Yet the tale of an Iberian Peninsula sailing away from Europe not only denies the reader any explanation of the bizarre occurrences that it relates, but also seems to refute the possibility even of establishing a reliable approximation of the truth about the past. Moreover, the book's publication in the year of the Portuguese and Spanish states' commitment to membership of the EEC led many critics to interpret the forces that propel the fictional Iberia away from Europe as promoting not socialist internationalism but a form of separatist Iberian nationalism. Such an interpretation, however, fails to take account of two aspects of the text: first, its championing of the praxis of socialist revolution, and second, the full range of its postmodernist questioning of the nature of knowledge and historiography. While doubt is cast on the foundations of Marxist revolutionary theory, there are also clear indications at the novel's end that abandoning Europe is not in itself a solution to Spain's and Portugal's problems. This study reads *The Stone Raft* as a text that, while conducting a postmodernist critique of the historiographical premises of Marxist revolutionary theory, simultaneously attempts to redirect the aims and values of Portuguese society away from the construction of a single European free trade zone and towards the construction of an egalitarian socialist society.

*The Stone Raft* is set in an immediate future bearing a close but hazy resemblance to the mid-1980s. In this imaginary temporal location, a deep crack opens up along the Pyrenees, and the Iberian Peninsula wrenches itself away from Europe and sails due west across the Atlantic, like a great stone ship or raft. After near-collision with the Azores, the Peninsula changes direction several times, following by turns a rectilinear, then a rotary trajectory before coming to an inconclusive halt between Africa and Latin America, roughly the heart of the post-colonial Hispanophone and Lusophone world. This inexplicable occurrence appears to coincide with five individuals' involvement in bizarre supernatural events. In Portugal, Joana Carda scratches an unerasable line in the earth with a stick of elm wood. José Anaiço is followed everywhere by a benign, yet otherwise Hitchcockian flock of starlings. Joaquim Sassa throws a huge rock into the sea, where it bounces over the waves until it disappears from sight. Over the border in Galicia, Maria Guavaira unravels an infinite length of blue yarn from an old sock, whilst elderly Andalusian Pedro Orce becomes a human seismometer, able to feel the earth trembling under his feet. Suspecting that their actions may have precipitated the geological aberration that has thrown their communities into turmoil, the five meet up and travel the floating landmass, seeking explanations to events in the seemingly exceptional objects and animals they encounter: the elm wand, the blue yarn, the starlings and a fearsome looking yet benign dog that leads them on a circular voyage around the Peninsula.

When the stone raft stops moving and the novel ends, the eldest of the five is dead, and the other four, now two couples and expecting parents, are left debating their futures. Their uncertainty about exactly how to continue their lives and love affairs is aggravated by the failure of their mission of discovery. Throughout the novel, a heterodiegetic narrative voice exposes the characters' conclusions about the determination of history as either implausible or unprovable, but also signals itself as the voice of an outsider who is by their own confession not only far from impartial but also wholly unreliable. This narrative voice gives conflicting evidence, points to lack of proof, or, when agreeing with the characters' suppositions, reveals its assessment of observed phenomena to be highly subjective by recounting events with absurd rhetorical overkill: hyperbole, pathetic fallacy, and speculation about the symbolic nature of an object or event. By highlighting the protagonists' ignorance of their exact circumstances and playing on the reader's desire to extrapolate clues to the Stone Raft's destiny from among the

array of ambiguous symbolic referents, Saramago's text points to the abuse of rhetoric in humankind's attempts to interpret the unknowable, or at least indemonstrable truth about the past.

The belief that the full truth about the past is objectively irrecoverable suggests *The Stone Raft's* authorial ideology to be closer to postmodernism than to Marxism. Through emphasis on the inevitable shortcomings of his/her account, the narrator demonstrates by example the inadequacy of even the purportedly most scientific accounts of history. It notes both the impossibility of collating all existing "evidence," or traces of the past—"the evidence relating to the period, the various documents, newspapers, films, video recordings, chronicles, private diaries, parchments, especially the palimpsests" (25)—and the impossibility of recovering data never committed to the record, as when it claims not to have been given all of the details of the story (203).<sup>2</sup> The narrative voice points to the selection of data for inclusion that anyone compiling an account of the past is obliged to make; the vast bulk of data that must be rejected by foreshortening an analysis of the geological makeup of the peninsula "because of the narrator's lack of knowledge and time" (23). By constantly interrupting itself with comments that satirise, contradict or retract data it has just asserted as, if not true, then at least worthy of the reader's attention, it indicates that the traces of the past frequently contradict one another, forcing the historian to judge which traces are more reliable and which tell more about the past. Inevitably, certain traces must be chosen over others, and some people's experience of the past must be privileged whilst that of others is ignored, as is demonstrated when the narrative voice vainly attempts to include the inhabitants of the peninsula that have been excluded from the story (91). As Keith Jenkins points out in *Re-thinking History* (1991), the traces of the past, whether written or archaeological, do not actually tell us anything; rather, they are the silent pieces of data that the historian manipulates in order to tell his/her own version of events (22 and 38). The subjectivity of the historian is inevitably brought to bear as traces are analysed, processed and codified to re-create the past. The historical account reflects the assumptions and opinions of the present day, and frequently the assumptions and opinions only of a socially privileged minority.

Postmodernist historiography questions the possibility of a single, unbiased account of the past and points out that accounts that are partial in both senses of the word are presented to us as concise and objective. As Linda Hutcheon argues in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, postmodernist narrative fiction has made

a significant contribution to this critique of the assumptions of conventional historians and histories (105-12). Hutcheon uses the term "historiographical metafiction" for fictions that revisit the past to make satirical critiques of how the processing and codifying of images permits the construction of accounts of history in accordance with the dominant or "official" ideology of the present (5-6). Hutcheon's label fits perfectly for Saramago's two previous novels: *Baltasar and Blimunda* and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (*O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*, 1984). Both texts revisit key episodes of Portugal's past, drawing on data that official histories have ignored or suppressed—e.g., the experience of the peasantry and the proletariat—to create an alternative account that, while admitting its own ideological bias, asserts itself as no less valid than existing, equally ideologically motivated accounts. *The Stone Raft*, meanwhile, scrutinises the construction of the dominant conceptions of the present—1980s Portugal—and its ideological motivation: the project of EEC membership to which Saramago has repeatedly voiced his opposition. Helena Kaufman and José Ornelas, in their 1997 study of contemporary Portuguese fiction, observe how the official discourse of mid-1980s Portugal

was already preparing the road for a union with the EEC countries, processing and codifying images which would rationalize its objectives. Even the future of Portugal was called into question; without the union there would be no future. Thus, an impression was created that the *raison d'être* of Portugal, the identity of its people, depended entirely on the formalization of the union. (162)

Primarily, *The Stone Raft* seeks to dismantle ideologies of EEC integration and to create a discursive space for a consideration of alternatives to EEC membership (Kaufman and Ornelas 162). The postulation of the Iberian Peninsula's inexplicable abandonment of Europe for an uncertain ultramarine destiny forms the premise for a chain of counterfactual events, which in turn facilitate the creation of a "counterdiscourse" of Portuguese identity and destiny. Interpolating the discourses of mass media, party politics and canonical literature, Saramago explores the construction and reinvention of national identity through the privileging, suppression and manipulation of both historical data and myth. The novel rearranges the building blocks of Portuguese identity formation—e.g., the nation's relationship to the oceans, the age of the Discoveries and of imperialist expansion eulogised by Portugal's national bard, Camões, and the literature of the purportedly unique



Portuguese emotion of *saudade*—in order to suggest alternative inscriptions of a national ethos.

Although the novel does not assert a monolithic ideological program, it offers these alternative inscriptions as an argument for the viability of a political future for Portugal alternative to that of EEC membership: essentially, future action to eliminate social ills such as poverty, homelessness and sexual discrimination. It may seem hypocritical to denounce one political lobby's textual remaking of past and present as biased and deceptive whilst offering equally contrived, textual evidence to support an alternative agenda. Yet arguably any postmodern text must enter into this contradiction if it seeks to make an active intervention aimed at displacing the dominant ideology. I will argue that *The Stone Raft* effects just such an intervention through the self-consciously contradictory strategy of using counterfactual events to support a political message. It repeatedly advertises its inscription of Portuguese identity and destiny as just as much a rhetorical construction as the one it displaces, but in many instances the fiction that serves to provide justification of that inscription is based on an interpretation of genuine historical data: thinly disguised accounts of the authentic convulsion of Portugal's 1974 revolution. Saramago identifies a different national spirit at work in the social transformations of that period: an aborted project, the completion of which Saramago argues should be the national community's political priority.

The second half of this study explores how the novel treats the manifest practical problems in returning to such a project. As well as looking at what I consider to be the novel's contradictory approach to questions of nationality and identity, I aim to dispute readings by Mary L. Daniel, Piero Ceccucci and others who see *The Stone Raft's* ending as the realisation of Utopia in an Iberia that has slipped the leash of capitalist Europe. Even in this counterfactual future, displacement to the mid-Atlantic can guarantee nothing more than a chance to rethink political options in relation to arguments inevitably based either on immaterial rhetorical devices or on subjective and selective accounts of history.

The novel charts how such subjective and selective histories fuel a debate as to whether or not Spain and Portugal *are* European. As the Pyrenean rift widens, "some member states came close to displaying a certain detachment, there is no more precise adjective, even going so far as to suggest that if the Iberian Peninsula wished to go away then let it go, the mistake was to have

allowed it to come in" (31). Spain and Portugal's longstanding cultural engagement with neighbouring communities to the north and east is conveniently disregarded in order to privilege the idea of the two countries' status as newcomers, based on their only very recent entry into western Europe's dominant political and commercial forum. But opinion is sharply polarized: when the Peninsula does go its own way, a self-styled movement of solidarity picks up across the continent, provoking reaction in the assertion of an ideal European quintessence against which Spain and Portugal can be measured and found wanting:

Although it may not be very polite to say so, for certain Europeans, to see themselves rid of baffling Western nations, now sailing adrift on the ocean, from whence they should never have come, was in itself an improvement, the promise of happier times ahead, like with like, we have finally started to know what Europe is, unless there still remain some spurious fragments which will also break away sooner or later. Let us wager that ultimately we shall be reduced to a single nation, the quintessence of the European spirit, simple and perfect sublimation, Europe, that's to say, Switzerland. (125)

The irony is that the "nation" feted as "quintessential" is the one that has most consistently declined to form alliances or join a European union.<sup>3</sup> The so-called "Iberianist" lobby asserts the freedom of communities to control their destiny free from outside influence when it declaims a slogan echoing J.F. Kennedy's infamous "Ich bin ein Berliner": "We are Iberians too."<sup>4</sup> The dream of a homogenous Europe modeled on a society inaccurately touted as a fusion of the politically and economically dominant nations of the EEC is countered by an ideology of decentralisation and cultural diversity. This ideology finds its fullest expression when the slogan is scrawled on walls across Europe in seventeen languages, listed in full in the text (126). This diversity, however, is served little better by the comfortingly simplistic conception of a patchwork quilt of sovereign nation-states than by a movement towards centralisation and homogenisation. The nation-states that the political establishment eulogises as the "intrinsic foundations" of Europe's identity are not organic entities but precarious constructs, "so laboriously created throughout hundreds of years" (124). The Iberianists' slogan and their protests convulse the continent precisely because they question the integrity not only of the patchwork quilt but also that of the

component patches. The narrative voice's observation that the first appearance of the graffiti slogan—the French “Nous aussi sommes ibériques”—could have been proclaimed first in Belgium or Luxembourg (126) exposes what Benedict Anderson identifies as the fabrication of national consciousness through the arbitrary imposition of “print languages”: standardised versions of vernacular dialects imposed as languages-of-state (67-80). As the protest gathers momentum, the phrase appears “in every conceivable language, even in regional dialects, in various forms of slang” (127) including, no doubt, the minority languages—Breton, Flemish, Alsatian, Occitan, Catalan, Basque—and dialects that French governments sought during so many years to eradicate yet which as spoken languages still extend across political borders, often merging indivisibly into one another.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the nation-state is exposed as a mythical concept.

When European governments respond to the movement of “solidarity” with the Iberian peninsula by staging carefully rigged televised debates (127), the fragile artifice of *identidade europeia* is presented to the reader as a construction (or rather, a panicky reconstruction) in progress. Official media dictate the parameters of debates and impose a definition of opponents of European integration as “those restless spirits who unwisely ... put Europe's identity at risk” (164). Whilst in reality granting a platform only to those who will denounce the insubordination of a wayward, backward European periphery, these “debates” pay lip service to the tradition of free expression and democracy so frequently cited as a hallmark of that (western) European culture now imperilled by separatist fanatics.

This whitewash parallels that identified by Kaufman and Ornelas in the Portuguese media (162), which warned that opposition to EEC membership put the nation's future at risk. The novel also parodies media and government discourses in Spain and Portugal. In both countries an official interpretation of events on the shifting Portuguese coast is imposed through exploitation of two well-known yet conflicting inscriptions of Portuguese character: the Camonian image of heroic maritime pioneers and missionaries, and the image of a contemplative, fatalistic race abstracted in its collective sense of *saudade*, presented by the Spaniard Miguel de Unamuno in his *Por tierras de Portugal y de España* (*Through Portugal and Spain*) of 1910.<sup>6</sup> An embattled Portuguese prime minister apes Camões by assuring the people that the Peninsula's navigation—emphatically not a simple drift—makes Portugal the

envy of Europeans who “see in this historic adventure into which we find ourselves launched the promise of a happier future, or to put it in a nutshell, the hope of regenerating humanity” (169). Meanwhile in Spain, television newscasters report Portuguese reactions to the peninsula’s movement with a paraphrase of Unamuno’s anthropomorphic portrait of Portugal as

a beautiful, gentle country girl sitting with her back to Europe at the brink of the ocean ... resting her elbows on her knees and her head between her hands, as she contemplates the sun’s descent into the infinite waters. (Unamuno 10)

The Spanish TV news is restricted to a single image of the coast,

with the waves beating on the rocks ... and lots of people watching the horizon, with the tragic expression of someone who has been prepared for centuries for the unknown.... There they are now, just as Unamuno described, your dark face cupped between both hands, eyes fixed on where the sun sleeps alone in the infinite ocean. (*Jangada* 93; translation mine)

Further derision follows in the reference to the Iberian national governments rejecting European protests “with manly pride on the part of the Spanish and feminine haughtiness on the part of the Portuguese” (129). This burlesque of Unamuno’s sexist designation of Spain and Portugal as respectively male and female dismisses the implication that Portugal should behave like a good, subservient lady and agree to love and to cherish, to honour and obey (Unamuno 10).<sup>7</sup> Appearances and commonplaces regarding national character can, as Unamuno failed to realise, be misleading: in Saramago’s novel, ironically, it is the Spaniard Pedro Orce who recognises in “the apparent melancholy of the city [of Lisbon] the faithful image of his own intimate sadness” (83).

The reality—or at least that part of it experienced by the novel’s protagonists—does not match with these inscriptions. The lesson to be learned is that it is easy to boast of unique specificities of national character, but quite another thing to find proof for them: a nation’s “nature of conscience,” if it exists at all, is plural, more amorphous and less distinctive than many commentators would like to believe.

In addition to these parodies, the novel makes its own appropriations. The echoes of the voyages of Discovery in the Peninsula’s journey are



exploited in order to combat both European disdain for Portugal and native nationalism. Portugal's primary role in the exporting of European languages, religion and ideas, the importing of material riches of other continents and related projects—from which stem many of the characteristics used to define modern Europe—provides a substantial argument for the Portuguese people's right to be considered European. At the same time, jingoistic notions of Portugal's uniquely exalted status as instigator of ultramarine exploration and conquest is debunked by revision of the bombastic Camonian epithet for Portugal: the prow or head of Europe. After the stone vessel turns 270 degrees on its axis, it sails south with Cap Creus in Catalunya, and not Cabo da Rocha in Portugal, as its prow (257). Elsewhere, however, the same epithet is called up to challenge Unamuno's view of the Portuguese. Portugal has ceased to be the prow of Europe not because its people are, as Unamuno asserted, exhausted and suicidal but because the country has sailed away from the European quay, as a ship of its own:

Look at the Portuguese, all along their golden beaches, once but no longer the prow of Europe, for we have withdrawn from the European quayside to sail once more the Atlantic waves. (71)<sup>8</sup>

Saramago replaces these two chauvinistic inscriptions of national character with values of fraternity and pragmatism. However, he asserts these values as authentically Portuguese not by producing spurious, fictional examples, but by interpolating into the counterfactual sequence an event that parallels documented events of the revolutionary period. Just as in 1974-76 empty housing units in Portuguese cities were occupied by collectives of shantytown dwellers, so in *The Stone Raft* impoverished Algarve residents battle with police to take over abandoned hotel complexes and establish soviet-style communities.<sup>9</sup> The narrator sardonically recalls the Unamunian and Camonian models of Portuguese character:

Seriously ... there are two different types of Portuguese, those who take themselves off to the beaches and sand dunes to contemplate the horizon despondently, and others who advance intrepidly on those hotels-cum-fortresses defended by the police. (75)

The old imperialist heroism gives way to a no more altruistic, but more egalitarian struggle to provide all of humanity with the basic necessities of

life. This pragmatic egalitarianism informs the Portuguese people's spontaneous (if admittedly chaotic) evacuation of the coastal regions when it appears that the Peninsula is about to collide with the Azores. Saving their own skins whilst the Government of National Salvation dithers, the Portuguese confound Unamuno's expectations that they will wallow in the salt waters of their lachrymose "resigned desperation, or ... despairing resignation" (*Jangada* 17; translation mine) until the night of oblivion closes upon them.

However, in order to present this return to the values of 1974 the novel must contradict its own critique of the artificial boundaries drawn through communities by the state frontiers and print languages that, as Benedict Anderson asserts, serve as facilitators and guarantors of capitalist markets regulated by individual sovereign states (67-80). Saramago's splitting of the Pyrenees, creating an absolute division by deep blue water in place of the topographical semi-division of mountains, effectively legitimises the drawing of the boundary between citizens of two states whose only official print languages, until comparatively recently, were French and Castilian respectively. At the same time, it bisects the catchment areas of two dialect clusters that are today strongly affirmed as print languages by local populations: *Catalá* and *Euskera*. Indeed, students of separatist political movements within the Spanish state might argue that the most implausible thing about *The Stone Raft* is not that the Peninsula sails away, but that Catalonia and the Basque country do not split off and sail back to Europe. Analysis of *The Stone Raft's* treatment of Basque and Catalan nationalisms exposes narrative "silences" and "gaps" of the type that Marxist theorist Pierre Macherey famously identifies as pointing to the flaws and blind spots of a work's authorial ideology (85). Although *The Stone Raft* signals its consideration for the cultural concerns of Basque nationalism by, for example, calling Basque cities by their *Euskera* names—"Donostia," not "San Sebastián" (232) and "Gasteiz," not "Victoria" (224)—questions of Basque identity are effaced from the novel's first fifty pages, where the Pyrenean split is established. The split in the western Pyrenees appears in Orbaiceta, Navarra, and no Basque reactions are recorded. At the eastern, Catalan-speaking end of the range, cracks appear on both the French and the Spanish borders of Andorra before the tiny principality finally cleaves to the departing peninsula (23). No such apparent conflict of loyalties, however, is reported as the autonomous province of Catalunya breaks from Catalan-speaking

Rousillon in France, while the Balearic islands—Catalan-speaking and politically united with Catalonia since the thirteenth century—disappear from the text altogether once it is reported that “so far there is no evidence that the islands have moved, but who can tell what tomorrow may bring” (29).<sup>10</sup> Reference to departure from the “European quayside” (71) casts Iberia in the role of one of Álvaro de Campos’s “nation-vessels” [navios-nações], but the Iberian peninsula of the 1980s was surely a ship whose crew would sooner mutiny than accept the label of a single nation.<sup>11</sup>

Tensions between Spain and Portugal and their former colonies are similarly silenced. As the peninsula halts roughly equidistant from Puerto Rico, Brazil and Guinea-Bissau, local reactions go unreported. The narrative seems coy about admitting that the Iberian nations, rather than physically assuming a position of privileged intermediacy between Europe and post-colonial southern America and Africa, need to initiate a mutually consensual, and thereby mutually beneficial, *rapprochement* with formerly colonised peoples as an alternative to accepting the weakening of ties dictated by EEC membership in the form of barriers on trade and immigration.<sup>12</sup> The reader of the novel should also note how the idea of an international movement in support of Iberia’s separation from Europe can only be based on the dubious assumption of a pan-European stance of opposition to an expanded, integrated EEC. Many people who lived in, for example, Poland or Czechoslovakia during the 1980s would agree with Sławomir Mrożek and Milan Kundera that the real-life 1980s counterparts of the Polish *juventude* who write *My też jesteście iberyjczykami* on the walls of Warsaw had a very different relationship to the idea of European identity from that either of Saramago’s Portuguese or of their real-life counterparts. Mrożek and Kundera have both examined how their compatriots considered themselves to be Westerners and Europeans oppressed and isolated from Europe by a national power, Russia, which they, unlike Saramago (*The Stone Raft*, 126), defined as non-European, or as belonging to a separate, Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup>

While Saramago’s Poles seem to express only the aspirations of the Portuguese, in the novel there is one voice outside Iberia that is allotted the opportunity to speak on behalf of its own interests: that of the US president. Though the narrative hints that the roving Peninsula may have surprises in store for the directors of the capitalist world order (255–58), that world order is still in control at the novel’s end. Contrary to what is suggested by Daniel’s and Ceccucci’s emphasis on portents of positive social change in *The Stone*

*Raft*, at the novel's end the transformation of Portuguese society remains unguaranteed.<sup>14</sup> Since the occupation of the Algarve hotels, there has been no clear evidence of social change. Just as the ideals of 25 de Abril had become increasingly confounded or compromised in the Portugal of the 1980s—the occupations of empty housing blocks, for example, being ruled unlawful and evictions being forced following legislation passed in April 1975—so in *The Stone Raft* processes that intimate social change are derailed or discredited.<sup>15</sup> The “Iberianist” solidarity movement collapses into violence and chaos, an echo of the lack of organization and pragmatism that arguably characterized many popular movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Meanwhile, Portugal's incoming Government of National Salvation is exposed as simply a cynical repackaging of the incumbent governmental team, whose fecklessness is revealed when catastrophic collision with the Azores threatens. Although the collision never occurs, the Portuguese government suffers the humiliation of being overruled by its US counterpart—the supreme power of international capitalism—when it attempts to monitor the situation on its own sovereign territory (189).<sup>16</sup>

Changes of greater profundity are initiated more adroitly by the novel's five protagonists, whose journey around the Peninsula creates new social conditions and conventions, in particular new freedoms for the two women to control their own destinies and to engage in acts of love without surrendering their liberty. Joana Carda tells her three male companions that she went to Lisbon in search of them “because I saw you as people detached from the apparent logic of the world, and that's precisely how I feel myself to be” (*Jangada* 147; translation mine). Just as the logic of natural physics is defied by the movement of the Peninsula, so the social logic of western civilisation is challenged, as conditions on the road and under canvas dictate a new and less sexist division of labor. When, for example, the five turn to peddling clothes in Spain for a living, each individual contributes according to his/her talents and training. The two women select stock, the accounting is handled by Joaquim Sassa, and the Spanish-speaking dispensing pharmacist Pedro Orce handles the sales patter whilst Portuguese-speaking José Anaíço stays back at the wagon preparing food (205-08).

Perhaps more significantly, when Maria Guavaira and Joana Carda freely admit to having had sex with Pedro Orce, it becomes clear that their new way of living means new practices of loving. Both women are determined to reject the notion that a lover is physically and spiritually the property of his/her



partner, and assert that if their partners cannot understand their position, then the journey, the friendships and love affairs are all invalid and must end. When Joana Carda invokes the elm wand to support the assertion of her and Maria Guavaira's guiltlessness, she reminds her companions that for her the wand is still the totem of her freedom, the rod with which she marked her independence in the soil at Ereira and which "can still be used to draw another line here" in order to determine "who is to remain on this side and who on the other" (229): the demarcation of a new beginning and new social rules.<sup>17</sup> Joana Carda's relationship to the elm wand constitutes a great temptation to conjecture that the use of the elm tree as a symbol of dignity in Western Christian iconography could have relevance here, suggesting the dignity that for millennia has been denied to women while their bodies are controlled and traded by fathers and husbands.<sup>18</sup>

But while the two women are both "making exception the rule" in order to create more propitious rules (240), there is no reason to believe that these changes reflect transformations in society as a whole. Joaquim Sassa makes the comparison between the five friends' lifestyle and that of gypsies (202). Like gypsies, they inhabit the social and economic margins, and their lifestyle remains different whilst the rest of society recovers from the threat of collision with the Azores ("people are returning to their normal habits and pursuits, if that is the right word to describe their former habits and pursuits" [244]). On the day after meeting her new friends, Maria Guavaira rejects the privations of widowhood by substituting her old, colorful clothes for dark mourning dress. But although the flamboyant garments that she and Joana Carda hang out to air "billow and flutter like flags," and although "one feels like shouting Long live liberty" (155), there is no confirmation that shouting or flying flags will change anything. By the end of the novel, Joana Carda's cousin is presumably still "casada e mal-maridada"—married to a bad husband—in Ereira (*Jangada* 158), and, presumably, she is also pregnant.

The impregnation, shortly before the end of the novel, of the entire population of fertile women on the Peninsula throws a very big spanner into the engines of this tentative, unfinished movement towards female liberation. Critics such as Ceccucci have interpreted the mass pregnancy as a positive symbol, as the "total redemption through love" that predicates "the ascent of a new class of humanity; of a new epoch not merely hoped for and dreamed of, but also willed and constructed" (214). For two reasons, however, one must take issue with this optimism. First, unplanned pregnancy *en masse*



would not universally be deemed a blessing in 1980s Portugal, given the country's long history of criminalisation of abortion and the Estado Novo's use of a cult of large families as a means to keep women in the home and out of public life.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, the occurrence leaves the novel and its protagonists literally in a state of expectation. The birth of Joana Carda's and Maria Guavaira's children will be the acid test of their relationships and the new rules of partnership, division of domestic labor and now paternity that they have negotiated. Furthermore, the enigma of the two foetuses' paternity, and the uncertainty as to where and by whom the children will be raised, make it impossible to guess what cultural and national or regional loyalties they will develop, or what influence they and their 12-15 million as yet unborn contemporaries will have on social organisation on the Iberian Peninsula of the future. The allegory of the peninsula's geopolitical realignment, and the new paradigms of national and gender identity, provide tentative suggestions for the future, but cannot guarantee Utopia any more than Iberia's "rebirth" can be proven by a poet comparing the rotating peninsula to a baby turning in the womb (252).

On the last page of the novel, Pedro Orce is laid to rest, the narrative voice is silenced, and fundamental and unanswered questions resonate in the air: "who knows what future awaits ... how much time, what destiny" (263). As a rainy day dawns, prospects are not much brighter for the four remaining protagonists than for the Iberianist opponents of US and EEC intervention. Neither of the two couples is completely reconciled following discussion of the paternity of the unborn children, and there is no certainty as to what they will do with their lives now that they have no dog to guide them. Will they perpetuate their journey and the new values of communality and sexual equality, or will they dissolve their ad-hoc marriages and resume their former existences? The only intimations of social change are the wholly ambivalent symbols of renewal: the unborn children, the fanciful image of the peninsula as an unborn baby, and the green but budless elm wand that Joana Carda plants on Pedro Orce's grave. The elm branch, previously possessing ambiguous resonances of a magic wand, a symbol of a wife's declaration of independence, a lucky charm, might sprout and grow to become a Tree of Life, symbol of hope and regeneration, or a broad and spreading elm, symbolic of a woman's realized independence and recognized dignity. Then again, it might not. The parallel drawn between Pedro Orce's burial and that deemed suitable for the exiled Spanish poet Antonio Machado (56 and 260)

not only reopens discussion of the problematic relationship between territory and identity, but also warns against excessive optimism by highlighting the reference, on the novel's final page, to Machado's poem "A un olmo seco" ("To a dying elm-tree") in *Campos de Castilla* (Machado 799-800).<sup>20</sup> Machado's poem addresses a rotting, half-dead tree whose single green branch makes the poet long for "another miracle of the Spring."<sup>21</sup> By association with this the elm branch stuck in the barren desert of Venta Micena comes to represent not the certainty of a future Utopia but the precarious nature of human hopes and aspirations. It may develop into a "resuscitated tree," but only "if a piece of wood stuck in the ground is capable of working miracles" (263).<sup>22</sup> Unamuno implied that the Portuguese have been ill-served by their faith in miracles.<sup>23</sup> *The Stone Raft's* inconclusive and unpromising ending argues that, even when the reassuring certainties of materialist analysis of history prove ill-founded, life, and the struggle to make life better and fairer, must go on. The only certainty, in Portugal, Spain or elsewhere, is that the actions of the common people must be added to the rhetoric of politicians and novelists, if a better society is to be built out of a humanity fragmented by economic, ethnic and generic divisions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interviewed, in 1986, by Clara Ferreira Alves, Francisco Béland and Augusto M. Seabra for the *Expresso* magazine supplement in "A facilidade de ser ibérico" ("The Simplicity of Being Iberian"), Saramago reaffirmed his commitment to Marxism and to "a materialist view of the world" (Saramago 1986).

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from *The Stone Raft*, except where otherwise indicated, are from Giovanni Pontiero's translation. All other translations of quoted material are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Switzerland has been neutral since 1815. In a referendum in 1993, following the creation of a European Economic Area that the Swiss government was compelled to join, the Swiss electorate rejected ratification of an agreement to enter the European Community (*New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, XXVIII.355).

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy's actual words were: "All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words 'Ich bin ein Berliner'" (qtd. in Schlesinger Jr. 808-09).

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Battye and Marie-Anne Hintze identify the Revolution of 1789 as the catalyst for "the crystallisation of a feeling that the dialects and the minority languages spoken on the French national territory constituted some kind of external threat" (41). Abbé Grégoire's *Rapport sur la nécessité d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française* (*Treatise on the Necessity of Annihilating Primitive Speech Forms and of Universalizing the Use of the French Language*) of 1794 formed the basis for a state primary education policy with the principal objective of imposing what, 127 years later, the *Bulletin officiel de l'instruction publique* (*Official Bulletin on Public Education*) of 1921 termed "the language of Racine or Voltaire" in place of

"the urban slang ... the village patter ... the regional dialect" (Battye and Hintze 42 and 48). The teaching of such "dialects" as Basque, Catalan, Breton and Occitan in French state schools was outlawed until 1951, that of Corsican until 1974 and that of Flemish until 1976. By the mid-1970s, Basque, Breton and Corsican separatist political parties were still outlawed in France and many of their leaders still imprisoned (Gordon 100-02).

<sup>6</sup> Unamuno talks of two facets of the Portuguese *ethos* as represented in Guerra Junqueiro's poems *Os Simples* (*The Unaffected*) and *Pátria* (*Fatherland*): "the bucolic Portugal, impassive and unaffected ... and ... the heroic, noble Portugal" (19). In the same book, his observations on contemporary Portugal indicate that for him the latter facet is an attitude restricted to, or lost in, the Portuguese past: Unamuno compares the Portuguese to Ulysses who "returned to domesticity and ... ensconced by the hearth, contemplating the rise and fall of the flames, which call to mind the crests and troughs of the ocean waves, would recount to his children and grandchildren tales from the thick of battle and from his far-flung expeditions" (21). It should be noted that *The Stone Raft's* Camonian references have no truck with the connection made by the organs of the Estado Novo—in works such as José Leitão de Barros's epic film *Camões* (Lisboa Filme, 1946)—between Camões, the calumniated hero who dies awaiting the return of days of Imperial glory, and the fatalistic cult of *Sebastianismo*.

<sup>7</sup> In one passage Unamuno compares Portugal to the hapless Inês de Castro (91).

<sup>8</sup> See Unamuno on Portuguese fatalism (38-39) and suicidal tendencies: "Portugal is a nation of suicides, perhaps, indeed, a suicidal nation" (80). He also quotes Camões (*Os Lusíadas* X.145) in talking of "the sea, which was once Portugal's glory, the sea, which has granted her immortality in the history of humankind, the sea has delivered her 'into the clutches of lusting greed and into the brutishness of a harsh, gloomy and detestable sadness' ['no gosto da cobiça e na rudeza / d'huma austera apagada e vil tristeza']" (Unamuno 48-49).

<sup>9</sup> Two detailed contemporary accounts of the post-revolutionary housing struggles are Downs and Ponte. *The Stone Raft* also recalls the collapse of the Portuguese tourist industry that accompanied the period of unrest in 1974-75 (Maxwell 141), and the subsequent use of empty Algarve hotels to accommodate not the local homeless, but some of the 500,000 *retornados* from the former "overseas provinces" in Africa. This initiative must have provoked resentment among the indigenous population, and almost bankrupted the post-revolutionary Portuguese state. Concern for the welfare of the *retornados* did not, however, extend to allowing them to stay on in the hotels once tourists could be coaxed back (Morrison 51-52).

<sup>10</sup> The Balearic islands were conquered by Jaime I of Aragón by 1235. Together with Catalonia they were ruled directly by the Aragonese monarchs, apart from a period of autonomous monarchic rule on the islands from 1298-1349 ("Balearic Islands," in *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. [1995], 830).

<sup>11</sup> Campos (Fernando Pessoa), "Ode Marítima," stanza 9, line 1: "Ah, the Great Quay from which we embark in Vessel-Nations! [Ah o Grande Cais donde partimos em Navios-Nações!]" (Pessoa 136).

<sup>12</sup> Saramago advances the following argument regarding Portuguese and Spanish relations with former colonial communities:

I admit that, for the right or wrong reasons, those whom we once set out to find may want to forget who we are but, if I might be permitted the indulgence of prophecy, I foresee that we will end up finding our own cultural vitality diminished if we persist in seeking or accepting solutions and goals which, through our own erroneous conception of them as exclusive of other solutions and goals, might lead us to ourselves forget who we are. ("A Península" 11)

<sup>13</sup> Mrožek, interviewed by Timothy Garton Ash, identifies a belief widespread amongst educated Poles that they, "unlike the Russians, indubitably belong" to Europe and to "the West"

(Mrožek 97). Kundera (in 1980) makes a distinction between two quite separate European civilizations:

As a concept of cultural history, Eastern Europe is Russia, with its quite specific history anchored in the Byzantine world. Bohemia, Poland, Hungary, just like Austria, have never been part of Eastern Europe. From the very beginning they have taken part in the great adventure of Western civilisation... The post-war annexation of Central Europe ... by Russian civilisation caused Western culture to lose its vital centre of gravity ... and we cannot dismiss the possibility that the end of Central Europe marked the beginning of the end for Europe as a whole. (230)

<sup>14</sup> Daniel writes of the "promise for a brighter future of continued life on the new continent" in a novel that expresses an "optimistic and robust vein of confidence in the future" (541), while Ceccucci refers to "a new era hoped for and dreamed of, but also willed and established" (214).

<sup>15</sup> According to Charles Downs, the earliest enforcement of the 17 April 1975 Anti-Occupation Decree was in January 1976 (*Comissões de moradores* 20-23). Due to considerable popular opposition, it was not until 1978 that evictions took place on a large scale.

<sup>16</sup> This episode can be interpreted as another reference to events following 25 April 1974, specifically the intervention of the USA in Portuguese affairs, motivated by concern about the future of its air base at Lajes in the Azores. Only two months after the coup, President Richard Nixon met General Spínola for private talks about Lajes and Portugal's membership in NATO. The US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, apparently favoured subjecting Portugal to total isolation in order to suffocate any attempts at revolution (Morrison 26-28).

<sup>17</sup> Joana Carda's gesture recalls a passage in Saramago's *Levantado do Chão*. Here, a line scratched in the earth challenges abusive husband Domingos Mau-Tempo's claim to hold authority over his wife, Sara da Conceição, who has taken refuge along with her children in the home of her kinsman José Picanço:

With his staff, Domingos Mau-Tempo scratches the earth in front of him, to all appearances it's a challenge, the signal for a brawl, and Picanço interprets it that way, and makes himself prepared, grasping hold of a stick.... Behind him, on the other side of the door, are three terrified children and a woman who would fight to the death to protect them if she could, but the two sides are badly-matched, and so Picanço takes a chance and etches his own scratch in the earth. (48-49)

Whereas Sara da Conceição, living in the Alentejo circa 1910, must rely on male relatives to protect her from her husband, Joana Carda determines not to be dependent on any man.

<sup>18</sup> The association of the elm tree with dignity is discussed by Roig (69).

<sup>19</sup> Following legislation in 1984, abortion is legal in Portugal only in certain extenuating circumstances. Prior to 1984, abortion was expressly banned in any circumstances. However, in the period immediately prior to 25 April 1974, an estimated 200,000 illegal, and often very unprofessional, abortions were carried out annually. These resulted each year in around 2,000 recorded fatalities (Salgado 8). In 1936, Salazar's Estado Novo established OMEN (Obra das Mães para a Educação Nacional), aiming to "bring up the 'new woman' from infancy to be a good Catholic and patriot, and in the future a 'prolific' mother and an obedient wife" (Rosas and Brito 609 and 675). These groups organized annual "Mothers' Weeks" from 1938 until the 1960s, and "attempted, by means of hand-outs of cribs, hope chests and prizes for 'prolific' mothers, to combat restrictions on the index of population growth and ... to promote the return of women to domesticity" (Rosas and Brito 676).

<sup>20</sup> Significantly, Pedro Orce drops dead outside the hermitage of Turruchel, just south of Bienservida, at the border between Castilla La Mancha and his native *autonomía* of Andalucía



(259). Pedro Orce's earlier declaration that "my [native] land is Andalusia," and that other parts of the Spanish state such as Galicia mean nothing to him because "it's possible for us not to know our own state, but we all know our own land" (*Jangada* 178; translation mine), can be interpreted as an attempt to distinguish between a chauvinistic, nationalist cult of *o país* ("the state") and a more benign sentimental attachment to *a terra* ("the land").

<sup>21</sup> The passage in *The Stone Raft* does not quote any poem from *Campos de Castilla*, but echoes the association Machado asserts between his soul and the landscape of Soria in, for example, "Campos de Soria" IX, lines 1-8:

Yes! You travel with me, Sorian fields....  
 You have found your way into my soul,  
 or perhaps you were always rooted in its depths? (772)

and in "Caminos," lines 41-46:

There, in the highlands—  
 where the Duero traces  
 its crossbow curve  
 around Soria, amid lead-coloured hills  
 and the smudges of ragged oak groves—  
 my heart is wandering in dreams (804).

<sup>22</sup> The planting of the elm on Pedro Orce's grave also recalls the miracle of St. Zenobio, recounted in Eça de Queirós's *Dicionário de Milagres* (174). On its way to burial, the coffin of Bishop (later Saint) Zenobio of Florence accidentally struck a dead elm tree, which burst immediately into leaf. Pedro Orce, it would appear, is no St. Zenobio.

<sup>23</sup> "Deep down, we Spanish have less faith in miracles.... We do not believe in the return of a King Sebastian" (Unamuno 40).

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