



# **A Responsibility to the World: Saramago, Politics, Philosophy**

Burghard Baltrusch/Carlo Salzani/  
Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte (eds.)

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A Responsibility to the World: Saramago, Politics, Philosophy

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# **A Responsibility to the World: Saramago, Politics, Philosophy**

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# INTRODUCTION





# Observing, Acting, Intervening: Saramago's Responsibility to the World

BURGHARD BALTRUSCH, CARLO SALZANI  
AND KRISTOF K. P. VANHOUTTE

In a 1987 interview with Henry Thoreau, Saramago pronounced what could be taken as his political-philosophical credo, which in turn we are adopting here as the guiding thread weaving through the fabric of essays and analyses in this book: “Human beings should not content themselves with the role of mere observers. They bear a responsibility to the world; they must actively engage and intervene” (1987: 49).<sup>1</sup> Saramago, not just as a human being and a citizen, but also as a writer and artist, never settled for the role of mere observer. Instead, he ceaselessly pushed both his public and his artistic persona towards impactful actions and interventions, in an unwavering commitment to reshaping the world. And it is this side of his legacy that this volume intends to explore.

1987 was also the year in which the second edition of *The Year of 1993* was published with illustrations by Graça Morais—and we are very honored to use Morais’ portrait of Saramago as the cover of this book. It was executed some time after the writer’s passing, drawn from a photograph circulated in the press (see Baltrusch and Baião 2022: 39–40). The robust brushstrokes and patches of gentle chromatic contrasts stand as a sterling example of Graça Morais’ portraiture practice. While inherently subjective, this portrayal captures Saramago’s physiognomic qualities, his intricate persona, always in pursuit of a broader meditation on the human condition—one that consistently bears philosophical and political undertones. This portrait masterfully captures the poetic-political character of Saramago’s life and work.

In this sense, *The Year of 1993* (originally published in 1975) can be considered one of Saramago’s first true ‘political’ works, at least his first politico-poetic

.....  
1 “Der Mensch darf sich nicht mit der Rolle des Betrachters zufriedengeben. Er hat Verantwortung gegenüber der Welt, muß handeln, eingreifen.”

‘intervention,’ which already sets the terms of his political-philosophical engagement (e.g., Baltrusch 2020). The poems of *The Year of 1993*, unfortunately not yet translated into English, are a concise outline of the poetics and philosophy of Saramago’s forthcoming work. The book can be read as a manifesto of humanist, ethical, anti-speciesist but also anti-systemic values. His demand for freedom and gender equality, coupled with his resolute rejection of patriarchal structures, is unique in the Portuguese-language literature of the time written by men.

The book ends with doubts about humanity and its future, ever returning to authoritarianism. But what might be construed as pessimism in Saramago’s perspective can equally be deemed a ‘Realism of Everyday Practice’ (*Realismus der Alltagspraxis*), literarily conceived before Habermas described it philosophically (1999: 52). In a 1978 interview, Saramago grounds his realistically pragmatic approach to revolution in this book, which is highlighted here as a pivotal touchstone in his thinking and creative endeavors during this time: “I began ‘The Year of 1993’ before the 25th of April, precisely on the day of the military uprising in Caldas da Rainha. I started it out of desperation. Then came the revolution, and the book seemed to have lost its significance. If fascism, as they said, was dead, then why still talk about oppressors and the oppressed? Today we know that fascism is still alive, and I fulfilled my duty by publishing the book [in February 1975], when we hadn’t yet experienced the most beautiful and elevated hours of the revolution” (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 177).

Throughout Saramago’s life and work, this engagement constitutes an incisive scrutiny of life’s brutality that, by shaking and shocking the reader, aims at provoking moral outrage and even a sort of ‘ontological malaise.’ As it refuses to be reduced to a sense of hopelessness, it aims at awakening thereby one’s responsibility towards the other but also toward one’s own humanity.<sup>2</sup> A responsibility to the world.

.....

2 This work can be considered a breviary of what would become the poetics of the author’s future work, with its characteristic transfiguration of neo-realism through the imaginary, the defense of humanist but also anti-systemic values, of freedom and gender equality, among other current themes of universal transcendence.

This structure emerges in most if not all of Saramago's works but takes a paradigmatic form in what is perhaps his most famous novel, *Blindness* (1999a), which opens with a telling epigraph from a fictional *Book of Exhortations*: "If you can see, look. If you can look, observe."<sup>3</sup> This new triad—seeing, looking, observing—is not alternative to the one proposed in the 1987 interview—observing, acting, intervening—but rather complements and refines it: one's responsibility begins precisely in observation, in an ethico-political gaze, but is also dependent on the (social, economic, political) conditions of possibility for this observation. And, for Saramago, this went beyond the gaze of the author or even the viewpoint of literature—which, according to him, had become strangled by all sorts of technicalities like literary genres, narrative styles, clichés, etc.—, but went all the way back to the real world of the humble women and men who acknowledged and took upon themselves the necessity of a political life.

However, only a 'proper' observation, as the allegory of *Blindness* strongly emphasizes, can lead to proper and concrete actions and interventions. This is then the rationale of Saramago's ethico-political responsibility to the world: in his art, a penetrating observation aims at unveiling injustice and thereby intervening in the world with the action that is proper to the writer. The essays collected in this volume take this rationale as their own and revisit Saramago's oeuvre from markedly philosophical and political perspectives.

## 1 Observing

The present volume collects some of the papers presented at the Seventh Saramago International Conference of the University of Vigo: "José Saramago's Philosophical and Socio-political Legacy," held in Vigo, Spain, on 16–19 October 2022. The conference was part of a series of international events celebrating Saramago's centenary, which also coincided with a number of other important anniversaries: 2022 was also the centenary of another great Portuguese writer, Agustina Bessa-Luís; moreover, it was the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publica-

.....  
 3 "Se podes olhar, vê. Se podes ver, repara."

tion of Luís de Camões' great epic poem, *The Lusíads* (1772); it was the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the independence of Brazil and the centenary of the São Paulo Week of Modern Art, which heralded the beginning of Brazilian Modernism. But it was also the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wiriyamu massacre committed in Mozambique, for which the Portuguese Prime Minister has publicly apologized (in 2022) on behalf of his country; and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of three important books, each of them contributing in its own way to the decline of the dictatorship: *Portugal Amordaçado*, by Mário Soares; *Dinossau-ro Excelentíssimo*, by José Cardoso Pires, and, above all, the *New Portuguese Letters* by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa. Last but not least, 2022 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the world premiere of "Grândola, vila morena" by Zeca Afonso, the signature song for the beginning of the Carnation Revolution. Finally, the year 2023 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Saramago's Nobel Prize awarding, and 2024 the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Carnation Revolution.

The celebration of all these anniversaries takes place in a world torn, more than ever, by violence and war: not only the war ravaging the Ukraine after the Russian invasion in February 2022, but also the never dormant conflicts and violence in the Middle East, in South-East Asia, in the Sahel and in sub-Saharan Africa, in South America and in the poor and marginalized communities everywhere. A world that was just (perhaps irrationally) hoping to leave behind the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused more than 6 million (reported)<sup>4</sup> deaths worldwide and has seen the confidence in political and scientific leadership being (justly?) questioned and shaken—leaving the world more divided than ever—, but that is still unable to take responsibility for and adopt measures to contrast climate change (certainly a concause of the pandemic) and the waves of hunger, poverty, social disruptions, growing epidemic dangers, and migration that it provokes. It is not a form of impotent apocalypticism to state that we live on the brink of a catastrophe, in a Limboic fool's paradise, or, better, as Walter Benjamin put it: "That things are 'status quo' is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given [...] hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now" (Benjamin 1999: 473).

.....

4 The estimated death toll ranges between 16 and 28 million.

The global catastrophe in which we live, which some call Anthropocene and others Capitalocene, demands more than ever that we look, see, and observe, that we sharpen our gaze and our awareness, and take responsibility for the state of the world. Instead, we seem to do the very opposite and look away. As Saramago said in a 1995 interview at the time of the publication of *Blindness*, instead of tackling the big problems, “we are getting increasingly blind, because we prefer to see less and less. [...] we are all blind to Reason” (qtd. in Lopes 2010: 106). Things are certainly not better today. The dire state of the world demands that we look more, that we see more, that we observe more, but instead we prefer to see less and take refuge in unrealistic fantasies of technological fixes, the colonization of other planets, or mind uploading. The problem is structural and perhaps there is nothing new under the sun, but the threat today is not only the insecurity of how to interpret reality and ‘reinvent’ history, but the existential one on how to survive on this planet (if possible, without destroying and poisoning it at the same time). This threat demands that we question not only our way of living, inhabiting, traveling, and consuming, but our very ‘humanity,’ how we conceive and define it in relation to the earth, nature, and the other living beings. That is why we need today the sharpness of Saramago’s gaze, and the hope, compassion, and justice that must accompany this gaze for a responsible approach to the world.

## 2 Acting

In the face of the catastrophe, the gaze of the writer cannot perhaps but take on pessimistic and even dystopic tones. And in fact, a certain melancholic pessimism marks most of Saramago’s works, verging on dystopianism in his most overtly political novels such as *Blindness* and *Seeing*. This pessimism might have to do in part with the Portuguese *Weltanschauung*, always marked by a certain touch of *saudade*, and in part also with Saramago’s own biography, growing up poor and under a fascist dictatorship, self-educated and committed to a forbidden political ideology, experiencing first the euphoria of a revolution and then its ‘taming’ or even failure, and finally witnessing the worldwide victory of the neoliberal ideology. But it is most of all a trait of his political *realism*,

of his commitment to truthfully face and honestly represent his time and his society with all their problems. Whether he is writing about the poor farmers of Alentejo in *Raised from the Ground* or the 40,000 workers involved in the construction of the colossal convent of Mafra in *Baltazar and Blimunda*, but also about the magical scission of the Iberian peninsula in *The Stone Raft* or an inexplicable strike by Death in *Death with Interruptions*, Saramago's fiction is always about this world, about real people (but also about real animals), about real suffering, about the wrongness and injustice of this world and the need to change the circumstances in a humane way—it is about an ethico-political responsibility to the world. As he said in his second Nobel Prize speech in 1998:

Governments cannot be expected to do in the next fifty years what they have not done in the years we are commemorating [the Universal Charter of Human Rights]. So let us, ordinary citizens, take the floor and the initiative. With the same vehemence and strength with which we claim our rights, let us also claim the duty of our duties. Perhaps the world can begin to become a little better. (Saramago 1999d: 20)

That is why his thoughts and literature could be transformed into a Universal Charter of Duties and Obligations of the Individuals, which has already been submitted to the United Nations, since, he thought, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not enough to guide humanity.

At some point this growing pessimism led him to question the very idea of literature and the meaning of even talking about literature. In *The Last Notebook of Lanzarote (Último Caderno de Lanzarote)*, which dates from 1998 but was only recently discovered and published in 2018, he wrote: “I’m less and less interested in talking about literature, to the point that I even doubt one can talk about literature” (Saramago 2018, 146). In 1998, when the neoliberal euphoria had not known yet its inevitable crises and history itself was said to have come to an end, literature and his ethico-political *engagement* appeared to Saramago as worn out and impotent, incapable of influence and even less change history and society. But it is precisely this discrepancy, this *décalage* with respect to one’s own time and one’s society that allows the gaze of the writer to look, see, and observe what is wrong with it. The intellectual can be a critic of their time

when they do not coincide with it, when they can take a melancholic distance from it that allows the necessary lag for a proper observation.

In this respect, the words of Susan Sontag have been associated to Saramago's ethico-esthetico-political stance. In her acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize in 2001, Sontag said:

A writer ought not to be an opinion-machine. [...] The writer's first job is not to have opinions but to tell the truth... and refuse to be an accomplice of lies and misinformation. Literature is the house of nuance and contrariness against the voices of simplification. The job of the writer is to make it harder to believe the mental despoilers. The job of the writer is to make us see the world as it is, full of many different claims and parts and experiences. It is the job of the writer to depict the realities: the foul realities, the realities of rapture. It is the essence of the wisdom furnished by literature (the plurality of literary achievement) to help us to understand that, whatever is happening, something else is always going on. (Sontag 2007: 125–26)

This is the job and the responsibility of the writer, and in this consists their *action*: “to tell the truth” and “to make us see the world as it is,” even when, as with Saramago, this action takes an ‘allegorical’ route.

Much has been written about Saramago's ‘allegorical turn’ after *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. His novels, beginning with *Blindness*, take on a ‘paradigmatic’ tone that disposes of historical and personal details and of a simplistic realism—perhaps also as a consequence of historical factors such as the integration of Portugal into the European Economic Community in 1986, the end of ‘real existing socialism’ in 1989, and the final triumph of the neoliberal ideology in the 1990s (Marques Lopes 2010: 103–4)—in order to aim at the ‘essence’ itself of our reality. This allegorical form, however, is to be read together with his melancholic pessimism as a more *realistic* way of approaching reality with no illusions and no false hopes, and ultimately with an essential mistrust in the power of language and literature itself. The concept of allegory developed by Walter Benjamin (1998) has been proposed therefore as an appropriate model (Baltrusch 2022): allegory was for Benjamin a way of looking at the world



under the sign of decadence and natural history, as a landscape of ruins and wreckage, in order to uncover its most hidden meaning, its ‘truth content.’ A form of ‘destruction’ or ‘deconstruction’ is therefore necessary: getting rid of the false appearances (and of the embellishments of literature) to arrive at the truth—the truth of history and its so-called ‘progress,’ of social relations, of the inequalities and injustices of class, gender, and even species.

Saramago stated therefore that his books must be read as a sort of ‘essays.’ “Probably I’m not a novelist,” he said; “probably I’m an essayist who needs to write novels because he cannot write essays” (Reis 1998: 48). And he explained with another image:

When I say that I’m starting to doubt that I’m really a novelist I’m not joking, I’m saying that honestly, because I’m starting to understand that a novelist is probably something different from what I am. I am a sort of poet who unravels and develops an idea. In my books things happen a little like in a musical fugue. There is a theme which is then subjected to different handlings and processings with respect to tones and movements. This can happen in any of my books. One completes the reading with the impression of having read a long poem. (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 188)

Essayism was Saramago’s way of interweaving the poetical, the political, and the philosophical, directing a merciless, allegorical gaze at reality and always raising new questions and outlining new problems. And in this consists, again, the *action* of his writing, of his responsibility to the world.

### 3 Intervening

Saramago’s ‘active’ pessimism does not stand in opposition to the fundamental and characteristic *hopefulness* that marks his novels and his philosophico-political attitude more in general. On the contrary, we can attribute to his aesthetic politics the same thrust towards a positive “organization of pessimism” that Walter Benjamin derived from the Surrealist writer Pierre Naville: “Mistrust in

the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals” (Benjamin 2005e: 216–17). Only the “organization of pessimism” can lead, both for Benjamin and Saramago, to an active stance and a true intervention into reality.

The work of the New Left theorist Raymond Williams might even help us in overcoming an all too great insistence on pessimism, rebalancing the scale in favor of the just mentioned hopefulness. Although the presence of pessimism, or realism, is real, emphasizing the negativity too much leads away from the importance of those sparkles of hope in Saramago's work. True, after *Blindness*, as we just came to read the ‘confession’ in *The Last Notebook from Lanzarote*, Saramago had somewhat lost his trust and faith in the power of Literature's potential revolutionary agency. But all hope had not disappeared, not from his writing and neither from his convictions. In fact, it had made him (re-)discover a different, more concrete form of hope. It is the hope in the action of the ‘little man,’ of regular, ordinary, human beings. It is the hope in concrete day-to-day action, the action that could actually make a difference. Exactly like the population of the capital in *Seeing*, who, notwithstanding the abandonment of the government kept the capital clean and thriving by keeping up the ordinary, everyday, activities of the city (cleaning the streets, collecting the garbage, etc.). It is this same form of concrete hope of the ordinary human being that we can also find in the work of Raymond Williams. Williams too, stressed the importance, even the need, in “making hope practical” (Williams 1989: 209). And the only people who could be called upon to make this happen, in what certainly could only be a long revolution, are what he called, in an absolutely non-pejorative way, the ordinary people. In a shaking up of the cards, Williams even re-appropriates culture for the ordinary people. Culture, with capital C, William renders clear, is ephemeral, it is like reaching for our elegant dress when we think about culture (cf. Williams 1989: 99).<sup>5</sup> Real culture, on the

.....

5 “Many highly educated people,” Williams explains the bias of the ‘Cultured,’ “have been so driven in on their reading, as a stabilizing habit, that they fail to notice that there are other forms of skilled, intelligent, creative activity: [...]. The contempt for many of these activities, which is always latent in the highly literate, is a mark of the observers’ limit, not those of the activities themselves” (Williams 2017: 405).

contrary, is ordinary (cf. Williams 1989: 4). And it is this reversal of values, this Nietzschean *Umwertung aller Werte*, that is also at stake in Saramago's ordinary and active hopefulness.

Like Benjamin, who compared it to a "bad poem on springtime, filled to bursting with metaphors" (Benjamin 2005e: 216), Saramago did not like the term 'utopia,' since "it is an invitation to laziness" (qtd. in Gomez Aguilera 2010: 374). However, as Marcia Tiburi and Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte explain in their contributions to this volume, the meaning and use of this concept are very complex and varied in Saramago's work. What marks his oeuvre is nonetheless an unquenchable sense of *hope*, a fundamental belief in the human capacity for goodness. This is clear from his various public interventions such as, for example, his by-now famous address during the fifth edition of the World Social Forum, held in 2005 in Porto Alegre. But we also find it in the various romantic plotlines that very often constitute the kernel of Saramago's stories (love as a redemptive force), or in many of his female characters, who embody the potentiality for redemption, or even in the 'wisdom' of many nonhuman animals, which, as Hania Nashef and Carlo Salzani propose in their chapters, may even work as a corrective to build a better humanity. The conclusion of *The Year of 1993* and *The Stone Raft*, when all women become pregnant, is in this sense paradigmatic: what Saramago's work finally wants to transmit is the hope in a new future, in a rebirth and a new humanity; his message is ultimately the call for an ethics and a politics of responsibility, in constant defiance of the inevitable pessimism that the circumstances impose.<sup>6</sup>

In a 2003 interview with Rosa Miriam Elizalde, Saramago declared:

I am a libertarian communist, someone who defends the freedom of not accepting all that he sees and makes this commitment together with three questions which should always orient us in our lives: why?, for

.....

6 Even in his darkest novels there is always hope, and not just in the love stories. In *Blindness* and *Seeing* there is always hope as well in the acting of the people who work against evil. And despite all of Saramago's critical pessimism, he also empowered us as readers when he said that "I like a book of mine to be well understood, I enjoy a good analysis of that book, I am surprised, and very happy, when the critic discovers things that I hadn't thought of yet and that, after he has brought them to light, I recognise" (Reis 1998: 45).

what?, for whom? These are the three basic questions, and, in fact, you can accept a set of rules and obediently abide by them, but you must preserve the freedom to ask: why?, for what?, for whom? (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 311)<sup>7</sup>

This liberating and libertarian aspiration is the ultimate sense of Saramago's poetic-political endeavor: a skeptical but constructive approach to his time and his world, which does not accept things as they are but believes in the possibility and the necessity of transforming them. Saramago's literature 'captures' the world in order to create it anew from the perspective of an inescapable responsibility to it, which forces the author to intervene and take action.

In *The Last Notebook of Lanzarote*, when trying to explain what it means today (i.e., in 1998) to be a 'communist writer,' Saramago returns to the quotation from Marx and Engel's *The Holy Family* that he used in 1978 as epigraph for *Objeto quase*: "If man is shaped by environment [*Umgebung*], his environment must be made human" (Saramago 2018: 196; Marx and Engels 2010: 131).<sup>8</sup> This is ultimately the intervention of the writer and their responsibility to the world: a personal commitment not only to critically observe and analyze the state of the world—as important as this role is—but also to 'organize,' and maybe even transform one's pessimism in interventions and transformations of the world and of humanity as well. Observing, acting, intervening: this is the task Saramago gave himself as a citizen and as a writer and the legacy he bequeathed to us as our own responsibility to the world.

.....

7 "Sou um comunista libertário, uma pessoa que defende a liberdade de não aceitar tudo o que vem, e que assume o compromisso juntamente com três perguntas que devem sempre nos orientar na vida: por quê?, para quê?, para quem? Essas são as três perguntas básicas, e, efetivamente, você pode aceitar um conjunto de regras e acatá-las disciplinadamente, mas tem de manter a liberdade de perguntar: por quê?, para quê?, para quem?"

8 In Portuguese, the German *Umgebung* is translated (quite literally) as *circunstâncias* (circumstances), so that the quotation becomes: "Se o homem é formado pelas circunstâncias, é necessário formar as circunstâncias humanamente."



A RESPONSIBILITY TO THE WORLD



# Utopia/Dystopia: José Saramago and the Regency Apocalypse

MARCIA TIBURI

It wasn't quite the end of the world, they judged,  
so there was no point in rushing.  
José Saramago, *The Cave*

A true democracy, which would flood all peoples with its light,  
like a sun, should begin with what we have at hand, that is,  
the country where we were born, the society where we live,  
the street where we live.  
José Saramago, *What is democracy?*

## Introduction

In this chapter, I want to analyse the expression 'regency apocalypse' (*apocalipsis regno*) used by Saramago in an interview in the year 2005. To explore this counterintuitive concept, as several of the political concepts employed by the Portuguese writer, I will try to expose in a few lines his thoughts on democracy together with the notion of capitalism as catastrophe as found in such apocalyptic critics of capitalism as Marc Fisher. I take as my starting point what, for Saramago, were the "telling signs of the relations between states and economic groups whose criminal and even warlike acts are leading our planet to catastrophe." The notion of catastrophe is fundamental in Saramago and it seems to be at the root of his radical questioning of utopia.

There is a special meaning in Saramago's fierce critique of utopia precisely because, starting from the notion of 'regency apocalypse,' what liberal bourgeois democracy does is to cover up the catastrophe produced by capitalism. In this case, utopia also becomes a danger, it starts to function as dystopia and



vice-versa. Therefore, in the end, I propose the notion of ‘negative utopia’ in order to talk about the sliding of the critique of utopia in Saramago. Recovering the sense of utopia as an impulse to practise will not happen without recourse to dystopia.

It is important to emphasise that it is not an exaggeration to state that Saramago’s entire literary work may have been one long meditation on politics, while, at the same time, it was an aesthetic-political practice. On the one hand, in the realm of writing itself we see politics in the sense of sharing, “partition” or “distribution” of the sensible (Rancière 2004). That is, writing is what gives form to the political community, and Saramago did this by provoking the imagination of his time and becoming a classic that will continue to be read endlessly in the future. On the other hand, Saramago was a militant writer who exercised an activity as a public intellectual, someone who did not shy away from a practice of intellectual intervention in the manner of a public performance that caused effects. Thus, perhaps one can speak of something like an ‘unwritten doctrine’ (ἄγραφα δόγματα, *ágrapha dógmata*), as it is said of Plato’s work mentioned by his historical commentators.<sup>1</sup> This ‘agrapha dogmata’ would be the set of interventions and public interviews that, with a performative function, brought to light the contradictions contained in words such as ‘democracy’ and ‘utopia’ that lead us to discuss and debate them up to this day. Saramago spoke disturbingly about these words in order to trigger our reflection on them and, in that sense, to explore a larger politics, one that reinstates the community beyond the ideological cover-up that such words have served.

In the context of the analysis of the idea of democracy, I would like to offer a modest contribution to the debate on utopia around Saramago’s work. My hypothesis is that utopia is intimately linked to the theme of democracy that is inscribed in a comprehensive perception of political themes (the theme of violence in *Cain*, the class struggle in *Raised from the Ground*, the gender perspective in *Baltasar and Blimunda* or *The Stone Raft*, among others). From my point of view, utopia is not just a recurrent theme, it is not a mere part of the set of the writer’s political subjects. In fact, in Saramago, utopia works together with dystopia composing a kind of more than formal outline, a kind

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 1 Cf. e.g., Nikulin (2012).

of aesthetic-political border which is, at the same time, an ontological border of the work as a whole.

In fact, there is a political thought in Saramago exposed as a background in all his literary works. However, secondary texts, written or oral, such as interviews and lectures, can serve us as a shortcut to connect the dots of the politics that, like a thread, sew the main work. Certainly, this leads us to expand his legacy and make good use of it in these dark times that follow in a politically dangerous evolution, especially as fascism lurks ahead.

## Democracy Against the Backdrop of a Regency Apocalypse

In an interview with an El Salvador newspaper during his visit to the country in 2005, José Saramago was asked about the issue he would like someone to reflect on when reading his books. His answer was: “democracy” (Saramago 2005). Such an answer forces us to re-read the works of the Portuguese author taking democracy as a key word. However, democracy is not a word that refers to certainty but instead to a distrust. An unresolved issue for the writer, democracy was not simply given as ready and, at the same time, demanded questioning.

Although questioning democracy and perceiving its paradoxes, including its relation to voting, Saramago nevertheless defended it. Despite clamouring for it to stop being “an acquired value, defined once and for all and untouchable forever,” he insisted on the self-criticism of democracy against its paralysis.<sup>2</sup> We can certainly see democracy as a kind of magnifying glass informing on the author’s engagement, on the ethical-political impulse that moved him. In

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2 According to Burghard Baltrusch, “Saramago was aware that a complete substitution of utopia for pragmatism, as proposed by a central trend in Marxism, would turn into a neo-liberal discourse. The slogan ‘there is no alternative,’ exhaustively used by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s to emphasize the rightness of capitalist globalization and of free trade for modern societies, could be invoked as an example of a radicalized pragmatic discourse. Therefore, Saramago’s critique of utopia does not claim to exclude possibilities of rehabilitation, such as the one exposed by Karl Mannheim who, in *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), warns of the danger that ‘a disappearing of utopia could lead to a static state of affairs, in which the human being itself is transformed into a thing” (Baltrusch 2014c: 14).

times when fascism is renewed and advancing throughout the world, when writers are persecuted and threatened and often shy away from taking a political stand—for fear of persecution—, it is very good to see democracy as a fundamental word for a writer like Saramago who, with great courage, declared himself a communist.

The term communism was a conviction and a provocation that also forces one to think. Sometimes seen as an enemy of democracy due to his communist self-understanding, Saramago was, on the contrary, perhaps the most democratic person of all as he questioned social injustice using the tactic of provocation in his public appearances. Perhaps in his thought the specific sense of true democracy coincides with communism. Precisely because he had seen into the bowels of bourgeois and liberal democracy, he needed to point his finger at the veils that cover its true face.

In that sense, we are all living within the scenario of *Blindness*. There is something we are not seeing. The writer's effort in making his counterintuitive criticism was to show everyone what we are not seeing, either in the text or in public speech. Perhaps, in talking about democracy, and also about utopia, Saramago is in the position of the doctor's wife, who keeps seeing what everyone else is unable to see. But what are we unable to see? In the El Salvador interview, Saramago said he believed that "we are all living, in the globalised world, a kind of regency apocalypse, in which there seems to be no immediate solution, and this is what represents the greatest affront to humanity" (Saramago 2005). Although he did not make explicit what "regency apocalypse" means, the following answer shed some light on the matter. The regency apocalypse is related to democracy and governmentality. By stating that "it is necessary to put democracy at the centre of the discussion," Saramago reaffirms the potency of an idea. And he sends this idea back to its realisation, since, according to him, it is necessary to "redefine the concept on the basis of people's real needs" (Saramago 2005).

What Saramago calls "regency apocalypse" is part of a deeper project of which the governments of countries and the very idea of elections are only the emanation. According to him, "it is not a matter of exchanging one government for another in a given country." The "regency apocalypse" is a state project and not only a government project. The insistence on deepening the

debate on democracy—a word transformed into an empty signifier (Laclau and Mouffe 1985)—, is part of this strategy. If overcoming the regency apocalypse depends on “putting democracy at the centre of the discussion,” this means that democracy must be assessed in concrete terms. Democracy should, by definition, serve all people and not just interest groups. If it is being exploited by individuals or groups, then it is no longer universal as it should be since its very conceptual construction.

Saramago’s concern is not only theoretical but also ethical and practical. Democracy should be useful to solve problems in the concrete life of the people who need it, the majority of the population made up of poor people. The debate on democracy is necessary to translate democracy into practice. In the aforementioned interview in El Salvador, Saramago mentions the countries of Central America, where “despair is the order of the day.” Calling for a true democracy, or rather a “full democracy,” in which rights are respected, against a “hijacked democracy” (or a “caricatured” and “debased” one, according to his terms), he criticises the extreme poverty that is advancing around the world and causing the migration of people who have no future in sight (Saramago 2005). The regency apocalypse is related to this lack of future that stems from a present determined by the poverty of the majority, which is produced in a system of economic inequality.

What Saramago says is worth quoting:

We supposedly live in a democracy, but in reality that is not the case. Maybe one day we will be in a democracy and it will be effective with freedom and justice, and that is why we face the challenge of changing power relations not only in Central America but all over the world, in Africa and Asia, where poverty is most unbearable and aggressive. This world is full of injustices and they are not being resolved quickly. The wealth produced today gives us the possibility for all people to have a dignified life, but inequalities have been introduced even into human practices themselves, without any hope on the horizon, we are practically in darkness. But problems are not solved overnight, if we start fighting now for a dignified life, we will be able to face poverty, illness, and hopelessness. (Saramago 2005)

In this excerpt we see the engaged writer denouncing social inequalities on a geopolitical scale. The ethical impulse—marked by solidarity with colonised peoples—is clearly demonstrated, revealing the issue of ‘power relations’ which, in Saramago’s materialism, are class relations. These relations are what should be changed in a project of improving living conditions for a real democracy, namely, with more freedom and justice. What might be a regency apocalypse in this case has to do with our capacity to live with injustice, as if we were used to it and had no prospect of fighting for change. The class struggle is involved in overcoming this regency apocalypse.

Democracy should be rethought and reinvented to meet the needs of people against the catastrophe programmed by the system. Saramago claims, in a discourse with a pragmatic tone, that human beings make use of the reason that is natural to them to account for sustenance, life and human rights. That is, his pragmatic appeal goes in the direction of guaranteeing life. According to Saramago, if we do not take up this task, we will be destroyed as a human community. We will have, therefore, reached the goal of the regency apocalypse operated by those who economically run the world without concern for the life of all and, we should add, for the life of other species and the environment.

Assuming his role as an engaged Marxist intellectual, Saramago affirms the historical task of writers, artists, and intellectuals who “have done nothing but try to interpret the world,” in a reference to Marx’s famous 11<sup>th</sup> Thesis on Feuerbach. The ‘awareness’ generated by militant and intellectual work was important, but, according to Saramago, “in present-day societies the question arises of who has power, who exercises power and to what end, and that is the core of the matter” (Saramago 2005). In this line, respecting the intellectual task, he insists that “artists and writers have dedicated themselves to human consciousness, to important things of the human essence that, in fact, question social reality and, therefore, social relations and power” (Saramago 2005). He, however, knows that it is necessary to seek to change the injustices and inequalities of the world that are caused by endless political and economic power games. The regency apocalypse is about maintaining this political and economic control that corresponds to a project of the end of the world.

Saramago had the opportunity to speak more clearly about democracy in other texts. In an article published in 2004 in *Le Monde diplomatique*, he

reminds us of the Western birthplace of democracy with Aristotle who, in his *Politics*, says two things that matter to the writer: 1) “in a democracy, the poor are king because they are more numerous and because the will of the many has the force of law”; 2) “equity in the state requires that the poor have in no way more power than the rich, that they are not the only sovereigns, but that all citizens are sovereign in proportion to their numbers” (Saramago 2004). In Saramago’s view, these are the indispensable conditions for the State to effectively guarantee equality and freedom.

Remembering that, in Aristotle, the state is a superior form of morality and that democracy is born direct, Saramago understands that in representative democracy the sovereignty of the people rules through their rulers, but is aware that this democracy is itself paradoxical, since people give up their freedom without gaining anything in return. Aware that the democracy of the Greeks has been yielding to economic interests over time, and thus subjugating political power, Saramago states then in the same article:

If democracy were truly a government of the people, for the people and by the people, all debate would cease. But we have not reached that point. And only a cynical spirit would have the temerity to claim that all is well in the world we live in. (Saramago 2004)

His argument leads to a question: “can we fail to wonder whether contemporary economic empires are not also radical opponents of democracy, even if, for the time being, appearances are maintained?” Unhappy with façade democracy, with the aesthetic masquerades of power, Saramago thinks that “calling a government ‘socialist,’ or ‘social-democrat,’ or even ‘conservative,’ or ‘liberal,’ and calling it ‘power,’ is nothing but a ‘cheap aesthetic operation’” (Saramago 2004). Politics has become this “cheap aesthetic operation,” whereby one pretends to “name something that is not there, where they would have us believe it is.” This process of deception that democracy has become—what the Greeks understood as demagoguery—hides the fact that the “real power lies elsewhere: it is economic power” (Saramago 2004). Saramago’s entire meditation on democracy is therefore the result of the perception that economic power reigns over all other powers and thus over all forms of life.

It is along these lines that he will say that “the market conditions governments ‘offer’ their peoples” transform them into sacrificial populations. Recognising the market as the instrument par excellence of economic and political power in liberal globalisation, he will speak of a “market triumphant to the point of obscenity” that is “anti-democratic because it is not elected by the people, it is not managed by the people and, above all, because it does not aim at the people’s well-being.” It is also in this sense that the “mass of poor people called upon to vote are never called upon to govern.” Criticising liberal democracy, he insists that what needs to be built is a true economic and cultural democracy. Economic democracy should replace the market to which it has been reduced, just as a cultural democracy should supplant the “industrial massification of cultures” (Saramago 2004).

Well, the writer Saramago, who one day established that the writer and the citizen go together, that when one speaks, the other also speaks, this writer perceived democracy itself as sunk in its paradox. Saramago perceived the permanent state of exception (Agamben 2017a) reigning over all things and all human and non-human beings, and he integrated it in a work that, in general, constitutes therefore a poetic-political *corpus*. The state of exception, the moment of manipulation of the law itself that reduces everyone to a mere living body ready to be murdered—to the body that can be killed, to generalised murder—is explicit in the moment in which the world enters into a process of fascistisation, that is, in the policy of extermination of bodies, of subjectivities and of nature that is at the service of neoliberalism.

If democracy was kidnapped in the state of exception, a condition in which words serve to cover up and not to show (Cusicanqui 2010), the same happens with the sense of utopia that is part of it. What Saramago shows us is that, together with democracy, utopia was also submitted to this permanent state of exception, through which everything is relativised to guarantee authoritarianism, through which the sovereignty of the people is controlled by the powerful owners of capital. Saramago fought with words and for words, that is, by debating the meaning of democracy he makes us look at the danger to which the symbolic dimension itself is subjected, which is being destroyed by the advance of fascism.

The question we must ask ourselves is whether the fascism of our time would not be precisely the apex of the regency apocalypse prepared by the economic system in progress. In this case, the discourse of bourgeois and liberal democracy would exist to cover up the misery generated by the system that leads to catastrophe, but with the aim of total extinction. In this context, the word utopia criticised so vehemently by Saramago, at the same time, was not simply thrown away by him, because just as democracy needs self-criticism, the desire for a more just and dignified world also needs to be reviewed.

## Utopia/Dystopia

Saramago's arguments and the history of the idea of utopia have already been thoroughly analysed.<sup>3</sup> In view of this, my aim here is only to analyse the expression "regency apocalypse" in its relation to the writer's repudiation of utopia.

If self-criticism was necessary in relation to democracy, Saramago is even more forceful in relation to utopia. In the line of the performativity presented above, in the 2005 Porto Alegre Social Forum Saramago publicly stated that he considered utopia something useless.<sup>4</sup> In front of an audience that expected him to defend utopia, he denied being a utopist. According to Saramago, what could be said should not be said through the word 'utopia.' Saramago is like

3 Cf. e.g., Baltrusch (2014c); Marques (2014); Claeys (2017); Vanhoutte in this volume.

4 Saramago's address is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcE-176Ae9A>. [Accessed 26 June 2023]. The text has also been published in print in the journal *Blimunda* (Saramago 2014b). His argument is as follows: "I have bad news for you [...]: I am not a utopist. And, even worse news, I consider utopia, or the concept of utopia, not only useless but also as negative [...] as the idea that when we die we all go to paradise. *Utopia*, it is said, started with Thomas More, with his book *Utopia*, published in 1516, and that places the birth of a word, of an idea, but we could go much further back, we could go to Plato. Basically, utopia is born without a name. And perhaps what is hindering all this here is the name because, curiously, everything that was said before could have been said with equal rigor without the introduction of the word utopia. I will demonstrate, or at least try to demonstrate further on, [that] there is a question that is inseparable from utopia [...], or the yearning of the human being to improve life (and not only in the material sense), [to] improve it also in the sense of the spiritual dimension, the ethical dimension, [the] moral dimension. It is inextricably linked, and it seems not, to the revitalisation and, if you like, the reinvention of democracy. [For] the 5,000 million people living in misery [...] the word utopia means strictly nothing."



the doctor's wife in *Blindness*, concerned with what his audience, in general, is unable to see or refuses to see. His concern is to include those who are 'outside the subject' (not full subjects, less than human), as befits a radical democracy. That is why he says that "for the 5,000 million people who live in misery, the word utopia means strictly nothing." In fact, we can see in this manifestation the influence of the socialist perspective against the utopian perspective, typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, we see the influence of a Marxist tradition that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, bet on theoretical pessimism to safeguard practical optimism.

One aspect cannot be overlooked in this lecture at the World Social Forum. In it we see the only writer in the Portuguese language to have been awarded the Nobel Prize, speaking out against a word. This is an immense fact in itself: a lover of words who built his whole life and work through them but who attacks one word. This irony certainly was not lost to this man who knew that words move the world and can also paralyse it. In other words, Saramago's criticism is perfectly understandable in the scenario in which he assumes the role of the one who makes people think, that is, he knows that his linguistic gesture will trigger other gestures. Like Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, he puts himself in the place of the spirit that "constantly denies" in order to trigger reflection.

In another occasion,<sup>5</sup> in order to explain utopia Saramago uses the metaphor of the horizon, since the horizon is the line that is never reached, that is sought but is always distant, that is close to the eyes but forever out of reach. It is by emphasising the uselessness of utopia that Saramago proposes that we leave it aside, that we act in the present, because it is from the actions of today that will come the result we hope to have tomorrow. In this sense, this word, 'tomorrow,' explains what Saramago means: "if you ask me about utopia, I tell you: tomorrow, because tomorrow we will still be alive." Thus, against a romantic and naïve idea of utopia, Saramago proposes a notion that insists on

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5 When inaugurating an extraordinary chair that bears his name at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Saramago defined utopia as "something that one does not know where it is, nor when, nor how it will be reached. Utopia is like the horizon line: we know that even if we look for it, we will never reach it, because it is always moving away with every step we take; it is always out of sight, not out of sight, but out of reach" (Vargas 2004).

hope: 'tomorrow' is the focus of the commitment to transformation. Because tomorrow is near and we can still act on it.

Before investigating the relationship between what is posed as a naive utopia in Saramago and a practical utopia that is instead concerned with creating conditions for survival for tomorrow, I believe it is necessary to reflect on the relationship between utopia and dystopia in the author's work. In fact, the repudiation of utopia is argued in the writer's public discourse, while in his literary work we see dystopias proliferate. Certainly, we can treat such dystopias (*Blindness*, *Seeing*, *The Cave*, *Death at Intervals*) as negations of utopias. Saramago's dystopias are certainly not entertainment, just as none of his books is. However, they are dystopias that refer to utopias. I must explain myself, because I believe that another perspective can help us understand the complexity of the relationship between theoretical and performative critique of utopia and, at the same time, the literary affirmation of dystopia. Therefore, I propose to reflect on this binomial—utopia and dystopia—in action in Saramago's thought and literary work.

Perhaps utopia and dystopia are at the very foundation of Saramago's literary work, as his 'unwritten doctrine.' Even more, it is possible that the relationship between utopia and dystopia is not one of opposition, but of complementarity. Thus, perhaps we can speak of a 'utopia/dystopia,' of a 'dystopia/utopia' in which the sign '/'—which implies simultaneity—works better than the sign 'X' indicating opposition. The binomial or dyadic utopia/dystopia establishes a marriage between subject and text, between reality and fiction, between ontology and politics. Operating with the hypothesis that Saramago's repudiation of utopia is an intuition of the concomitance of 'utopia/dystopia,' we can move forward. To this concomitance, Saramago responds with a dialectic between work and concrete reality. I refer to the perception that utopia does not change the world, and that the world that should be changed is this world, that "only a cynical spirit would have the audacity to affirm that everything is fine in the world in which we live." At the same time, in his novels Saramago creates bold allegories about social, moral and political contradictions. These allegories are dystopian, but at the same time, making one reflect, they point to another possible world.

The allegorical character of certain novels demonstrates the dialectic between fiction and non-fiction, between theory and practice, between reality and imagination. It is also the play between what is shown and what is said, between what is told from a reflective point of view and, at the same time, what is fully narrative. If we work with the hypothesis that utopia and dystopia work together, in a negative dialectical sense (that is, without synthesis), we understand the meaning of what Saramago called “regency apocalypse.” This apocalypse is about the organised catastrophe, a catastrophe administered to lead to the end of the world.

## Regency Apocalypse and Capitalist Realism

There is an affinity between the notion of regency apocalypse, that is, of this managed apocalypse, and the notion of ‘capitalist realism’ as used by Mark Fisher (2009).<sup>6</sup> In Fisher’s definition, capitalist realism is the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but that it has become impossible to imagine a coherent alternative to it. Fisher shares this position with theorists such as Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson. Saramago’s position is not exactly the same. He comes close to Fisher in terms of his denunciation of the orchestrated apocalypse, but while Fisher remains at the level of theory, Saramago goes further, that is, he enters into practice in the realm of the imagination by constructing a work in which dystopia returns to its utopian role, that of denunciation. For Fisher, this is precisely what has been lost with contemporary dystopias that have been transformed into mere entertainment.

Analysing the film *Children of Men* (2006), Fisher notices a shift in the presentation of dystopia that relates to the workings of capitalist realism. In his view, dystopian films and novels formerly played the role of exercises in imagination. Disasters served as a narrative pretext for the emergence of other

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6 The Capitalist Realism movement emerged in Berlin in the 1960s, with Sigmar Polke as one of its main exponents. The movement satirised Soviet socialist realism and American pop art, whose aim was the mass production of art for consumption.

forms of life. However, in *Children of Men* there is a narrative on the scene that seems to project a known horror. Fisher saw in this film an exacerbation of the known world, namely the world of capitalism, rather than an impulse that could show an alternative to that world. The correspondence between the 'world' of the film and the real world was a cause of perplexity in the face of a paradigm change involving human perception. In this film, the continuity between the elements proper to 'ultra-authoritarianism' and Capital proved not to be incompatible.

Fisher perceived in the film the coexistence of "concentration camps and franchise cafés." The film shows the truth of capitalist realism, when human beings have become accustomed to catastrophe. Unfortunately, Fisher died before seeing, not in a film, but in real life, young women posing for sexy pictures in front of the gates of Auschwitz, as seen today. Fisher realised that in dystopias the public space is destroyed and invaded by wild nature as in many other films, and that in this film everything happens in a climate of coexistence. In the dystopia that is capitalist realism, catastrophe is no more than a part of life. In many territories of the planet, the difference between what happens in the film and what happens in life is increasingly erased. Reality is made up of life and catastrophe, as if the real dystopia is now the only alternative and therefore what we must be content with. It is to some extent an immanent utopia, i.e., cancelled but still utopian, as in Voltaire's *Candide*, when the character accepts the Leibnizian line about the "best of all possible worlds."

The naturalisation of horror is part of life under neoliberal conditions. As Fisher says, catastrophe is not waiting, nor has it already happened. It is being experienced like anything else. There is no specific moment when disaster occurs, because this world is already the catastrophe. The world is gradually falling apart and a strange conformism takes over. It is against this conformism that generates stupefying utopias or mere heterotopias (Foucault 1986) that we must criticise utopia, but also the dystopia that functions as utopia.

This is one way of understanding what Saramago called the "regency apocalypse." Reality as horror is normalised. The dissatisfied can keep shouting, because they will conform in practice and, in the end, die like everybody else. In capitalist realism, democracy and utopia are covert discourses of an "inverted world," as Cusicanqui argues (2010). Catastrophe as disaster is fostered

economically, as Naomi Klein showed (2008), but also aesthetically. The psycho-narrative atmosphere of the world creates dystopias. It reveals the aesthetic economy of catastrophe as an atmosphere of the normalisation or naturalisation of dystopia. Far from being a rhetorical gratuitousness, catastrophe is an aesthetic form of the political ideology of capitalism in its neoliberal configuration. Catastrophe is inscribed in the project of capitalist globalisation. The audio-visual industry emerges as a kind of aesthetic populism, in which styles that escape the domination of the cultural industry are treated as enemies. The 'people,' that is, the spectators composing masses without reflection, are adulated with entertainment and easy and exciting mental and cognitive products. Aesthetic populism has been annihilating the people's ability to think and feel, but also their ability to perceive what is going on. Film and audio-visual companies sell dystopian narratives as aestheticized nonsense for the consumption of anaesthetized masses who can see in the mirrored horror nothing more than mere entertainment.

I believe it was against this scenario that Saramago rose up. The maintenance of capitalist realism depends on the lack of counterpoint and the absence of difference, the lack of alternative theories, gestures, actions, movements. The sustaining of conformism and despair are essential and utopia itself could be part of this. Conformism and despair are natural effects of the system and must be reproduced to sustain the system in its eternal invitation to perverse enjoyment, that is, the satisfaction of living in a world without meaning and without responsibility towards this same world and all the otherness in it.

Catastrophe is the goal that capitalism imposes and feeds on. In this sense capitalism is necropolitical. Everything that is thought, felt, or done must aim at the destruction of a possible or alternative world. In this context, we can also recall what Adorno called "damaged life" (*beschädigtes Leben*; Adorno 1974). The 'regency apocalypse' would be the form of production of this damaging of life, that is, the organised and managed production of catastrophe. Of a life that can be lived but must be mutilated. The regency apocalypse is not a fortuitous effect of a society that lost its way by chance, but a rational project, in the sense of a linguistically elaborated form. The apocalypse as a system of the production of catastrophe, is organised in language, and needs to be contested in the linguistic practice that affects the whole production of what we are and

what we do. Therefore, Saramago's war against the word 'utopia' is the only way to rescue another possible world and becomes itself utopian.

Fascism coupled with neoliberalism depends on the catastrophe and presents itself as an accomplished dystopia. Therefore, the fascist investment in the aesthetic field is a procedure that fascism, in its initial and immature, purely capitalist moment, already exercised with mastery as control of the form and its stiffening. The mystical underpinning of authority, in neoliberalism and fascism, has always been aesthetic. It corresponds to the 'catastrophisation' or 'flagellation' of the world concealed under the mystique of globalisation. Just as the aesthetics of extermination is the aesthetics of coldness that serves as a backdrop for killing.

The political economy of catastrophe corresponds to the aesthetics of catastrophe. It is the covering of the world in which the decorative principle is in force. The dystopian configuration needs to frighten and stress the sensory apparatus by rendering the organism insensitive. The function of torture is to shake without killing. Those who survive do not become stronger; if anything, they become harder and more rigid. Victimised by aesthetic terrorism, nobody feels the pain of the other any longer, and not even their own pain. Emptied out, subjectivity gives way to a material body that wanders through shopping malls in the form of a spectre. The cultural industry of horror films creates recreational panic as a commodity form of real panic that sells movie tickets, television subscriptions and antidepressants. Catastrophe is opposed to utopia and, like utopia, is an effectual or performative category in the sense of causing concrete effects on people's mentality and action. Destruction on the most diverse scales becomes a method, but also a product. As a method, destruction aims at making room for new commodities. Everything that is destroyed can be replaced or compensated for by new commodities that will make up for the losses. Destruction, method, and product: it is big business.

A new enjoyment, a new form of fulfilment is what appears with the emergence of merchandise. This circuit provokes a new enjoyment of ready-made things, of immediacy, which compensates for a body and a psyche tired of struggling for survival. The enjoyment of ready-made ideas is given to the masses who, adulated by advertising and political leaders in the alliance that shapes the cultural industry of politics, attack reflection and critical thinking.

## **A Conclusion: Negative Utopia vs the Trivialisation of Utopia**

We can, therefore, speak of a ‘negative utopia,’ another utopia pitted against the use of banalized utopia to cover up the catastrophe. As a writer, Saramago made his art a medium for reflection, a medium for democracy and a medium for utopia as he was critical of cowed words and used words to act in the sensitive field of life. Saramago’s novels touch the readers in a sensitive way. They require the readers to put themselves in the position of hermeneutic subjects, of subjects of understanding.

In very simple terms, this means that when we read Saramago, we are asked to reflect not only ‘on’ what is told, but we are placed alongside what is told. We are taken beyond what is told through what is told. As an indelible part of the process, the reader’s class consciousness is summoned. If it were not a form of reductionism, we could say that José Saramago’s fiction is a way of doing politics. In fact, not of ‘doing politics’ in the sense of a socialist realism. Evidently it is not a specialised language of politics. On the contrary, it is about the ‘politics of language,’ that is, in his work language is a means of reflection but also a means of democracy and a means of utopia, which necessarily implies politics as awareness of power games.

In speaking of utopia, we are faced with the ethical impulse of theory, the citizen condition of the writer, the communism of a writer. Just as enunciated by Marx in his 11<sup>th</sup> thesis on Feuerbach—when he said that philosophy always interpreted the world, and that it would be necessary to transform it—, Saramago knew that literature affects the world. Saramago did not demand that literature change the world, but he knew that it is a means for transformation through understanding the world, as a symbolic intervention in that world. Art is not the design of utopias or of *a* utopia, because the true utopia remains faceless, that is, it is a negative utopia, as we see in Theodor Adorno.

Art is the position before the horizon that we cannot reach and that we must look at every day, indignant, appalled, and, precisely because of our indignation at this impossible, turn our eyes to what we have at hand, to the time of today, to the here and now, to what remains to be done. The critique of utopia is not a ‘dis-utopia’ but dystopia as a confrontation with reality, or as a way of

exposing reality. The suggestion of the erasure of utopia is, in fact, a condensed image of a lengthy reflection, which can be inscribed in the scenario of what we may call the dialectic of urgency by which Saramago calls with his work for meditation, for deep reflection on democracy and utopia and, thereby, on politics as a whole.

Adorno interpreted Marx's famous phrase by saying that philosophy is still alive because it has let the moment of its realisation pass (Adorno 1973: 3). Philosophy implies this 'not yet,' as we also see in Ernst Bloch. In an analogous sense, we can say of Saramago that literature is still alive because it let the moment of its realisation pass and became, not a utopia, but a dystopia. On the one hand, this dystopia has a utopian dimension, but, on the other, utopia is denounced in its dystopian dimension.

Therefore, despite his criticism of utopia and even the discomfort that Saramago manifests in relation to this word, one can say that he is a writer of utopia, precisely because, by criticising utopia, he invites us to reflect on it. The rhetoric of the denial of utopia is a way of awakening to the presence of dystopia as naturalised in the world. The dystopian novel is an invitation to think about another possible world. Art is mediation for utopia, while dystopia plays the role of method. Dismantling the false utopia of capitalism, pointing to the 'regency apocalypse' as a production of naturalised catastrophe, Saramago places himself in the line of those who sound the fire alarm (cf. Löwy 2005).

In a kind of poetic-political anatomy of the world, utopia is preserved as a negative way out of the text. True atlas of social and mental anatomy, showing the dystopian character of life itself dominated by the totalitarian capitalist system, Saramago's books are realistic tales, at odds with the naturalised dystopia of the world. However, more than narratives or novels, Saramago knew that every book is a metaphor, in the sense of being a transport, a means of communication, itself a portal, a utopian object. The book sends us beyond the book. It is a demand for praxis, an invitation to act.





# **Islands and Boats: (Lucid?) Meditations on a Stone Utopia and a Naval Heterotopia in the Work of José Saramago**

KRISTOF K. P. VANHOUTTE

A scratch on the ground and a knock on a door. With these two elegant, but rather slight, gestures does this meditation begin. But few scratches on the ground and few knocks on a door have had more incisive effects in man's literary history. They don't belong to the realm of simple cause and effect, but that doesn't matter. Where they take us does matter, and it is a maritime world of islands and boats, floating rocks and possibly sinking caravels. The scratch on the ground was done by Joana Carda, the knock on the palace door was performed by a nameless man. Both are literary characters, but their modest gestures have much broader implications than 'just literature' (whatever that may mean). They take us to the heights of some of philosophy's most important political concepts, recent and ancient. And why not, let me name them from the very beginning, they are the concepts of utopia and heterotopia.

Were these scratches that caused a rift to form at some abandoned mountainous frontier and those rappings and tappings on some palace door a conscious and intentional prelude to these distinguished and most noble philosophical concepts? I don't know. Up until a certain point I think it is fair to say that they were, but beyond that point, it is hard to tell. What I will be discussing can thus be considered as a combination of intention and a surplus of pure coincidence. But that these literary acts might be a union of intentionality and some sort of gratuitous coincidence, shouldn't preoccupy. What is more, this combination can even be considered as advantageous for at least two important reasons. First of all, it gives me the required speculative leeway to write what I am going to write (I'm no phenomenologist, so I don't intend to make intentionality an important part of this text). And, secondly (and at least the-

oretically more important), didn't Manuel Vázquez Montalbán already insist on the importance of the coincidences in the work of Saramago (cf. Saramago 2018: 54)?<sup>1</sup> And, furthermore, aren't the felicitous coincidences exactly those aspects that make a work of literature go beyond itself and its time—rendering it thus ... timeless?

But let me avoid becoming too hermetic. And let me turn to our first pair—as I will proceed firstly in couples—, José Saramago's *A Jangada de Pedra, The Stone Raft* (Saramago 1996), and the philosophical concept of utopia. And let me begin with utopia.

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The word and concept 'utopia' was coined by the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century British statesman and philosopher Thomas More. It was to become the abbreviated title of his most famous book (More 2003) published in 1516 under that somewhat longer title: *The best state of a Commonwealth and the new island of Utopia: A truly golden handbook, no less beneficial than entertaining, by the distinguished and eloquent author, Thomas More, citizen and sheriff of the famous City of London*. This long-titled but rather short booklet, that became an instant hit, was, in good memory of the platonic tradition, written in the form of a dialogue. Peter Giles, a Flemish friend of Erasmus, a character called Morus (who can only partially be seen as impersonating More himself), and a Portuguese navigator called Raphael Hythloday are the book's main characters. And the book itself is divided into two parts. The first part consists of a truly slashing critique of some of the major social, economic and political problems of the English, but also the broader European societies of that epoch, and the second part portrays a radical alternative to this society in shatters in the form of the largely egalitarian republic that is supposed to be found on an island called Utopia. Utopia, the word, is Greek and can either mean 'good place' or 'no place,' and it is generally understood to mean an ideal society that exists

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1 Vázquez Montalbán was speaking specifically about *Blindness*, but I have no doubt he wouldn't mind extending this to most of the work of Saramago.

nowhere in reality but that, by its purported perfection, should allure people to change their current state of life (cf. Wilde 2017: 1).<sup>2</sup>

If there was someone who was not a fan of this concept and its history, then it is José Saramago. He was no fan of it at all. In fact, during the fifth edition of the World Social Forum, held in 2005 in Porto Alegre, Saramago somewhat stunned the 5,000 people who had gathered to listen to a debate about ‘Quixote Today: Utopia and Politics’ by telling them that he was not a utopist. “I have bad news for you,” he started his intervention; “I’m not a utopist. Even worse: I consider the concept of utopia not only useless but also as negative as the idea that when we die, we go to heaven” (Saramago 2014a: 85). Although the crowd laughed somewhat after this introductory bomb, the laughter was a lot less vivid than when Saramago had been introduced.

This was not the first time, nor will it be the last, that Saramago had spoken up against the concept of utopia. A couple of months earlier, interviewed for one of Mexico’s leading daily newspapers, he had already stated that if he “were to choose a word to delete from the dictionary, I would delete utopia.” And the reason why he would have done this was because “it does not help to think, ... it is an invitation to laziness” (qtd. in Gomez Aguilera 2010: 374).<sup>3</sup>

Years later, in 2009, he would up the ‘anti’ on his disdain for this concept even more. “[Utopia] is a concept worn out by overuse,” he said to Antonio Lucas from *El Mundo*; and he added: “I have a kind of visceral hatred of [utopias], especially the childish idea[s] that drive[s] them” (qtd. in Gomez Aguilera 2010: 375). He would also refer back to his presentation in Porto Alegre, changing the accusation of utopia being ‘useless,’ to it becoming a lure; a word or concept that fools people; something similar to that infamous horizon, in the *boutade* by the Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano, that continuously moves further away the closer we get to it.

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- 2 The word is constructed from the Greek ‘topos,’ which means place, and the prefix ‘eu’ or ‘ou,’ which, respectively, makes the word either mean ‘good place’ or ‘no place.’
- 3 In Porto Alegre he will somewhat tone down this critique. He admits that he would not go so far as to delete the word utopia from the dictionary (cf. Saramago 2014a: 90). He would leave it alone and simply not talk about it anymore. Although his ‘tone’ might have changed a bit, his main attitude towards the concept did not really change in the end.

Although these negative words might seem somewhat harsh, it has to be said that Saramago is in highly esteemed philosophical company in this despicability of his. As Russell Jacoby (2005) wrote in the same year as Saramago addressed the somewhat incredulous crowd in Porto Alegre, a number of “[l]eading twentieth-century intellectuals such as Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and Hannah Arendt,” not to mention the famous historian Norman Cohn, “followed in [Thomas] More’s footsteps” in denouncing the doctrine of utopia (Jacoby 2005: xiii). For as much as Jacoby is pushing it a bit by listing Thomas More himself (and actually most of the scholars present in the list)<sup>4</sup> as a detractor of the concept of Utopia, that all of these scholars shared a disapproval of utopia is hard to counter.

Utopia was, for these scholars writing in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi horrors of the second world war and during the first acknowledgements of what Stalinist terror looked like, very much tainted by these forms of totalitarianism.<sup>5</sup> Cohn, who was a historian and not a philosopher, added one further chuckle to this supposed chain of utopian Nazi and Communist terror by enlisting the medieval radical sectarian anarchist millenarians. His by now classic *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (2004) ends with John of Leyden’s disastrous battle of Münster.<sup>6</sup> And, as Manuel Vázquez Montalbán would agree, what a nice coincidence indeed, that this same horrific history was also told by Saramago in his 1993 play *In Nomine Dei* (Saramago 1993a). And, as Carlo Salzani so correctly stated in his reading of this play, just like Cohn, also Sar-

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 4 Kei Hiruta (2017), for example, has demonstrated how Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin not only discredit utopia, but also sustain a peculiar form of it in their work.

5 Saramago clearly agrees with this depiction. In fact, when declaring what he dislikes most about utopia in Porto Alegre he states: “[E]ven Hitler used to say that the Nazi regime was going to last for one thousand years; *here’s another utopia*” (Saramago 2014a: 87, emphasis added). For Saramago as well utopia was thus colored by the totalitarian nightmare.

6 Although information did not travel as fast then as it does now, Thomas More was aware of the horrors of this battle and made it perfectly clear that he disavowed any affinity with these violent ‘sectarians.’ And aware of the possible connection that could be made with his work, especially his *Utopia*, he made it perfectly clear that he would have none of it. In his *The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, More wrote that in times when people are purposely misconstruing Holy Scripture, he’d rather have this, but also his own, book(s) burnt than for them to have helped sectarian (cf. More 1973: 179).

amago couples his indictment of utopia with an equally loaded charge against messianism (cf. Salzani 2018: 28).

The experience of the post-war Western world, together with the acknowledgement of the main causes of medieval Millenarianism, made one realize that the far-flung, hugely idealistic and mostly very impractical salvationist ideas that form the basis of utopias seem to inevitably lead to dictatorship, atrocious violence, and terrible human sufferance. Less of these moral high horses and more down to earth actual attempts to improve life on earth are needed. “[I]f only we could give up dreaming about distant ideals and fighting over our Utopian blueprints for a new world and a new man” (Popper 1968: 487), wrote Karl Popper. What is needed is to “work for the elimination of concrete evils rather than for the realization of abstract goods [...] fight[ing] for the elimination of poverty by direct means” (Popper 1968: 485). And Popper concludes: “do not allow your dreams of a beautiful world to lure you away from the claims of men who suffer here and now (Popper 1968: 485).

These are words by the philosopher Karl Popper, but they could have easily been pronounced by Arendt and Berlin—and in a different way, they could have been pronounced by Cohn as well—and they certainly could have been said by Saramago. In fact, Saramago did pronounce similar words. Still at the Porto Alegre conference, he, for example, affirmed:

for the 5,000 million people who live in poverty the word ‘utopia’ does mean absolutely nothing. And it won’t mean much even after their basic needs will have been satisfied. They will not start using [...] the word utopia, as if it added anything to what is needed in the work and struggle to change the fact that there are 5,000 million people living in poverty. (Saramago 2014a: 85)

And this is just one of the many possible citations that could have been given.

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Things, however, aren't so candid. And they aren't so unequivocal with any of the attackers of utopia, but, and this is of sole interest to us, they certainly aren't so with Saramago.

In fact, as Burghard Baltrusch has accurately noted, Saramago's attitude towards the concept of utopia is, to say the least, a bit paradoxical (Baltrusch 2014c: 10). Still in his address in Porto Alegre, there is the clear positive reference to utopia, when he calls out for "our utopia," "the day of tomorrow is our utopia" Saramago stated (Saramago 2014a: 87). Even though he backtracks a bit in this lecture, the dice has been thrown, there seems to be a positive aspect as well to this tricky concept.

Saramago, furthermore, had previously to this lecture in Porto Alegre already hinted at a possibly positive connotation of the concept of utopia. In fact, almost a decade earlier he had even acknowledged the presence of utopia in his own work. During his Nobel Prize lecture, when talking about *The Stone Raft* he said the following:

Then the apprentice imagined that there still might be a way of sending the ships back to the water, for instance, by moving the land and setting that out to sea. [...] the novel I then wrote—*The Stone Raft*—separated from the Continent the whole Iberian Peninsula and transformed it into a big floating island, moving of its own accord [...], in a southerly direction, [...] on its way to a *new Utopia*. (Saramago 1998b)

And he continued that this novel even offers "a vision *twice Utopian*" as it not just regarded a political one but also relates to a social, human utopia, with the characters "two women, three men and a dog, continually travel[ing] through the Peninsula as it furrows the ocean. The world is changing and they know they have to find in themselves the *new persons* they will become" (Saramago 1998b, emphasis added). They need to become new people for a new, and utopian, world.

Two points need to be made regarding this presence of a positivity towards the concept of utopia. The first regards the fact that also with reference to this ambiguity towards the concept of utopia, Saramago is, once again, in very good philosophical company. In fact, it has become accepted amongst most scholars

to talk about two different forms, or two different interpretations, of utopia. The first is considered the negative version and is generally called ‘blueprint utopia’ or ‘blueprint utopianism’ (e.g., Jacoby 2005; Storey 2019; Storey 2022) and it stands in radical opposition to that other form of utopia or utopianism, a positive one, that has been, variously, called ‘radical utopianism’ (Storey 2019; Storey 2022) or ‘iconoclastic utopianism’ (Jacoby 2005).

Blueprint utopias, as the word ‘blueprint’ already suggests, are utopias that “map out the future in inches and minutes” by giving out very “precise instructions” that need to be followed by the letter (Jacoby 2005: xiv). It is this form of utopia, or this way of understanding utopia, that intends to make an imagined ideal society that exists nowhere into a reality. It is also this way of understanding utopia, by requiring an obligation to be followed step by step, that betrays its nature for domination all too clearly. It is, indeed, this form of understanding the workings of utopia that will, according to this double reading, inevitably lead to dictatorship, atrocious violence, and terrible human suffering.

Against these millenarian-style totalitarian blueprint utopias stand those ways of interpreting utopia that refuse to lock the future down. These utopianisms don’t use or don’t propose a roadmap that needs to be followed exactly as prescribed, but turn to it, for example, as a critique (cf. Bloch 1988; Marin 1984), as a means to defamiliarize us with the present (cf. Storey 2019), or simply decline for it to function as a topography but as a topic that should lead to a discussion (cf. Marin 1984: 115). As Ernst Bloch declared in a conversation with Horst Krüger and Theodor W. Adorno—and Bloch is, as Adorno correctly remarks, the person mainly responsible for “restoring [some] honor to the word ‘utopia’” (Bloch 1988: 1)—“the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present” (Bloch 1988: 12).<sup>7</sup> Its purpose is, as John Storey takes up this contention by Bloch, to “defamiliarize the here and now” (Storey 2019: 2). It intends to “make unsteady what is [...] taken for granted and [...] as ever so obvious” (Storey 2019: 2). As such, the purpose of a utopia is to undermine the “manufactured naturalness of the here and now, making it conceivable to

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7 This basic function of utopic discourse is repeated by Louis Marin albeit in a somewhat more critical tone when he states that utopia functions as “an ideological critique of the dominant ideology” (Marin 1984: xiv; 195–196).



believe that *another world is possible*” (Storey 2019: 2, emphasis in the original). Or, as Louis Marin said, the utopian practice—which is not about a place but constitutes a discourse—is about “introducing [a] sudden distance by which contiguities and continuities of time and space are broken” (Marin 1984: xxii).

Understood in this way, utopia is thus about the subversion of that terrible acronym TINA (There Is No Alternative), breaking and opening it up to the fact that there (always) is an alternative. This utopia as critique, or this utopian defamiliarization, intends to rupture with the habits that makes us complicit with the prevailing structures of power (cf. Storey 2022: 63).

Secondly, the utopian intent that Saramago reads in the figure of Don Quixote, or the call to work for “our utopia” that can be found in the pragmatics of tomorrow, should make us think twice about Saramago’s attitude towards utopia. What is more, it indeed opens up a whole new perspective on *The Stone Raft*. Namely, that *A Jangada* is indeed, at least up until a certain point, a utopian tale.

That there is this possible connection between this novel and our concept, certainly explains why the concept of utopia has been so frequently invoked when dealing with this book. Silvia Amorim, Ana Paula Arnaut, Burghard Baltrusch, Anna Klobucka, Raquel Ribeiro, Mark Sabine, Marisa Corrêa Silva, and so many others have, for one reason or another, all connected *A Jangada* with the concept of utopia.

Arnaut and Klobucka, to begin with them, qualify the whole novel as a utopia in very general terms. For Arnaut it is a tale about “the desire for another (*non*) place where perfection assists human daily life” (Arnaut 2014: 5, emphasis added) while, for Klobucka, *The Stone Raft* is simply a “magic-realist utopian fable” (Klobucka 2001: xvi). Ribeiro and Silva, instead, get somewhat more into the plot-line of the novel, and call *A Jangada* either “Saramago’s utopia for the Iberian Atlantic” (Ribeiro 2012: 773) or simply call the whole idea of Iberism as utopic (cf. Silva 2002).

Amorim (2010), from her side, sees the utopianism clearly present in *The Stone Raft* (Amorim 2010: 49), but, surprisingly—at least for how this text of mine will proceed—she also adds *The Tale of an Unknown Island* as a clearly utopian text. Furthermore, even in texts by Saramago that aren’t utopian, Amorim sees the presence of Utopian characters. Interestingly, it is precisely

that critical stance typical of the non-blueprint utopianism, as proposed by Bloch, Storey and Marin as we discussed previously, that is the peculiar nature of Saramago's utopianism according to Amorim.

Also for Burghard Baltrusch is it this critical stance that connects *A Jangada* to the concept of utopia (Baltrusch 2014c). Although Baltrusch is more cautious and never qualifies Saramago's work as utopian (Baltrusch is too aware of Saramago's ambiguous attitude towards the concept to fall into that trap), there is, for him (and justly so), this 'pragmatism' that certainly tends towards utopia (the pragmatism of a utopic tomorrow) that he finds present in this work of Saramago.

Finally, Mark Sabine somewhat combines all these varied takes and adds one more aspect to this combination. Sabine first acknowledges a more general form of utopianism that is present in Saramago's work. "[U]topian political thinking," he states, is not only a "viable" way for Saramago to express himself, "but [it is] indeed essential" to his work (Sabine 2016: 4). As to *The Stone Raft*, utopic trans-Iberism is, for Sabine, not the only level where to read the practice of utopia. In fact, the novel, so he claims, is a "tentative 'materialist utopianism'" that has as its crux in "the contingency of love's transformative power upon the courage to defy convention, and to change" (Sabine 2016: 188). The utopianism of *A Jangada* is thus one that is transformative beyond the political, entering into the fields of gender and social conventions. It is indeed "twice Utopian" as Saramago himself had unveiled.

Considering what we have seen up until now, starting from the double possible reading of the utopian interpretation over to Saramago's own rather ambiguous attitude towards the concept of utopia (inserting himself thus in a certain way into this double reading), all these interpretations are, and this notwithstanding Saramago's earlier covered harsh words and his visceral hatred against the concept of utopia, more than just permissible. They are even somewhat invited by Saramago's work itself.

Interesting as this all is, I want to propose one more possible take on this unusual pair that *A Jangada* and utopia form. One more possible take that somehow shifts the cards not only regarding what has been said by the commentators on Saramago's work, but also of what has been said and written by Saramago himself. And maybe, just maybe, will all of this allow us also to

say something different, maybe even new, about what can be understood as a utopia.

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The different reading I am proposing finds its starting point in Thomas More's *Utopia*. More specifically, it originates from *Utopia*'s main character, the enigmatic Portuguese navigator Raphael Hythloday<sup>8</sup> who supposedly accompanied Amerigo Vespucci on three of his four voyages, and the creation story he offers of Utopia (not *Utopia* the book, but Utopia the island):

They say [ ... ] their land was not always surrounded by the sea. But Utopus, who conquered the country and gave it his name (for it was previously called Abraxa) [ ... ] had a channel cut fifteen miles wide where the land joined the continent, and thus caused the sea to flow around the country. He not only put the natives to work at this task, but all his own soldiers too, so that the vanquished would not think the labour a disgrace. With the work divided among so many hands, the project was finished quickly, and the neighboring peoples, who at first had laughed at the folly of the undertaking, were struck with wonder and terror at its success. (More 2003: 42)

This is the genesis narrative as told by Hythloday. However, the good reader will have understood that we are not dealing with a single narrative of the birth of a nation. In fact, we not only have two but actually three different ones.

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8 Before we give any credit to Hythloday's narrative, a word of warning is required. In fact, for as much as his name, Raphael, is supposed to refer to the archangel Raphael, the messenger, guide and healer of the blind souls, his last name, Hythloday, can both mean being hostile to nonsense or, contrarywise, being extremely well experienced and versed in the production of nonsense—the name Hythloday does, in fact, derive from the Greek words ὑθλος ('hythlos': nonsense, empty chatter) and δαίος ('daios': experienced, but also hostile to). It can thus be translated as 'experienced in chattering,' but also, on the contrary, as 'hostile to chattering'—. The ambiguity present in the concept of utopia, it being either a good place or no place at all, finds its mirroring image in its main character. But let us turn to this angelic babblers and his tale on the origin of the Island of Utopia.

The first creation narrative offered in Hythloday's tale is related to names. We first learn that Abraxa was the original name of the country. It was then conquered, after which it took the name of its conqueror Utopus. So, Utopia's name, according to this tale, is related to the name of the new ruler. In this sense, Utopia is like Rhakotis, that ancient Egyptian city at the delta of the Nile that became Alexandria once it was conquered by Alexander the Great. The isthmus or peninsula named Abraxa became Utopia once Utopos had conquered it.

The second genesis narrative presented by Hythloday takes us probably into more familiar territory. In fact, it is what has become the classical understanding of the idea of Utopia. It is the idea of the possibility of an idealistic world. A world beyond restrictive boundaries, a world that is open to the toleration of all differences. It is present in Hythloday's tale where he describes the digging of the channel by both the conquered and the soldiers. They are working utopianly together. Abraxa thus became Utopia, in this reading, because of the wonder of the collaborative laborious cooperation that, almost miraculously allows for the work to finish so quickly and almost effortlessly. Although in this part of Hythloday's narrative, it is only labor that is present, the utopianism at stake potentially spans all politico-religio-socio-cultural aspects of life. And it is also as such that it is present in the rest of the second part of More's book. Abraxa, according to this particular reading, thus became Utopia because of the transformative overcoming of limiting socio-politico and cultural-religious confines.

Now most readings of Utopia stop with these two possibilities. There is, however, also a third, and I believe much more interesting nativity story of Utopia present in Hythloday's narrative. It doesn't disqualify the former narratives. In fact, it actually includes them. And, most importantly, it elevates them to a whole different level.

This third narrative regards the fact that Utopia might not be about changing names, or about changing habits for the better, but that it just might be about physical, or should I say geographical change—or better geographical circumscription. Utopia, and this is strangely all too often forgotten, wasn't always an island. As Hythloday told, Utopus, the conquering king, had a channel cut where the land joined the continent, which caused the sea to flow around

the country. Abraxa, before being conquered, was thus part of the main land. It was most probably an isthmus or a peninsula. And, if we are to follow this third 'birth-certificate' of Utopia, it was only by making it into an island, that is, by separating it from the main land that it became Utopia. By cutting itself literally off in an act so radical, that all the neighboring peoples were struck with wonder and terror, did it become what is known as Utopia.

Now this third version of the birth narrative of Utopia might seem rather slight at first sight. What is a mere geographical change? It certainly doesn't stand out against the opening up of possibilities that are beyond the restrictive boundaries and toleration of differences, as the classical understanding of the idea of Utopia goes. It certainly is, as Lawrence Wilde, who is one of the more profound readers of More's *Utopia*, acknowledges, a neglected aspect in the research of More's book, but also in the broader field of utopian studies (cf. Wilde 2017: 65). In fact, it seems that the only ones who actually did give some importance to this fact of Utopia being an actual island, were those who thought More had referred to an actual existing island. Maybe it is time to give this aspect of Utopia, this making of an island, a bit more attention.

Before I venture into this endeavor, some might have already made the connection with Saramago. As I revealed in the opening lines of this text, didn't Saramago's *The Stone Raft* begin in a very similar way? Didn't Joana Carda, in the first sentence of *A Jangada*, scratch the ground with an elm branch after which the earth started to tremble and the Iberian Peninsula started to tear itself away from the European mainland? I know, at the same time as Joana Carda had scratched the ground with her possibly magical wand, Joaquim Sassa had thrown a stone in the ocean and Pedro Orce had risen from his chair. Little changes though, cracks appeared in the mountains of the Pyrenees and the peninsula, just like in Thomas More's *truly golden handbook, no less beneficial than entertaining*, was on the verge of becoming an Island. And, once again just like in More's *Utopia*, a mere geological, but slowly also a geographical, issue occurs that has surprisingly wide repercussions.

Returning to More's *Utopia*, it is extremely surprising that scholars have largely neglected the fact that Utopia, for it to become Utopia, had, first, to

become an island.<sup>9</sup> The oversight of the importance of the becoming-island theme is even more surprising since More himself did insist on the importance of this from the very beginning of *Utopia*. First of all, there is the not so unimportant issue of Utopia being called U-topia. The Greek word ‘topos’ which means place is present in the name of the island itself. Now if Shakespeare was right and there is something in a name, then the fact that there is the reference to place itself, in the name of the place—which, as it goes with naming, regards giving a place in the world—, then one should not simply ignore the topicality of u-topia. Most scholars did not get any further than the discussion of the prefix—the place being either good or simply not—leaving the particular type of topos it was ... well for what it was.

Furthermore, if we look back at the original title (long as all book-titles of Renaissance humanists), then there are two fundamental aspects highlighted by More himself. The book is both about *The best state of a Commonwealth* and *the new island of Utopia*. More’s insisting on Utopia being a *new* island is an important red flag.

Then, as if the previous hints by More weren’t enough, there is also the fact that in Hythloday’s story, the neighboring people are particularly affected by Utopos’ project. Contrary to most commentators’ conclusions, they, however, were not struck by wonder and terror by the collaborative means by which the project had finished so quickly (cf. Wilde 2017: 48). No. They were struck with wonder and terror (and at first had laughed at the folly) of the creation of the island as such. If there is one thing strange in Utopos’ project it is not the cooperation of people, but the idea of creating an island.

As to what it meant for Utopia to be an island, Louis Marin, who is the only scholar I am familiar with who has spent some time dealing with Utopia’s island-ness, made the important remark that Utopia, that island separated

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9 So many other early utopian narratives also had an island as its utopia. Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* had with Bensalem its own utopian island, and Bernard de Fontenelle, just to give two examples, had, in his *The Republic of Philosophers*, the island of Ajao that featured as its utopia. Also if we look at some predecessors of the utopian narrative, we find the island at the center in Plato’s take on Atlantis and More’s other ancient sources, as Aristophanes and Lucian are, feature utopic islands (Aristophanes has Cloudcuckooland in his *The Birds* and Lucian has the islands of the blest in his *True History*).

from all other places “never admits anything that is external to it; utopia is for itself its own reality” (Marin 1984: 102). And everything that Hythloday tells us about Utopia and how it deals with what is external to it, only confirms Marin’s affirmation. That Utopia is a closed-off society is already visible from its physical shape. Utopia is a circular island, or better, it is an island in the shape of a crescent moon, closed from and for the outside, and open to and for the inside, that is open only for and to itself. Furthermore, for as much as Utopia is not isolated from the world, the Utopians have not a single treaty with other countries (cf. More 2003: 83). Then there is also the fact that nobody can come to the island by her or his own decision. It is impossible for any stranger to enter the harbor without a local man that serves as pilot (More 2003: 42). And even when Hythloday is supposed to give coordinates of the island to Morus and Giles so that they can come and see the island for themselves, a servant coughs and nobody understands what Hythloday has said. And, last but not least, even when the Utopians venture out into the wider world, and they seem to do this mainly to colonize, it is in an exclusivist way. In the rare events they are overpopulated and thus need new land, they select an almost abandoned area in some other country and simply drive all others out. Utopia is thus an island that not just in its shape but also in its operativity is formed as closed in on itself.

Now, all of this might sound surprisingly non-utopic. It certainly is if we stick with the most classical interpretation of a utopia where a happily-ever-after society is depicted. The question thus rises about the accuracy of this more classical reading and interpretation of the idea of utopia. Does this reading even find validation and confirmation in More’s work and ideas? True, there was the harsh critique on the existing conventions in the first book of *Utopia*, but the society that was described by Hythloday was hardly perfect (besides maybe in name, and a name that satirically speaking was both good and inexistent). More importantly, it was also never claimed to be perfect. And this has indeed stunned many scholars. On numerous occasions, in fact, does Hythloday state that the society the utopians had created only laid out the *foundations* for an enduring country (cf. Wilde 2017: 3, 16, 52, 83). A whole series of issues still remained open. There is, for example, the violent colonialism we just came to see. And Utopia also had slavery, just like it had criminality. Furthermore,

there is the highly problematic status of both the interaction of the sexes and the social conventions. All these aspects can hardly be called utopic in its most common and generally accepted understanding.

What is more interesting than the presence of these problems, is the fact that no solutions are offered or can be found in More's book. Furthermore, also no preview of, let alone any path towards, a possible overcoming of these issues is offered by More. It wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the innovation of the utopistic genre in Victorian England, that the idea of utopia being futuristic—and the static understanding of utopias made way for a more dynamic one that included the possibility of the idea of overcoming persistent problems—came to the fore (cf. Kreisel 2022). None of all this was, however, present in More's tale. One can even speculate that the presence and the awareness of utopia as an island might have been intended to render this whole idea, of potentially conquering problems by means of a futuristic hope, as null.

Bringing all we have just seen together allows me to phrase a first provocative, but for the moment only partial, conclusion—a temporary conclusion that is provoked by combining this geographic inspired reading of More's *Utopia* and Saramago's *The Stone Raft*. This provocative but still only partial conclusion goes as follows: what if utopia is basically just an isolated idea that is not about improvement, betterment, let alone the rendering perfect of the *whole world* by means of the overcoming of traditional boundaries and inclusion of all? What if, to attempt to describe this temporary conclusion positively, the idea of utopia is just and even merely an idea that is considerable in the context of an island, in isolation from all? Said differently still, what if the concept of utopia does not consist in it being an expansive all-embracing amelioration, but is only an empty sectarian concept?<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, to add one more element to this provocation, what if the idea of utopia being a mere empty sectarian concept immediately includes the awareness or the acknowledgement, that once contact is made with something external—that is, once the idea is exported and expanded—then it immediately

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10 By saying that utopia is empty, I simply mean that its content is of no importance for a utopia to be utopian. Hythloday's second narrative-line can, as such, be considered as a mere *accident de parcours*



collapses and implodes? Said differently by means of an example I already referred to: what if the Münster Anabaptists are the quintessential example of a utopia? As long as they were isolated enough—be it on their island or cloud—, their utopia worked. Once it went beyond that, it all necessarily came crashing down in the most horrible of ways.<sup>11</sup>

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Although I just acknowledged that it was combining More's *Utopia* and Saramago's *The Stone Raft* that made me come to this somewhat non-utopian temporary conclusion, it has to be made clear that the combination was more of the discovery of a dissonance than one of similarity. In fact, for as much as More's utopic island and Saramago's *A Jangada* share many basic elements—elements that also allowed all the commentators I mentioned before to bring *The Stone Raft* in the realm of utopian literature—, there is one big difference between the two books. As the title of Saramago's novel makes perfectly clear, *A Jangada* is not an island—at least it isn't for the largest part of the book. It is a raft, or could we say, by taking a little bit of poetic freedom, it is a boat. And it is a boat that is rather similar to another boat in Saramago's oeuvre, namely the one that we can find in *The Tale of the Unknown Island* (Saramago 1999b).

Also this work by Saramago, as I already mentioned in the opening sentences of this text, starts with a tiny gesture. It's a simple knock on a palace door. At first, as the story goes, there came no answer to this nameless man's knock. When the king finally deigns himself of noticing the knocking, he sends the maid to ask what is desired of his majesty. As always, the king then ignores the maid and the request. However, the man who had knocked on the king's door was not like most other visitors. He refused to leave without an answer. This naturally annoyed the king who finally summoned the man. "What do you want? [...] Do you think I have nothing else to do?" asks the king (Saramago

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11 If this reading of *Utopia* is followed, then we get a more profound understanding why More realized that it was better to burn his *Utopia*, the book, than let it be appropriated by the minds of Anabaptists with imperialistic tendencies. They simply had not understood the core message of *Utopia*.

1999b: 10). To the king's surprise, the man answered only the first question: he wanted a boat to go in search of the unknown island.

Now, if there is one concept that is connected to boats and rafts then it is, however, not utopia, but that other -topia, that other *topos*, that other place, that place that literally means other-place: namely heterotopia.

Although the French philosopher Michel Foucault did not coin the term—he took it from the medical sphere, where it simply indicated a part of the body that was not in its 'normal' place—he can be considered responsible for bringing it to the broader humanistic community; where it, ever since, has known a rather surprising (but probably also unmerited) success.<sup>12</sup>

Foucault only refers to the concept of heterotopia on two occasions. The first time is in his *The Order of Things (Les Mots et les Choses)* (Foucault 2005), and the second time is in a lecture entitled *Of Other Spaces* (Foucault 1986). It has to be acknowledged that what Foucault said about this topic on these two occasions is not particularly impressive. In *The Order of Things* he merely indicates in the preface that heterotopias function in a similar way as the weird Borgesian taxonomy of animals of some Chinese encyclopedia with which he had started his study. *Of Other Spaces*, on the other hand, basically consists of a list of what he considers to be the six fundamental principles of heterotopias. Although I wouldn't go as far as Edward Soja, the American urbanist, who describes Foucault's words on heterotopia as frustratingly "incomplete, inconsistent and incoherent" (Soja 1996: 162), they are certainly not to be considered as Foucault's strongest writing. What they do have working in their favor, however, is that they are enormously evocative, particularly the two aspects that seem to be Foucault's crux.

The first aspect, one that is woven into all of Foucault's thoughts on heterotopia, is that, with the exception of the mirror (and the conclusion of this text

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12 That I call its success unmerited is related to the simple fact that Foucault only refers to the concept of heterotopia on two occasions, and that the by now hundreds and hundreds of scholarly publications that have been dedicated to this topic have mostly gotten what Foucault said completely wrong. Besides the fact that almost everything has been defined as heterotopia by now, most scholars also deal with heterotopia in an overly romanticized way, reducing it to a highly polarized question of marginalization, difference, or otherness. All of this is highly problematic. This, however, is not the place to confront these issues.

will bring us back to this point), between utopia and heterotopia there is nothing but the strictest possible opposition. This radical opposition is constantly confirmed in what he says about these two concepts in both *The Order of Things* and in *Of Other Spaces*. It is even possible to state that what Foucault exactly says about utopias, or what he understands utopias to mean, is secondary to it simply being the opposite of heterotopias.

As to the second point, in order to fully understand its meaning, I think it best if we turn to an earlier reference to a boat by Foucault. It is his famous lines of the *Stultifera navis*, the *Narrenschiff*, the Ship of Fools that made its real appearance on the canals of Flanders and the Rhineland during the Renaissance, drifting around, from town to town, with its 'cargo' of undesired lunatics (cf. Foucault 2006). The navigation of these ships of fools, Foucault writes, were

heavily loaded with meaning, and clearly carried a great social force. On the one hand, it had incontestably practical functions, as entrusting a madman to the care of boatmen meant that he would no longer roam around the city walls, and ensured that he would travel far and be a prisoner of his own departure. But there was more: water brought its own dark symbolic charge, carrying away, but purifying too. Navigation brought man face to face with the uncertainty of destiny, where each is left to himself and every departure might always be the last. The madman on his crazy boat sets sail for the other world, and it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. (Foucault 2006: 10–11)

“Water and navigation had that role to play.” Foucault continues some lines later:

Locked in the ship from which he could not escape, the madman was handed over to the [...] sea where all paths cross, [...] A prisoner in the midst of the ultimate freedom, on the most open road of all, chained solidly to the infinite crossroads. He is the Passenger par excellence, the prisoner of the passage. [...] His truth and his home are the barren wasteland between two lands that can never be his own. (Foucault 2006: 11)

And from all of this, Foucault concludes, and this is our second point<sup>13</sup>: “This enforced navigation is both *rigorous division* and *absolute Passage*” (Foucault 2006: 11, emphasis added).

The function and place, the *topos*, of heterotopias consists in this combination of rigorously dividing and being the absolute passage. Heterotopias are, in fact, the liminal reality that divides between the real and the ir-real, the rational and the ir-rational, the sane and the mad. But it does so, that is, it can only do so, in passage, ‘*en passant*’ as they say in French. It is always only for a limited time, just a glimpse, always on the verge of solidification but never solid, that it is able to show the reality of that which opposes (and the reasons of and for this opposition).

Like I already mentioned, more than anything Foucault’s words are highly evocative. It is hard to put one’s finger on the always fleeting nature of this heterotopia. And probably because of its fleeting characteristic, and because of the presence of this aspect of division and passage, it allowed to make Foucault conclude *Of Other Spaces* by saying that it is indeed “the ship [that] is the heterotopia par excellence” (Foucault 1986: 27):

the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and [as such] [...], you will understand why the boat has [...] been [...] the greatest reserve of the imagination. (Foucault 1986, 27)

If I were allowed to use an imaginative image in these sentences that slowly bring us to the end of this text, an equally imaginative as evocative image, but maybe a bit more concrete in our present situation; the heterotopic boat is to be envisioned between the real and the unreal of the mainland and the island, it is floating, or maybe simply drifting, in-between the mainland (maybe the mainland of Europe, as in *A Jangada*) and those islands, or maybe just that single island called Utopia.

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13 The first being that heterotopias are the opposite of utopias.

*The Stone Raft* and *The Tale of an Unknown Island* have extremely unveiling endings. They might seem, at first sight, to be leading in opposite directions from each other, but, if we read carefully, they might just be mirroring images.

In the end, as Saramago wrote in *The Tale of an Unknown Island*, the king obliged the man who had so insistently knocked on his palace door. He not only offered him a ship (an old caravel), but unbeknownst to the stubborn man, he also gave him a first member of his crew. The maid, in fact, had followed him. But unable to find any other sailor to accompany him in his voyage, the nameless man, felt obliged to surrender his quest. Stopped by the maid, he, after a night full of dark dreams, in the end finds love in her warm and intense embrace, and at noon, the Unknown Island, as they had baptized their caravel, sets sail to look for itself.

If there ever was a tale to accompany the theory of heterotopia, then it can only be this one. As long as the Unknown Island (the boat) keeps on sailing, always 'en passant,' in-between what is known and unknown, what was and will be, between the main land and the various islands (and, indeed, thus never finding itself), then there could be no better image of the heterotopia.

Contrary to the Unknown Island, the drifting peninsula is predicted to come to a halt (cf. Saramago 1996: 286). And as the raft is slowing down the embryonic new society that the main characters had formed during the novel and for the time the stone raft had drifted in the Atlantic Ocean, starts to collapse. Pedro Orce, the man who had risen from his chair when the earth had started to tremble as the Iberian Peninsula started to detach itself from the European mainland, returns to that resting position. Only this time it is for eternity. And indeed, Pedro dies only a few lines before we are informed that the peninsula has stopped (cf. Saramago 1996: 292). With the raft having come to a stop, that same utopian union further crumbles. The embryonic new society, in fact, collapses as all go their own way. Even the dog Ardent, who had chosen them, left and would never be seen again. With the new world turning into Utopia, but a utopia open to that what is external to it, the devastating nature of utopia sets in.

Joana Carda's scratch with the elmwood branch, was like Utopos' canal for Abraxa. But, unlike Utopos' Utopia, the coordinates of its place were widely known. And although Saramago put up a titanic fight, letting the raft make all kinds of surprise moves and unexpected diversions, as it so often goes with stories, they have a life of their own, and the author's efforts were in vain. And so the Iberian Peninsula became what Saramago had feared all along. As it slowed down to finally stop and take up its place in the broader world where it would have to explain its nature and be at the mercy of the infamous external imperative forces, it would become one more devastating Utopia which is synonymous with its own destruction.

Utopianism is, in fact, hardly ever present in the cards of Utopia. At max it is only present in the most isolated forms of island utopias, or in those fleeting moments and spaces of the floating heterotopias.



# ***Raised from the Ground and the Spectre of Revolution***

RAQUEL VARELA AND ROBERTO DELLA SANTA<sup>1</sup>

Since the world has existed—the old have learnt from the young.  
José Saramago

That even the dead are not safe if the enemy wins.  
Walter Benjamin

Karl Marx used to say that one could know much more about the contemporary social situation through a number of literary works than through the study of scientific analyses dealing with the same issue (Lukács 1983). Literature has its own power of comprehending reality. The transcendence of its cognitive discourse—in the face of social and human sciences—is remarkable. And let us remember that the Old Moor did not even live through the era of academic hyper-specialisation or the intellectual ultra-productivism of our times, in which history and literature are so often in incommunicable places within small circles.

But (social) science and (literary) art do not follow identical paths when it comes to producing social knowledge. If the former gains density by formulating general categories and laws, the latter outlines contours through specific characters and situations. In the first case, we have *critical thought*, and in the second, *creative imagination*. One is universal; the other, specific. Science produces concepts that are abstract(s) and *objective*; art, on the other hand, manufactures images that are concrete, and, of course, *subjective*. The *knowledge-effect* of art is unavoidable, since it radiates, in a pervasive skewed manner—for

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1 Translated from the Portuguese by Michael Skinner; revised by Burghard Baltrusch and Carlo Salzani.



want of a better expression—‘inside,’ figures and forms. The *ubiquitous* prisms of the light of science would be more enlightening, ‘outside,’ backgrounds and contents. More than a *zero-sum game*, where one wins what the other loses, there is fruitful reciprocal fertilisation between both social forms.

In the Portuguese case, there is also an unavoidable and noteworthy idiosyncrasy: a public sphere that has never achieved a robust process of critical autonomy vis-à-vis the state or the market (see Santos 1979). An intellectuality that is, for that same reason, very decaffeinated. The lasting effects on the traditional intelligentsia, in the centres divulging a strict hegemony, made the impact of the Counter-Reformation on certain social groups clear. This is a country with a Tribunal of the Holy Office—or, more popularly known as the ‘Holy Inquisition’—which lasted for something like three hundred years with the one hundred and fifty-year-long Counter-Reformation, a fascist dictatorship of almost half a century and, finally, the Roman Catholic Church, to this day influential in cultural, political, economic, and social circles (see Real 2018).

Unlike the Russian intelligentsia, formed by a social group outside the scope of official institutions, which struggled with the system and advocated social reform, the Polish *intelligencja*, associated with bodies of teachers, officers, lawyers etc., was formed in the shadow of power. The Portuguese case is much more closely linked to Polish cadres than to Russian *Narodniks*. The height of social criticism—from Antero de Quental (1842–1891) to José Saramago (1922–2010)—for a number of reasons and senses, comes more from artists than historians.

There is no better way to introduce the object of our study than with the following lines from Saramago himself:

I think that ‘from the ground, everything rises’—even we rise. And the book being what it is—a book about the Alentejo—and as I wanted to recount the social situation of part of our population, over a relatively long period of time, what I saw was that every effort of these people whose lives I was going to try to talk about is basically that of someone who wants to get up. That is to say: all the economic and social oppression that has characterised life in the Alentejo, the relationship

between the large estates known as latifundia and those who work for them has always been—at least from my point of view—a relationship of oppression. Oppression is, by definition, crushing, it tends to humiliate. It tends to squash. The movement that reacts to this is the movement of lifting: lifting the weight that crushes us. That dominates us. So, the book is called *Levantado do Chão* (Raised from the Ground) because, deep down, men are raised from the ground, the fields are raised, it is on the ground that we sow, and it is on the ground that trees are born. And it is from the ground that a book can be lifted. (Saramago 1981)

In this case, we believe that not only the concept of the work tends towards a dynamic reality, but, perhaps, the movement of reality leans towards the work of this concept on canvas.

The proposal tries to ally the perspective of the ‘history of the people,’ in the sense of Chris Harman’s (1999) and Howard Zinn’s (1999) *people’s histories*, in the analysis of Society, and the so-called ‘lifestyle issues,’ in allusion to the study of ‘*Byt’* [‘daily life,’ in Russian], by Antonio Gramsci (2011) and Leon Trotsky (1973), in their research on Culture, with the *horizon of possibilities* brought about by the verve of critical theory, both social and literary, by authors such as Antonio Candido (1965), Roberto Schwarz (2000), Raymond Williams (2017), and Terry Eagleton (2013). In the attempt to unveil the *full dialecticity* between text and context, we propose such an angle, here and now, in order to integrate the three elements for the interpretation of *Raised from the Ground*, the first great novel by the writer José Saramago.

However, it is worth noting that the interpretative essay that follows, true to the essay form, is not intended to offer ‘ready-made’ truths, but forms of thinking together. And above all, it rejects the corset of academic specialities—void of conventions. It is a study of the revolution through literature, but also of literature by way of the revolution. For this, in depth and breadth, we avail ourselves of Walter Benjamin as our guide.

## April Arrived From Africa

It would be impractical to start from a literary point of view of the pre-April period in Portugal, which is one of the oldest social formations in Europe with high literary values. Much simpler, however, is to give a snapshot of the social situation prior to 1974 in this country. For such an account we quote, extensively, the initial descriptive part of Perry Anderson's three-part study on "Portugal and the End of Ultra-Colonialism" (1962):

The primary sector (agriculture, fishing, forestry) thus absorbs about 50 % of Portugal's manpower. Industry accounts for only 24 %. The tertiary (white-collar) sector employs the remaining 26 %. As a pattern, this is unique in Western Europe. [...] Fertiliser techniques are rudimentary—it is officially estimated that production could be raised by at least 50 % given adequate fertilisation. Mechanisation is minimal (there were 6,000 tractors in all Portugal in 1958). Erosion, due to unreliable rainfall and lack of preventive measures, is widespread. As a result, despite the overwhelming place of agriculture in national life, Portugal has a permanent cereal deficit. (Anderson 1962: 84)

The average agricultural wage is 5/7d. a day for men, and 3/1d. for women. The urban working class is little better off. The average wage in the cities is 6/7d. a day—some £2 a week. There is no question of striking for higher wages, shorter hours or better conditions: unions are illegal. With a stagnant economy and creeping prices (monopolies, inflated administrative and commercial sectors) real wages dropped by one third between 1939 and 1958. Per capita consumption of meat is a quarter of that in France, and scarcely more than that in Egypt. Consumption of sugar compares with Ceylon or Pakistan. Calory intake (2,410) is lower than in such underdeveloped countries as Greece, Paraguay or Egypt. (Anderson 1962: 86–87)

Housing conditions match diet: even by official Portuguese standards 11,000 families in Lisbon alone (population 790,000) live in dwellings

unfit for human habitation. In 1950, only 14.5 % of all Portuguese houses had running water in the houses (34.2 % in Spain, 28.7 % in Greece); only 19.5 % had electricity (Spain 80 %) and 7.8 % baths. Health inevitably reflects the conditions of food and shelter. The infant mortality rate is the highest in Europe (88.6 per 1,000 population), and higher than some colonial and ex-colonial territories (67.5 in Senegal). Tuberculosis is more frequent than anywhere else in Europe (51 deaths per 100,000 population). Portugal has only had an actual Ministry of Health since 1958. (Anderson 1962: 87)

Education fares no better. 0.4 % of the population over seven years of age is illiterate, the most damning single figure of all. The emigration statistics are a verdict on the system. Between 1954 and 1957 net average emigration was 31,760 persons a year (about 65 % went to Brazil or Venezuela), one third of the net national increase of population over that period. The sovereigns of this misery are a tiny, compact oligarchy of families which entirely dominate the economy through a set of complementary personal and institutional controls. (Anderson 1962: 87)

## The Spectre of Revolution

The spectre of revolution, however, appears in two senses. The novel is revolutionary from the point of view of its social content, since it gives voice to a collective subject—a frank regenerator—in its pages. But it is also revolutionary in the literary form it claims for itself. From the writing to the language used, from the ideology to the imagery, *Raised from the Ground* is profoundly revolutionary. Not only because of the powerful language used against the abuse of political, economic, and cultural power through the text, but also because of the sharp wit with which the canon of cultural tradition—from the epic Camões to popular fado—is subverted, in context, and now directed against the same classes—or fractions of classes—that have exercised power in contemporary times. It is a matter of retelling history, questioning its gaps, or fantasising about its contradictions.

José Saramago's *Raised from the Ground* is a history of the country as seen by 'those below,' from the expropriation of the 'primitive accumulation of capital,' to the state-force and its armed forces, to the formation of the working class, the disillusionment of the First Republic (1910–1926), to the tragedy of the Salazar dictatorship, implacable but defeated, but only half a century later. Until the liberation, in 1974–1975, of even the dead.

Walter Benjamin's allegory (see Löwy 2005) reverberates the social revolution in the novel: in Saramago, it raises the dead by halting the history of 'progress' and 'order.' The common thread—the dog Constante—of an idea that, under various imprisonments, deaths, and wars, has never left us, namely human emancipation. In Saramago, History rises again in the figure of the people, the workers, some of whom are merely victims in the long historical duration of social inequality, others, also political resisters. In the masterly passage of the ants "watching" the torture of the communist worker—where we cannot help but recall Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (2020), or the "banality of evil," totalitarianism and imperialism, in Hannah Arendt (2004); in the surrealist resource of the animals who witness the tortured man fading away, until he falls over dead, and in the final scene of *Raised from the Ground*, in which the dead rise, God already dead, in the figure of a Father Agamedes, symbol of the real Party of fascism, Catholic Action.<sup>2</sup>

For a moment, history became eternal. The most libertarian, democratic, and happy moment for most of the Portuguese. 40, 45, and even almost 50 years later, we interviewed the protagonists of this revolution in surveys, ordinary people who made the country that was yet to be built and, invariably, this ever blurred-eyed testimonial is repeated: "those were the happiest days of my life" (Varela 2014; 2019; Löwy 2005). The capital of smiles as Gabriel García Márquez had already told us (Varela 2014: 363).

The central causes of the Portuguese revolution are the colonial war, the economic crisis (war and crisis, as two dimensions of the national crisis), the protagonism of the workers' social movement, and its specificities in Portugal, characterised by social (movements), economic (trade unions) and/or polit-

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2 Editor's note: A lay Catholic movement that the fascist Portuguese Estado Novo used to legitimise itself.

ical (political parties) fragility, and the great concentration of the Portuguese working class in the productive belt of Lisbon-Setúbal. This 'void' opened the door to the Portuguese *soviets*, to the workers', residents', and soldiers' committees. The military coup of 25 April 1974 opened the doors to the entry on the scene of millions of workers, initiating a revolutionary situation in Portugal of a social-democratic type, condensing and displacing the struggles for democratic freedoms, the hatred towards the fascist dictatorship, the sanctions of collaborators with the political police (PIDE), which determine the disruptive admission on the scene of the workers and intermediate sectors, against the orders of the very military leadership, which had put an end to the dictatorship, the MFA (Armed Forces Movement). And, of course, it was a global wave of revolutionary crises which, from 1967, the year of the English industrial uprising, to 1975–78, the Portuguese political counter-revolution and the Moncloa Pacts in Spain, shook the whole continent.

Saramago explores this somewhat ironic contradiction in *Raised from the Ground*. The permanent play with the 'literal' and the 'literary' meaning of some key words, that a characterisation of 'chaos' has become commonplace for the occupation of enterprises and land by industrial and agricultural workers in order to maintain social production, and 'political normalisation' when social initiative is returned to the bourgeoisie, whose recovery of the rate of accumulation necessarily depends on factors that generate social disorder, such as the stoppage of production, or unemployment.

But how could the point of view of narration have interfered so counter-currently?

## A Pendulum Between History and Literature

There is a pendular movement between history and literature, a connection between unity-distinction, which sometimes brings them close and sometimes estranges them. What is literature, after all? What is its relationship with history? And in what way are literariness and historicity mutually intertwined? How is fiction structured to interpret, understand and explain the past or the present? Could literary texts serve as historical evidence, providing informa-

tion about social conditions or ideo-political values in a particular time and place? In what ways do other types of primary sources or historical documentation affect or amplify the reading of literature? From Aristotle's *Poetics* (4<sup>th</sup> century BC) to the New History of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, these are questions that arise. Both fields deal with various issues concerning the relationship between reality and fiction, memory and writing, reconstitution and testimony, and the formation of an imaginary/ideology through language artefacts. These are relevant themes in *Raised from the Ground*. But, we will soon see, in an absolutely authentic or innovative way, within tradition.

The newly recreated voice—from a certain heteroglossia of its characters—gives rise to another story, as evidenced by its narrator, with a typical modernist inflection: “But there is another way to speak of all this” (Saramago 2013: 10). If the author literarily accomplishes some of the key ideas of the representatives of the Portuguese 1870 generation, he does so because he wishes to rework events and processes as narrated, because literature, although in mutual fertilisation with history, surpasses it and affirms itself as a new mode, reflection, and refraction. The novel can be read as an attempt at the redemption of those vanquished and of the tradition—as Walter Benjamin would say—of the oppressed and fighting classes.

But who was Saramago? He was a radical humanist, against the ecstasy of the mercantile logic of the European Union project, when all the illusions of ‘Europe with us’ were still alive and we were being offered the ideal of a ‘Scandinavia of the South’ in exchange for (we soon discovered) cheap labour, food for high value-added industrial concentration, for the rich Europe of the North, and for the bankers of Europe and Portugal, these ‘vampires,’ devourers of everything. The surrealist resource (Saramago had never been a neo-realist) of the insect-observers of political torture in *Raised from the Ground* is one of the most powerful figures of speech in world literature on real fascism, of the dead who return. So are the uncomfortable issues when Saramago, disillusioned with the political counter-revolution, looked at a world of the blind, abstentionists, and asked them if they did not see the precipice of humanity. In *The Stone Raft* (1986), against the anachronistic autarchism of his party, the PCP, he recovered the *Iberia* of Antero de Quental, on a raft that moves away from the EU, with no isolationist illusions, on a path of prefiguration of con-

crete utopia when the reunited brothers, Portuguese and Spanish, re-bonded by tremor and sensations, one would say inexplicable, and walk together in a changing world. He was a heretic, within his country, the counter-current of his own party (Oliveira and Real 2022). *Eppur si muove...*

Saramago is therefore 'the' least tolerable nuisance of the Portuguese ruling classes. It is as if the 25<sup>th</sup> of April had never died. It would always return, it could not rest on empty, demagogic speeches, in an Assembly that, in 1975, was surrounded by 80 thousand workers demanding the right to protected work and not allowing the members of parliament to go out and talk to the people. And, 50 years later, it has 12 military muscled members of a neo-fascist party inside a Parliament, surrounded by bars, which does not allow the people to be heard by the MPs.

The historic schism of the revolution, where never so many people had decided as in these two years, 1974–1975, is a painful reminder for the country's ruling classes, who, like everywhere else in the world, are experiencing what Antonio Gramsci called a "crisis of hegemony," a profound crisis between the representatives and the represented. Officially, using an institutional scale that is far from accounting for all the real dimensions of misery, there are 47% poor in this 'Southern Scandinavia.' Saramago took Portugal's name to the world, not as the slave-owning leader of an international enterprise, the so-called 'maritime expansion'; not as the no doubt courageous labour force of 'Italian bankers,' who in the maritime venture invested in the Iberian Peninsula, as a counterpoint to trade across the Mediterranean; not as the 'good student' of Maastricht Europe and champion of low wages. But as the good, the just, and the beautiful when the periphery became the centre. As Saramago's attentive biographer Filomena Oliveira recalls (Real and Oliveira 2022), no one in the world knows who King João V was, but everyone knows who the epic stone haulers were, the construction workers of Mafra Convent (see *Baltasar and Blimunda*, 1982).

The splendour of Portugal in the world, when and where it reached much further than the Caravels, is with Saramago, with his arts. Because they are universal, and he is universal because he is an author who transcends the national-popular to (re)write humankind. It is worth noting here that the differentiating, extraordinary, unique event in Saramago's life is not poverty, the



idealisation of the Village, of Azinhaga, of suffering (his mother pawned their blankets in winter), all biographical data in themselves impressive, but, as we wish to argue throughout this interpretative essay, the Carnation Revolution.

Portugal was the first country to abolish the death penalty, but it also had the longest dictatorship of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Carnation Revolution was one of the most extraordinary and intense social and political revolutions of the world's contemporary era, but it was the emergency brakes of an unbearable reality, the longest-lasting state of exception in Western Europe. This country systematically used forced labour over a long period of time, but, at the same time, forced labourers became one of the most important examples of social resistance in the world, supporting the anti-colonial revolutions in Angola, Guinea, and Mozambique (1961–1974), which brought the regime to political collapse, with a 'bloodless' coup d'état, followed by one of the most important revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the last in Europe to actually question the private ownership of the fundamental means of production, with real democracy, in the workplaces.

The Portuguese bourgeoisie extracted gold from Brazil until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the country did not have an autonomous industrial revolution, despite having one of the most powerful workers' traditions in Europe, with more than 300 newspaper titles between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1980, part of the country still had peasants with hoes in hand, while the Covilhã Factories were already operating swiftly in the world market in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were already counted by English capitalists as unique places where you work well, pay little and where the workers are content with little (see Varela 2018). When the Lisnave workers lowered their arms in the strike of 1969 at Rocha Conde de Óbidos in Lisbon, there were workers chained up in colonies and political prisoners in Caxias and Peniche prisons. The Melo Group, fuelled by the fascist dictatorship that supplied them with forced labour, raw materials, and industrial conditions, starts, with the help of Swedish capital, among others, the largest Dry Dock in the world, Lisnave, when, not long after, already during the revolution, the 6 thousand workers of that company march onto Lisbon. On September 12, 1974, arm in arm, they stopped in front of the Chilean Embassy, held a minute of silence for the dead of Augusto Pinochet—the first world laboratory for global neoliberalism, born

*manu militari*—and marched as one to the headquarters of the Ministry of Labour with a pamphlet approved in a democratic assembly where they affirmed an independent political programme for the working class as a whole. To the government, which had members of the MFA, the PS (Socialist Party), the PSD (Social-Democratic Party), and the PCP, they said, “We are only with the MFA and the government if they are with us.” The epic Atlantic pulse and Zeca Afonso’s songbook of a land of brotherhood—since *Grândola, Vila Morena* (Grândola, Swarthy Town, 1971)—are, in short, antagonistic social forces that place Portugal as the Gordian knot of global dis-encounter.

Saramago’s literature rejected the neoliberal élan, what Tariq Ali called the “extreme centre” (2015), i.e., the collusion of centre-left and centre-right in favour of a capitalist status quo (Saramago’s trilogy of essays—*Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, and *Intermitências da Morte*—*Blindness*, *Seeing*, and *Death with Interruptions*—could not have been more eloquent about such a social critique). It had force because it was the voice, transmuted, and heretical, of the people-nation. *The creator recreated*. And, for this reason, *an integral man*. He represented their critical-revolutionary past which so many took so many years to expiate blaming it on their youth, in self-deceit, in self-delusion; the author retained, assimilated, and revolutionised it: to Iberian and world literature.

There is a Saramago that rises from the ashes, from the counter-revolution, after the fateful 25<sup>th</sup> November 1975, where he was isolated, even within his own party, which continued to accommodate, within the framework of Yalta and Potsdam, the climate of armed peace of the cold war, licking the wounds of the revolution in literature. And José Mário Branco’s song-rhapsody “FMI” (1982), or Fausto’s album “Por este rio acima” (1982), two tragic ways of licking the wounds of historical defeat, in the guise of catharsis. Saramago’s first stance in this sense is initiated by the novel format in *Raised from the Ground*.

## Narration and History

It is worth exploring, even if *au passage*, the relationship between the theory of literature and the theory of history, starting with Walter Benjamin. The

self-evident link cannot be explained without referring to the many meanings that the lexeme 'history' assumes in neo-romantic or neo-Latin languages. We are dealing with *History*, as a real process, an event, and an experienced event; *history*, as a field of knowledge or scientific discipline; and, finally, history, as *narration* and/or story. To avoid confusion, many have suggested adopting the distinction between *historiography* and *history*. Against the grain of shortcuts, Benjamin sought to reconstitute the unity between history *per se*, historiography, and narration in a seasoned critique of the ideology of progress typical of positive or social-democratic historicism (Gagnebin, 2013).

The blurring of the boundaries between the three meanings never confused such meanings. Both the ontology and the epistemology attached to them are interdependent, with a profound link between what has passed, what has been told, and what has come to be known. This is what created the best moments in Benjamin's work, for example, the link between literary analysis and social analysis present in "The Storyteller," a masterpiece in which he tests the commentary on Nikolai Leskov (Benjamin 2006b). Both the flagrant decline of traditional narrative and the depletion of experience, in a strong sense, have a vigorous interconnection. All narratives feed to a large extent on experience handed down from generation to generation, and it is no mystery that, among the narratives converted to the verbal code, the best are those which come closest to recording the oral and colloquial histories of incognito folk tales, which will never gain the distinguished status of actual authors. The way of life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is, however, the time-space in which they would be lost. But the Portuguese semi-peripheral 20<sup>th</sup> century keeps the archaic and modern in coexistence.

There are, above all, two groups that hold the know-how of narration as is. On the one hand sailors and their trade, with all that they saw and heard in distant lands, and on the other agricultural workers, tied to the land, their various histories, and local traditions. Typical characters of the remote narrative, both groups converged in old workshops, under the old master craftsman, of a more sedentary nature, and the apprentice or officer, more nomadic, with the expertise inherited from tradition and know-how learnt from distant countries. The very rhythm and intensity of craftsmanship gave rise to a favourable narrative. The internalisation of these was more organic and favourable when

it gave up the subtleties of the spirit when telling and listening to stories since one could more easily immerse oneself in new experiences in order to tell them over and over again. The space-time condensation favoured a relaxation of the psycho-physical connection. Boredom is still its sorest point. The rhythmic cadence and the bored worker composing songs and telling stories like no one else. The rhythm takes hold of the storyteller and produces the best moments of the narrative (Jameson, 1985).

It is not by chance that there exists the famous analogy between the artisan and the art of storytelling, as engraved by any kind of chisel, making the marks he succeeds in instilling in his audiences. It is not by chance that Saramago has taken refuge in the more typical Alentejo to come out with a masterpiece based on the national-popular experience, of those ‘from below,’ and not in the Lisbon-Setúbal industrial belt, which saw the end of trade guilds, their systematic expropriation and ‘progress’ with such dense ‘barbarism.’ As will soon be seen, the concept of revolution as a constraint to history was never so clear (see Varela and Della Santa 2021). It is yet another expression of his writing of the story, intertwined with the attentive listening of historical time.

*Raised from the Ground* breaks the old myth of Portuguese ‘mild manners.’ Social peace, in Portugal, in contemporary Portugal, has two names: vile political police or ample social rights (and mitigation of inequality). All other historical times, in the contemporary era, are marked by ungovernability and—dialectically—result in the impediment to capital accumulation outside critical scientific circles, euphemistically called ‘social stability.’ In 76 years of monarchic constitutionalism, there were 43 general elections, giving an average of 1 year and 8 months per parliamentary term. Between 1910 and 1926, there were seven general legislative elections, eight presidential elections, and 39 governments! During the 1974–1975 revolution, there were six governments in 19 months and, between 1976 and 1983, ten governments, two of which were interim governments and three presidential governments; with a bold and courageous working class, and a bourgeoisie that oscillated and oscillates between associated dependence and fascist dictatorship. What the right does not forgive, and will never forget, is the April Revolution, the permanent ‘open-air plenary.’ It is the most important socio-historical azimuth in the whole history of contemporary Portugal. It is also the most important milestone in the life

of Saramago's work, who not only became a world-famous writer but, as his biographers remind us, was the writer who opened the half-closed doors to Portuguese literature all over the world (Varela and della Santa 2022).

Modernity was born in the most intense social conflict and class warfare: the liberal revolution—violent and armed—of 1820–23, which followed the French invasions (the “Napoleonic Wars”), blows or counter-blows of the endless war between aristocracy and bourgeoisie, from which the latter emerged partially victorious in 1834, but in fact, its last act of victory over the nobility only occurred in 1910. Until then, we had the September Revolution of 1836, with a pale affirmation of the workers, and the Revolution of “Maria da Fonte” in 1846, the last gasp of the *ancien régime* and already a popular-national revolt against the State and the market. Then, we had the Janeirinha revolt in 1868, after the crisis of 1866, a prelude to the Paris Commune, mother of the first collective organisations of the working class in Portugal. It was followed by the social crisis, the first Russian revolution, and the Franco-English workers' and trade union revolt, between 1905 and 1914, which included a republican revolution, in 1910. Portugal's fascist dictatorship, since 1926, would succumb to the international wave of revolutions initiated in May 68 and the peak of which is, precisely, the Portuguese revolution and counter-revolution. However, it was the 1961 anti-colonial revolutions in Africa which—in fact and law—gave rise to the April uprising.

The expression of ways of living, feeling, and thinking about life, from the point of view of a historical reconstitution, has not escaped any of Saramago's critics or commentators. More often than not, however, such a correct insight is associated either with some form of neorealist design—which Saramago never had—or, worse still, with a dog-like loyalty to a political party (the PCP), which has never been this narrator's political, let alone poetic, way of being.

It is true that Saramago is clear about his ‘social view of the world’ or what—in the intellectual tradition of German idealism—one would call his ‘total conception of the world’ (*Weltanschauung*). But claims of him being reductionist (in the sense of a reductionism from images to ideas) are, besides being utterly inconsequential, totally out of place. The recalcitrant critics of his literary know-how cannot—contradictorily—hide their own lack of literary attention and intellectual honesty. This well-known strain of extraliterary

criticism, however, should not take our gaze away from the more contemporary well-intentioned readers of our author who, like Benjamin's dead, is not safe. Far from this strain, a new wave of critics of recent Saramago studies is attempting to re-link Saramago to a literary, social, and political criticism of an openly postmodern nature. Contemporary susceptibility (and intelligibility) ignores various undercurrents.

Saramago's work is not exclusively about self-evident points of contact between narrative and actually existing historical forms. The narrative is in deep and extensive connection with the historian's craft, but not, as recent critical fortune intuits, in the mode of a 'historiographical metafiction' or any other somewhat similar device. The intimate relationship of his literary narration with the art of reconstituting history against the current is part of the same breadth of waves of the "materialist historian"—in the immortal words of Walter Benjamin's theses "On the Concept of History" (2006c: 390)—but it does not entirely merge with the historian's craft, maintaining mutual autonomy with it. It is not postmodern epistemological scepticism (ontological mistrust) that drives the need and urgency to thematise or formalise the search for processes and events. The craft of the chronicler/diarist/journalist who narrates history is somewhat similar to that of the historian. One recounts history; the other is impelled to go further and explain why and how something happened in one way or another. The chief guardian of Portugal's National Archive of Torre do Tombo, the typical mediaeval chronicler, could take pleasure in revealing celestial designs or legitimising, in the *interregnums* of sovereignty, this or that line of succession of monarchies.

When the chronicler is stripped of this closed character of religious hermeneutics, he rises to become a narrator. Hence, not only is José Saramago's fierce atheism in his merciless wanderings into the past—remote or recent—above all an anti-hierarchy (= *hieros*- sacred + *archia*- power) absolutely contemporary with the 20<sup>th</sup> century (even when he is heir to an anticlerical lineage which comprises and surpasses it). But it is also the composition of an acute profanation of "all that is sacred" (*Communist Manifesto*), which thus builds on an already deep-rooted Alentejo regional tradition of popular social atheism. The subtle 'presence' of our narrator, as an advisor to his 'audience' of readers with a defined 'purpose,' is not a 'partisan' thesis of literature, in the negative

sense of the term, nor is it a post-modern vogue for fragmentation/convulsion of the social or literary subject-object. The epic remembrance, or *salvation of the dead*, is what moves the weaving of Saramago's narrative.

In *Raised from the Ground*, we have such 'stories' against the current. The inequalities begin in the property itself—"there's never been any shortage of landscape in the world" (Saramago 2013: 9)—, there is abundance and the inexplicability of the private appropriation of it. The novel also bears the mark of European expansion and colonial slavery, in an extremely late transition to modernity. Latifundia and accumulation are shown in an unrestrained manner:

For example, those of a king or a duke, or of a duke who then became his royal highness, a bishop or the master of an order, a legitimate son or the delicious fruit of bastardy or concubinage, a stain washed clean and made honorable, or the godfather of a mistress's daughter, and then there's that other high officer of the court with half a kingdom in his grasp, and sometimes it was more a case of, this, dear friends, is my land, take it and populate it to serve me and your offspring, and keep it safe from infidels and other such embarrassments. (Saramago 2013: 9)

The images then make up the social critique:

When he inherited it or bought it from the friars or, since justice is blind, stole it, he found, clinging to the estate like a tree trunk to its roots, a few creatures with arms and legs who were created for precisely such a fate, by producing children and bringing them up to be useful. Even so, whether out of pragmatism, custom, etiquette or pure self-interested prudence, Adalberto has no direct contact with those who will work his land. And that is a good thing. Just as the king in his day, or the president of the republic in his, did not and does not go about bandying words and gestures with the common people in an overly familiar manner, it would seem quite wrong on a large estate, where the owner has more power than either president or king, were Floriberto to be too forward. (Saramago 2013: 68)

The ‘fetish,’ the social classes, and the unfinished bourgeois revolution: “money rises, that’s why it has wings, not in order to fall. Money’s rightful place is in a kind of heaven, a lofty place where the saints change their names when they have to, but not the latifundio” (Saramago 2013: 10).

Saramago’s narrative is an epic, heroic tale of the formation of the Portuguese working class, which gains density and body. From poor artisans to small peasants to migrant proletarians to the big city and abroad. To write this novel, Saramago himself takes refuge in the Alentejo, where the PCP had been strongest and not in Lisbon’s factories. In the vital space of the post-1976 agrarian reform, he finds a kind of ‘balance and perspectives’ that reconnects him to the national-popular moment and, as a life direction, this decision founds or re-founds a literary project. A new diction emerges, not only ‘opening the voice’ to sing to time, but the timbre of the narrator. It is never too much to remember that this author revolutionised grammar, syntax, and semantics. It was necessary to subvert the most immovable rules of the language-structure itself, along the way, to impose on the fulcrum of his master craftsmanship the event, to make it known and to narrate it.

Allow us some intellectual digression—or theoretical detour—since it will not be secondary in the author’s formal arrangements and figuration dispositifs. The capitalist mode of production has—necessarily—a phase of primitive accumulation, without which it cannot impose itself as a dominant mode of production at all. The creation of mobile (marketable) wealth, that is, capital, on the one hand, and free-paid workers—forced to sell their labour—on the other. Today the accumulation of capital takes place primarily through strictly economic social processes, i.e., through the exploitation of labour. A capitalist invests in machines and raw materials, and hires labour, the workers work a given *quantum* of hours to be paid their wage and the remaining hours they work are not paid for. This value is expropriated by the individual capitalist, who thus expands their capital. But where does the initial capital come from without which the capitalist would not be worthy of such an epithet? How does this first accumulation (*ursprüngliche Akkumulation*) take place, which was translated in chapter 24 of Marx’s *Capital* as *primitive accumulation*? More attention has been paid to colonial exploitation in the genesis of capital, but Marx points out the direct relationship between colonial exploitation and the



expropriation of peasants and artisans subjected to the modern slavery of uncertain paid labour without autonomous means. It is the combination of the capital form and free labour, colonial exploitation and exploited labour in European countries, that gives rise to the formation of global capitalism as a world system, from the outset, unequal and combined.

To create free workers, it is necessary to expropriate direct producers from their fundamental means of social production (master craftsmen and small peasants), and to create capitalists it is necessary to expropriate the nobility and the clergy from their properties, handing them over to the free market, dominated by the new rising social class, the bourgeoisie. This delivery generates a new chaotic society which disproportionately increases, on the one hand, the typically bourgeois production and, on the other, its denial—the workers. The fundamental classes (there are more, but these are the decisive ones) are formed—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, in a clear formula, the non-owning workers and the non-working owners—with the struggle for modern vindications ('liberty, equality, and fraternity,' but not in an effective sense, because after all, the revolution is already feared).

Due to the increasing expropriation of public property, increases in land and property taxes, the gradual privatisation of communal properties ('vacant lands'), the end of laws such as the *morgadio* (lord of the manor which passed inheritance exclusively to the first-born), private ownership of the land was created. It could be commodified, creating a contingent of free paid workers. A typical process of primitive accumulation was thus 'on the march'—literally on the march because these processes were accompanied by militias and armies in front of the property title, bayonet and pike in hand. The seizure of power by the liberals involves a succession of revolts, coups, military pronouncements, and various wars, until the 1850s, which only comes to an end, in fact, in the first Portuguese republic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The restitution of the memory of the social conflict between the large land-owners, the 'Bertos,' and the 'Mau-Tempo' farmers organises the narrative in *Raised from the Ground*. It is a long, slow process of social class consciousness on the part of the social group present, perhaps accompanying the natural cycles and their eternal return. The peasant malaise will generate a movement of denial against the social oppression of the Alentejo. The slow and gradually

germinating process of social emancipation, is allegorically transfigured by *topoi* of the historical act and Brechtian *gestus*—namely—the raising of the eyes, the voice, the arms; and whose parallels are juxtaposed with the animal capacity of ants or dogs to do the same (see Frier 2007, 2009). The metabolic-social simile, between the social being and the natural being, man and nature, emerges untimely in one of the most violently and beautifully constructed climaxes of the narrative. To retell what the political police perpetrated, the torture of the workers who rose up from the ground against the inhuman organisation of labour, Saramago has restored to the forbidden, the untold, and the damned Lusitanians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the historian's craft. Two people murdered by the police are restored to recognition both within the narrative and in the author's pre-textual acknowledgements with their real names, e.g., Germano Vidigal and José Adelino. Even more than in other works by the author, the protagonism here is that of a collective subject (Almeida, 2012).

Voluntary remembrance, all the work involved in reworking historical time, without ever losing sight of the effective textualization and contextualization of a memory that puts a people and their time in perspective, makes it possible to re-present reality in a brand new light. Thus, the narrator is given the opportunity, like the potter and his vase in the novel *The Cave* (2002b), to set his marks of production, not only in the fictional material but also in his readership. *Raised from the Ground* reveals, at one and the same time, a narrative woven between the critical thinking of the representation of reality and the creative imagination of the extra-referential fable. For this reason, just as ants (and dogs) raise their heads, so those little people, and our author, raised themselves from the ground. The irremovable imbrication between an author, an audience and their system of relationships is what had already given time and place to something new in Ibero-American literature (e.g., García Márquez or Érico Veríssimo) as well as in the canon of world literature. However, here and now, we can problematise our own thread of argument and from there suspend the very flow of critical reflection. We are no longer in the historical era of traditional narration and the vector, used by the writer, is the support of new social relations, that is, the modern novel.

As Walter Benjamin warns, in relation to Marcel Proust—in addition to his classic essay, “Experience and Poverty” (2005f)—the isolated individual

and the hypostasis of the subject can imprison the stream of consciousness of involuntary memory, typical of the bourgeois author, with no contact with shared experience. What Saramago did was precisely the opposite. Instead of being subjected to such a rhythm, such dispersion, and such forgetfulness, he made the dream confront wakefulness. Not only did he counteract the influxes of individual involuntary memory with volitional collective memory, as if blowing off the historical continuum. But also by rereading against the current the collective fabric of the transindividual subject of the Portuguese people-nation in its social and literary representation, already typically established in the rural Alentejo (Benjamin, 2005c).

The fictionalisation of an event for many years denied by the agents of the fascist dictatorship, vivifies the memory of the most brutal rage suffered by two workers who led the struggles of the construction workers' union. The long sequence that tells of the beating to death of Germano Santos Vidigal by the guards Escarro and Escarrilho, under the tutelage of Lieutenant Contente, is one of the highest moments in twentieth-century Portuguese literature. But also of the process of explaining (and understanding) the intricacies of the state-force and its connivance with the methods of historical fascism, when any attempt at rationalisation, beyond cynical resignation or tragic despair, fails among intellectuals.

“They gather in the bullring, but not for any bullfight.” They are the strikers accused by the army and they are there instead of the bulls, ready for the whipping. They represent a threat to order and progress—in this case, to property—the crime in question. The strikers are workers considered by the kingdom of latifundia to be indolent. Initially, naively, they go to their bosses hoping to have their demands heard. *Pari passu*, they gain in organisation, awareness, and experience (once again, real life lived). “From the square is abstracted the epithet of a single man: Germano Santos Vidigal.” (Almeida, 2012). Forcibly removed from the plebeian public sphere, he is expected not only to confess his crime but also to betray his comrades. The non-place of this torture chamber, forbidden to one's gaze and unspoken by official history, is impenetrable to the author, the narrator, and, therefore, the public. The worker ants, close to the ground, are the ones who recount this act of vile cowardice.

The allegory electrifies the whole narration. Prevented from seeing, looking, and noticing, we are guided through the iterated journeys of the working ants: a total of ten up to the time of the murder. Taking it as part of a whole, the not-so-brief Portuguese twentieth century can be metonymized to the hours of the duration of the torture session, equivalent to ten work expeditions at an ant's pace. The ubiquitous space of the cell may be assumed as the rectangle of the Portuguese mainland. And the occurrence of violence, systematic and oriented, in the centre of the scene, while socially necessary production does not even have pauses, in a scale of astonishing audience, pervades fundamental historical facts from the First Republic to the First World War, the fascist dictatorship in Western Europe and the Iberian Peninsula, the Spanish revolution (1936) and the Portuguese revolution (1974). All these founding historical moments are for the animal witness the same as for the worker and peasant audience, especially in rural Alentejo, where the natural cycle from sowing to the harvest was interspersed with hunger, misery, and indecipherable violence.

In Portugal, the 'original' act of primitive accumulation took place with the triangular slave trade (Africa–Portugal–Brazil in the modern era), with the expropriation of nobles and kings by the bourgeoisie, with the proletarianization of peasants and artisans, and, from 1890 onwards, with the massive recourse to forced labour in Africa. It is thought that the Portuguese state used around 2 million forced labourers until 1974, maintaining the monopoly on the import of raw materials and the export of textiles, for example, to Africa, the banner of economic and social 'development' of the Portuguese bourgeoisie from 1890 onwards. And all this, after mourning for 70 years the loss of Brazil and the total inability to invest on a large scale in machine-manufacturing production in Portugal, without the aid of credit, machinery and English and/or other technicians (see Mónica 1987).

The credit system is common to all developed countries as the social genesis of typically capitalist relations. It is the umbilical relationship with the power of the State to guarantee foreign currency and collect taxes to pay for it that drives modern 'bankocracy'. In the case of Portugal, as a semi-peripheral country, the credit system has a double meaning: the umbilical relationship between the State and the Bank and the impoverishment of the population through taxes;

and the subordination to foreign capital, mainly British, but also French (and, after EU accession, German), who 'lend' it.

Throughout *Raised from the Ground* we encounter spurious methods of creating wealth by creating the poor, from the phase of primitive accumulation to the phase of repression of the strikes in the First Portuguese Republic:

Then the Republic arrived. The men earned twelve or thirteen *vinténs*, and the women, as usual, less than half. Both ate the same black bread, the same cabbage leaves, the same stalks. The republic rushed in from Lisbon, traveled from village to village by telegraph, if there was one, advertised itself in the press for those who knew how to read, or passed from mouth to mouth, which was always by far the easiest way. The king had been toppled, and according to the church, that particular kingdom was no longer of its world, the latifundio got the message and did nothing, and the price of a liter of olive oil rose to more than two thousand *réis*, ten times a man's daily wage. (Saramago 2013: 30)

The workers' and people's social malaise—in the Republic—is made clear in the words of the author:

Long live the republic. So how much is the new daily rate, boss, Let's see, I pay whatever the others pay, talk to the overseer, So, overseer, how much is the daily rate, You'll earn an extra *vintém*, That's not enough to live on, Well, if you don't want the job, there are plenty more who do, Dear God, a man could die of hunger along with his children, what can I give my children to eat, Put them to work, And if there is no work, Then don't have so many children, Wife, send the boys off to collect firewood and the girls for straw. (Saramago 2013: 30)

But the complaint (the demand) goes much further than that in the writer's pen:

When Gracinda Mau-Tempo grew up, she did not go to school. [...] the propagandists for the republic urged the people, Send your children to

school, they were like apostles sporting goatees, mustaches and trilby hats and proclaiming the good news, the light of education, a crusade they called it, with the signal difference that it wasn't a matter of driving the Turk out of Jerusalem and from the tomb of our Lord, it wasn't a question of absent bones, but of present lives, the children who would later set off with their bag of books slung over one shoulder with a piece of twine, and inside it, the primer issued to them by the same republic that ordered the national guard to charge if these same children's progenitors demanded higher wages. (Saramago 2013: 174)

The list of those killed in the republican revolution—whose liberal-bourgeois political leadership initiated violent repression of workers' strikes—is lapidary. Most of those killed and wounded in the implantation of the Republic were civilian workers: 12 factory workers, 11 office workers, 10 cabinetmakers, 10 locksmiths, 10 carpenters, 8 bricklayers, 7 clerks, 7 shopkeepers, 7 students, 6 porters, 5 bakers, 4 painters, 4 shoemakers, 4 turners, 3 printers, 3 domestic servants, among other workers.

From the republican repression of the modern proletariat, particularly strong in the Alentejo region against agricultural workers, as early as 1911 and 1912, we move on to the banning of workers' unions and political parties during the fascist dictatorship in very close relationship with the non-working owner classes, the GNR and the Church. Which translates into misery, child labour, little food, lack of education, and miserable housing and bodies:

João Mau-Tempo is not the stuff of heroes. He's a skinny little ten-year-old runt, a scrap of a boy who still regards trees as shelters for birds' nests rather than as producers of cork, acorns or olives. It's unfair to make him get up when it's still dark and have him walk, half asleep and on an empty stomach, the short or long distance to wherever his place of work happens to be, and then slave away all day until sunset, only to return home, again in the dark, mortally tired, if something so like death can be called tiredness. (Saramago 2013: 52)

The Mau-Tempo saga is long term.

Intimately linked to all these themes is the role of property inheritance, in the names ending in ‘-berto’—the ‘Betinhos’ (preppies) of this Portugal?—, the same name, is succeeded by Constante (the steady). There are, at least, three axes of social oppression: the phantom of agricultural unemployment, the implacable State-force, and the doctrinal armour of the Church; and only one emancipator—the humanity they carry within themselves as demiurges of all the wealth produced and the organisation, metaphorized in the ants, an organised ‘trail.’

We also have the role of the ‘traitors’ and their ‘sociology,’ such a cross-cultural translation of Malcom X’s distinction between a “field-slave” and a “house-slave.” The Traitor dog is different from the Constant dog:

As well as land, the first thing Lamberto needs is a foreman, the foreman being the whip that keeps order in the pack of dogs. He is a dog chosen from among the others to bite his fellow dogs. He needs to be a dog because he knows all a dog’s wiles and defenses. You wouldn’t go looking for a foreman among the children of Norberto, Alberto or Humberto. A foreman is, first and foremost, a servant, who receives privileges and payments in proportion to the amount of work he can get out of the pack. He is, nonetheless, a servant. He is placed among the first and the last, a kind of human mule [...] who betrays his fellows in exchange for more power and a slightly larger chunk of bread. The biggest and most decisive weapon is ignorance. At his birthday supper, Sigisberto said, It’s just as well that they know nothing, that they can’t read or write or count or think, that they assume and accept that, as Father Agamedes will explain, the world cannot be changed, that this is the only possible world, exactly as it is, that they will find paradise only after death, and that work alone brings dignity and money, but they mustn’t go thinking that I earn more than they do, the land, after all, is mine. (Saramago 2013: 68–69)

The Portuguese dictatorship was so long that millions were born and died without knowing what it was like to live in freedom. Forty-eight years of a ‘long night.’ Torture and imprisonment for thinking. Exiled for loving freedom.

A single party, a National Assembly as a front, no free elections. Divorce was repressed. There was no universal welfare system for the majority. Between 1960 and 1973, over a million and a half Portuguese left the country, fleeing the war and the poor life that the dictator Salazar called 'humble.' Portugal occupied the top spot in Europe for the lowest wages—achieved by banning strikes and free trade unions. In the shadow of state protection, obscene wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few families. Every year, the war absorbed 30–40% of the State Budget, a sum of money that did not go towards building schools, houses, motorways, or sanitation.

## **The Dead and the Living**

The Carnation Revolution was the most important post-war social revolutionary movement in Europe. It began on April 25, 1974, a rainy Thursday, as a coup d'état against the colonial war, led by the MFA. The link between the 13 years of war and April 25 is crucial: 10,000 dead on the Portuguese side, around 100,000 estimated on the African side; massive support from African peasants, many forced labourers, for the liberation movements. We believe, moreover, that we are talking about the same revolution: the Carnation Revolution actually began in 1961 in the anti-colonial revolutions. So, it was not a "revolution without dead." And it did not begin in the atrocious slaughter of white settlers by the UPA (later National Front for the Liberation of Angola) in 1961, but weeks earlier, in the barbaric massacre of the forced labourers on strike at Cotonang, murdered by the thousands by the armed forces of the Portuguese State. The last, anachronistic colonial empire collapsed in 1974.

In 48 years of dictatorship, the Portuguese state had not forged any mechanisms of mediation with the population. In 1974, at first, the people spontaneously created their own forms of power, the most important of which were in the army, in workplaces and homes, the soldiers', residents', and workers' committees. Forms analogous to the 'soviets' of 1917—where the State failed, the population organised itself autonomously. The tragedy of war is part of the relationship with the dead and with the past:



In the inventory of wars, the latifundio plays its part, although not a large one. Those Europes, where another war has just begun, play a far greater part, and from what one can ascertain, which is not very much in a land of such ignorance, so removed from the rest of the world, Spain is in such a state of ruin it would break your heart. But any war is a war too many, that would surely be the view of those who died in a war they never wanted. (Saramago 2013: 105)

Or, in another passage, with the dead without a 'name,' those who make history but do not write it:

These men escaped from among the dead and the wounded. We will not name them one by one, it's enough to know that some went to Lisbon to languish in prisons and dungeons, and others returned to the threshing machine, being paid the new wage for as long as the harvest lasted. Father Agamedes issues a paternal admonishment to these madmen, reminds them directly or indirectly how much they owe him and how they, therefore, have still more of an obligation to fulfill their Christian duties, for did not the Holy Mother clearly demonstrate her power and influence by touching the bolts on the prison doors and making them fall away and by prying open the bars on the windows, hallelujah. He makes these grand statements to a church almost empty apart from old ladies, because the other parishioners are still brooding over how much that gratitude has cost them and are not consoled. (Saramago 2013: 167)

The revolution and the form of emancipation in Saramago do not fail to concentrate psychic energies and vital dispositions. They interpellate, negatively affect, and, why not?, raise the collective subject, in a moment of awakening, full of remembrance. In the Benjaminian theses "On the Concept of History," two moments are interwoven. One negative, of historical criticism of the dominant idea of order and progress, a notion of linear time; and the other positive, in which a new theory of history has its time and place. Past events cannot be justified by the present time, there is no plot of 'great characters' and their 'heroic deeds' in which the anonymous people have no voice and empathy

with the victors is nothing more than a sign of praise for the subalternity one would like to fight against. His method of choice is to brush history against the grain and seek what there is in what there was.

Once again, we must stop the course of our argument and question ourselves. The target of Benjamin's critique, as we well know, was not only liberal and bourgeois history but also that of the social democratic and Stalinist parties worldwide. To put our author to the test it is necessary to understand whether he goes beyond the so-called orthodoxy of the communist parties in his own notion of time, as well as in what there was, and in the historicised/narrated. Has the author (and the narrator) risen beyond sectarian optimism, typical of this progressive and orderly left, which believed itself to be 'rowing downstream'? Did his notion, in terms of idea and image, of revolution resemble more the locomotive of history or Benjamin's metaphor of the emergency brake of a fast locomotive facing the abyss? Were there no hints of national developmentalism and popular-democratic illusions in his critical thinking and creative imagination? Our intuition must be put to the test.

It seems to us that the obstinate faith in the progress or support of the 'masses,' as considered by the PCP, and the subsumption to the apparatus, was not the author's way. Long after the horrors of the Second World War and—moreover—after the various crimes against humanity committed in the name of 'communism' (Budapest 1956, Prague 1968, etc.), and also in the aftermath of the Portuguese counter-revolutionary coup of November 1975, in which he put his own convictions to the test per se, Saramago came into contact with Critical Criticism without ever opting to leave ipso facto the confines of the political party. But in a way that would lead him, after an irreversible rupture with the most pusillanimous sector of the Portuguese bourgeoisie, which in fact tried to censor his work, to an island of the Spanish state (Lanzarote). Against the optimism of fools, he developed a growing organisation of the pessimism of intellect and sensitivity, which never led him to any form of cynicism and resignation (Gramsci, 1977).

As Filomena Oliveira and Miguel Real recall in *As 7 Vidas de José Saramago* (*The 7 Lives of José Saramago*, 2022), the man is not the Carnation Revolution. There is deep and extensive previous work, a being before and after historical time, which the authors analyse closely, including the role of chronicles, poems,

studies, intellectual companions and true friendships, in the construction of the writer. But without the social revolution there was no fundamental rupture, including the distancing—becoming critical support—to the PCP, which did not forgive him for having supported the military left, breaking the social pact of world division and ‘peaceful coexistence,’ to which PCP leader Álvaro Cunhal was faithful, the geopolitical touchstone negotiated, at Yalta-Potsdam, between Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill. Portugal was a member of NATO, Angola was in dispute, and this implied some sort of mediated solution on November 25<sup>th</sup>, which left part of then Prime Minister Vasco Gonçalves’ left wing orphaned. Saramago would therefore have no job when he left the *Diário de Notícias* newspaper, and a new doorway opened when he went to the Alentejo to write *Raised from the Ground*—a literature of rupture, of creation, of the new.

There is no room for conformism in the (literary) letter of the text and in the (public) life of the author. More than the belated counter face of urban and industrial development, this rural Alentejo that Saramago presents to us is the synthesis of barbarian social progress, which epitomises catastrophe after catastrophe throughout the Portuguese twentieth century. There is no neutrality in technical and scientific development under the yoke of a system that insists on making human labour the driving force of any kind of ‘progress.’ The crises and wars of capital can only be stopped by labour revolt and revolution. The abstract idea of progress, inseparable from a notion of empty, homogeneous time, is not appealing to our author and narrator. Only the list of negative figurations with which he weaves the fabric of his plot would serve the purpose of disentangling himself from such an understanding. His ‘stories’ (what happened, what is historicised, and what is narrated) are a whole saturated with “times-of-now” in which an indissoluble unity is constructed between the past, the present, and the possible future. The struggle for the past becomes a battle for the present and a bailout for a better future. The task of saving the past is common to the historian’s craft and to the literary master craftsman. To appropriate a remembrance, as it flashes in the sky of history, is the end of the work (Löwy, 2005).

The tragic ending of *Raised from the Ground* has a surprising epic dimension, in a condensed form it stirs up the very rhythm of history, redeeming a teleological burden. The spectre of revolution still belongs very much to the

present for the reunion of the various generations of oppressed and fighters. In Saramago, it is a formal arrangement in which the author's own voice emerges alongside the voice of the narrator. Social and literary criticism to the sound of the music of the Portuguese twentieth century—crisis, wars, and revolutions—is a surprising choreography between literature and social revolution. There is a renewed historical time, *Kairós* over *Chronos*, and our artist, at last, reaches the infinite.

The living march for agrarian reform, as in a profane procession, to gain access to the means of socially producing and reproducing their own existence through work, but they are seen and accompanied, guided almost, by the dead. Who died—the narrator tells us—because of their work and in the struggle for dignified and humanised living conditions—among the sick, the frail, the lame, and even one suicide. The dead accompany the living. Now, in the march for life, which begins on the land, with the agrarian reform, and ends in the very condition of having historical consciousness in itself and for itself, the ontology of social being in movement: the integral human being. The march makes the metamorphosis of the funeral, which is now a pilgrimage of life, returning hope. It is the dead who remind the living of the consciousness that the workers make history when they march, and yet many thousands, millions—the number is amplified and undefined by the narrator—do not know it. From the lack of consciousness—the end of everything, death—comes the clear and atrocious awareness of making one's own history. This redeems not only the future, but also saves the past itself, in an allegory that reminds us of the redemption of the living of which Benjamin spoke. Thus, it is a tragic narration to the living, guided by death, that is, by history, an entity that transmutes itself, everything changes, or, in Camões' words, is made up of changes, always taking on new qualities:

Overhead, the red kite is counting, one million, not to mention those we can't see, for the blindness of the living always overlooks those who went before, one thousand living and one hundred thousand dead, or two million sighs rising up from the ground, pick any number and it will always be too small if we do the sums from too great a distance, the dead cling to the sides of the trailers, peering in to see if they recognize

anyone, someone close to their body and heart, and if they fail to find the person they're looking for, they join those traveling on foot, my brother, my mother, my wife and my husband [...]. João Mau-Tempo puts his arm of invisible smoke about Faustina's shoulders, and although she hears and feels nothing, she begins, hesitantly at first, to sing the chorus of an old song, she remembers the days when she used to dance with her husband João, who died three years ago, may he rest in peace, an unnecessary wish on Faustina's part, but how is she to know. And when we look farther off, higher up, as high up as a red kite, we can see Augusto Pintéu, the one who died along with his mules on a stormy night, and behind him, almost hanging on to him, his wife Cipriana, and the guard José Calmedo, coming from other parts and dressed in civilian clothes, and others whose names we may not know, although we know about their lives. Here they all are, the living and the dead. And ahead of them, bounding along as a hunting dog should, goes Constante, how could he not be here, on this unique and new-risen day. (Saramago 2013: 335–36)

# Seeing Populism in *Seeing*

DAVID JENKINS

## Introduction

Few topics in political theory have encouraged so much commentary as the ‘thin-centred ideology’ that is populism (Mudde 2004). Where some regard populism as the opening salvos of a proto-fascist seizure of state power and the corruption of democratic institutions (Weyland 2001; Mudde 2004; Müller 2017), others regard at least some of its variants as an effective rhetorical and strategic ideological mechanism for mobilising ordinary people against elite predation and ‘oligarchic overreach’ (Laclau 2010; Mouffe 2018; Vergara 2020). In this chapter, I argue for a populist reading of Saramago’s *Seeing*, in which the author offers both an implicit populist structuring of the terrain on which the story unfolds—an incorrigible, dangerous and morally bankrupt elite confronts a largely anonymous but basically decent popular constituency—whilst also explicating something of a gap in that novel, one is testament either to a deep pessimism about popular capacities for resistance or, alternatively, an insufficiently sophisticated understanding of political reality. Specifically, although the terrain is populist, the popular constituency Saramago renders from out of the inhabitants of the besieged city—the population, which I use interchangeably with ‘the people’<sup>1</sup>—is essentially decent and resilient, but insufficiently ‘ferocious’ in its responses to elite predation (McCormick 2001).

The chapter proceeds as follows. I first outline the plot of *Seeing*, focusing in particular on the differences between the unreality that is characteristic of this novel, compared to that which Saramago employs in other of his work,

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1 The provinces in the novel have not contributed to the country’s political crisis, “differing little from the norm” in their turnout and voting patterns (Saramago 2006: 17). Nevertheless, this constituency quickly drops out of the story—the only citizens who feature in the story are those who live in the capital.

that which he has described as a ‘Borgean virtual reality’ and which I have, elsewhere, described in terms of the ‘traumatic counterfactuals’ that structure novels like *Blindness*, *Death at Intervals* and *The Stone Raft* (Saramago 2010b: 83; Jenkins 2018). Second, I locate the specifics of the story within an ecumenical understanding of populism, in which I draw from the work of Michael Saward to describe populism, most fundamentally, as a form of critique that takes aim at the perceived failures of a political community’s claim-making institutions (Saward 2010). I then use this to construct the populist terrain that grounds the story: there are the elites (primarily, those in control of the country’s political parties and its state institutions), the people (largely anonymous and taken as an agglomeration) and a more mobile class of colluders, ‘refuseniks’ and ‘traitors’ (Jenkins 2023, 7). In terms of how the enmity between these various groups expresses itself, I argue that Saramago’s populist constituency is characterised by three things: they are, essentially, decent, resilient (and thus active) but, ultimately, acquiescent. In contrast to a number of others, who argue for seeing something potentially productive in the population’s ‘silence’ and ‘refusals,’ I draw on the work of John P. McCormick—specifically, his populist reading of Machiavellian republicanism—to argue, instead, that this amounts to a gap in the novel, one which leaves us, at the story’s end, with a population that will, eventually, be defeated.

Part of my intention with this chapter then is to weigh in on the ongoing and fractious normative assessment of populism, in order to recover the original meaning and thrust of populism, as augured in by the American Populists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a political movement and party, started on the plains of Kansas, in places that were “two hundred and fifty miles to the nearest post office, one hundred miles to wood, twenty miles to water, six inches to Hell” (cited in Wall 2008, 177). In other words, I want to hold onto the idea that populism can be an empirical grounded and morally correct appraisal of our current situation, and that *Seeing* captures something that is happening in our political systems today. However, over and above this, I want to argue for a particular kind of populist constituency, one that is not satisfied to stand content with its own decency, but is rather willing to enter the fray and confront elites with demonstrations of its own distinctive “plebeian ferocity” (McCormick 2001).

## The Story of *Seeing*

Although *Seeing* is a sequel, and to arguably Saramago's more popular novel, this fact is something that is only gradually revealed. We enter the story at a polling station, on election day, where it is chucking it down with rain. Although turnout is not, ultimately, as low as officials fear, the final count shows that only 25 % of votes cast are actually for any one of three main parties (of the right [p. o. t. r.], the middle [p. o. t. m.] and the left [p. o. t. l.], and fully 70 % are blank (Saramago 2006: 16). In response, an irate collection of state and party-political officials, anticipating they are going to have a constitutional crisis on their hands, instruct the people to try again (*ibid.*: 19). With election number two, the following Sunday, even more people turn out, but do so, in the main—that is, 83 % of them—to cast a blank ballot (*ibid.*: 27). And so, having been asked, nicely, to try again, the citizenry has, the state officials believe, fundamentally failed in its duties as citizens. It declares a state of emergency, withdrawing its personnel in the dead of night, and places the capital under a state of siege (*ibid.*: 31). Within the context provided by that siege the government attempts to incite turmoil and unrest, detailed below, but singularly fails. About halfway through the novel a state official receives a letter from, it turns out, the first blind man from *Blindness*—he who went blind at the traffic lights—who points the finger of suspicion at the Doctor's Wife from that novel, accusing her of being the mastermind behind a so-called Blank Ballot Movement (*ibid.*: 171–173). An investigation is launched, with three agents being sent to infiltrate the city and gather intelligence as to the veracity of the accusation. Finally, at the conclusion of the story, we witness (spoiler alert!) the assassinations of both the doctor's wife and the superintendent put in charge of investigating her (*ibid.*: 301, 307).

Before proceeding, and to situate *Seeing* to a different reality than that which characterises the crises that occur in other of his novels, it is worth focusing on the specific numbers of people who are turning out to post these crisis-inducing blank ballots. In contrast with other of Saramago's stories, there is here no subverting of the laws of biological systems that we see in *Death at Intervals* (2008); there is no undermining of the rules of epidemiology as there is in *Blindness* (1999a), nor of the laws of geology and tectonic movement that



we see in *The Stone Raft* (1996). In *Seeing* we are much closer to our contemporary reality. These kinds of numbers—25 % or 17 %, respectively, of votes for one of the contesting political parties—are only slight exaggerations of the low turnouts witnessed during, for example, US midterms, in states like Arkansas, which often deliver turnouts as low as 40 %—which, importantly, do not take into account the significant disparities that exist between constituencies within those states (Perry *et al.*, 2022). The novel then seems to pose a question: what is the threshold for a political crisis? If 83 % of people turnout to say ‘no,’ that is a recognizable crisis, one which incites a sustained project of elite revanchism. But what about if 70 % just don’t turn out, even if that low turnout is from just a handful of constituencies? With this proximity to reality, *Seeing* also indicates, in ways more pressing than fantastical biological, epidemiological, and geological aberrations, the perilous and poisoned situation lying—barely—beneath the surface of contemporary political life.

## ***Seeing’s* Populist Terrain**

There are a number of ways to understanding populism, and then reading it into *Seeing*. For example, Cas Mudde describes populism as

An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (Mudde 2004, 544)

To be sure, an 83 % rejection of ‘all of the above’ is as close to an expression of the ‘general will’ as you are likely to get. Moreover, as soon as they embark on their murderous reactionary campaign, elites are earning their stripes as immoral and corrupt, whatever failings they might have beforehand. The story of *Seeing*, then, would seem to be reducible to just this moralized vision of a political universe.

Mudde presents his description as being ‘a morally neutral’ description. However, the language of purity, as against corruption, provides a fairly sub-

stantive vision of exactly who the people are. Appeals to purity, for example, are that which fill out ideas of a ‘rural heartland,’ but which would seem to have nothing to do with a ‘pan-ethnic vision’ of peoplehood grounded simply in commitments to ordinariness, decency or hard-work (Frank 2020: 87–115). Moreover, and more importantly, there are other ways of filling out a populist constituency that are quite distinct from *any* essentialist notion, but which draw instead on the idea of ‘the people’ as occupying a distinctive *structural* position *vis-à-vis* the elite (Jenkins 2023: 13). In other words, although the story posits popular *decency* as a central feature of the popular constituency—as I demonstrate below—it is not expressed in the idiom of moralized *purity*.

In a similarly negative—although more explicitly so—vein to Mudde, Jan-Werner Müller describes populism as a form of “degraded democracy” (Müller 2017: 6). On this view, populists’ attempts to force a bright line between ‘the (real) people’ of a political community and ‘an (incorrigible, dangerous, etc.) elite,’ renders it an inherently anti-pluralist and exclusionary project, which simplifies the political terrain in such a way that renders its practitioners unable to deal with the inevitable tensions and contradictions which attend to any political system of minimal complexity (*ibid.*: 3). Even as populism “promises to make good on democracy’s highest ideals,” it can do so only in ways that are poisonous to the health of liberal and democratic institutions (*ibid.*: 6). In other words, within his starting definition of populism—which, incidentally, explicitly excludes even the 19<sup>th</sup> century *progenitors* of the term, the American Populists—Müller rejects the legitimacy of any form of populism.

In contrast to these knee-jerk rejections of populism—either those that posit popular purity or assert exclusionary antipluralism as the essence of the ideology—I offer a far more capacious and ecumenical understanding of populism, one that can include forms of nativist populism we should rightly reject, but also those movements that are motivated by both a more complicated understanding of elite predation and a more sophisticated account of the relevant popular constituency.

My own capacious and ecumenical definition of populism takes the following tripartite form (Jenkins 2023: 13). First, populism poses a dividing line between, on one side, a favoured constituency, identified as ‘the people,’ that is being harmed by, on the other side, an elite. There is, in other words,

an enmity that populists place at the heart of political life, but which can be filled out in a variety of ways, all equally populist. In *Seeing*, on the elite side we have government and state actors more broadly, who provide the protagonists for the first part of the story. These are the characters whose motives and actions we do get to witness, including the party establishment, all of whom are ridiculous, but also dangerous. On the other side there are the people of the capital, the population, including, if only toward the end of the story, the remaining members of the cast of *Blindness* and, that 'traitor' to the elites, the superintendent, who is charged with investigating the blank ballots.

Crucially, it should be noted that populists only ever posit popular-elite battles as the central division of political life, rather than the only relevant division that needs to be taken into account: enemies exist for populists, but so do other problematic categories demanding distinctive populist treatment (cf. Schmitt 2001: 26). So, in *Seeing*, too, we get defections, mobilities across the divides, and new solidarities: Ministers resign after having had their eyes open to elite incorrigibility (Saramago 2006: 115); there are soldiers who we might think of, and despise, as deluded stooges and 'traitors' to the people as they enforce the siege with their efforts (*ibid.*: 142); there is, as well, the first blind man, a 'traitor' to the besieged population, who accuses the Doctor's Wife of instigating the Blank Ballot Movement; and, finally, there are those 'voters,' i.e., those would-be 'traitors' who did vote for one of the three parties, who try to escape from the capital in the dead of night, but are rebuffed by soldiers (and then accepted back by the population).

Second, populists are exercised by considerable ambivalence with respects to the functioning of actually existing democratic institutions. Importantly, it is an empirical question as to whether or not that ambivalence should be felt. Populists can be motivated by racist, ill-informed paranoid-delusion with respects to both the elite that requires confrontation and the various 'outsiders' (or non-people) with whom those elites either collaborate or whom they intend to assist in one way or another. QAnon-inflected, Great Replacement theorists and the like, fall into this category. However, populists can also be motivated by sophisticated appraisals of an activist elite class that is systematically dismantling democratic protections and constitutional rights and combine this

with pan-ethnic, even international visions of the affected popular constituency (Henwood 2021).

This ambivalence in *Seeing* is not, in fact, something that is articulated by any specific actor recognizable as populist. Instead, it is the people themselves, acting as a spontaneous agglomeration, that offers a critique of the various parties' claims to representation, one that cuts right at the heart of a democracy's more *general* claims to be functionally representative of, at least, some significant section of the population (Saward 2010). Michael Saward, from whom this idea of 'claim-making' comes, describes representation as a practice involving five parts: There are, first, the "makers of representations," offering themselves as, second, "subjects," capable of standing for, third, "an object"—which is the maker's "idea of (the relevant) constituency"—that is constructed out of, fourth, a "referent," "which is all the other things the constituency is, or might be" beyond that constructed object. Fifthly, and finally, this representation is offered to an "audience," which "receives the (maker's) claims and accepts, rejects, or ignores them." To flesh this out more concretely, parties—their candidates, members, infrastructure, expertise—are the typical *claim-makers*, offering themselves as *subjects* capable of standing for the interests of, for example, 'families,' the 'middle' or 'working' classes, 'patriots'—all of which are potential *objects*, articulated from out of the relevant *referent*. Parties present this construction, to the electorate—the *audience*—at election time, which receives and adjudicates between those claims before casting their votes (Saward 2010: 37). Populists are, amongst other things, political agents who declare some representative field, i.e., all the claim-making subjects considered as a whole, as failing to provide legitimate representation of the kind the people—the audience—deserve.

However, and second, populists also offer *themselves*, and their own claims, as the one claim that the people *should* regard as legitimate. It is straightforward how *Seeing* fits into this only partially: The electorate *en masse* unite in being simply unimpressed with the claims on offer, and for perfectly intelligible reasons, i.e., it is no mystery, even without any details, why people might wish to express dissatisfaction with the available electoral choices. The first part justifies, then, the 'vote against all' or the 'NOTA vote.' But for populists, the casting of a blank vote is only an excellent start. The gap, in *Seeing*, is that there

is nowhere for the population to go: there is no improved claim to representation being made, no political force claiming to be for the people, even if such a force will have to take them beyond the realms of formal, representative politics and toward some kind of secessionary project. Instead, the population must await what comes next and react.

The third and final part of a sufficiently ecumenical form of populism, is that all populist projects anticipate that their entries into the political arena will precipitate projects of elite revanchism. In other words, the enmity that populists posit as central to political life will play out in such a way that their efforts at correction will be attacked and undermined and, ultimately, that the elites will seek to expel them from the political arena—electoral, but also cultural and social institutions as well—in order to maintain their grip on power. And this is where the populist reading of *Seeing* breaks down again. For there is no entry into the terrain that has been established by the population's opening critique. The lines are drawn, the battle is ready to commence, but there is only a protagonist—the elite—because for much of the novel, the population is amorphous, faceless and appears merely as an agglomeration. That is, the population is a collective, composed of thoroughly decent people, but is never a *purposive* or *antagonistic* agent. Instead of an agonism of elite-popular conflict, we have instead an elite constantly willing and able to impose itself on a population. Indeed, even as those characters who do emerge from anonymity continue to impress us with their decency, there is nothing *formidable* about them. Without any kind of populist insurgency to respond to elite impositions, the people, too, can only muster enough resilience to, ultimately, enable their ongoing acquiescence to that imposition (cf. Vanhoutte 2018; Martel 2019).

To summarize then: In *Seeing*, a populist orientation plays out in a particular and only partial way. First, and in true populist fashion, some pretty clear lines are drawn between the elites and the people, or the population. Second, the people are profoundly ambivalent about the democratic credentials of their political community, an ambivalence that becomes all the more securely confirmed as the novel proceeds and the elites pile on the reactionary violence and subterfuge. Third, and here is where the populist reading breaks down, there is no popular entry onto the political terrain. Instead, it is the population's in-

activity that moves the elites to double down, without repercussions, on their methods of siege, terrorism, and assassination.

## The People as... Resilient Agglomeration

The population lacks ferocity. Moreover, they lack any putative representative to be ferocious on their behalf. What we do get, however, from the resilient agglomeration that is the population, are shows of popular decency occurring in the teeth of sustained elite activity against the population's opening disavowal of, at least, the party-political formation. But, to be clear, this should not be understood as 'Bartlebian politics' à la Žižek's interpretation (Žižek 2008: 214). The population *does* take action, such that it is not appropriate to describe it in terms of sheer refusal and passivity (Vanhoutte 2018). These examples of resilience—and activity—include the festivities that follow on from the state's declaration of a siege (Saramago 2006: 86–87); the solidarity that is expressed in the aftermath of the bombing (*ibid.*: 122–32); the unloading of the would-be traitors' luggage after they return from having been denied exit from the city (*ibid.*: 151); and the Doctor's Wife 'turning' the superintendent with her account of the events in *Blindness*. Taken together, we might describe these acts of essential decency as producing (something like...) a 'government without a government'—at least for a time, because they do hold things together for the population (Vanhoutte 2018: 245). And, to be sure, Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte is right that this could be understood as a kind of "mute activity" or "silent operativity" (*ibid.*: 247). At the very least, the people manage to coordinate a peaceful response to elite activity without resorting to large assemblies or similar institutions. And, as readers, we are, I take it, *impressed* not only with the resilience of the people's decency in the face of elite revenge, but the fact that such resilience appears as a natural, effortless outgrowth of who they are.

This decency, which is politically impotent, is prevalent in a lot of Saramago's stories. In *The Cave* (2002b), for example, the family escapes from the clutches of their previous employers, but their fates are uncertain. In *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1993b) Jesus asks men to forgive a God who knows not what he does, calling for resignation to a future history of suffering. The

world of *Blindness* (1999a) ends with uncertainty, but in becoming the world of *Seeing* (2006), ends with political assassination and a recalcitrant elite. Across all of these stories, the characters with whom we have the most sympathy are also those who lack any ability to enter the terrain as protagonists. They are groups of people who do not make history—except maybe by accident—but rather formulate reactions to the impositions of others.<sup>2</sup> In the context of *Seeing*, we have no reason to think that the population's decency and resilience will produce anything political efficacious. It is surprising that, for a committed communist such as Saramago, the power of working-class organizations, or any collective agent for that matter, is never seen operating even at the margins. There are no heroic revolutionaries, elbows up, leaning into the fight.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, in the context of the battle that characterise *Seeing*, what are the likely real, lasting political effects of the population's resilient decency? Frederick Douglass averred that “power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them; and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both” (Douglass 2016: 288). What happens in *Seeing* is never an effect of intentional collective action emanating from an association: It is rather an aggregation of individual decisions generated by basic common—read: populist—decency. But no demands are articulated—naturally, given the people's “mute operativity.” Indeed, no resources are developed that would even allow the population to leverage demands on their own behalf. And so nothing accumulates, nothing gathers.

Perhaps, it might be argued, there is something prefigurative about the population's refusals to engage the elite. The population is demonstrating an approach to collective life that reflects an anticipated future society which can shake off the shackles off their former political formation. But this is a fantasy. Take Barcelona, as an historical example of an actually existing prefigurative

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- 2 Only the tourists beating the military in a battle over a hotel in *The Stone Raft* seems to offer a more militantly productive instance of collective agency (Saramago 1996: 80).
- 3 Interestingly, one of Saramago's five favourite films is *The Salt of the Earth*, a film that is about a strike, i.e., action that is both reaction to, and positive engagement against, a set of incorrigible and dastardly elites who have to be defeated with collective action (Saramago 2010b: 243).

moment during the opening of the Spanish Civil War, which George Orwell described in glowing terms:

In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist. Except for a small number of women and foreigners there were no 'well-dressed' people at all. Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls, or some variant of the militia uniform. All this was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for. (Orwell 2003: 3–4)

But Barcelona was a situation achieved through sustained collective and disciplined action, i.e., deep forms of intentional mobilisation, smelted out of violent conflict with a recalcitrant and reactionary elite, which eventually reorganized to defeat that politics and that moment. In *Seeing*, there is no deep mobilisation, there is no entry onto the terrain of a battle. Instead, there is simply a reservoir of resilience, drawn on to sustain collective acquiescence.

The story unfolds, essentially, as an account of the project of elite revanchism enacted by political elites to punish the population for their collective critique—and damning—of the wholesale corruption of a democracy's claim-making institutions. This revanchism is recounted in the form of a distinct set of moments. First, the elites declare a siege as retribution for that critique, intended to both impose a "cautery for the foul suppuration" the population has generated and provoke some soul-searching (Saramago 2006: 86). When this fails, we have the staging of black flag terrorist bombings (*ibid.*: 116–117). And then, finally, the state initiates a covert investigation into the non-existent Blank Ballot Movement (*ibid.*: 183), leading to the targeted assassinations which end the novel.

But, and to be clear, it is not as if the story ends with any *détente* having been accepted by the powers that be. What *Seeing* shows are only the opening salvos in an elite project of sustained revanchism. Certainly, popular disenchantment has produced space for popular decency to be expressed, but this is not meaningful political activity. It is not clear, contra Vanhoutte's argument,



that the population enjoys any ability to resist through “a possible actualization of their im-potentiality that could lead to a ‘coming community’” (Vanhouette 2014: 13). Within the specifics of a modern system of nation states, it is hard to see where the power comes from to make the secession—if that is what is imagined as the endpoint for this story—last for any significant amount of time. Crucially, we have to ask: why would the elites quit? Thus far, they have suffered no repercussions for their activity, other than the dropping out of certain personnel, who are easily recyclable. Moreover, the population is presumably occupying some prime urban real estate in which the state is going to have an ongoing interest. There is also, returning to revolutionary Barcelona, the danger of a good example to consider if the population manages to keep all this up. Without fear of suffering any repercussions, the state, it seems, can double down on any number of the tools it deploys, such that the siege can be lengthened and strengthened, more terrorist acts employed, until eventually the population submits. Another analogue of this case might be Cuba, one that echoes the prefigurative aspect at work in 1930s Barcelona. Having thrown off the shackles of a barbaric dictator and crippling poverty, the Cuban people have laboured (spiritedly, to be sure) under a reactionary and internationally condemned trillion-dollar blockade for decades now, and is now struggling, as a regime, in profound ways. Decency is only going to get people so far and resilience can be exhausted.

## Ferocious Populist Manoeuvring

In contrast, the *populist* move is always, most basically, to both refuse acquiescence and to galvanize popular reaction into more purposive forms of activity. Populists only *begin* with a charge—namely that political, economic, cultural elites have let ‘the people’ down by not giving them what they deserve—because populists follow this up with a claim of their own: specifically, that what people deserve *is* politically feasible, but achieving it requires both changes in representative personnel and a concerted fight against the relevant elites. Populism then, however foul the specific politics attached to it, is always a politics of hope and possible redemption *for someone* and condemnation *for someone else*.

Populism is, in other words, the refusal of despair, and the rooting of that refusal in the capacities of ordinary people, but only in the event that those people become protagonists in some way or another, a role which different populists define in different ways. For some, we might call them vulgar populists, such redemption is synonymous with just electing them to power and then accepting their activity as necessarily emanating from ‘the (one true) people.’ For others, the battle is far more complicated, and the activity far more demanding. But, in all genuine forms of populism, populist political actors must reject John Adams’ idea that the people, who “will have unbounded power” because they are, just like “the great,” “extremely addicted to corruption and venality” (Adams cited in Shklar 1998: 148). In other words, for populists the people are capable of shouldering the burden of political responsibility in ways that do not lead to corruption. But part of popular responsibility is politicising their decency in such a way that they can confront, and ultimately defeat, the elites.

If what we need is for the people—the ‘population’ in *Seeing*—to become protagonists, to become an association that is capable of acting for itself in this battle with the elites, where does all this leave us? I want, by way of fleshing out this idea of the populist protagonist that is missing from *Seeing*, draw some resources from Machiavelli. More specifically, I want to use John P. McCormick’s reading of Machiavelli as a populist committed to a politics “that seeks to control elites first and foremost” (McCormick 2001: 310). In other words, from McCormick’s reading we develop an understanding of popular activity that combines resilience with *ferocity*. In contrast to other positive appraisals of populism, such as those developed by Mouffe and Laclau, where the focus is on the *discursive* work performed by populists, McCormick’s ferocious populism assumes this discursive work has already been performed. The problematic McCormick and Machiavelli’s populists must address is thus what work the people must do once they have arrayed themselves against an elite that has the bit between their teeth.

Crucially, McCormick’s Machiavelli is a figure who believes that a primary function of republican politics is to maintain control of elites—a group whom he “resents, despises and distrusts”—through two levels. The first, which is preferred by Machiavelli, is via plebeian institutional mechanisms such as are provided by the “extra-electoral institutions and practices” like “the tribunes

of the people, public accusations, and popular appeals” of ancient Rome (*ibid.*: 297). Through these institutions and practices the plebeians—the *popolo*—enjoy resources that enable them to rein in the ambition of the nobility—the *grandi*—and thereby preserve their freedom. These institutions serve, in other words, a *defensive* and in some ways prophylactic purpose.

However, second, and in more extreme circumstances, i.e., when those constitutional methods for controlling elites have failed, Machiavelli takes great relish in describing the ways in which elites are “unmembered, dis-membered” as and when the occasion requires it (McCormick 2001: 298). Examples include the story Machiavelli gives of Cleomenes, the Spartan King, who

perceived that he could not confer this benefit on his country unless he obtained sole power. For he saw that the ambition of others made it impossible for him to do what was useful for many against the will of a few. Wherefore, finding fit occasion, he murdered the Ephori and all others likely to oppose him; after which, he completely renewed the laws of Lycurgus. (Machiavelli 2003: 46)

Another example is the political game played by Spartan king Clearchus who “came to power through the influence of the nobles, who hoped he could serve their desire to oppress the people. But once secure, Clearchus switched his allegiance to the people and disposed of the nobles by hacking them all to pieces” (*ibid.*: 64–65).

Obviously, *Seeing* describes a situation where there are no institutions capable of controlling the elites. Indeed, the only ostensibly democratic institutions solutions available to the people have been declared unfit for purpose. As a result, the ambivalence the population should feel towards the state might well start to justify that array of more extreme, extra-institutional activity. Exactly how this cashes out is a question we need to leave open, but, to be sure, the elites in *Seeing* deserve a considerable retaliatory smiting. However, there are no figures in positions of power, like a Clearchus or Cleomenes, who are capable of ferocious activity on behalf of the people. There is, within the context of *Seeing*, neither a mechanism nor a personality capable of remedying this situation. There is only collective and spontaneous resilience undergirded

by a decency that has not (yet) given way. And, to be sure, perhaps this gap is just what Saramago regards as our current parlous state. As a communist, he sees the international proletariat as having departed and without replacement. There is no lack of evidence for this kind of despair, and Saramago is on record acknowledging his own pessimism (Langer 2002). However, for those who wish to espy some kind of political lesson in *Seeing*, which amounts to more than this despair, than it can only be found in what *Seeing* does not describe. As it stands, the novel itself is barren.

## Conclusion

The novel begins with a collective—and damning—appraisal of the democratic credentials of their country's political institutions. This expresses the populations' nearly unanimous ambivalence about those institutions. Furthermore, the novel is driven by a division between, on the one hand, the elites (whom we despise) who make the moves as the story's protagonists against the population (with whom we are mostly impressed) who mostly acquiesce to those moves. In other words, very clear dividing lines characterise the development of the story. These two dimensions—ambivalence and popular-elite enmity—are two necessary starting points for populist orientation. But they are not sufficient. There is nobody we, as readers, encounter amongst the population who is willing to step into the breach and confront the elites as their active champion. The divides are there—they are too obvious to ignore; the people, as well, are by no means committed to the idea that things cannot be different. But they present no obvious pathway that might deliver them from the story's concluding murderous impasse.

There is, in other words, little reason to regard *Seeing* as offering up much by way of an “heretical tale” with real world political valences (cf. Vanhoutte 2018: 248). Prefigurative politics is of extremely limited value when elites are this incorrigible, and what we witness in the novel is really just an opening salvo of, at least potentially, a longer-term project of sustained oppression. Even as the spirit of anti-elitism is thus in full force—the political elites and those lackeys that remain to do their bidding are never less than vile—Sara-

mago never envisions popular decency galvanising into a political power that is capable of 'taking on' elites. Instead, we are left with a resilient but ultimately acquiescent popular decency that, politically, amounts to nothing: If the terrain is decidedly populist, i.e., characterised by ambivalence and enmity, it will not do to try and exit that terrain, precisely because there is no realistic possibility for withdrawal and non-engagement.

Heretical silences can take us only so far. Whatever the specific tactics used to take on whatever set of incorrigible elites, there is a need to engage elites with the ferocity of a Cleomenes, and have it adhere in the people as a kind of plebeian *virtù*, or virtuosity. Without some corollary operative on the kind of terrain that Saramago sets up in *Seeing* it is just not clear how any of this *could* end, except badly.

# The Color of Democracy

MARCO MAZZOCCA

## An Explicit Introduction

Contrary to what one might think, Saramago's *Seeing* (2006) is not just a novel. The Portuguese Nobel Prize winner's book is not simply an allegorical tale, a thought experiment, or a huge 'what if?'<sup>1</sup> As the work's original title *Ensaio Sobre a Lucidez* (literally 'Essay on Lucidity'), suggests, Saramago's work has perhaps more important purposes than telling a story alone.

However, although this chapter neither intends to nor can investigate the original aims of *Seeing*, it is worth noting how, regardless of the author's original intentions, it is possible to draw several insights from a literary work. Besides, as Umberto Eco stated, "When we consider a book, we mustn't ask ourselves what it says but what it means" (Eco 2014: 403), and one can attribute many meanings to Saramago's *Seeing*.

This chapter outlines just one of the many possible insights that can be drawn from *Ensaio Sobre a Lucidez* by interpreting the text as a lesson on democracy and anarchy, on individual voting and participatory decision-making. Therefore, in the following sections, after briefly summarizing the plot of *Seeing*, I outline some of its most salient features. More specifically, I explore several key characteristics shared by almost all democratic systems, including the one described in *Seeing*. Thus, after establishing how even a fictitious democratic system like the one described in *Seeing* can have the minimum essential characteristics to be defined as a democracy, I focus on analyzing issues related to voting and, particularly, the blank vote and its possible meanings. I then

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1 The idea that *Seeing* is not to be considered only as a story is the result of the exciting debate that arose following the panel "Filosofia 1: Lucidez, Democracia, Politica," which took place on October 27, 2022, in Vigo as part of the "VII José Saramago International Conference." I particularly want to thank the Chair of the Panel, Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte, for his valuable remarks.

discuss how Saramago's work can be interpreted as an antithesis to Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1999). According to the Swiss-born philosopher, civil society makes everyone free because everyone loses their individual rights to gain them back as civil rights; however, here I shall emphasize how, according to the Portuguese writer, one can break free from civil society without neglecting other individuals. In other words, following what Saramago wrote in his 'essay,' I illustrate a possible democratically consistent way out of civil society (or, at least, from a particular conception of civil society).

## Saramago's Dream Democracy

To some people, *Seeing* may be no more than the sequel to *Blindness* (1999a). A keen reader of Saramago's works meets the unforgettable protagonists of *Blindness* again in *Seeing*. To others, Saramago's book may mainly be a gripping political thriller. To others still, it might be not only a thriller or a sequel but also an essay that attempts to answer the following question: what happens to a country if, during an election, the citizens (or at least their overwhelming majority) decide to cast blank ballots?

From the very beginning of the story, the reader is immersed in the events that are related to the "municipal elections for the future of the capital" (Saramago 2006: 2) of a particular unnamed country—the same nameless country in which is set the plot of *Blindness*. However, as early as the end of the first chapter, it becomes apparent that there is something strange about these elections: despite the excellent turnout, "more than seventy percent of the total votes cast were blank" (*ibid.*: 16). As the narrator points out, such an outcome not only confuses and astonishes the country but also prompts the government to call for new elections exclusively in the capital city. Yet this return to the ballot box does not seem entirely legitimate from a legal point of view (not even in the fictional, unnamed country's legal system). Indeed, the only law that is mentioned in the book to justify the repetition of the elections appears to be one that "stipulates that in the event of a natural disaster, elections shall be repeated eight days later" (*ibid.*: 18). The problem is that there seems to have been no natural disaster on election day. There are no events such as earth-

quakes, hurricanes, or floods. At most, there is a heavy rainstorm, which ends before the polls close. Moreover, even assuming that it is up to the executive power to decide what constitutes a natural disaster on a case-by-case basis, it is unclear why only the population of the capital city (and not, for example, citizens living in other municipalities that were hit by rain on election day) should repeat the elections. Of course, some might argue that blank ballots may constitute a natural disaster, but in that case, they should also explain what they mean by the term ‘natural.’

One could then argue that what is narrated in *Seeing* is actually an example of what Giorgio Agamben calls a ‘state of exception,’ or a kind of “zone in which application is suspended, but the law, as such, remains in force” (Agamben 2005: 31). However, based on the (few) elements that emerge from the Portuguese Nobel Prize laureate’s novel, the government’s choice seems more like an *abusus iuris* (or abuse of rights) than the introduction of a state of exception. Beware, however: similarity not equality. A number of the characteristic elements of abuse of rights are indeed missing.<sup>2</sup>

In any case, even if from the plot of the novel it is not clear what justifies a return to voting from a purely legal point of view, from a political point of view the message is clear: it is unacceptable that the majority of voters in the capital voted ‘blank.’ Unfortunately for the government, however, the result of the second election in the capital leaves no room for doubt regarding the will of the voters: there are no abstentions or spoiled votes, and 83 % of ballots are left blank.

At this point, one might ask whether the electoral scenarios imagined by Saramago in *Seeing* are somehow consistent with contemporary democratic systems. On the one hand, one could claim that among valid (not-blank) votes, it is possible to detect the emergence of a majority (perhaps through a multi-party coalition). On the other hand, however, such a majority would be no

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2 As Giorgio Pino reminds us, to properly speak of abuse of rights, it is necessary (a) that a person has a subjective right; (b) that it may be exercised in a not strictly predetermined plurality of ways; (c) that the concrete exercise of the right, even if formally respectful of the legal framework, may be objectionable concerning a certain criterion of evaluation (legal or extra-legal); and (d) that there is an unjustified disproportion between the benefit of the right holder and the sacrifice that falls on some other party (cf. Pino 2004: 31–32).



more than the majority of a tiny minority. How, then, should blank ballots be considered? The blank ballot can be considered a ‘vote against all,’ a so-called “None Of The Above” (NOTA) vote, or nothing more than a blank ballot (cf. Vanhoutte 2014: 8). However, before one can define how a blank ballot should be ‘read,’ they must first define the concepts of democracy and voting.

Currently, the word ‘democracy’ does not always have a clear definition and is therefore an example of what W.B. Gallie called “essentially contested concepts” (cf. Gallie 1976). Hence, the concept of democracy is not only a confused, ambiguous, and open-structure concept, it is also a concept that does not yet have a shared common definition in literature. Nevertheless, anyone who claims that it is impossible to provide a good definition of democracy because of the many possible definitions would be mistaken.<sup>3</sup> Assuming that it is impossible to provide a unique, adequate definition of democracy does not mean that every definition is equal to the others. That is, denying the possibility of finding a single, correct definition of democracy does not imply that no argument can be provided to support one meaning over another. As suggested by David Miller, if one wants to “show that one meaning of a term is the ‘correct’ meaning, he [...] will have to justify the general standpoint, which corresponds to the interpretation of the concept which favors” (Miller 1983: 50). Accordingly, what I want to do in what follows is to identify some key elements of the concept of democracy to make explicit the core of meaning that stands behind all the various uses of the term; this requires a core of meaning that is necessarily general and sufficiently vague to make some variations possible, but it also requires a meaning that is “not so vague as to allow any meaning to be attached to the word” (Arblaster 2002: 9). What, then, are the basic features of all (or almost all) definitions of democracy?

Hans Kelsen, for example, argued that the idea that democracy is “the rule of the people over themselves” (Kelsen 2013: 35) underlies all definitions of democracy. Despite the apparent simplicity of Kelsen’s definition, it is not easy to define the boundaries of who can be considered part of the people. Who are

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3 Various attempts to list all the definitions of ‘democracy’ have been made in the past. In the 1950s, for example, as many as 311 definitions of democracy were identified by Arne Naess and his colleagues (cf. Naess *et al.* 1956).

the people? Are they all residents of a given country? Are they only legitimate residents? Are they only citizens? Are they only citizens of legal age? Or are they only citizens of legal age who are fully competent? This series of questions, combined with other considerations regarding the homogeneity of the culture, language, religion, gender, or age of the population, could influence (and indeed do influence) every democratic system. Take, for example, the voting age criterion. It is commonly argued that only citizens who reach the ‘legal age’ are eligible to vote. This is why in many democratic countries, 15-year-olds are not allowed to vote. Yet it could be argued that 15-year-olds know much more about many things than their great-grandparents (who can vote) and that, on closer inspection, the decisions made by today’s elected officials influence the futures of 15-year-olds more than the future of those in their 90s. Some might point out that what counts is the experience and maturity of the voters, but how do you measure maturity? Is a number on one’s identity card enough to measure this? Questions such as these concerning the definition of the people, particularly in terms of the voting population, are tough to answer. Luckily, the Austrian author also suggests a minimal—and, in a sense, circular<sup>4</sup>—definition of ‘the people’ as “the set of all individuals who are subject to a certain legal order” (*ibid.*: 36).

To qualify a system as democratic, however, a generic allusion to the people is not enough. Every individual must also take part in decisions as equals. In a self-respecting democracy, no vote has more or less value than others. Of course, participating in democratic choices on an equal footing “may mean no more than registering as a voter and, from time to time, casting a ballot” (Pennock 1979: 438). Some might provocatively argue that only those informed about the meaning of voting and how institutional mechanisms work should vote (cf. Casati and Varzi 2008). However, no Western democracy has thus far administered voters a civics quiz before letting them into the voting booth. The right to vote is undoubtedly compatible with voters’ lack of knowledge. For all

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4 Indeed, if only individuals who are subject to a legal system are considered part of the people, and if, as happens in democracies, it is the people themselves who form the legal system, then it can be argued that the people create the legal system that, in turn, recognizes the people who made it as the people subject to it.

we know, a voter could cast lots to decide who or what to vote for, and it is not possible to force them to do otherwise.

Still, this does not mean that there are no voting disenfranchisement rules in modern Western democracies. To vote, it is often necessary to be a mentally competent citizen of legal age who is endowed with the rights associated with democratic participation. On closer inspection, despite the ideal concept of 'equal participation,' not every member of the people can participate on equal footing with others in the democratic life of a country.<sup>5</sup>

Once the issue of the people (and how they participate in democratic life) is addressed, all that remains is to provide a general overview of how they rule over themselves. The purpose of this chapter is not to list all democratic procedures with precision, and I therefore highlight only the core of every democratic decision: the majority principle. The minimal definition of democracy should imply a definition of the majority principle as a principle that ensures that the social order agrees with as many people as possible and disagrees with as few people as possible (cf. Kelsen 1955: 24–25).

Given these three minimum elements of democracy (i.e., the people, equal participation, and the majority principle), it does not seem possible to consider the electoral events narrated in *Seeing* as undemocratic. For both votes that took place in the capital, the participation of the voting population took place on equal footing. Moreover, at the end of both ballots, it is undeniable that a clear majority emerges—in this case, a majority of blank votes. Thus, all the minimum requirements of a democratic vote seem to have been met in both the municipal elections held in the capital. The problem then becomes how to count blank ballots in a democratic system.

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5 At this point, one might question whether one can still be considered part of the people if they do not participate in the democratic life of society. This question, however, does not help in achieving the objectives of this paper and is therefore left unanswered in this chapter.

## Counting Votes and Letting Votes Count

The workings of modern democratic voting systems often appear to be very clear. Elections are called, votes are counted, and whoever gets more votes than the others is elected. In democracy, votes matter because we can count them. In a sense, votes can be considered as a kind of unit of measurement. The problem is to understand what they measure.

One could hazard to guess that votes are the unit of measurement of opinions (or, more precisely, of the distribution of opinions within a given population) on specific political or social issues. However, as Roberto Casati and Achille Varzi remind us, an opinion is often more complex than a vote. In an opinion, there are distinctions, nuances, and afterthoughts. You like some aspects of one candidate and dislike others. Perhaps you also like some aspects of the other candidate. However, you are obliged to choose. You cannot vote one third for one candidate and the remaining two thirds for another candidate (cf. Casati and Varzi 2008). There are no divisible votes. A vote, like an atom, is indivisible.

At the same time, a vote is also a way of expressing something that has to do with a choice. In simple terms, voting is expressing a choice. A ballot says what an elector has chosen. If we had no choice—if upon entering the polling place, we were handed a ballot paper with only one option—we would perhaps feel that we have not even voted (i.e., we would feel that we have not chosen). In this sense, one of the merits of *Seeing* is that it reminds us how there is always more than one choice when voting: the choice to cast a blank ballot.

Presented in this way, then, a vote would not seem very dissimilar to an opinion poll. After all, even a survey is a matter of choices between several options, including the option of not answering or answering 'none of the above.' One could, however, argue that only a small sample of the population is polled in a survey. But even if a poll succeeded in covering the entire population, it would only register people's opinions. In the case of such a poll, the most popular opinion gathered would in fact have no direct political effect. In that case, moreover, the day after one reveals their opinion, they can always change their mind. However, this will at most result in the polling institute recording the change. Voting, instead, is not a poll. When choosing an option on a

ballot paper, as Casati and Varzi note, we implicitly accept that the political consequences of our choice go beyond our opinions (cf. *ibid.*). And even if we changed our opinion the day after the vote, we would have to wait for a new vote to express this.

This last consideration makes the choice of what to vote for a heavy one, at least in comparison to any choice one would make in a survey. When one votes, one also chooses to lose the possibility of voting again in the same election (or referendum). In other words, once one has voted, they can no longer re-use their vote in the same election. Given this important consequence, one might wonder why in the novel of the Portuguese Nobel prize-winning author such a large number of voters decided to cast a blank ballot. The answer is that blank votes also, in a sense, count. And, indeed, they count a lot.

## Rousseau's Nightmare

Claiming that a majority of people who voted blank in an election is consistent with a minimum conception of democracy seems to generate more doubts than it solves. Indeed, it would not be so strange if doubts regarding blank ballots' political or legal meanings arose.

Initially, the majority of blank ballots may seem to express nothing. Indeed, it may seem senseless to vote blank. What do people vote for when they vote blank? As stated above, a vote is a way of expressing something, but what a vote actually expresses also depends on the electoral system. There is a unique 'grammar of voting' that has its own rules, and this 'grammar' is often created by lawmakers. In many electoral systems, for example, there is a difference between voting blank and abstaining from voting. In such systems, the two choices express different positions.<sup>6</sup> Whereas in the first case, one does not

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6 Obviously, there are electoral systems with a more straightforward or more articulate 'grammar' than the one just outlined. Consider the case of Italy where, under Article 62 of Presidential Decree No 361/1957, the voter may withdraw the ballot paper and then hand it in without entering the polling booth. In such a case, the voter shall be counted among the voters, and the ballot paper shall be declared void and placed in the envelope provided at the polling stations. This is evidently a kind of hybrid form between abstention and non-voting possible

participate in the democratic decision-making process, in the second case one takes part in the decision by voting in such a way as not to give consent to anyone—or by giving it to everyone, depending on the perspective and the electoral system.

Voting blank could therefore be understood as a passive or at least neutral choice. Some might read a blank vote as a passive way of accepting the decision of other voters or, worse, as a neutral choice that does not antagonize anyone. However, one of the merits of *Seeing* is that it demonstrates how wrong those who consider voting blank solely as a passive or even neutral vote would be. In this regard, the Portuguese author reveals both how voting blank could be an active way of not yielding to the pressures of any political position (whether right, center, or left) and how the choice to vote blank is anything but neutral and can even involve antagonizing an entire country.

The latter considerations could also give rise to the erroneous assumption that the blank ballot constitutes an act of civil disobedience. However, as Hugo Bedau notes, “A dissenter performs an act of civil disobedience only if he acts illegally; i.e., if he violates some positive law” (Bedau 1961: 653). According to one popular opinion, indeed, civil disobedience is a public, non-violent, and conscientious breach of law undertaken with the aim of bringing about a change in laws or government policies (cf. Rawls 1999: 320). For this reason, as Candice Delmas and Kimberley Brownlee point out, “people who engage in civil disobedience operate at the boundary of fidelity to law, have general respect for their regime, and are willing to accept the legal consequences of their actions, as evidence of their fidelity to the rule of law” (Delmas and Brownlee 2021).<sup>7</sup> It is therefore not possible to consider blank voting as an act of civil disobedience for the simple reason that in most cases it is a lawful act. Indeed, it could be argued that the idea of blank votes is not contrary to democratic systems

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in the Italian electoral system. But this only goes to show the complexity of a certain electoral grammar.

7 This is not to say there are no other possible definitions of civil disobedience. In this chapter, however, I have chosen to report only what seems to be the most popular opinion among legal practitioners, according to which one cannot blame someone for disobeying the law if they have not effectively broken it. I thank this chapter’s reviewers for allowing me to specify this point.

but in fact constitutes an aspect of their fulfilment (cf. Vanhoutte 2014). The idea that any of the election events narrated in *Seeing* are illegal—or at least an *abusus iuris*—could instead be applied to the repeated elections or the punitive<sup>8</sup> measures taken by the government against the capital’s population.

Thus, assuming that the blank vote Saramago recounts in *Seeing* is not a passive or neutral vote or an act of civil disobedience, the question arises as to how this vote should be interpreted. In the following paragraphs, I propose an interpretation of the blank vote in the elections described in *Seeing* as the beginning of a path of individual self-awareness and an escape from the social contract theorized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

According to the Swiss philosopher, the social contract should ensure a form of association that can defend and protect the person and property of each associate “and under which each of them, uniting himself to all, will obey himself alone, and remain as free as before” (Rousseau 1999: 55). The idea behind this contract is that each individual, by entering into the contract, renounces their “original rights and [...] natural freedom” (*ibid.*) while simultaneously earning “the equivalent of all that he loses and greater strength for the conservation of what he possesses” (*ibid.*).

In other words, according to Rousseau, individuals must give up all their rights to the community (which is constituted by individuals). In so doing, they would lose all their natural rights *uti singoli* and regain them, *uti cives*, as citizens. The main problem with this conception of the social contract is that, unlike other conceptions,<sup>9</sup> it subjects all citizens to their general will. The ambiguity of Rousseau’s conception of civil society lies precisely in the fact that, while it is true that all citizens can abstractly exercise all their rights, it is equally true that they often want to exercise them differently from the general will. The totalitarian absorption of the individual into the community thus implies that “if anyone refuses to obey the general will, he will be compelled to do so by the whole body, which means nothing else than that he will be

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8 In this case, the term ‘punitive’ is to be understood in its legal sense as a consequence of violating a legal norm (cf. Kelsen 1934: 485–489). It remains, however, unclear which rule the citizens of the capital (of Saramago’s book) would have broken by voting blank.

9 One thinks, for example, of the works of Thomas Hobbes (cf. Hobbes 2005) or John Locke (cf. Locke 1960).

forced to be free” (*ibid.*: 58). In modern democratic systems, this can simply mean that the laws enacted by a particular majority also apply to minorities. The question, as Saramago underscores, is the following: what happens when a large group of citizens do not recognize themselves in any of those majorities that enacted the laws? In other words, what should one do if the majority that emerges from the elections is ‘blank’?

To answer these questions, it is first necessary to emphasize that a blank majority does not force anyone to do anything simply because there is nothing to obey. Of course, one can join the blank majority—which is what happens in Saramago’s novel when the percentage of blank ballots increases from over 70 % in the first vote to 83 % in the second. However, Saramago seems to suggest that joining the majority of those who vote blank means nothing more than pledging not to identify with any particular political side and, precisely for this reason, striving to diminish ideological contrasts.

The blank vote, then, turns out to be a blessing rather than a political disaster, as the political representatives of Saramago’s novel seem to believe. Indeed, “contrary to the fugitive president’s ill-intentioned prognostication, there were not thieves or rapists or murderers” (Saramago 2006: 92–93) in the capital city after the votes and especially after the first ‘punitive’ measures of the national government. In a way, Saramago offers a further step to what Rousseau proposed. If for Rousseau the passage from the state of nature to the civil state makes the individual “not a limited and stupid animal, but an intelligent being and a man” (Rousseau 1999: 59) subject to the general will, for Saramago it seems that a blank majority might free civilized man from the chains of the general will.

In other words, citizens would lose their rights *uti cives* to regain them *uti singuli*, or as individuals. Yet this step would not restore citizens to their original condition (which they had in the state of nature). They would remain, so to speak, ‘civilized persons.’ Adhering to a blank majority, citizens would escape from subjection to the general will but would continue to care for each other not as part of a community but as single individuals. In this sense, one only has to think, for example, to the incident of the refuse collectors’ all-out strike. On this occasion, while the strike was happening, “from every house in the city emerged women armed with brooms, buckets and dustpans, and, without a word, they started sweeping their own patch of pavement and street”



(Saramago 2006: 92). Moreover, at some point, “the refuse collectors also came out onto the street. They were not in uniform, they were wearing their own clothes. It was the uniforms that were on strike, they said, not them” (*ibid.*: 93). In other words, they were striking as members of a community (the refuse collectors’ union), but as single individuals they did not stop caring for others.

## A Concluding Metaphor

Although more than a decade has passed since the first release of *Ensaio Sobre a Lucidez*, the book remains timely. It is the story of a capital city and an extensive group of citizens who decide to vote blank in municipal elections. But it is also a spy story, a search for the meaning and political significance of everyday activities, and—at least for some characters—a path to self-consciousness.

Compared to the considerable inputs, many topics, and multiple interpretations of *Seeing*, the present work has highlighted only a few points. Firstly, it showed how voting blank is consistent with even the most minimal conceptions of democracy.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, this chapter also excludes the hypothesis that blank ballots or, more precisely, the blank ballots in Saramago’s work are passive or neutral votes or examples of civil disobedience. On the contrary, Saramago represents such votes as a legitimate and lawful form of individuals’ democratic expression. In contrast, other forms of expression such as civil disobedience, although in some ways legitimate, would not be lawful by definition. Saramago’s representation therefore seems to outline a democratically acceptable way out of the social contract—and civil society—outlined by Rousseau. Indeed, if the Genevan philosopher required “the complete transfer of each associate, with all his rights, to the whole community” (Rousseau 1999: 55), the Portuguese

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10 Blank voting does not conflict with (i) the right of the people to vote, (ii) who vote on an equal footing and (iii) in accordance with the majority principle. Of course, it could be argued that it is often unclear whether voters are aware of this possibility or whether the electoral grammar allows this possibility—whether the blank ballot expresses anything at all. However, it seems complicated to imagine any consequences for blank voters should the vote be secret. At most, it can be assumed that the blank ballot is not counted at all in such cases. But even so, should, as in Saramago’s novel, a majority of white votes emerge, this would constitute a fairly clear political message.

'philosopher' claims that single individuals can lawfully take back every right they have given to the community without neglecting to care for others. From a contractual perspective, the blank vote could be regarded as a resolving clause: a way for individuals to terminate the agreement and free themselves from its obligations. And indeed, legally speaking, it would be strange if a contract did not provide for the possibility of its termination.

Of course, it could be argued that such an interpretation of *Seeing* is nothing more than a way of making an apology for anarchy, a form of a society ruled by no one or non-rule. However, Saramago's work offers a non-chaotic image of an anarchist community as a community where everyone takes care of each other as individuals, where there are no more crimes, and where, paradoxically, all the hostility and confusion are brought (from outside) by the state government.

At this point, there is only one mystery left to unravel, although the English language does not help in this endeavor. All that remains is to explain why this essay is entitled "The Color of Democracy." The solution lies in the language in which the *Ensaio Sobre a Lucidez* was originally written: Portuguese. In Portuguese, in fact, 'to vote blank ballot' translates as '*votar em branco*' (literally 'to vote in white'). This expression is actually common to many Neo-Latin languages such as Italian ('*votare in bianco*'), Spanish ('*votar en blanco*'), or French ('*vote blanc*'). Such a 'colorful' expression is as intriguing as it is surprisingly apt for what is asserted in this chapter.

White is universally known as the only color "experienced as achromatic" (Bosten, Beer, and MacLeod 2015: 1). Moreover, since white is often given by the additive synthesis of all the colors in the visible spectrum, it is commonly said that it derives from the combination of all colors. White, in other words, contains all colors and at the same time reflects them all. The symbolic power of the color white in reference to the democratic systems is amazing, particularly as we are now used to political sides being represented with different colors such as the Black Shirts, the Golden Dawn Party, the Khmer Rouge, or the Green Parties. Just as all colors produce white light, the blank (white) ballot is the product of all political options. Thus, the blank vote does not represent non-decision or the unwillingness to take responsibility for others, nor does it equate to being blind to different political and social proposals. On the contrary, it could be a sign of our return to clearly seeing.



# Saramago, Agamben, and the ‘Invention of an Epidemic’

CARLO SABBATINI

## Doctor Strangelove

At an Italian conference in 2003, Saramago described *Blindness* (and announced *Seeing*)<sup>1</sup> as a “context allegory,” which narrates “simultaneously [...] a reality too radical to be true and [...] a reality which, given due abstractions, is what we deal with every day” (Saramago 2022a: 156). I understood the true meaning of his words when re-reading the two novels during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same period, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben questioned the reality of the pandemic. He saw in it a pretext for the statal biopolitical project that reduces the citizen to ‘bare life,’ exploiting emergency legislation to nullify personal freedoms and transforming the ‘exception’ into the ‘rule’ (Agamben 2017a: 101f.; Agamben 2017e: 123–26; Agamben 2021b: 26ff.). The pandemic also taught me something about Agamben’s way of thinking.

Recent interpretations of the lazaret in *Blindness* are based on Agamben’s logic of the exception, of the camp, and of bare life, focusing on structural elements of contiguity between the two authors (see Nashef 2015 and 2017; Neiva 2021). But one could also find other analogies in *Seeing*, where, just to give one example, the peaceful resistance of the besieged capital is readable as a ‘deactivation’ of the law (Agamben 2005: 98) through which people leave the “state of virtual exception” and enter the “state of actual exception” (Agamben 2017a: 55), thus realizing the “form-of-life” (*ibid.*: 153; Agamben, 2000: 3f.). The reason why I have not taken these or other possible paths, which were at first sight very promising, is the serious risk that they will end up in sterile exercises of erudition. As I will try to show in this chapter, I have found a

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1 The English versions of Saramago’s novels *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (1995) and *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez* (2004) were published respectively with the titles *Blindness* (1997) and *Seeing* (2006).

fundamental difference between the anthropologies of the two authors, which can turn the apparent convergences into mere parallelisms in themes and into clear divergences of contents and purposes.

Describing the doctor's wife, the protagonist of *Blindness*, Saramago writes:

She could not go blind, because she had been capable of compassion, of love, of respect, of maintaining a sense of profound dignity in her relationship with others, because, recognizing the fragility of the human being, she had been capable of understanding. (Saramago 2022b: 95)

Together with this character, the author also describes the relational dimension of ethics in his novel, confirmed by a textual analysis which reveals a network of concepts such as responsibility, empathy, civics, solidarity, and trust (see Martín 2021). These concepts do not simply populate Saramago's imaginative universe, but emerge constantly from his speeches, interviews, and articles, and are summed up in his idea of an "ethical citizenship, even if it may seem old and anachronistic" (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 152).

Reading Agamben's latest statements on the pandemic, I had the impression that this test-bed mercilessly discloses the sterility of his erudite works, showing how a community in which 'relationship' is renounced for 'contact' (Agamben 2017g: 1242; Agamben 2021b: 99–101) results in solipsism; revealing the surreptitious justification of a self-satisfied egoism behind the ontological interpretation of 'love' (Agamben, 1999a); and confirming that the 'irresponsibility' that he preaches is not freedom, escaping the pincers of the 'relationship' of moral and civil laws (Agamben, 2017e: 775; Agamben, 2017g: 1250f.), but just the result of a pathetic (or pathological) lack of sense of reality. Through the pandemic, Agamben's 'community' of the 'alone by oneself' shows up devoid of any alleged 'intimacy' (*ibid.*: 1242f.): it is nothing more than the outcome of an 'exasperated individualism' (Salzani 2022).

The only thing Agamben ruthlessly reveals is that his 'in-difference,' which "makes [...] lovable (quodlibettable)" the 'singularities' (Agamben 2007a: 18), ends up in prosaic indifference towards one's neighbour. Agamben loves his neighbour so (ontologically) badly that, in the midst of the pandemic, he invited them to be wary of "medicine as religion" (Agamben 2021b: 49–54) and to

give up face masks and social distancing in order to discover the metaphysical entity of the 'face,' meeting each other like the ancient Romans did (*ibid.*: 86f.; Agamben 2021a: 111–113), whose life expectancy was much shorter than in the present. Never mind if the neighbour dies. After all—given that the core of Agamben's philosophy is the point at which opposites blur and pass into each other—inviting one to risk death is a supreme act of love. A strange love.

Saramago and Agamben confronted a pandemic in very different ways: the former as a literary fiction, the latter as a real instrument of political oppression. However, both used it to shed light on the critical predicaments of the sovereign state and its democratic form. And through these events, real or imagined, they reflected on the prospects for political change, which for both remains an open question. With their help, I would like to reflect on what happened to us and why—without repeating the sudden awakening of the characters in *Seeing*, who realise that the epidemic they thought had passed was actually far from over.

## Prisoners of Bare Life

Recapping the results of his book *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes:

1. The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion).
2. The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoē* and *bios*.
3. Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West. (Agamben 2017a: 148)

I will examine these three points to sketch a basis for comparison with Saramago.

I start with the second point. Agamben uses the Greek distinction between *zoē* as the “simple fact of living common to all living beings” and *bios* as the “form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (Agamben 2017a: 5).

Sovereign power arises through an “inclusive exclusion (an *exceptio*),” that is, by excluding the ‘fact’ of the *zoē* at the very moment in which it includes and qualifies it as *bios* in the ‘law’ (*ibid.*: 9f.). Thus, it produces a “zone of indistinction” called “bare life,” which is no longer “natural *zoē*,” or “political *bios*” but is rather “life exposed to death” (*ibid.*: 75f.; see Salzani 2014).

I move now to the first point. The ‘paradigm’ of this performance is the *homo sacer* of Roman law, the one who, according to the “sovereign ban,” can be killed with impunity by everyone but cannot be sacrificed. He represents the bare life of the “state of exception,” which is “at once exclude[ed] and captur[ed] within the political order” (Agamben 2017: 10f.). The “ban” is the “originary structure” of sovereignty, because in it “law refers to life and includes it in itself through its own suspension” (*ibid.*: 27). Carl Schmitt gave its standard formulation in *Political Theology*, writing that “the sovereign is the one who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 2005: 5) because he has “the legal power to suspend the validity of the law” and is therefore at the same time, *paradoxically*, inside and outside the law (Agamben 2017a: 17).

I come now to the third point. For Agamben, “biopower” is the root of Western politics, where “the realm of bare life” grows up to “gradually [...] coincide with the political realm,” so that “the exception everywhere becomes the rule” (*ibid.*: 11) and every citizen becomes—potentially—a *homo sacer* (Agamben 2017b: 241; Agamben 2017e: 818). The “declarations of rights,” which enabled the “inscription of natural life in the juridico-political order of the nation-state” (Agamben 2017a: 106; Agamben 2000: 19f.), are for Agamben a precondition for the ‘camp’ as the ‘space of exception’ built by the sovereign ‘decision.’ The camp is a “piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order,” in which the “law is completely suspended” and “fact and law are completely confused.” Think of the “suspension of fundamental rights” and of the concentration camps in the Nazi Reich (Agamben 2017a: 139ff.; Agamben 2000: 36ff.). From these declarations to the camp, Agamben accuses democracies and totalitarianisms of using the same tools, and of dangerously blurring their boundaries (Agamben 2017a: 11f.).

## Appendix Viralis (or: the Great Transformation)

For Agamben, the use of the state of exception as a paradigm of government has its correlate in the “legal civil war” fought by totalitarianisms and democracies, both externally and internally, for the “elimination” of “citizens who [...] cannot be integrated into the political system” (Agamben 2017b: 168). Countries like Italy resort to exceptional legislative tools such as the ‘emergency decrees’ of the executive power, which replaces Parliament as a “source for the production of law,” transforming democracy “into governmental” regimes (*ibid.*: 180).

Agamben applies his theories to the management of the COVID-19 emergency in *Where Are We Now?*, where he speaks of the “invention of an epidemic” (Agamben 2021b: 11) and of a pandemic “irrelevant whether it is real or simulated,” which gives the states a “pretext” for the “Great Transformation.” This transformation consists in imposing a state of permanent exception through “emergency decrees” to establish “a sanitation terror” (*ibid.*: 7f., 36f., 38, 42, and see 49–54, 55) through “a massive campaign to falsify the truth” (*ibid.*: 46). In the name of “biosecurity” (*ibid.*: 9, 57, 60ff.) and relying on a “society [that] believes in nothing more than bare life” (*ibid.*: 17), medical science delivers to the state “anthropological machine” the “infected” and the “asymptomatic patient”: a “potentially pathogenic life,” which “can be deprived of its freedoms and subjected to prohibitions and controls of all kinds” (Agamben 2021a: 108), from “social distancing” (Agamben 2021b: 9, 31ff., 36, 39, 57, 61), to the “virtual yellow star” of the green pass, to vaccines not adequately tested (Agamben 2017a: 107ff., 115f., 120).

## Saramago: From the Camp to the City

According to Agamben, Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty is the perfect result of biopolitics, which cannot be reformed but only overcome (see Salzani 2013a: 132). However, his theory never goes beyond these vague calls for a ‘politics to come.’ I think that Saramago can help us understand whether such an idea of sovereignty is the real matrix of modern democracies and whether it dooms



them too to be left behind. In other words (based on point 3), is the camp really and without appeal their biopolitical paradigm?

Taking as examples *The Stone Raft*, *Blindness*, and *Death at Intervals*,<sup>2</sup> David Jenkins examines Saramago's resort to "traumatic counterfactuals," which introduce inexplicable events and then extrapolate a number of consequences, such as: a) always inadequate authorities' response; b) solidarity among people; c) open endings. Through this logic of 'what ifs?' Jenkins challenges Schmitt's (and Agamben's) 'assumptions' about the claim of the sovereign state to face emergencies by treating them only in terms of political 'conflict' (Jenkins 2018: 211–18; see Schmitt 2005: 6). Although I share most of Jenkins' arguments, I do not agree with his interpretation of Ivan Ermakoff's theories of "exceptional cases," which he uses to establish a common basis for Schmitt's and Saramago's ideas on the exception. I believe, to the contrary, that a fundamental epistemological distance emerges between Schmitt and Saramago, a distance which lets us better appreciate their differences regarding the "gaps in the institutional response" (Jenkins 2018: 219). In the words of Ermakoff, we could say that Saramago proposes exceptional cases as "anomalies," which "deviate from what we believe should happen"; they are "disruptions of routine" which "pave the way to major scientific breakthroughs," crossing the threshold beyond which, according to Thomas Kuhn, the model of "normal science" is surpassed. Schmitt (and Agamben), instead, works on the model of the exception, whose "key difference" compared to the anomaly is "the explicit reference to a claim or a rule" (Ermakoff 2014: 227–9); while the exception tends to assume a paradigmatic value as it "epitomize[s] a class of phenomena" (*ibid.*: 231),<sup>3</sup> Saramago's anomaly has a "heuristic value," because it can be used "for the purpose of inference-making that produces 'novel facts'" (*ibid.*: 234).

In a recent essay, I tried to correlate Saramago's approach (that is open to complexity) with the current socio-environmental context, whose "increasing turbulence and uncertainty" requires an epistemological turning point in gov-

2 The English translations of *A Jangada de Pedra* (1986) and *As Intermittências da Morte* (2005) were published respectively with the titles *The Stone Raft* (1994) and *Death with Interruptions* (2008).

3 Agamben underlines that the state of exception of the camp is not an anomaly (Agamben 2017a: 137) but "the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (*ibid.*: 148).

ernance with respect to the paradigm of 'normal science' described by Kuhn and based on relative stability and low complexity (Sabbatini 2022; see also Ravetz 1999: 647, and Funtowicz 2001). Although it may be counterintuitive, if we consider the war events and the resulting political changes of the early 1900s, these last two characteristics are better suited to the political context of national sovereignties in which Schmitt's theory is historically rooted and finds its sphere of validity.

Saramago's crises strike the political system but are not born from and do not run out within its horizon; they show therefore the current drawbacks of Schmitt's theory about the State as a decision-making monopoly. When Agamben applies Schmitt's paradigm to today's democracies to criticize them, he runs into an anachronism, because he attacks something which is now deprived of those attributions. On the one hand, Agamben critically places Schmitt's category of the state of exception as the basis of Western democracies, and, on the other, he affirms that "the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government [...]; it is not the law, but the police" (Agamben 2017c: 623). But if, *à la* Schmitt, the exception identifies the sovereign decision, and if this binomial was conceived in relation to the socio-political context of the early 1900s, the risk for Agamben is that of obscuring the differences between the model of the sovereign and the Foucauldian model of government, always re-proposing the phantom of the first behind the second.<sup>4</sup> As shown by his statements on the state of emergency against COVID-19, by presuming a political conspiracy behind the pandemic Agamben mirrors the same logic of the exception as the one he denounces.

Agamben strangely underestimates today's complexity and permeability of the political system. For him, the ruler's decision is still able to filter the *zoē* and capture it as bare life to produce *bios*. The bare life (represented by the camp) builds the bulwark that prevents the *zoē* from entering the *bios* and from up-setting and renewing it. Captive of this paradigm (by definition unsurpassable because it is sealed from the outside and locked inside), Agamben cannot see who or what is able to overcome it. Certainly not the bare life of today's society,

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4 For an analytical evaluation that aims to integrate the presence of the two models in Agamben's thought, see McLoughlin (2012).

which he despises in *Where are we now?* Therefore, after decades of esoteric criticism, he is still left with the announcement of a politics “yet to be entirely thought” (Agamben 2000: 111).

When Saramago lets the counterfactual of *zoē* barge into *bios*, he breaks the perimeter of bare life and shows that the latter and *bios* are not the only content of the state. Hania Nashef cleverly illustrates the logic of exception and camp through the hospital in *Blindness*, where the first blind or presumed infected people are confined and deprived of rights (see Nashef 2017), but I would like to suggest another possible interpretation. I think that what is at stake in the novel is that the biological exception swallows up the sovereign in a spiral of indistinction which, instead of confirming its power, destroys it. When the collapsed fence of the lazaret shows that “there’s no difference between inside and outside, between here and there, between the many and the few, between what we’re living through and what we shall have to live through” (Saramago 1999a: 242), Saramago makes implode Agamben’s and Schmitt’s paradigm and shows a limited and intrinsically fragile sovereignty,<sup>5</sup> exposed to private manipulation and therefore in need of the intervention of the people (see Jenkins 2018: 223).<sup>6</sup>

## Agamben: The Happy, Profane Life of the Quodlibet

Agamben’s purpose is to recover the sense of politics that “has been contaminated by law” (Agamben 2017b: 242) and leave room for “a *nonstatal and non-judicial* politics and human life” (Agamben 2000: 111) which are “ordered ex-

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5 In *The Stone Raft* Saramago writes: “Governments are only capable and effective at times when there is no real need to put their ability and effectiveness to the test” (Saramago 1996: 184).

6 Saramago’s governments are often grappling with emergencies, which they struggle to manage with internal plots, conspiracy theories, and sometimes clumsy use of the media. Just think of the “government of national salvation” in *The Stone Raft* (Saramago 1996: 184f.), of the emergency (although not decreed as state of emergency) in *Death at Intervals*, of the press releases and of the planned “government of unity and national salvation” of *Blindness* (Saramago 1999a: 130). *Seeing*, most of all, stages the ministerial debate about the “state of emergency,” the “government of national salvation” and “state of siege” (Saramago 2006: 28–31), then the “rapid implementation” of the state of emergency (*ibid.*: 35) and of the state of siege (*ibid.*: 50): an escalation in which the surrounded capital becomes the real besieger of the government.

clusively for the full enjoyment of worldly life" (*ibid.*: 113). The implicit premise of this statement is Walter Benjamin's distinction between sovereign "mythic violence," which is "law-making" as well as "law-preserving," and "pure" or "divine" or "revolutionary" violence, which "neither makes nor preserves law, but deposes it" and is "anomic" in that it exists "outside" of the law (Agamben 2017b: 212f.; Benjamin 2002: 236ff.). Pure violence creates a "real state of exception," which contrasts with Schmitt's "virtual" one (where the law is only "pure form," has force but no meaning) with a "symmetrical but inverse gesture" by which "life [...] is entirely transformed into law" (Agamben 2017a: 48).

This is the meaning of Agamben's "worldly life" as a "happy life [...] over which sovereignty and right no longer have hold" (Agamben 2000: 113f.). Agamben calls it "form-of-life" because it is inseparable from the "form" it gives to itself and makes it impossible "to isolate something such as naked [that is, bare] life" (*ibid.*: 2f.), merging together *bios* and *zoē* (see Agamben 2017g: 1225f.). To be free in its being "whatever" (i.e., "quodlibet," or "*such* as it is") and therefore "lovable," the "singularity" of the form-of-life (Agamben, 2007a: 1f.; see Coccia 2017) needs the immediacy of the "contact," understood as "intimacy without relation," because the latter implies conditioning (Agamben 2017g: 1242). Severing the "nexus between violence and law" (Agamben 2017b: 242) and overcoming the form of the relation means for Agamben *deposing* the law or "de-activating" it, that is "rendering [it] inoperative, no-longer-at-work" without replacing it with another law (Agamben 2005: 97f.). This is the task of a "destituent potential" (Agamben 2017g: 1268ff.; see Zartaloudis 2015), which carries out a "profanation" in that it deactivates the Schmittian theological and political "apparatus" of law, through which something or someone is *consecrated* and transferred to a "separate sphere" and removed from "common use" (Agamben 2009: 17–9; Agamben, 2007b: 73f.; see Salzani 2013a: 155f.). That is why, according to Agamben, a "happy life" is "absolutely profane" (Agamben 2000: 113).

## Living in the Demented Labyrinth of the City

Saramago's *Seeing* is set in the country that was struck four years earlier by the epidemic of white blindness, which, by tacit agreement, has been removed from common memory, until an avalanche of blank ballots (83 %) overwhelms the parties in the elections, delegitimizing the democratic system. The colour white which connects the two facts recalls the epidemic, providing the authorities with a wavering pretext to suppose a political plot and to charge the sighted "doctor's wife" of *Blindness* with being its leader. The real object of the suppression is not the epidemic, but its revelation of the inherent weakness of sovereignty. Here Saramago takes the final step from the camp to the city. The natural event in *Blindness* laid the premise for the human action in *Seeing*, where the blank ballots as "sheer denial of any reference frame (orthodoxy)" (Vanhoutte 2018: 248) manifest themselves within the anything but solid sovereign space of modern democracy. But I would like to get to the point step by step.

The first step is *Blindness*, which seems dominated by bare life inside the hospital, abandoned by the authorities to rape and oppression, and outside it, where people live and die in search for food. The equality of both sides confirms that Saramago's 'epidemic reset' erased the *bios* of law together with the bare life as its product. Therefore, the life lived in the "demented labyrinth of the city" (Saramago 1999a: 217) is no longer bare life, but *zoē* in search of its own form, striving to become a form-of-life, as Agamben would say. Despite the ostensible analogies, there are deep differences between the two authors' anthropologies, whose consideration allows us to evaluate their distance on an ethical and political level.

In *Blindness* Saramago describes a sympathetic humankind, rooted in relationships thanks to "moral conscience" (*ibid.*: 17). Around the time he publishes the novel, he feels the need to "literally" express an "ethical feeling of existence" (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 152). He thinks that, avoiding "complicating life with great philosophies on good and evil," it is sufficient to base oneself on the "simple" but "fundamental" rule which consists in "not harming others" and "leads not to selfishness but to human relationship" (*ibid.*: 149). Therefore, if "ethics must dominate reason" (*ibid.*: 150), "thought can never be autistic" (*ibid.*: 207), otherwise "it becomes a destructive weapon" (*ibid.*: 182).

When Saramago explains the metaphor of blindness as a “non-rational use of reason” (*ibid.*: 179f.), he is therefore referring to its disengagement from ethics and politics, which, quite to the contrary, is based on “collective responsibility” (*ibid.*: 483) through “involvement” and a “very strong feeling of solidarity” (*ibid.*: 614). As Saramago writes (recalling the Marxian concept of justice): “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” (Saramago, 1999a: 141). Basically, someone who considers himself outside the relationship with the others is blind. And for this reason, one can “die of blindness” (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 179).

Michael Keren stresses this awareness of interdependence before any conceptual abstraction and any logic of covenant about a just society. Neither saints nor demons,<sup>7</sup> Saramago’s characters seek together a revisable balance, facing difficult choices (Keren 2007: 461f.). Andre Santos Campos relates the “anonymity” of Saramago’s characters to Feuerbach’s “species-being,” which does not erase singularity but makes man “aware of himself as a being-of-relations (he is not only *in* relation; he *is* relation).” And this becomes the “driving force” in the choral, “bottom-up” dynamic of the narrated social transformations (Santos Campos 2018: 72f.). Just think of the group of blind people led by the doctor’s wife in *Blindness*, or of the peaceful and orderly people in the ex-capital in *Seeing*. There can scarcely be a clearer difference from Agamben. Agamben prefers contact to relationship, demonised as a “bond” imposed by the logic of the exception, and substitutes it with a “caesura” (Agamben 2017g: 1273), which unites us “to one another in the form of our being alone” (*ibid.*: 1243), striving to “think ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation” (Agamben 2017a: 42; and see Agamben 2017g: 1273) and to imagine such unrelatedness in the form of a community (Agamben 2017g: 1243).

## Messianism and Class Struggle

Towards the end of *Blindness*, the blind doctor and his wife seek refuge in a church, where a sacrilegious man has blindfolded the sacred images and statues

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7 “Humans are not inherently good or bad” (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 151).

(Saramago 1999a: 315ff.). This episode recalls the meaning of ‘profanation’ in Agamben as a deactivation of the political-theological device of the law. For Saramago, too, it is a matter of revealing the crisis of a whole system of conventions, values, and hierarchies, and it is not devoid of significance that this happens while blind people roam the city, using what they find based on their needs and while “new ways of living are being invented” (*ibid.*: 256). This happens in the doctor’s house too, where friends live by sharing, fulfilling what Agamben describes as ‘use’ without law, typical of the highest Franciscan poverty (Agamben 2005: 27; Agamben 2017: 985ff.; and see Cavalletti 2017). Agamben links this transformation to an interpretation of messianism which does not refer to a future time but to “the time *that* we ourselves are;”, “not the end of time, but *the time of the end*,” which deactivates the law without annulling its form or its external consequences, but suspending it and bringing it to completion (Agamben 2005: 61–8).

According to Carlo Salzani, Saramago shares with Benjamin and Agamben an anti-utopian vision of history, redemptive of the oppressed and linked to simultaneity, that has as a keystone messianism as a “time of salvation (and of political action)” and recovers thereby the present through the vision of the past (Salzani 2018: 23, 29; see also Saramago qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 489). By identifying a significant analogy with Benjamin’s historical materialist in “On the Concept of History,” who “blast[s] open the continuum of history” (Benjamin 2006c: 396), Salzani stresses that Saramago’s path is based on the interplay between the messianic “now” and the “Marxist ideological framework,” which is the solid bedrock of an approach “correcting the past in a progressive social (and human) emancipation” (Salzani 2018: 22, 27; on Marxist materialism, see also Santos Campos 2018: 64ff.). Benjamin writes that in the class struggle for “crude and material things” it would be impossible to redeem the past from “conformism” without “spiritual things” such as “confidence, courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude”; their “secret heliotropism” (Benjamin 2006c: 390f.) seems to be the same force which reactivates Saramago’s tension between synchrony and diachrony, pushing human beings to emancipation.

## Recovering Democracy: Acting and its Political Consequences

At the 1999 conference on *Democratic Truth and Illusion* Saramago denounced the inability of current democracy “to stop and reverse” the ongoing “backwards transformation process” caused by the interference of economic powers. These have degraded the “instrumental void” between electors and delegates (necessary for the functioning of the representative system) to the point of reducing it to a “civic abdication” and an “act of renunciation” (Saramago 2018: 236–39, 241). *Seeing* works in a narrative form on the recovery from this representative democratic short circuit, which, according to Saramago, can be overthrown by a “substantial democracy” based on participation (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 542).

What is at stake is the difference in the conception of acting and freedom in Saramago and Agamben, whose political consequences are manifest in this novel. In Agamben’s messianism, what plays a central role is the “charge of redemption” (Salzani 2013a: 64) inherent in ‘potentiality,’ a category that Agamben develops through a close confrontation with Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *De anima*<sup>8</sup> and by examining Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, the man who “would prefer not to [write]” (Agamben 1999b: 253f.). Agamben makes Bartleby the focal point of an “ontology of potentiality” (*ibid.*: 259), shifting the accent from the “potentiality to be” (which “has as its object a certain act”) to the “potentiality to not-be.” Instead of concentrating on the “passage from potentiality to act,” he looks at potentiality as the capability “of its own impotence,” coherent with the free singularity of the “whatever” or “quodlibet-like character” (Agamben 2007a: 35f.). According to Agamben, the “power to not-be” is a form of resistance that suspends and renders inoperative theological and moral devices like “essence,” “historical or spiritual vocation,” or “biological destiny” (*ibid.*: 43); in other words: “essential and identity presuppositions” (Salzani 2013a: 65) and their relationships, as well as the laws imposing them (see Agamben 2017g: 1250f.).

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8 For a detailed analysis of the topic, see van der Heiden (2014: 240–61).



Even *Seeing* seems readable in perfect Agambenian style: the ordered people of the ex-capital, who casted blank ballots, represent a “destituent potential” whose “divine” or “pure” violence suspends the law and realises the “real state of exception,” in which *zoē* joins *bios* and realises itself as a “form-of-life.” But as shown by Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte, Saramago’s blank ballots are very different from *Bartleby’s* abstention, which remains within the “power not-to-be.” What is at stake in *Seeing* is instead a “silent activity,” an active and explicit delegitimization of the government (see Vanhoutte 2018). According to his Marxist materialistic dialectic, Saramago does not stop in potentiality but opts for actuality, which is consistent with his conviction about human beings as related to each other and to the world. Through his characters, Saramago does not place himself outside the democratic representative system but within it and criticizes its current outcome in order to change it (see Gómez Aguilera 2010: 518f., 536f.; see Martel 2019: 140). What is deactivated in *Seeing* is not the democratic institutional framework but the exception of the delegitimized ruler, whose decision now appears to be a source of crimes and abuses on the people of the ex-capital.

## The Impotence and the Act

What Agamben criticises in the “potentiality to be” is the “*energein*, being-in-act,” which “can only mean passing to a certain activity” and which expresses a kind of necessity, which subordinates potentiality to act (Agamben 2007a: 35). Here it is not possible to develop this topic further, but I believe that with the ‘potentiality to not-be’ Agamben lays the speculative foundations of a criticism which aims at striking both the dichotomous “ethics” of “rule and life, universal and particular, necessity and liberty” (Agamben 2017f: 946) and its modern interpretation in Kant’s “ontology of command and having-to-be,” which rigorizes the “theological-liturgical tradition of *officium* and operability” and reduces freedom to the execution of an imperative (Agamben 2017d: 747f.).

Agamben’s critical attempt is undoubtedly appealing, but it fails to account for a fundamental problem, which it shares with the same Kantian formalism he criticises. As the recourse to *Bartleby* shows, the ‘potentiality to not-be’

is totally reabsorbed by the negation, which empties it of all meaning and content and forces it to surreptitiously postulate them from being in act, from the *energeia* of morality or of political power which were to be deactivated. Accepting power as a presupposition, Agamben's man/Bartleby is subjected to its conditions; they *can* only ever be reactive, never active.<sup>9</sup> Although the inoperativeness of such *argos* man claims a clear distance from nihilism and decisionism (Agamben 2007a: 43),<sup>10</sup> it is nevertheless compliant, 'quodlibetally' indifferent and as much 'decisionist' and nihilist as the biopower which it only apparently attacks, being completely unable to escape the binary alternative imposed by the latter (see Laclau 2007: 21f.; Mills 2008: 135f.).

Starting from these premises, I will use the doctor's wife in *Blindness* to underline some differences between what I generically called the anthropology of Saramago and Agamben and to evaluate their ethical and political consequences. James Martel considers this woman, who "is acting rather than unacting" (Martel 2019: 143), as the main expression of Saramago's realistic pessimism "based on bonds between human actors," which at the end of *Seeing* unleashes a second and definitive anarchist pandemic against the "affective lockdown" of "archism" (*ibid.*: 145).<sup>11</sup> By eliminating the doctor's wife, the government in *Seeing* makes her both an innocent victim of the conspiracy of the white ballots and a guilty instigator of the protest they only 'incubated.' Her experience during the white blindness can only bear fruit in the reconstituted 'archistic' order, after the biological pandemic has revealed it to be irretrievably compromised. Such a development, given by *Seeing*, is heralded by a sentence of the woman in the first of the two novels: "I am blind with your blindness,

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- 9 For an exemplary critique of Bartleby as a "beautiful soul" whose "empty refusal" is the antechamber of a "social suicide," see Hardt and Negri (2000: 203–4).
- 10 "Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability [sic!] [*inoperosità*] of human-kind, to the radical being-without-work of human communities. There is politics because human beings are *argos*-beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation—that is, beings of pure potentiality, that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust" (Agamben 2000: 140).
- 11 "Archism is the opposite of anarchism although it is not often called by that term" and "is a principle of rule and domination characterized by two key principles, hierarchy and representation" (Martel 2019: 127).

perhaps I might be able to see better if there were more of us who could see” (Saramago 1999a: 297).

Unlike Bartleby, who prefers not to, the woman chooses and pays the very high price of the “responsibility of having [her] eyesight when others have lost theirs” (*ibid.*: 252), going so far as to kill the leader of the exploiters of the lazaret, to lay claim to her own dignity as well as of all the women they raped.<sup>12</sup> Compared to Bartleby’s ‘potentiality to not-be,’ Saramago’s woman experiences the ‘potentiality to be,’ realizing that her being “born to see this horror” (*ibid.*: 276) makes sense in the name of the relationship with the others: a bond that Agamben must break to remain in ‘impotence.’ The extreme deed of the doctor’s wife marks a major narrative turning point in *Blindness*, starting the riot in the hospital, whose destruction puts an end to the public and private oppression, which share the same logic of the ‘affective lockdown.’ Before the rebellion, the old blind man with the black eyepatch summarizes the ethical implications of her action as follows:

If shame still has any meaning in this hell where we’re expected to live and which we’ve turned into the hell of hells, it is thanks to that person who had the courage to go and kill the hyena in its lair [...], but we, who have nothing, apart from this last shred of undeserved dignity, let us at least show that we are still capable of fighting for what is rightfully ours. (Saramago 1999a: 196)

## Witnessing the Horror

In these quotations from Saramago’s work, some keywords stand out, such as ‘responsibility,’ ‘eyesight,’ ‘shame,’ ‘dignity’ and ‘rightfully,’ which I believe can provide an interesting basis for comparison with the analysis of the testimony

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12 “We shall return to that place where they humiliated us so that none of that humiliation may remain” (Saramago 1999a: 197).

proposed by Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.<sup>13</sup> In this work, Agamben examines some terms that indicate the witness in the Latin legal and in the Greek theological vocabularies, discarding for his purposes the meaning of the *testis* as a 'third party' and focusing on survivor (*superstes*), guarantor (*auctor*) and, in part, martyr (*martys*), but granting a privileged role to the *superstes* (see Agamben 2017e: 772, 778f., 861). Referring to "[Primo] Levi's paradox" (*ibid.*: 861), Agamben considers "the true witnesses, the 'complete witnesses' [...], those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness" because they were annihilated. Therefore, the survivors who "speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses [...] bear witness to a missing testimony [...], in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness" (*ibid.*: 784).<sup>14</sup> The true witnesses are represented by the so-called *Muselmann*<sup>15</sup> reduced to 'non-human,' who before dying experienced "the impossibility of knowing and seeing" as "he who has seen the Gorgon" (*ibid.*: 796f.). By witnessing the unbearable (unspeakable and invisible) in their stead, the survivor feels that they have also lost "humanity and responsibility when entering the camp," becoming bare life. Once the sentiment of dignity has vanished (*ibid.*: 800–2, 807), shame manifests itself as a real "ontological sentiment" in the "double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification" (*ibid.*: 831f.).

This last passage for Agamben underlies the same "purely discursive reality" of the 'I,' characterized by an "irreducible negativity" which "pushes his own lived experiences back into a limitless past and can no longer coincide with them." Every speaker/survivor experiences the trauma of that "double movement" as a witness: whoever knows feels an "impossibility of speaking," and whoever speaks experiences "an equally bitter impossibility to know" (*ibid.*: 842–43). This makes speaking a "paradoxical act," a testimony of the non-coincidence of living being and speaking being, subjectification and desubjectification, from which shame arises (*ibid.*: 851, 856). On the basis of

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13 For an exemplary and detailed critique of Agamben's positions, see Mesnard and Kahan (2001); on this debate, see Salzani (2013a: 119f.).

14 On this topic, see Salzani (2013a: 114–9).

15 "A being from whom humiliation, horror, and fear had so taken away all consciousness and all personality as to make him absolutely apathetic" (Agamben 2017a: 151).

these characteristics, Catherine Mills considers shame in Agamben as an “auto-affection” which reveals the self-referentiality of the testimony and of the subject, depriving its ethics of any relational dimension (Mills 2008: 103f.).<sup>16</sup> Taking a cue from her considerations, I believe that it is precisely through the testimony that Saramago’s option for such a dimension can be highlighted.

To do this, I would like to start with a (hopefully not excessively) cryptic reference to Kafka’s *Trial*. Upon returning from the lazaret in the ghostly city, the doctor’s wife drives her husband and the girl with the dark glasses to his eye clinic. It is there that she utters the words:

The only miracle we can perform is to go on living [...], to preserve the fragility of life from day to day, as if it were blind and did not know where to go, and perhaps it is like that, perhaps it really does not know, it placed itself in our hands, after giving us intelligence, and this is what we have made of it. (Saramago 1999a: 297)

The young woman with the dark glasses reproaches the doctor’s wife for speaking as if she had been blind too. And the husband adds: “I am afraid you are like the witness in search of a court to which he has been summoned by who knows who, in order to make a statement about who knows what” (*ibid.*). The doctor’s wife’s reaction is immediate. If she were in this situation, she would release two “statements”: 1) “Time is coming to an end, putrescence is spreading...”; 2) “Let’s open our eyes” (*ibid.*).

Salzani’s thesis about the messianic and redemptive aspect of Saramago’s Marxism seems to be confirmed by these statements: if the first introduces an apocalyptic “end of time” (Agamben 2005: 62), the second shifts the focus to a messianic “present as the exigency of fulfillment” (*ibid.*: 76). However, it is necessary to take into account the only partial coincidence of Saramago’s ‘messianic time’ along with Benjamin and Agamben’s underlined by Salzani (Salzani 2018: 29); in fact, if the deviation must be identified in Saramago’s option for the ‘potentiality to be,’ it is not possible to underestimate the clearly divergent

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16 For a broader critical reconstruction of this topic, see Mills (2008: 87–105).

consequences of his messianism compared to the Agambenian 'impotent' and 'irresponsible' one.

The context of the words spoken by the doctor's wife is also interesting, if one considers Agamben's constant commitment to Kafka and *The Trial*, in which he interprets the problem of justice through the "deposition, *désœuvrement*, in the messianic overcoming of its signifying/penal structure" by Josef K. (Salzani 2013b: 263). Even more interesting is the role that Agamben attributes to shame in this deactivation, repeatedly quoting the final passage of the novel (see Agamben 1995: 85; Agamben 2000: 133; Agamben 2017e: 830) in which the protagonist, executed "like a dog," feels that "the shame would outlive him" (Kafka 1964: 286; see Salzani 2013b: 269).<sup>17</sup> Josef K., who does not survive the trial, is also an integral witness; unlike the *Muselmann*, he is still capable of feeling shame, but his dying 'like a dog' on the edge of the city reaffirms the lack of a relational dimension stressed by Mills in the ethical implications of the combination shame/testimony.

Borrowing (and forcing) Agamben's distinctions, I believe that the entirety of the doctor's wife's testimony in *Blindness* derives precisely from the strength of staring at the Gorgon without falling into the impossibility of seeing and into the silence of death. In *Seeing*, she does not die 'like a dog' but *with* a dog (the dog of tears) (see Saramago 2006: 307). "Born to see this horror" to prevent her companions from "turning into animals, worse still, into blind animals" (Saramago 1999a: 133), in *Blindness* she is both *auctor* and *superstes* and in *Seeing* she becomes *martyr* too: but sight and word allowed her to understand and give voice to the sacrifice of the blind people and to the silent protest of the blank ballots.

Thanks to her, from shame comes the claim to dignity which, as the old man with the black eyepatch says, "rightfully" belongs to human beings. There is a clear distance from Agamben's critique of 'secular ethics,' which he deems is based on the juridical categories of guilt and responsibility (raised "to the status of supreme ethical categories") and on the judgement of "law, independent of truth and justice" (Agamben 2017e: 773, 777). *Thanks to her*, the idea of justice

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 17 On the interpretation of *The Trial* in Saramago through the "paternal authority," see Saramago (2010b: 256–59).

does not lose its meaning in the hospital and remains a thread that connects the 'before,' the 'during' and the 'after,' well beyond the narrow limits of Agamben's politics, because testimony is not based on exception and thus 'unassumable,' but on an intrinsic and relational humanity and on the need to responsibly assume all that it is capable of. When her group of blind people, having come out of the lazaret, lives in her house, the doctor's wife says:

We went down all the steps of indignity, all of them, until we reached total degradation, the same might happen here albeit in a different way, there we still had the excuse that the degradation belonged to someone else, not now, now we are all equal regarding good and evil, please, don't ask me what good and what evil are, we knew what it was each time we had to act when blindness was an exception, what is right and what is wrong are simply different ways of understanding our relationships with the others, not that which we have with ourselves, one should not trust the latter. (Saramago 1999a: 276)

Good and evil, removed from any absolutization, take on meaning for Saramago only in the relationship among differences and human frailties, making every staying together all the more crucial the more these differences and frailties are exposed.

## Common Sense, Justice, Law

Agamben's ethical theory of deactivation and 'impotence' is based on three main presuppositions: 1) "Auschwitz marks the end and the ruin of every ethics of dignity and conformity to a norm," as "the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends" (Agamben 2017e: 807); 2) "The state of exception starts to become the rule" (Agamben 2000: 39); 3) "The camp is the paradigm itself of political space at the point in which politics becomes biopolitics and the *homo sacer* becomes indistinguishable from the citizen" (*ibid.*: 41). Saramago's choice appears to be different: 1) the hospital does not represent the end of the ethics of dignity and rules, but the place of

their reconstruction; 2) his state of exception is not able to become the rule, because it is continually crossed over by wider dynamics, which indeed 'take exception to' the sovereign and his exceptions; 3) since the overlapping of state and camp is no longer in place, the citizen remains distinct from *homo sacer*. Much of this happens because in Saramago's stories his ethics and dignity do not remain outside the gates of the camp and vulnerable people are connected by shame and pity. In *Blindness*, even the thief who took advantage of the first blind man is welcomed into the doctor's wife's group and despite his selfishness he is treated compassionately until he dies.

If Agamben rejects the ethics of guilt and responsibility and the law as universal devices of capture that must be deactivated or be suffered as one's lot (see Agamben 2017e: 773ff.); if he considers only 'happiness' as a matter of ethics, which (according to the Greek etymology of *ethos*) is 'selfhood' and therefore "the mode in which each one enters into contact with oneself" and is "contemplation of a potential"; then it is inevitable that what he calls form-of-life is nothing but the "articulation of a zone of irresponsibility, in which the identities and imputations of the juridical order are suspended" (Agamben 2017g: 1250f.). Saramago, instead of demonizing the law and ethics' universality, works on their insularity and relationality, speaking explicitly of responsibility and making them 'means with ends,' the ends that humanity pursues "to preserve the fragility of life from day to day" (Saramago 1999a: 297).

As Mills emphasizes, the refusal of "relationality and alterity" as "fundamental aspects of ethics" (Mills 2008: 105, and 107–31) and the messianic deactivation of "rights and law as instruments [...] in a struggle for justice," leave Agamben prisoner of his "conceptual absolutism" and completely incapable of critical intervention in the face of the reality of existence, its social, cultural, political and economic inequalities and its dyscrasias, reduced to mere facticity (*ibid.*: 136). Saramago, on the other hand, consciously uses these 'instruments' to keep the human community on its feet, considering them an imperfect but ineliminable part of our social reality.<sup>18</sup> The writer does not expound a thematic vision. With the laconic concreteness of those who have known dictatorship, he rests his vision on the three cornerstones of common sense, justice and the

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18 "There will always be laws, whether they are just or unjust" (Saramago 2022c: 110).



law (Saramago 2010: 81): the first principle, common sense, is the logic of the relationship, from whose balancing between human interests and aspirations derives the second principle, justice,<sup>19</sup> which finds positivity and protection in the third one, the law. Like Agamben, Saramago also denounces a “judicial system that resulted from the invention of sin” (*ibid.*: 136). However, he focuses on the commitment “to introduce common sense into our tribunals” (*ibid.*: 75). He supports The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (harshly criticized by Agamben) and accuses their violations (see *ibid.*: 16, 61, 81; Gómez Aguilera 2010: 629–636). And he sarcastically echoes the words of the government in *Seeing*, which considers rights a “mere symbol of what could be” (Saramago 2006: 85f.), to ask for respect for the Constitutions (see Saramago 2010: 46).

The relational dimension in which Saramago projects the protagonists in his novels represents the only foothold in the silence of the law and of the sovereign decision (objected to and defeated by the *zoē* in *Blindness*). An instance of justice remains alive in human beings and struggles against its opposite, which inexplicably seems to be the only remaining player in Agamben’s camp. Through the doctor’s wife this common sense (as the sight as *sensorium*) bridges with *Seeing*, where the sighted justice among the blind must reactivate the justice of the law, which the sighted people instead represent as blind (to bring common sense back to the courts, said Saramago). Therefore, in *Seeing* the doctor’s wife on the one hand is not afraid to confess to the murder and indeed claims justice for it (see Saramago 2006: 217), and on the other she still sees in the current law a significant bulwark against the accusation of having hatched the conspiracy of the white ballots (*ibid.*: 258).

The law, as a common measure, remains imperfect but developable, subject to twisting, but also to a plurality of forces and instances of control, as Laclau objects to Agamben (see Laclau 2007). Therefore, if the doctor’s wife cannot be convicted of either murder or conspiracy, her murder by the state, on the

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19 Through the eyes of a sixteenth-century Florentine peasant, who embodies the ingenuity of common sense, Saramago denounces the deceit of Natural Law, speaking of the “powerful arguments of some gullible scholars, for whom the idea of Good, as a source of duty and right, is innate in the human soul and precedes any convention.” For Saramago, albeit it is only an “invention of man,” the law nevertheless expresses his “yearning [...] to build his own freedom” (Saramago 2022c: 111).

other hand, can be politically denounced (the population of *Seeing* taking to the streets) (see Saramago 2006: 290ff.) and, who knows, perhaps legally prosecuted (Saramago 2010: 81f.). As integral witness, never blind or dumb, with her active 'no' the doctor's wife sought justice also in the law. As Saramago suggests: "A no like the one introduced in the novel *History of the siege of Lisbon* by the proofreader Raimundo Silva. That no in the novel is that of those who say: 'enough.' Those who understand that others are telling a story, but an official story" (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 526). A far cry from *Bartleby's 'I'd rather not.'* While for Agamben testimony is an area of indistinction between human and non-human, for Saramago it is a choice that distinguishes the former from the latter.

## Conclusion

Unlike the intellectual snob Agamben, Saramago has a very clear idea of dictatorship, because he really experienced it. Unlike the quixotic Agamben, he does not need to imagine dictatorship underneath a democratic form and to give substance to his imaginary battles by inventing the invention of an epidemic. It would be foolish to reject Agamben's meditations as a whole. But I do not share his overlap between Schmittian politics and modern democracy. According to his theory of the Great Transformation, by taking advantage of the pandemic governments are overtly imposing the state of exception as normal and permanent (see Agamben 2021b: 18, 28, 36, 39), with 'very likely' consequences such as the closure of universities to students and the ban on "gathering to have conversations about politics or culture" (*ibid.*: 39). However, for months we have resumed face-to-face lessons, and we still meet to talk about Saramago, politics, and Agamben.

Although I don't like the Italy of today, I cannot compare it to the Italy of the fascist era. Nor am I willing to seamlessly link the state in which I live to totalitarianism. Agamben does both (*ibid.*: 9, 38, 41f., 57, 69; Agamben 2021a: 115f.), and also denounces the very modern theory of rights that guarantees his freedom to denounce it. While for Agamben it is enough to 'accuse' society of being democratic (since in his idea democratic regimes share the same bi-

opolitical roots as the undemocratic ones and are therefore oppressive like the latter), Saramago accuses it of not being democratic enough. I see the serious problems with democracy, but I also believe, along with the Portuguese writer, that its very imperfections, its exposure to the traumatic counterfactuals of the *zoē*, still give us room and opportunities to try to live and think better.

# Debord and Saramago: Allegories of the Society of Spectacle in *Blindness* and *The Cave*

GUSTAVO RACY

The last chapter of Guy Debord's *The Society of Spectacle* (2002) opens with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The passage, rather famous, defines self-consciousness (*Selbstbewusstsein*) as that which exists *in-* and *for-itself* only for another self-consciousness and therefore, only as it is recognized by another self-consciousness. The concept of self-consciousness bears the mark of being Hegel's basis for the concept of personality and is developed and retaken throughout his philosophy. It is not by chance, of course, that the definition of self-consciousness is referred to by Debord. It matters, there, to 'put the matter in materialism,' so to say, and grasp the materialisation of ideology within the society of spectacle. Quite simply, this materialisation is, itself, the *spectacle*. As false consciousness, the spectacle is the totalitarian view of non-history, it "is the acme of ideology because it fully exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life" (Debord 2002: 56). As spectacle increasingly imposes itself as 'the new power of deception,' human society is proportionately estranged from itself. For Debord, spectacle can be so successful that it manages to reconcile materialism and idealism, as it merges the conception of the world as representation and technical mediation of signs and signals "which ultimately materialise an abstract ideal" (Debord 2002: 57). Eventually, society becomes "what ideology already was" (*ibid.*). Ultimately, society has turned into a representation of itself.

According to Debord, the spectacle is a partial reality that reflects a world that is pure contemplation. It is a "social relation between people that is mediated by images [...]. It is a worldview that has been actually materialised" (Debord 2002: 7), as both a producer and a product of the social relations of production. The structure that unfolds from the society of spectacle relents us to a life of false consciousness, as personal relations become relationships between

appearances. It is not only a visual production, but an economic production of the visual, which comes in only to express political economy's negation of life, veiled in the positivity of signs that come together to represent a world deemed desirable. Different spheres come together in this construction: religion, power, consumption, aesthetics, belonging, technology. The overall conclusion is not precisely optimistic: a "true critique" is necessary and, "seeking to go beyond the spectacle [it] must *know how to wait*" (Debord 2002: 57). It cannot strive for immediate results, nor be achieved by the "isolated individual nor by the atomized and manipulated masses, but only and always by the class that is able to dissolve all classes by reducing all power to the de-alienating form of realised democracy" (*ibid.*). Although spectacle is the transformation of capital into image, materialised in the commodity, Debord is concerned, mostly, with the conceptual, or mental, processes through which the spectacle prospers "in *totally* colonising social life" (Debord 2002: 13), hence the importance of ideology as false consciousness and the return to Hegel's concept of personality. Despite championing for a real critique that can circumvent immediacy and be materially active in the world, Debord departs and arrives at the unresolved problem of ideology. Rethinking personality, society and economy is, thus, central for a critique of the society of spectacle, as a way of reuniting what it separated.

The encounter between two distinct self-consciousnesses, i.e., the recognition between two self-consciousnesses—the only way through which it may become self-consciousness *in* and *for itself*—is a starting point for understanding yet a different author in whose work the critique of the society of spectacle is translated literarily. José Saramago's tetralogy, composed by *Blindness* (1999a), *All the Names* (1999c), *The Cave* (2000b), and *Seeing* (2006), comprises a striking criticism of contemporary neoliberal society. Thirty years after Debord's book, Saramago managed to structure a literary account of Western, post-modern neoliberal economies, which eventually led him to become the most famous Portuguese writer and the first of his language to be awarded the Nobel prize. Of course, such a distinction is of little importance regarding the quality of his writings. Saramago was a harsh critic of capitalism and contemporary democracy which, to him, have its share of responsibilities in world wars, poverty, and famine, as it aids the market's spurious games of stockholding and speculation (see Uechi 2022). A writer of parables, the novels in his tetralogy

range from Kafkaian plots of labyrinthine bureaucracy in *All the Names*, to the re-evaluation of Plato's *Republic* in *The Cave*, passing through existential absurdism, all of it preciously crafted with a baroque character proper to Saramago. As political novels, Saramago's tetralogy touches upon different issues, inquiring on human nature, ethics, the meaning of labour and economy, the essence of democracy, the problem of social control, and so forth.

An inveterate communist, Saramago evidently shares with Debord a striking similitude as he sees the consolidation of post-war European democracies as symbiotic to capitalism. However, especially in *Blindness* and *The Cave*, it seems worthy to reflect how, through a completely different path, Saramago can provide a materialist portrayal of Debord's theoretical observations. Both novels, each one a parable, are amongst the best-known works of the Portuguese writer. *Blindness* tells the story of a country struck by an epidemic of "white blindness." Different from what blindness is usually assumed to be, that is, total darkness, the blindness of the novel is completely white, total absence of darkness. *The Cave*, on the other hand, retakes Plato's allegory of the cave, and the story follows a ceramist whose life loses any purpose once his work is deprived of value due to the erection of a megalomaniac Centre, a mix of industrial facility, shopping mall and gated community, that progressively takes hold of the imaginary land where the novel is set. Both texts share a concern with the ethical and material consequences of capitalist organisation and control society in everyday life. Such consequences are expressed in each novel as the plot unfolds and we are led to reflect on the characters' actions and choices.

As a pair, both novels create a set of compliances that allows experimenting on them as complimentary essays or allegories of the contemporary world. This way, as *Blindness* may be considered an essay on ontological and ethical concerns over human nature and good/evil, *The Cave* brings forth a reflection over epistemological and social questions, such as the economic organisation of life and the exercise of power. As *Blindness* puts its reader in front of a situation in which characters are reduced to the most basic structure for survival, *The Cave* presents us the opposite, and situates characters in a context in which ideally, on an individual level all their material needs may be fulfilled. Any opposition between both novels is, thus, only apparent as, in the end, they feed into one another, portraying the same sort of attack to contemporary society, each one

focusing on different spheres. This way, *Blindness* uses vision, or the lack of it, as a motto to accuse the misdeeds of a society in which seeing is power, whereas *The Cave* does the same by accusing the overwhelming power of commodities present in the windows and passages of the Centre. Together, they form an allegory of contemporary society, criticising, specifically, neoliberal economy and the cultural structure it grounds, overpoweringly commodified and depersonalised, although promising to bring autonomy to the individual, at the same time as it abandons them to a social structure in which one is forced to choose or surrender to a multiple and overwhelming universe of meanings that conflate politically (see Hoff 2014). Ontology, on the one side, and ethics on the other, *Blindness* and *The Cave* conflate a worldview in which the society of spectacle is given matter and shape in the form of storytelling.

Perhaps the obvious starting point for the relation between Saramago and Debord is the issue of vision. An allegory for Saramago, vision is the centre-piece of spectacle for Debord. Whereas for Saramago the lack of vision is a means for addressing problems proper to contemporary society, for Debord it is the main sense through which spectacle is grounded. If everything “that was directly lived is now merely represented in the distance” (Debord 2002: 7), with the consolidation of the society of spectacle, the world became an object of which experience is only lived through contemplation. The spectacle, as “concrete inversion of life” (*ibid.*), is the dispositive through which social relations become imagetic, mediated by images. People become, thus, images to be seen. This relation had already been analysed, originally, by Marx in the *Capital's* famous section on the fetishism of commodity. There, Marx observes that the act of seeing implies a physical relation between physical things. When it comes to commodities, however, this relation is lost, and objects stop being seen in connection to their physical properties, but by a quasi-magical, fetishized property, assuming “the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 2010: 82). If, at first, it is the commodity that starts redefining the social relations between people, eventually, Debord hypothesizes, this redefinition is concretized as fetishism enters the relations between people themselves. The spectacle is, this way, a world in which people do not recognize themselves as people, but by fetishized images of objectified personalities. This question had, again, already been analysed by Marx (1998) in his critique of Feuerbach.

There, Marx criticises the current materialism by denouncing that it had not yet managed to objectify reality as “*sensuous human activity, practice*” (Marx 1998: 569), rather, only “subjectively [...] in the form of the *object (Objekt) or of contemplation (Anschauung)*” (*ibid.*). In other words, for Marx, materialism up to Feuerbach had not been able to surpass the object/subject dichotomy inherited from the classical philosophical system. As Marx sets out to explore the reproductive cycle of capital, he manages to address how human activity, and only *through* human activity—as the sum of human actions responding to material and intellectual needs—are we allowed understanding the way Society organises and reproduces itself, laying bare the ideology that informs the specific functioning of modern economy. In Debord’s terms, “the spectacle represents the dominant *model* of life” (Debord 2002: 5).

What is usually left out by orthodox Marxists, is that Marx understood the human sensorium as of vital importance for the reproduction cycle of capital, since it is through our senses that we experience the world. As fetishized relations increasingly gain predominance in everyday life, and the contemporary world grows more and more visual,<sup>1</sup> it is through vision,<sup>2</sup> through sight, that reified relations find the utmost opportunity to establish themselves as spectacle. In *Blindness*, as readers we are put in front of a context in which, deprived of sight, the characters must reinvent themselves to survive. Deprived of sight, these characters are somewhat deprived of images. As only one of the characters remain ‘uninfected,’ it is through her eyes that the remaining characters will refashion their environment. Allocated in a sanatorium, they are faced with the most instinctual situations in a search for food, water, hygiene and, eventually, power. In this structure, the spectacle which informs everyday life lingers, however, as the *appearance* of a former world pushes people into striving towards anything that might resemble it. As some of the blind characters start organising themselves to withhold the scarce material available for an institution delivered to chaos, the spectacle comes back as this

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1 On the increasing centrality of vision in Modernity, see Crary (1988, 1992, 2013); Foucault (1995); Jay (1988); Jay & Ramaswamy (2014); and Mirzoeff (2011).

2 Of course, the sensorial reification and fetishization is not exclusive to vision. One may simply bear in mind, in the Marxist tradition, Adorno’s studies on the fetishization of music and the regression of listening (see Adorno 2001).



small group of men subjugates the remaining people, reproducing the image of the world prior to the blindness. The irony resides, however, in the fact that, creating a microcosmos, a highly concentrated *topos* wherein human nature would be put to the test, Saramago lays bare the historical core of such nature, as he shows that human relations are a product of the overall sum of concrete practices within the world. Sight or no sight, vision or no vision, looking and/or noticing, or not,<sup>3</sup> the mediation of human relations by images, the reproduction of the status for its own sake, would probably, in the event of an epidemic of blindness, carry on. The interplay between sight and blindness attests to Debord's observation on the spectacle being a social relation between people mediated by images. Life under the mediation of images eradicates the possibility of a self-consciousness in- and for-itself, as it denies the conditions for the recognition between two self-consciousnesses. Under this conception, in the epigraph to his last chapter, Debord epitomises what in *Blindness* becomes explicit as a parable: that the conditions for self-improvement and exercise of liberty through the fulfilment of humankind's inner potentialities is impossible under the current social reality. This impossibility resides in the fact that the spectacle dominates social relations, reifying them through images, blinding us to self-consciousness.

If *Blindness* shows the effects of the society of spectacle on the ontological level, allegorizing the process of dismantlement of self-consciousness, *The Cave* broadens the scope of this process by a direct approach to the social relations of production in motion in capitalism. The novel tells the story of a widower ceramist, Cipriano Algor, his daughter, and his son-in-law. The plot revolves around the construction of a Centre, which propels the decay of Cipriano's traditional handcraft. Eventually forced to move to the Centre, the novel shows the overwhelming forces of industrial production. In it, everything is not only possible, but existent:

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- 3 Saramago distinguishes between *ver*, *olhar*, *notar*, *reparar* (seeing, looking, noticing and repairing), all visual relationships with different consequences and social mechanisms and meaning. I use 'sight' in this phrase as a way to express the physiological phenomenon of seeing. I thank Burghard Baltrusch for the observation on the different spheres of vision as a social fact.

a secret door, another door with a notice on it saying experience natural sensations, rain, window, and snow on demand, a wall of china, a taj mahal, an egyptian pyramid [...] the skeleton of a tyrannosaurus, another one apparently alive, Himalayas complete with Everest, and amazon river complete with Indians [...] a firing squad, an angel playing a trumpet [...] a list of prodigies so long that not even eighty years of leisure time would be enough to take them all in, even if you had been born in the Center and had never left it for the outside world. (Saramago 2002b: 204)

The relation to spectacle is, here, evident. The Centre is the contemporary accomplishment of the Parisian *passage* (see Benjamin 1999).<sup>4</sup> In it, the merging of interior and exterior is fulfilled as one finds the Amazon and the Himalayas just next door. At the cost of a fee, everything becomes accessible, consumable. In the Centre, every power of nature and every symbol of society becomes a spectacle. With the ongoing reproductive cycle of capital, culture is transformed into a commodity in a movement which eventually destitute it from being “the general sphere of knowledge and of representations of lived experiences within historical societies” (Debord 2002: 25). Autonomous, split (*Entzweiung*) from the sphere of human activity, “culture embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that ultimately led to the decline of that independence” (*ibid.*). The bourgeois autonomy of culture is only possible by commodification, and Debord is precise in observing, in this movement, the decadence of the very autonomy culture seeks to achieve. As he takes back the discussion made by Hegel on the difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s philosophical systems (see Silva 2016), Debord sees in the autonomous culture of bourgeois society, an attempt to redemption, to gain back the totality offered, once, by myth, which held culture together as the representation of shared knowledge and experience. As spectacle, however, culture becomes a

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4 The *passages* can be considered the precursors of shopping malls and great magazines. Walter Benjamin used the Parisian *passages*—from its content to its architectural form and its inner industrialist and colonialist—logic to explore the prefiguration of capitalist consumerist society.

representation only of those experiences which are now split from human activity. Culture is something that becomes, thus, unrecognisable; it is but a simulacrum of experience. This is precisely what we see in *The Cave's Centre*, as numerous natural phenomenon and labour products are reproduced while annihilating their human characteristics and the possibility of experience humankind could live through them as part of a totality. The Centre therefore represents, precisely, the simulacrum of experience spoken of by Debord.

As Saramago's plot develops, he shows that work is part and parcel of the process that grants culture its autonomy, as a tool that produces images, thus as the operating agent of the new form of social relations introduced by the society of spectacle. This is clear as the main character progressively sees the devaluation of his work as a ceramist, since the Centre could produce the same sort of pieces in larger amounts, shorter time, and consequently lower price. The fact that these products are taken as being equal to those produced by Cipriano's hands is, of course, false. Nonetheless, it shows how the image that veils the produced thing takes the place of the actual human activity that was necessary for it to exist. Parallel to Walter Benjamin's observation that an artwork's exhibition value eventually takes the place of its cult value (see Benjamin 2006a), Saramago turns the fetishism of commodity into a parable. In a possible reading, this inversion could be seen as refunctionalizing (see Benjamin 2005b) his role as an author, laying bare what Debord called "the struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the basic theme of internal cultural development in historical societies" (Debord 2002: 25).

In the evolution of the novel, the reader is, this way, led to accompany the process through which the spectacle attempts to emulate experiences, while, at the same time, made aware that such a deed is not possible, once human activity is denied to culture. The separation caused by the society of spectacle is attempted to be overcome precisely by that which caused it in the first place. Trying to bring back the unifying totality historically lost with the onset of Enlightenment (see Adorno and Horkheimer 2007), culture becomes the battlefield in which the society of spectacle inscribes itself. It contains both the imposing forces of fetishization, commodification, and reification, and the principles of resistance, offered by history, labour and, surprisingly, myth. If it is true that Reason mythologized itself in the attempt to overcome the mythical,

and culture, as the unifying sphere of knowledge and experience, is separated into different spectacular tasks, fragmenting the views of reality, then it is also true that it is culture that holds a part of the elements that may overcome the fragmentation, and division, as it holds, in itself, the language of myth, which once communicated the lost totality longed for by contemporary society. Not by chance, thus, it is to Plato's allegory—or myth—of the cave that Saramago goes back to. By allegorizing an allegory, Saramago portrays a baroque world of contradictions and complex juxtapositions.<sup>5</sup> Thus, by the end of the novel, Cipriano finds, buried deep in the undergrounds of the Centre, Plato's cave itself—which soon becomes one of the Centre's attractions—and realises, upon seeing six skeletons fixated to the walls, that they must have lived the same reality as he did or, better yet, the same structure in which experiences are split, separated, divided from human activity.

As a complementary pair, *Blindness* and *The Cave* can be considered, too, as following Debord's methodological observation on the correct approach towards the society of spectacle. At the beginning of *The Society of Spectacle*, Debord states that

[in] order to describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions, and the forces that work against it, it is necessary to make some artificial distinctions. In analyzing the spectacle we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle's own language, in the sense that we have to move through the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle. (Debord 2002: 4)

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5 Allegory must here be understood according to Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1998). Essentially, Benjamin draws back to the original Greek meaning of allegory as the use of an image to express something other than itself. In the referred book, Benjamin shows how German dramatists of the seventeenth century used images to compose a mosaic of the social and ontological issue of their own time, prefiguring some important political problems that the German territories would endure in the near future. Indeed, Saramago's images are not allegorical, and in a deeper analysis would be considered different from Benjamin's allegory. It seems, however, that he turns Plato's allegory of the cave into an allegory itself, showing that the effects, meaning and results which Plato's allegory symbolize must be understood through an interpretation of the different meanings and modes which it engenders. In current society, this entices exploring the capitalist mode of production in detail. For more on Benjamin's take on allegory, see Turner (1994) and Mieszkowski (2004).

In this sentence, Debord points out the need of using the spectacle itself to expose it, even if it “presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned” (*ibid.*). This strategy, in turn, is moved forth by Saramago not only in what we have here considered to be a tetralogy, but by the author’s own style and literary conception, which mirrors Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on Kafka, Proust and Döblin (see Benjamin 2005a, 2005c, 2005d). Just as Saramago had turned the city of Lisbon into the main character of *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1998a), resonating Döblin’s Berlin, and had retold the history of Portugal throughout novels such as *Raised from the Ground* (2013), *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1992), and *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1987a), he also created a set of relationships that unfold in the world whilst denouncing the powers that shape it. Hence his heroes are often ordinary people thrown into official narratives or subject officialising authorities. This happens in *All the Names*, whose ordinary origin of the main character is exposed by its name, José, but also in *Alabardas, alabardas, espingardas, espingardas* (*Halberds, Halberds, Rifles, Rifles*), Saramago’s last and unfinished novel, in which artur paz semedo, an office clerk on the armament industry, impersonates the typical bureaucrat of capitalism (see Gonçalves 2022).

In our reading it is, indeed, capitalism that permeates most of Saramago’s novels. Especially in the tetralogy, but not exclusively, capitalism is expressed as the specialization of power, “the root of spectacle” (Debord 2002: 5). In our understanding, there seems to be no difference between Saramago’s concept of capitalism as a structure based on commodity (see Uechi 2022), and Debord’s understanding of the society of spectacle as the realm of total reification. In this, the role of fetishism is central, as a pervasive phenomenon that turns human relations into relationships between things. This can be referred back to Marxist philosophy, and ties Saramago not only to Debord, but to a whole range of twentieth century Marxist thinkers, such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno (1991), Herbert Marcuse (1978), Georg Lukács (1972, 1974), or Raymond Williams (1977), and, working specifically in the realm of literary production, helps us to explore this issue in a more effective level. By contrasting the structure of contemporary capitalism to the lives of its characters, Saramago reinstates the task of storytelling in a very similar way as explored by Benjamin in his reflections on literature (see Benjamin 2006b). According

to Benjamin, the development of capitalism led to a crisis of narrative, through which storytellers—and people in general—became unable to transmit valuable experiences, bound, instead, to the accidents of *Erlebnis*, everyday living. There would be no more possibility for transmitting meaningful knowledge by way of telling stories, of passing experience and knowledge onwards through generations, telling and re-telling tales that bring a core of shared human meaning. Kafka, Proust, Leskov, Döblin, and many other authors were important, according to Benjamin (2005a, 2005c, 2005d), because they were the few able to denounce the impossibility of storytelling by, precisely, telling stories. This mirrors Debord's observation, quoted above, that it is necessary to use the spectacle to denounce it. Saramago does both: he uses the spectacle and its tools to expose it, while at the same time using literature and telling a story to expose its impossibility (see Racy 2011).

Saramago's procedure is to expose life under contemporary capitalism through different microcosmos, and the relationship between the characters under certain conditions, denouncing the overall structure of life. Two good examples come in hand, as they repeat this trend, which is observed in full force in *Blindness* and *The Cave*. The first is the chronicle "*Salta, cobarde!*" ("Jump, coward!") published in *Deste Mundo e do Outro* (Saramago 1997b), and the second is his unfinished novel, *Alabardas, alabardas, espingardas, espingardas* (Saramago 2014). The chronicle tells the fictional story of Jürgen, a young man from Kassel who decides to jump off a building. After much work from the crowd, firemen and the police to dissuade him, a single voice screams from the back, crying "Jump, coward! Jump!" Jürgen climbs back the steps and throws himself. The second example, Saramago's unfinished novel, tells the story of a typical office clerk of an armament factory that suddenly sees his life changing as he discovers that the factory could have been related to the Franco regime in Spain.

"*Salta, cobarde!*" expresses the banality of evil—not necessarily understood here in Hannah Arendt's sense—that is standard in capitalist society. The man in the crowd's lack of recognition and responsibility towards a different self-consciousness expresses the complete dominion of false consciousness of the society of spectacle. Doing evil is easier than doing good; a single voice in the crowd can undo what hundred others strove to build. The voice screaming

from the crowd, challenging Jürgen to jump is anonymous, has no face, cannot, also, be recognized. This image can be seen as a portrait of those who are able to exert power within a society turned into spectacle.

As a novel, *Alabardas, alabardas, espingardas, espingardas* presents us with a more complex dynamic, but the structure around which Saramago erects the plot seems to be the same: that of capitalist societies. Artur paz semedo is a typical bureaucrat, a clerk from an arms factory who suddenly realises his life is devoted to helping produce weapons and arms dealing. His pretentious neutrality—he was but a functionary following orders—crumbles down as he watches an adaptation of André Malraux's *L'Espoir*, and he decides to investigate the possible relationship between the company he works for and the supply of weapons for the Franco regime during the Spanish Civil War. The transformation of the character from a mere functionary to an autonomous, politically responsible agent is the central topic of Saramago's unfinished novel, and mirrors that "[c]onsciousness of desire and desire for consciousness" of which Debord (2002: 8) spoke about and which end is, precisely, the abolition of class society.

It must be said that, in fact, most of Saramago's novels, by working within the conditions imposed by contemporary capitalism, unpack, through the psychological development of their characters, existential questions that, upon realising the workings of exploitation, reification, and abuse of power, unfold towards the struggle for a classless society. We may see this in the unfinished novel, with the transformation of the typical clerk into a self-conscious subject, or even in *Baltasar and Blimunda*, as the couple of lovers struggle to make the *passarola* fly, despite the unwillingness of the powerful—who end up killing Baltasar<sup>6</sup>—or in the two novels we set out to explore: *Blindness* and *The Cave*. It is perhaps in these two novels that the issues pertaining to contemporary

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6 *Baltasar and Blimunda* does not address contemporary capitalism, since, as a historical novel, it is set in the sixteenth-century. Nonetheless, and this is connected to our understanding of Saramago's literature as allegorical, we understand it to be not a novel about past phenomena (the building of Mafra and the lives it cost), but about the origins of modern society and its imperative logic of oppression and class-domination that are still the grounds of political relations under capitalism. This reading is part of understanding Saramago's writing as one that deals directly with the impossibility of experience and his literature as a tool for writing history against the grain (see Racy 2011).

capitalist society are represented in a pivotal sense, summarising the issues explored by Saramago. By reading his novels in parallel with Debord's thinking, we may understand this form as that of an exploration of history through the lens of self-consciousness. Saramago's work explores the forced participation of the ordinary person in the "work and struggles that constitute history" (Debord 2002: 11), while expropriating them from their work, struggle, and history.

The overlaying of relations between sight, culture, commodity, spectacle, and myth forms, in this way, allegories of contemporary society, both in *Blindness* and *The Cave*, that are in many ways parallel to the observations made by Debord. It is interesting, and important, thus, to reflect on the ways through which intellectual critique updates itself. As one of the most important writers of the second half of the twentieth century, Saramago has certainly contributed to the materialist reading of the contemporary world. If Debord has left us with a somewhat pessimistic disclosure, considering that real emancipation will only be possible when individuals are "directly linked to universal history" (Debord 2002: 29), Saramago will show us that such "universal history" has always been there, linked to individuals in every refusal of acceptance of the current order, adding, with baroque style, a bit of hope in our will for refusal. After all, "[h]ope is like salt, there's no nourishment in it, but it gives the bread its savour" (Saramago 2006: 34).





# Approaching Death and Ethics in José Saramago through Blimunda's Memorial

BURGHARD BALTRUSCH

## Introduction

In a philosophical perspective, José Saramago's oeuvre opens up an ongoing and never-ending process of deconstruction and re-construction of meaning, a continuum of translations and transformations.<sup>1</sup> In an etymological sense, all of Saramago's novels, but also his short stories and plays, could be considered essays because they share the firm intention to 'check something out,' to examine an idea, to assess it, to consider different possibilities. Saramago never relied on the 'power' and 'fame' he had achieved with the Nobel Prize, but he always strove for a way of being that was political and poetical alike and, indeed, also philosophical. Fernando Pessoa thought himself to be "a poet animated by philosophy, not a philosopher with poetic faculties" (1996: 13), but in the case of Saramago the assessment should rather amount to a sympoiesis<sup>2</sup> of literature and philosophy. This also implies the political necessity of an ethics of individual and collective responsibility, in constant defiance of the inevitable pessimism imposed by circumstances. Analysing the relation of death

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- 1 This is a revised version of an original Portuguese text ("O Memorial de Blimunda—reflexões sobre a reinvenção da ética em José Saramago," *Revista de Estudos Saramaguianos* 15, 2022, 40–67). Translated from the Portuguese by Manus O'Dwyer, adapted and revised by the author.
- 2 I take this concept from Donna Haraway and have already applied it to Saramago in a different context (Baltrusch 2023). Haraway defines it this way: "Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means 'making-with.' Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. In the words of the Inupiat computer 'world game,' earthlings are never alone. That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it" (2016: 58). The poetical and the philosophical in Saramago behave in a comparably complex, and sociopolitical way.

and ethics in Saramago's most acclaimed novel may shed further light on the philosophical significance of his work.

In the documentary *Memorial do Convento* (Memory of the Convent) (2011), produced for the Portuguese national broadcaster, RTP, Pilar del Río Sánchez Saramago notes how, on the day of Saramago's funeral, Eduardo Lourenço insisted that a copy of *Baltasar and Blimunda* (B&B)<sup>3</sup> be placed beside the coffin. The eminent Portuguese philosopher justified his request by stating, "this novel contains everything."

B&B is the most emblematic novel in contemporary Portuguese literature today, and a mandatory read in secondary education in Portugal. Perhaps even to a much greater extent than in *Raised from the Ground*, this book confirmed the originality of Saramago's writing. It masterfully emphasises his fusion of popular and erudite culture, and the extreme subtlety of a discourse so resonant with literary and oral tradition, imbued with philosophical reflections and a critical review of historiography. With the character of Blimunda, Saramago also deepened the treatment of gender issues and the representation of women, which he began with *The Year of 1993* (1975), attempting to rescue it from the prevailing patriarchy within a Portuguese literature still predominantly authored by men. B&B was also one of those books lifted up by the crowd as the coffin was carried past during Saramago's funeral. This book uniquely concentrates and exemplifies the key thematic and literary elements that captivated the author throughout his lifetime. Like all great books, despite having been the subject of numerous and diverse readings, B&B rewards revisiting, as it remains relevant to contemporary philosophical issues and concerns.

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3 Translator note: The title of the English translation of the novel *Memorial do Convento*, literally 'Memorial of the Convent,' is *Baltasar and Blimunda*. The polysemy of the word 'memorial' in Portuguese, which the author discusses, does not find an exact equivalent in English. In the context of the title of the novel, however, we can take it to mean written account, but with the allusion to memory implicit in the word 'memorial.' The author argues that while the novel, on one level, deals with the 'memorial' or written account of the construction of a Baroque and Neoclassical palace-monastery located in Mafra, on the other hand it is also the 'memorial' of Blimunda, the female protagonist of the novel, whom the author takes to be the figure through which the ethical and political message of the novel is transmitted. The phrase 'memorial of Blimunda,' used throughout the text, should be understood in this context.

In modern Portuguese, the word *memorial* (lat. *memoriále*, ‘that which helps memory’) can refer to a notebook, a reminder of a previous request, or an account that clarifies or records memorable events. The word was also used in a business context, referring to the ledgers in which business transactions were recorded. I believe that B&B is a novel that contains various layers of memorials: on the one hand, we have the well-known literary-historical memorial, which refers to the construction of the convent of Mafra and which focuses on the people and events that the official historiography obscured. This is a memorial that rewrites history from the perspective of the defeated. On the other hand, B&B is also the history of a people, understood as a collective agent, as an entity that produces work and culture (oral literature, for example, but also knowledge and culture in a wider sense), upon whom the novel attempts to bestow memory. The historical-literary memorial (or account), populated by both historical and fictitious characters with their love affairs, friendships, fights, and misunderstandings has, until now, been the focus of critique.

In this chapter, I will try to show that there is, as a kind of palimpsest, another kind of memorial in this novel. This is the ‘memorial of Blimunda,’ the character through whom the narrative threads of the story coalesce and through whom the ethical and political message of the text is transmitted. This memorial relates to ethical questions of virtue, responsibility, faith, and secrecy. It also, and subliminally, renders an economy of sacrifice, “an economy that is ambiguous enough to seem to integrate noneconomy,” and “in its essential instability the same economy seems sometimes faithful to and sometimes accusing or ironic with respect to the role of Christian sacrifice” (Derrida 1995: 109). In this regard, the question arises as to whether we might also read B&B as an ironic ‘commercial novel,’ a subversive but also clearly ethical and political meditation on the economy of selfless sacrifice of Biblical tradition.

## How Derrida and Saramago Meet

In *The Gift of Death* (1995), Jacques Derrida deconstructs some of the foundational elements of both Western thought and conceptions of the subject in ways that are both similar and dissimilar to Saramago's novel. In his essay, and

here developing the thought of a series of philosophers and writers (Patočka, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Levinas, Baudelaire, and Nietzsche), Derrida attempts to reveal the foundational elements of our conceptions of responsibility, one of the key questions for both contemporary philosophy and for contemporary politics and society. To do this, he analyses the concept of the responsibility of the subject in its Judeo-Christian acceptance, through a critical revision of the emblematic Biblical story of Abraham and the Sacrifice of Isaac. Throughout his essay, Derrida enters into dialogue with previous analyses of the story, engaging principally with those of Kierkegaard and Patočka. Among Derrida's reflections on the problematical relationship between rational ethical responsibility and irrational faith implicit in the Old Testament text, I am above all interested in his meditations on individual responsibility.

Indeed, this sense of individual responsibility serves as a fundamental cornerstone of the subject's ability to take action and make a meaningful impact on the world. In the specific context of Saramago's novel, Blimunda's responsible behaviour, and her capacity to assume responsibility for her actions, raises the question of whether we need to posit an anterior moment of decision, similar to that which Derrida identifies in the case of religion. We might also ask as to the extent to which this fundamental responsibility constitutes Blimunda's essential goodness, another cornerstone of the subject's capacity for acting and intervening.

It is important to pay careful attention to the arguments of *The Gift of Death* in order to compare Derrida's text with Saramago's description of Blimunda in B&B:

On what condition is responsibility possible? On the condition that the Good no longer be a transcendental objective, a relation between objective things, but the relation to the other, a response to the other; an experience of personal goodness and a movement of intention. That supposes, as we have seen, a double rupture: both with orgiastic mystery and with Platonism. On what condition does goodness exist beyond all calculation? On the condition that goodness forget itself, that the movement be a movement of the gift that renounces itself, hence a movement of infinite love. Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to become finite, become incarnated in order to love the

other, to love the other as a finite other. This gift of infinite love comes from someone and is addressed to someone; responsibility demands irreplaceable singularity. (Derrida 1995: 50–51)

One of the foundational points for the description of responsibility here is that the subject must confront an absolute alterity, an Other that is absolute and incommensurable, to which it must respond. This is a limit situation, in which the subject finds itself in a realm beyond knowledge or certainty, and in which it must assume an absolute responsibility beyond known norms and give itself absolutely to the Other. The love between Blimunda and Baltasar can be considered as similar to the Kierkegaardian “leap of faith,” although in the case of the protagonists of B&B there is no passage from the ethical to the religious. Another aspect that inflects responsibility, according to Derrida, is what he terms the gift of death, taken in both an objective and a subjective sense: in deciding for the Other, the subject gives itself as a gift, even to the point of offering its own death. Only through this experience of death can the subject come to consciousness of itself and have an experience of the ‘I.’ The gift of death as a new experience of the Other allows for the transcendence of the traditional subject/object divide. This is because the gift of death establishes between me and the Other an economy of debt and sacrifice that exceeds mere exchange, profit, or retribution:

Yet only death or rather the apprehension of death can give this irreplaceability, and it is only on the basis of it that one can speak of a responsible subject, of the soul as conscience of self, of myself, etc. We have thus deduced the possibility of a mortal's accession to responsibility through the experience of his irreplaceability, that which an approaching death or the approach of death gives him. But the mortal thus deduced is someone whose very responsibility requires that he concern himself not only with an objective Good but with a gift of infinite love, a goodness that is forgetful of itself. There is thus a structural disproportion or dissymmetry between the finite and responsible mortal on the one hand and the goodness of the infinite gift on the other hand. (Derrida 1995: 51)

To say 'I' at every moment, to exist as a singularity, implies a betrayal of the Other, its negation, sacrifice, or murder. In Derrida's work, absolute singularity is intertwined with absolute alterity: the Other is also the Completely Other, that which is infinitely different and of which the word God is a synonym. Only from this absolute heteronomy, which transcends the subject/object relation, is it possible to conceive responsibility, because only it can allow for the possibility of an infinite gaze that pierces the most intimate elements of the self. This is what happens in the case of Blimunda, when she sees the dark clouds or the wills of other characters, although it is notable that she refuses to use her gifts with Baltasar, at least until the moment of his death. This suggests that Saramago tried to avoid describing a heteronomy in the relationship of Blimunda and Baltasar, implying that, contrary to Derrida's stance, not only is each element of the relation irreplaceable, but that the relation as a whole is too.

## Responsibility, Death and the Gift

In any case, the idea of responsibility in B&B is developed in correlation to a specific understanding of death. In the novel, Blimunda does not die, but becomes, in a figurative sense, a depository for the deaths that do occur and, in a more specific but absolute sense, a depository for the death of Baltasar. From the perspective of this character, death can be seen as something absurd, that arrives from without, but which, at the same time, and in an almost Sartrean or Existentialist sense, is a nothingness that determines being.

Derrida, however, conceives of death not as something absurd, but as a gift, "that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, 'given,' one can say, by death" (1995: 41). Responsibility and virtue would here be indissociable from this unsubstitutable death of the subject and

[o]ne can conceive of this disproportion without assigning to it a revealed cause or without tracing it back to the event of original sin, but it inevitably transforms the experience of responsibility into one of guilt: I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite

goodness nor up to the immensity of the gift, the frameless immensity that must in general define (in-define) a gift as such. This guilt is originary, like original sin. Before any fault is determined, I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible. What gives me my singularity, namely, death and finitude, is what makes me unequal to the infinite goodness of the gift that is also the first appeal to responsibility. Guilt is inherent in responsibility because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one is never responsible enough. (1995: 51)

There is no passage in B&B, however, where one could deduce this relationship between culpability and responsibility. The love of Blimunda and Baltasar is described in such a way as to counter the Christian idea of original sin. Their experiences of responsibility, love, and death are developed free from notions of guilt. There is no asymmetry or disproportion between their finitude and the infinite responsibility that characterises their love: death is uncertain in the case of Blimunda (apart from not being included in the story, she establishes a coexistence with death on other terms, *cf. infra*) and Baltasar 'remains' in her (in the form of memories, but also, corporally and affectively, as a type of incorporated cognition, *cf. infra*). Both, and especially Blimunda, are shown in B&B as beyond sufficiency with regard to their respective dimensions of absolute responsibility (towards the Other, towards History, etc.). They represent an asymmetry within an asymmetry, a movement that is distinct from those that Derrida defines:

One is never responsible enough because one is finite but also because responsibility requires two contradictory movements. It requires one to respond as oneself and as irreplaceable singularity, to answer for what one does, says, gives; but it also requires that, being good and through goodness, one forget or efface the origin of what one gives. (1995: 51)

According to the French philosopher, the uniqueness, the irreplaceable singularity of the I, means that my existence can never find a substitute:



It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense only a mortal can be responsible. [...] death is the place of one's irreplaceability. No one can die for me if "for me" means instead of me, in my place. (1995: 41)

However, the singularity or irreplaceability of Blimunda in B&B is not only defined by her condition as a mortal human being. It is also constructed from a certain dissensus that, if we follow Jacques Rancière (1996), is not a difference in emotions or ways of feeling, but is, rather, a division in the very heart of the sensible through which rational and political thought is constituted. In B&B, these divisions mark the historical and epistemological discourses of religion, patriarchy, rationality, as well as the conventions that characterise Western societies. One of the best examples of this is the night in which Blimunda and Baltasar speak to each other among the statues of saints that are destined for the Palace-Convent of Mafra, which at this point is still under construction:

[Baltasar:] Perhaps they speak to one another when they're alone, [Blimunda:] That's something we don't know, but if they speak only to each other, and without witnesses can't help asking myself why we need them, [Baltasar:] I've always heard it said that the saints are necessary for our salvation, [Blimunda:] They didn't save themselves, [Baltasar:] Who told you that, [Blimunda:] That's what I feel deep inside me, [Baltasar:] What do you feel deep inside you, [Blimunda:] That no one is saved, and no one is lost, [Baltasar:] It's sinful to think such things. (Saramago 1987a: 317–318)

As opposed to Baltasar, who tends to conform to norms and conventions, Blimunda senses inside herself an autonomous voice. To put it in other words, her rational understanding is founded on a precise and unbreakable sense of herself. And that is not only in her mind, the supposedly unique seat of reason, but in a holistic consciousness, one that denies the division between the body/emotions and mind (cf. e.g., Damásio 1994 and 1999). Blimunda appears before us as her own boss, self-determined, or, to use contemporary terminol-

ogy, empowered. She is aware of her irreplaceability and of her independence with regard to the patriarchal system. This irreplaceability also operates as the premise of her ethical and altruistic responsibility towards the Other, and is constructed in accordance with four thematic areas:

1. The socio-historical dimension in which her ability to see is the ultimate symbol of her belonging to a feminine genealogy.
2. Her supra-individual desire, a “goodness that must not only forget itself but whose source remains inaccessible to the donee” (Derrida 1995: 40), and which is exemplified in her abnegated love for Baltasar.
3. Her unconditional dedication to the flying machine, which becomes the central ethical-political metaphor for her responsibility in the novel.
4. The acceptance of life in proximity to death, through which she synthesises her philosophical position.

The quoted dialogue between Baltasar and Blimunda, which takes place in the presence of religious statues (statues that Blimunda deems superfluous), continues with a negation of the retributive power of the Divine and a warning that the Biblical idea of the power of life over death is founded on a mistaken perspective:

[Blimunda:] Sin doesn't exist, there is only life and death, [Baltasar:] Life comes before death, [Blimunda:] You're deceiving yourself, Baltasar, for death comes before life, who we were has died, who we are is being born, and that's why we do not die all at once, [Baltasar:] And when we go under the earth, and when Francisco Marques is crushed beneath the cart carrying the stone, is that not death without recourse, [Blimunda:] If we're talking about Francisco Marques, he is born, [Baltasar:] But he doesn't know it, [Blimunda:] Just as we don't really know who we are, yet we are alive, [Baltasar:] Blimunda, where did you learn these things, [Blimunda:] My eyes were open when I was still inside my mother's womb, and from there I saw everything. (Saramago 1987a: 318)

In a certain sense, Blimunda articulates the idea of death as a possibility of being, as the premise of life and love. From a Heideggerian perspective, we could say that death, here, loses some of its absolute qualities, to the extent to which it is an event that is essentially limited to the subject: “Such dying for... can never, however, mean that the other has thus had his death in the least taken away. Every Da-sein must itself actually take dying upon itself. Insofar as it ‘is,’ death is always essentially my own” (Heidegger 1996: 223). When Blimunda states that “who we were has died, who we are is being born” and that “that’s why we do not all die at once” (Saramago 1987a: 318), the idea of death as an absolute is diluted in the idea of a ‘survival’ of the subject, through a continuous succession of self-translations<sup>4</sup> of the subjects, for as long as they are remembered. It does not matter whether she or he is alive or not, because through speaking of them they are born once again, and ‘speaking’ here does not necessarily imply human language (*cf.* Benjamin 1916). Blimunda’s understanding of death is, then, legitimated by a sense of that which is ‘singular’ and ‘irreplaceable’: when fasting she can see inside people, a gift that allows her to capture the wills of the dying which will ultimately allow the flying machine to function. This exposition to the death of Others provokes in Blimunda a serious illness, and only the ministrations of Baltasar, combined with the music of Domenico Scarlatti, save her.

Blimunda’s gift comes not from God, but from her mother. At the same time, this gift does not just descend from the mother, but is also something that is given to the Other (Baltasar, Father Bartolomeu, other people in general). Death is also a gift, something that she receives from the dying and which she later offers to the “flying machine project.” Her abnegation and dedication to this task means that it is a genuine gift to the Other(s), and that giving only exists when neither giver nor receiver is aware of the nature of the act:

What is given—and this would also represent a kind of death—is not some thing, but goodness itself, a giving goodness, the act of giving or the donation of the gift. A goodness that must not only forget itself but

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4 Cf. the Benjaminian notion of a “continuum of translations” and the unlimited translatability of history (Benjamin 1916 II: 151 and 1923 IV.1:10).

whose source remains inaccessible to the donee. The latter receives by means of a dissymmetry of the gift that is also a death, a death given, the gift of a death that arrives in one way but not another. Above all it is a goodness whose inaccessibility acts as a command to the donee. It subjects its receivers, giving itself to them as goodness itself but also as the law. (Derrida 1995: 41)

In this regard, the gift can appear as an impossible aspiration. Absolute altruism is an impossibility, a situation that leads Derrida to claim that the possibility of the gift is intrinsically related to its impossibility, to death. There is no solution to this problem, no dialectic that would overcome this apparent incommensurability, in which the possibility of the gift is implicit in its impossibility, and vice versa. However, this is not just a trivial game of paradoxical auto-referentiality. In a certain sense, it could be taken as a metaphor for the deconstructive method itself, which seeks to make visible the hidden binaries and hierarchies inherent in the logic of Western thought. Derridian deconstruction is an attempt to offer the true gift, in the form of hospitality, pardon, mourning, love, etc., but always recognising that these ideas are always elusive or unrealisable. With this almost aporetic vision of the gift, Derrida also wants to subvert the generalised understanding of human relationships as a kind of economic exchange:

In order to understand in what way this gift of the law means not only the emergence of a new figure of responsibility but also of another kind of death, one has to take into account the uniqueness and irreplaceable singularity of the self as the means by which—and it is here that it comes close to death—existence excludes every possible substitution. Now to have the experience of responsibility on the basis of the law that is given, that is, to have the experience of one's absolute singularity and apprehend one's own death, amounts to the same thing. Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. (Derrida 1995: 41)

Similarly, the French philosopher has questioned the concept of pardon, indicating the impossibility of pardoning that which is not within our gift to pardon. Visible here, of course, is the influence of the thought of Jacques Lacan, who famously described love as the attempt to give that which we do not have. All of the situations that we can relate to ideas of pardon, hospitality, love, etc. are based on a decision, a decision for the Other. And any decision of this type will also be a decision of the Other in me. When Blimunda sees and captures the wills of the dying, she decides not only to see the dying Other as he or she essentially is, but also to receive them into herself to the greatest extent possible. She appears to realise that which Derridean deconstruction denies: the impossibility of the gift of the irreplaceable death of the Other becomes implicitly possible when Blimunda exposes herself to this death of the Other.

The culminating point in her exposure to death occurs when she receives into herself Baltasar's will. Far from being a redemption of the masculine by the eternal feminine, this act means that the death of Baltasar becomes a memorial whose author and depository is Blimunda. This memorial maintains its validity as long as Blimunda lives (and in the novel she does not die) or manages to transmit the story (something she did orally during the seven long years in which she searched for Baltasar). His death belongs to him, to her (as a responsible subject), and to the physical world of Others (from whom he receives it), contradicting in this way the idea of death as something singular and irreplaceable that only belongs to the subject, an idea that Derrida and Kierkegaard derived from God's testing of Abraham's faith: "And there is a dark cloud in the centre of his body. Then Blimunda said, Come. The will of Baltasar Sete-Sóis broke free from his body, but did not ascend to the stars, for it belonged to the earth and to Blimunda" (Saramago 1987a: 343).

This phrase, which ends B&B, is also written on a plaque that is situated under an olive tree in front of the José Saramago Foundation in Lisbon, and under which lie some of the ashes of the author. Blimunda's memorial was inscribed on the public space, conferring on Saramago a 'survival' that should someday be analysed in a more holistic, sympoietic way. But the way in which death in B&B is written both on the earth and on Blimunda is not a kind of telluric spirituality. It is, rather, an inscription on the body, on the physical and physiological, based on the self-consciousness and embodied cognition of a

singular and irreplaceable protagonist whose goodness and responsibility are orientated towards the Other. The moment in which Blimunda takes Baltasar's dark cloud inside herself is a metaphor for this double-bind, the Derridean dual decision: for the Other and of the Other in me. It is, on the one hand, an exemplification of deconstruction as an attempt to establish a relationship with the Other, a reception of the Other and, on the other hand, an act that denies the singularity and irreplaceability of the subject. And as opposed to Emmanuel Levinas, in Derrida the category Other is not restricted to human beings.<sup>5</sup>

## Non-androcentric and Non-biblical Epistemology

But we might ask ourselves as to the significance in this context of Blimunda's gift, her unknowing goodness. What turns this figure so genuine and convincing is her innate capacity to act and survive in a complex and difficult reality—violent, dangerous, small-minded, intellectually and culturally backward, etc.—with a levity, naturalness, and even a certain sense of superiority that, paradoxically, does not exclude humility. She has a survival instinct that allows her to carry other people along with her. What in her could be understood as goodness and ethical responsibility is fruit of the development she undergoes throughout the novel. She enters the story as a young woman whose emotional intelligence is due to the advice of a wise mother. This special relationship with the mother is highlighted in two brief but significant moments in the novel: the telepathic communication between mother and daughter during the *auto-da-fe* described at the beginning of the story, and Blimunda's previously cited claim that even in the womb she had special visionary gifts.

The way in which the mother indicates the man who is at her side suggests the possibility that Blimunda is one of a lineage of women with the gift to see the interstices of life and death. It is not just that she chooses Baltasar (although the novel makes it clear that her choice is a free one), but it is a choice that

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5 Here we could also evoke the dog of tears in *Blindness*, a character Saramago was especially proud of, but also the description of animals in Saramago's work more generally, be it from a non-speciesist or anthropomorphic perspective (cf. also Salzani in this volume).

takes its place in the context of a historical genealogy of female community.<sup>6</sup> Blimunda will not have a child of her own, at least, the novel does not mention this possibility, although at the end of the text she is of an age where this would still be possible. But beyond a real pregnancy, it could be argued that Blimunda falls pregnant in a metaphorical sense, to the extent to which Baltasar becomes simultaneously both companion and son. In this context, the ironic and heretical allusion to the immaculate conception is secondary; what is important is the suggestion that someday a child could be born who would be (if only symbolically) the offspring of Blimunda and Baltasar. This child would belong entirely to the earth, a continuation of the feminine genealogy that proceeds from the mother. This message allows for a more revolutionary reading of the novel than those influenced by a more traditional Marxist dialectical materialism: in B&B, history is not only transformed by human action, but also by an understanding of life, suggesting a completely different understanding of history in which the agents of change would be women. Here we encounter the necessity of finding another epistemology to define concepts such as goodness, the gift, responsibility, etc., a non-androcentric epistemology. This would be an epistemology of what, in patriarchal societies, has been Other, the perspectives that have been historically excluded, from the Bible to modern Western philosophy, in a phallogocentrism that has also been fundamental to literature and religion. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida even alludes briefly to this circumstance drawing on Baudelaire, though he does not elaborate on it:

From the strange and impossible filiation that we suspect it has, in memory of so many fathers and sons, in memory of so many men ready, without ever succeeding, and perhaps without ever believing in it, to kill themselves to death, it would at least keep this trait that we will name after Baudelaire: it can always appear as “homicidal and suicidal literature.” History of men and not of women. A history of “fellow hu-

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6 This evokes a fascinating question that I will not develop here for reasons of time and space, and which has to do with the question of free choice in the work of Saramago. The scene referred to here reflects something of the complexity of the novelist's approach to these philosophical questions.

man beings." History of brotherhood, Christian history. "Hypocritical reader, my fellow man, my brother!"<sup>7</sup>

As B&B ends, so the circle is also completed, as from the moment in which Blimunda chose Baltasar, she did so in a social, familiar, historic, and psychological context that is non-patriarchal. When she blesses herself and her partner with the blood of her virginity, she returns the Christian symbolism to its pagan origins, recuperating not only a culture, but also a pre-Christian episteme and epistemology. This is not only an aspect of this specific novel but is an important element of Saramago's work more generally. Despite its constant use of symbols and linguistic formulas from the Catholic tradition, his oeuvre constructs an imaginary that questions Biblical spirituality and epistemology.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this in B&B is the moment when Baltasar asks as to how Blimunda knew that Sebastiana Maria de Jesus, her mother, wanted to know his name, as she was being brought to be lashed at the *auto de fe*: "I can tell, even though I can't explain why I can tell, don't ask me questions I cannot answer, behave as you did before, when you followed me home without asking any questions" (Saramago 1987a: 46). Blimunda's reply serves in the novel as a counterpoint to the institutional, sibylline response that, at the start of the novel, the Franciscan friar Frei António de S. José gives to the King D. João V: "I know, although I cannot explain how I came to know, for I am only the instrument through which the truth is spoken, Your Majesty need only respond with faith" (1987a: 6). While the Franciscan attempts to

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7 My translation. The English translation omits several paragraphs here. Oddly enough, it is precisely this important passage in which Derrida refers to Baudelaire and his internal critique of Christianity: "De l'étrange et impossible filiation que nous lui soupçonnons, en mémoire de tant de pères et de fils, en mémoire de tant et tant d'hommes prêts, sans jamais y parvenir, et peut-être sans jamais y croire, à se donner la mort à mort, elle garderait au moins ce trait que nous nommerons d'après Baudelaire : elle peut toujours apparaître comme 'littérature homicide et suicide.' Histoire des hommes et non des femmes. Histoire des 'semblables.' Histoire de la fraternité, histoire chrétienne. ' – Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère !'" (Derrida 1999: 150).

8 Saramago does so in the knowledge that, having been raised in the culture of Catholicism, he cannot completely rid himself of his formative education. However, his desire to deconstruct Catholicism and Christian belief is clear, and we need only think of *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* or *Cain* for examples of this tendency.



exclude himself as a subject, delegating his ethical responsibility to faith in God, Blimunda assumes another form of faith, a faith not in a divine being, but in a more concrete and earthlier collective: the generations of women to whose genealogy she belongs. Beyond this, the possibility of understanding her abilities in rational terms is denied. Understanding becomes a question of faith, not of religious faith, but of faith based on trust and mutual care.

In this way, history ceases to be an object, becoming instead a process with objectives that are not controllable. Decisions are taken without reference to determined forms of knowledge or social norms, in situations where there can be no definitive resolution. This is the case when Blimunda chooses Baltasar, when she assents to capturing inside herself the wills of the dying, or when she chooses to take the will of Baltasar. This is also a question of faith (not relating to a specific religion), in which a dedication to or relation to the Other is formed, a relation of absolute risk that goes beyond knowledge or certainty. The gift of death is relevant here, as it describes the transcendence of the Other and the infinite love, care, and absolute ethical responsibility in selfless goodness that Blimunda experiences in relation to the death of Others. In this movement of goodness, and however paradoxical it may seem, responsibility and faith exist side by side, both exceeding questions of knowledge and mastery. The death that Baltasar gives to Blimunda would be, following Derrida's reflections in *The Gift of Death*, this alliance of responsibility and faith. And it is this excessive opening, this aporetic relationship of the possible and the impossible, that informs the conception of history that underlies B&B. This is the principal argument of the story of Blimunda.

As opposed to the secret, according to which Abraham is convinced to sacrifice his son Isaac in an absolute and irrational act of faith in his God, Blimunda's decisions of absolute risk are not secretive and are free of guilt and removed from the economy of exchange.<sup>9</sup> They have nothing to do with Biblical mystagogy, and we can refer once more to Derrida to describe their effects:

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9 Other implications of "Saramago's Re-telling of the 'Sacrifice of Isaac'" were already analysed by Federico Dal Bo (2018).

It is a matter of unfolding the mystagogical hypocrisy of a secret, putting on trial a fabricated mystery, a contract that has a secret clause, namely, that, seeing in secret, God will pay back infinitely more; a secret that we accept all the more easily since God remains the witness of every secret. He shares and he knows. We have to believe that he knows. This knowledge at the same time founds and destroys the Christian concepts of responsibility and justice and their "object." The genealogy of responsibility that Nietzsche refers to in *The Genealogy of Morals* as "the long history of the origin of responsibility (*Verantwortlichkeit*)" also describes the history of moral and religious conscience—a history of cruelty and sacrifice, of the holocaust even (these are Nietzsche's words), of fault as debt or obligation (*Schuld*, that "cardinal idea," that *Hauptbegriff* of morality), a history of the economy of "the contractual relationship" between creditors (*Gläubiger*) and debtors (*Schuldner*). These relations appear as soon as there exist subjects under law in general (*Rechtssubjekte*), and they point back in turn "to the primary forms of purchase, sale, barter, and trade." (1995: 112–113)

The fact that the gift can become an object of exchange destroys, in the very moment when the idea of retribution arises, the very possibility of its existence. It is devoured by the economic system:

The moment the gift, however generous it be, is infected with the slightest hint of calculation, the moment it takes account of knowledge [*connaissance*] or recognition [*reconnaissance*], it falls within the ambit of an economy: it exchanges, in short it gives counterfeit money, since it gives in exchange for payment. (1995: 112).

In order to escape this logic, the gift must avoid reciprocity, place itself outside of the circuit of giving and receiving, of blame, and of the commercial symmetry and economic calculus that degrade it. As a consequence, the gift is that which does not appear, that which is not present as such. All that makes the gift appear destroys it, makes it impossible. The gift, to remain as such, can have neither cause nor reason.

## Blimunda's Gift

Saramago describes something similar to the paradoxical structure of the gift in his portrayal of Blimunda, whose capacities exist in a realm beyond Biblical and patriarchal visions of human reason, and which cannot be deduced according to the latter. However, from Blimunda's perspective, the division Derrida makes between two different forms of responsibility is also questioned. In the context of binary Western thought, it is certainly possible to distinguish between ethical responsibility, marked by clear rationality, and a responsibility that is rationally blind, the faith that, according to Derrida, precedes reason. To explore this question we should consider, first of all, what it means in Western philosophy to 'precede reason,' and also what, in this context, we should understand by the word 'faith.' We might consider here whether faith should be understood in universal terms, or in terms of Christianity alone, and also whether the idea of absolute altruism is an exclusively Christian notion. In the case of Blimunda, however, the question of the existence of something that precedes her goodness is related primordially to the question of whether, in her case, such a neat division between two types of responsibility—one rational and one irrational—makes sense. We might argue that, given Saramago's cultural formation, it is not surprising that questions of absolute altruism and Christian faith should arise in the novel. However, as we shall see, these are superficial aspects of the text that have a merely aesthetic value.

This aspect becomes apparent when Bartolomeu appears to conduct a symbolic rebaptism of Blimunda: "You are Sete-Sóis or Seven-Suns, because you can see in the light of day, and you are Sete-Luas or Seven-Moons, because you can see in the darkness of night, and so Blimunda, who until that moment had only been called Blimunda de Jesus after her mother, became known as Sete-Luas" (Saramago 1987a: 81). This name, and the attempt to link Blimunda to the figure of Jesus Christ, fails to designate Blimunda in her entirety, describing only the appearance she maintains before the dominant discourse.<sup>10</sup>

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 10 Blimunda's two surnames—the Christian Jesus and the Pagan Sete-Luas or Seven Moons—create, on the one hand, an equilibrium, but, on the other, a disequilibrium with regard to the Portuguese eighteenth century historical context in which Christianity and the Catholic

Sete-Luas removes her association with Jesus Christ and converts her into a figure suggestive of the need for a feminine alternative to Christian deities. She does not become an anti-Christ, but she does deny his spiritual and universal validity. When she decides to go to mass while fasting, it is “not to receive God but to see Him, if He truly existed” (Saramago 1987a: 119). In truth, she will only see a dark cloud in the sacred host, that is, nothing different to what she sees in other mortals. She then asks herself: “if what is inside the Sacred Host is what is inside men, what, after all, is religion?” (1987a: 119). Here, and thanks to her gifts, Blimunda deconstructs Christian belief and the duality of its internal contradiction: its desire to be the word of God given by man (*sic*) and its desire to be the promise of life that overcomes death.

But the ‘word’ that Blimunda incarnates throughout the novel are the “visions and revelations” of her mother, of a woman who claimed that she could be “a saint just like all the other saints, or even better, for I can see no difference between them and me” (1987a: 43). And we have also seen how in the novel death is a beginning, an originating condition prior to life. Blimunda sees and makes visible the binaries and false hierarchies that are inherent in religion—the superiority of the masculine over the feminine, life over death—that, according to Baltasar, not even Father Bartolomeu can explain. Blimunda’s deconstruction is a genuine gift, a gift that only she can give: “Between life and death, said Blimunda, hovers a dark cloud” (1987a: 119). This act of giving (seeing, capturing, conserving, and restituting human wills) takes place in the context of a resignification of the Biblical story of the tree of knowledge. In B&B, this is an olive tree, and the apple is Blimunda’s (and a whole genealogy of women’s) gift of sight. The sky itself becomes a rain cloud, emptied of Divine content because a dark cloud represents the human will, and there is no “Child

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Church are still absolutely dominant. Seen from a diachronic perspective, Blimunda represents a more destabilising than stabilising force, as she turns against (Catholic) reason and common sense: she sees inside people, she can trap the wills of the dead, communicate with others without words, a form of communication far superior to that of normal people. From a spiritual perspective, these gifts could be considered divine. But while the definition of Blimunda as “a new Our Lady” (Real 1995: 95) is absolutely beside the point, imagining her as a type of pagan goddess would be equally inaccurate. Both options lead us away from Saramago’s intentions in the novel, and serve to show that attempts to identify a spirituality in his work (like that of Martins 2015) do not make any sense.

Jesus in his arms” (1987a: 119), a fact that makes Christ unnecessary and inexistent in a repetition of history that desires to be no such thing. The similarity between the two scenes can be reduced to the possibility that only “situations recur, locations differ as well as the times, and even the tree itself is different, but as for the rain, it has the same comforting touch on one’s skin and on the soil, a life so excessive that it can kill, but this is something to which man has become accustomed since the beginning of creation” (1987a: 119). All that remains, then, of religious *pathos* is an earthly folk knowledge: “when the wind is gentle it mills the grain, when it is strong it tears the windmill’s sails” (*ibid.*).

In this way, Blimunda’s memorial does not speak to us of a gift or sacrifice made with absolute and blind faith, faith in a god, humanity, or any other androcentric idea. Nor does it speak to us of an absolute Christian altruism (we might remember that Blimunda kills in order to save her own life). All of this means that interpretations of Blimunda as a reconfiguration of the Virgin Mary (Real 1995: 95), or as the incarnation of a pagan spirituality (Martins 1995), are misguided. Saramago himself, on various occasions, made clear that it was not his intention to idealise women, and that his portrayals of women should not be understood as feminist messages (cf. Saramago/Viegas 1989: 19)—although this latter is perhaps inevitable, given the political resonances of his novels.

I believe that Saramago was very conscious of the fact that, as a man, it was not his place to appropriate an unequivocally feminist discourse, despite having constructed a radical rewriting of Western epistemology in his description of the goodness and responsibility of Blimunda. The importance of this epistemological rewriting is made explicit in the context of the symbolism of the flying machine. Blimunda is the link that connects Baltasar to Father Bartolomeu Lourenço, whom she knew before having met her partner, and she establishes a profound connection with Domenico Scarlatti through music: “Blimunda raised her eyes, which turned almost white in the semi-darkness of the coach-house, and Domenico Scarlatti heard the deepest chord of a harp resounding within his soul” (Saramago 1987a: 159). In a terrestrial trinity, she represents the Holy Spirit and, according to Father Bartolomeu, “perhaps she is closest to being part of a trinity that is not terrestrial” (*ibid.*). The earthly trinity of B&B is a parody of Biblical conceptions of the divine, something that is hinted at in the metaphor that is, in fact, central to the novel, that of a quadrinity. This

four-part entity is composed of philosophy and science, represented by Father Bartolomeu; the artisanal skills of Baltasar; the emotional intelligence and parapsychology of Blimunda; and the art of Domenico Scarlatti. Music functions here as a *pars pro toto* of art in general, of artistic creation and expression, a ludic-aesthetic element that sustains the wills of the dying as well as the efforts of Blimunda to overcome the systems within which she is inserted. Blimunda's penetrating gaze could be analysed in terms of a postmodern hermeneutic triangle, in which the aesthetic moment, that is, the moment of the gaze, creates both an aesthetic and a utopia,<sup>11</sup> in this way provoking an anaesthetic, that is, an iteration of these aesthetic and utopian forms. The working of this process might be something similar to the effect produced by multiple interpretations of the same musical piece.

This terrestrial quadrinity is an aesthetical and philosophically powerful image, and is made even more so by the intertwining of history and fiction: Domenico Scarlatti was a real historical figure who visited Portugal; Father Bartolomeu was also an historical figure, although with his fantastic and misunderstood designs for a flying machine he aimed solely to amuse a Lisbon population that were already primed for the soon to be successful flights of air balloons; Blimunda was inspired by Dorotheia Maria Roza Brandão, whose hydroscopic gifts drew the attention of the Parisian Academy of Sciences (cf. Baltrusch 2014a); Baltasar is the only character without a real historical reference in this quartet, although it could be argued that in the novel he is the alter-ego of José Saramago. As the fictional elaboration of a historical figure, and despite her apparent secondary role in the chapter in which Father Bartolomeu invites Domenico Scarlatti to visit the flying machine as it is under construction, and in which he refers to an "earthly trinity" (of himself, Baltasar, and Blimunda), Blimunda is the central element of the group. In order that the flying machine functions, "the wills are the most important of all, without them, the earth will not allow us to ascend" (Saramago 1987a: 133) and only Blimunda, "this woman with those extraordinary eyes, who was born to perceive wills" (1987a: 166), can prevent their loss. In this respect, her condition as

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11 On the philosophical concept of utopia in relation with José Saramago cf. Tiburi and Vanhoutte in this volume.

a woman is fundamental, as she herself argues that men have “less will power” (1987a: 124) when compared to women whose wills “seem less inclined to be separated from their bodies, for some strange reason” (*ibid.*).

Blimunda does not only unite these capacities and talents, she constitutes them in mind and body, giving them direction and meaning. She acts as a signifying force in the novel, despite the fact that it was Father Bartolomeu who invented and explained the flying machine. While the priest loses himself in the rational questioning as to whether God is one or a trinity, or whether God and man are the same thing, Blimunda demonstrates by her actions throughout the novel that these questions are incorrectly posed: it is not a question of whether God exists or not, it is a question of whether the existence of God makes sense. Does it make sense that God exist? Does it make sense that there is a condition prior to a responsible decision? With regard to these questions, the novel provides a clear answer: the existence of God does not make sense as long as we limit ourselves to an earthly level. We do not need God when there are human subjects with the desire and ability to take on our most important challenges. The flying machine, as a metonym of the central and universalisable message of the novel, does not only represent the capacities of human beings—if they gather their forces and talents, even in small groups—to raise themselves beyond the conditions imposed by history and current power structures. The flying machine is also a central metaphor for the memorial of Blimunda in which the protagonist represents the im/possible *perpetuum mobile* that allows for the fusion of the creative group, avoiding the expansion of unnecessary hierarchies and defeating, if only symbolically, and through incommensurable goodness and responsibility, death itself. It is Blimunda’s ‘soft power’ that prevails both in the quadrinity and in the metaphoric construction of the novel.

## Political and Transhuman Dimension

The flying machine is a complex metaphor that does not refer to any given culture or nation. It is well known that Saramago did not believe in the capacity of large structures, whether national or ideological, to realise lasting change (cf. Baltrusch 2014c). In all of his novels, it is always small groups who change

or rewrite history, and we might think here of *The Stone Raft* (1996), or of *Blindness* (1999a) and *Seeing* (2006). This is reminiscent of the conceptions, inflected by existentialism and anarchism, of Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued that only a small group, a “*groupe en fusion*” (cf. 1974: 627–755), a group that forms spontaneously and outside of institutions, can realise a community that practices individual liberty as the liberty of all. The quadrinity of B&B, thanks to the possibility of an impossibility embodied by Blimunda, puts this vision of community into practice, effecting profound alterations of consciousness without, simultaneously, reproducing the old power hierarchies. This is a group in fusion in which ideas, talents, and affects merge, and in which the exercise of power takes place in the most horizontal manner possible, attempting to achieve, with the flying machine, a truly revolutionary result.

The device that propels this revolution is not just the result of Father Bartolomeu's engineering, or Baltasar's craftsmanship, or even the artistry of Domenico Scarlatti, but to a much larger degree, it is the result of Blimunda's capacity to capture, care for, and ‘digest,’ the latter taken in its widest sense,<sup>12</sup> human wills. This knowing how to see, capture, and digest the wills of the dying confers upon her a transhuman status, one in which the notion of the human is traversed not only by death, but by a responsibility that extends beyond history, making her the main protagonist of B&B. The memorial of B&B is, then, at its deepest level, the memorial of a woman at the limits of the human, who exists between life and death, who has a superior emotional intelligence, but who is not the fantastic or supernatural figure described in some critical approaches to the novel.

The manner in which Blimunda perceives things is similar to what phenomenology and psychology describe as ‘embodied cognition,’ a type of intelligence that goes beyond individual corporality and which includes other humans/animals and even inanimate objects. To see others' interiority to the extent of incorporating those others into oneself is not different, in figurative terms, to human consciousness. Theories of embodied cognition describe consciousness as intrinsically linked to the body and physical interaction, opposed to the classical models of cognitivism, computationalism, and Cartesian dualism (cf. Rowlands 2010). In Blimunda are combined all that to which the

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12 To digest also in the sense of Haraldo de Campos' anthropophagic translation theory.



body, experience, and consciousness are exposed: the place, the need to react, a consciousness that develops within a vast sociocultural expanse, with action always the immediate object of cognition. Apart from this, with her recording and digestion of wills for the flying machine project, Blimunda acts as a crossing point for a public *space of appearance* (Hannah Arendt) of bodies and wills, in which the metaphors of the flying machine and the will of a plural subject (the people, human beings) create a revolutionary “affective atmosphere” (Anderson 2009).

In all of this, there is always implicit the possibility of an impossibility, the aporetic condition of the gift that means that no system can remain closed or complete. There always remains an opening to the future as a quasi (non-religious) transcendence, but also a possibility of failure (cf. the crash of the flying machine or the death of Baltasar). Blimunda’s humanity contains within itself that which exceeds humanity, and there is no need here to speak of fantastic or magic realist elements within the novel, elements which would only devalue the sublimity of her actions.

The humanity that defines Blimunda is exemplified, directly or indirectly, in that aspiration to give that which is impossible, a desire that is present in the philosophy of Derrida, but also, and in literary terms, in the work of Saramago. It is a question of knowing that it is not possible to give with complete certainty but risking the gift in any case. In this way, in her decision for and of the Other in itself, Blimunda incarnates, simultaneously, the possible and the impossible: “Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to become finite, become incarnated in order to love the other, to love the other as a finite other” (Derrida 1995: 51). The gift of “infinite love” of Blimunda and Baltasar seems to require the existence of an “irreplaceable singularity” that can only be conferred by an experience of “near death.” It is in this context that “the mortal thus deduced is someone whose very responsibility requires that he concern himself not only with an objective Good but with a gift of infinite love, a goodness that is forgetful of itself” (1995: 51).

In the case of Blimunda, however, the question of knowledge, prior or posterior, of that which one is, of the goodness that does or does not know its own nature, is unimportant when compared to the imperatives of a *hic et nunc* that is tautological, heterological and which excludes both reason and faith as condi-

tions for a responsible decision: "I can tell, even though I can't explain why I can tell, don't ask me questions I cannot answer, behave as you did before, when you followed me home without asking any questions" (Saramago 1987a: 46). Perhaps it is this double aporia (the necessary "irreplaceable singularity" conferred by "near death," and the exclusion of reason and faith as conditions for a responsible decision) that defines the sublimity of the figure of Blimunda.

## Conclusions

But the question of the sublime in relation to female figures in the work of Saramago should also be placed within the context of a decolonial rewriting of history. And more specifically, of an attempt to rewrite the long history of the representation of women by male writers. From the pregnant woman of *O Ano de 1993* (The Year of 1993) to Gracinda Mau-Tempo of *Raised from the Ground* (2013), and even the doctor's wife in *Blindness* (1997), Saramago's work has produced a series of strong, calm, and wise women characters, who are often superior to their male counterparts. These portrayals of women counter the hegemonic and patriarchal vision of history with a new understanding, one whose poetic vitality and sublimity distance it from traditional forms.<sup>13</sup>

The theories that have constituted Western conceptions of the sublime since the eighteenth century (Burke, Kant, Schiller) were all based on dualist epistemologies characterised by the antinomies of culture-nature, soul-body, rationality-emotion, strength-weakness, etc. Femininity was linked to beauty and nature; the sublime, on the other hand, was conceived as overcoming the feminine categories of beauty, nature, and the body, and therefore a category that was properly masculine. Throughout the centuries, the interaction between rationality and imagination in the sublime has been an allegory of the relations between sexes in the patriarchal system. Saramago's depiction of female characters, however, and especially in his depiction of Blimunda, contain elements that have been evoked by gender studies as the conditions

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13 Cf. also the fundamental study of Ferreira on "Saramago's Axiology of Gender Difference" (2018).

for the feminine sublime:<sup>14</sup> the ethical and responsible relation to the Other in which the subject does not seek to identify or categorise the Other, but simply accepts difference. In the majority of cases, the female protagonists of Saramago's work are not portrayed as having "essentially" feminine traits.<sup>15</sup> Rather than an appropriation or colonisation of the Other, there is an attempt to develop a conception of the feminine sublime based on a respect for that which is incommensurably different in the Other.

Blimunda embodies that which has made the aesthetics of the sublime one of the principal currents of modern art: the event that occurs when the imagination can no longer represent an object in concepts, when something is evoked that we can think or feel but which we cannot represent. Kant described the absence of form as a possible index of the irrepresentable. But we should disregard the Kantian idea that the most sublime part of the Bible consists in the prohibition of the representation of the absolute ("Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image"). The portrayal of Blimunda subverts this command, as she is represented in the broadest of strokes (we know little of her physical appearance) but at the same time in an incredibly plastic and immediate way, as if she were the palpable evocation of something that is, ultimately, irrepresentable. The precept, established by Kant, of the necessity of an incommensurability in the relationship between reality and concept might remain in force, but it is clear that the traditional, logocentric, and patriarchal understandings of the sublime are questioned and transfigured by Saramago's Blimunda.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Cf. Freeman 1995, Zylinska 1998 and 2001.

15 Although it should be said that Saramago does not always avoid this trap (cf. Baltrusch 2014a).

16 Something comparable occurs in the figure of the narrator who, in Saramago's work, is replaced by the "literary place": "the reader does not read the novel, the reader reads the novelist," given that "a book is, more than anything else, an expression [...] of its author" (in Reis 1998: 97–98). Both in the narrative voices of the novels and in various paratexts, Saramago offers us indications for a reading that, in a certain sense, adapts and contemporises the precepts of Brecht's "epic theatre": the narrative voices in the novels always warn us of the inherent precarity of their discourses and of the roles played by the various characters: there is a tendency towards explanation in the narrative discourse, a tendency that invites criticism; and it is always the case that central elements of traditional history and the collective imaginary are revisited in critical form. Although this might be a topic for another study, it is interesting to note here how these techniques are not central to the construction of Blimunda or the doctor's

In the dialogue of ethics and aesthetics, a formula that could well define Saramago's work, we can detect elements of a utopic desire for totality, for the total work of art (cf. Baltrusch 2014b), ultimately an attempt to think of the whole, to think in a sympoietic way. This desire is channelled in an allusion to the unrepresentable, to the amplitude of the historical concept of the novel, simultaneously romantic and (post)modern, marvellous and realist, dreamlike and concrete, passionate and emotionless, fabulous and merely descriptive, a tangle of lies and a search for truth, etc. Ultimately, a constant evocation of an irrepresentable sublime. Even that which could be described as postmodern in Saramago, for example that which denies traditional conventions of morals, taste or beauty, becomes a type of representation of the irrepresentable. The rules are questioned so as to find others that could have been, or that will have been, alluding in this way to two simultaneous paradoxes: the past rewritten or the future prewritten.

But there are other important elements relating to the question of the sublime that should be taken into account, and which affect that which in Saramago's female characters, and especially in the case of Blimunda, appears as the impossible and the unrepresentable (and I do not refer here to what is often termed the 'fantastic'). In the final chapter of B&B, there is a moment in which Blimunda seems to assume her status: "but when she discussed this matter with other women, she often gave them food for thought, after all, what are these sins of ours, of yours, of mine, if we women are truly the lamb that will take away the sins of the world, the day when this message is understood, it will be necessary to start everything anew" (Saramago 1987a: 280). Once more, beneath this outwardly heretical and subversive message, there hides a more profound one, linked to the previously mentioned idea of an alternate history, in which women would serve as the driving forces.

In this regard, the reinvention of ethics in Saramago's work would also refer to the negation of the need for a prior decision, framed within traditional patriarchal and logocentric terms, which would provide a rational basis for responsibility. History as rewritten by women, what B&B suggests but does

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wife, or to Saramago's female characters more generally, but that they do play a role in the depiction of most of his male characters.

not realise, would invalidate the need for a strict division between a rational ethical responsibility and an irrational, faith-based responsibility. The aporia between the necessity of the irreplaceable singularity of the subject and his or her near-death, of the exclusion of reason and faith from the process of responsible decision, falls apart in the moment in which the subject refuses to identify and categorise the Other. It falls apart when he or she begins to accept unqualified difference. It falls apart when the economy of sacrifice is replaced with a practice and an ethics of care, which would be a human ethics based on affect and the capacity to care in a responsible way for Others. It falls apart, also, when the imagination fails to represent an object with the concept, when things that we think and feel are evoked but cannot be represented.

Saramago may not be classified as a feminist writer, yet within the context of the Portuguese literary tradition that, until the mid-twentieth century, largely sidelined women, his depictions of female characters represented a progressive departure from the norm. The portrayal of women in his works reveals a deliberate intention to rectify historical injustices and contribute to the empowerment and the revaluation of women in the annals of Portuguese literary and cultural history. Moreover, beyond this admirable objective, the character of Blimunda is not just a deconstruction but also a reimagining of fundamental aspects of Western thought concerning the ethical responsibility of the subject. In this regard, the memorial of Blimunda, which I have outlined in broad strokes, encapsulates the central message of B&B. Consequently, it helps us gain deeper insights not only into the portrayal of women but also into human responsibility and their ethical and political dimensions within Saramago's oeuvre.

# A Literary Autopsy: An Anthropological and Medical Approach to Saramago's Oeuvre

EGÍDIA SOUTO AND PHILIPPE CHARLIER<sup>1</sup>

[...]. Love is a malady whose remedy is  
A kiss, or Death.  
António Nobre, *Saudade*

If you have a heart of iron, enjoy.  
Mine was wrought from flesh and bleeds all day long.  
José Saramago

One may wonder whether José Saramago ever aspired to be a physician, whether he once entertained the idea of enrolling in a health faculty, or whether he had family members in the medical field. One thing is certain: his keen observations of the body, illness, agony, and death are astounding and reflect an immense fascination with these subjects. At times, the author even displays a flawless command, not only of the lexical field, but also of the key concepts and notions in the history of medicine. Starting from the book *Death at Intervals* (2008) and, with some brief forays into *Blindness* (1999a), we will seek to understand, through an ontological approach, how the novelist turns the text into an autopsy room, to establish a diagnosis that attests to the complexity of the human being and problematizes their connection with a world marked by a state of 'blindness.' Undoubtedly through fiction Saramago raises questions related to ethics and existence.

It is considered that, since 1995, Saramago's work takes on a more universal character, with concerns of ethical, social, and philosophical nature, leaving

.....  
1 Translated from the Portuguese by Michael Skinner; revised by Burghard Baltrusch and Carlo Salzani.

aside relevant themes and episodes of the Portuguese cultural imagery. With *Blindness*, the visionary author already showed how an epidemic can reveal the limits of democracy. He demonstrated how the states of ‘white blindness’ described in the novel are nothing but a blindness of the citizen, blinded by the chaos of a pseudo-democracy. The sudden onset of a blindness epidemic that appears to be affecting the entire world—except for one woman, who continues to see but hides this fact from everyone—will unveil all the flaws of the human species. The realism in depicting the transmission of the epidemic, the spread of the disease, and its physiological consequences are a marvel of erudition and medical analysis. It is worth noting that this blindness is also a kind of death, or better, a partial death, the death of the gaze, which immediately involves the death of interaction. The blind people don’t have time to adapt, and the nature of the epidemic prevents all forms of mutual support (all are affected, except the woman). They are all in a kind of ‘little death,’ and in this sense, the two concepts are totally comparable if not superimposable.

The narrator observes with sensitivity, noting the sequence of symptoms, the immediate and distant consequences on this or that part of the body, but also on a behavioural and social level. Regarding this book, Fernando Meireles asserts: “it is a text that raises many questions but gives no answers; it raises questions about the evolution of human beings, makes us reflect critically, but doesn’t give directions. Each one must discover the path on their own” (Meireles 2010: 50). From this premise, it could be said that Saramago’s entire oeuvre can be considered as a literature of initiation or as a survival manual. And in this sense, we recall the epigraph of *Death at Intervals*: “We will know less and less about what it means to be human” (Saramago 2008: 8).

Through writing with ethical concerns, Saramago also addresses the medical community, urging it to acknowledge its limits in knowledge. The novelist points out the need for us to confront death and not perceive it as the great taboo of the 21st century. In this regard, we emphasise the significance of Geoffrey Gorer’s “Pornography of Death” (1955), which argues that the rise of the bourgeoisie and sexual liberation seem to have shifted one taboo to another. If sexuality has become a commonplace and less prohibited topic than in classical times, death, on the other hand, has become a taboo and ends up being confined to the private and familial sphere in the Western world.

Saramago's approach in these two works is not only a contemplation of death itself. It is primarily a contemplation of the death of a civilization in the era of capitalism. Let us recall the philosophy of Nietzsche, revisited by the oldest living philosopher, Edgar Morin, who asserts:

Death, with its corollary, sexual reproduction, death-rebirth, in other words, is not only the remedy against this deterioration, the source of perpetual youth [...] it is also the most refreshing, the most optimistic, and the happiest discovery of life all the more dazzling the more ephemeral: the butterfly lasts only one day. And if life is not death, this death plotted by the species is life. (Morin 1948: 292)

Saramago, in turn, universalizes the theme of death and even raises the question of interspecies death:

Have you ever wondered if death is the same for all living beings, be they animals, human beings included, or plants, [...] will the death that kills a man who knows he's going to die be the same as that of a horse who never will. And, it went on, at what point did the silkworm die after having shut itself up in the cocoon and bolted the door, how was it possible for the life of one to have been born out of the death of the other, the life of the moth out of the death of the worm, and for them to be the same but different, or did the silkworm not die because the moth still lives. The apprentice philosopher replied, The silkworm didn't die, but the moth will die after it has laid its eggs, Well, I knew that before you were born, said the spirit hovering over the waters of the aquarium, the silkworm didn't die, there was no corpse inside the cocoon when the moth had left, but, as you said, one was born out of the death of the other, It's called metamorphosis, everyone knows that, said the apprentice philosopher condescendingly. (Saramago 2008: 61–62)

Undoubtedly, death and life are intrinsically intertwined. Speculating about the meaning of death means interrogating the meaning of life. Defining death is tantamount to defining the end of life. There can be no analysis of one with-



out there also being a commentary on the other. Moreover, death is not in opposition to life, it is the opposite of birth, since life is everywhere, universal, endless, merely undergoing transformations (Charlier 2021: 19). And in these works by Saramago, written when he was nearly 70 and 80 years old, we find ourselves facing a treatise on life, as he himself stated in an interview with Maria Alzira Seixo in 2006.

Far from a morbid discourse on death, the author provides his readers a way to achieve a 'good death', akin to the treatises of *Ars Moriendi*, the art of dying well, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For, in times of epidemics, it was necessary to 'achieve a good death' to ensure a place in Paradise. Saramago tells us that, in one of his many readings of Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), he found material for a new novel, inspired by the descriptions of death contained therein. The initial title of the work was *The Smile of Death*, but it ended up being *Death at Intervals*. For the author, it had become evident that "the novel no longer had to keep telling stories, as the stories of our time are told by cinema and television, and therefore, for the novel and the novelist, there remained nothing more than to return to the three or four human questions, perhaps only two: life and death" (Vasconcelos 2010: 107).

In the book *Death at Intervals*, Saramago introduces the notion of a "state of suspended life or, as they preferred to call it, arrested death" (2008: 31–32): the subject (the patient?) is already 'potentially' dead (he would already be dead if she were in a foreign country; and this survival is only due to Death's inactivity). We are merely waiting for the heart to stop, in other words, for death to cut the thread. This new concept of death aligns with the notion of "real and constant death" on death certificates, the "brain death," based on the definition of the Glasgow Coma Scale, from resuscitators who authorize the removal of an organ from a subject with a beating heart, and the recently redefined social death on an anthropological and medical level (Charlier and Hassin 2015).

Let us recall that, in this novel, which we deem to be Saramago's most philosophical, death ceases to kill and places the reader in the face of a grave epidemic. We want to emphasize that death raises a genuine epistemological question about the very meaning of its function. What would the course of the world be if death were to suspend its duty? What would the meaning of life be (without death)? What would signify this proliferation of bodies suspended

between life and death, in a liminal realm where one is not truly dead and not entirely alive but rather on the threshold of the end?

The epidemic in the novel is that of a humanity without death, with all the consequences that this entails, as can be read in this passage: “why are you so alarmed by the fact that death has ended, We don't know that it has, we know only that it has ceased to kill, which is not the same thing” (Saramago 2008: 30). Now, ironically, death doesn't die, she, who is a figuration of a woman in the novel, only suspends her activities. And it is not in vain that Saramago, in his essayistic vein, reaffirms that “without death, there is neither religion nor philosophy” (Saramago 2005: 116). We can also read in *Death at Intervals*, that “Whether we like it or not, the one justification for the existence of all religions is death, they need death as much as we need bread to eat. The religious delegates did not bother to protest. On the contrary, one of them, a highly regarded member of the catholic sector, said, You're absolutely right, my dear philosopher, that, of course, is why we exist” (Saramago 2005: 29–30).

Paraphrasing Pascal, we could speak of the delicious Death that marks a boundary. As patients in a state of 'suspended death' cross that boundary, death knows them from end to end, in accordance with an undisturbed anatomical logic, spreading like wildfire along the physiological networks of nerves and vessels: “it was at the precise, fateful moment when they crossed the frontier, feet first so that the head would be aware of what was happening to the rest of the body, that the poor unfortunates passed away, uttered their last sigh” (Saramago 2008: 53–54). This detail reminds us of Plato's account of the death of Socrates, which describes the cold current of death gripping the philosopher from his feet upwards as he drinks the cup of hemlock, ultimately ending his life as this lethal flow reaches his heart and chills it completely (Stella 2006: 122).

In this attempt at anatomy learning, Saramago goes into great detail with the descriptions, going as far as playing with the functions of the internal organs of the human being:

This had nothing to do with the men on this side of the border, for they knew they wouldn't die even if a burst of machine-gun fire cut them in two. Although, out of perfectly legitimate scientific curiosi-

ty, we should ask ourselves how the two halves could survive in cases where the stomach was left on one side and the intestines on the other. (Saramago 2008: 54)

When Death, portrayed in the novel as a woman, starts writing to justify her cessation of activity, and later to decree the systematic week before each death, Saramago once again plays with human anatomy. The narrator asks himself how a skeletal hand can hold a pen. We then see that, beyond any ethical and moral questions, the author is intrigued by anatomical issues inherent to the species' capability. And in this manner, he dares to venture into the forensic realm with details about the crafting of dactyloscopic profiles:

one sceptic protested that there was no previous record of death ever having written a letter and that it should be sent at once to a handwriting analyst, because, he said, a hand made only of bits of bone would never be able to write like a complete, authentic, living hand, with its blood, veins, nerves, tendons, skin and flesh, and since bones obviously wouldn't leave any fingerprints on the paper, which meant that they wouldn't be able to identify the author of the letter that way, a dna test might throw some light on this unexpected epistolary appearance from a being, if death is a being, who had, until then, remained silent all her life. (Saramago 2008: 87)

By delving into the realm of the sciences, Saramago opens up the contemplation of other fundamental questions of human society, particularly the advancement of "genetic engineering," the planet's evolution, and also the issue of "resource management" (Saramago 2005: 118), as he himself stated in several interviews.

Always in an ironic manner, the decadence in which our civilization lives is also narrated. To demonstrate this, Saramago insists on highlighting the malevolence, cruelty, injustice, and above all, the violence perpetrated by human beings. His fondness for statistics is evident, as can be gleaned from several pages, such as when the narrator employs a theoretical analysis of epidemiology (not necessarily accurate in statistical terms): "we feel we must mention that death, by herself and alone, with no external help, has always killed far

less than mankind has" (Saramago 2008: 91). If we observe closely, the raised interpretation corresponds to the author's tendency to act as an avenger in a society he deems "sick." Invested in his role as an avenger, the author undoubtedly refers to wars, exterminations, murders, and torture. Several studies tend to confirm that cruelty is inherent in human nature. The human species is the only animal species that commits evil for pleasure, that tortures, murders and rapes with premeditation. Saramago spares no detail in depicting what humans are capable of to satisfy their basic instincts. We often speak of 'animality,' but, on the contrary, it is 'humanity' that may not ultimately be synonymous with 'humanism' (Charlier 2017: 394). However, Saramago seems to be referring here to non-natural deaths that would exceed the frequency of natural deaths. Would it be audacious to see another influence of forensic medicine in this excerpt of his discourse? Assuming that forensic medicine treats victims and administers justice, we draw an analogy here from the author's discourse.

We must not overlook that another dimension of this interest concerns places associated with health. Saramago is acquainted with hospitals, and particularly their smells. The narrator mentions them when Death finally resumes her activity: "Now they were dead, and had been taken away and buried, and the air in the hospitals, with its unmistakable aroma of ether, iodine and disinfectant, had become as pure and crystalline as mountain air" (Saramago 2008: 98). The cruelty and chaos of the public healthcare system, and specifically the hospital environment, are also highlighted. The lack of ethics in handling human remains and corpses does not escape criticism either, and there is clearly an indictment of the way in which people die:

the truth is that many of them, with no known relatives and no money to pay the rates demanded by the eventide homes, were crammed in wherever there was space, not in corridors, as has long been the custom in these worthy establishments yesterday, today and always, but in lumber rooms and attics, where they would often be left for days at a time, without anyone taking the slightest notice of them, for, as the doctors and nurses said, regardless of how ill they might be, they couldn't die. (Saramago 2008: 98)

Again, the author reveals the fragility of the overwhelmed hospital system, the lack of conditions, but also the inequality in the face of death. Even though the criticism is evident here, it was primarily *Blindness* that first tackled healthcare issues in a critical and symbolic manner (especially when considering the case of Portugal). Both works use allegory to explore broader issues such as corruption, dehumanisation, lack of solidarity, and the fragility of the human condition. Although not an exclusive depiction of the Portuguese hospital environment, Saramago's work presents a powerful critique of the healthcare system and the lack of humanity and empathy in patient treatment. Saramago used fiction as a tool to reflect on the social and political issues of his time, and his approach in this excerpt could be thus interpreted as a criticism of bureaucracy, inequality, and lack of attention to public healthcare policies.

We consider the issue of health to be an important theme in the author's oeuvre. However, it is a relatively underexplored aspect by critics: throughout *Death at Intervals*, we can observe over fifty occurrences of hospital-related vocabulary and more than thirty references to illnesses. It is also important to highlight that a true reflection on euthanasia is evident in the thoughts of José Saramago, as well as on the difference between killing and giving death ("Taking someone to their death and killing them are two different things"; Saramago 2008: 36). We should note that the author had already given lectures at the Faculty of Medicine in Lisbon (Sousa Dias 2005) at a time when the concept of euthanasia and palliative care was not even being discussed in Portugal (Miranda Monteiro 2001: 34–49). The decree of the Portuguese Parliament regarding medically assisted death, including euthanasia and medically assisted suicide, was passed on November 5, 2021.<sup>2</sup> It's worth highlighting that ahead of time, or more accurately, in a period marked by numerous taboos, Saramago explicitly proposed a reflection on the subject, as can be read in this passage:

Not even the gentlest of euthanasias could be as easy or as sweet. The most interesting aspect of the new situation is that the justice system of the country in which people do not die finds itself without any legal basis

.....

2 It should be noted that at this moment, in most European countries this debate is at the heart of political preoccupations and of numerous referendums.

on which to take action against the buriers, always supposing they really wanted to, and not just because of the gentlemen's agreement that the government was forced to make with the mafia. It can't accuse them of homicide because, technically speaking, no homicide takes place, and also because the reprehensible act, and if anyone can find a better way of describing it, then please do, takes place abroad, and they can't even accuse them of burying the dead, since that is the natural fate of the dead, and they should be grateful that there is someone prepared to take on a task which, however you look at it, is a painful one, both from the physical and the psychological viewpoint. (Saramago 2008: 57–58)

It's important to clarify that *Death at Intervals* offers a reflection spanning over three pages on the criteria for selecting who gets to die, as well as the associated inequality, since “naturally, all of this cost a lot of money” (Saramago 2008: 59). And in this sense, Saramago's text also raises the following questions: “What criteria can be applied in this case: anthropological, sociological, biological? What are the consequences of this status of social death for the practitioner in terms of the ethics of care practices and biomedical research?” (Charlier and Hassin 2015: 394).

*Death at Intervals* not only exposes the inequality in accessing palliative care. The fictional perspective, aligned with the narrative parable, also raises questions about the “mafia” that transported the bodies of the ill to allow them to die at the border and the ensuing moral dilemmas of triage. In light of these aspects, we consider the reflections of the medical ethics specialist Marta Spranzi (2023):

These are questions of philosophical choice in which it is well known that no clear-cut arbitration is possible. Considerations of the societal consequences of potentially legalizing assisted dying does not provide further clarity: the arguments of the slippery slope that some fear are countered by the injustice experienced by those who, due to lack of connections and means, do not have access to this valuable service, which is available either illegally in France or legally abroad.

These are issues that can be linked to Saramago's novel:

We want you alive, not dead, Yes, but not in my current state, alive but dead, dead but apparently alive, If that's what you want, we'll do as you ask, Give me a kiss. The daughter kissed him on the forehead and left the room, crying. With her face still bathed in tears, she went and told the rest of the family about her father's plan, that they should take him, that same night, across the border, where death was still functioning and where, or so he believed, death would have no alternative but to accept him. (Saramago 2008: 33)

Another pioneering theme that this book addresses ironically is the denunciation of sexist and misogynist practices in health care in general, but even more in the context of health care institutions. The author, well aware of the history of misconduct among hospital staff in the context of the well-known pre-MeToo harassment, does not spare his criticism: "They didn't crack open any bottles of champagne, but the happy smiles of administrators and clinical directors were a salve to the soul, and as for the male doctors, suffice it to say that they had recovered their traditionally predatory gaze when they gave the female nursing staff the eye" (Saramago 2008: 98).

Saramago also engages in rhetorical acrobatics using his anatomical knowledge: "only an arrant fool could think that death, who, as everyone knew, was a skeleton draped in a sheet, would set out, bony heels clattering along the pavement, to mail her letters" (2008: 107); "the archives of the official identification service in which were gathered photographs of all the country's inhabitants, both indigenous and foreign, classified and ordered according to certain basic characteristics, the dolichocephalic to one side, the brachycephalic to the other" (2008: 109). And the juggling with anatomy can even transform into a treatise on life and death: "Death knows everything about us, and that perhaps is why she's sad. If it's true that she doesn't smile, this is only because she has no lips, and this anatomical lesson tells us that, contrary to what the living may believe, a smile is not a matter of teeth" (2008: 117).

One gets the impression that Saramago is playing with the anatomical and physiological knowledge of the skull, as well as with the methodologies of forensic anthropology developed in Soviet Russia by Gerasimov, in an attempt to reconstruct death's identikit picture. There are no mistakes in the use of terms,

no misinterpretations in the outline of a methodology described for the reader; it's a flawless execution, in addition to being a fascinating idea. The author is not lacking in surgical knowledge either, as Saramago is equally comfortable with medical techniques and even forensic techniques of craniofacial reconstruction. That is to say, he seems familiar with the method by which, by overlaying standardized layers of skin, muscle, and adipose tissue onto the surface of a dry skull, one can create a composite portrait that closely resembles the facial features of a deceased individual. Initially carried out by artists using clay or plaster models, this scientific specialty, linked to forensic medicine and criminology laboratories, now employs computer technology for its work.

This exemplary description proves it perfectly:

It was then that a forensic scientist, well informed about everything that related, directly or indirectly, to his profession, had the idea of inviting over a celebrated foreign expert in the reconstruction of faces from skulls, this expert, basing himself on representations of death in old paintings and engravings, especially those showing her bare cranium, would try to replace any missing flesh, restore the eyes to their sockets, add, in just proportions, hair, eyelashes and eyebrows, as well as appropriate touches of colour to the cheeks, until before him appeared a perfect, finished head of which a thousand photographic copies would then be made so that the same number of investigators could carry it in their wallets to compare with the many women they would see. (Saramago 2008: 108)

Now, with this passage, one can assert that the book somewhat resembles a detective novel, as upon the unveiling of the criminal Death's face, justice is served and the mystery is solved. And we can't help but think of the body of the famous *Inconnue de la Seine*, retrieved in 1885 from the River Seine and whose great beauty led the morgue pathologist at that time to create a death mask of her face in wax plaster (Prévot 2021). This face inspired not only Rainer Maria Rilke, but also other artists and curiosity seekers up to our days. Let us remember that it was also the facial reconstruction that allowed the identification of this woman. Giving a face to our significant other is "the wisdom



of the nations” (Saramago 2008: 109). The narrator’s statement highlights the significance of recognizing mortality, specifically acknowledging ourselves as human beings who are subject to death. In *Death at Intervals*, scientists, forensic pathologists and criminologists collaborate with the justice system and the police to create a visual representation of the features of ‘Madame Death,’ drawing upon the historical significance of the figure of Death: “the models chosen for the facial reconstruction had been taken from old engravings and paintings” (Saramago 2008: 109).

Without a doubt, Saramago is one of the first writers to manage to reanimate death in such a detailed and impactful manner. He gives it a hand to write with, a heart to love with, and, above all, to have vital functions and to be, after all, human: “Death, however, this death who has become a woman, takes a pair of dark glasses out of her bag and uses them to protect her now human eyes from the risk of catching a nasty case of conjunctivitis” (2008: 155); “[she] would be a woman of about thirty-six and very beautiful indeed” (2008: 109). Saramago makes death human, because according to him, the “only answer we have to death is love” (Saramago 2005: 116). In *Death at Intervals*, Saramago addresses the age-old question of the drive for life, *Eros*, and for death, *Thanatos*. And if the greatest utopia is to overcome death, his novels leave open the possibility of charting a path for new reflections. In conclusion, it can be said that at the intersection of medicine, Saramago was a great visionary humanist. He was not afraid to weave a crossing of the disciplines of the hard sciences and the humanities, as evidenced in this novel:

The sun doesn’t trouble her empty eye sockets, that’s why the skulls found in archeological digs have no need to lower their eyelids when the light suddenly strikes their face and the happy anthropologist announces that his bony find shows every sign of being a neanderthal, even though a subsequent examination reveals it to be merely a vulgar homo sapiens. (Saramago 2008: 155)

Through a prism that intersected anthropology, medicine, and philosophy, we sought to emphasise that the concept of death in José Saramago is nothing but an attempt to comprehend the world and the human condition. It is the ethical

citizenship stance of the author that prompts the reader to contemplate the kind of human they wish to become in the future. This utopia of ethical citizenship through interdisciplinary critical thinking endeavours to draw attention to and connect knowledge so that there can be contemplation about the meaning of humanity and what defines us as a human species. Could the author not have endeavoured to gauge a potential future with the aim of awakening an awareness of what we are or wish to be? As we read in the epigraph and on the back cover: "We will know less and less what it means to be human" (2008: 8).

Towards the end of his life, Saramago wrote a novel that raises pertinent ethical questions, probing the fate of humanity, its relationship with emotions, and death. António Damásio asserted that feelings are an integral part of human epic (Damasio 2018). And Saramago, through his literature, grasped what neurology now confirms. What humanity would we possess without feelings? The death portrayed by Saramago, in the voice of his narrator, thus demands, through an anatomical exercise that masterfully autopsies a passionate death, a profound reflection on human finitude and destiny. Modern medicine undoubtedly has a wide range of proposals and solutions for preventing death and even turning back its signs. But no matter how hard we try and how much we want to cheat death, it inevitably remains humanity's destiny. For the time being, and despite all the transhumanist promises of longevity, you can't escape death even if you're in love with it. Evasion of death eludes us, even if it were enamoured. Hence, Saramago insists that "[w]e travel with our own death, if we do not carry it inside" (2005: 118).

The strength of this book is that Saramago has turned death, which resides within each of us, into a desired being. Finally, the fact that death is a woman, and one that is beautiful, desirable and sought after, and whose love is consummated with a man at the end of the book, adds to its sensuality. Far more than the classic Eros/Thanatos opposition, what we find here is a fusion of the two. It's not the love for a corpse (necrophilia), but rather the love for death as a distinct entity (thanatophilia). Embodied death, made into woman. One might begin to dream: what if death were pregnant from that night of love with the musician? What would this child be like?



# Canines: Unlikely Protagonists in the Novels of Coetzee, Saramago and Shibli

HANIA A. M. NASHEF

Anthropomorphism, which combines two Greek words, *anthropos* and *morphe*, meaning ‘human’ and ‘form’ respectively, is a term that reflects our attribution of human characteristics to non-human animals and objects, bestowing upon them agency (Taylor 2011: 266). Claire Parkinson reminds us that until the second half of the nineteenth century the term referred to the tradition of attributing humanlike characteristics or bodily form to deities (2020: 2). At the beginning of the twentieth century humans started attributing (allegedly unique) human characteristics to non-human animals and to regard anthropomorphism pejoratively (Parkinson 2020: 2). In one respect, however, anthropomorphism elevates the status of the non-human animal, moving it from being an object to being a subject. In addition, exercises in anthropomorphism often lead to a hybridity that results in the “mixing of human and animal traits where animals are often endowed with characteristics assumed to be human specific, such as emotion and free will” (Taylor 2011: 270). Our normal understanding of hierarchy within our social life is that the designation of subject can only be awarded to human beings, as “only humans have agency” and “other non-human entities are [considered] passive recipients” of a power that can only be exerted by humans (Taylor 2011: 274–275). In addition, denied the *logos*, animals are often defined as creatures without compassion or reason. Moreover, defining animals in relation to humans stems from the human belief that they are superior creatures, more deserving of life.

In this chapter, I discuss a number of dogs in novels by José Saramago, J. M. Coetzee, and Adania Shibli that go against these traditional anthropocentric

assumptions and, through a certain critical “use” of anthropomorphism,<sup>1</sup> illustrate how these particular animals are not only subjects with agency but also protagonists in their own right. The dogs in the novels *Blindness*, *Disgrace*, and *Minor Detail* exhibit a form of humanism that is markedly missing in some of the human subjects. Moreover, they exhibit free will and emotions that are often associated with the human being and denied to animals.

## **Dog Life = Human Life: *Ensaio sobre a cegueira***

In Saramago’s novel *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* [*Blindness*], which was first published in Portuguese in 1995, a mysterious and contagious malady spreads rapidly through an unnamed city, leaving an entire population with an unexplained white blindness. For an inexplicable reason, one character, the doctor’s wife, retains her eyesight and ends up being the de facto leader of the group of characters we follow in the novel. In the asylum where they are confined, she tries to organize the daily activities of the inmates; at the same time, she becomes privy to the degradation that ensues and the abysmal circumstances of the confinement of the blind. Not only does she bear witness to the disintegration of an entire community, but also to the dehumanization of those who have been detained in the asylum. She tells us: “If [we] cannot live entirely like human beings, at least let [us] do everything in [our] power not to live entirely like animals” (Saramago 1999a: 111).<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben argues that the definition of what connotes a human being does not only rest on the characteristics of the human, but also depends on the recognition of oneself as being such; the human is the “*animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*” (2004: 26, emphasis in the original). Being human depends on “a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human,” since “*Homo sapiens* [is] neither a clearly defined species nor a substance” (Agamben 2004: 26). In her

- .....
- 1 On the critical and ironic “use” of anthropomorphism, especially but not only in Saramago, see Carlo Salzani’s chapter in this volume, “The Temptations of Anthropomorphism, or, How an Elephant Can Help Us Become Human.”
  - 2 “Se não formos capazes de viver inteiramente como pessoas, ao menos façamos tudo para não viver inteiramente como animais” (Saramago 1995: 119).

efforts to retain some dignity for the inmates, the doctor's wife is asking those humans to recognize themselves as such.

Agamben also notes that the machine or device that produces the human

necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion). Indeed, precisely because the human is already presupposed every time, the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside. (2004: 37)

This becomes evident from early on in the novel, in which the lines between inclusion and exclusion are blurred. From the onset, the authorities establish a boundary between those they consider human and those they do not. The physical predicament of being blind becomes the factor distinguishing those who retain their humanity from those who are denied theirs. Succumbing to white blindness becomes the mechanism used to demarcate the boundaries that exist between humans and beasts, as those beings whose humanity has been stripped.<sup>3</sup> The “articulation between human and animal”—and what occurs in the asylum—ultimately produces a life which is “neither an animal life nor a human life, but [is] only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*” (Agamben 2004: 38). The “white blindness brings with it a stripping of humanity to its bare essence; animal behavior rises to the fore” (Nashef 2010: 30). In Saramago's novel,

the encounter with white blindness creates a reality in which people are forced to live a bestial existence in a wholly different world that compels its inhabitants to engage in a new kind of interaction and to

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3 I have argued in a previous work that the “marking lies in the ability to see; the soldiers on the outside consider themselves human by mere virtue of being sighted; those within the asylum have been relegated to the status of animals on account of their blindness” (Nashef 2010: 36).

take up a new kind of learning and a new kind of communal living.  
(Nashef 2010: 27)

From the beginning of the novel, the only commodity allowed in the asylum is food, deposited at the main door, three times daily, but it was evident from the start that the supplies were not sufficient. The inmates had to rely on their sense of smell to locate the parcels left outside the building. Like beasts, they sniff for their food. References to dogs and animals abound in the novel. In the first part of the novel, the blind doctor reflects on their plight, comparing their new predicament to dogs:

no dog recognises another dog or knows the others by the names they have been given, a dog is identified by its scent and that is how it identifies others, here we are like another breed of dogs, we know each other's bark or speech, as for the rest, features, colour of eyes or hair, they are of no importance. (Saramago 1999a: 55)<sup>4</sup>

The doctor's wife later reflects: "There are many ways of becoming an animal" (Saramago 1999a: 89).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the regimental commander instructs his soldiers to shoot the blind by drawing a comparison between their malady and "rabies of a dead dog" (Saramago 1999a: 98).<sup>6</sup> In a possible reference to the painting *El Perro* [The dog] by Spanish artist Francisco Goya, the old man with the black patch recalls his visit to a museum in which he saw a painting with a "drowning dog in it, already half submerged," a comparison with their plight and futile struggle against the disease (Saramago 1999a: 123).<sup>7</sup> Following a fire at the asylum, the doctor's wife guides a group of inmates into the outside world, which, to her dismay, is overflowing with spectacles of people

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- 4 "[N]enhum cão reconhece outro cão ou se lhe dá a conhecer, pelos nomes que lhes foram postos, é pelo cheiro que identifica e se dá a identificar, nós aqui somos como uma outra raça de cães, conhecemo-nos pelo ladrar, pelo falar, o resto, feições, cor dos olhos, da pele, do cabelo, não conta, é como se não existisse" (Saramago 1995: 64).
- 5 "Há muitas maneiras de tornar-se animal" (Saramago 1995: 97).
- 6 "A raiva de um cão morto" (Saramago 1995: 104).
- 7 "[U]m cão a afundar-se, já estava meio enterrado" (Saramago 1995: 129).

and packs of animals competing for food. In the chaotic world that she encounters, animals and humans are seeking sustenance and shelter. The doctor's wife reflects: "there's no difference between inside and outside, between here and there, between the many and the few, between what we're living through and what we shall have to live through" (Saramago 1999a: 229).<sup>8</sup>

Outside the asylum, the woman sees how the blind people and the packs of dogs are scavenging for food, emphasizing the parallel that has been "drawn between the animals and the once-human citizens" (Nashef 2010: 38). Ironically, unlike the humans, the dogs on the outside have retained their sight, which in turn allowed them to form groups "to defend themselves from being hunted down" (Saramago 1999a: 247).<sup>9</sup> In this no longer recognizable city, the doctor's wife loses her direction, but is soon guided by what becomes known as the 'dog of tears' that takes it upon itself to act "as a guide dog for the blind characters": without "the friendship and the help of a guiding dog, it would seem, human beings are quite lost" (Salzani and Vanhoutte 2018: 196). This particular animal, whom the doctor's wife starts referring to as the 'dog of tears,' left his pack to join the humans, and "licks her face [as] perhaps it had been used to drying tears ever since it was a puppy" (Saramago 1999a: 222).<sup>10</sup>

The dog of tears appears at a moment of complete despair, when the doctor's wife feels completely helpless. Paradoxically, the dog of tears approximates human behavior. He identifies with the good woman who is trying to help her group, and having grown too close to human beings, he exhibits traits that we often associate only with human beings. In addition, the narrator tells us that the dog of tears "does not follow the scent of dead meat," but instead "accompanies a pair of eyes that he knows are alive and well" (Saramago 1999a: 229).<sup>11</sup> The dog feels its duty to help the humans and becomes an "ill-tempered animal when he does not have to dry someone's tears"; and he feels it is his responsi-

8 "Não há diferença entre o fora e o dentro, entre o cá e o lá, entre os poucos e os muitos, entre o que vivemos e o que teremos de viver" (Saramago 1995: 232).

9 "[E]m grupo se defendem de ser caçados" (Saramago 1995: 249).

10 "[L]ambe-lhe a cara, talvez desde pequeno tenha sido habituado a enxugar prantos" (Saramago 1995: 224).

11 "[N]ão anda ao cheiro de carne morta, acompanha uns olhos que ele bem sabe estarem vivos" (Saramago 1995: 233).



bility to guide them “as if it had been born to guide a flock, under orders not to lose a single sheep” (Saramago 1999a: 226, 254).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the dog restores part of the humanity and dignity the humans have lost (Cole 2006: 119).

The dog of tears refuses to emulate the actions of the other dogs who devour corpses. The narrator tells us that the “dog of tears looked at both the rats and the cats with the indifference of someone who lives in another sphere of emotions, this we might say, were it not for the fact that the dog continues to be the dog that he is, an animal of the human type” (Saramago 1999a: 253).<sup>13</sup> This contrasts sharply with “the animalization of the human,” and in spite of everything that unfolds in *Ensaio*, the dog of tears is capable of showing “kindness, love, passion, and support” (Salzani and Vanhoutte 2018: 200). These qualities exhibited by the dog of tears, which one usually identifies with humans, are throughout the novel juxtaposed with beastly acts performed by the human beings. Eventually, the dog of tears begins to react in a manner similar to that of the humans; when they uncover a rotting corpse, the doctor’s wife turns her eyes away, prompting the dog of tears to move closer, but even though “death frightens it, it still takes two steps forward, suddenly its fur stands on end, a piercing howl escapes from its throat, the trouble with this dog is that it has grown too close to human beings, it will suffer as they do,” the narrator reflects (Saramago 1999a: 294).<sup>14</sup> The incessant howling of the dog is a comment on all human suffering (Cole 2006: 120). The animal howls in the face of misery and the animalization of humans; his howling is a reminder to us of our lost humanity.

Anthropomorphism in general “is enmeshed in human-nonhuman animal power relations and intervenes in discourses that shape the practices which govern the material lives of animals. [It also] engages both human empathy

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- 12 “[É] um animal áspero e intratável quando não tem de enxugar lágrimas”; “como se tivesse nascido para cão de rebanho, com ordem de não perder nenhuma ovelha” (Saramago 1995: 229, 255).
- 13 “O cão das lágrimas olhou uns e outros com a indiferença de quem vive noutra esfera de emoções, isto se diria se não fosse ele o cão que continua a ser. mas um animal dos humanos” (Saramago 1995: 253).
- 14 “O cão das lágrimas aproxima-se, mas a morte intimida-o, ainda dá dois passos, de súbito o pêlo encrespou-se-lhe, um uivo lacerante saiu-lhe da garganta, o mal deste cão foi ter-se chegado tanto aos humanos, vai acabar por sofrer como eles” (Saramago 1995: 294).

for and misunderstanding of nonhuman animals” (Parkinson 2020: 129). In *Ensaio*, “canine anthropomorphism is coupled with animalization of the blind humans” (Bolt 2007: 45). Humans in the novel are not only described through their beastly behavior but are recurrently depicted on all fours.<sup>15</sup> In this set of power relations, the dog of tears seems to have the upper hand. Furthermore, the animal is showing empathy towards the humans it has chosen to guide, which results in the doctor’s wife reciprocating with compassion and love. Identifying with the humans puts the animals at risk of suffering like them. On another note, in some cultures, dogs are “viewed as near-humans that are thus vessels that humans look upon so to see themselves [...]. Guilt and shame are projected upon animals, allowing humans to define themselves as they look at that which is similar if radically different from them” (Grinberg and Ashkenazi 2020: 90). At the same time, the dog of tears in *Ensaio* is not only “an animal other,” but rather “a human companion” that “also represents the human self” (Grinberg and Ashkenazi 2020: 101). According to Carlo Salzani and Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte, mongrels “usually align themselves with forms of social oppression,” and the dog of tears has allied himself with this group and specifically with the doctor’s wife, in order to propel change and protect what remains (Salzani and Vanhoutte 2018: 197).

The dog’s actions, behaviors and reactions to the situations that unfold reinforce the social commentary of the author, and therefore represents “the author’s critical positioning toward the (metaphorical) blindness affecting humanity” (Salzani and Vanhoutte 2018: 198). In the absence of human values, the dog of tears becomes a “*function* of the human, a derivative and dependent being,” an embodiment of a morality that is lacking (Salzani and Vanhoutte 2018: 201). In a number of Saramago’s novels, dogs “ascend to the rank of central characters.” The dog of tears is not only promoted to the role of protagonist but also has a “positive role,” to play, which “is charged with symbolism” (Salzani and Vanhoutte 2018: 194).

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15 David Bolt lists a number of instances in the novel. He writes: “This animalizing declaration is bolstered by the way in which the blind humans are repeatedly depicted ‘on all fours’ (62, 69, 70, 97, 131, 198, 218), as animals (96, 126, 170), as pigs (90, 92, 97, 178), as crabs (97) and ‘[t]hieving dogs’ (102), not to mention the invocation of the blind-as-a-bat maxim (99). Put briefly, the novel is abundant with animalizing references to blind humans” (Bolt 2007: 45).

## Life as a Dog: *Disgrace*

Jacques Derrida argues that humans are the ones who have assigned the word animal to “corral a large number of living beings within a single concept” (2002: 400). In doing so, humans have reserved for themselves

the right to the word, the name, the verb, the attribute, to a language of words, in short to the very thing that the others in question would be deprived of, those that are corralled within the grand territory of the beasts: the Animal. (Derrida 2002: 400)

Similar to *Ensaio*, J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* (1999) is replete with references to animals, especially dogs. In *Disgrace*, when “dogs first appear, they are caged, temporarily out-of-service guard dogs: agents of the enforcement of apartheid” (Dekoven 2009: 850).<sup>16</sup> As the novel progresses, dogs are assigned different roles and given different attributes. Two of the animals also begin to assume central roles, rather than peripheral ones.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the lines that strictly separate humans from non-human animals begin to blur. The phrase ‘like a dog,’ which is employed pejoratively to demarcate the lines that separate animals between humans and non-human animals, is repeated on three separate occasions in the novel, signifying the lowest form of life. But as the novel demonstrates, this form of life is no longer the prerogative of animals. On another note, the noun dog-man, with its similarly negative connotation, is repeated six times in the novel. The first use of the term is when David Lurie, the disgraced English professor, meets Petrus, the handyman at his daughter’s farm, who describes himself as the ‘dog-man.’ Indeed, his duty is to look after

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16 Gabebe Baderoon argues: “The use of the metonymic relation signalled in ‘like a dog’ is contrasted. With metaphor [...] humans become animals, for instance [...]. The distinction between metaphor and metonymy, between being an animal and being like an animal, is significant” (2017: 354).

17 According to Harry Sewllall, these non-human characters inhabit “a significant epistemological, political and ecologically ethical space in both these texts. The prominence given to the figure of the canine is reinforced by a seemingly mundane detail appearing on the cover design of the first edition of *Disgrace*” (2013: 78).

the guard dogs, the “Dobermanns, German Shepherds, ridgebacks, bull terriers, Rottweilers,” which his daughter Lucy describes as “Watchdogs” who function as remnants of the apartheid regime. She tells her father that “[d]ogs still mean something [...]. Dogs and a gun; bread in the oven and a crop in the earth” (Coetzee 1999: 60). These dogs, David later reflects, exist “in a country where [they] are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man” (Coetzee 1999: 110). These particular dogs were targeted by David and Lucy’s assailants, in an “act of brutality [which] is by no means politically incomprehensible” (Crary 2016: 231).

After the attack on them and the guard dogs, Lurie’s connection to the dogs grows and develops into an expression of their new status of “alterity through [this new] association with dogs” (Mondry 2018: 22). Additionally, “when imagining Lucy’s rape, David envisions the attackers’ pleasure in destroying the watchdogs as former weapons and symbols of power” (Olson 2014: 124). He and his daughter, as with the canines, are now part of a “sharing with the dogs the status of border-creatures, who live on the margins of society” (Mondry 2018: 22). Following the attack, Petrus is no longer the dog-man; his status has changed. During a conversation with his daughter, David asks if he should assume the vacant position of dog-man: “Why? Do you need a new dog-man?” Petrus, who previously occupied this role, reflects that, because the dogs have been killed, he is “not any more the dog-man” (Coetzee 1999: 88, 129). As the novel progresses, David finds that he has taken the role; he reflects: “A dog-man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*. Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs” (Coetzee 1999: 146).

By accepting the “role of the ‘dog-man’ [...] Coetzee’s novel introduces a unique dimension into alterity” (Willett 2014: 157). Once he accepts calling himself a dog-man, David begins to see “himself as akin to the dog or snake or other animal” (Willett 2014: 162). Previously, Lurie saw himself as separate from non-human animals; he believed that they are not entitled to the same privileges or rights as human beings, because, according to him, they are soulless. David is now forced to reconsider the hierarchical structure he believed in, which put humans on a higher level than animals, but as the narrative progresses, Coetzee’s work “develops a notable image of human-animal kinship”

(Crary 2016: 232). The author is asking the readers “to see human beings as distinctive in our ability to injure ourselves by stunting our own emotional and rational development,” making a “defensible case for a distinctive image of moral fellowship between human beings and animals” (Crary 2016: 232, 233). In addition, Alice Crary argues:

If we allow that the tenets of moral individualism apply to non-human as well as human creatures, we are obliged to treat any capacities that we take to be morally significant in human beings to be likewise morally significant in animals. (2016: 127)

Early on, “David is inclined to treat animals as beings of a different order who, while meriting humane treatment, shouldn’t be regarded as individuals deserving special forms of care and attention” (Crary 2016: 230). At the beginning, David “expresses his disdain for animal lovers,” believing that life can be divided into two levels, higher and lower (Willett 2014: 164). He tells his daughter:

As far as animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity. (Coetzee 1999: 74)

In addition, Olson deduced from that that Coetzee’s novel

demonstrates that the treatment of other humans as “brutes” results out of a Western history in which supposedly less valuable persons were associated with animality. The narrative illustrates humans’ systematic projection of their own “ferocity” onto non-human animals and association of persons they disparage with beasts. (Olson 2014: 119)

In *Disgrace*, the reader is exposed to a number of canines with different roles to play, but for the purpose of this chapter, I would like to reflect on the roles that Katy, the abandoned bitch, and the young dog with its crippled back legs, play. As with Saramago’s *Ensaio*, *Disgrace* demonstrates how “non-human animals

are made to stand both as a marker of humankind's barbarity and as a testament to humankind's innate humanity" (Jolly 2010: 44).

In the novel, David develops a special connection to the aforementioned dog, Katy "the bulldog bitch, the abandoned one," and a young male dog "with a withered left hindquarter which it drags behind it" (Coetzee 1999: 68, 215). Both of these canines are marked by deformities, which marginalize them further. Dogs in Coetzee's novels, at times "intervene in ways that distract his protagonists from their suffering and despair" (Ley 2010: 62). In this case, David does not only begin to identify with the canines but also attributes human characteristics to them by projecting his altered situation and fear onto them. The dogs in the novel, which David relates to, "are the abject beings" that he learns to love (Olson 2014: 127).<sup>18</sup> Cynthia Willet argues that, gradually,

Our shameless protagonist, who flaunts conventions, will take his final ethical cues as did the ancient Cynics, those original so-called dog men, not from ordinary morality or institutionalized religion, but from animals. The irony for us is that it is not a god but the dog who calls this story's cynic back to ethical life. (2014: 170)

As I mentioned before, this transformation is caused by his relationship with the two dogs, Katy and Driepoot. When he is first introduced to Katy, David asks his daughter whether dogs experience boredom:

"Don't the dogs get bored?" He points to one, a tan-coloured bulldog bitch with a cage to herself who, head on paws, watches them morosely, not even bothering to get up. "Katy? She's abandoned. The owners have done a bunk. Account unpaid for months." (Coetzee 1999: 62)

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18 Derek Attridge argues that, although "Lurie's growing attachment to animals, his increasing awareness of their own singular existences, can be traced in a number of narrative developments—the two Persian sheep, the abandoned bulldog, the many animals he helps Bev Shaw to treat at the clinic—the most telling and fully-realized exemplification of this new attitude is his handling of the dogs that have to be killed" (2000: 113).

In a later passage, Katy is referred to as the “abandoned one,” an inference to the state David feels himself in, and as he trails behind his daughter, “the bitch pad[s] behind, panting,” in some ways mirroring his own situation (Coetzee 1999: 68, 70). On another occasion, David enters Katy’s cage and

She raises her head, regards him, lets her head fall again; her old dugs hang slack. He squats down, tickles her behind the ears. “Abandoned, are we?” he murmurs. He stretches out beside her on the bare concrete [...]. “Making friends?” says Lucy. “She’s not easy to make friends with.” “Poor old Katy, she’s in mourning. No one wants her, and she knows it.” (Coetzee 1999: 78)

A parallel is drawn between David’s mourning for his earlier life and feeling of abandonment. Volunteering to help at the animal clinic and shelter with Bev Shaw forces David to reevaluate his relationships with animals. He learns from Bev that many of them have to be euthanized because

There are simply too many of them. When people bring a dog in they do not say straight out, “I have brought you this dog to kill,” but that is what is expected: that they will dispose of it, make it disappear, dispatch it to oblivion. (Coetzee 1999: 142)

His reactions to the fate of the dogs is surprising; the narrator tells us:

Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake [...]. He is convinced the dogs know their time has come. Despite the silence and the painlessness of the procedure, [...] despite the airtight bags in which they tie the newmade corpses, the dogs in the yard smell what is going on inside. They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dying; locking their legs, they have to be pulled or pushed or carried over the threshold. (Coetzee 1999: 143)

He decides it is now his duty to take care of them:

The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted: *because we are too menny*. That is where he enters their lives. He may not be their saviour, the one for whom they are not too many, but he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves. (Coetzee 1999: 146)

David not only begins to forge a relationship with the dogs but also feels he can act as their redeemer in life and in death, so when they die, they are not “tossed into the fire unmarked, unmourned” (Coetzee 1999: 178). Failing that, he feels that he would have betrayed them and for this “will he ever be forgiven?” (Coetzee 1999: 178). To afford them some dignity, he decides to volunteer for the incinerating (cf. Coetzee 1999: 145). At this stage in the novel, David regards the dead dogs “in an ethically loaded manner, as individuals who, like himself, are embarked on mortal adventures and who have arrived at a dismal closing chapter” (Crary 2016: 156). Even after their death, “he looks upon their bodies as having a kind of ‘honor’ in virtue of which they merit respectful treatment” and their corpses “demand certain forms of respect and attention” (Crary 2016: 156).

At one point in the novel, David even considers a role in his opera for the ‘abandoned’ dog that no one wants, which he refuses to name. He tells us that “he has been careful not to give it a name (though Bev Shaw refers to it as Driepoot); nevertheless, he is sensible of a generous affection streaming out toward him from the dog” (Coetzee 1999: 215). David adds that he is certain that this dog reciprocates that affection and even enjoys the music he plays:

Arbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been adopted; the dog would die for him, he knows. The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa’s line, and the humming begins to swell with feeling (it is as though his larynx thickens: he can feel the hammer of blood in his throat), the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling. (Coetzee 1999: 215)



Even though David refuses to name the dog, so as not to “possess or control him, or set up expectations in the dog that he had been adopted,” he considers writing him in his Byron opera as a protagonist (Woodward 2001: 110). The above scene shows that those on the periphery not only share the same marginalized position but also “the same artistic and metaphysical longings” (Mondry 2018: 31), as for both “the experience of music becomes an embodied one” (Woodward 2001: 111). In addition, the relationship with Driepoot “entails genuine empathy and reciprocity, an exchange to which Lurie gives the name of ‘love’” (Baderoon 2017: 356). David begins to approximate the essential qualities that are needed to be human; he projects his newly acquired traits onto the dog, and in return these qualities are projected back onto him. To identify as human and not-animal “requires us not simply to conform to certain codes of behavior, but appreciate the importance of certain abstract concepts—concepts such as honesty, trust, respect and loyalty” (Ley 2010: 60). David learns that animals have souls, which he wants to save. As he ties the last bag containing 23 dogs, he leaves one behind:

the young dog left, the one who likes music, the one who, given half a chance, would already have lolloped after his comrades into the clinic building, into the theatre with its zinc-topped table where the rich, mixed smells still linger, including one he will not yet have met with in his life: the smell of expiration, the soft, short smell of the released soul. (Coetzee 1999: 219)

He contemplates saving the dog he grew attached to:

He can save the young dog, if he wishes, for another week. But a time must come, it cannot be evaded, when he will have to bring him to Bev Shaw in her operating room (perhaps he will carry him in his arms, perhaps he will do that for him) and caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up. He

will do all that for him when his time comes. It will be little enough, less than little: nothing. (Coetzee 1999: 219–220)

The emotions that David exhibits are contrary to those we witnessed earlier; these “acts of tenderness [...] stand in contrast to David’s earlier comprehensively narcissistic acts” (Meljac 2011: 150). But then he reconsiders and, “[b]earing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. ‘I thought you would save him for another week,’ says Bev Shaw. ‘Are you giving him up?’ ‘Yes, I am giving him up’” (Coetzee 1999: 220). For David, Driepoot is now referred to with the pronoun ‘him’ and not ‘it.’ In some respects, David is sacrificing the dog whose attributes are similar to his own; not only does he now identify with the dying animal but he also sees the dog as an extension of his own life. The dog, we are told, has “adopted” him, and metaphorically has become an extension of his own being (Coetzee 1999: 215). The death of the dog signals the death of David’s earlier life. In addition, in “putting the dog to death, Lurie becomes aware that he too experiences the disgrace of dying, that the corpse he so consigns to the grave is in some sense his own” (Danta 2018: 184).

## **Howl of a Dog: *Minor Detail***

In *Minor Detail* (2020), a novel by Palestinian writer Adania Shibli, dogs also pervade the narrative and, as in the previously discussed novels, the howling of these animals serves as a comment on a cruel world lacking mercy and humanity. Shibli’s narrative relates the brutal slaying of a Bedouin girl in 1949 at the hands of Zionist gangs, following a massacre of her tribe, through an account of a young West Bank woman from Ramallah, who becomes obsessed with uncovering the burial site of the slain girl. The canines in this work not only bear witness to a story of erasure, occupation, and killings, but their incessant barking gives voice to two silenced protagonists separated by 25 years. As with *Ensaio*’s dog of tears and *Disgrace*’s Driepoot, one particular dog who accompanies the Bedouin girl during her predicament in the first section of the novel becomes a protagonist in its own right, its incessant barking and howling making a commentary on the cruel events that unfold. The silence of the desert

in *Minor Detail* is often marked by the sounds emitting from the creatures that inhabit it, the barking of dogs and groaning of camels, a testament that they are an integral part of its landscape. Throughout the novel, the continual barking not only disrupts the sought-after stillness of the barren hills by the aggressors who insist that this is an empty land in need of inhabitants, but is also a revolt against this hegemonic narrative by the settler-occupiers that denies rights to the natives of the land.

In *Minor Detail*, the Bedouin girl is silenced physically and symbolically. She is not given the right to speak, as she is considered less than human. Her utterances are described as “babbling incomprehensible fragments [often] intertwined with the dog’s ceaseless barking” (Shibli 2020: 35). Shibli’s novel recounts an actual story that happened in 1949, the story of a young Bedouin girl who was gang-raped, murdered, and discarded in a shallow grave by Zionist gangs following the murder of her entire tribe. The novel, which describes the atrocity through the two narratives, first by the perpetrator and later by a silenced traumatized woman 25 years later, explores the difficulty of “portraying the atrocity [and] the limits of empathy” (Cummins 2020). At the same time, the work is an attempt at “right[ing] (or writ[ing]) historical wrongs by giving voice to the voiceless” (Cummins 2020). The two parallel narratives, initially told in the third person and later in the first person, conjure up a present that remains haunted by the past. The trauma of the Nakba for those in the occupied territories compels the Ramallah woman to sneak into the Negev desert in order to unravel a minor detail related to the crime to reach the truth. The silenced protagonist is connecting the dots of the Palestinian ordeal, tracing its beginnings through one of its threads. Furthermore, the date of the crime uncannily coincides with her birthdate, and it is as if the barking of the dog, which is carried by the wind, is compelling her to act. The woman reflects:

The date on which [the crime] occurred cannot be more than a coincidence. Besides, sometimes it’s inevitable for the past to be forgotten, especially if the present is no less horrific; that is, until I’m awoken at dawn one morning by the dog barking, followed by the wail of a strong wind [...] and all the while it carries the dog’s frantic barking, tossing the sound in every direction [...] There may in fact be nothing more

important than this little detail, if one wants to arrive at the complete truth. (Shibli 2020: 61)

The unnamed woman's "subject of interest is the history of the place where she lives, a history she has been denied by systematic erasure," and she needs to find a trace of the slain girl (Lewin 2020). The incessant barking and howling of dogs point to a story that has been suppressed and needs to be told. In the first part of the novel, the dog's howling ceases when the weeping of the girl is heard. The narrator tells us:

The dog's howling finally stopped, and a degree of calm settled over the place. Now the only sound was the muffled weeping of a girl who had curled up inside her black clothes like a beetle, and the rustle of thorn acacia, terebinth leaves. (Shibli 2020: 24)

The canine is silent to allow the girl to symbolically speak. But whenever she is in danger or subjected to abuse, the dog joins her in her cries; in one of the rape scenes, the dog "bark[s] louder, and she wail[s] louder, and the sounds merged as he pushed the girl's head into the ground, clamping his right hand over her mouth, and her sticky saliva, mucus, and tears stuck to his hand" (Shibli 2020: 25). Similarly, in another scene, we witness the reaction of the dog, when the officer, "shout[s] at her, ordering her to pick up the soap, and immediately the soldiers' laughing and mutterings fell silent, leaving only the dog's panting, which chafed against the air" (Shibli 2020: 30). During the rape scenes by the officer, his right hand would seal the girl's mouth to subdue her cries and screams. Her few utterances, which are interrupted by sobs, are not to be heard. Her agony is not acknowledged, and the sounds she emits are considered inhuman. Her denied agency and stolen voice result in her dog's stepping forward to share her plight. Ironically, the barking of dogs in *Minor Detail* serves as a voice for those who have been silenced by history and occupation. This same barking also serves as a revolt against the atrocities that the animal witnesses. There are 72 references to dogs in the novel, often as a form of howling that exists in the background. The howling functions as background sound that traverses both time and space, often in the form of a "distant howling of a dog"

(Shibli 2020: 12). At times, the howl is a premonition of danger, for example when the officer finally locates the Bedouins and their eyes meet, “their wide eyes, and the eyes of the startled camels, which hopped up and trotted a few steps away the moment the dog let out a howl” (Shibli 2020: 24).

In the second part of the novel, the dog returns in its spectral presence with its capacity to haunt, telling us that the wrongs have not been righted. Repeatedly, the howling remains a metaphor for unheard voices. The narrator describes sounds that “would seep into the space,” “dogs barking infiltrated the space,” “sound of a dog barking float[ing] up through the air,” “the louder the dog’s barking became as it echoed through the space,” and in the second part of the novel, “a dog on the opposite hill began to howl incessantly,” continuing “to echo in the air until the last hours of morning,” disturbing the Ramallah woman (Shibli 2020: 16, 23, 24, 34, 53 & 61). In the second part, the dog returns most urgently through the howling that pervades all spaces, a reminder of the atrocity and the silenced Bedouin girl; it “returns as a spectre [and unlike] in the first section, where its physical presence is seen and acknowledged by the human characters, the narrator of the second section never sees the dog but only hears its cries” (AlAmmar 2022: 565). No one is named in the novel, and neither is the dog, which is distinguished by its incessant barking and howling. According to Layla AlAmmar, the presence of the dog

aims to push the reader into a state of “empathic unsettlement” by allowing them to take on the role of secondary witness. There is an anguished dog in *Minor Detail*. A character in its own right, the dog witnesses the atrocities perpetrated by the soldiers over the four days of the narrative. (AlAmmar 2022: 561)

In addition, AlAmmar argues that the dog, more “than standing in for an unnamed, voiceless victim[,] functions as a reader—and, to an extent, author—proxy, standing apart from and outside the girl’s experience in a profoundly unsettling state of empathy” (2022: 562). The dog not only has a premonition of the atrocities that ensue; even though it does not directly witness them, its proximity to the events allows it to “testif[y] to the trauma” the girl suffers (AlAmmar 2022: 562).

## Conclusion

In the three novels I discussed, the dogs not only bear witness to the events and trauma that unfold in front of them but also provide a nonverbal commentary on the atrocities perpetrated by the human race. Furthermore, in the absence of compassion, these animals begin to embody traits that are often associated only with humans. By their own right, they occupy the role of main protagonists in the three novels, and their cries are a reminder to us of our lost values and of our eroding humanity. In addition, the dogs in the three novels negate the hierarchy that considers non-human animals lesser and irrational beings existing on the margins of society. They rely on their instincts to save the humans; as the dog of tears intuitively leads the blind group, as Katy and Driepoot symbolically save David's soul and as the howling of the Bedouin girl's dog marks a crime, these animals exhibit compassion that is often lacking in humans. In their respective work, Coetzee, Saramago and Shibli have shown that the zone that separates humans from animals is arbitrary; the right to be recognized as a human animal must be earned.



# The Temptations of Anthropomorphism, or, How an Elephant Can Help Us Become Human

CARLO SALZANI

## The Temptations of Anthropomorphism

The subject of this chapter is anthropomorphism and the ways it is stigmatized and rejected but also used and deployed, ironically and critically, to unmask and dismantle human arrogance and self-aggrandizement.<sup>1</sup> Though probably an innate tendency of human psychology (cf. e.g., Hamington 2008: 184; Bernaerts et al. 2014: 70), anthropomorphism is considered in science and ‘serious’ investigation as a capital sin, blasphemy, and a taboo,<sup>2</sup> since the attribution of human traits to nonhuman beings—especially to nonhuman animals—is thought to lead the researcher astray and afar from the much-coveted and fetishized ‘objectivity.’ Anthropomorphism is left therefore to the playful imagination of poets and novelists, who can afford their flights of fancy away from objectivity because they do not engage in ‘serious’ scientific pursuits. I will challenge this position through a reading of Saramago’s novella *The Elephant’s Journey*, but before I get there, I need to illustrate Saramago’s own view on this subject.

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- 1 This chapter was written as part of the project “The Limits of Imagination: Animals, Empathy, Anthropomorphism” funded by the Austrian Research Fund (FWF, project no. P 35137).
  - 2 Anthropomorphism was originally a religious term: the Greek philosopher, theologian, and poet Xenophanes of Colophon, perhaps the inventor of the term, condemned it as the ‘sin’ of attributing human characters to the gods, and the Christian Church did the same when condemning anthropomorphic heresies in the early Middle Ages (Tyler 2003: 267). The term was then forgotten for a long time, and when it reemerged in the mid-nineteenth century with a focus on animals rather than on gods (possibly to deactivate the antivivisectionist criticisms to the cruel ‘scientific’ practices of the time; cf. Hribal 2010: 448n33), it retained the religious connotation of blasphemy and sin.



Saramago did explicitly touch on the problem of anthropomorphism in a few moments of his career, but his most articulated statement appears in a passage from *The Stone Raft*. Towards the end of the novel, when the floating Iberian Peninsula is finding a new location in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean (but in the Southern hemisphere), turning around on its imaginary axis, the narrator cites a fictional poet who “compared the revolution and descent of the peninsula to the movement of a child in its mother’s womb as it takes its first tumble in life.” “The simile is magnificent,” he continues,

although we must deplore this yielding to the temptations of anthropomorphism, which sees and judges everything in an essential rapport with human beings, as if nature had nothing better to do than to think about us. It would all be much easier to understand if we were simply to confess our infinite fear, the fear that leads us to people the world with images resembling what we are or believe ourselves to be, unless this obsessive effort is nothing other than feigned courage or sheer stubbornness on the part of someone who refuses to exist in a void, who decides not to find meaning where no meaning exists. We are probably incapable of filling emptiness, and what we call meaning is no more than a fleeting collection of images that once seemed harmonious, images on which the intelligence tried in panic to introduce reason, order, coherence. (Saramago 1996: 261–62)

Anthropomorphism, Saramago argues, is the human attempt, in fear and panic, to fill the void of meaning in the world and in our existence with comforting but fictional images of order and coherence. This attempt misfires because it always comes down to projecting onto the world human needs and demands, judging the world merely in rapport with human beings, and finally placing humans and their needs at its center. The position of the poet is here ambiguous, since the poet is the one who more explicitly yields to the temptations of anthropomorphism, but at the same time, and perhaps in so doing, unmasks the fear and panic at the very origin of these temptations. “There is no lack, there never has been, of those who affirm that poets are truly superfluous,” Saramago writes introducing the above-cited passage; “but I wonder what would

become of us if poetry were not there to help us understand how little clarity there is in the things we call clear” (Saramago 1996: 261).

When approaching the elephant Solomon in *The Elephant’s Journey*—his only novel in which the main character is not human—Saramago again distances himself from the temptations of anthropomorphism: he did not want to anthropomorphize the elephant, he told João Céu e Silva, and “took care not to write anything that could seem to want to translate the mental universe of the elephant—because I don’t know whether he thinks, I don’t know what he thinks and I don’t know how he thinks” (Céu e Silva 2009: 262, 382). The elephant, therefore, is a “strange protagonist,” opaque and mysterious to both the narrator’s and reader’s gaze and, moreover, with no true initiative in the fictional action (“he’s lead, taken,” passively following the human plot); but a protagonist nonetheless, since without elephant there would be no journey (Céu e Silva 2009: 382). His protagonism is explicitly affirmed in the novel (Saramago 2010a: 19–20),<sup>3</sup> but for many readers Solomon is just another allegorical or symbolic figure in the long history of animal literary allegorization: an alter ego for his mahout Subro or only an excuse to descant on human life and the world (e.g., Neste 2014; Koleff 2019: 74). Saramago himself seemed to confirm this allegorical or symbolic status when he said in an interview that, as a novelist, he needed to “show all possible connections, the close as the distant ones, so that the reader understands that, when I talk about an elephant, for example, what I’m talking about is human life” (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 230).<sup>4</sup>

I will come back to this central point in due course. What I want to emphasize here, however, is that, far from being a flat, bidimensional allegory

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- 3 “The mahout subhro, or white, is about to become the second or third most important character in the story, the first being the elephant solomon, who, naturally, takes precedence as the main protagonist, followed by the aforementioned subhro and the archduke, jockeying with each other for the lead role, now this one, now that” (Saramago 2010: 19–20).
- 4 The allegorical/symbolic status of the animal is almost explicitly—though also ironically—stated at the beginning of the novella, when the king João the Third visits the elephant in Belém with his secretary Pêro de Alcáçova Carneiro, and the latter tells his monarch: “Your coming here, my lord, was, indeed, a poetic act, and the elephant was merely the pretext, nothing more” (Saramago 2010a: 9). Saramago’s telling the story of the elephant is indeed a poetic act, but one, I will argue, that does not treat the animal as a symbol or pretext but rather acknowledges its untamable presence.

or excuse to talk about humans and humanity, the elephant Solomon retains instead throughout the novella a certain unbridgeable opaqueness and impenetrability that is difficult to capture and tame, for the reader as well as for the narrator. Solomon is rather simultaneously approached and described from many different perspectives, as perhaps in a Cubist painting (Bertoluci 2021: 60–61); but also in a manner that recalls an old story the Buddha told his disciples about religious truths. A king, the story goes, once gathered all the blind men in a village and brought an elephant before them, asking them to touch and describe him. Each blind man put his hand on a different part of the elephant—a side, a tusk, the trunk, a leg, an ear—and gave a different description, disputing the truthfulness of the others<sup>5</sup>; and so is with religious truths: each one knows only a part of it, though a unitary, solid, and consistent truth does indeed exist (qtd. in Rothfels 2021: 1).<sup>6</sup> Metaphors aside, there exists the elephant (the animal), who resists all attempts of reducing him to a tame and flat set of ‘objective’ traits, an unfathomable but concrete and lively presence, and as such, I will argue, he emerges in Saramago’s narrative.

Moreover, the elephant does not exist in abstract isolation, but rather in a web of interspecies relations, negotiating his place in the world in a lively interplay with the other characters. If Saramago resists the temptations of a facile anthropomorphism that merely projects human traits onto the world, he also resists the temptations of an equally facile scientific reductionism that pretends to capture and imprison the animal within the cage of human conceptualizations. It is against this reductionism that Saramago also ironically indulges in a certain ‘use’ of anthropomorphism, ultimately breaking down the antiquated and toxic hierarchies of traditional anthropocentrism. In this web of relations and exchanges, the human is brought back into an evolutionary

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5 “The first man touched one side of the elephant and declared the animal was like a wall; the second felt a tusk and insisted the elephant was like a spear; the third put his hand on the trunk and was certain the elephant was like a snake; the fourth felt one of the elephant’s legs and claimed it was like a tree; the fifth moved his hand across an ear and argued that the elephant was like a fan; and the sixth contended the elephant was like a rope after he touched the animal’s tail” (Rothfels 2021: 1–2).

6 I will briefly comment on the inappropriateness of the ableist metaphor of blindness for ignorance at a later stage.

continuum with nonhuman animals, whereby the pretense of human exceptionality is regularly and continually ridiculed. Some examples: the convoy leading the elephant to Valladolid strikes Subhro for its “motley appearance, understandable given the diversity of animals involved, namely, elephant, men, horses, mules and oxen, each walking at a different pace” (Saramago 2010a: 20); in the morning, there is “a whole procession of men obeying the calls of intestines and bladder, hardly surprising given that we’re all animals under the skin” (2010a: 33); the “law of life, triumph and oblivion,” says Subhro to the commanding officer, is the same for all, elephants and men alike (2010a: 47); and to the priest in the village, who objects to giving a “Christian” name to an animal because “animals aren’t people and people aren’t animals,” Subhro replies: “Well, I’m not so sure” (2010a: 58; cf. also Bertoluci 2021: 70). The ridiculing of the pretense of human exceptionality, I will argue, is the use Saramago put anthropomorphism to.

## Critical and Heuristic Anthropomorphism

*The Elephant’s Journey* is framed by a meditation on death, which closes the story but is also at the origin of the novella itself. The short conclusion tells that Solomon died less than two years after his arrival in Vienna (he arrived on May 7, 1552, and died on December 18, 1553; Jordan Gschwend 2010: 31). The body was skinned and the legs turned into recipients “for walking sticks, canes, umbrellas and sunshades in summer” (Saramago 2010a: 196), while the bones were used to build decorative objects, such as a three legged chair exposed today in the museum of the Kremsmünster Abbey.<sup>7</sup> The profanation of his remains went further: his hide was dried and stuffed and the taxidermized body was exhibited as a hunting elephant. In 1572 the archduke Maximilian (by-now emperor Maximilian II) donated it to his brother-in-law, the Duke Albert IV of Bavaria, who took it to Munich and exhibited it in his *Kunstkammer*, until in 1928 it was moved again to the Bayerische Nationalmuseum.

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7 The very last scene of the film *José e Pilar* (2010) portrays Saramago sitting in contemplation in front of this chair.

Placed in a bomb shelter during World War II, the stuffed Solomon molded due to the damp location, and what remained was used after the war to make leather shoes (Jordan Gschwend 2010; Rocha and de Vito Zollner 2011; Wylie 2012: 81; Fonseca 2016).<sup>8</sup>

This manifest disrespect for Solomon's remains (and especially for his legs) leads Saramago to commiserate the fate of animals, who "die with no nurse to place a hand upon their fevered brow." "As you see," he concludes, "kneeling before the archduke did Solomon no good at all" (2010a: 196). (According to the historical records, Solomons was probably born in captivity in present-day Sri Lanka around 1540 and was therefore only 12 when he died in the Habsburg menagerie then installed at Schloss Kaiserebersdorf, a little outside Vienna.<sup>9</sup> Since Asian elephants in the wild can live more than 50 years,<sup>10</sup> at the time of his death he was little more than a child.) But this feeling of injustice is precisely what prompted Saramago to write the story. As he said in several interviews, the image of those legs, which had walked for more than 3,000 km to end up, so sadly, being fashioned into recipients for walking sticks and umbrellas, impressed itself in his mind and aroused his moral outrage: without this sad ending and this sense of injustice, he said, perhaps he would not have written the book (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 230). This meditation also informs and clarifies the epigraph of the book, taken from a fictional *Book of Itineraries*: "In the end, we always arrive at the place where we are expected." What expects us all in the end is death, Saramago explained, nobody escapes this fate, but important is also what happens with us after we die, and the fate of Solomon's legs became for Saramago a metaphor for the very pointlessness of life (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 128, 230, 231; cf. also Lopes 2009: 28; Rocha and de

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8 Saramago comments on this destiny also in other passages of the book, as when he writes about "those tusks like pointed sabres, which, in the imagination of the inquisitive, unaware of suleiman's placid temperament, would doubtless be used as powerful weapons of war before being transformed, as they inevitably will be, into the crucifixes and reliquaries that have filled the christian world with objects carved out of ivory" (2010a: 133).

9 Solomon was the first elephant to set foot in Austria in 1552, creating immediate sensation and consequently producing a good historical documentation. For his story see e.g., Jordan Gschwend (2010); Rocha and de Vito Zollner (2011); Fonseca (2016).

10 On elephants' life expectancy (and many other issues), both in the wild and in captivity, see Rees (2021), especially pp. 154–55.

Vito Zollner 2011: 840, 843–45; Koleff 2019: 74; Lopes Sabino 2021: 223; Bertoluci 2021: 70, 76).<sup>11</sup> This equating human and nonhuman fate in death, the Great Equalizer, can be considered the first of Saramago’s anthropomorphic temptations, since animals, as Martin Heidegger famously stated, do not die, they merely perish.<sup>12</sup>

The compassion and moral outrage that Solomon’s death arouses in Saramago ties the elephant together with the more general fate of the oppressed, human and nonhuman alike. And the same holds for the cow in the story Subhro tells the soldiers accompanying the convoy: lost with her calf and attacked by wolves, the cow resisted for days, until she was saved by the people of the village; but, after two days,

because the cow had turned wild and learned to defend herself, and because no one could tame her or even get near her, she was killed, slaughtered, not by the wolves she had kept at bay for twelve whole days, but by the very men who had saved her, possibly by her actual owner, incapable of understanding that a previously docile, biddable creature, having learned how to fight, could never stop fighting. (Saramago 2010a: 84)

The cow is praised by the audience for her courage and for revealing herself “to have such *human sentiments* as love of family, the gift of personal sacrifice,

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11 Death is interestingly also the focus of the dedication to Pilar del Rio, which reads: “To Pilar, who wouldn’t let me die.”

12 Heidegger wrote, for example, in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1995: 267): “Is the death of the animal a dying or a way of coming to an end? Because captivation belongs to the essence of the animal, the animal cannot die in the sense in which dying is ascribed to human beings but can only come to an end.” And in “The Thing” (1971: 176): “The mortals are human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death as death. Only man dies. The animal perishes. It has death neither ahead of itself nor behind it. Death is the shrine of Nothing, that is, of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself.” Against this thesis, current research in ethology and animal ethics emphasizes the presence of a “concept of death” in nonhuman animals (e.g., Monsó 2019; Monsó and Osuna-Mascaró 2020). Throughout history, moreover, elephants have been singled out among nonhuman animals because they are thought to mourn the death of conspecifics.

and self-denial carried to the ultimate extreme,” but the story is also challenged and criticized by a soldier as mere anthropomorphic exaggeration: the cow, all agree at the end, “deserved the truth as much as she deserved the medal” (2010a: 84–85, emphasis added). The point is however that the story—albeit in exaggerated fashion—attributes to the cow a feature traditionally reserved to human subjectivity: namely agency.

Agency is traditionally defined as the capacity to act in a given environment and is usually linked to concepts such as purposefulness, intention, awareness, and reflexivity, all features uniquely reserved in the Western tradition to human subjectivity. Saramago endows instead the cow and mostly Solomon with a definite and clear personality, with different moods, with sympathies and antipathies (2010a: 88), and with a distinct and stubborn will that ends up conditioning and determining the actions of the other characters and the unfolding of the plot itself. Subject, as the human characters, to “erratic moods” (2010a: 126), at times he is excited or nervous (2010a: 21),<sup>13</sup> is described as “concocting something in that great head of his” (2010a: 107) and thinking “otherwise” than expected (2010a: 117), and might refuse to offer his customary services (2010a: 20); in the end, the convoy is forced to organize itself in accordance to Solomon’s needs and habits, to the point that the commanding officer exclaims: “So the elephant’s in charge here” (2010a: 29; cf. Bracamonte and Gómez Ponce 2016: 64, 66–68; Sabino 2021: 221–22). Solomon is portrayed as an intentional and competent actor who actively pursues his interests, makes meaningful choices, and shapes his relations in his social context (albeit the context does not depend on his choosing): he is an actor and is not merely acted upon.<sup>14</sup>

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13 Elephant bulls (males) periodically go through stages of sexual arousal called “musth,” when the levels of testosterone can rise up to 140% higher than normal and the animal present highly aggressive behavior (Rees 2021: 88). Since Asian elephants reach sexual maturity around the age of 14 (though in captivity this can happen earlier; Rees 2021: 157–61), at the age of 10–12, when he made his journey from Lisbon to Vienna, Solomon was still little more than a child, and never troubled his companions and escorts with aggressive musth behavior (cf. Bertoluci 2021: 67–69).

14 The question of animal agency is complex and articulated and cannot be reduced to an extension of the kind of rational reflection and conscious intent with which human agency has been traditionally characterized (though humans themselves present many different facets of agency). For some recent literature on this topic, see e.g., Hribal (2011); Carter and Charles

The question of agency raises another point that is central to the contemporary debate on animality and that Saramago explicitly thematizes: animal labor. Just like agency, to which is closely tied, labor has always been considered a specific human practice, an intentional activity that is part of a socially and historically determined economic system. And yet, throughout history the work of animals such as horses, mules, donkeys, and oxen has been the primary supplier of power in agriculture, milling, transportation, and many other human activities, which would have been impossible otherwise. In a sense, human civilization is constructed upon the labor power supplied by nonhuman animals, a process that even intensified with the advent of capitalism in the eighteenth century (Hribal 2010: 443). Work has often been a site of the most intense instrumentalization of animals, which have always been considered mere tools and expendable resources (not least in the juridical sense), but in a manner not so dissimilar from the instrumentalization of human slaves, children, women, factory workers, etc. In this sense, Jason Hribal argues, “animals are part of the working class” (2010: 453).<sup>15</sup>

Elephants, in particularly the Asian species, have been put to work for centuries, and Saramago, through an ironic use of anthropomorphism, points this out. Even before we meet the elephant, in the first pages of the novel the queen of Portugal, Dona Catarina of Austria, complains that Solomon has been doing nothing since his arrival from India, “as if he were a kept beast, but one who’ll never earn his keep,” to which the king replies: “That’s hardly the poor creature’s fault, there’s no suitable work for him here, unless we were to send him to the docks on the river tagus to transport planks, but the poor thing would only suffer, because his *professional speciality* is transporting felled trees, so much better suited to the curve of his trunk” (Saramago 2010a: 2–3, emphasis added). The queen later acknowledges, in the privacy of her conscience, the injustice she had done to a “creature who had been forced to labour in india, on no pay, for years and years” (2010a: 7). And the narrator attributes similar feelings to

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(2013); Pearson (2015); Birke and Thompson (2017); Räsänen and Syrjäma (2017); Jamieson (2018); Tomasello (2022).

15 On animal labor see e.g., Coulter (2016); Porcher (2017); Porcher and Estebanez (2020); Blattner, Coulter, and Kymlicka (2020).



Solomon himself, when the latter shoots a stern glance to some villagers who watch him eat, “making it clear that he was not some fairground animal, but an honest worker who had been deprived of his job by unfortunate circumstances too complicated to go into, and had, so to speak, been forced to accept public charity” (2010a: 51).<sup>16</sup>

In Saramago’s novel, agency strangely also informs another central feature of the anthropological difference, namely the animals’ lack of (human) language. Nonhuman animals communicate of course in a large range of non-verbal manners, but since at least Aristotle, their lacking *logos* (as both language and reason) has been considered the main dividing factor and the proof of human exceptionality and superiority. Animal silence and muteness have always been associated with inability, impotence, restriction, and thus animality has been considered (and continues to be considered) as a lesser form or being, a kind of disability (muteness retains today a negative connotation as a metaphor of marginalization and oppression: dumb means stupid—like an animal; see e.g., Schalk 2013). Saramago ironically attributes instead the silence of Solomon to a conscious choice:

Like magicians, elephants have their secrets. When forced to choose between speaking and remaining silent, an elephant always chooses silence, that is why his trunk grew so long, so that, apart from being capable of transporting tree trunks and serving as an elevator for his mahout, it has the added advantage of being a serious obstacle to any bouts of uncontrolled loquacity. (Saramago 2010a: 174)

Silence is presented here not as inability and impotence, but rather as a “secret,” deactivating thereby the hierarchy based on language. Solomon is not endowed, as in facile anthropomorphism, with the gift of human speech,<sup>17</sup> but rather with a will that stubbornly decides not to speak (the language of the

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16 In another passage, Saramago writes that “the vicissitudes of life determined that he would earn his sad daily bread carrying tree trunks back and forth or putting up with the loutish curiosity of certain lovers of vulgar circus shows” (2010: 125).

17 This facile anthropomorphism is not limited to fables and other literary genres, but also informs those experiments, so popular from the 1960s to the 1990s, that tried to teach human

master). Solomon's muteness perhaps claims the right to be silent, not to submit to the anthropocentric and logocentric dictates of human language—and indeed in this way he loquaciously and efficiently communicates (Bracamonte and Gómez Ponce 2016: 73–74).<sup>18</sup>

The obsession of Western culture with *logos* is generally mocked and deactivated throughout the novella (and throughout Saramago's oeuvre). Saramago explicitly avoids attributing human *logos* to nonhuman animals, but at the same time also avoids the opposite extreme, that of denying any form of rationality to animals and of using *logos* as the discriminating feature. The logocentric bias of human exceptionalism is expressed in the novel by figures of authority, as for example when the commanding officer says: "The elephant doesn't have an opinion, he's not of this world" (Saramago 2010a: 79). But the human characters, and in particular the mahout Subhro, always act—as everyone who has to interact with nonhuman animals does every day—as if the elephant possessed a form of rationality and thought: Subhro must understand the thinking of the elephant and guess his intentions, he speaks to him and whispers in his ear (2010a: 105–6), and mostly does not give orders but gently suggests possibilities, acknowledging the necessity of a mutual interaction with a being endowed with free will (e.g., 2010a: 174–75).<sup>19</sup> As the philosopher Mary Midgley famously put it:

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language to primates and parrots: at the roots of these attempts lies the notion of human language as the *norm*, which effectively condemns other forms of life to muteness.

- 18 In another passage of the novella, when Solomon says goodbye to the porters in Valladolid, the elephant's *will* to be silent is again expressed when Subhro says: "And don't be afraid, Solomon is sad, but he's not angry, he'd grown used to you and has only just found out that you're leaving. How did he find out, That's one of those questions not even worth asking, if you were to ask him directly, he probably wouldn't answer, *Is that because he wouldn't know or because he doesn't want to*, In Solomon's mind, not wanting and not knowing form part of a much larger question about the world in which he finds himself, it's probably the same question we all need to ask, both elephants and men" (2010: 87, emphasis added).
- 19 This attribution of thought and intentions is not limited to the elephant. In the episode with the wolves, Saramago writes: "These wolves had never seen an elephant. It would not surprise us to learn that some of the more imaginative wolves, always assuming wolves have thought processes parallel to those of human beings, had thought how lucky it would be for the pack to have at its disposal all those tons of meat just outside the lair, the table always set for lunch, dinner and supper" (2010a: 74).

Obviously the mahouts may have many beliefs about the elephants which are false because they are “anthropomorphic”—that is, they misinterpret some outlying aspects of elephant behaviour by relying on a human pattern which is inappropriate. But if they were doing this about the basic everyday feelings—about whether their elephant is pleased, annoyed, frightened, excited, tired, sore, suspicious or angry—they would not only be out of business, they would often simply be dead. (1992: 214)

This necessary form of anthropomorphism—necessary for everyday interactions with nonhuman animals, and often for simple survival—is a “pragmatic strategy” that the psychologist Gordon Burghardt has called “critical anthropomorphism,” the need to formulating testable hypotheses in order to truly understand animal behavior—and our interactions with them (Burghardt 1985: 916). Primatologist Frans de Waal insists that, since humans are undeniably animals (from a biological, physiological, and anatomical point of view), it is the *a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals that obstructs true understanding, and therefore a certain form of strategic anthropomorphism can be a very useful heuristic tool (de Waal 2006: 63, 65).<sup>20</sup> It is the opposite principle, which de Waal names “anthropodenial,” that does not follow a basic principle of evolutionary parsimony when assuming that similar or analogous behavior originates in divergent physiological or mental processes (2006: 62).<sup>21</sup> Thus another ethologist, Marc Bekoff, also advocates a form of “biocentric anthropomorphism” as the proper “scientific” stance in the study of animal behavior (Bekoff 2000; Horowitz and Bekoff 2007). This form of anthropomorphism is therefore not an end but rather a starting point, an imaginative exercise that creates possibilities for understanding in an evolutionary continuum that is always relational (Hamington 2008: 184).

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20 The work of de Waal, among many other ethologists, has been instrumental in undermining the ageless Western prejudice of human exceptionality. His two recent volumes on animal intelligence (2016) and animal emotions (2019) for a lay readership are very pleasurable and invaluable reading.

21 The same argument is sustained, among others, by Mary Midgley (1998, 134).

It is this form of anthropomorphism Saramago ironically recurs to, in order to avoid precisely the opposite mistake, what Jesus Rivas and Gordon Burghardt (2002) call “anthropomorphism by omission,” and break down the ageless and toxic species narcissism “which sees and judges everything in an essential rapport with human beings, as if nature had nothing better to do than to think about us” (Saramago 1996: 261–62).

## Becoming Human (Through Anthropomorphism)

The recourse to critical anthropomorphism has not of course the pretension to ‘capture’ animal subjectivity. The animal other (as also, in part, the human other, or even our own subjectivity) retains a certain degree of opaqueness that no level of ‘scientific’ penetration will ever dispel. Despite all his insistent and ironic uses of anthropomorphism, this is in a sense also Saramago’s mantra throughout the novella. Many characters repeatedly state that they will never be able to understand an elephant, beginning with the narrator, who, when Solomon suddenly and loudly trumpets, exclaims: “[p]erhaps elephants and men will never really understand each other” (Saramago 2010a: 88). Even Subhro, who knows the elephant better than any other, twice proclaims his incapacity to understand Solomon in his discussions with the commanding officer: when the latter says, “I really don’t think I’ll ever understand elephants,” Subhro replies that, despite having worked with them almost since he was born, “I still can’t understand them” (2010a: 28). This is because, Subhro adds, “an elephant is much more than just an elephant”; he is much more than human conceptualizations will ever be able to ‘capture.’ And in another passage, replying again to the same confession of ignorance on the part of the commanding officer, he says: “every elephant contains two elephants, one who learns what he’s taught and another who insists on ignoring it all, How do you know, When I realised that I’m just like the elephant, that a part of me learns and the other part ignores everything I’ve learned, and the longer I live, the more I ignore” (2010a: 115).<sup>22</sup>

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22 This commonality of (self-)misconception and (self-)misunderstanding is also emphasized in another passage: “In Solomon’s mind, not wanting and not knowing form part of a much

Humans and animals habitually misunderstand each other (and themselves) in their attempts of mutual (and personal) understanding, which will always raise more questions than the answers they can provide.

And yet, the questions raised by critical anthropomorphism are fundamental for understanding, reshaping, and improving the relations between humans and nonhumans. These questions, as Subhro seems to say, “form part of a much larger question about the world in which [Solomon] finds himself, it’s probably the same question we all need to ask, both elephants and men” (Saramago 2010a: 87). And what Saramago’s entire oeuvre questions is first of all the human. Through its critical anthropomorphism *The Elephant’s Journey* challenges not only the way we conceptualize and treat nonhuman animals, but also our self-conceptions as human beings. Or better, challenging the way we conceptualize and treat the nonhuman other forces us to rethink the very meaning of the human. Perhaps this is how we could re-interpret Saramago’s admission that “when I talk about an elephant [...] what I’m talking about is human life” (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 230): talking about the elephant (and the ways we interact with him) is a way of questioning and challenging human nature. The way we treat animals (with cruelty or with empathy and compassion) tells us who we are.

This is a recurring trope both in Saramago’s fiction and in his public interventions. The animal is often used by Saramago as a litmus test to highlight and criticize the limitations and shortcomings of human nature, which miserably fails the haughty ambitions of its own self-conceptualization. As the narrator of *The Elephant’s Journey* says, “Hard experience of life has shown us that, generally speaking, it is inadvisable to trust too much in human nature” (Saramago 2010a: 34). In this contraposition, Saramago upholds the all-too traditional dualism of the Western tradition that opposes the Human and the Animal as two homogeneous and consistent ‘essences’ (and which the critical anthropomorphism of *The Elephant Journey* so explicitly deconstructs). Moreover, the contraposition rests on the traditional pair of opposites, ‘reason’ (for humans) and ‘instinct’ (for animals)—although the goal of the opposition is

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larger question about the world in which he finds himself, it’s probably the same question we all need to ask, both elephants and men” (Saramago 2010a: 87).

precisely to ironically deactivate itself and show how irrational humans truly are: if reason is used (as it is) against reason itself, what good is it?, he wonders. And since reason sleeps and produces nothing but monsters, then the human is for Saramago “the most irrational of all animals,” a “sick animal,” incapable of finding its place in nature, where animal instinct serves them much better than reason ever serves humans (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 96, 113, 114). In the Nobel Lecture (1998b), Saramago said that “we pervert reason when we humiliate life” and that “man stopped respecting himself when he lost the respect due to his fellow-creatures.”<sup>23</sup>

These statements are made in reference to his probably most famous novel, *Blindness* (1999a), whereby the rationale of the whole novel is that the blindness of reason generates monsters (the dystopia the novel portrays). The metaphor of blindness as lack of reason is as common as it is problematic, since it not only perpetuates the ableist ideology of impairment as a negative form of embodiment, but also, just like muteness, equates this lack with animality, as a character in the novel explicitly suggests: “If we cannot live entirely like human beings, at least let us do everything in our power not to live entirely like animals” (1999a: 111). The point I want to make from the above-quoted passages is, however, that denying any commonality between humans and non-humans and banning every such thought as unscientific anthropomorphism is a form of willful ignorance (a better term than blindness, which is often used in defense of certain uses of anthropomorphism), and a critical use of anthropomorphism can instead help us dispel the white fog that prevents us from finding our way and our place within the interspecies relationalities of the world. This anthropocentric white fog is ultimately what prevents us from *becoming fully human*, as Saramago never tired of repeating. The human, he argued, is an “unfinished project” and thus “our great task is to become more human,” to “construct humanity”; “we are not really human,” he insisted, “if being human means to orient oneself through reason, sensibility and respect.”

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23 Ursula Le Guin (2010) emphasizes the link between these statements and the nonhuman characters in Saramago’s fiction, especially dogs, but since *The Elephant’s Journey* approaches the question of the animal on a far larger scale, she ranks it very high in her personal classification.

“Perhaps,” he explained with an image, “we are traveling a long and endless path leading us to the human being. Perhaps, I don’t know where or when, we will eventually succeed in becoming what we have to be” (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 109, 106, 112, 108, 99).<sup>24</sup>

Another problem of maintaining the human-animal dualism is that the animal can also be used, as so often in Saramago, to emphasize all the failings of the human, while the animal is endowed with all the virtues that the human lacks. The virtuous Solomon (as the dogs in other novels)<sup>25</sup> is often portrayed as more human than the humans themselves and is thereby idealized as superior to the humans (Levécot 2013: 162). Anthropomorphically attributing human qualities to nonhuman animals does indeed help unmasking the lie that allotted for so long all positive attributes (intelligence, emotions, morality, etc.) to the human alone, but when this turns into merely a reversal of the process of exclusionary attribution that traditionally saw animals as lacking (that is, allotting all qualities to the animal at the expense of the human) it perpetuates the sentimental and ultimately anthropocentric dualism that is all but embarrassed by reality (Masson and McCarthy 1996: 64). This is the wrong kind of anthropomorphism. In *The Elephant’s Journey*—as elsewhere—Saramago ambiguously navigates the difficult path between good and bad anthropomorphism, succeeding nonetheless without a doubt in emphasizing the necessity of a different form of relation and cohabitation for humans and nonhumans.

The final message one can extrapolate from the vicissitudes of the elephant Solomon and his human companions is a demand for “friendship and respect” across the species divide, “an idea unconfirmed by the moral precepts in our

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- 24 Saramago’s “becoming human” could appear specular to the concept of “becoming animal” proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), but whereas the latter, although intended to deconstruct the Western exclusionary notion of subjectivity, ultimately retains the dualism that is essential and constitutive to this very subjectivity in the first place, Saramago’s “becoming human” presents the potentiality to overcome it towards what Mary Midgley (1992) called an interspecies “mixed community.”
- 25 Solomon is regularly (and anthropomorphically) described as having “a good heart” and even a “soul” (2010a: 107), as “good-natured” and patient (2010a: 125–26) in the face of humans’ many failings. It is true that, as G. A. Bradshaw (2010) emphasizes in many stories of elephants traumatized by human violence, these animals are capable of a very special (more-than-human?) kind of “forgiveness.”

codes of conduct, but which can perhaps be found inscribed in letters of gold in the fundamental laws of the elephantine race” (Saramago 2010a: 88–89).<sup>26</sup> Despite the fact that perhaps elephants and humans will never really understand each other, different—more friendly, more respectful—forms of interaction are possible and necessary. Besides, understanding is not the necessary and sufficient condition of a friendly and respectful relationship, as appears so clearly in the moving and emotional scene of Solomon’s farewell to the porters in Valladolid:

there were moments of intense emotion, as was the case with one man who burst into heartfelt sobs as if he had been reunited with a loved one from whom he’d been parted for years. The elephant treated him with particular indulgence. He touched the man’s head and shoulders with his trunk, bestowing on him caresses that seemed almost human, such was the gentleness and tenderness implicit in every movement. (2010a: 88)

And as also dawned on Subhro one night with “the sudden revelation that he loved the elephant and did not want to be parted from him” (2010a: 104). Ironic and critical anthropomorphism can open a path towards these new relationships and toward a new form of humanity that can finally meet its own haughty standards. But it is on the humans to take this step, since elephants (and nonhuman animals in general) have been all-too patient for far too long:

We’re just fortunate that they’re so good-natured, especially those that come from india. They realise that a lot of patience is required if they are to put up with us human beings, even when we pursue and kill them in order to saw off or extract their tusks for the ivory. Among themselves, elephants often remember the famous words spoken by

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26 These “moral precepts in our codes of conduct” are best summarized by Aristotle, who marked the history of human-animal relationships for centuries (and the precepts of the Catholic Church as established by the Aristotelian Thomas Aquinas) and claimed that there cannot be “friendship towards a horse or an ox, nor slave *qua* slave,” since friendship requires equality and association (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1161 b2).



one of their prophets, Forgive them, lord, for they know not what they do. (2010a: 125–26)

## Coda: Anthropomorphism at the Zoo

I want to conclude with a vignette that evokes and summarizes the same moral outrage that prompted Saramago to write *The Elephant's Journey*. On February 19, 2009, just a few months after publishing the novella, Saramago wrote in his blog an entry titled “Susi” (later collected in *The Notebook*; Saramago 2010b: 122–23). Susi was an African elephant cow held at the Barcelona Zoo who, from 2008, became the subject of an intense campaign under the banner *Libera! a Susi* aimed at raising awareness about the inappropriate conditions in which Susi (and elephants more in general) was held in captivity and at reshaping from the ground the conditions of captivity for wild animals (who should not be held captive in the first place).<sup>27</sup> Susi was probably born in the wild in 1973 and, after working in a circus and being kept in another animal park in Benidorm, in 2002 was acquired by the Barcelona Zoo. Her only companion was the elephant cow Alicia, who became the matriarch (of a herd of two), but when Alicia suddenly died in February 2008 Susi was left alone and showed clear signs of depression, also beginning to have, as a consequence, serious intestinal problems (the main cause of death for elephants in captivity).<sup>28</sup>

In his blog entry, spurred by the *Libera! a Susi* campaign, Saramago inveighs against zoos and circuses which confine wild animals in small and barren enclosures and use them for (ultimately cruel and anti-educational) human entertainment.<sup>29</sup> Compassionately looking at the predicament of this “hapless

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27 Cf. <<https://liberaong.org/campanas/603/>>, accessed 7 June 2022.

28 On the psychological consequences of hunting, culling, captivity, and other traumas for elephants, see Bradshaw (2010), who applies the categories of trauma studies to the analysis of elephants.

29 The critique in the blog entry of the cruelty of forcing elephants “to balance unsteadily on metal balls” (2010b: 122) evokes, with the same image, the same critique in *The Elephant's Journey* of “people [who] have very mistaken ideas about elephants [when] [t]hey imagine

victim of human cruelty,” Saramago’s gaze focuses again on the legs and feet of the poor animal: “The floor Susi walks on is made of concrete, absolutely the worst material for the sensitive feet of these creatures, who perhaps retain a vestigial memory of the secure ground of the African savannah underfoot.” And the meditation on the end of life is again central: “Taking proper care of Susi would involve awarding her a more dignified end to a life than that of seeking refuge in such a depressingly confined space, or of having to tread on a concrete floor that is a very hell to her” (2010b: 123). No fear of undue anthropomorphizing can deny the suffering of animals in these conditions, all zoo newspeak notwithstanding. Today Susi still lives in the Barcelona Zoo, in a bigger and “enriched” enclosure and with two new elephant companions, Yoyo and Bully, but still prisoner of human panic fear of emptiness.<sup>30</sup>

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that elephants enjoy being forced to balance on a heavy metal ball, on a tiny curved surface on which their feet barely fit” (2010a: 125).

30 Cf. <<https://www.zoobarcelona.cat/en/news/yoyo-susi-and-bully-0>>, accessed 7 June 2022.



# What is a Book?

MILOŠ ĆIPRANIĆ<sup>1</sup>

The book is such a common thing that there seems to be no reason to contemplate or search for its essence. It is something primarily intended for reading, a well-known thing that is used without the need to define it, and hence any reflection *on* the book is actually secondary to the reflection *with* it. The book is a true companion in the act of reading. The relationship between literary works and their authors has a circular form. Books are the children of writers, just as writers are the children of books. In fact, it is hard to say who is the parent to whom in that relationship. Books and writers mutually bring each other into being within that revolving circle, and this circling movement significantly contributes to the life of literature. In other words, individuals decide to become writers, that is, they discover their true vocation, having read books that left a strong impression on them. Reading various books, they develop their own style and poetics, and write books that are also capable of turning their readers into writers.

## Position Synthesis

Anyone who has devoted their life to letters and writing books must have asked themselves at least once what the product of their work actually is. José Saramago did not just write books, he also talked and wrote about what a book is, what that object or 'object' is. Now it is not possible to ask Saramago in person for his opinion about what is a book and a work of literature. The answer to that question can be found in his writings, as traces left behind him.

One word or category is the basis of Saramago's variations on the essence of the book and, more specifically, the work of literature. It is an unavoidable

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1 Translated from Serbian by Vuk Šećerović.

starting point for understanding his experience of what he was writing and reading. That word is 'person' (*pessoa*). In relation to this term and what it signifies, Saramago described the book from three different perspectives: from the point of view of the work itself, from that of the reader, and from that of the writer. In other words, starting from the three conditions or factors that constitute the life of literature as an institution. The category of person has central importance in Saramago's ontology of the book. When defining or understanding the book as such, he expressed consistency, but not rigidity.

To begin with, it is appropriate here to point out some of Saramago's exemplary statements that support this thesis. The first statement is related to the teleology of books and literature as such. What is the purpose, or at least one of the purposes, of writing a work of literature? "What I want, in the books I write, is for every reader to get an idea about the person who writes them" (qtd. in Arias 1998: 34). In order to get to know the author of a book, the one who reads it has to "extend their hands" to its writer, by turning its pages. Namely, the reader "can understand the text only when he is 'within' it, when he acts as someone who takes part in the finalization that the book requires, which means reading it" (qtd. in Reis 1998: 102). Thus, a literary work, written and published, is not completed in the strong sense of the word. It will actually become completed once it is read, that is, when one person gets to know the other in such a way. The literary work waits for someone to fulfill its purposes.

There is no need to emphasize that each writer and each reader are persons, individuals with particular characteristics, yet it is debatable if the same thing can be said for books. Saramago's own words provide us with an indication for clarifying this dilemma: "My books are born and they walk, and walk, until they say it is enough, and that can mean three hundred, four hundred or any which number of pages" (qtd. in Arias 1998: 63). The writer follows them on their walking, or rather directs them, and listens to them when, just like human beings, they tell him that they have reached their end. These novels seem to know what their measure is.

All these statements were made by Saramago in a series of conversations that were published, in which, among other things, he explained what his understanding was of what he created: *José Saramago: el amor posible* and *Diálogos com José Saramago* speak about the writer, and he speaks through

them. However, Saramago did not elaborate on his view of the book only in his conversations with Julian Arias and Carlos Reis. He expounded on this topic, implicitly or explicitly, in other places as well. Hence, his opinion about the book is not some insignificant question. After all, it would probably be incongruous had he not tackled or at least raised this question, bearing in mind what his profession was.

Instead of asking what a book is, it is perhaps better to tackle this problem by asking what a book can be. Such cautiousness in thinking about the ontological status of the book results from the variety of its possible definitions, the multiplicity of perspectives involved when dealing with this question. Saramago does not pretend to offer an outlook which is absolute and universally valid, nor he aspire to do so. Considering the work as an element of the system of literature, Saramago sees books as living creatures. Within the framework of discourse, books behave as human beings. A work of literature is understood as a trace of an individual person. The writer is not absent from the pages of the book he wrote, that is, his pages. Ultimately, the act of reading is the act by which one person reaches out to the other. The reader of the literary work actually encounters its author.

## The Book as a Person

Humans live with things, they are dependent on them and cannot survive without them. Both in literature and in reality, things can be perceived and experienced in different ways. In Saramago's prose, inanimate objects behave like living creatures and human beings, or resemble them. It is one of the motifs that are characteristic of his work. Let us focus on his novel *Seeing* for a moment. In this novel, which is actually entitled *Essay on Lucidity (Ensaio sobre a Lucidez)*, there is, among other things, an elevator capable of hearing people riding it, a sofa that is friendly to a person who sits on it, while papers thrown into the air resemble birds in flight (Saramago 2006: 271, 288, 295). Attributing life to things is an act that demonstrates the dialectic existing between the human beings and the inanimate objects surrounding them.

In a similar vein, significant insights can be found in the writings of Fernando Pessoa. *The Book of Disquiet*, in which the world itself is perceived as a great novel, is a collection of fragments in which the strict opposition between the animate and the inanimate is questioned. People make things that are designed to perform some function and these objects have an external purpose. In that sense, things express themselves and come into being through our relationship with them: “I consider it neither a human nor a literary error to attribute a soul to the things we call inanimate. To be a thing is to be the object of an attribution” (Pessoa 2016: 311–312). The author points to the table on which he is writing those sentences as an example which sheds light on his statement.

In addition to the vivification of non-living things, personification is another feature fundamental for understanding Saramago’s relationship to the book. The writer does not use only phrases which often, without closer reflection, personify inanimate objects, common places that are not specific to his work. On the contrary, the personification of things is a conscious decision. The sentence quoted above about a book walking towards its end and speaking to its writer is an example of this attitude. In Saramago’s works of fiction, a thing can be very eloquent. It is precisely in this sense that personification is synonymous with anthropomorphization. A thing that cannot speak becomes capable of speech. Speech ceases to be the exclusive characteristic of humans.

It is not only physical objects that are perceived as persons. Even something that has no body can be personified. Such is the case with language itself. In *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* we read: “Perhaps it is the language that chooses the writers it needs, making use of them so that each might express a tiny part of what it is. Once language has said all it has to say and falls silent, I wonder how we will go on living” (Saramago 1992: 47). This human creation is playing with its creators. Although thingness is not its fundamental feature, a book is also a physical thing, or at least it was exclusively something physical until recently. It is an artificial creation and an object that complements and gives meaning to the human world. By stating that the book is something that ‘complements’ and ‘gives meaning,’ the previous sentence has been formulated in such a way that the book has the status of the subject, even though it is also referred to as an ‘object’ in the same sentence. This is not contradictory.

The statement that the book does something is in accordance with Saramago's position, that is, the trope he used when referring to it.

Actions that a work of literature is capable of performing stem from its capacity to reason, which it possesses or is attributed to it. In this sense, the novel is like a living thing capable of thinking. More precisely, "the book *knows* more than I do," we are told in the *Lanzarote Notebooks* (Saramago 1994: 141). A literary work, thus, transcends its author. As a result of all that is sedimented in such work of literature, it becomes a person that stands above the subject that created it. It can surprise even its writer. It is very difficult to be in control of all that is written. It is perhaps worth pointing out that such intention can never be fulfilled in its entirety.

The question of speech is particularly significant in view of the issue which is being examined. Being inanimate objects, can books speak? The book is at the same time something that is reflected on and something that reflects. One way to express thoughts and emotions is through words. Literary works are destined to consist of this kind of signs, even if their discourse is vivid or pictorial, if they tend to create verbal images, streams of descriptions, and a narration without an apparent need to give an interpretation of what is happening in the fictional world. Something that is primarily made of words also uses them as a means to communicate, cogitate and act. In *Nuestro libro de cada día* (*Our Daily Book*), we read: "The other, namely, the book, is saying to me: 'Get to know me! I have so much to offer you.' And if one book does not give you anything, there will be another that will. That's for sure" (Saramago 2001: 30).

These sentences are very concise and illustrative, and they are worth dwelling on. Any book that a reader comes across for the first time is a stranger to them, just as the prospective reader is a person unfamiliar to that book. Like any stranger, the book that is in the hands of the person who wants to read it speaks in a language that this reader either knows or does not know. In any case, the book invites the reader, in a seductive imperative. It actually talks to the person with whom it had eye contact. When the capacity of speech is attributed to a book, it is seen as a human being. A literary work such as a novel develops by itself, like a living organism. The events unfold resulting from previous events, literary characters act according to their personalities and circumstances. Saramago is the one who decides, but he lets the text show



him the way to a certain point in the narrative. Namely, “my novel is a novel continuously under construction, it is a novel that keeps creating itself” (qtd. in Reis 1998: 133). The writer is the one who has control and gives direction—as much as possible—shaping the plot, the course of action and the development of his narration, in line with the internal logic and dynamics of the novel.

The idea behind the title of Saramago’s collection of short stories can be referred to and reaffirmed in the context of this chapter. That book is entitled *Objecto Quase* (*The Lives of Things*). Can we say that a book is also *almost an object*? Something that is neither subject nor object. As agents with the capacity to act, books are persons, more precisely, non-human and non-living persons, which does not mean that they are dead. Thus, in the hands of its reader whom it acts on, *Objecto Quase* is also an *objecto quase*.

There is a story in this book entitled “Things,” which tells the tale of a disappearing or erasing distinction between things and human beings. In this work of fiction, we do not know exactly who is the one that acts and who is acted on. The dialectic of being active and passive in a political system, together with a symptomatic reification of human beings, results in a collective catastrophe, a nightmare from which humans, it seems, cannot wake up. Who is really in control over whom? At the end of the story, an unnamed woman says: “Never again will men be treated as things” (Saramago 2012: 114). This story shows what happens when the ‘proper’ relationship between individuals as subjects is lost, when we lose the ‘appropriate’ relationship with the objects around us, when we are out of touch with ourselves.

The question arises whether seeing books as persons is actually a sign of alienation. Treating these objects in such way can be characterized as a perturbation of values. Namely, when books are given the status of persons, they are equated with human beings, that is, they are put on the same level in terms of their value. Of course, ‘human being,’ ‘subject’ and ‘person’ are not synonymous, although their denotations overlap considerably, so in some contexts these terms are interchangeable and, with due caution, they can replace one another. The answer to the above question is negative. In this case, personification or anthropomorphization is quite the opposite to alienation.

Seeing a person as a thing is not the same as seeing a thing as a person. Alienation is a process that reduces the human being to a physical object and

thus renders the person dehumanized, whereas personification aims to give human qualities to such an object. It is reasonable to anthropomorphize a book, bearing in mind that it is a human product that can, among other things, help humanize and, in a certain way, elevate its reader—who is supposed to be a non-thing—and discover or nurture in the reader something which is believed to be worth having.

There is no doubt that literary works have the power to impact on social reality. Needless to say, there are books which are tiresome and make their readers feel like they are climbing the long stairs of a tall building, books which are “like a staircase without an elevator” (Pessoa 2016: 359). However, the same goes even for the books describable with this comparison from *The Book of Disquiet*. Once published, the work of literature takes on a life of its own and its course cannot be predicted. In fact, such a work thus becomes a subject that enters into the sphere of reality and is given an opportunity to be active, even politically. It is true that Saramago did not believe that literature and art can radically change humanity and the world. Although he was skeptical about this idea, which he deemed overly optimistic and perhaps even naive, he did not stop writing. It is a telling decision.

The power of a book or a work of art should not be overestimated, but it should also not be underestimated either. Every so often, a book is under attack by a government or a dominant institution because of its ideas, which can shake up or challenge the system that is being guarded, just as individuals who stand up against the power structures have to pay a price for their deeds. There are many examples in history when books were banned, while there were others that were at the same time promoted for certain reasons.

Saramago bestowed life to books not only in his non-fictional writings. In addition to passages from his diaries and speeches, he described the book as a living being in his novels too. In *The Double*, Saramago wrote that books are “waiting, as all things always are, it’s something they can’t avoid, it is their ruling destiny, part, it seems, of their invincible nature as things” (Saramago 2004b: 11). The book he is talking about is here a book on historiography. This book about the Mesopotamian civilization keeps appearing in several places throughout the novel, silently watching what is happening. A book can invite its reader or just wait in silence. *The Double* deals with the issue of at least two persons who

are physically identical. Who is the original and who is the duplicate? Such a question can be posed in the world of books. Identical twins are essentially more different from each other than two copies of the same book, including *The Double*. One of the doppelgangers from this novel asks himself which one of them was born first, which would mean that he is not a copy of the other. Of course, the first edition of a novel is older than all its subsequent editions, but this does not mean that it has ontological priority over those that come later.

The idea of a book as a person existed before Saramago. It is not his invention. An example of this personification can be found on the pages of Michel de Montaigne, who was one of Saramago's main sources of inspiration. In his *Essays* we find that a book can be a bore, it can smile, make company, and so on. He cites Horace's lines from his *Satires* in which the Roman poet compares books or notebooks (*libri*) with friends (*sodales*) (Montaigne 1958: 479). The origin of this personification can be traced back to the Antiquity. In one of the essays, entitled "Of Books," Montaigne wrote that in books that he read only once he made comments about those books. In fact, "for whatever language my books speak to me, I speak to them in mine" (*ibid.*: 305). Just like different people, each book has its own native language in which it communicates.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking passage in which Montaigne describes his experience of the book as such is not encountered in the essay "Of Books," as one would expect from its title, but elsewhere. That text is entitled "Of Three Kinds of Association." In this essay, special attention is paid to books, which are eulogized and paid tribute to: "For I cannot tell you what ease and repose I find when I reflect that they are at my side to give me pleasure at my own time, and when I recognize how much assistance they bring to my life" (*ibid.*: 628). Montaigne expounds about what he seeks to find in a work he takes to read, together with his critical remarks and opinion about some of the books of his selection, ranging from poetry to historiography. Montaigne also gives a description of his library, located on one floor of the tower on his property. Moreover, in these pages, books are seen as animated objects, if not wholly anthropomorphized, which are pleasant to spend time with. The French essayist writes:

To be diverted from a troublesome idea, I only need to have recourse to books: they easily turn my thoughts to themselves and steal away the

others. And yet they do not rebel at seeing that I seek them out only for want of those other pleasures, that are more real, lively, and natural; they always receive me with the same expression. (*ibid.*)

In addition to the motif of a particular book that repeatedly appears in the narrative unfolding of a novel, such as *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, there are also other Saramago's works in which a book, either published or unpublished, plays an important role by influencing the plot of the story. For example, the theater play *What Will I Do with This Book?*, in which an epic poem waits to see the light of day and faces various obstacles along the way, or *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, a work that contains other two works with the same title as that intricate novel, all interacting with each other. Hence, Saramago's prose includes elements that can be described as work-about-work and book-within-book. Without them, these literary works would lose their point, because the function of these *almost objects* is not to play a secondary role within the main plot.

In the literary world created by Saramago there are also fictional books. Those are not the ones that appear in his books, but rather 'books' of which only sections and titles are mentioned. Namely, the sentences and thoughts taken from such books, like the *Book of Exhortations* and the *Book of Voices*, serve as the epigraphs in novels. A number of titles of works of literature have been mentioned so far in this chapter. Nowadays, every book has or must have a title, just as people have the names that are given to them. Saramago really attached great importance to the titles of his novels. He said that he used to start from the title, even when he did not know exactly what he was going to write about. Saramago acknowledged: "As strange as it may seem, my novels are usually born from the title" (qtd. in Arias 1998: 66). This is another example of a bio-metaphorical discourse, since the verb 'to be born' is predicated to the book, as if it were a living being. In any case, it is the title that largely determines and delineates the contents of a literary work such as a novel.

Someone might say that the proper name given to a person is something arbitrary, that the name does not say anything about the person who has it. Two people can have the same name and have nothing else in common. Just like every work of literature, every human being is unique. An individual can

change their name and still be the same person. If this is true, does the same go for the works of literature and their titles? It might be worth examining to find out whether the identity and the meaning of, say, a novel change when its title is changed.

Giving a different title to a literary work is not necessarily a decision of the author only, but also of a translator or someone else. Some of the original titles of Saramago's books have been changed not only in English translations. So, sometimes it happens that a book appears under more than one title in its lifetime, just as a person can be called by different names at the same time. However, in such cases there is a tendency to make book titles shorter and simpler. For instance, the original title of the novel *Blindness* is *Essay on Blindness: A Novel*, that is, *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira: Romance*, in Portuguese, while the novel *Seeing* is actually entitled *Essay on Lucidity*, as already pointed out above. These are not the only Saramago's works whose titles have been changed in that way, but these examples are given here for one specific reason. In the titles of the translations of these novels, the term 'essay' has been omitted, which strips these works of an important dimension that their author wanted to emphasize. Saramago's novels are not only literary fiction, but also intellectual reflections and meditations on the human condition.

While preparing and writing a book, its author may suggest several titles for it, both to themselves and others, before making a final decision about it. A writer can also start with one title, believing it to be definitive, and end up with another. Thinking about the book on his early life, Saramago planned to give it the title *The Book of Temptations*, as testified by an entry from the *Lanzarote Notebooks*, before that book was written: "The patient *Book of Temptations* must wait" (Saramago 1997: 241). However, this autobiographical book was eventually published under the title *Small Memories*. It may be reasonable to argue that a work of literature remains the same, despite its title having changed, even though a different title may cast a whole new light on that work.

## The Book as a Trace of the Author

Autobiography is a literary genre that deals with the existence of an individual, or at least a part of that existence, in such manner that the subject and the object coincide in it. Therefore, it can be argued that the author is present in the most explicit way in works that belong to that genre. However, the idea that a book is a trace of one's life cannot be reduced to a book that has the life of a person as its subject matter. It is important to underline this difference. This idea covers a much wider range than the prose in which individuals write about themselves. It applies to each and every work of literature. In their books, writers are always physically absent, they are actually not in it, even when they take themselves as the subject matter of their writing. This fact, however, does not mean that the authors are not present, in some sense, in the pages they wrote.

The absence of the writer from their work is not absolute, because the book is indeed their product, but not entirely theirs. A certain author can be recognized by the characteristic style of writing, atmosphere, themes, and motifs, without them explicitly writing about themselves or something that happened to them. Saramago said that his books are "the sign of a person" (qtd. in Reis 1998: 98). In that sense, a literary work is a trace that points to the one who created it, apart from it being a sign of something else. This idea refers not to any specific contents of a given work, but rather to the fact that a book is a personal creation. With regard to their book, the author is a person-within-a-person. They are hidden in the book which speaks on their behalf.

When we look at the novel as a literary genre, a literary character can resemble the one who created him or her. To do that, it is sufficient to add something autobiographical to that character. However, even writing about one's own life in the form of fiction is not a necessary condition for a work of literature to be considered *o sinal de uma pessoa* (the sign of a person). In the world of Saramago's novels, there are literary characters who read a lot and spend their days immersed in papers and letters. Raimundo Silva is surrounded by books on the shelves in his room, he lives with them and they live with him. Senhor José, the chronicler of those who come into this world and those who leave this world behind in *All the Names*, has the same name as the writer who

created him. Such coincidences are indicative, but it is debatable to what extent Saramago did portray himself in such fictional characters.

As an object, the book usually outlives its author, because the latter's life span is biologically limited. The writer's products are not limited in the same way, they cannot die, because they are not living things. Of course, throughout history it happened that some scroll, codex or incunabula vanished from the face of the earth, together with whatever was written in them, just as there were cases in the era of printed books when the entire print run of a book was confiscated and destroyed. It is possible for a book to disappear, but for every man death is inevitable. People have a hard time coming to terms with this fact. Each page in our life can be turned only once, unlike the pages of a book. Making a work of literature is an attempt to resist the law of transience. In this sense, the books of an author who is no longer alive are a form of their post-existence. Needless to say, the books' primary function need not be to rebel against finitude.

Another perspective on the meaning of the written work is correlative with the point of view according to which it is intrinsically related to the concrete person. A work of literature, and others alike, can also be imagined and seen as a monument. From that perspective, the work, as well as the book itself, would function as objects that preserve a certain memory and thus resist the implacable passage of time. That quality or character that works of literature can have does not depend on the literary genre to which they belong.

It is yet another question which is embodied in such a monument, that is, who is the subject of memorization. The work of literature as a monument can preserve and evoke the memory of something, but also of the person who made or 'built' that work. In other words, both the subject of the work and its author can be worthy of it. It should be added here that those two positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, because one work can encompass both of them, so that a given work can be a dual monument, so to say. The first of these includes, for instance, historiographical writings, while the latter includes works of poetry. Horace, who has already been mentioned, described his *Odes* as a *monumentum* that he erected to himself: "I have built a monument more lasting than bronze, and loftier than the royal pile of the pyramids" (Horace 1998: 150). The poem expresses the belief that the verses shall serve as a path for the poet to reach a state somewhere between partial death and immortality.

A monument is not just a non-discursive object, a thing made of hard materials that stands upright, a permanent structure built to last. Novels are also forms of commemoration in their own right. In Saramago's oeuvre they also serve that purpose. One such novel is *Baltasar and Blimunda*, or more precisely, *Memorial of the Monastery (Memorial do Convento)*. This book with such a suggestive title tells the story of the construction of a monumental architectural object, accompanied by everything that such a huge endeavor entails and everything that goes on around it. Viewed in historical terms, this story about an event from the 18<sup>th</sup> century is neither true nor false.

There is a chapter in the novel that vividly describes how a giant stone was transported—the hard work required to build that edifice—the writer's effort made to show that remarkable achievement in a memorable way. If it were only possible, it would be worthwhile to see that feat. By taking part and joining in that effort, the majesty of that action or the suffering of a multitude of laborers who transported that stone, would become much more manifest, but the readers fail to achieve that, “from the place and the time of this page” (Saramago 1982: 260). This entire architectural endeavor is reminiscent of the story about the erection of the pyramids in ancient Egypt. The idea of constructing this building, and its realization, can be associated with the topos of ruler's madness, long present in European tradition.

Structurally, as the novel unfolds and its monumentality keeps growing, so does the construction of the edifice, equally monumental. They are intertwining, one following the other, moving in parallel towards the end and the purpose which they were made to serve. It is a dance between architecture and literature. *Memorial do Convento* is a monument-to-a-monument, that is, the monastery is a monument-within-a-monument. It is, among other things, a linguistic construction erected in memory of the people who toiled building that edifice and thus left their trace—those who remain anonymous and those whose names are known—and at the same time it is also one of the monuments in the history of literature and a testimony to Saramago's creativity.

In this book, the monastery is one of the literary characters. Despite the fact that it is mute, that it cannot speak—surely the writer could have given it that ability—this object, incomplete as it is, significantly influences the plot, demanding the effort of the people and observing all that is happening around it.



Indeed, in Saramago's other novels, elements of buildings are compared to parts of the human body and those elements behave like persons. An example of this can be found in *The Lives of Things*, more precisely in the story "Embargo": "The gray eye of the window-pane gradually turned blue, staring all the while at the two heads resting on the pillow" (Saramago 2012: 27). In *Blindness*, we are told: "The door handle is like the outstretched hand of a house" (Saramago 1999a: 304). The personification of the elevator in the novel *Seeing* has already been mentioned. In keeping with that trope, a part of a building or an apartment speaks to the person who lives in it. The main character of the novel *All the Names* talks to the ceiling in his home on more than one occasion. Senhor José engages in an "imaginary and metaphysical dialogue" with it (Saramago 1999c: 136). In the world of fiction, such things are possible.

The notion that the distinctive character of the author manifests itself in what he writes and the idea of literary creation as an effort of an individual to leave something behind after their death, or the will to immortality, can be characterized as a manifestation of egotism and vanity. However, the multi-perspective definition of the book as such prevents any attempt to see works of literature solely as a manifestation of the person who wrote them. In that matter, the point is not the person *per se*, but it is what they felt, thought, and created, their personal experience of the world, a perspective that complements, expands, and enhances that world with words in contact with other people. When a writer speaks about their work, it is quite understandable that they see it as something that belongs to them, as a product to which they applied themselves. Based on everything elaborated so far, and on what is about to be expounded, we can say that a work of literature, taken in its totality, is more than that.

## The Book as a Meeting Place

The writer and the reader live in reciprocal relation and mutual exchange and thus they enrich the life of literature. The writing act and the reading act are directed towards a book, or a literary work which mediates between two persons. The book is simultaneously a mediator and a place of communication. "Reading is an encounter" (Saramago 2001: 43). With regard to what has been

said so far, the question is whether it is someone or something that the reader encounters, and what is actually meant by 'someone.' It is really difficult to determine whether the reader is headed towards the writer or towards the work. The reading act gradually blurs the difference between the author and the book they wrote. As if the boundary between two persons starts to disappear.

Reading a literary work requires the reader to be physically present in front of the text. This practice makes it possible for the reader to actualize the life of the writer, his person. When the writer is dead and absent in the strict sense, it is the person reading who revives him through the signs the writer left behind. What is the nature of those signs? In reality, the words printed on paper have yet to be given life. This can be done through the act of seeing, but also through other senses, such as listening. It is then that the procession of sentences that make up a book starts to move towards its destination.

Once again, it is important to look back and remind ourselves of Montaigne's stance regarding the relationship between the book and the person as a category, only this time the person are both the writer and the reader. At the end of the preface to the *Essays*, entitled "To the Reader," speaking directly to anyone who wishes to read his book, the author makes himself clear: "Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book" (Montaigne 1958: 2). This statement, in which the author says something about himself through his work—by erecting a magnificent monument to what he is or what he used to be, that is, what he used to do—can be correlated with Saramago's position. Of course, a book that is written and published is usually intended for someone else, because 'I' does not exist without 'you.' Montaigne adds: "For I have a singular curiosity, as I have said elsewhere, to know the soul and the natural judgments of my authors" (1958: 302). Montaigne and Saramago did not hesitate to mention the names of authors who left a lasting impression on them, but gladly did so.

When we read literary works such as novels, they tell us something, even though they are voiceless. While there are myriads of words on their many pages, these works keep silent at the outset. Readers are faced with that muteness while bringing to life what lies behind the written letters. The language of defectology—this term is to be understood in its original meaning, in the sense of its constituent words—can also be applied to the body and the soul of the book. On the other side, facing the book, the reader appears to be somewhat blind.

In literature, the world of fiction is the realm of the invisible. Looking at the sentences and gliding across them, together with them, the reader really does not see with their own eyes what is happening and developing before them.

Bearing this in mind, it is possible to imagine a hypothetical situation. What would happen to books if all the people lost their sight? In *Blindness*, following the outbreak of epidemic, a writer says: “Now nobody can read them, it is as if they did not exist” (Saramago 1999a: 290). This remark is perhaps an eccentric acknowledgment of the importance of readers in the life of literature. In the light of Saramago’s social ophthalmology, it seems that this comment from the novel is actually a dark diagnosis of a society that gave up on reading.

The writer was wrong, because one person did not lose sight. At bedtime, she reads aloud to her blind friends. Listening to the reading is one of the ways to postpone and avoid the death of the book at that moment. It is clear which act is the precondition for it. The reader is not completely blind. While the ophthalmologist’s wife is looking at the letters, others are listening to her words, all of them eager for what lies behind those sentences. With their musicality, the words psychagogically allure those who witness the act. It is a point of connection. There is a place in the novel that reads:

Now there is no music other than that of words, and these, especially those in books, are discreet, and even if curiosity should bring someone from the building to listen at the door, they would hear only a solitary murmur, that long thread of sound that can last into infinity, because the books of this world, all together, are, as they say the universe is, infinite. (1999a: 304–305)

Saramago’s poetics is characterized by the motifs of indescribability and sensory deficiency. These two motifs are highlighted here because they also apply to the book as a thing and to its content. Indescribability and sensory deficiency are characteristics that have one thing in common, namely, they both imply an absence of something. In the first case there is a lack of appropriate words to present something in a satisfactory way, while in the second case there is a lack of sensorial capacity through which one can experience and perceive different dimensions of reality.

Sensory deficiencies are observed in things and non-things alike. Deafness, muteness, and blindness are conditions that indicate the limits of what is shown and described. In the case of blindness, it can be both a metaphor and an actual physical disability. The human being is allegorically portrayed by Saramago, that moral and political ophthalmologist, as an imperfect creature who either lost or lacks the sense of sight. On the other hand, it is true that books cannot actually hear anyone, because, being inanimate objects, they are deaf, although in a certain way they hear their readers who engage in a kind of dialogue with them.

The motif of indescribability is also present in *Blindness*. No words and “no imagination, however fertile and creative in making comparisons, images and metaphors” can ever depict everything that is seen in one particular place (Saramago 1999a: 131). It may seem unusual that Saramago uses this motif in other novels too, given his great literary talent and writing skill. In this sense, one could say that for such a writer, there is nothing that cannot be described in an exceptional, even unforgettable way.

A later example of this motif can be found in *Death at Intervals*. In this novel, death, among other things, sits on a chair, writes letters, and sends them to people, and at one point also takes the shape of a woman. In the last chapter of this book, death attracts the attention because she looks “pretty in a very particular, indefinable way that couldn’t be put into words, like a line of poetry whose ultimate meaning, if such thing exists in a line of poetry, continually escapes the translator” (Saramago 2008: 294). It is quite pertinent to refer to this passage here because it is an instance of something which appears anthropomorphized and indescribable at the same time.

In addition to the view that not everything in life can be expressed in language, it seems that Saramago wants to stir the reader’s imagination with short descriptions or the statement about something being indescribable, so that the reader would creatively engage in what they are reading, by filling the gaps that were left for them. At the same time, describing something completely is not achievable, because there is always something else that can be said or observed. Since a description that aims to achieve this goal is unattainable, a book that would attempt to accomplish it would never be completed.

Awareness of the inadequacy of words implies that something must be seen and experienced personally. When something that belongs to the invisible

world of literature is said to be indescribable, it should be kept in mind that the experiences of real life and literary fiction are so intertwined that they are apparently impossible to disentangle. Indescribability is a state that occurs not only in case of something visually perceptible and knowable, such as a physical thing, but also in case of sounds, as well as feelings and emotions. Literary works need not be read only. There is something called a ‘talking book.’ Nowadays, a book is no longer only a physical object, a thing subject primarily to the sense of sight. Talking books are intended for blind people, but also for those who prefer not to savor a book with their eyes, but rather with their ears. The audiobook breaks the silence of its counterpart, the book as a thing to be read. In its presence, the listener, say, sitting in an armchair, feels like they are in front of a person who is describing and telling them something.

Standing between the writer and the one who listens or reads their writings, there is the book, which is a thing neither entirely transparent nor opaque. Therefore, the communication of one person with another is mediated by an object, which can be viewed both as something—a thing or a place—and as someone. The book makes that encounter possible without the precondition of those two participants coexisting at the same time, nor requiring them to be simultaneously in the same place. Given that the book serves as an intermediary, the writer lays themselves bare through it, but also hides themselves in it. They do not give anything that is not right there in their writings and their fiction: “I do not want my readers to know what I know about myself. What stands between me and them are my books” (qtd. in Arias 1998: 34).

Saramago’s attitude towards the book as such and the literary work is characterized by a rather distinct idea. Namely, the book refuses to be just a physical object and transcends its own boundaries. If the focus is on the book itself, it is seen as a person, not something that is incapable of thinking and acting on its own. As regarding the writer, the book is not so much a physical thing as a sign that goes beyond its material bedrock and points to the author and the problems they have dealt with. When a book is being read, it ceases to be an object made of paper and letters and becomes a place that makes a specific event possible. When a book speaks, it disappears as a thing in front of the one who wrote it and the one who reads it.

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