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**HOW TO DECIDE WHETHER *MEMORIAL DO CONVENTO*
BY JOSÉ SARAMAGO IS OR IS NOT A POSTMODERNIST NOVEL?**

In this century of great democratic, peaceful and not so peaceful revolutions, not only the common citizen, but also the common reader has been liberated from authoritarian rule. It is undeniable that the process to grant sovereign rights to the reader has not yet been completed. There are still pockets of resistance to the democratization of the role of the reader in countries where fundamentalist beliefs or one-party systems prevail. On the other hand, in other places the freedom of the reader has been interpreted in such an absolute way that even one of the most liberal minds alive and alert today, Umberto Eco, thought it appropriate to point out that there are limits of interpretation, arguing that «the notion of unlimited semiosis does not lead to the conclusion that interpretation has no criteria» (Eco 1990: 6). I am not sure, however, that Eco is correct in asserting «that the interpreted text imposes some constraints upon its interpreters,» or that the text has «rights» which must be respected (6-7).

Why do I have doubts about Eco's recent, surprisingly restrictive argument? My doubts originate, first, in the anthropomorphic metaphors which Eco uses to describe textual functions. Strictly speaking, there are no constraints emanating from an uninterpreted text. The text, as an inert artifact, is dead. If there are any constraints they must be recognized and interpreted first by the reader who will use his or her limited potential for attributing meaning to textual features. Different from Eco, one could argue: the readers' cognitive activity, their limited knowledge and experience imply constraints that are imposed on the text and restrict the range of attributed meanings. As a material artifact, the text also cannot be assumed to possess «rights» nor «intentions» (cf. Eco 1990: 58).

Secondly, Eco discusses the correctness and desirability of interpretations not from a descriptive empirical point of view but rather from a prescriptive position. Eco wishes to distinguish between pretextual readings and interpretations, between cases where texts are used and where they are interpreted, ostensibly favoring the latter ones. However, he adds immediately that «it is frequently very hard to distinguish between use and interpretation» (Eco 1990: 62). This confession, indeed, weakens his argument.

I do agree with Eco that it is possible to judge the merit of interpretations, but I would like to do so on different grounds. I would not refer to the rights or the intentions of texts — which cannot be established with certainty —, but I would

concede that authors as well as readers have rights in both a legal and ethical sense. Allow me to remind ourselves of certain simple notions. Authors possess the copyright over their work. As a result, they are protected against plagiarism. Their original work, often the product of many years of labor, is respected by the community and cannot be trampled with in just any way. The now fashionable device of rewriting can hardly be applied to recent texts, as a rewriting may be judged to be a form of plagiarism.

This legal situation, enforced by law, is only a reduction of a more general condition of respect for another person's accomplishments. There are social norms which discourage plainly offensive criticism of a work of art. Please note, that I am not referring to constraints imposed by the text, but rather to constraints on social behaviour in a particular community. This view is compatible with the ethical norm of respect for an author's intention advocated by E. D. Hirsch in his book *Validity in Interpretation* as early as 1967. The discussion of the validity of interpretations relies indeed partly on ethical norms upheld within a particular semiotic community. These norms are restricted to a particular culture of whatever size, and far from universal. Interpretation, therefore, is a communicative act, to be carried out in accordance with group norms. It is not a scientific activity, except for the part where it is subjected to universal rules, such as a logic of inference. Before turning to this latter aspect, let me give some more examples of the role of ethics in interpretation.

If an author firmly resists a particular interpretation of his or her work, this is usually taken to be a significant fact. If the rejected interpretation moreover is offensive, an ethical and possibly legal norm is at stake. To mention one example: in the Netherlands poetry written by a young woman — Neeltje Maria Min — was interpreted as being based on an experience of incest. This interpretation was firmly denied by the poetess, who added that publication of this interpretation in the press had deeply offended her father (Wester 1990; cf. Brackmann 1990). The case could have been brought before the court as a specimen of libel, although almost certainly the claim would not be granted as the defense might point out, first, that the poem itself should be considered a fictional text and that any comment on fictional texts has no basis in reality, and, second, that the text which is meant to be a work of art should be considered to belong to the public domain and that, therefore, anyone may do with that text whatever he or she likes. The conclusion of the defense might be that any interpretation of this text has nothing to do with its biological author. That position, however, would not be as conclusive as it, at first sight, would seem to be, since the comment by the critic was referring to a possibly unconscious experience by the poetess in real life. In fact, for the sake of the argument, I would have appreciated if the poetess had brought her complaint before the court.

When, however, an author supports a certain interpretation of his or her work, this is also considered significant. In the Netherlands, fiction written by Gerrit Krol was interpreted as being postmodernist. The author himself conceded that on the basis of a given definition of postmodernism the interpretation was correct (Krol 1984; cf.

Ruiter 1991: 277), and this admission became an important argument in the discussion of his work (cf. Zuiderent 1989). If, on the other hand, an author rejects any affiliation with a label such as postmodernism, this attitude usually influences the interpretational debate as well.

The rules of interpretation are rules of communicative behavior valid within a certain culture; they cannot be deduced from the text. This does not mean that the text is a neutral factor in the competition between interpretations. The text does not determine the interpretation, but neither is it disregarded by the interpreter. In modern European culture we sail somewhere between the Scylla of textual determinism and the Charybdis of interpretive anarchism. Why are we following this middle course? Because the interpretations of a text usually overlap as to various aspects, such as the major characters and plot, place and time of action — which usually are inferred from textual data in a way which can be corroborated by systematic and intersubjectively validated analysis (Reinhold Viehoff and Elrud Ibsch have demonstrated this in papers which are in press); but empirical research has also shown that the interpretations of a text differ at other points, because the knowledge and experience of the interpreters differ, and because their aims and ways of reporting will be different.

In short, most interpretations of one text converge in certain aspects and differ in other ones. Interpretation is a rule-guided enterprise based on ethical norms as well as logic. It can even be predicted on what points interpretations will converge, which means that there are regularities in the interpretive results. These regularities can be explained in semiotic terms.

The knowledge that a reader has of the symbolic system used by an author usually deviates from the knowledge the author had at his or her disposal when producing the text. In fact, it would be rather surprising if the competence of the readers would be exactly the same as the competence of the author. It is more likely that their knowledge of the various codes used during the production of the text overlap where relatively simple codes are concerned, and that the knowledge of reader and author become more divergent where more complicated codes are at stake. Their knowledge of the linguistic code — their knowledge of English, or Portuguese — may largely overlap. Knowledge of the literary code, which predisposes author and reader to consider a text as a literary one, i.e. a text with a high degree of coherence, with obvious consequences for the production and acceptability of connotations and metaphors, may also be largely shared by author and reader. However, differences between author and reader may increasingly occur as to the knowledge of the generic code, the group code, and most of all the author's idiolect, which also can be considered a code, insofar as it is distinguishable on the basis of recurrent features (cf. Fokkema 1984: 8-9).

On the one hand, since it is a cognitive activity based on available knowledge and guided by certain aims and rules, interpretation is not an arbitrary affair. On the other hand, since interpretation necessarily relies on knowledge available to the

interpreter and is guided by his or her subjective ends, the text alone does not determine the outcome of the interpretation. Interpretation is neither determinist nor anarchic. This implies that we cannot unconditionally establish the quality of a particular text as being modernist or postmodernist. The title of this paper, therefore, is wrong: we cannot decide whether *Memorial do Convento* «is» a postmodernist text. We can, however, argue or try to argue, that *Memorial do Convento* can be interpreted as a postmodernist text. And we may hope to argue that a postmodernist reading of this novel is more profitable than a modernist or a realist reading. Such an argument cannot be developed irrespective of the text.

Although I will propose a particular reading of *Memorial do Convento*, I must admit that I am seriously handicapped by an insufficient knowledge of the Portuguese language and, perhaps more importantly, by my lack of knowledge of the Portuguese reception context. Many suggestive hints, many intertextual references will have escaped me. These handicaps, however, have not deterred me from offering my interpretation.

Indeed certain texts are more likely to be interpreted as being postmodernist than other texts. Although in principle any text may receive a postmodernist reading, in practice this does not happen; it would deplete texts of their informative value if they all could be read in the same way equally well. Sign systems, from the language code to group codes and idiolects are designed for particular purposes. Their functions are validated in practice, which again motivates the users of the codes to continue using them. This empirical fact warrants the hypothesis that, on the basis of our understanding of a text, we may successfully attempt to construct or even reconstruct the codes an author has used in text production. Ideally, programmatic or metapoetical statements by the author should support our argument, or, in the absence of such statements, the judgement of other readers might serve as a point of reference. The question is: how can we defend our preference for a postmodernist reading of *Memorial do Convento*? This is a more correct phrasing of the task that I have set myself.

The concept of postmodernism has been circulating among literary critics for about thirty years. The concept has a certain semantic content, though with fuzzy edges. We could proceed by giving an abstract definition of postmodernism and investigate which literary works would fit into the concept. Or we could select a few texts which by consensus are considered postmodernist and derive our notion of postmodernism from these texts. When T.S. Eliot was considering to advance a definition of a classic, he wrote: «Whatever the definition we arrive at, it cannot be one which excludes Virgil» (Eliot 1945:8). So we could decide that whatever our definition of postmodernism will be, it may not exclude fiction by Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Angela Carter, Marguerite Duras, Botho Strauss, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco. From there we may try to find textual and contextual features that are common to their work.

Since we need a concept of postmodernism in order to direct our postmodernist reading of *Memorial do Convento*, I will for reasons of time present that concept, without much ado.

Postmodernism can be explained by telling a story, and although I see no particular logical merit in iconicity, it may serve a rhetorical function. It is well-known that the authors just mentioned are telling stories again. So let me join them. The days of explicit epistemological reflection, typical of modernism, are gone. Modernist fiction was characterized by an overt and explicit epistemological doubt. It questioned the possibility of acquiring reliable knowledge about the world, but it still attempted to find a kind of authentic knowledge. Even the many voices of an André Gide or a Fernando Pessoa were designed to escape from non-authentic essentialism. The modernists were motivated by the desire to escape from words which had the appearance of being truthful but which were felt to be inadequate. Their intellectual and metalinguistic suspicion was persuasively described in Nathalie Sarraute's *L'Ère du soupçon* (1956), one of the last landmarks of modernism. By then, the modernist code was exhausted; it had lost its critical impetus which had been directed against a petrified realism and a mystifying symbolism, which were no longer felt to be worthwhile to give much thought to. Modernism, which had culminated in novels such as *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, *Ulysses*, *La Coscienza di Zeno* and *Doktor Faustus*, seemed to have exhausted its intellectual potential and certainly could not be surpassed by writing in the same vein. A new generation of authors looked for weak spots in the modernist way of writing, and they found them. To them it appeared that modernist fiction lacked a good story, paid too much attention to intellectual considerations, and therefore attracted a one-sided readership. Modernism was considered elitist and boring.

The postmodernists were not so naive as to believe that the stories they wanted to tell were truthful. It seems that in their literary socialization they went from epistemological doubt to epistemological despair, and beyond. Their stories may well be read as if being placed between quotation marks, such as some of Donald Barthelme's stories indeed are. Postmodernism is a kind of writing for people who refused to commit suicide, although there are too many reasons for despair. In *The Floating Opera* (1956), John Barth explains that suicide is motivated by a norm, and if that norm is not clear or even absent, suicide is nonsense. Or, in his own words,

To realize that nothing makes any difference is overwhelming; but if one goes no further and becomes a saint, a cynic, or a suicide on principle, one hasn't reasoned completely. The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including that truth. Hamlet's question is, absolutely, meaningless (Barth 1956: 251; quoted by Hoffmann 1986: 201).

My story of postmodernism is one that moves from doubt to despair and beyond. The insolent announcement that «nothing makes any difference» is itself a story as good as any other one. Postmodernism, then, is not nihilistic, but it is inherent in

postmodernism that a nihilistic story can be told as well as a utopian one. In both cases there is no truth-claim.

The question could be asked here, why these stories are told, if they have no pretension to tell the truth or to describe the real world. Is it to make us think? Not in the way the modernists did, but in a radically new way which allows us to forget for a while our real life existence and to enter a world with different norms and laws. Not surprisingly, science fiction is a much favored genre among postmodernist writers, as much as its historical counterpart: writing about the past by way of inventing new facts or even new laws and forgetting the obvious ones.

Memorial do Convento is such a book. It is not a historical novel, or it is a historical novel with calculated flaws. You may wonder about the word «flaws,» because from the postmodernist point of view there is no *métarécit* — no metanarrative — that provides us with a basis from where we can judge whether an author makes the mistake of deviating from historical truth. Again, for rhetorical reasons, one might argue that the author of *Memorial do Convento* has introduced several new laws, which we may call F-laws and which the uninitiated reader may interpret as «flaws.» What I wish to convey is that where Saramago seems to deviate from accepted views, he simply creates a world as good and as convincing as the one we believe to be familiar with. And, possibly, many readers will conclude that the way he described the private world of Baltasar and Blimunda is more just and more beautiful than the world we know from our own experience.

Saramago tells a story situated in early eighteenth-century Portugal. He incorporates scenes of court life, the building of a vast Franciscan monastery in Mafra, and the story of an exceptional love which begins and ends near an auto-da-fé. There are at least three F-laws in the novel. First, the «ungeschehene Geschichte» (Demandt 1984) of the *passarola*, the aeroplane which was built by the historical figure Bartholomeu de Gusmão (1685-1724). In the book it is father Bartolomeu Lourenço who, together with Baltasar Mateus and Blimunda, builds the aeroplane and takes off. By describing two flights with this aeroplane in the early eighteenth century, Saramago deviates from the accepted historical record.

A second F-law is constituted by the essential device which enables the three main characters to fly. The wills of people, after having been caught in a little bottle with a piece of amber, make the aeroplane fly. This F-law contradicts several empirical laws. The will of a person is visible as a dense cloud above the stomach, but only to Blimunda, the woman who, if sober, can look through people. Her paranormal capacity of seeing through things is a third F-law in the book.

Finally there are various instances of the stylistic device of quasi-nonselction, such as the many enumerations or catalogues, and the names of the main characters which all begin with the letter B. Perhaps randomness and mere coincidence in a story should be considered an F-law as well.

If the contradiction of the historical record is part of postmodernism, *Memorial do Convento* complies with this criterion. If the contradiction of empirical laws and

deviation from accepted logical inference also are criteria of postmodernism, the novel can be called postmodernist on these grounds as well. We discussed already the chemical effect of the human will and the contradiction of the law of gravity, but the novel also has instances of far-fetched logical inference and reversed rationality — a hyperrationality that leads to quite unexpected conclusions. The author manages, for instance, to describe a penitential procession as a kind of sadomasochistic exhibitionism closer to prostitution than to a religious experience (Saramago 1982: 29). He succeeds to prove that the winding sheet of the body of Christ that is shown in Lisbon is the only real one, «because it is in Portugal» («porque está en Portugal,» 32). Father Bartolomeu praises the functionality of the iron hook Baltasar has instead of a hand he lost in the war, and argues that it is an advantage to have only one hand and that also God has just one hand (68). This kind of reasoning which inflates the argument can also be found in fiction by Thomas Bernhard, such as *Korrektur* (1975) and *Wittgensteins Neffe* (1982) (cf. Ibsch 1986: 119-135). The thesis that God has only one hand, the right one, is an expression of refutation and exemplifies the mutation of (modernist) hypothesis into (postmodernist) refutation, which was elaborated in *Korrektur*.

Hyperrationality or logical inflation fit into the postmodernist framework and can be explained as resulting from a mental process that has lost support in an empirical reality. The attempt to explain the world we live in seems to have been given up by the postmodernists. Instead, they are offering new worlds which are verbal constructs, not less questionable than the accepted world views. Beyond the stage of despair — or to refer to the title of a recent study of contemporary American literature by Marc Chénétier, *Au-delà du soupçon* (1989), beyond the stage of suspicion — stories can be told again and even be enjoyed. Enjoyment of postmodernist fiction seems possible, precisely because it offers alternatives to a one-dimensional rationality. It shows the possibility of other norms, other laws, other conventions, and this is a necessary — though not sufficient -- condition for eliciting an aesthetic effect.

Memorial do Convento also is an attempt to rewrite history from the point of view of the oppressed (Wesseling 1991). It tells the story of the royal family in the second and third decade of the eighteenth century, but it does so in a rather debunking way. The king, Dom João V, promises to build a monastery if his wife will bear him a child. The child is born and the monastery is being built, but what was intended to be a work in praise of God turns out to be a monstrous building claiming the lives of many workmen who are forced to go to Mafra and who die in the numerous accidents. This is one instance where the evaluation of historical events is reversed.

An outspoken revisionism is at work throughout the book. Dom João V is a frequent visitor of nunneries, but there he indulges in rape rather than prayer. The grounds for organizing an auto-da-fé are shown to be doubtful, but the dinner party of the king in the offices of the Inquisition after the poor souls have died in the flames is plainly repugnant (Saramago 1982: 49-51). The monk who has shown Blimunda —

searching for Baltasar — where she can stay overnight did not act out of compassion but will try to rape her (345). «Cursed are the friars,» says Blimunda («Malditos sejam os frades,» 346). However, the major revisionist characteristic, of course, is that the story of the monastery of Mafra is told from the point of view of the oppressed common people. In fact, the focus is rather on the couple Baltasar and Blimunda, who love each other more deeply than I can indicate here. They live a happy life, which at times is shared by father Bartolomeu Lourenço and by Domenico Scarlatti, who in 1721 came to Lisbon to become a music teacher at the court, which is one of the historical facts that reminds us of the genre; we are reading a historical novel, though of a postmodernist kind.

In this historical novel the roles are reversed. The common people are to be admired, not the royal family or the Roman Catholic prelates. The argument is not that Baltasar and Blimunda are better people, but there is no reason to assume that they are less admirable than any other person. The postmodernist device of nonselection or rather quasi-nonselection is certainly used in this text. Indeed, the assertion that all laws are equal and that Mohammed is an equal to Christ (95) comes from someone who has to go to the auto-da-fé, but there one can find the most respectable people, including Blimunda's mother, or her lover, Baltasar. (At the very end of the novel Blimunda sees him, in the flames, after a period of separation of nine years during which she has looked for him all over Portugal.)

The heretic belief that all laws are equal and Mohammed is on a par with Christ is, with slight variations, also pronounced by Bartolomeu Lourenço, who certainly is a character that is described with great sympathy. Farther Bartholomeu argues that in one aspect at least Jesus and Pilate were the same (162). He advances this and other heresies in a cataract of quasi-logical arguments (171-173). Blimunda, that admirable woman, says it more plainly: «Sin does not exist, there is only death and life» («O pecado não existe, só há morte e vida,» 331).

This is the postmodernist view: after doubt and beyond despair, there is life and love and certainly also death.

If someone would prefer a different reading of *Memorial do Convento*, let him or her try. Perhaps the concept of magical realism (cf. Weisgerber 1982) could provide a framework for another convincing interpretation. However, I assume that certain things will return in almost all interpretations: the oppression of the common people by court and church alike, the delicate and loyal love of Baltasar and Blimunda, the revision of standard historiographical conceptions about the glorious Portuguese past, and the antihistorical incident of flying in an aeroplane in the early eighteenth century. In this novel I see moreover a notion of quasi-nonselection, a beautiful story without a basis in clearly defined norms, a story that transcends hypothesis and despair and tells us of a life independent from the great ideologies and *métarécits*. This postmodernist reading, I believe, is capable of explaining the various components of the story and their interrelationship.

Someone might object that the novel is too fine a story for being characterized as postmodernist. It is certainly a story that has internal coherence. There is no fragmentation, and the beautiful life of Baltasar and Blimunda, though not adhering to a norm, creates a norm. I would suggest that this objection does not apply. Although the novel is voluminous, it is simply a fragment of history with no direct linkages to any other episodes in the history of Portugal. The story stands on its own feet and is self-sufficient. It makes no claim to universal truth. As such, it remains a «petite histoire» in comparison to the grand narratives that have directed European civilization: Christianity, ancient forms of democracy, the Enlightenment, and the ideological values of the French and Communist revolutions. *Memorial do Convento* is a story about heresy, both in content and form. (As to the formal aspect: the three main characters are heretics and the story is mainly told from their point of view; there is a heretic use of rationality, logical inferences and empirical data; the book is a heretic innovation of the genre of the historical novel.)

Memorial do Convento fits in the series of novels which have presented heretic rewritings of the past, such as Juan Goytisolo's *Reivindicación del conde don Julián* (1970), Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (1980), and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Goytisolo and Rushdie are each other's counterpart: Goytisolo writing a vehement criticism of the Roman Catholic, Castilian view of Spanish history and having words of praise for the Islam, and Rushdie writing a criticism of the fundamentalist Islamic belief. I believe postmodernist readings of these novels have a large potential for explaining their formal structure and semantic content. Perhaps in some ways inspired by the Latin-American boom of fiction, from García Márquez to Carlos Fuentes, these novels are part of a European, and perhaps predominantly South-European boom of historiographical novels.

Allow me to venture an even more audacious generalization. The sudden leap, especially in Portugal and Spain, from political oppression to finding a way towards democratic practices implies a search for new values, new ideals and new evaluations of history. This situation is an enormous challenge to writers in the Iberian peninsula, who make use of their traditional self-consciousness and formal competence to write the novels which we, living in the dark and dull North, love to read.

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