José Saramago's Historical Fiction

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It is best to be wary of what we see or think we see.
Saramago, *Deste Mundo e do Outro*

The past is filled with voices which cannot keep quiet
and alongside my shadow there is an endless multitude of
people justifying it.
Saramago, *A Bagagem do Viajante*

Everything in the world is giving us answers,
what has not yet arrived is the time to ask questions.
Saramago, *Baltasar and Blimunda*

José Saramago's mastery of different literary genres is widely recognized; it is the novel, however, that undoubtedly constitutes his favorite genre.[1] My aim in this article is precisely to concentrate on Saramago's novels. Taking into account the development of the author's literary project, I will devote my attention particularly to his historical fiction, that is, to the novels in which Saramago explicitly uses history as his narrative subject. These novels are *Levantado do Chão* (*Raised from the Ground*, 1980), *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1982), *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984), and *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1989). All these works reflect, in different ways, on the past of the Portuguese nation, seen from a present perspective while a process of revision of the history of Portugal unfolds within the fictional text. This process translates into the adoption of an attitude that seeks to rewrite and to correct history, and is made possible by conjecturing

about the supposed objectivity of historical discourse and the representation of events it gives. This reappreciation of Portuguese history gives rise not only to an analysis of the intimate relations between the writing of history and political power, but also to an epistemological and ideological examination of the historical, human, linguistic, literary, ethical and political heritage of the Portuguese nation.

On the basis of the above-mentioned *corpus*, and considering Saramago's special attraction to history, I will attempt to demonstrate that his historical fiction reflects the writer's politics of representation, which are characteristic of postmodern fiction in general. It is a literary production that seeks to understand a complex and constantly evolving present by turning to the past, to the writing of history, and to the ways in which our knowledge about the past is processed and transmitted. Thus, I will propose a typology of postmodern historical fiction, through which I will show how the different fictional representations of historical events and characters in Saramago's novels, while promoting the dialogue between fiction and historical discourse, suggest the notion that literary and historical representation are both political constructions whose logic is challenged by the fictional text itself.[2]

Focusing our attention on postmodern fiction, we identify two great trends resulting from the same need, namely, the need to investigate empirical reality and the ways in which it is interpreted and represented. Ever since the end of World War Two, human beings have struggled to come to terms with a profound sense of anguish caused, on the one hand, by the many attempts to annihilate the human subject in the various conflicts happening throughout the world, and, on the other, by the uncertainty about the truthfulness of our representations of the empirical world. More specifically I am referring, first, to the great interest in the past that literary fiction has taken, which manifests itself especially in the rejection of a clear distinction between truth and fiction and between past and present (Fokkema), and, second, to the attention that literary works dedicate, in a process of self-reflection, to fiction itself, i.e., to the linguistic and literary conventions underlying its construction. The former literary trend is connected with the production of different types of historical fiction where the dialogue between fiction and history predominates; the latter has to do with the experimental character of literature, revealed through the great interest in the aesthetic use of language to create literary texts, as well as through the predominance granted to metafiction.

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Though recognizing the important role played by experimental fiction, the objectives of this essay clearly restrict my analysis to the former literary trend. The degree of interest in the past that literature has taken has helped pave the way to granting the same degree of credibility to the different representations of reality provided by historical and fictional discourse.[3] It is important to note that fiction and history were regarded for a long time as completely separate domains, on the premise that fictional discourse dealt with so-called imaginary referents whereas historical discourse had to do with supposedly real referents. This conferred a status of truth on the latter type of discourse alone, even when the former made explicit reference to chronologically precise historical periods reconstructed with the utmost accuracy.[4] In other words, it was as if only history could be deemed certain in relation to empirical reality, while fiction was relegated to the domain of fortune, that is, to the realm of the merely possible. This situation was mostly the result of the belief in historiography as based on documentary record, without questioning, however, either its validity or the criteria that guided the selection of the documents, or the way in which the historiographer used them.[5]

The dialogue between fiction and history takes on special significance when narrative discourse starts working as a sort of a "seam" (Bessière), that is, as a link between fictional and historical representation, destroying the status of certainty that had, until then, characterized historical discourse. The "seam" becomes visible when historians distinguish the presence of a verbal structure, in the form of a narrative discourse, in the historical task of explaining the structures and processes of the past (White, *Metahistory* 2). As Hayden White aptly summarizes, a narrative "is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes, but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even political implications" (*Content* ix), an observation that calls our attention to the partial and fragmented character of history as well as to the interrelations between history, fiction, and politics.[6] The notion of historical truth is thus irremediably compromised, and it becomes possible to regard history as a space for the configuration of different possibilities, that is, to accept the fact that history does not proceed in one single direction and that a given event "happens within a range of possibilities and, as a realization or a translation of a given possibility, is not entirely contained in its determinations"

(Gusmão 89). This statement reminds us of the distinction between *facts* and *events* that Linda Hutcheon makes in relation to postmodern literature, highlighting both history and fiction as human mental constructions, systems of signification through which we can understand the past (*Poetics* 89). According to Hutcheon, the meaning of the past does not lie in the events, but rather in the meaning(s)-producing systems that transform these past events into historical facts.[7]

Considering that novelists' interest in the past is not an exclusive prerogative of postmodern writers and that such interest underlies the mimetic process itself—if *mimesis* is what Barbara Foley suggests, i.e., a "*mode of cognition*, enacted through a generic contract of which the purpose is to interpret and evaluate past or present historical actuality" (64; original emphasis)—we have to question ourselves as to the innovative character of postmodern historical fiction. This innovation is closely linked with the way in which we regard the old relation of opposition between fact and fiction.[8] In fact, historians and novelists alike have come to understand historical facts as the result of human mental constructions arising from the different possible representations of a certain event. This position leads to a significant blurring of the line separating fact from fiction and allows for a dialogue between historical and fictional discourse as representations of the empirical world that draw our attention to the unstable nature of these representations. Within this dialogue, it is important to consider the potentiality and the viability of some fictional techniques, described by Maria Alzira Seixo (*Lugares* 84), in the modification of the symbolic and ideological scope of both historical and fictional representation. The most significant of these techniques are: introducing unexpected, imaginary, or fantastic events into the narrative; elaborating certain fictional characters; and using heritage in its multiple forms as a parodic tool to reconstruct the past, correct history and (re)write it. In view of the above, let us consider the following proposal for a typology of the main trends of postmodern historical fiction.

Starting from the assumption that quite a large range of historical fictions appeared in the second half of the twentieth century, I propose the following typology, composed of four main types of novels that incorporate historical matter and transform the past and written history into their subject. What interests me above all is to observe the different meanings created by the transformation of history into narrative matter, especially with regard to Saramago's works. It is important to note that this proposal is simply an

attempt to approach and classify postmodern historical fictions and, therefore, it needs to be seen as a starting rather than a finishing point within a still ongoing research project. Thus, it neither excludes different readings and approaches nor denies the possibility of discovering other historical fictions likely to introduce changes in this typology and to lead to its rearrangement.

The first type is the historical novel. This denomination arises for the following reasons: first, the novel is modeled after historiography and focuses on history's process of change; second, it follows events, respecting the canonical version of history; and, finally, it projects external reality in a detailed and rigorous way through its characters (both fictional and historical). The denomination was chosen because this type of novel represents, as it were, a development of two models: the nineteenth-century historical novel, which followed the pattern set by Walter Scott, and modernist historical fiction. In other words, I believe that postmodern historical novels inherited a concern with reconstructing the past with rigor and detail from nineteenth-century historical fiction, taking on a role that seeks to complement historiography while affirming their character as fictional works with a potential to depict history in a creative and attractive way. On the other hand, postmodern historical novels show similarities with modernist narratives that focused on the past. Indeed, the postmodern model performs not only the didactic function of disseminating knowledge about history through fiction, but also the eminently critical function of making frequent and explicit comments of a metahistorical and metafictional nature. These comments are used above all to draw attention to the relativity of historiography and to the verbal translation of empirical data. However, whereas modernist historical fiction stressed the subjective process of shaping the experience and consciousness of history, what I have termed postmodern historical fiction highlights not so much the writing of history as, rather, the process of construction and affirmation of one specific version of history, with its consequent political and ideological implications. In other words, this type of novel is more interested in investigating the motives that led, *a posteriori*, to the historical record of a certain event than in the event *per se*. This interest draws our attention to two factors: the partial and subjective nature of historical knowledge and explanation, and the likelihood of there being diverging views on the same event, which in its turn calls into question the legitimacy of historical sources. An example illustrating this first type of

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postmodern historical fiction is Gore Vidal's series *American Chronicle*, which is composed of six novels tracing the history of the United States from its foundation as an independent nation until the mid-twentieth century.[9]

The second type of postmodern historical fiction corresponds to novels combining historical data with elements that are characteristic of the fantastic genre, as interpreted by Seixo (*Lugares* 51-52). For this Portuguese critic, the use of fantastic elements in contemporary fiction allows

> first, the interference of two worlds *or* two orders—the natural and the supernatural, the rational and the irrational—where it is unclear which of the two converts into the other; second, the category of **alterity** that results from this interference (and which takes on various configurations such as ghost, spirit, double personality, etc.), with special emphasis on the *proximity* of this *otherness* which would be expressed, in logical terms, as a *non-disjunction*, giving rise to a second level of double entities functioning in the opposite way; third, the inclusion of elements of the **unusual**, which upsets the system previously organized by the *doxa*, and provokes specific reading reactions (of the characters in relation to the facts, of the readers towards the fictional work) ranging from curiosity to fear, from perplexity to terror, and from bewilderment to the mesmerizing attraction that Duarte Faria calls "*assombro*" ["awe, dread"], a simultaneously physical and mental attitude of awe and wonder. (*Lugares* 52)[10]

In this type of historical fiction, there are no deviations from official history, and the common strategies used to highlight empirical reality and the instability of its representation are the comparison between different orders and the circulation of certain characters through various worlds and time periods.

Although Seixo (*Lugares* 52) distinguishes between the fantastic genre and other contiguous genres (such as, for instance, fantasy, science fiction and horror fiction), in the second category of my typology I include elements that historical fiction typically borrows from science fiction. The reason for this inclusion is that the degree of alterity needed to deconstruct possible mythifications of historical discourse is often introduced into works of historical fiction by referring to worlds and ways of living that are completely different from those experienced in everyday life.[11]

It is interesting to note that literary criticism generally finds it difficult to classify the novels that belong to this second category of postmodern historical fiction, or rather, given their generic permeability, to choose a

fitting label for them. On the one hand, it is not pertinent to regard them as historical novels, if we bear in mind the abovementioned characteristics of this category. On the other, it would be hasty to classify them as fantastic novels *tout court*, because, although they invite a flight into alternative worlds, they respect the canonical version of history by referring, directly or indirectly, to the real world. Thus, it is more functional to give them the more encompassing denomination of supra-real historical fiction, which alludes both to the incorporation of historical material and to the reference to the possible existence of one (or more) world(s) organized according to rules that are different from those governing the empirical world.[12] It is this very sense of estrangement caused by alternative ways of life that sheds light on the complexity of human existence and its relations. Typical examples of this type of historical fiction are José Saramago's *Baltasar and Blimunda* and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, which will be discussed below. An illustration of supra-real fiction incorporating elements characteristic of science fiction is Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade* (1969).

The third type of novel in the typology proposed here corresponds to what Elisabeth Wesseling has called "uchronian fiction," that is, those works that, while using history as their narrative subject, propose alternative histories on the basis of a series of events that did not take place, but which could have. Uchronian novels have a counterfactual character, as they are based on the notion that any historical situation could have developed within a framework of possibilities different from those that are socially and historically accepted. This type of novel resembles the other two. On the one hand, just like historical novels, it uses canonical history as its source; on the other, it finds inspiration in elements and discursive modes that are typical of the fantastic genre and of science fiction. In other words, in conceiving a uchronian novel, the writer resorts to the creation of possible alternative worlds that, when they intersect with the literary model of the real, draw attention to the need to establish a new relation with history.

This type of fiction places special emphasis on the process of constructing history, on its writing, and on the transformation of events into facts, attributing great importance to the sources and archives of official history. These are parodied and subverted in the projection of a different course of events, which is consequently represented by a character who often plays a role equivalent to that of a historian. Underlying this process is the need to call the reader's attention to the fact that historiography, being a verbal

representation of reality, can be corrected, which, in its turn, stresses the uncertain and provisional character of history and of the notion of historical truth. An example of this category is José Saramago's novel *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1989), to which we will return below.

It seems appropriate to include another novel by Saramago in this category: *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991). Indeed, in this text, the importance of rewriting and correcting history derives from a rereading of the Bible and from the presentation of a different version of Jesus Christ's life. The literary text reveals a Christ who is, above all, human, as are all the other members of his family. It is a Christ who loves his companion as any other man loves a woman whom he has chosen to share his life; a Christ who does not hesitate to question God's love for his Son and for human beings in general; a Christ able to question the possible reasons underlying his mission, a mission that he supposedly has to fulfil through a sacrifice that he did not choose, but for which he was chosen. These are but a few examples of the changes that this work of fiction introduces in Christ's life on the basis of its rereading of the Bible, which is seen here, above all, as a historical document. This interpretation of the biblical text, on the other hand, does not prevent the novel from establishing a new dynamic in the relation between the sacred and the fictional, through the suggestion that God is, as stated by Wladimir Krysinski in his analysis of this work by Saramago, "a structure of power, a superstructure of manipulation, a construction of inequality" (403).[13]

The fourth type of historical fiction in my typology is historiographic metafiction, a denomination made popular by Linda Hutcheon, who has regarded it as the representative model of the postmodern novel. However, here I will use this concept in a more limited sense, largely because I consider Hutcheon's proposal to be too inclusive. In my opinion, what this author regards as the representative model of the postmodern novel comprises only the novels belonging to the first category of postmodern fiction I identified at the beginning of this discussion, that is to say fiction that is interested in the past and in the rewriting of history. Novels like *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) by Italo Calvino and *Duluth* (1983) by Gore Vidal, which are postmodern texts and undoubtedly self-reflexive, but which do not evoke history, clearly call into question Hutcheon's theoretical premise. These two novels, although making use of different fictional techniques (the discussion of which goes beyond the scope of this article), are a good illustration of the reflection on the (im)possibility of escaping from the prison of language in

representing the empirical world. Moreover, they challenge not only the limits imposed by literary and linguistic conventions, but also the established reading protocols, including, in the case of Vidal's novel, the conventions and protocols characteristic of postmodernism.

Therefore, the term "historiographic metafiction" is used here to consider a type of novel that, combining elements of self-reflection and historical evocation based on the belief that both history and fiction are human constructions, reassesses and rewrites past forms and contents always from a present perspective (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 5). In other words, in adopting Hutcheon's concept, I refer only to those fictional narratives that, without resorting to elements and discursive modes of the fantastic genre or science fiction and without deviating from historical facts (as do uchronian novels), promote a dialogue with historical and/or literary intertexts and draw attention to their own internal structure. Examples of this category are John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and José Saramago's *Levantado do Chão*.

Levantado do Chão is an interesting case of historiographic metafiction.[14] The predominant historical intertext corresponds to the events that marked the twentieth century in the world and, more specifically, in Portugal: the foundation of the Republic, World War I, Salazar's Estado Novo, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the Portuguese Colonial War, and the April Revolution of 1974. All these events are seen through the eyes of various generations of a poor peasant family from Alentejo and are filtered through a narrator who critically analyses historical facts from a present viewpoint. The narrator maintains that "all this can be told in a different way" (14), thus summarizing one of the main themes of the novel: the recording of the stories of the people whom official history has chosen not to hear, or even to silence. Fiction can thus vindicate a new way of writing history and—why not—a new way of making history.[15] The metafictional component is not, however, as explicit as in Fowles's novel. This component takes on an increasing significance within *Levantado do Chão* through the narrator's voice, which compares the official and unofficial versions of history; the former corresponds to the discourses of the clergy, the landowners and the state, and the latter to the peasants' discourse.

Levantado do Chão discusses the ideological writing of official history by playing with two intertexts that are well known to its potential Portuguese readership: the literary and the biblical. Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva

identifies the novel's heroes, the Alentejan farmhands, with the "heirs of the old epic," seeing them as the "distinguished barons" of the "inland sea" epic, that is, of Alentejo, a clear allusion to Camões's *The Lusiads* (*José Saramago* 193-94 and 230). Silva also shows how biblical language (which appears in the novel, especially in the sermons of Father Agamedes and the other priests, all of whom share the same name, an indication of the uniformity of the clergy's discourse) served the interests of both the State and the landowners by helping them preserve their privileges and oppress the peasants economically and politically (Silva, "O Quinto Evangelho" and "Do Labirinto"). The novel's innovation consists in enriching the historical intertext with the oral version of facts presented by the farmers, given that there are no written historical documents laid down by those whom the novel wishes to "raise from the ground." The oral testimony of those who have been silenced by official historiography thus acquires the status of historical testimony within the literary text. It is precisely by confronting the voices of power (represented by the landowners, the church and the state) with the voices stifled by the dominant classes that the novel uncovers both the project of the perpetuation of injustice and social inequality and that of the battle against it through a progressive raising of political and social awareness in those who have the courage to fight to make themselves heard. In sum, *Levantado do Chão* is a fictional text that rereads and rewrites Portuguese history in a politically and socially committed way (Seixo, *Lugares* 125-27), thereby drawing attention to the need for a more humanized history. It is a history that demands the presence of those who go through this world without leaving any mark, a constant claim in Saramago's fictional production.

Considering my proposal for a typology of the main trends of postmodern historical fiction in more general terms, it is important to note the problematic underlying the four great types of novel that make up the typology, i.e., *error, deformation* and *correction*, or, in other words, the consciousness that any representation of the past, being a linguistic construction, can be manipulated ideologically. Hence the necessity to tell what has already been told in a different way. These different ways of telling and writing are exactly what my typology seeks to encompass, emphasizing in all of them the importance of the consciousness of alterity, manifested through the adoption of the Other's point of view in the narrative (the Other who has been forsaken by history, the Other who has been offended by

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official historiography, the Other who presents a version that history tries to destroy at all costs).[16] Each type of novel proposes different discursive formulations, which correspond to different ways of representing the empirical world symbolically. Presiding over these modalities is a common concern based on three components: the pedagogical, epistemological, and politico-ideological, which correspond, respectively, to the fictional text's teaching about the past as seen from multiple viewpoints; discussing problems related to how the past is learned and represented; and promoting a reflection on the ways in which various versions of history function as power mechanisms (in the past and in the present). In short, and to paraphrase the quotation from *Baltasar and Blimunda* that appears in the epigraph to this article, there are different ways of formulating questions to the answers that the world gives us.[17]

It is important to return now to the category that I have termed the postmodern historical novel, since in the other categories it is usually the narrator who dictates the rules of the "game" that combines the present (of the enunciation) with the past. It is the narrator who frequently tells about past events long after their occurrence, and who knows better than all the other characters the course of historical events and the impact they will have on the narrative and on the empirical reality. Thus it is most commonly the narrator who ingeniously regulates the mechanisms of analepsis and prolepsis, the introduction of anachronisms, and the announcing of prophecies, which act within the limits of the expectations of the potential readers of literary texts, prefiguring, to a great extent, the symbolic dimension of literary representation. Given all the above, it is pertinent to ask the reasons for the inclusion of a category called "historical novel" in our proposal for a typology of postmodern historical fiction. Seixo's observation with regard to Saramago's novels provides an answer to that question. Reflecting on the great significance of history in Saramago's works, the critic maintains that his historical fiction is constructed "thinking about the present much more than about the past that constitutes its object" (*Lugares* 55). Nonetheless, we cannot forget the existence of historical fictions such as the abovementioned works of Gore Vidal. In these novels, the narrators (usually fictional characters whose existence is not historically documented) do not inscribe the author's present perspective in the plane of enunciation (here it would be interesting to analyze in detail how each narrator in the novels that illustrate the different categories of our typology introduces a present

perspective to be compared with the past). In sum, it is on the basis of the novels composing Vidal's representative *American Chronicle* that I identify three key features that lead me to propose the category I have called the postmodern historical novel: one, respect for the canonized version of History (even though underlying this series is the postmodern concern for unveiling and interpreting the ideological meanings that inform the distortions in the representation of, for instance, North American political history); two, exclusion of the present from the plane of enunciation (the present is here understood as the period in which the author writes each novel in the series); and, three, the use of introductions, prefaces, postscripts and notes, in which the author marks out the boundaries of what is fictional and what is historically documented in his novels.

From now on, I will focus my attention exclusively on the part of Saramago's literary production that uses the history of Portugal as its subject. This will enable me to consider the specificity of the novels belonging to the categories of supra-real historical fiction and uchronian fiction. What interests me above all is to see how the boundary is drawn between *this* world (the real world which is modeled by historical discourse) and the *other* world, which incorporates elements from the fantastic genre and creates alternative fictional worlds.[18] I will examine to what extent this boundary allows a glimpse into the epistemological and ideological analysis of the heritage of the Portuguese nation, considered here in its various components: historical (relevant historical events recorded in the novels); human (historical figures transformed into fictional characters, and the people who achieve the status of equality as regards their place in history); linguistic (the retrieval of a popular voice neglected by official historiography and the metalinguistic observations that frequently appear in the novels); literary (intertextuality with representative Portuguese authors and texts, such as Camões, Almeida Garrett, Eça de Queirós, a process that reaches its zenith with Fernando Pessoa and his heteronyms); and ethico-political (the frailties and contradictions of political power caused by personal vanity and power-hungry alliances). Thus, I propose to consider, on the one hand, where and how fantastic elements enter *Baltasar and Blimunda* and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (that is, where and how historical fiction becomes supra-real) and, on the other hand, where and how *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* becomes a uchronian novel. To this effect, I have selected the following passages on which to comment: chapter five of *Baltasar and*

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Blimunda; chapter one of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*; and chapters two and three of *The History of the Siege of Lisbon.*

Chapter five of *Baltasar and Blimunda* contains a detailed description of the first auto-da-fé in the novel, when Blimunda, Baltasar, and Bartolomeu Lourenço meet for the first time. These three characters will be responsible for building Father Bartolomeu's airship, a realistic project within the historical context of eighteenth-century Portugal (although there is no historical evidence that the actual airship did fly), which, in the overall framework of the novel, will run parallel to the construction of the Mafra Convent as the fulfillment of a pledge made by the king, Dom João V, in return for the queen giving him an heir. However, no mention is made of the airship in chapter five of the novel, which deals with a special encounter between a crippled soldier, Baltasar Mateus, and Blimunda, simple people who apparently are brought together while watching the procession of those accused by the Inquisition. Their meeting is somehow contrived by a gagged woman in the procession. She is Sebastiana de Jesus, who has visions and revelations, and who feels her heart jump when she is about to locate her daughter Blimunda in the middle of the crowd. The supernatural is introduced in the novel through this character, while the potential present in Blimunda's eyes is suggested in the following passage:

> At last my heart has given me a sign—my heart has given a deep sigh. I am about to see Blimunda, I am about to see her. Ah, there she is. Blimunda, Blimunda, Blimunda, my child. She has seen me but cannot speak, she must pretend that she does not recognize me, or even pretend to despise me, a mother who is bewitched and excommunicated, although no more than a quarter Jewess and converted. She sees me, and at her side is Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço. Do not speak, Blimunda. Just look at me with those eyes of yours, which have the power to see everything. Who can that tall stranger be who stands beside Blimunda? She does not know— alas, she does not know who he can be or where he comes from. Whatever will become of them? Why do my powers fail me? Judging from his tattered clothes, that harrowed expression, that missing hand, he must be a soldier. Farewell, Blimunda, for I shall see you no more. Blimunda said to the priest: That's my mother. Then, turning to the tall man standing beside her, she asked: What is your name? And the man immediately told her, thus acknowledging that this woman had a right to ask him. He told her: Baltasar Mateus, called Sete-Sóis. (39)

It is in this same chapter that Blimunda and Baltasar are united through a marriage ritual that is directed by the young woman and violates the laws of Catholicism. I am referring to Blimunda's use of the blood of her lost virginity to cross herself and to draw a cross on the soldier's chest, thus sealing a union that will come to an end many years later, during another auto-da-fé, in which Baltasar is burned alive. It is significant that this supernatural framework appears in a chapter centered around an auto-da-fé, an instrument of the Church's political power. The wealth of detail in the scene reveals not only the ponderous workings of the Inquisition, but also the hierarchy prevailing in the relations among the various religious orders that fought over the king's endowments. The monarch honors the ceremony of the auto-da-fé with his presence, emphasizing the support given to the clergy. Most curious of all is the irony used by the narrator in describing the procession, his mingling with the condemned, and his characterization of the event as a moment of general cheerfulness, an entertaining show for the people. The auto-da-fé therefore loses part of its religious character to reveal a recreational component that, in its turn, deconstructs the authority of the Church. This process is then reinforced by the importance given to the marriage ritual between Blimunda and Baltasar, undoubtedly heretical and deserving punishment, according to the religious laws of that age. The introduction of supernatural elements only in the fifth chapter confirms what the first four chapters had already announced, that is, the criticism of the power structure of D. João V's reign, based on a dependent and passive court that exploited the riches from Brazil and contented itself with the Church's forgiveness for its excessive self-indulgence. In fact, the introduction of another world in the novel does not surprise the reader, since the preceding chapters have prepared him or her for a narrative that privileges subversion. This is made clear by the narrator's sharp irony, whose favorite targets are the king and the queen (witness the minute and comic description of their sexual intercourse), as well as the all-powerful clergy represented, in addition to the critical description of the auto-da-fé, in the episode of the theft of the lamps from the Franciscan church, on which occasion the narrator draws a map of a large part of Lisbon using the city's countless churches.

By emphasizing the heretical side of the political and religious ceremony of the auto-da-fé, by describing the union of a specific couple among the many that have come together to celebrate the event, and by associating Blimunda, from the very beginning, with the supernatural, Saramago hints

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at the important role that will be played by Blimunda and Baltasar in the political and ideological criticism leveled by the novel in its retelling of the history of the building of the Mafra Convent.

The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis is the novel by Saramago in which the inclusion of fantastic elements is taken to an extreme. Its main character is Ricardo Reis, one of the heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa, who is transformed into a fictional character. Saramago takes advantage of the fact that Fernando Pessoa died in 1935 to (re)create Ricardo Reis, who in the narrative returns to Portugal after many years in Brazil. Moreover, Saramago wakes Pessoa from the deep slumber of death and brings him back to the world of the living as a critical and attentive observer of the year 1936 in Portugal and the world, converting the dead poet into Ricardo Reis's privileged interlocutor. Reis is an alter ego of Pessoa, who, deep in the maze of his multifaceted mind, debates over the anguished questions: "who?," "where?" and "what for?"[19] In *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, Reis's questioning somehow extends to José Saramago himself. Indeed, by resorting to a paper character, the fruit of Pessoa's creative feigning, Saramago does not limit himself to recovering and problematizing Pessoa's and Reis's writing. He reflects on his own literary work when, apart from Pessoa and Reis, he converses with other guiding figures of Portuguese literature, such as Camões and Eça, whose works are recaptured in the narrative, especially through Reis's and/or Pessoa's passing through certain areas of 1930s Lisbon.[20] The novel focuses on the complex period of the mid-1930s in Europe and, above all, in Portugal; this historical context is described in detail through the newspapers that Reis eagerly reads and which introduce into the narrative another aspect of the reflection on the representation of the empirical world: the role of the press. It is important to note that Portuguese newspapers of the time, haunted by the ghosts of the political police and the blue pencil of censorship, wrote about what interested the regime of Salazar's Estado Novo.

The fantastic component enters the narrative surreptitiously in the very first chapter, through the gloomy atmosphere of a rainy winter day surrounding the *Highland Brigade*'s arrival in Lisbon. The ship's sluggish approach, the view of the "silent city … the somber city, enclosed by facades and walls" (3) and the routine procedures in the customhouse, disquietingly characterized as an "antechamber, a limbo … to what awaits outside" (4), precede the presentation of the novel's protagonist, whose identity is revealed little by little. He is an apparently middle-aged man with a Brazilian accent

who, despite being Portuguese, does not know where to go. The presence of the fantastic is "formalized" (given that a somber atmosphere has pervaded the narrative from the very beginning with phantasmagoric tones) when the character fills out the hotel registration form. It is then that Ricardo Reis's intimate quest for an identity is alluded to; in a broader perspective, it is a quest that can be read to a certain extent as Saramago's own, since he has to come to terms in his own literary production with the inevitable reference represented by Pessoa's work:

> Meanwhile the guest returns to the reception desk, somewhat out of breath after all that effort. He takes the pen and enters the essential details about himself in the register of arrivals, so that it might be known who he claims to be, in the appropriate box on the lined page. Name, Ricardo Reis, age, forty-eight, place of birth, Oporto, marital status, bachelor, profession, doctor, last place of residence, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, whence he has arrived aboard the Highland Brigade. It reads like the beginning of a confession, an intimate autobiography, all that is hidden is contained in these handwritten lines, the only problem is to discover the rest. (10)[21]

The "rest," besides Reis's identity, is, on the one hand, the cultural and literary heritage represented by the legacy of Pessoa's poetry and, on the other, the year 1936 (the time reference of "this" empirical world), which represents the year of the death of Ricardo Reis (the time reference of the "other" world, the world of Saramago's fictional text).

The incorporation of another world—which is, in reality, the world of poetic work, a world that exists only on paper—is reinforced by references to the books brought along by Ricardo Reis. One of them in particular acquires special significance because it belonged to the ship but was kept by the passenger upon leaving the vessel. It is *The God of the Labyrinth*, an imaginary book that appears in one of Borges's *Fictions* (1944). The work, apart from alluding to the importance of the image of the labyrinth (and the literary references it evokes), suggests the character's search for an identity through the similarity between the pronunciation of the name of the book's author (Quain) and the Portuguese pronoun "*Quem*" ("Who"), a personal search highlighted by Saramago's use of Ricardo Reis's verses in the prose text. These verses remind us of the first of Ricardo Reis's odes, which is dated as the final one and which points to the difficulty in finding an answer to the question "Quem?," since Pessoa's heteronym describes himself as inhabited by

countless entities. The assimilation of Reis's poetry within narrative prose is an ingenious device used by Saramago to signal the characters' (and also the potential readers') passage through different worlds, revealing in the process an extremely elaborate fictional technique, which comprises not only Saramago's own creative inventiveness, but also Pessoa's and Reis's.

Also emerging in the first chapter is another element that will acquire particular significance in the course of the novel: the mirror. The large mirror in the living room of the Hotel Bragança suggests the importance of the process of duplication as well as the theme of the double within both Pessoa's poetry and the organization of the narrative (Seixo, *Lugares* 40-41).[22] This mirror enables us to reaffirm the importance of newspapers in the novel. Newspapers can, indeed, be interpreted as a sort of mirror of the actuality of 1936, a mirror reflecting the somber image of Fascism, which was gaining ground in Portugal and in Europe, an image of the world distorted by censorship and power interests. The novel's first chapter not only appears to be the frame that delineates the boundaries of supra-real historical fiction, but also introduces the main themes of the narrative, which will then be developed in the second chapter, when Reis goes to Pessoa's tomb in the Cemitério dos Prazeres.

Among Saramago's novels, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* is the one that explicitly focuses on the construction of historical and fictional discourse. This is achieved through the narration of a version of the siege of Lisbon that contradicts official historiography, starting from the assumption that the Crusaders did *not* help Dom Afonso Henriques fight the Moors in 1147. The first chapter functions as a sort of prologue, in which the proofreader Raimundo Silva introduces his opinions regarding the relative character of historical discourse and the importance of correction, referring to the epigraph of the novel, taken from an imaginary *Book of Exhortations*. The second chapter functions as a gateway to an alternative world. It is in this chapter that we learn about Raimundo's propensity to fabulate on the basis of the texts he has corrected, a characteristic that is revealed in the description of the muezzin's waking Lisbon at dawn and which prepares the potential reader for possible intrusions by the proofreader into the historian's text:

> The proofreader has this remarkable flair for splitting his personality, he inserts a *deleatur* or introduces a comma where required, and at the same time, if you'll pardon the neologism, heteronomises himself, he is capable of pursuing the path

> suggested by an image, a simile, or metaphor, often the simple sound of a word repeated in low voice leads him, by association, to organize polyphonic verbal edifices capable of transforming his tiny study into a space multiplied by itself, although it is difficult to explain in plain language what that means. (14)

The passage into an alternative world occurs, in effect, in the third chapter, when Raimundo introduces, in the historian's text, the "not" that modifies the historical truth concerning the Crusaders' support of Dom Afonso Henriques's siege of Moor-occupied Lisbon. Before introducing the "not" the narrator carefully identifies the proofreader, gives him a name, and describes him as a single, solitary man, who lives in old lodgings on the castle hill, from where he can see the river. Underlying this painstaking care in identifying the proofreader is the narrator's attempt to explain Raimundo's unexpected action, almost as if he were trying to protect Raimundo from the mistake he is about to commit. In this chapter, the notion of error becomes relevant again, going back to the reflection begun at the outset of the book in the conversation between the proofreader and the historian. This time, we are confronted with Raimundo's greatest mistake, his impertinent "not," the seriousness of which is played down to some extent by the discussion of the errors consecrated by the authority of history (the reference to the number of legs of a fly is a perfect example). Thus, the proofreader's impulse for correction (which went beyond his duty) is, to a certain extent, justified.

The passage into the world of historical deception is not direct. It happens in the midst of many doubts resulting from the mistakes and inaccuracies found in the historian's book, which led Raimundo to conjecture, for instance, about the correct name of the weapons used in the siege and about the origin and nature of the political speech delivered by Afonso Henriques to the Crusaders in order to try to convince them to fight against the Moors. The passage into another world is, in effect, surrounded by an enchanted atmosphere, characterized by a thick fog and by the sounding of a siren that alerted vessels to the perils of the sea, recalling the "low bleating" (31) of a seductive mermaid. It is interesting to note that the fog and the sound disappear after the introduction of the rebellious "not," as if the old order went back to normal, or rather, as if it were now easier to go from one world to the other, as well as because the proofreader's house was coincidentally located on the site of the siege. It does not matter; the "not" was already there in the historian's text, which was asking to become something else,[23] that is,

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to become that which was in turn to become the novel *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* by the proofreader Raimundo Silva, a perfect *mise en abîme* through which Saramago recovers, rewrites and corrects history as writing subject to possible changes, to the fictional text (the novel that makes history into its narrative subject), and the proverb (as a minimal narrative condensation that translates popular wisdom throughout time) (Seixo, *Lugares* 73-82). After all, as Raimundo Silva recalled in his conversation with the historian, "platitudes, clichés, repetitions, affectations, maxims from some almanac, refrains and proverbs, *all of these can sound new*, it's merely a question of knowing how to handle properly the words that precede and follow them..." (5; my emphasis). At the time, Raimundo did not know that the impertinent "not" he was introducing into the historian's text would become the motor for endowing history with the newness of a novel.

Considering postmodern fiction's great attraction towards the past and the writing of history, along with the fact that a significant number of Saramago's novels contain a rereading of important episodes and periods in the history of Portugal, I have tried to show that Saramago's historical works reflect the main trends of postmodern historical fiction. To this effect, I have analyzed some of the reasons for the interest that postmodern literature has taken in the past and in the weaknesses of historical discourse, so as to present a proposal for a typology which can account for some of the regularities characterizing historical fiction produced in the second half of the twentieth century.

José Saramago's novels that explicitly use Portuguese history as their narrative subject can be included in the categories of supra-real historical fiction, the uchronian novel, and historiographic metafiction; all of them reveal the writer's deep concern for the destiny of contemporary Portugal. For this reason, these novels should not be apprehended simply as rereadings of the past, but also, and especially, as investigations into the present seen from a social, cultural, and political perspective. Saramago's narratives are thus privileged ways of gaining knowledge about the past; furthermore, it is particularly those that contain fantastic or supernatural elements, or that construe possible alternative worlds contradicting the official historiographic version of facts, that highlight the ruling classes' political and ideological investment in the writing of history. In all the narratives, this investment is laid bare by privileging the point of view of the Other, without which the correction and the critical rewriting of the past would not be possible. In

sum, Saramago's literary works that deal with the past reflect the writer's politics of representation, capable of transforming the literary text not so much into an aesthetic artifact, as, rather, into an ethical model revealing the novel's potential for intervention and historical transformation. Thus, Saramago's novels about Portugal's past posit themselves as socially and politically committed, ultimately engraving, in the memory of literature and history, the role of the people in the building of the Portuguese nation.

Notes

[1] On the novel as Saramago's favorite genre, see also Seixo *Lugares* and Martins "A Crónica."

[2] On the relations between postmodernism and politics, see Bertens and Best and Kellner, who report on the main trends and give specific bibliographic indications in this area. On the political dimension of postmodern literary representation, see Foley, Hutcheon *Poetics* and *Politics*, and Wesseling.

[3] On the representation of reality in western literature see also Auerbach, Foley, Foucault, Hutcheon, Jameson, and Wesseling.

[4] On this see White *Content.* On the problem of historical representation and its relation with the narrative discourse, besides the aforementioned volume, see also White *Metahistory.*

[5] For a discussion of the possible relations between history and fiction based on the opposition between certainty and accident, and particularly in José Saramago's fictional work, see the interesting essay by Jean Bessière.

[6] The expression "partial and fragmented character of history" was used by Saramago in a conversation with Carlos Reis (Reis 79).

[7] On this, see also Hutcheon, *Politics* 57.

[8] Although an analysis of historical fiction before postmodernism is clearly beyond the scope of the present article, I would like to draw attention to three models based on different interpretations of the relationship between fact and fiction: the narratives Barbara Foley has called "pseudofactual novels," which became popular in the eighteenth century; the nineteenth-century historical novel, with Walter Scott as its canonical author; and modernist historical fiction from the first half of the twentieth century. For a discussion of novels that use authentic materials and which Foley calls "documentary novels," see Foley, as well as Hutcheon *Poetics* and Wesseling. On postmodern historical novels in Portugal, see Marinho "Pós-moderno" and *O Romance.* For a study of the "pseudofactual novel," see especially chapter five of Foley's study. For an explanation on how the first novelists viewed the relation between fact and fiction, see David Lodge's comments in the volume edited by Currie (152). On the model of the historical novel created by Walter Scott, besides Georg Lukács's famous study, see Foley, Wesseling and Hutcheon *Poetics.* On modernist historical fiction, see Wesseling and Hutcheon *Poetics.*

[9] These are the titles of the novels making up the series *American Chronicle* in the order in which they were published: *Washington* D.C. (1967), *Burr* (1973), 1876 (1976), *Lincoln* (1984), *Empire* (1987) and *Hollywood* (1990). At the end of 2000, Vidal published *The Golden Age*, which is also part of this series of novels.

[10] Seixo's italics; my boldface.

[11] On science fiction from the middle of the 1920s to the 1970s, see McCaffery and Clareson. On the main trends in scientific fiction produced from the 1950s onwards, see Ebert. For a concise history of scientific fiction, see chapter two in José Manuel Mota's PhD thesis.

[12] I rely here on Seixo who, as regards *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, stresses that while the novel respects historical truth completely, "nothing about the central characters corresponds to reality" (*Lugares 42*), the reason why this fiction is said to be supra-real. I also find it pertinent to include in the category of "supra-real" fiction those literary texts in which the main characters sometimes behave in ways that do not follow the rules of empirical reality.

[13] Although I include *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* in my proposal for a typology of postmodern historical fiction, I will not discuss this work in more detail here, since it is not one of Saramago's novels that evoke important events in the history of Portugal. For more on *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, see, apart from Krysinski, Saramago "Interview," Viegas, Costa, Seixo "Narrativa" and *Lugares*, Silva "O Quinto Evangelho" and "Do Labirinto."

[14] On *Levantado do Chão*, see, among others, Seixo *Lugares* and Silva *José Saramago*, "O Quinto Evangelho" and "Do Labirinto."

[15] This vindication of a new history is corroborated by the principles of the French *Nouvelle Histoire*, with Georges Duby as one of its main proponents; Saramago was very familiar with these principles. See Silva 1989 and 1999, as well as Lourenço.

[16] On the adoption of the point of view of the Other in Saramago's fiction, see Seixo, *Lugares* 126 and Bessière 463-64.

[17] My position here is clearly different from McHale's, who maintains that postmodern fictional production is characterized by a predominance of ontology, in radical opposition to the dominant feature of modernism, which is, in his opinion, epistemologic. For a discussion about the pertinence of the ontological dominance in postmodernism, see, among others, Hutcheon, *Poetics*, and Wesseling.

[18] On the possible worlds in Saramago's novels and, especially, in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, see Martins *História*.

[19] See the ode written on 13 November 1935, whose first line is "Vivem em nós inúmeros" (Pessoa 291) and which Saramago includes in his novel (13).

[20] See the following passage from the first chapter of the novel, when Reis chooses his hotel room and the narrator evokes Eça de Queirós's literary legacy:

> What I wanted was a room with a view of the river. Ah, in that case you will like room two hundred and one, it was vacated only this morning, I'll show it to you right away. The door at the end of the hallway had a little enameled plate, black numerals on a white background. If this were not a humble hotel room without any luxuries, and the room number were two hundred and two, and if the guest were called Jacinto and like Eça de Queirós's hero owned an estate in Tormes, then this episode would not be set in the Rua do Alecrim but on the Champs Elysées, on the right as one goes up, just like the Hotel Bragança, but that is the only detail they have in common. (9)

[21] [Editor's note] Giovanni Pontiero's translation of the last sentence of this passage has been slightly modified here.

[22] The importance of the mirror and of the projection of the same image seen from different perspectives in Ricardo Reis's search for an identity is clearly shown in the following passage:

> Perhaps the guest wishes to slip out quietly in search of Lisbon by night and its secret pleasures ... although the wintry night makes the cozy atmosphere of the lounge seem more enticing, here at hand, the deep highbacked armchairs in leather, the chandelier in the center of the room so rich in crystal pendants, and that big mirror that encompasses the

entire room and duplicates in it another dimension. This is no simple reflection of the common and familiar proportions the mirror is confronted with, length, width, height, they are not reproduced in it one by one and readily identifiable. Instead they are fused into a simple intangible apparition on a plane that is at once remote and near, unless there is some paradox in this explanation which the mind avoids out of laziness. Here is Ricardo Reis contemplating himself in the depths of the mirror, one of the countless persons that he is, all of them weary. (16)

[23] In the same chapter and before the introduction of the "not," the historian's text is characterized as follows: "In those four hundred and thirty-seven pages [Raimundo Silva] did not find a single new fact, controversial interpretation, unpublished document, even as much as a fresh reading. Nothing more than yet another regurgitation of those interminable, played-out accounts of the siege, the description of places, the speeches and deeds of the royal personage..." (30).

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