

The God Maker: A Reply to Saramago

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Comment “parler religion?” de la religion? Singulièrement de la religion, aujourd’hui? Comment oser en parler au singulier sans crainte et tremblement à ce jour? Et si peu et si vite? Qui aurait l’impudence de prétendre qu’il s’agit là d’un sujet à la fois identifiable et nouveau?

Jacques Derrida, *Foi et Savoir. Les deux sources de la “religion” aux limites de la simple raison*.

In a long-forgotten text published in 1969,¹ Maurice Blanchot offers a meditation on the elusiveness of atheism, mostly by showing how humanism, understood as the discourse of the death of God, is still a “theological myth” (248). Writing in the aftermath of the publication of *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, the French writer-philosopher had as his intended targets those who, primarily in France (but soon after everywhere else), had not been able to read Foucault’s (in)famous proclamation about the disappearance of man—“it is reassuring and profoundly calming to think that man is no more than a recent invention, a simple fold in our knowledge, and that he will disappear as soon as he has found a new form” (247)—beyond its superficial facetiousness, and surrendered to a facile and shallow controversy over the scandal of the “end of humanism.”

In his serene and piercingly rigorous prose, Blanchot lets us see how the threat to humanism lurks instead within its very formulation. Rather than

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being the victim of a late-coming nihilism, humanism is always already undermined by the Sovereignty that it inherited from the theological era: when God dies, man is endowed with the Promethean powers that allow him to found and create, to found and create *himself*, thus being configured in a relation with finitude as much as with the absolute. Whether God's rival or his replacement, man is still thought with the same categories used to think the divine logos, Blanchot reminds us. This is, after all, the allure and the trap of Feuerbach. We can postulate that man is God's true creator who alienates himself whenever he renders cult to his creation; however, whenever we think man as the bearer of meaning, and we think meaning as light, and language as the expression of a meaning that precedes it, we are insisting on the traits that, within atheism, "perpetuate what is essential to the divine logos." Atheism remains, alas, a pure pretension, and it never speaks in the first person, since the "I," the ego, in its self-founded autonomy, "constitutes itself by way of the unmitigated theological project."

There was a time when statements like these were the bread and butter of public debates. Even in Portugal this text deserved, many years ago, the attention of a young Eduardo Prado Coelho² who, trying to stir a debate with the musty Catholicism and social realism that stifled the literary and political milieu of the sixties, managed at least to maintain a sophisticated soliloquy. But *these* are hard times, when, after the recent death of one of the great philosophers of the century, a major newspaper in the United States happily celebrates "the end of theory." When punditry replaces critical inquiry, "theory" becomes anachronistic; we are from now on devoted to the untimely.

These untimely remarks and this delayed homage to Blanchot arrive by way of a brief commentary on a very timely text by José Saramago, previously published in Spanish and Portuguese newspapers and now included in this issue of *PLCS*. In it we are reminded of many of the violent scenarios that tarnished with nameless horror the last and the present centuries; violence perpetrated by man against defenseless man, often in the name of God. Scenarios of what Hannah Arendt once called "the banality of evil." We are also urged to watch out for, not God—who, after all, and in a Feuerbachian fashion, exists "only in the human brain,"—but mainly the "God Factor," a term that Saramago coins in order to convey a religious representation that "is present in life as if it were effectively life's lord and master." Aside from being "the most obstinate and corrosive" of enemies of "the human spirit," he sustains, it is also "terrifyingly equal in all human beings no matter where

they come from or whatever religion they profess.” Furthermore, this religious representation, “having supposedly made the beast into man ended by turning man into a beast.”

These are very momentous statements that, in these times of “the return of the religious,” we should all take very seriously. In this limited space, though, and in all seriousness, we have to restrict ourselves to raising some questions and sharing some perplexities.

The first one deals with equality: if the “God factor” is equal in all human beings, shouldn’t we include in that number those who do not profess any religion except for that of atheism? Because if, as Saramago sustains (in a very monotheistic language, let us add in passing), God himself is innocent of the violence perpetrated in his name, then we are led to conclude that those who kill in the name of God are the true non-believers, the only consistent atheists. And this leads us to a further, more disquieting perplexity: if the “God factor” is a human product, equally present in all humans, how can we keep thinking of it as the enemy among all enemies of “the human spirit,” and how will we keep believing that it is responsible for blocking “our steps to a real humanization”? Instead, isn’t it time that we see the “God factor” as the hallmark and the flesh and blood of the “human spirit,” one of the least elusive vestiges of what something like a “real humanization” can be? The “God factor” may well have turned man into a beast, but isn’t man the only known beast capable of gratuitous violence? If we had the time to investigate, we would find that the bestiary, the *homo hominis lupus*, belongs, after all, to the very language and tradition that Saramago wants us to suspect as a religious one: the tradition that has been called humanism. Wouldn’t we be wise to think, taking Blanchot’s propositions seriously, that the “God factor” is first of all a certain relationship with language? And that, therefore, “those for whom God is nothing more than a name,” to quote Saramago once more, that group to which he wants to belong, are still forgetting how weighty words can be, particularly those words that are capable of making gods? Aren’t they still forgetting how elusive atheism can be, especially when it is still and again an affirmation, that of the absence of God?

Because the language of exhortation, injunction, and appellation is used with some degree of comfort—and to comfortably conflate man and beast, atheism and humanism, and, most notoriously, vigilance and the “human spirit”—one is led to presuppose that there is, behind such confections and comforts, a knowledge of what these words mean and what their use implies.

This knowledge must be what confers authority over he who possesses it (and we find a consistency, perhaps involuntary, in the use of the personal pronoun “he”); yet, interestingly enough, this is an authority that allows the knowledgeable columnist to excuse himself from interrogating the presuppositions of both his knowledge and his authority. However, isn’t it precisely by interrogating the theoretical and ideological foundations of one’s discourse that we will be able to take strides in preventing, ever so precariously, the threat of the “God factor”?

Thinking interrogatively is now a luxury that very few can afford, and perhaps we should not be too demanding in the face of real adversity. But, in these hard times, when “the human spirit” and “human dignity” are but the commonplaces of the late-coming empire-builders, I would like to give that thinking a chance, by letting Blanchot speak once more, perhaps risking untimeliness: “Let us then not drag the thought of ‘humanism’ into a debate where this word’s use would suffice for its understanding.”

Notes

¹ “L’Athéisme et L’Écriture. L’Humanisme et le Cri.” *L’Entretien Infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1965. I am using the English version by Susan Hanson, “Atheism and Writing. Humanism and the Cry.” *The Infinite Conversation*. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993.

² See “Notas (polémicas) para um anti-humanismo,” in *O Reino Flutuante. Exercícios sobre a razão e o discurso*. Lisboa: edições 70, 1972.

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