

On the Labyrinth of Text, or, Writing as the Site of Memory

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Translated by

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And Françoise, when transmitting to us the Marquise's message: "She said to me, 'You'll be sure and bid them good day,' she said," would counterfeit the voice of Mme de Villeparisis, whose exact words she imagined herself to be quoting textually, whereas in fact she was distorting them no less than Plato distorts the words of Socrates or St. John the words of Jesus.

Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

Although it is rescued from banality only by its conclusion, the above passage from Proust appears to suit perfectly my proposed reading of the novels forming José Saramago's first major narrative cycle, from *Levantado do Chão* (*Raised from the Ground*, 1980) to *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991), such a grouping being of necessity somewhat arbitrary, but, as I hope to demonstrate, not devoid of coherence. The question that interests me—captured in an ironic synthesis by the Proustian quote—is the representation of the other's speech in a literary discourse, which, through its reference to the other, establishes with him or her a double-faced relationship composed in equal parts of respect and betrayal. In other words, writing is understood here as a labyrinthine agglomeration of discourses belonging to different times, places and genres and whose fragmentary irruptions break up the allegedly smooth continuity of the text. At the same time respected and betrayed, those singular utterances, when brought into the discursive present, place in check the historical linearity that had situated them in a given chronological context, henceforward rendered inoperative. Respect and

treachery: such is the fate of the words pronounced by Proust's Mme. de Villeparisis, literally repeated by Françoise and, on a second level, transcribed by the narrator within rigorously displayed single quotation marks, but then followed by a reference to the "distortion" produced by the speaker's tone of voice. In a more general sense (and here the passage assumes its exemplary meaning), any citation or reference to an earlier enunciation is likely to retain the same ambiguity, as indicated by the Proustian narrator's surprising evocation of acts of infidelity committed by the generally unsuspected discourses of philosophy and religion when they resolve to quote a preexisting source: thus Plato betrays Socrates and John is unfaithful to Jesus. This final allusion, as we shall see, proves to be especially expedient with regard to José Saramago's novels and in particular to *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*.

The enterprise of writing under the weight of the remembered past is not limited to any given author or historical period. Even in those times when the act of quotation lacked an ethical or aesthetic justification (for instance in antiquity, with its Platonic disapproval of poetic imitation), writers were incapable of producing texts resplendent with an inaugural purity of origin. Remnants and ruins have always been treasured material, zealously preserved by time in order to be preyed upon by our memory in a conscious exercise of cultural pillage. It should be noted, however, that such a plunder is a generous undertaking, since it brings up to date our interpretation of tradition, whether it proceeds in a reverential mode or is carried forth by a countercurrent of anti-canonical defiance. The new text subjects the past to a regenerative action, making it leave its own bounds and thus acquire unexpected shapes and angles.

On the other hand, it is also undeniable that different ways of dealing with the intertext do not always share the same motivations nor lead invariably to the same results. Modernity has exacerbated the consciousness of the text's dialogic nature; it has discovered that readers are not merely receptive or ironic accomplices of the text, but rather negotiate its meanings while armed with their own cultural assumptions. It has also challenged the absolute authority of authors and their property rights with regard to the truth of the text, and it has understood that the recovery of traditions is not tantamount to endorsing them or placing oneself in their debt. As Foucault concluded, in his reading of Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, "in order to dream it is not necessary to close one's eyes, it is necessary to read" (106).

Already Montaigne had said, in a most modern fashion, that writing has always been a kind of gloss or comment on other writing. But books that read books do not cease to function as well as readers of the world: the intertextual commitment cultivated by the contemporary age, far from trapping the texts in a web of self-referentiality, historicizes instead these acts of reading, privileging, albeit in an unorthodox manner, the viewpoint of the present in its reappraisal of the past. The act of quotation is thus transformed into an ongoing process of recognition and provocation, which accomplishes much more than mere repetition, in conformity with the Latin etymology of the term “citation” evoked by Antoine Compagnon: the past is set in motion and the present text allows it an opportunity to participate actively in the renewal of its meanings.¹

One possible way of reading the novels of José Saramago takes as its point of departure the author’s role as a reader of the Portuguese, Iberian and generally Western cultural traditions, and whose writing is fundamentally a site of memory, as his entire body of work ceaselessly reiterates. It suffices to recall in this context his recent novel *All the Names* (1997), where Sr. José’s search is nothing if not a demonstration of the necessity to disturb the traditional image of the present as life and of the past as death. To refuse to separate the dead from the living is to maintain them all present, since, after all, the freedom associated with the present does not consist in its autonomy in relation to the past, but rather in the possibility of the two engaging in a fruitful dialogue, capable of responding in a different manner to those echoes from the past that have remained unanswered.

The role of Saramago as a writer/reader of culture becomes manifest in some recurring facets of his work. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on his recovery of the texts that compose the foundations of Portuguese and Western imagination, with particular emphasis on Camões, the Bible, and the narratives of history. Along these lines I will consider the novels of Saramago’s first great narrative cycle, distinguished by certain ideological postulates (namely, the revisiting of history or of cultural formations) and by a distinct narrative voice, that has been described by some as Baroque: the long musical sentence, a discourse more *conceptista* than *cultista*, the vastly spreading scope of the narrative. These characteristics have become less pronounced—which represents neither a loss nor a gain—in the most recent novels, *Blindness*, *All the Names* and *A Caverna*, a triptych reflecting humanity’s quest for meaning in the midst of its end-of-millennium crisis. While the selection of the works for

discussion could have been different, other texts would have required a distinct analytic perspective; the choice I have made possesses one clear advantage: an unambiguously identifiable presence of the textual characteristics outlined above.

The Camões Intertext

It is hardly by accident that the author most commonly quoted, referred to or parodied in the Portuguese literary tradition should be Camões, particularly Camões the author of *The Lusíads*. Saramago's narrator in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984) affirms, in a proverbial tone, that "all the Portuguese roads lead to Camões," presenting his fiction, in a Borgesian manner, as a sort of theory of the text. Using the roads that lead to Rome as the source for his pastiche, Saramago creates his own version of the expression, which designates Camões as the meeting point of all Portuguese utterances. If, at the level of the narrative, the Lisbon square with the statue of the poet becomes a basic reference guiding the traveler through the streets of the capital, the reach of Saramago's proverb-like quip is clearly much broader, especially if we consider that the traveler in question is another Portuguese poet experiencing a personal and political identity crisis; here, the geographic layout gains the significance of a cultural confluence. In such an emblematic manner, the third novel of the cycle gives concrete shape to the rhetoric of Camonian evocation that has always been present in the cultural imaginary informing Saramago's writing. As Eduardo Lourenço expressed it (and as I repeat here, following the medieval practice of citation as a guarantee of critical *auctoritas*), "It is impossible to commemorate *The Lusíads* innocently" (158). When these words were written, just a few years distant from the fourth centenary of Camões's death, any form of tribute might have appeared dated; Lourenço's postulate, however, reached much further, pointing to the meaning of commemoration as an exercise of *co-memory*. This is tantamount to saying that when our collective memory evokes Camões, it never does so innocently.

Saramago's novel *Levantado do Chão* (*Raised from the Ground*, 1980) exemplifies this process by treating the phantasmagoric presence of *The Lusíads* as a structural device. The citation is not necessarily made manifest by explicit quotation or by direct reference to Camões's emblematic characters; instead, the book's more ambitious project is to produce a peasant epic drawn, in a willful distortion of the original source, around men and

women “raised” from the ground (the soil of Alentejo and, by extension, of Portugal), just as Camões’s intrepid sailors once “rose” from the sea. It is not the “matchless heroes” (“*barões assinalados*”) but rather peasants of no distinction who cross the “interior sea” of the latifundium, their desired land no longer situated in the remote Calecut, but in the villages of the agrarian revolution: “Mantas and Pedra Grande, Vale da Canseira, Monte da Areia, Fonte Pouca, great hunger, Serralha, worth nothing, over the hills and valleys” (365). It is a story whose stated objective is to sing the “little people who came with the soil” (14), to bring into writing the subjects without history, and, finally, to carry out a victorious crusade against the new, emblematically named “infidels”: the Latifundium, the State, and the Church, three powers dramatically shaken up by the agrarian revolution of 1975, which took away their power, authority and public voice.² Leaving their estate unoccupied, the landowners Bertos escape, after the Revolution of 25 de Abril has prompted the collapse of the authoritarian state. The priest Agamedes falls silent, since he does not know what to say, and only “speaks in parables,” because “the prudence of the church is infinite” (354). Similarly, “the guard does not leave the barracks” (364), because the corporal Tacabo, the sergeant Armamento or the lieutenant Contente—redundant even in their own names, which mark but do not identify them—have “their hands tied”: they no longer have the old orders to turn against the villagers who invade the abandoned lands. There is the symbolic substitution of the robust name “Espada” (“Sword”) for the fatal “Mau-Tempo” (“Bad Time/Weather”), which suffices to curb the authority and brilliance of the “Bertos” (etymologically: “luminous,” “famous,” “noble”). A reflex of another generation that managed to turn fatalism into action, this revolutionary generation includes women as well, metonymically represented by Maria Adelaide Espada, whose blue eyes are a legacy of her grandfather and whose name boasts a most singular etymology, as Germanic in origin as the names of the former masters: *ade*, *adde*, *adal*, *adel*, meaning “noble,” a new nobility that is neither of the blood nor “of the cloak,” but of the struggle. This is why, at the end of the novel, “waves never cease to make circles in the interior sea of the latifundium” (363), the “sun is just” (364), and all the men and women, the dead and the alive, experience the apocalypse of the revolution in a day that is “elevated and essential” (366). These are ideal ingredients of an epic discourse that claims the right to come to a standstill in the moment of conquered glory. When *Levantado do Chão* was published, the victory of

the Alentejan peasants, who had built their first rural cooperatives based on communal principles, was no longer quite so complete. However, in spite of the fact that this historical conquest was being threatened by the inevitable crises that affect any inaugural experience, Saramago allowed himself the right to celebrate a fully realized utopia: in his version of the epic, the explorers' ships triumphantly return to Lisbon with no counterbalancing equivalent of Camões's "heartlessness and degrading pessimism" ("*austera, apagada e vil tristeza*") (226).

Returning now to the question of intertextuality and to the dialogic concept of the text as a mosaic of citations, I will forgo here the task of compiling an inventory of Saramago's sources, inasmuch as my objective is not to uncover influences, but rather to capture formal constructs that structure the not always orderly dialogue between the quoted discursive voices and the monuments of the past or the echoes of their own historical setting. If we continue, for instance, to follow the thread of Camonian references in *Baltasar and Blimunda*, it becomes especially crucial to note the various ways in which Saramago's text evokes *The Lusíads* in two exemplary episodes: the flight of Father Bartolomeu's Passarola and the recruitment of the workers who will build the convent in Mafra.

In each of these narrative moments, discursive affinity with epic loftiness is given a particular textual shape. When Bartolomeu, Baltasar and Blimunda are about to take off in the Passarola, the narrator, aware that the project is precarious, its chances of success fragile, and its participants face great obstacles, comes to their aid and invokes—as in the epic—divine assistance: the Guardian Angel takes here the place of the goddess Venus, protectress of the Portuguese in Camões's poem:

And now, Guardian Angel, what will you do? For your presence has never been so necessary since you were first entrusted with this role. Here you have three people who will shortly go up into the sky, where man has never ventured, and they need your protection. They have done as much as they can on their own... Unless you are prepared to give a little help, Guardian Angel, you are neither an angel nor anything else... She is that woman who is holding the glass phial. Protect her, Guardian Angel, for if the phial should break, there will be no journey, and that priest who is behaving so strangely, will not be able to make his escape. Also protect the man working on the roof. His left hand is missing, and you are to blame, for you were inattentive out there on the battlefield when he was wounded. (176-77)

In structural terms, what the narrator performs here is the epic invocation, customarily followed by the description of imminent dangers. He had already referred to the Passarola as an “aeronave,” a ship of the air, thus linking the aerial adventure to the maritime epic, and further commented on the departure as a form of abandoning “the port and its moorings in order to go off in pursuit of secret routes” (182), or, in other words, of “oceans where none had ventured” (“*nunca dantes navegados*”) (Camões 3). Through an extended metaphor, the narrator goes on to evoke in a consistent manner the archetypal elements of *The Lusíads*: “Who knows what dangers await them, what Adamastors they will encounter, what Saint Elmo’s fires they will see rise from the sea, what columns of water will suck in the air only to expel it once it has been salted?” (182). And later, when the Passarola is about to crash, “A shadowy form looms up before them—the Adamastor, perhaps, of their voyage—and mountainous curves rise from the ground crested with streaks of crimson light” (184). What happens here is that the classic text, consecrated by tradition, is made to bestow on the present adventure a measure of heroic bravery and an epic dimension that it is deemed to deserve.

Not always, however, is Camões’s epic evoked to support the heroic dimension of Saramago’s text. In the episode in which the workers are brought to Mafra against their will, in order to expedite the construction of the basilica, the intertext is deployed with bitter irony, as a model of a rebellious diatribe against the arbitrary implementation of royal power. The scene of the workers’ painful departure from their land recreates masterfully the episode of the Old Man of Restelo from *The Lusíads*, with its lamenting women, despairing men and the vociferating patriarch. Here however the similarities end, since the narrated story lacks the epic scope of the glorious past venture and the expectation of a victory over the unknown that justified, in principle, the departure of the sailors. Although they are criticized by the Old Man, whose speech reveals the mendacity of ideological discourse, the deceptiveness of language that conceals truth instead of uncovering it, and the masking of vanity as fame and of bestial cruelty as bravery, in the end Camões’s sailors escape the wrath of the “old man of venerable appearance” (95) and the forces of the destiny that he has summoned against them (97):

The devil take the man who first put
Dry wood on the waves with a sail!
[...]

And may no solemn chronicler,
 No sweet harpist nor eloquent poet
 Commend your deeds or celebrate your fame,
 But let your folly vanish with your name! (97)

Notwithstanding all the moral reservations voiced by the narrator of *The Lusíads* in the famous stanza 145 of the tenth Canto, the sailors complete their voyage and return victorious to Portugal. But their salvation is most of all due to the fact that the “sweet harp” destined to celebrate them—Camões’s epic—did not fall silent, as the old man had wished, but instead spread widely their memory and fame.

The workers’ departure for Mafra, on the other hand, appears not to have any meaning for the community that finds itself involved in a project of purely individual grandeur. Its actors are no longer the “matchless heroes” of Camões’s epic, but rather poor men, “tied like sheep” (270), who witness the suffering of their women—tearful, humiliated, violated—and whose voices echo the Old Man’s curses, couched in a language that substitutes colloquial profanity for erudite allusion: “May you be damned unto five generations... may you be impaled from ass to mouth, thrice-cursed villain” (270).

If, up to this point, the Camonian intertext could be taken to function merely as a sort of rhetorical background, further development of the scene makes the allusive commitment definitive by reprising literally a number of verses from *The Lusíads*. With no concern for verisimilitude, these mothers and wives also say farewell to their sons and husbands in classic decasyllables, expressly quoted by Saramago as a textual ready-made that produces an inescapable semantic estrangement. The text is woven from shreds of Camões’s verse (here rendered in italics), connected by phrases that serve to recreate the rhythmic feel of the heroic decasyllable (the segments in bold type):³

que vão clamando, *qual em cabelo, Ó doce e amado esposo*, e outra protestando, *Ó filho a quem eu tinha só para refrigério e doce amparo desta cansada já velhice minha*, não se acabavam as lamentações, *tanto que os montes de mais perto respondiam, quase movidos de alta piedade*, enfim já os levados se afastam, vão sumir-se na volta do caminho, rasos de lágrimas os olhos, em bagadas caindo aos mais sensíveis, e então uma grande voz se levanta, é um labrego de tanta idade já que o não quiseram, e grita subido a um valado, que é pulpito de rústicos, *Ó glória de mandar, ó vã cobiça, ó rei infame, ó pátria sem justiça...* (293).

[weeping as they go, heads uncovered: Oh, sweet and beloved husband; while another wails: Ah, my beloved boy, who gave me comfort and protection in my weary old age. The lamentations went on and on until the nearby mountains echoed those cries, moved by pity for these poor creatures. The men are already at some distance and finally disappear from sight where the road curves, their eyes filled with tears—large teardrops in the case of the most sensitive among them—and then a voice rends the air. It is that of a farmer so advanced in years that the magistrate's men were reluctant to take him. Having mounted an embankment, a natural pulpit for countryfolk, he calls out: Ah, empty ambition, senseless cupidity, infamous King, nation without justice... (270)]

Saramago's discourse becomes here a kind of resonant fabric that incorporates quotations from Camões with great skill, but without diminishing their visibility. The writer's intertextual strategy does not seek to cover up difference; on the contrary, it is emphasized, precisely owing to the effort involved in the co-optation of the old text by the new. As the proofreader in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* puts it, "the interesting thing about life has always been in the differences" (3).

In *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, the privileged group of intertextual references derives, naturally, from the writings of Fernando Pessoa—from the texts themselves and, in particular, from the heteronymic play of masks⁴—but Camões's epic also makes a prominent appearance through an inverted quotation of the famous line from the third Canto: "Where the continent ends and the sea begins" (52). In its original form, this line is a splendid emblem of the view of Portugal as a pier of departures and of the expansionist project that continued to sustain the phantom of Portuguese glory long after its persistence had been recognized as fallacious. The catastrophic defeat at Alcácer-Kebir appears, in this version, as merely a stage, yet another calamity, which, in any case, becomes translated into the Sebastianist myth and as such nourishes for centuries, in the words of Eduardo Lourenço, "the prodigious unreality of the Portuguese society's own self-image" (19). Saramago's project, formed at a time when the country struggled to awaken from its delusion of greatness, situated itself of necessity on the antipodes of that image. The two versions of the emblematic sentence, placed, respectively, at the novel's opening—"Here the sea ends and the earth begins"(1)—and at its closure—"Here, where the sea ends and the earth awaits" (358)—signal

instantly a change of perspective. Symptomatically, the novel begins with Ricardo Reis's return trip to Portugal, made over what are now much-traveled seas—"between London and Buenos Aires like a weaving shuttle on the highways of the sea, backward and forward, always calling at the same ports" (1)—and on board the *Highland Brigade*, an English steamer of the Royal Mail Line, a choice that cancels irrevocably any recollection of the glorious ships of yesteryear. In addition to this voyage devoid of epic qualities that brings Dr. Reis home from Brazil, and with him, albeit in third-class cabins, the usual proportion of failed emigrants, the novel avails itself as well of the already mentioned roads leading to Camões—to Lisbon's Largo Luís de Camões—and of the statue of Adamastor in Alto de Santa Catarina, likewise symbolically charged.

Another epic reference may be found in Saramago's "stone raft," which, unmindful of the laws of nature, navigates whenever necessary. It would be reductive to see in the novel a simplistic allegory of a refusal to join the European Union, in spite of the author's frank disclosure of his convictions in this regard. When the novel was published in 1986, the year of both Spain's and Portugal's accession to the EU, the connection was surely too obvious to satisfy a writer who had already proven his skill in plotting narratives that blend fantastic adventure with historical realism. In its vision of a separatist utopia, *The Stone Raft* reaches beyond a strategic intervention in the history of the present. Having repeated, by means of the breach in the Pyrenees, the original ritual of separation of earth and sea in the Genesis, the novel invites the reader to embark on a different voyage, which retraces a geographic trajectory comparable to that inscribed in Camões's epic, even while placing the old project under erasure. As the Iberian Peninsula is rotated upside down, its seafaring tradition receives a metaphorical guarantee of preservation through a simultaneous depiction of two voyages—by land and by sea—toward the final resting point in the southern Atlantic Ocean, a location perceived by Saramago as Iberia's cultural destiny and justification. No longer a colonialist epic, the novel represents this expedition as both an encounter between equals and a recovery of historical roots, just as the protagonists' travels across their land culminate in its explosive renewal—contrasted with the sterility of the old European continent—when all the women of Iberia become simultaneously pregnant and the dry elm branch stuck into the ground turns green again. Such is Saramago's reconstruction of

Camões's argument in *The Stone Raft*: it has no need for the scene of laments at the Restelo pier, since it does not send off sailors in search of the unknown. Instead, it is the land itself, the raft-peninsula, that embarks on a voyage, reorienting its bearings in order to find its own direction. And, given that the novel recycles the scenario of Camões's maritime epic, its discourse does not shy away from explicit quotation. This is how the narrator comments on the separation of the Iberian landmass (my emphasis to mark the quotation from *The Lusiads*, first stanza of Canto One): "*Human strength could do nothing [Não podia a força humana nada]* on behalf of the cordillera that was opening up as a pomegranate, with no apparent suffering, and simply, who are we to know, because it had matured and its time had come" (24). If human strength had once been surpassed by the sailors who assumed the task of conquering the unknown, it was now helpless in face of an irreversible geological spectacle, which overlaid the tragedy with a suggestion of an erotic charge produced by the collusion of natural forces and history: the peninsula is like a fruit that opens because its time has come. This is why Camões's text resurfaces in the novel after the breach between the Pyrenees and Europe has become definite. The Peninsula's just-beginning adventure is new, inaugural and epic, so new that it frightens, and epic because truly, in this case, unprecedented:

a series of satellite pictures [showed] the progressive widening of the canal between the peninsula and France, *flesh froze and hair bristled [arrepriavam-se a carne e o cabelo]* at the sight of this great catastrophe, *beyond human powers [maior que a força humana]*, for this was no longer a canal but open sea, where ships sailed at will, *over water that had truly never been sailed before [em mares, estes sim, nunca dantes navegados]*. (77)

Finally, when this peculiar raft threatens to crash its Cabo da Roca into the Azores archipelago and speculations with regard to its destiny are again overtaken by fear, the giant Adamastor makes an implicit appearance: "*one shudders just to think [arrepriam-se as carnes e o cabelo]* of that horrendous moment" (177). To speak of one cape and to evoke another (Adamastor's "Cape of Storms"), to evoke a new fear and to recall an old one, these are Saramago's suggestive ways of reawakening his Portuguese readers' culturally conditioned responses to the novel experience of his text.

The Historical Intertext

In this section, I do not intend to return to the question of Saramago's approach to the historical novel, a much discussed topic that I also have addressed on some earlier occasions, and one to which the author himself has dedicated a great deal of ongoing reflection.⁵ I will instead consider the intersections of historical texts within his novels, with an understanding that the "historical texts" explored by Saramago are not necessarily of an academic nature; the writer has also utilized, to great advantage, journalistic sources, whose fictionalized integration in his novels does not prevent the author from submitting their real-world referents to a careful and ingenious consideration.

Not surprisingly, a good illustration of this approach may be found in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, since for the more recent historical record, such as that explored in the novel, the press has been a rich source of documentation. It does not matter, in reality, that the documents in question are monuments to the political power of Salazar's dictatorship and that, as a consequence, they tend to disguise rather than expose the historical "truth." As Jacques le Goff has rightly argued, no document is truly innocent and, in one way or another, every document has a monumental dimension, since it exists as a result of the society's conscious or unconscious effort to pass on to the future generations a certain image of itself. Therefore, when faced with newspaper sources, a writer who is aware of the traps they contain learns to question them in such a way as to make them disclose their submerged meanings.

Along with the manuscript of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, Saramago deposited in the National Library in Lisbon an authentic calendar from the year 1936, into which he had entered information that he had obtained from Portuguese newspapers published that year in order to reconstitute its time and space in his fiction: news of the Spanish crisis, which absorbed a large proportion of the published material and transposed onto the neighboring country the Portuguese readers' own anxieties, leading them to interpret the events in the way intended by the authorities; Italy's invasion of Ethiopia; the growing power of the German model in shaping the militarization of the Portuguese life (as exemplified by the Mocidade Portuguesa, a version of the Hitler Jugend); as well as some apparently anodyne bits of information, such as weather forecasts

and commercial advertisements. These elements reappear in the novel not as a merely specular registry of events; instead, they become endowed with a symbolic meaning by the narrative context into which they are integrated. Such is, for instance, the case of the weather. Nineteen thirty-six was, in fact, a grey and rainy year, as daily newspaper reports consistently confirm. Nevertheless, Saramago's processing of this bit of information colors it with a qualitative tinge. In the following examples, all taken from the first pages of the novel, references to rain carry an incriminating charge:

It is raining over the colorless city. The waters of the river are polluted with mud, the riverbanks flooded. A dark vessel, the *Highland Brigade*, ascends the somber river... (1)

Behind windowpanes ingrained with salt the children peer out at the grey city... (2)

But it is the silent city that frightens them, perhaps all its inhabitants have perished and the rain is only falling to dissolve into mud what has remained standing. (3)

Beyond the docksheds lies the somber city, enclosed by façades and walls... (3)

The first passengers disembark. Their shoulders bent under the monotonous rain... (3)

It is growing dark although it is only four o'clock... (4)

The rain had died away, only a few scattered drops continued to fall, but in the sky there was not a trace of blue, the clouds had not dispersed and they formed one vast roof the color of lead. Has there been much rain, the passenger inquired.

For the last two months it has been bucketing down like the great flood, the driver replied as he switched off his windshield wipers. (7)

The association of the rain with expressions such as "the somber city," "a dark vessel," "the silent city," "bent shoulders," and "roof the color of lead" helps construe a scenario in which the cold darkness and the intimations of death and silence point to a reality characterized by fear, oppression, secrecy, weakness of spirit, censorship, political persecution and curtailment of freedom. The narrative transforms a fortuitous, circumstantial piece of data into a symbolically charged, motivated and necessary fictional construct.

Another form of appropriation of newspaper data can be illustrated by the narrative episode in which the writer's virtuosity of composition reaches its highest point: the report on the invasion of Addis-Abeba. Saramago mixes

together authentic newspaper headlines, fragments of radio news broadcasts, excerpts from political speeches, and a short story by Borges ("A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain"). There is also an ode by Ricardo Reis and a variation on it produced by the narrator who displaces the poet's ancient Persia to Addis-Abeba and the poem's past tense ("they burned," "they were") into the narrative present ("they burn," "they are"), even as he preserves, in a compliant echo, the same syntactic rhythm and the same scenes, with raped women, burning houses, looted possessions and children bleeding in the streets. The coming together of all these apparently disparate elements produces a text of many voices and varied rhythms, in which tragedy and irony go hand-in-hand and the patchwork of borrowings from different narrative registers never disguises its composite nature. The episode creates a sort of rhythmic vortex, sweeping up the reader into a state where the constant jumping between discourses of diverse nature and orientation generates a contradictory multiplicity of responses and emotional reactions. In this skillfully orchestrated confusion, the startled reader is not allowed to ignore the process of narrative construction, as he or she follows attentively the narrator's mood swings, from anger to compassion, and from irony to astonishment, in the face of that rehearsal of the violent destiny that fascism was preparing to wreak upon the world.

Historical discourses are also present in *Baltasar and Blimunda*, the novel whose writing required extensive research into the documents of the Inquisition, Portuguese convents, the court of Dom João V and, of course, the construction works at Mafra. The author was able to reconstitute these realities while at the same time subverting and parodying the perspective of the official record by celebrating the oppressed workers instead of the king who had been the intended beneficiary of the architectural tribute. But it is surely in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* that we can perceive most clearly Saramago's strategy in composing his narrative discourse with or from preexisting discourses, namely, a radical irreverence with regard to institutionalized knowledge and a reliance on the paradox as a leading device in the author's critical rereading of the *doxa*. Saramago's appreciation of the paradox may be verified at the very beginning of the novel: its epigraph, taken from an imaginary *Book of Exhortations*, explains that amending the truth is the only way of attaining it. What *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* postulates is precisely this: if, according to the traditional logic, it is necessary to reach the truth in order to be able to correct it, the novel makes this

affirmation fold in on itself by proposing correction as the primary act. This play on words, instead of immobilizing the novel's action through its apparent impossibility, is vindicated by the doubly troublesome attitude of a proofreader who extrapolates ("voluptuously," the narrator notes) the function of an attentive reader of historical truth in order to remake himself into the writer of a history that did not take place. Far from engaging in gratuitous playfulness, Saramago asks here some very serious questions with regard to a new concept of history.

It is, therefore, less important to detect in the novel traces of historical accounts of the siege of Lisbon (undoubtedly researched by Saramago) than to uncover its engagement with the theoretical premises of a new historiography founded on the principles supplied by the French *Nouvelle Histoire*, with which Saramago had already shown himself to be familiar. *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* conjugates a narrative project with a theoretical one, a strategy that has gained ground in Saramago's more recent works, where the seductive pleasure of a well-told story seems to become subordinated to a greater substantive economy determined by a central idea; although the narrative never loses its zest, it clearly gains an almost essay-like functionality.

This is not yet the case in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, where, in fact, what we perceive in the novel's discourse is the opposite: a narrative delight in the excess produced by the tripled version of historical data. The first level is situated outside the novel: it consists of the siege, the event itself, obviously inaccessible to us today, except through historical record. The second level, referred to in the narrative, is a history of the siege of Lisbon written by an academic historian, whose galleys are being "corrected" by the proofreader Raimundo Silva. The reader of Saramago's novel has no access to the text of that book, with the exception of a single sentence. That is the sentence bound to arouse the humble proofreader to a state of unexpected voluptuousness, as he modifies it with a "not" and thus generates a contrary version, not only of the specific historical fact in question, but quite possibly of Portuguese history in its entirety. The third level is the alternative history of the siege whose point of departure is the "not" added by the proofreader. But before this history can materialize, a new narrative line has to unfold, situated in the present: the love affair between the proofreader and his editor, Maria Sara. It is therefore a woman—as often happens in Saramago's novels—who, noticing the error, perceives its great transformative potential and who impels the writing of the new history. The proofreader's boldness is reinterpreted

from a more progressive and generous perspective. Once the error is discovered, the integrity of the edition is restored by the insertion of an erratum; but there remains one “copy without any erratum, a book which preserves the deception, that makes no attempt to remove this error or falsehood” (92), a book that is returned to its author by the woman’s hand. (This book of pure fiction, of which only one copy exists, may be compared with the reference to Borges’ book of Herbert Quain in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*.)

This book belongs to you... Let me rephrase that, This is your book... Mine, he asked, Yes, it’s the only remaining copy... that does not carry an erratum, the only copy which still claims that the crusaders refused to help the Portuguese... (92)

What is left unsaid, but what will be made clear immediately afterwards, is that the book is not a gift, but property restored to its owner—an embryonic, barely established property, still in need of a fresh and irreversible qualitative jump that would transform it into a homonymous work of fiction: *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*.

Don’t ask me to explain, it’s something I can sense rather than explain, and this is what made me decide to make a proposal, And what is it, That you yourself should write a history of the siege of Lisbon in which the crusaders do not help the Portuguese, therefore taking your deviation literally, the word I heard you use a moment ago... (96)

It is not for the first time that we see love create a world: Maria Sara and Raimundo Silva will have the right to their own story, ingeniously mirrored by a love story from the past, which is boldly brought into relief by the proofreader turned writer in the text he sets out to compose, and which resonates also with echoes of another ancient narrative, the medieval romance *Amadis de Gaula*. This specular love, born of the comings and goings of the love experienced in the present, is lived by a new Oriana (of the *Amadis* fame), now named Ouroana, who in her own way becomes a teacher of the ways of passion. The multiple levels of these overlapping stories, with their images reproduced in duplicate or triplicate, are all contained in what is, in the end, the only narrative that we read from the beginning to the end: *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, a novel by José Saramago.

But what the reading also yields, beside the narrative itself, is the author's conscious proposal for a new way of writing history. The first chapter, which serves as a sort of a theoretical prologue of the novel, determines the text's coordinates as it presents two characters in a face-to-face dialogue: one, a traditional historian, secure in his positivist convictions and firmly aware of his obligation to uncover absolute, objective truth; the other, a simple proofreader, who will later become a writer, and who already throws a shade of doubt that disturbs and perplexes his interlocutor's seriousness and certainty. It is the proofreader who declares "in my modest opinion, Sir, everything that is not literature is life," prompting the historian's retort—"History as well[?]"—an expression of such fatal innocence that it can only lead to a more radical restatement of the concept: "Especially history, without wishing to give offence" (6). This brings me to reiterate, in other words, what I have suggested earlier, that this novel is a sort of deductive parable, an exemplification of an idea expressed in the initial chapter. *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* does not tell a story in order to intuit a principle; on the contrary, its narrative serves to illustrate the novel's foundational notions: the fallibility of any reconstruction of the real and the bankruptcy of specular writing. Neither one of these concepts, however, is aimed at discrediting the historical project as such; indeed, they have the opposite effect, as they serve to empower the truth-generating potential of the historical fiction.

The Biblical Intertext

Saramago has stated, on a number of occasions (particularly when asked about his novel *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*), that it is not necessary to be a believer in order to see oneself as immersed in Christian culture. An unexceptionable affirmation, as the writer is well aware, considering to what extent the formation of Western ethical discourse has been indebted to the Judeo-Christian imaginary, as have been Western aesthetic models in the areas of literature, visual arts, architecture or music: from the Gregorian chant to Moissac's *Christ*, from the stained-glass windows at Chartres to Chagall's grand Biblical paintings, and from Gil Vicente's religious *autos* to Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme*.

The Christian imaginary recurs frequently in Saramago's work, and while the author certainly rereads it from an unorthodox perspective, the consequences are not necessarily sacrilegious. Although desecration

tends to be the end result when Saramago writes in a predominantly ironic or parodic mode, often enough religious references crop up in his work without losing their numinous aura, albeit dislocated from the divine to the human level. It is not even necessary to refer to the notorious *Gospel* in order to identify such instances of revisionist reiteration of the biblical text in Saramago's novels, beginning with *Levantado do Chão*.

In that novel, religious references employed by the discourses of the Latifundium, the Church and the State in order to legitimize their violent and authoritarian actions are ironically desecrated when denounced as instruments of political power. In a number of episodes, the narrator's ironic discourse exposes the ideological underpinnings of the religious project or reveals the absurdity of its claims by simple juxtaposition of the ideal Christian model and the actual human behavior: the scene of the rally in Évora (94), the distribution of alms to the children by the grotesque D. Clemência (187), Father Agamedes's speech on behalf of the secret police (120), and, in the novel's extraordinary first chapter, the evocation of the impersonal and abstract voice of authority, which relies on a mythical narrative to justify the history of the land's occupation by the latifundia (14).

On the other hand, Saramago often avails himself of a strategy of narrative displacement in producing heretical versions of religious models. A more radical procedure than the deconstruction of sacred truths by means of irony, this form of usurpation does not negate the value of the model, but rather denies its uniqueness and exemplary character, insofar as it multiplies the original pattern or discovers its recurrences in places and people that have no relation to divinity. An example may be found in the references to the Way of the Cross, the birth of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of the dead that occur in three central episodes of the novel. The motive of the *via crucis* is rewritten twice, in the respective episodes of João Mau-Tempo's carrying an exceptionally heavy wooden log and Germano Vidigal being taken in for torture by the police. Thus doubled, the suffering of Christ loses the singularity that has given it its exemplary force: Golgota and the Cyrenian, Veronica with her handkerchief, the Last Supper and the centurions are reiterated by the narrative in what is not a repetition, but an enactment of a new, greater drama (if of lesser value to the official history) by a different group of actors.

There's been much sermonizing over the last two thousand years about how Christ carried the cross to the top of Golgota, assisted by the Cyrenian no less, and of this crucified man coming along here no one says a word, he who ate little for supper last night and almost nothing today, still half a way to go, eyes growing bleary, it's agony, gentlemen, as everyone can see. (76)

They found him. Two guards are taking him... and now this really seems intentional, it's all uphill, as if we were watching a film on the life of Christ, there on top is the Calvary, these are centurions in heavy boots and sweating as befits warriors... and the procession has only a hundred meters left to go, high up above the wall we see a woman hanging a bedsheet out to dry, wouldn't it be something if her name were Veronica, but no, she's just a Cesaltina and not much of a religious type. She sees the man led by the guards, follows him with her eyes, she doesn't know him but has a sense of foreboding, she rests her face against the wet sheet as if it were a sweat cloth and says to her little boy who wants to play in the sun, Let's go inside. (167)

Saramago redeploys this sacrilegious method with reference to the birth of Christ. The newborn child turns out to be, in this time of new "miracles" (295), a girl, the daughter of Gracinda and Manuel Espada, who also merits a luminous aura ("a reflected luminosity is falling over the bedsheet, let us not speculate where it is coming from") and her own three wise men: grandfather, uncle and father. The gifts she receives instead of gold, myrrh and frankincense are geraniums, daisies and hands open to form a huge flower, and her star of Bethlehem metamorphoses into fireflies that illuminate the road Manuel Espada takes to see his newborn daughter; they come to rest over the door frame, waiting and signaling an homage to the "glory of man on earth" who takes precedence over God in the heavens. Furthermore, to complete the traditional association of Christ with light, the narrative discourse invents a deceptive falsehood: "The two waiting fireflies started to fly again, close to the ground, shining so brightly that the ants who were keeping guard over their anthills gave a shout to announce the sunrise" (301). The falsehood is deceptive because although the ants confuse the radiance of the fireflies with sunlight, metaphorically they are not mistaken in their announcement of another sunrise, represented by the birth of Maria Adelaide: the bright day of the revolution, introduced in the novel with the words "This is the sun of justice" (364).

As if to complete a narrative cycle begun with the Genesis, the novel ends

with an epic-Biblical scene of the resurrection of the dead, which does not occur in a transcendental space and time, but in the time where human victories are achieved and in the earthly space of the Portuguese Alentejo, where the agrarian revolution is taking place. That which the example of Christ promises for an afterlife is realized in the present, as a utopia made concrete within history.

Some might call these heretical appropriations, and they would be right, at more than one level of reading. In the first place, we may understand "heresy" in its etymological sense, with no religious reference yet attached to the term, as "choice" (from the Greek "*airesis*"); in this sense, Saramago "chooses" to displace sacred attributes or stories from the plane of transcendence to that of human experience. At a second level, heresy is perpetuated through the voluntary inversion of dogmas or of supposedly divine truths in such a way as to subject them, if not to an outright denial, then at least to a questioning, which has a naturally disconcerting effect with regard to situations that traditional consensus, established religion and morality have considered unquestionable. To agitate, stir up, set into motion: these actions are only possible from within religious discourse, as is the case, in fact, of all heretical processes. Whether labeled as heresy or as sacrilege, it is a form of audacity that opts to work with fragments of referential texts, remnants or castaways of a culture, and to reuse them in a manner different from their original purpose.

The most ample material for this kind of reflection may of course be found in Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, which presents in the guise of a fictional construct the discourse transmitted by the tradition as an expression of absolute truth. This is a text that not only avails itself of the Christian repertoire of cultural references, but also articulates its own writing formula on the basis of sacred texts. Its sacrilegious character consists ultimately in its close approach to the model in order to absorb it skillfully within a conscious exercise of pastiche.

In truth, however, let it be said that Saramago's audacious dialogue with the Christian tradition does not obliterate it, but, on the contrary, offers it an opportunity to learn to speak for itself not in eternal but in present time. Is not this the meaning of the artful somersault performed in the novel's second epigraph, which quotes Pontius Pilate's words, *Quod scripsi, scripsi*? "What I have written, I have written" signifies here not only an authoritarian gesture

of the man in power who refuses to go back on his actions, but also an ironic indictment—on the narrator's part—of the speaking subject's ignorance with respect to the fatality of the written language itself that is unable, once written down, to elude the many readings it is bound to unwittingly generate. Once written, the Holy Gospels became liable to engender apocryphal, parodic and even heretical versions, since their words are not stamped with the seal of copyright and, on the contrary, have grown richer with the liberty of their diverse interpretations.

Saramago's writing, taking the sacred as its point of departure in order to endow it with unexpected meanings, invests in a revolution that, like all revolutions, consecrates the sacrilege.⁶ In choosing its sacrilegious strategy, it rests on etymological roots that suggest as much a theft of the sacred as its possession or reading (*lego*: "to bring together, gather," but also "to read," and, by way of litotes, "to take, appropriate or steal"). The result is a contradictory game played against the other (text), which seduces and invites parodic reconsideration: it requires the courage to touch what must not be touched (the sacred) so that it does not become soiled (sacrilege), marked or branded. In this sense, the revolution to which fiction subjects the holy document is not just sacrilege directed against it, but also, paradoxically, its consecration. The narrative does not place itself in opposition to holiness: its goal is merely recontextualization.

To recontextualize the sacred means, for example, to displace the scene of the Last Supper from the eve of the crucifixion to the celebration of Jesus' lovemaking with Mary Magdalen. Their love affair begins after the woman applies healing ointments to Jesus' foot: thus Saramago rewrites the episode in which Jesus washes his disciples' feet before the feast, replacing, in the process, an expression of the Master's humility before his followers with a prelude to physical passion that consists in educating the senses and learning the body: "Discover my body," says Mary Magdalen, and then "Discover your body" (213).

To recontextualize the sacred also means to create Jesus as a disciple and not as a master, a disciple who needs masters and will have them: in Pastor, whom he does not understand, and in Mary Magdalen, who finally makes Jesus apprehend what he had earlier perceived but dimly, until he himself discovers the impending tragedy and is driven ineluctably towards the sacrifice. God's design is thus revealed as an enormous betrayal and an immoderate exercise of power, which cannot be countered

for reasons of historical verisimilitude and internal coherence of the narrative. To invert God's plan, making Jesus die on the cross without having realized his own divinity, would be tantamount to inaugurating a history that did not take place. This strategy, therefore, has no future, and God's words, which identify Jesus—"This is My beloved Son" (341)—are moved from the scene of baptism to that of crucifixion, during which, according to the Biblical text, the skies in reality fell silent. An immense irony, nevertheless, attends the fact that God chooses to impose his presence even though the dying Jesus desires to remain unrecognized and has not asked the question: "Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?". The disclosure of Jesus as the Son of God amounts to a denial of a possible reversal of history and is a gesture that effectively sanctions the bloody horrors to be brought about by the Christian dominance of Western culture. This authoritarian gesture of the Father can only be countered by the last generous action of the Son, who perverts the discourse of paternalistic charity aimed at saving from damnation the inconsistent, sinful humans who have crucified him—"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"—by choosing (*airesis*) a formula that identifies him conclusively with those very humans: "Men, forgive Him, for he knows not what He has done" (341).

I like to think, with Compagnon, that an author recreates in the process of writing the primordial gestures of playing with paper: cutting and pasting. All literary texts are construed through the superposition of successive layers of knowledge, showing marks of incisions and corrections, traces of dialogues and borrowings, voices of the present and shadows of the past. José Saramago negotiates in a manner both critical and generous his ample baggage as an attentive cultural traveler: he is well aware that in the constructs of the present a thousand living beings exist side-by-side with a hundred thousand dead, and that the sighs of the dead rising from the ground are the remains of the works bequeathed by the past. To know how to deal with these remains is to reproduce in writing a passion for reading, since reading and writing are similar, complementary and supplementary practices: they allow the transmission of the echoes of human knowledge—beyond mere repetition—by new utterances that are added daily to the immense universal library of humankind.

Notes

1. "Que la substance de la citation, par-delà les accidents du sens et du phénomène, soit une *dynamis*, une puissance, l'étymologie le confirme. *Citare*, en latin, c'est mettre en mouvement, faire passer du repos à l'action. Les sens du verbe s'ordonnent ainsi: d'abord faire venir à soi, appeler (d'où l'acception juridique d'une sommation à comparaître), puis exciter, provoquer, enfin, dans le vocabulaire militaire, délivrer une mention. En tout cas, une puissance est en jeu, celle qui met en branle" (Compagnon 44).

2. I have discussed in greater detail these structural similarities between *Levantado do Chão* and Camões's poem in "No Paraíso da Memória...".

3. [Translator's note] I have retained here the Portuguese original along with the translation, in order to better illustrate Saramago's intricate reworking and absorption of Camões's verse.

4. All these references and strategies of appropriation are comprehensively described in my *José Saramago. Entre a História e a Ficção*.

5. See, in addition to my book, Silva 1991 and 1998.

6. As Octavio Paz put it, "Every revolution is at the same time a profanation and a consecration. The revolutionary movement is a profanation, because it overthrows old images, but this debasement is always accompanied by a consecration of what up to that point had been considered profane: the revolution consecrates the sacrilege" (269).

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