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The Fundamental Re-writing: Religious Texts and
 Contemporary Narrative. Gore Vidal's *Live from
 Golgotha*, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*,
 José Saramago's *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo*
 Horácio Costa

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Fiat Lux, let there be meaning let there be light, said the Voice in the mythical beginning, or else so it sounded, and the interpreters hurried to write it down, and most of us believed them all along. Grossly, such axiom seems nowadays to have substituted the older and more respectful lines, minutely memorized by generations, which started, as we all duly remember, «In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.» Yes, the differences are not subtle between both utterances. The cautious spirit of religious faith sheds light in the latter as the caustic spirit of the Enlightenment sheds its shadows on the former—or should it be more properly stated the other way around, «shadows» being associated rather to the hemisphere of religious affairs and «light» to the one of reason? Of course, it depends on the point of view one is holding. *Fiat Lux*—what had given the basis of the poetics of the Genesis, interpreted for generations on a row in its literal sense—the Jewish-Christian God taking upon himself the spreading of light in the ether—has become the basis of the ethics of freethinking, i.e., the literal basis of *our* poetics—there must be no black holes for our exercise of thought, no mythical, frozen beginnings we couldn't possibly turn into fiction, if we so desire. From Voltaire to the post-modern writers, the unveiling of the light of reason, taken as the twilight of religion, has been a powerful constant in the shaping of modern sensibility.

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Or maybe it all started not in the enlightened courts of Europe but almost two centuries earlier, in religious-ridden Spain and in the very cradle of the modern novel, with Cervantes: let's just recall that Don Quixote tells his shield-bearer, in a particularly meaningful passage of that archi-novel, «Sancho, topamos con la Iglesia» («Sancho, we've stumbled upon the Church.») From this moment onwards, the erring knight and his squire will have to retrace back to the wilderness of La Mancha, giving up their intentions of «conquering» the Spanish urban centers, where Catholic orthodoxy had in these times absolute hold of bodies and souls. Sagely, if humorously, Cervantes plays with the fumes of the Inquisition, preventing his characters adventures from the sphere of the institution that, as it has been pointed out numberless times, represents the most evident link of the modern world with Antiquity, the Roman Church. By doing so, the novelist claims for the dreamy, limitless human spirit embodied in frail Don Quixote, the freedom of enforcing his imagination outside the borders carefully settled by the narrations canonized by the Church. Four centuries after Cervantes' insight, it would have seemed that the process of laicisation of Western societies was complete: the Reformation first, and after the Age of Reason which culminated, for what matters to us here, in the Treaty of Lateran, all would lead to the suggestion that the powers of the Vatican had been enclosed within the forbidding walls of that mini-state.

But, alas, the Christian faith is much bigger than the size of the Vatican, and the power of the narrations that give the impalpable, textual foundations to religious buildings is even bigger, in the moment we are living, than the undeniably powerful Christian faith itself. At least, that can be taken as a contemporary assumption, at least in the realm of literature, if the authors we will study here are to be believed—with the obvious exception of Salman Rushdie, who's well aware in his hideaway how constraining some branches of *his* religion can be, and for that very reason would understandably feel reluctant in subscribing such a bold, but possibly not exaggerated assumption.

Be as it is, Rushdie's hiding and the long road that unites Cervantes' novel to the ones of Gore Vidal and José Saramago, among the many that have persistently dealt with religious narrations from the side of fiction, show us that the tumultuous relation of the authority, if not the authoritarianism of the divinely inspired utterances with the endearments of free literary authorship—or, better saying, with literary authorship *tout-court*—are not to be taken any less than seriously. Since religious institutions have represented all along history an authority principle far better defined than no other ever materialized by any state or régime, it is relatively easy to admit that when intertextually dealing with their foundational texts—directly, be it with the Gospels or the Koran, or indirectly, with apocryphal or institutionally suppressed versions of the main religious texts—the novelist rises to the utmost level of confronting,

from his or her individual writing, the absolute power, the Word by an-tonomasia, the quintessential Canon ever to have been built up in a due civilizational frame. Be the writer an atheist or a believer, the father figure of God rests in the corner of his or her desktop every time he or she decides to meddle in His lofty, awesome terrains.

The magnificent religious narrations, foundational, abiding and thunderous, keep coming over and over to the forefront of our changing civilizational conscience with an insistence that reveals not only their vitality, their unfading importance for anything concerning that which once was called our *Weltanschauung*, but also their apparently endless literary economy. What do these religious narrations mean to the laicised mind with which the modern man is best associated? Putting their halo aside, can they be treated as stories, as simple literary subjects, and still not appear trivialized, or else, if trivialization or even aggression becomes a literary *parti-pris*, is there any ethical border that should be obeyed when approaching them? If the answer is positive, could this ever be accomplished without betraying the ethics of the novel as a literary genre whose proclivities lay in the side of speculation and desire and not in the one of conformity and iteration?

Moreover, inside a civilizational frame, could the religious narrations, which represent a strong tool for defining it in its imaginary core, in its metahistorical nucleus, be dealt with not only from a respectful or disrespectful distance, but from *any* form of critical distance at all? Is there any position *vis-à-vis* these narrations, including their bold negation, that have not been neutralized by them—as in the case of the moral mechanics of blasphemy, apostasy and sin, that they tend to consider as inverted signs of confirmation of their truth-bearing qualities? Pondering all that, how can a writer place him or herself about them, and which literary strategies would best suit his or her endeavors, to carve something critical in any literary text with those narrations as a basis?

In the three novels focused in the present essay, parody has been the literary mechanism *par excellence* to enhance this uneven man-God dialogue, this individual-institutional interchange. On the one hand, this refers to parodying as a major cultural trait not only of the novel as an ingrained parodical genre, as Bakhtin studied (1978; 1984), but, on the other hand, as a central discursive *modus* of our times, as envisaged by Linda Hutcheon (1985). In this sense, it comes as no surprise that Vidal's and Saramago's books carry the word «gospel» in their titles, or even claim, with a clear parodical *penchant*, their writing status as such. In the case of *Live from Golgotha* this is quite obvious, for it bears a subtitle called «the Gospel according to Gore Vidal.» In its turn, Saramago's novel, by being narrated in the third person, is presented not only as a mimicry of the evangelists authorial position, but as a «true» rendition of

the story of the founder of the religion of the West, as if Christ himself had «authorised» the version or the «gospel» one is reading. For Rushdie's part, his multi-layered novel carefully evolves around two suppressed verses of the Koran, which would have been dictated to Muhammad by the Devil, if a secondary tradition banished from the Islamic canon is to be believed. The reinstatement, the centerment of these marginalia responds not only to the fictional core or to the metaphorical nucleus of *The Satanic Verses*. It also responds to the condemnation on grounds of blasphemy or «fatwa» of its writer in that which became the ominous «Rushdie Affair.»

Parodying the «genre» of the gospels—the term is not completely appropriate but it cannot be ruled out when referring to a type of writing which bears no resemblance to any other—or parodically incorporating the Koranic *marginalia*, so as to uphold them both either as fictional references or intertexts, has allowed the critical stance chosen by the three writers to rise their «civil» status to the level of the «sacred» narrations. This standpoint entails two consequences. The first, obvious as it might sound, is to transform their fiction writing into a sort of religious re-writing. In this process, their novels become mock gospels and claim to themselves an intermediate if hybrid status between lay prose and Holy Scriptures. The second is that, by mimicking the religious canon, they become a possible canon of a mocking age, a form of an anti-canon stemming from the weakening of authority of the religious narrations taken as reminiscent patterns of absolute, self-referential thinking in the secularized late capitalist world. This might appear too grave a critical approach to texts written against the weight of authority and which, furthermore, ideologically display an enormous *caché* of irony as their most pervasive rhetorical trait. Yet, their rampant derision is seriously conceived. In cultural terms, the meaning of simultaneously affirming the validity of the religious narrations as active sources of contemporary sensibility, and relativizing if negating their untouchability as sacred artifacts, is to attain a problematic status, which is as much *ersatz* as fully critical of it. That shows how religiously inspired narrations still occupy a central niche in today's imaginary context, how fundamental it is to broaden their appraisal critically, and how meaningful it became today to revise and to re-write the canon; last but not least, it also evinces how myth-deconstructing provides a decantation service in a moment of spiritual unrest. These pieces of «carnivalized canon» act in a twofold manner: on the one hand, they help demolish long standing touchstones of authoritarianism; on the other, they recycle them. Far from literalness, at the antipodes of religious conservatism, in the broadest possible sense, and definitely not from a face-lift perspective, they still address religion.

Let's see how this works out in the novels themselves. Gore Vidal's narrative displays an astounding blasphemous leverage. From the point of view

of its contents, *Live from Golgotha* (1991) blends in two different lineaments. The first corresponds to contemporary issues like homoeroticism and male bonding as well as corporate policy and criticism of the American political-economical system in a historical perspective, which have been important preoccupations of Vidal throughout his *oeuvre* (Stanton 1980; Parini, 1992). The second corresponds to the history of the institutionalization of the Church, seen univocally and maliciously from St. Paul's strategical if marketing-oriented mind, leaving aside any pious aura. Both lineaments transgress traditional informations, for two reasons. Firstly, because sexuality has played a minimal if repressed role in all things related to the institutionalized religion and because since the early Middle Ages homosexuality has been considered a mortal sin by the Church. Secondly, because comparing religious affairs with marketing strategies is openly at odds with the ethics of *propaganda fide*, the propagation of the Christian faith, which is, as it is well known, ultimately based on a salvationist discourse.

From the point of view of genre, in its turn, *Live from Golgotha* combines two quite distant ones: the science-fiction novel and the old hagiologic tale. In the novel, the former is fully affirmed and the latter duly transgressed. On the one hand, the operation of sending a contemporary TV crew back to the crucifixion day by way of the advances of modern technology and the enticement of virtual reality is well succeeded, thus confirming the science-fictional *ethos*. On the other hand, the clearly anti-Christian behavior of St. Paul, the second main character of the novel, who sexually molests and even rapes the narrator of the «gospel,» St. Timothy, is boldly opposed to the «lives of saints» encomiastic model. If many a Christian reader may feel scandalized by the ways Vidal depicts the early days of the Church and relates them with the late capitalist business for business mentality, the post-modern aesthetical or critical apostles undoubtedly feel delighted with the unheard of blending of science-fiction and mock hagiology in a novel.

This surprising juxtaposition in two different textual layers of the *discours du merveilleux chrétien*, the medieval *exemplata* and the hagiological tales with the science-inspired *merveilleux*, is analogous to what Salman Rushdie develops in *The Satanic Verses* (1988), albeit in a less epistemologically surprising manner. In this novel an open conception of reality refers, firstly, to the imaginary of para-realist tendencies of twentieth century literature, namely the Spanish American «magical» narrative with its blend of surreal imagination and socio-historical awareness; secondly, it also refers to the Koranic narrations and Hindu folk-inspired stories. From the former, *The Satanic Verses* includes the treatment of chunks of unreality as parts of a wider meaning of existence with ideological overtones on the hermeneutic level. Some of these chunks appear as emblems of the whole novel, as the fall from a flying airplane and

the uncanny survival of the two heroes of *The Satanic Verses*, Saladdin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, after a Muslim fundamentalist terrorist bombing, on the shores of the British Isles. From the latter, aside from the above mentioned *marginalia*, the satanic verses themselves, the novel draws some subplots that help define the Indian subcontinent, the so called Third World *facies* in opposition to the European one, as the story of the Muslim prophetess Ayesha exemplifies.

There is no real clash between both lineaments as in the case of *Live from Golgotha*, the magical realist and the religious or folk inspired discourses rather complementing themselves in their attack of the rational, imperialist logos on two flanks. Nonetheless, as the novel progresses, they appear to divide into two different spheres of critical action. The magical realist perspective seems to deal better with the phenomena of the postcolonial world, as metaphorized by the mock «invasion» of England by the commonwealth heroes. From this lineament *The Satanic Verses* unfolds as a «novel of migration,» a multi-cultural approach to a central problem of today's international order (Spivak 1993; 217-242). The second lineament, in its turn, performs a biting criticism on the Islamic religious mythology, if not directly to Muslim fundamentalism (Ruthven, 1990), to the extent of being envisaged as a piece of «literary terrorism» (Akhtar 1990).

As opposed to *Live from Golgotha* and *The Satanic Verses*, *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo* (1992) reads as a free paraphrase of the New Testament. Nonetheless, the unorthodox alterations to which José Saramago submits the canonical grid purveyed by the Gospels, offer a different conception of the story of Jesus. The writer insists more in the humanity of the sacred family than in its holiness, a literary turn foreseeable in a novel. The novel contradicts the virginity of St. Mary, emphasizes the role of St. Joseph in the formation of his son's personality and insists in the carnal attachment of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. To enforce the human nature of Christ, the novelist seems to have been inspired by some of the doctrines that caused much unrest in the early Byzantine times, like the one of Bishop Nestorius, which led to the emergence of the long disappeared Church of the East (Boero 1994). However, the main line in Saramago's interpretation of the canon is the focusing of the notions of fatherhood and filialness in the conception of the Jewish-Christian God. Jesus' fate results from a clash between two heavy-burden inheritances. From the human side of Christ's dual nature, St. Joseph transmits his son a sense of guilt stemming from his egotistical behavior in the episode of the Death of the Innocents. From the super-human side of his nature, Jehovah charges Jesus with the task of completing his drive for religious-political control in a world scenario. Thus, Jesus becomes a powerless, if utterly unwilling tool, in the hands of his unscrupulous, egotistical albeit guiltless divine father. The thirst

of power of God the Father unveils during a dialogue between Jehovah, the Devil and Christ on a boat adrift for forty days under heavy fog in the sea of Galilee. This dialogue, in which Jehovah describes the persecutions that his monotheist policy would entail in the institutionalization of the Christian faith, appears as a chapter in an archetypal father-son confrontation in a mythical context. These alterations in the rendition of Christ's story, and the simultaneous textual closeness of the novel to the canon create a narrative in which the process of writing as re-writing surpasses derisive criticism and propitiates a poetical level of incorporation of the tradition. In this sense, the seriousness of putting forth a mock canon is completely attained in *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo*.

One is tempted to say that parody works in a different way in Saramago's novel than in *Live from Golgotha*. In *O Evangelho ...* parodying is less confounded with satire than in Vidal's novel. Considering Rushdie's, irony and the use of humor is less dependent on a contemporary tonus in *O Evangelho ...* than in *The Satanic Verses*. In this novel, for instance, the differences between colonial and upper class British English play a specially hilarious, if ideological, role. In Saramago's book, there is no plurality of dictions as in Rushdie's, no playing with time-frames as in Vidal's. Furthermore, the emergence of the *merveilleux chrétien* in *O Evangelho ...* follows closely the textual and the imaginary space provided by the evangelists, whereas in those novels the religious narrations function rather as a literary motif (Vidal) or a metaphorical core of the text (Rushdie). *Live from Golgotha* and *The Satanic Verses*' foremost classification lies inside the context of fiction *strictu sensu*. To put it in other terms, their *forte* is their quota of invention or «writing,» their parodical utilization of the religious narrations, their «rewriting» aspect notwithstanding. In its turn, *O Evangelho*'s textual closeness to the religious narrations places the novel in the context of «re-writing,» in a literary space that intersects fiction and history or cultural archeology, despite the book's fictional qualities. *Live from Golgotha* and *The Satanic Verses*' most evident goal is to forward an allegorical critique of contemporary affairs through the forging of religious institutions. *O Evangelho*'s goal is to analyze the everlastingness of the religious impulse from a heterodoxical, if not plainly heretical, approach (Saramago, 1994). In this sense, it is as much a novel of revision as it is of creation, indebted to the tradition of secularizing christology, which started in the mid-nineteenth century with biographies such as Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863) and leads to recent studies like *The Historical Jesus* by John Dominic Crossan (1991). On the other hand, it is well placed among the plentiful contemporary literary or media works that focus on the subject, from Pär Lagerkvist's *Barabbas* (1950) to Martin Scorsese's recent movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*, adapted from the homonymous novel by Nikos Kazantzakis (1955).

In spite of the differences between the novels we studied, and whichever their relative position in any discussable fiction-measuring, parody-estimating or in any taxonomical scale might be, a common ground unites them. This does not stem exclusively from their textual or rhetorical characteristics. Rather, as mentioned before, this has to do with the authorial status of their writers and with the novels considered as cultural artifacts of a secularized age, an age in which godlessness plays with «godlongingness,» and all intent of reducing this very longing to monotheist and institutional configurations is ruled out.

From their origin onwards, the religious narrations present a problematic status concerning their authorship. They have been written by men as if dictated by God, as in the case of the Old Testament and the Koran. In the case of the New Testament, they have been written by the evangelists, who got the trustworthiness of their writing from their direct witnessing or their proximity to the life and the words of Jesus. At any rate, those who wrote the Bible or the Koran never did claim autonomy for themselves, much less did they imply anything concerning authorship as we understand it: according to what they state in their texts and to the ethical point of view they held, they were «translating» Truth to their fellow men. However, by fully assuming their status as authors, by accepting them as equals in time and their narrations as historically and fictionally bound texts, the contemporary novelists can «translate» their «translation» to us. By transferring the contemporary status of authorship to the writers of the religious narrations, novelists as the ones who were focused upon here have not only exempted their narrations from their superhuman aura. Those novelists have also liberated these stories from their authoritarian if uncivil grid. Thus, they made possible the flux of the religious narrations in the contemporary literary arena, in which religious debates have not played an exceptionally resonant role—not at all similar, for instance, to the scrutinizing of the individual personality from a psychological point of view, or the analysing of historical conditions with a collective-minded goal.

Contrariwise to the opinion of those who identify blasphemy in the novels inspired by those religious narrations, novelists like Vidal, Rushdie and Saramago imprint on religious narrations, through secularizing them and enhancing to full authorship their narrators status, a redeeming effect, fit for our few centuries old reason—and mocking-oriented—mentality.

In a problematizing era, to have a problematic status equals to be alive; to have a doubt is more truthful than to bear truth itself. Maybe one of the reasons that the pagan gods stop having a meaning for the ancient societies was that they stopped being called to the invisible front of civilization, the imaginary inner sanctum that things occupy inside the individuals, as Vidal refers to in his novel *Julian* (1964). With the private ritual of reading substituting many public rituals and the progressive transfer of authority to individuals from

institutions, cleaning up the mechanics of religion through novels like *Live From Golgotha*, *The Satanic Verses* and *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo* point to the reader fictional and *actual* ways of wondering on the space that the religious narrations occupied in the forging of civilization and of themselves. Possibly this was not the aim of the three novelists—a North-American bred in a Reformed environment, a Muslim sanctioned for his so-called betrayal of a fundamentalist *diktat*, and a Portuguese atheist who rightfully criticizes the arbitrariness of Catholicism in his country's history. But the genre of the novel is necessarily double-edged.

It is an appanage of literature to bring forth what it suppresses and to rebuild what it destroys, as the Derridean-Platonic notion of «pharmakon» underlines (Derrida: 1968). In this sense, seeing these obviously transgressive books only in their transgressive aspects, as if they were just emulating, in a quite different cultural scenario, Émile Zola's anti-clerical stance in *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (1875), a novel written in a much clearer civilizational context, is impoverishing what they can mean to a contemporary process of building a religious-aware literary readership. By all means, their re-writing is nothing but fundamental.

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