

How totalitarianism begins at home: SARAMAGO AND ORWELL

Dr Christopher Rollason - rollason@9online.fr

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I

José Saramago has been called 'the most impressive living novelist' by none other than Harold Bloom¹, but the anglophone literary universe has not been the non-English-speaking Saramago's first priority, and his and George Orwell's work might at first sight not appear an obvious case for comparison. Orwell is, nonetheless, one English-language writer whom Saramago does cite², and if a theme binds the two it is that of totalitarianism, perceived not as an alien threat 'out there' but as the product of an insidious mindset that can all too easily install itself in the here and now, in Orwell's Britain or Saramago's Portugal - in other words, 'at home'. This contention will be developed through the discussion of both writers' work, both in general and with more particular reference to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and to Saramago's linked novels *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira/Blindness* and *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez* (the latter untranslated at the time of writing). By 'totalitarianism' I mean an authoritarian social and political system that openly suppresses dissent and undisguisedly rules by control rather than consent - in Gramsci's terms, using as its preferred principal mode of control *dominio* (force imposed through repressive state apparatuses) rather than *egemonia* (hegemony instilled via ideological state apparatuses)³.

II

The writing trajectories of Orwell and Saramago exhibit considerable differences. Orwell, who died at 47, saw himself as a writer almost from day one ('From a very early age ... I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer'⁴); Saramago established himself as a journalist only in his forties and as a novelist only in his late fifties, receiving the Nobel, in 1998, at 75. Orwell, schooled at Eton College, came from a privileged background which he part-renegeed descending among tramps and miners; the autodidact Saramago, whose mother was illiterate and who owned no books till the age of 19, lifted himself up from obscure rural origins. Orwell, though always a writer of the Left, became a visceral opponent of Stalinism, while Saramago remains a member of his country's

¹ Bloom, 203 (my translation from Catalan). For Bloom on Saramago, see also Rollason (2002), *passim*.

² Cf. note 13 below.

³ These concepts are expounded by Gramsci in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, *passim*.

communist party to this day.⁵ However, similarities too impose themselves. Neither's production appears under his name given at birth: 'George Orwell' was the pseudonym of the man born Eric Blair, while José Meirinho Sousa became 'José Saramago' at seven thanks to a mistake, worthy of one of his own novels, at the registry office⁶. Certain threads bind the careers of both. One is empire: Orwell, born in British India, served in the Burmese Imperial Police, exposed the colonial mentality in his novel *Burmese Days* and campaigned for Indian independence; Saramago's career as journalist and writer only took off in the wake of Portugal's anti-fascist and anti-imperialist revolution of 1974 and the consequent abandonment of empire and colonial war. Another is Spain, in the life and writings of each: Orwell in the Spanish civil war and *Homage to Catalonia*; Saramago particularly in *A Jangada de Pedra/The Stone Raft* - which echoes Orwell's memoir in featuring drama at the Cerbère/Portbou frontier - and his later relocation to Lanzarote. In formal or generic terms, both Saramago's and Orwell's work combines the fictive with the analytic and the journalistic, tending to relativise any rigid dividing-line between fiction and non-fiction; while both may fairly be considered as being - consistently and committedly - among the most political writers of all time. The production of both includes reams of journalism as well as published books, with Orwell's columns in Tribune or The Observer balanced by Saramago's in, say, the Diário de Lisboa⁷. Orwell mixes narrative and political exegesis in the same book (*The Road to Wigan Pier*; in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the extract from Goldstein's book and the appendix on Newspeak⁸), while his Burmese set-pieces 'A Hanging' and 'Shooting An Elephant' could as well be called short stories as essays. Saramago, as he himself stressed to Umberto Eco in 2004, has deliberately given his novels such un-novelistic titles as 'manual, memorial, history, gospel and essay'⁹, and has on several occasions described his later novels as essays in fictional form¹⁰ - a designation which could apply equally well to *Animal Farm*. Thematically, both writers combine respect for both the common man

⁴ 'Why I Write' (1946), in *Orwell and Politics*, 457-464 (457).

⁵ Today's Saramago describes himself as a 'libertarian communist' - see Eco and Saramago, 49. The obviously controversial question of the totalitarian nature of Stalinism, or indeed of the Soviet Union, scarcely arises directly in Saramago's fiction.

⁶ Saramago was born in the village of Azinhaga, in the Ribatejo region (Santarém district). The registry office was in the town of Golegã. In 1929 it was discovered that an official at the registry office there had in error entered his surname not as Meirinho Sousa but as Saramago (wild radish), the family's nickname, and thenceforth he became José Saramago. The rural connotations of his acquired name offer a curious parallel with Orwell, the surname assumed by Eric Blair after a river in the agricultural county of Suffolk.

⁷ The *oeuvre* of both includes a travelogue set in the author's native country and distributed by a book club (*The Road to Wigan Pier*; *Viagem a Portugal/Journey to Portugal*).

⁸ Orwell resisted pressure to excise the Goldstein's book section from the US edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: see Taylor, 408.

⁹ Eco and Saramago, 48; my translation from the Italian. In Portuguese, 'manual, memorial, história, evangelho, ensaio'.

¹⁰ In a 2000 interview with Diario 16 (Spain), Saramago stated: 'In my novels there is a kind of reflective density which, in principle, is to be found in the essay ... apart from the story, there is a reflection going on about what's happening. So it can be said that I approximate my novel to the essay' ('en mis novelas hay una especie de densidad reflexiva que, en principio, se encuentra en el ensayo ... además del relato, se está reflexionando sobre lo que sucede. Por lo tanto, se puede decir que acerco mi novela al ensayo' (Saramago, 'En mi vida nunca he sucumbido', 38).

or woman and the engaged intellectual with the deepest dislike of the owners of land and capital; both are keen secularists with very little time for Christianity; and Orwell's hostility to the British Empire runs parallel to Saramago's latter-day crusade against empire in the shape of globalisation and the mass consumerism satirised in *A Caverna/The Cave*. In terms of reception, both writers' work has had brushes with censorship and official opprobrium. Saramago left Portugal for Spain in 1992, in the wake of the withdrawal from an EU prize nomination of his *O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo/The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* - an action by the right-wing Portuguese government then in power which, as late as 2005, he described as: 'that censorship which happened to me ... an act worthy of a fascist dictatorship'.¹¹ Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm* have frequently been blacklisted by US school boards¹²; and both are, by a sad twist of history, today banned by a totalitarian regime in, of all countries, Burma¹³. Above all, the work of both is imbued with a constant attitude of critical questioning, a refusal of cliché coupled with a deep awareness of its power, and a restlessly alert libertarian spirit.

It is indeed that shared libertarianism that makes the shadow of totalitarianism loom large in the both writers' work. It should not, then, appear surprising if the alert reader finds in *Cegueira* and *Lucidez* numerous echoes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Saramago himself wrote in 2000: 'Orwell's prophecies have been fulfilled. Privacy no longer exists. Spying has installed itself in social life'¹⁴. We shall discuss this theme, first in Orwell, and then, comparatively, in Saramago.

III

Orwell lived through Fascism and Stalinism, and, while he always considered himself a man of the Left, his first-hand experience of Stalinist methods in Republican Spain marked his politics for life: for ever after he was in the uncomfortable position of being an anti-Soviet socialist. The term 'totalitarianism', and the concept, recur repeatedly across Orwell's political essays. We may quote as representative examples, for the term, his statement of 1946: 'Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism'¹⁵; and, for the concept, a passage from 1939: 'If even a few hundred thousand

¹¹ *El País*, 12 November 2005 (my translation). Original: 'aquella censura que me ocurrió ... una cosa propia de una dictadura fascista'.

¹² See Karolides et al., 12-15, 118-123.

¹³ See Larkin, 9, 14. Larkin repeats a Burmese joke: 'Orwell wrote not just one novel about [Burma], but three: a trilogy composed of *Burmese Days*, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*' (3).

¹⁴ The original, in Spanish, reads: 'Las profecias de Orwell se han cumplido. La privacidad se acabó. El espionaje se ha instalado en la vida social.' (Saramago, "Hemos llegado al fin de una civilización", 44).

¹⁵ 'Why I Write', 461.

people can be got to grasp that it is useless to overthrow Tweedledum in order to set up Tweedledee, the talk of "democracy versus Fascism" ... may begin to mean something' (Tweedledum being Fascism and Tweedledee Stalinism)¹⁶. His two most famous books are universally seen as satires on totalitarianism. *Animal Farm*, surely one of the most systematic romans à clef ever written, is structured around a set of one-to-one correspondences with Russia, and cannot be read as anything but a thinly disguised critique of the Soviet Union. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, however, a much more complex case, and it is this novel, with its variegated, hybrid prediction of a totalitarian world, that appears as a significant locus for intertextual comparison with Saramago's two narratives. Indeed, the word 'totalitarian' appears twice in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, once as adjective and once as noun. In Goldstein's book, Ingsoc, the official ideology, is said to have been 'foreshadowed by the various systems, generally called totalitarian, which had appeared earlier in the century'. O'Brien, in the course of interrogating Winston, declares: 'Later, in the twentieth century, there were the totalitarians, as they were called. There were the German Nazis and the Russian Communists'¹⁷.

The view is often met that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has the USSR as its sole, or at least primary, target. Orwell's publisher Fred Warburg, on reading the typescript, saw it as a satire on the Soviet Union 'to the nth degree'¹⁸, while even in 2001, the British political commentator Timothy Garton Ash labelled it a 'defining Cold War text' that had somehow told the truth about 'Communist-ruled Europe' (rather more significantly, he implies, than about Fascism).¹⁹ Such positions do not stand up to examination. As Orwell's biographer D.J. Taylor more measuredly puts it, the novel is 'not exclusively anti-Communist but anti-totalitarian'²⁰. Orwell himself, finding the novel misunderstood when it appeared, wrote in 1949 that it was 'NOT intended as an attack on socialism ... but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have already been partly realised in Communism and Fascism', adding: 'I do not believe that the kind of society which I described necessarily will arrive, but I believe ... that something resembling it could arrive', and entering the highly important caveat that his story is located in Britain 'in order to emphasise that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, *if not fought against*, could triumph anywhere'²¹.

¹⁶ Review of N. De Basiy, *New English Weekly*, 12 January 1939; in *Orwell and Politics*, 57-60 (60).

¹⁷ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 213, 266.

¹⁸ Quoted in Taylor, 401.

¹⁹ Garton Ash, xiii, xi. It is well-enough known that Orwell's novel was used or exploited in schools, notably in Britain, as a (supposedly) anti-Soviet text in the Cold War period, although, as we have seen and paradoxically, some US school boards banned it.

²⁰ Taylor, 402.

²¹ 'Statement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*', *Socialist Call*, 22 July 1949; in *Orwell and Politics*, 499-501 (500).

Nineteen Eighty-Four is, anyway, more than a response to a political conjuncture: it is also a text within a long Western tradition of utopias and/or anti-utopias (the two are not always easy to distinguish) going back to Plato (*The Republic*)²² and Thomas More, who gave utopia its name. This tradition has been particularly fertile in anglophone literature. Among the numerous utopian/anti-utopian texts which may be compared with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as sources or parallels, we may, for present purposes, identify four - one British, two American and one Russian: from Britain, William Morris' naïve-rustic, anti-industrial utopia *News From Nowhere* (1890); from the US, Edward Bellamy's urban utopia *Looking Backward* (1888) and Jack London's anti-utopian vision of an America turned authoritarian, *The Iron Heel* (1908); and *We*, the anti-Bolshevik Yevgeny Zamyatin's dark tale (written in 1920) of a totalitarian world state. Orwell reviewed the two last-named²³, and Zamyatin's novel is generally considered a prototype for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*²⁴.

The allusions of Orwell's anti-utopia to the Soviet system are obvious - the one-party state, the cult of the leader, the secret police and censorship, the executions, the rationing and shortages - but the main elements also existed in Nazi Germany, specific parallels with which appear in the *Two Minutes Hate* (recalling Hitler's speeches or, indeed, Chaplin's parody in *The Great Dictator*), and in the reduction of the colonised peoples to slavery (this echoes a Nazi project mentioned by Orwell in his 1941 essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn')²⁵. Meanwhile and significantly, Orwell does not follow Zamyatin in reducing organised society to a single 'One State', but, more disturbingly, imagines a world divided into three rival superstates (Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia), all totalitarian, all professing the same ideology under different names, and all uncannily near-identical.

Orwell's comment that totalitarianism 'could triumph anywhere', the anglophone world included, is of particular importance for understanding his anti-utopia. It is especially significant in the light of the anglocentric views he expresses elsewhere. Orwell is noted for a handful of essays that are

²² Plato's *Republic* supplies Saramago's *A Caverna* with its title and concluding image.

²³ Orwell reviewed *The Iron Heel* (with other texts) in *Tribune* on 12 July 1940, and *We* in the same publication on 4 January 1946 (*Orwell and Politics*, 93-96, 411-415).

²⁴ As regards precursors, cf. also David Frier's forthcoming study of the relationship between *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* and HG Wells' story 'The Country of the Blind'.

²⁵ See *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'the inhabitants of these areas [around the Equator], reduced more or less openly to the status of slaves' (196). Cf. 'The Lion and the Unicorn' (1941), in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*, 138-188: 'the coloured peoples, the "semi-apes" as Hitler calls them, who are to be reduced quite openly to slavery' (162).

repeatedly cited to bolster a notion of 'essential Englishness'²⁶ (as indeed Saramago's *A Jangada de Pedra* has been read as an 'iberocentric' text), and is as liable as most to reinforce the usual crude and ahistorical distinction between the British and all other Europeans - the latter being dismissed as identikit 'continentals' whose multiple differences all pale into comparison beside the original sin of not being native speakers of English. In a 1944 article, Orwell called a diverse group of writers 'all alike in being continental Europeans'²⁷, and a year later he labelled Joseph Conrad as 'not an Englishman but a European'²⁸. For Orwell, then, Britons are not from Europe, and all 'Europeans' are alike; and indeed, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, mainland Europe, including 'the areas that used once to be known as France and Germany',²⁹ has been absorbed into the homogeneous, Russian-dominated mass of Eurasia. It is true that in some places Orwell does criticise anglophone xenophobia, as in his essay on Dickens: 'All peoples who have reached the point of becoming nations tend to despise foreigners, but there is not much doubt that the English-speaking races are the worst offenders'.³⁰ Nonetheless, it is clear that, in general terms, for Orwell his co-nationals are not Europeans and Britain shares a common identity with the US: indeed, in a 1945 dispatch from post-war Germany he even speaks of an occupying entity called 'Anglo-America'³¹.

Despite such ideological positions, examination of the text of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* makes it clear that Orwell's totalitarian universe is in reality as much British, or Anglo-American, as it is anything else. The novel is located in a Britain renamed 'Airstrip Three', still recognisable and no carbon copy of Russia, and certain visibly 'British' elements in its genesis have long been recognised. The protagonist's very name, Winston Smith, ironically recalls Winston Churchill. D.J. Taylor writes: 'The Ministry of Truth ... in which Winston labours at his falsification of the past ... can be identified with the University of London Senate House, where the Ministry of Information had been based during the war. Its interior ... reproduces the BBC studios at 200 Oxford Street'³². Oceania's mindless popular press - 'rubbishy newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime and astrology'³³ - bears an obvious and disturbing resemblance, descriptive or prophetic, to the tabloid

²⁶ The Conservative Prime Minister, John Major, in a speech of 23 April 1993, famously evoked Englishness by quoting (in fact slightly misquoting) Orwell's image of 'old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning', from 'The Lion and the Unicorn' (139). Cf. Hitchens, 117-118.

²⁷ 'Arthur Koestler' (1944), in *Penguin Essays*, 268-278 (269).

²⁸ 'Man from the Sea' (review of two books by Conrad, *The Observer*, 24 June 1945), in *The Observer Years*, 164-166 (165).

²⁹ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 204.

³⁰ 'Charles Dickens' (1939), in *Penguin Essays*, 35-78 (51).

³¹ 'The Germans Still Doubt Our Unity', *The Observer*, 29 April 1945, in *The Observer Years*, 47-49 (49).

³² Taylor, 388.

³³ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 45-46. Cf. *Coming Up For Air* (1939): 'His [the narrator's father's] favourite paper was the *People* - Mother preferred the *News of the World*, which she considered had more murders in it' (46). Both publications existed and still exist.

press that remains one of Britain's great curses (and is today to a large extent controlled from the US). More than arguably British too, albeit taken to satiric extremes, are Airstrip Three's isolationist mindset and rampant xenophobia: 'Foreigners, whether from Eurasia or from Eastasia, were a kind of strange animal. One literally never saw them except in the guise of prisoners'³⁴. Indeed, there is a curious convergence with *News From Nowhere*, where an agrarian, de-technologised Britain is all but cut off from 'foreign parts' and Morris' time-traveller can get away with passing for someone 'from over the water'³⁵. In Oceania, ordinary citizens are even 'forbidden the knowledge of foreign languages'³⁶, and the familiar anglophone prejudice against other languages swells to nightmare proportions.

The Britain of Orwell's novel is, however, still globalised in a way that Morris' small-is-beautiful, island-race utopia is not. I here stress a point that for some reason tends not to be made: Airstrip Three is Britain become part of the empire of the United States. The text makes this clear: Oceania is the product of 'the absorption of ... the British Empire by the United States'³⁷, as is anyway implied in the references from the beginning to paying in dollars and cents. Oceania includes Britain, Ireland, the US, Canada, the other Anglophone settler territories, and a colonised Latin America, and in today's geopolitical language looks rather like a NAFTA expanded into the putative Free Trade Area of the Americas and then beyond. If the US has 'absorbed' the British Empire, then the real power lies across the Atlantic, and Oceania's 'titular head'³⁸ Big Brother can only be the President of the United States. Orwell's readers have tended to be surprisingly unaware of this dimension of the book (Christopher Hitchens, in his generally admirable study of 2002 *Why Orwell Matters*, manages to devote a whole chapter to 'Orwell and America' without mentioning *Nineteen Eighty-Four*)³⁹. Nonetheless, even if Oceania nominally has 'no capital'⁴⁰, Airstrip Three is a subordinate power-centre, only the 'third most populous of the provinces of Oceania';⁴¹ if it is administered by locals ('the administrators of an area are always drawn from the inhabitants of that area'⁴²), those apparatchiks take their orders from elsewhere. Additionally, antecedents from American literature are relevant to Orwell's vision. The morphing of the US President into Big Brother is a terrifying transformation of the benevolent dictatorship of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*

³⁴ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 122.

³⁵ See Morris, *News From Nowhere*, 74, 174.

³⁶ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 204.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 193.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 217.

³⁹ Thomas Pynchon, himself the author of the famously paranoid anti-utopia *The Crying of Lot 49*, does note, in his 2003 foreword to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'This grouping of Britain and the United States into a single bloc, as prophecy, has turned out to be dead-on, foreseeing Britain's resistance to integration with the Eurasian landmass'³⁹.

⁴⁰ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 217.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 5 (one might speculate that the second is Mexico).

(in that novel, the US economy has become one huge holding company, with the 'President of the United States [assuming] the headship of the industrial army')⁴³. Equally, Orwell's totalitarian Britain is an outpost of a authoritarian America comparable to that evoked by Jack London in *The Iron Heel*. O'Brien's famous metaphor of the future: 'Imagine a boot stamping on a human face - for ever'⁴⁴, suggests the title of London's novel, in which a tyrannical 'Oligarchy', part-forerunner of Orwell's 'Party', imposes a regime called the 'Iron Heel', under which the great mass of the people are reduced to 'machine-serfs and labour-serfs'⁴⁵, illiterate and stripped of all rights - only Orwell's boot is far worse than London's heel, since the latter does not outlast 'three centuries'⁴⁶. We may conclude that for Orwell the 'English-speaking races', even if different from other ethnic groups, are indeed 'not innately better than anyone else'⁴⁷.

Oceania is an empire built on an older one, namely the British Empire. Orwell was born in Motihari, India (today in West Bengal state), where his father was an administrator for the Raj, and his mother's family had a long-standing commercial connection with Burma. That family link induced him to sit the exams for the Burmese Imperial Police, in which force he served between 1922 and 1927, at a time when Burma, its annexation consummated in 1887, was ruled as part of India, a country it has little in common with culturally. Those years turned Orwell permanently against empire and gradually converted him to Indian independence. He later wrote: 'By the end of that time I hated the imperialism I was serving', one of his main complaints being, significantly, the intimate link between empire and censorship: in an environment where 'there is no freedom of speech', 'merely to be overheard making a seditious remark' can wreck a career⁴⁸. *Burmese Days* dramatises the contradictory position of Flory, a Briton in Burma, who, rejecting empire yet unable or unwilling to act against it, ends up shooting himself. The atmosphere in the novel's small-town British community is palpably totalitarian. Flory's Burmese manservant actively disapproves of his master staying at home evenings reading rather than socialising at the Club ('He hated to see his master behaving differently from other white men'); British Burma is 'a world where every word and every thought is censored ... you are not free to think for yourself'⁴⁹. The parallels with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are evident, not only in the all-pervasive censorship but in the disturbing likeness between the Club and the later novel's Community Centre, which Party members are

⁴² *ibid.*, 217.

⁴³ Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 143.

⁴⁴ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 280.

⁴⁵ London, *The Iron Heel*, 168.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁷ Cf. note 20 above.

⁴⁸ *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 134, 135, 137.

⁴⁹ *Burmese Days*, 60, 69.

expected to frequent every evening (Winston's neighbour 'would inform you with quiet pride ... that he had put in an appearance at the Community Centre every evening for the past four years')⁵⁰. The soul-killing conformism of Oceania thus has its antecedents in Britain's empire, as Orwell's critics have noted: Hitchens sees the stifling environment of *Burmese Days* as 'a strong prefiguration' of Winston's world⁵¹, while Emma Larkin reads Flory's perceptions of the 'constraints of colonial society' as anticipating Winston's 'musings on Oceania', arguing that Orwell's 'work as an imperial policeman ... greatly contributed to his ability to write about oppression'⁵².

If the white man's burden was in Orwell's day domesticated to become part of the British psyche, then the roots of totalitarianism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are not solely foreign but home-grown too. Within the novel's British and anglophone context, two elements may be identified that further point to the totalitarian as a spontaneous growth: the deformation of language, and the destruction of the collective memory. The long-term linguistic strategy of Oceania's rulers is to replace Standard English, at all levels, by the horrendous invention called 'Newspeak', characterised by the systematic, ever-greater reduction of the lexicon and intended to destroy independent thought by eliminating the signifiers that would permit the articulation of non-approved signifieds. As things stand, Newspeak is largely confined to Oceania's government and press discourse: 'English is its chief lingua franca' - have French, Portuguese and Spanish been abolished in the Americas? - 'and Newspeak its official language'⁵³. However, the long-term objective is Newspeak everywhere, and the recycled Winston ends up working on the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary. The whole thought-reduction phenomenon, which in some ways anticipates the lexical side of the 'political correctness' movement that emerged in late-twentieth-century North America, is described in the appendix on 'The Principles of Newspeak': 'Newspeak, indeed, differed from almost all other languages in that its vocabulary grew smaller instead of larger every year. Each reduction was a gain, since the smaller the area of choice, the smaller the temptation to take thought. Ultimately it was hoped to make articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all.'⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 24.

⁵¹ Hitchens, 17.

⁵² Larkin, 216, 107.

⁵³ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 217. Cf. Orwell's remarks on the English of his times in the essay 'Politics and the English Language', where he sees careless or misleading use of English as a form of degradation of democratic discourse (*Horizon*, April 1946; in *Orwell and Politics*, 397-411).

⁵⁴ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 322.

The totalitarian amputation of language has the further goal of abolishing history: 'When Oldspeak had been once and for all superseded, the last link with the past would have been severed'⁵⁵. This destruction of the collective memory is already highly advanced in the year 1984. Winston pays the terrible price of discovering that no real opposition to the Party exists. Under Jack London's (crushing but non-eternal) Iron Heel, tyranny is permanently subverted by a dogged underground resistance; Oceania, however, is closer to Zamyatin's One State, where a mass lobotomy, 'the Grand Operation',⁵⁶ plays a role similar to that of Newspeak (though neurological rather than linguistic), destroying thought to the point of total elimination of opposition. The disappearance of all folk or alternative memory is rudely brought home in the disturbing episode in which Winston questions an old working man in a bar about life in pre-Oceania Britain, only to unearth a jumble of random fragments of memory that are quite valueless: 'The old man's memory was nothing but a rubbish-heap of details. One could question him all day without getting any real information ... the few scattered survivors from the ancient world were incapable of comparing one age with another. They remembered a million useless things ... but all the relevant facts were outside the range of their vision'⁵⁷. The masters of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have destroyed the capacity to organise ideas, memories - and, crucially, people - in any form whatever that is not orthodox.

IV

If *1984* constructs an allegory not of any single historical instance of totalitarian rule, but of the potential descent of any contemporary society into totalitarianism, then a similar reading of *Blindness* (*Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, 1995) is made by Harold Bloom, who interprets it as a 'parable of the perpetual possibility of the return of fascism, or its advent'⁵⁸. Yet while for both Saramago and Orwell, totalitarianism is always close at hand, to say that totalitarianism begins at home in this text and its sequel *Essay* – that on *Lucidity* (*Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, 2004) requires us to determine where, if anywhere, 'home' might be⁵⁹.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 324.

⁵⁶ See Zamyatin, 172-174.

⁵⁷ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 95, 96. This is certainly far removed from the notion of the creative reassemblage of meaning from fragments espoused in *The Arcades Project* by Walter Benjamin - a writer whose fate at Portbou in Catalonia was, alas, far different from Orwell's.

⁵⁸ Bloom, 205 (my translation from Catalan).

⁵⁹ Since the English translation of *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* is simply *Blindness*, the parallel will not be obvious from the translated titles, irrespective of what name *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez* acquires in English. In French, similarly, *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* is simply *L'Aveuglement*, and in Italian *Cecità*, while in German it is *Die Stadt der Blinden* (*The City of the Blind*). By contrast, the Spanish title - *Ensayo sobre la ceguera* - replicates the original. The two languages in which *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez* had appeared in translation at the time of writing, Spanish and Italian, render it as *Ensayo sobre la lucidez* and *Saggio sulla Lucidità*: only in Spanish so far has the counterpoint between the two 'essays' been preserved.

One of the notable features of Saramago's more recent novels is the near-total disappearance of the intense 'portugalidade' of the books that made his name. The earlier Saramago in some respects paralleled Orwell's Anglocentric side in implicitly stressing Portugal's cultural specificity - or, in *A Jangada da Pedra*, dramatising the notion of Iberian 'difference' from the rest of Europe. It could be argued that this cultural specificity embraces particular historical practices of totalitarianism, or at least its authoritarian antecedents, as represented in *Baltasar and Blimunda* (*Memorial do Convento*, 1982) and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (*O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*, 1984). As in Orwell's novel, the absolute monarchy of King João V (1706-1750) and Salazar's dictatorial *Estado Novo* in the mid-1930s are both regimes whose demand for obedience and uniformity of thought, behaviour and identity goes hand in hand with the scapegoating and persecution of minorities, with imperialist exploitation, with repressive state apparatuses, censorship, and surveillance. The cult of the dictatorial leader depicted in these novels is later echoed by the hyper-patriarchal harshness of the Judeo-Christian God in the stylised Palestine of *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* (*O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo*, 1991) - for Bloom, 'the most disagreeable person in all Saramago'⁶⁰. However, what is distinctive about the oppressive environment of the five novels from 1995 on is the depersonalised, featureless urban space which their characters inhabit. All are set in and around the same nameless capital of a nameless country. While this capital city bears a vague generic resemblance to Lisbon, it is stripped of distinguishing features and, to a large extent, of history, thanks, one might conjecture, to the undermining of cultural particularity by the homogenising pressure of globalisation.

Saramago has, in the press interviews of this period, repeatedly denounced the free-market ideology, seeing his fiction as both reflecting and combating the dehumanisation for which he holds that ideology responsible. It is clear that today's Saramago, both as novelist and as public figure, sees corporate globalisation as a covert form of totalitarianism wherein human beings become a disposable resource. As the author asserted at his presentation of *A Caverna* in Lima in 1999, 'This is what's happening to people: no-one cares about a life lost inside a globalised world'⁶¹. In an interview, also in Lima (with *El Comercio*), that postdates *Lucidez* but remains fully congruent with that book's concerns, he stated:

We cannot speak of democracy when all we can do is get rid of one government and install another (...) It is not the governments who decide, but the powers that sit far higher above,

⁶⁰ Bloom, 204-205 (my translation from Catalan).

⁶¹ *El Comercio*, 19 December 2000 (my translation). Original: 'Eso está pasando con los seres humanos; a nadie le importa la pérdida de una vida dentro de un mundo globalizado'.

who sometimes find a dictatorship is in their interests and when it's no longer useful to them turn into democracy's keenest defenders. We can get paradoxes such as the fact that bodies like the WTO and the IMF which are not democratically elected are actually those who control democracy. (...) Governments only execute. We've had this shift from the ideal of full employment to job insecurity and junk contracts (or, euphemistically, 'social mobility'), without realising what was going on: all of society has been anaesthetised. Was this some stupid government's idea? No, it was the idea of the economic powers⁶².

In declarations like this, Saramago makes it clear that in today's circumstances he believes democracy is little more than a sham: the notion of an anaesthetised population may suggest Gramsci's *egemonia*, but the perception of dictatorship as a permanent option belongs far more in the realm of naked *dominio*. His position on globalisation recalls that of the US political scientist Benjamin R. Barber, whose *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995) is one of the less upbeat treatments of the subject. Barber expresses the fear that humanity may end up 'reduced to a choice between the market's universal clutch and a retribalising politics of particularist identities', in a world where 'everyone is a consumer; ... everyone belongs to some tribe. But no-one is a citizen'⁶³. His recent critics, too, have echoed him: Maria Helena Silva, writing on *O Homem Duplicado* [*The Double*], sees in Saramago's non-communicative universe a political and moral sounding of alarm-bells, 'a warning intended to be read as an urgent call for an effective humanism'⁶⁴.

Both *Cegueira* and *Lucidez* articulate the fear of dehumanisation in particularly stark form, as two texts umbilically linked by their topographical setting and with the second reactivating characters from the first. The text of *Lucidez* is sprinkled with backward references to *Cegueira*; the events of *Cegueira* are repeatedly stated in *Lucidez* to have occurred 'há quatro anos' ('four years ago'), a formulation which might seem puzzling were it not translatable into 'four novels ago', and thus into a metatextual reference to Saramago's production as writer. Saramago has said that all his books are in a sense chapters of one single book⁶⁵, and this is borne out by a high incidence of intertextual

⁶² *El Comercio*, 13 November 2005 (my translation). Original: 'No podemos hablar de democracia cuando no podemos hacer más que quitar un gobierno y poner otro (...) No son los gobiernos los que deciden sino los poderes que están mucho más arriba a los que de vez en cuando les conviene una dictadura y cuando esta ya no les sirve se convierten en los más entusiastas defensores de la democracia. Pueden ocurrir paradojas como que organismos no elegidos democráticamente como la Organización Mundial del Comercio o el Fondo Monetario Internacional son los que dirigen la democracia. (...) Hemos pasado del ideal del pleno empleo al empleo precario, al contrato basura también llamado eupemísticamente "movilidad social" sin que nos diéramos cuenta, ha sido una operación de anestesia de toda la sociedad. ¿Ha sido idea de algún gobierno tonto? No, ha sido idea de los poderes económicos.'

⁶³ Barber, 7, 8.

⁶⁴ Silva, 51 (my translation). Original: 'uma advertência destinada a ser lida como a necessidade urgente de um efectivo humanismo'.

⁶⁵ See Rollason (1999), 3.

reference within his novelistic *oeuvre* (although never before had he gone so far as to write a sequel)⁶⁶. The text of *Lucidez* harks back, too, to other Saramago novels, and, as we shall see, the end recalls the stark conclusion of Kafka's *Der Prozess/The Trial*⁶⁷.

V

In a text written about Chiapas (Mexico) in 1998, Saramago evoked a nightmare vision of contemporary humanity:

Every day, when we wake up, we may ask ourselves what new horror is awaiting us, not from the world, which, poor thing, is only a patient victim, but from those who resemble us, human beings (...) The human being, the one who resembles me, the one who resembles us, has patented cruelty as a formula for exclusive use on the Planet, and starting out from the perversion of cruelty has organised a philosophy, a thought-system, an ideology, all in all a system of domination and control which has brought the world to the sick condition it now finds itself in⁶⁸.

In context, he was speaking of the need to shake off such visions and solidarise with liberation movements. Nonetheless, the harshness of this vision - again, it is Gramsci's *dominio* that threatens to prevail - suggests a Saramago for whom the authoritarian and the repressive are today's

⁶⁶ *A Jangada de Pedra* has allusions to *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*, while *História do Cerco de Lisboa* recalls moments from both that novel and *Memorial do Convento*. The shopping-centre spectacles in *A Caverna* include a convent of Mafra (from *Memorial*) and a stone raft, while *O Homem Duplicado* revisits characters from four earlier Saramago novels on its second page.

⁶⁷ The commissioner of police imagines himself swearing on 'os evangelhos' ('the gospels'), while elsewhere the narrator recalls 'aquele pastor de ovelhas que disse ... , Não há maior respeito que chorar por alguém a quem não se conheceu' ('that shepherd who said ... , There is no greater respect than to weep for someone one didn't know'), harking back to *Todos os Nomes/All the Names* and its shepherd and unknown woman (*Lucidez*, 275, 139; translation mine; *Todos os Nomes*, 240). To this internal intertextuality, Saramago habitually adds an external intertextuality, both explicit and implicit. The presence in his work of Camões, Pessoa and Borges is eminently visible; in addition, *Memorial do Convento*, with its one-handed hero and pharaonic construction project, recalls *El reino de este mundo/The Kingdom of this World*, Alejo Carpentier's magic-realist epic of Haiti. Carpentier is also quoted in the epigraph to *A Jangada de Pedra*. Meanwhile *O Homem Duplicado* echoes earlier treatments of the *Doppelgänger* theme such as Dostoyevsky's *The Double* or Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' (the protagonist's bizarre name, Tertuliano, even occurs, as Tertullian, in Poe's story). Similarly, external intertextualities rise up from the dense pages of *Lucidez*. The opening, with its drenching deluge, recalls the Lisbon rain of Pessoa's *Livro do Desassossego/The Book of Disquiet* (the word 'desassossego' appears on p.12; here the rain also recalls that of Saramago's own *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*. For Saramago, Kafka, Borges and Pessoa are the three writers who embody the spirit of the twentieth century; see Rollason (1999), 3.

⁶⁸ Saramago, 'Chiapas' (Internet reference; my translation). Original: 'Cada mañana, cuando nos despertamos, podemos preguntarnos qué nuevo horror nos habrá deparado, no el mundo, que ése, pobre de él, es sólo víctima paciente, sino nuestros semejantes, los hombres. El hombre, mi semejante, nuestro semejante, patentó la crueldad como fórmula de uso exclusivo en el Planeta y desde la perversión de la crueldad ha organizado una. filosofía, un pensamiento, una ideología,

globalised society's default mode. Certainly, this terrifying novel has elements that harshly recall *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Located throughout in the capital of what we might call Saramagoland, it narrates the gradual breakdown of organised society under an unstoppable, contagious epidemic of 'cegueira branca' ('white blindness'), until the moment when the contagion is suddenly reversed, as inexplicably as it began. As the epidemic spreads, men and women are, even lexically, dehumanised, reduced to the condition of mere, undifferentiated 'cegos' ('the blind'). The one person to stay seeing through it all is the non-working spouse of an ophthalmologist, called throughout 'a mulher do médico' ('the doctor's wife'). The white blindness may be read as a metaphor less for totalitarianism than for the mindset that underlies it - that passive acceptance of authoritarian values by the mass of people that makes totalitarianism possible. Thus, those who go blind in Saramago's narrative were, figuratively, already blind all the time - or, at best, living in a society where the blind lead the blind. This is brought home in the episodes that chart the government's reaction. The ophthalmologist, one of the earliest victims, telephones the Ministry of Health; that night, an ambulance whisks him away, not, as he thought, to hospital, but to be quarantined in what soon becomes a fully-fledged internment camp, an ex-mental asylum given over to the confinement of ever-greater numbers of the blind. Saramago's Ministry of Health seems, indeed, little better than Orwell's Ministry of Love: the state's response is hyper-authoritarian from the outset. The camp is governed by a set of draconian rules: anyone trying to escape will be shot on sight; the lights are always on, as, again, in *Nineteen-Eighty Four's* Miniluv, 'the place where there is no darkness'⁶⁹. These rules' total arbitrariness marks them as the product of a regime that was already totalitarian, or geared up to become so at the slightest hint of an emergency. The authorities deploy a bombastic, cliché-laden rhetoric: 'O Governo está perfeitamente consciente das suas responsabilidades e espera que aqueles a quem esta mensagem se dirige assumam também, como cumpridores cidadãos que devem de ser, as responsabilidades que lhes competem' [The Government is fully aware of its responsibilities and hopes that those to whom this message is directed will, as the upright citizens they doubtless are, also assume their responsibilities]⁷⁰.

In this first part of the dyad, however, dehumanisation does not triumph altogether. Around the sole-seeing woman there forms a heterogeneous group numbering seven who, reinforced by a faithful (and seeing) dog, embody the survival of collective values and human solidarity, developing a tenacious coherence in the face of adversity. The nightmare of *Cegueira* thus appears

en definitiva, un sistema de dominio y de control que ha abocado al mundo a esta situación enferma en que hoy se encuentra.'

⁶⁹ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 185.

⁷⁰ *Cegueira*, 50, *Blindness*, 41.

to generate hope as that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does not, and in this novel Saramago seems closer to Jack London than to Orwell: blindness, like the Iron Heel, can be fought. The organising and interpreting - indeed, seeing - role of the doctor's wife is especially significant, incarnating what Conceição Madruga, writing in 1998, termed the 'resgate da mulher' ('redemption of woman')⁷¹ as a theme of Saramago's work, but also visibly paralleling Winston Smith in his first, not-yet-broken phase.

VI

The world of *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, however, is another matter altogether: same city, same government, several of the same characters, but a far darker dénouement. Saramago has in interviews⁷² presented this novel as if it were a political manifesto actually designed at encouraging voter abstention, but the critic is best advised to take it as not a tract but a work of fiction - this especially, given the intertextual link with *Cegueira*. This time round, the existing order is perturbed not by the blankness of blindness but by another kind of blankness: in a pun difficult to reproduce in English, the 'cegueira branca' is replaced by 'o voto em branco' (blank-paper voting), as practised by 83% of the capital's voters in an apparently routine municipal election. As in *Cegueira*, the government's response to the anomaly is, immediately, arch-authoritarian: state of siege, censorship, espionage, arbitrary arrest and indefinite detention, bombs planted by government agents. The censorship recalls both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Saramago's own vicissitudes as a journalist under the Caetano regime⁷³. The regime dresses up its repressive policies in a political rhetoric continuing that of the earlier novel, embodied in a sequence of eminently vacuous clichés, as thus: 'não tendo os cidadãos deste país o saudável costume de exigir o regular cumprimento dos direitos que a constituição lhes outorgava, era lógico, era mesmo natural que não tivessem chegado a dar-se conta de que lhes haviam suspendido' ('since this country's citizens lack the desirable habit of asking for the proper exercise of the rights granted them by the constitution, it was logical, indeed natural that they should not notice their suspension')⁷⁴. Here as in Orwell, if by different means - instead of a reduced lexicon, words are emptied of sense by their reduction to cliché - the deformation of language promotes the totalitarian.

⁷¹ Madruga, 141.

⁷² For instance, Begoña Pérez quotes Saramago as declaring that his fictional scenario 'no se encuentra muy lejos de la realidad' ('is not far removed from reality' - 48).

⁷³ As chronicled in the pieces from 1972-1973 collected in *As opiniões que o DL teve* [*Opinions of the Diário de Lisboa*]. Note also the allusion in *Lucidez* to Franz Kafka, insurance agent, in the police spies' use as a front of a plethorically named 'empresa de seguros & resseguros' ('insurance & reinsurance company').

Even worse, and again in a strategy bearing comparison with Orwell, in *Lucidez* Saramago conceives totalitarianism as obliterating the collective memory. In Orwell, what has been crushed is the remembrance of a different world; now, Saramago tears up with his own novelist's hands the counter-tradition he had created, the fabric of group resistance laboriously woven in *Cegueira*. The government concludes that the voter protest was orchestrated by the doctor's wife from the earlier novel. She is hunted down following an act of betrayal by another member of the *Cegueira* group, the 'primeiro cego' (first man to go blind), who had, besides, already started unravelling the old solidarity by divorcing his wife. For the second time, 'they' come to take the long-suffering ophthalmologist away, to an unknown whereabouts with no prospect of release. Whether the opposition movement of which his spouse is the alleged ringleader ever existed is, as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, left unclear: at all events, if in Oceania Winston was 'the last man'⁷⁵, in Saramago's city she becomes the last woman or last lucid human being - until, like Winston's, her resistance is sapped and her spirit broken by her ruthless adversaries. On the final page, in surely Saramago's starkest finale yet, the woman who in *Cegueira* had redeemed an entire city is savagely shot in the back by a man in a blue polka-dot tie, who, once she, the last woman, 'jaz morta no chão' ('lies dead on the ground'⁷⁶), then cynically shoots her dog, the redemptive creature from *Cegueira*. *Lucidez* thus disturbingly culminates in a shoot-out that combines the darkest elements of the endings, not only of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Winston, converted to loving Big Brother, knows even so that one day he will be shot)⁷⁷, but also of Kafka's *The Trial*, where on the final page Josef K., knifed by government assassins, perishes 'like a dog'⁷⁸. As dog, narrative and lucidity expire, the words: 'Ouviste alguma coisa' ('Did you hear anything') emerge from the larynx of 'um cego' (a blind man'), and a blind listener replies: 'Três tiros' ('Three shots')⁷⁹. The reader hears Saramago twisting in the knife, as if to resurrect the nightmare of his city of the unseeing. Such is the grimness of the anti-utopian vision here that - taking *Cegueira* and *Lucidez* as a single text - the character once embraced as a saviour is now betrayed and eliminated. As Winston, the last man, finally surrendered his critical sense, so now the risk exists that, with the disappearance of the last lucid woman, totalitarianism may yet install itself in the hearts and minds of a whole dehumanised population, and thus truly begin - and never end - at home. Against so fearsome a prospect, what stands most firm is the critical vision irrevocably embodied in the work of art, in Orwell's and

⁷⁴ *Lucidez*, 61.

⁷⁵ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 283.

⁷⁶ *Lucidez*, 329.

⁷⁷ 'In the end we shall shoot you' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 287).

⁷⁸ Kafka, *The Trial*, 292.

⁷⁹ *Lucidez*, 329.

Saramago's novels as aesthetic productions⁸⁰. The lesson of both can only be that the price of liberty - political, intellectual, creative - is, always and necessarily, eternal and unremitting vigilance.

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⁸⁰ Some of Saramago's readers might wish not only to compare *Lucidez*, with its dismantling of democratic processes and civil liberties, justified invoking an enemy within, with *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* abolition of democracy and cultivation of hatred of external and internal enemies, but also to juxtapose both fictional worlds with the real-world restrictions on civil liberties imposed in the US in the wake of 9-11, in the face of a perceived external threat.

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