

# ***The Cave* by José Saramago: Platonic Image versus Metaphysics<sup>1</sup>**

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The images born in our minds, “mental or imagined images”, fill and also delimit a virtual space, draw shapes and volumes: thus, the eyes of men and women’s intellect, doubtless their sharpest glance, do not lose themselves in a worrying and mysterious void, but, so to speak, encounter an object or, in other words, discover it at last. On many occasions, images save human beings from both uncertainty and vagueness, which are always so disturbing, and lead them instead towards the certitude of reality, paradoxically in this case, an imagined one, but some sort of reality in the end. It is well-known that imagination is free, even from the persecution of those who aim to assassinate the creative power of human mind, because in this area absolute control is in fact impossible. Nevertheless, images, as soon as they have been created, if one permits or even asks others to examine them on the video screen in their minds, are never univocal, but rather their meanings and interpretations multiply in a proportion which is quite similar to the sum of those who look at them. This is perhaps the reason why Plato, whose intellect had already climbed the *scala abstractionis* and reached the summit of the unchanging and everlasting Ideas, recognized the didactic and illustrative power of images, but, at the same time, he understood the need to explain their personal and precise meaning, that is, their Platonic meaning, conscious of his pedagogic mission –perhaps still better “anthropogogic” mission- of all true masters.

We see this very clearly when reading the seventh book of his *Republic*, in which the well-known image of the cave<sup>3</sup> appears, in this case, strictly in accordance with “the applicability” with which Plato himself endowed it. However, the great Athenian

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<sup>3</sup> I strictly follow the Platonic terminology, but it is worth remembering that “Myth, fable, simile, allegory, etcetera ” are some of the terms with which Plato has been “corrected”. Martin Heidegger, in *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 1988 -1943, 1<sup>a</sup> ed.-, p. 18) says, for instance: “Wir sprechen von einem ‘Gleichnis’, sagen auch ‘Sinn-Bild’. Das heisst: ein sichtbarer Anblick, so freilich, dass das Erblickte allsogleich ein Winkendes ist. Der Anblick will nicht und nie für sich allein stehen; er gibt einem Wink: dahin, dass es etwas und was es bei diesem Anblick und durch diesen Anblick zu verstehen gibt. Der Anblick winkt, - er lenkt in ein zu Verstehendes, d. h. in den Bereich von Verstehbarkeit (die Dimension, innerhalb deren verstanden wird): in einen Sinn (daher Sinn-Bild)”. Needless to say, a text by Heidegger is always a risky one. I do not know whether “Gleichnis” means here “allegory” or not. Ted Sadler understands it in this way in his translation into English: “We speak of an ‘allegory’, also of ‘sensory image’ (Sinn-Bild), of a sort that provides a hint or clue...” (*The Essence of Truth. On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*. London & New York: Continuum, 2002). In any case, it is worth bearing in mind once again that Plato says simply “this image... we must apply...”. Therefore, it deals with a προσαπτεία εικῶν that Plato does not seem to consider a ὑπόνοια, the Platonic term for ἀλληγορία.

philosopher seems not to have foreseen that this applicability, bidden by the wills of others, will not generally be executed *Platonico modo*, but rather by adapting it to sensibilities and interests which are very different from his. Let us look, then, at the well-known image:

‘Next’, said I, ‘compare (ἀπείκασον) our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this. Picture (ἰδέ) men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them (ῥοα) as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture (ἰδέ) further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet-shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets’. ‘All that I see’, he said. ‘See also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking and others silent’. ‘A strange image you speak of’, he said, ‘and strange prisoners’. ‘Like to us’, I said; for, to begin with, tell me do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows (τὰς σκιάς) cast from the fire on the wall (προσπιπτούσας) of the cave that fronted them (εἰς τὸ καταντικρὺ)?’. ‘How could they’, he said, ‘if they were compelled to hold their heads unmoved through life?’ / ... / ‘This image (εἰκόνα) then, dear Glaucon, we must apply as a whole to all that has been said, likening the region revealed through sight to the habitation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul’s ascension to the intelligible region, you will miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear. But God knows whether it is true. But, at any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this’. ‘I concur’, he said, ‘so far as I am able’. ‘Come then’, I said, ‘and join me in this further thought, and do not be surprised that those who have attained to this height are not willing to occupy themselves with the affairs of men, but their souls ever feel the upward urge and the yearning for that sojourn above. For this, I take it, is likely if in this point too the likeness of our image (εἰκόνα) holds’<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> 514a-517d, translated by Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970. All the quotations of Plato’s *Republic* will correspond to this edition. On Plato’s cave, its tradition and influence, see e.g.: Miorelli, A. *Ancora nella caverna: riscrittura narrative tardo-novecentesche del mito platonico della caverna*. Trento: Dipartimento de filosofia, storia e beni culturali (*Labirinti* 93), 2006; Smith, A. D. *The Problem of Perception*. London: Harvard University Press, 2002; Smythies, J. R. *The walls of Plato’s cave: the science and philosophy of brain, consciousness and perception*. Aldershot: Avebury, 1994. And on Plato’s *Republic*: Ferrari, G. R. F. (ed.). *The*

Being Platonic or idealist, or supporting Aristotle and his materialism in accordance with that fictitious partition of human beings proposed by the English romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge<sup>5</sup>, it would be certainly difficult for any cultivated Western citizen not to have ever felt the impact of Platonic images. Throughout the centuries, the Classical Tradition has accumulated different cultural riches, and *The Cave* by José Saramago<sup>6</sup> is but the contemporary confirmation of the centuries-old Platonic legacy<sup>7</sup> – indeed, Saramago prefaces his text with a brief quotation, which is meant to remind us of our shared identity with those Platonic prisoners: “What a strange scene you describe

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*Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Santos, G. (ed.). *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006; Blackburn, S. *Plato's Republic*. London: Atlantic Books, 2006; Dorter, K. *The Transformation of Plato's Republic*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Mills-Daniel, D. *Briefly. Plato's The Republic*. London: SCM Press, 2006; Rosen, S. *Plato's Republic: A Study*. New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2005; Mitchell, B. *An Engagement with Plato's Republic: A Companion to the Republic*. Aldershot: Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003; Ostfeld, E. N. (ed.). *Essays on Plato's Republic*. Aarhus; Oxford: Aarhus University Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> “Table Talk” in *The Oxford Authors* (ed. H. J. Jackson). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 594-5. And so defines Luis Cernuda that tension in his poetry between reality and desire: “It is true that in some verses I have deluded myself in a sense or another with alluring notions of immortality; it is difficult to be always loyal to our convictions, whatever deep they may be. The responsibility for this attitude may be attributed to a certain idealism of mine, both spontaneous and naïve, which only with the help of the passing of time I can control and, after reflecting on it, lead once more towards materialism. Coleridge already said that human beings are, by birth, Platonic or Aristotelian, that is, idealist or materialist” –the translation into English is mine) (“*Es cierto que en determinados versos yo mismo he querido engañarme con nociones halagüeñas de inmortalidad, en una forma u otra; es difícil ser siempre fiel a nuestras convicciones, por hondas que sean. La culpa tal vez pueda achacarla a cierto idealismo mío, espontáneo y cándido, que sólo con ayuda del tiempo puedo dominar y, tras la reflexión, orientar hacia lo materialista. Ya Coleridge decía que los hombres son, por nacimiento, platónicos o aristotélicos, o sea, idealistas o materialistas*” -Luis Cernuda. *La Realidad y el Deseo (1924-1962)*. Madrid: Alianza Tres, “Historial de un libro”, 1991, p. 417).

<sup>6</sup> For a general analysis, see e.g.: Laird, A. “Death, Politics, Vision, and Fiction in Plato's Cave (After Saramago)”. *ARION. A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 10 (3). WIN 2003, 1-30, and Ortega Villaro, B. “*La caverna de Saramago*” in A. Ruiz Sola-B. Ortega Villaro (eds.). *La recepción del mito clásico en la literatura y el pensamiento*. Burgos, UNiversidad, 2002, 2002, 325-340.

<sup>7</sup> On Saramago's life and work, see e.g.: Paula Martins, Adriana de & Mark Sabine (eds.). *In Dialogue with Saramago: Essays in Comparative Literature*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2006; Roani, Gerson Luiz. *No limar do texto: literatura e história em José Saramago*. Sao Paulo: Annablume, 2002; *On Saramago*. Dartmouth MA: Centre for Portuguese Studies and Culture, 2001; Venâncio, Fernando: *José Saramago: a luz e o sombreado*. Porto: Campo das Letras, 2000; Stegagno Picchio, Luciana. *José Saramago: instantanee per un ritratto*. Firenze: Passigli, 2000; Lago, Maria Paula. *A face de Saramago*. Porto: Granito, Editores e Livreiros, 2000; Arias, Juan: *José Saramago, el amor posible*. Barcelona: Planeta, 1998; Costa, Horacio. *José Saramago: o período formativo*. Lisboa: Caminho, 1997; *José Saramago: la Semana de Autor*. Madrid: Cultura Hispánica, 1995; Cerdeira da Silva, Teresa Cristina. *José Saramago: entre a história e a ficção, uma saga de portugueses*. Lisboa: Publicações Dom Quixote, 1989; Seixo, Maria Alzira. *O essencial sobre José Saramago*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1987.

and what strange prisoners, They are just like us” (Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII)<sup>8</sup> (“*Que estranha cena descreves e que estranhos prisioneiros, São iguais a nós*”. *Platão, República, Livro VII*)<sup>9</sup>. Let us read, then, the details of Cipriano Algor’s bold *katábasis* into the well-watched depths of the Centre:

“Down below, thirty or forty metres underground, you would not notice the difference between night and day, there would be nothing but darkness pierced by the crude beams from floodlights and arc lights (267)... In front of him two spotlights, one on either side, so that the light would not fall directly into the interior, revealed the oblong shape of the cave entrance (278)... it was as black as the inside of someone’s body. There was a fairly gentle, albeit uneven slope... At one point, he thought he could see something to his right that appeared to be a platform and a wall... Suddenly, the wall appeared in front of him... He had reached the end of the cave (279)... there appeared before his eyes what seemed to be a stone bench, and, the following moment, a row of vague shapes appeared and disappeared... then moved upwards to reveal a human body sitting there. Beside... were five other bodies... The smooth rear wall of the cave was about ten handspans away from their hollow eye sockets... Cipriano Algor... shone the torch beam on the dark, parched heads, this is a man, this is a woman... three men and three women, he saw the remnants of the ropes that had been used to keep their necks from moving, then he shone the light lower down, identical ropes were around their legs... The light from the torch once more caressed the wretched faces, the skin-and-bone hands folded on the knees (280)... Do you know what it is, Yes, I remember reading something about it once, replied Marçal, And do you know that, since that’s what it is, what we saw there has no reality, cannot be real, Yes, I do, And yet I touched the forehead of one of those women with my own hand, it wasn’t an illusion, it wasn’t a dream... If they can’t be those other people, since they never existed, who are they, asked Marçal, I don’t know, but after seeing them, I started thinking that perhaps what really doesn’t exist is what we call non-existence... There’s only one thing missing, muttered Cipriano Algor... Here it is, he said. There was a large black stain on the ground, the ground was scorched, as if a fire (281) had burned there for a long time. There’s no point now asking if they existed or not, said Cipriano Algor, the proof is here, each person must draw his own conclusions, I’ve drawn mine already... What did you see, who are those people, Those people are us, said Cipriano Algor, What do you mean, That they are us, me, you, Marçal, the whole Centre, probably the world, Explain yourself, please, Pay attention and listen. The story took half an hour to be told. Marta listened without interrupting him once. At the end, all she said was, Yes, I think you’re right, they are us” (282).

*“Lá em baixo, a trinta ou quarenta metros de profundidade, não se notaria a diferença entre o dia e a noite, certamente não haveria mais do que trevas cortadas pela luz crua dos projectores e das gambiarras (318)... Lá adiante, dois focos colocados num extremo e no outro, de modo que a luz não fosse dar em cheio no interior, mostravam a forma oblonga da entrada de uma gruta (330)...*

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<sup>8</sup> All the quotations will correspond to the following edition and the numbers in brackets refer to it: *José Saramago. The Cave* (translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa). London: Vintage Classics, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> All the quotations will correspond to the following edition and the numbers in brackets refer to it: *José Saramago. A Caverna. Romance*. Lisboa: Caminho. O Campo da Palavra, 2000.

*era negro com o interior de um corpo. Havia um declive não muito pronunciado, mas irregular... Em certa altura percebeu-lhe perceber que havia à sua direita algo que poderia ser uma plataforma e um muro (331)... De repente... a parede apresentou-se na sua frente. Havia alcançado o final da gruta... diante dos olhos surgiu-lhe... o que parecia um banco de pedra, e logo... alinhados, uns vultos mal definidos apareceram e desapareceram (331)... e era um corpo humano sentado o que ali estava. Ao lado dele... mais cinco corpos igualmente sentados... A parede lisa do fundo da gruta estava a dez palmos das órbitas encovadas... passou lentamente o foco da lanterna sobre as cabeças escuras e ressequidas, este é homem, esta é mulher... três homens e três mulheres, viu restos de ataduras que pareciam ter servido para lhes imobilizar os pescoços, depois baixou a luz, ataduras iguais prendiam-lhes as pernas... A luz da lanterna acariciou uma vez mais os míseros rostos, as mãos só pele e osso (332)... Sabes o que é aquilo, Sei, li alguma coisa em tempos, respondeu Marçal, E também sabes que o que ali está, sendo o que é, não tem realidade, não pode ser real, Sei, E contudo eu toquei com esta mão na testa de uma daquelas mulheres, não foi uma ilusão, não foi um sonho... Se não são os outros, uma vez que eles não existiram, quem são estes, perguntou Marçal, Não sei, mas depois de os ver fiquei a pensar que talvez o que realmente não exista seja aquilo a que damos o nome de não existência... Só falta uma coisa, murmurou Cipriano Algor (333)... Aqui está, disse. Na chão via-se uma grande mancha negra, a terra estava requeimada naquele local, como se durante muito tempo tivesse ardido ali uma fogueira. Deixou de valer a pena continuar a perguntar se eles existiram ou não, disse Cipriano Algor, as provas estão aqui, cada qual tirará as conclusões que achar justas, eu já tirei as minhas... Que foi que viu, quem são essas pessoas, Essas pessoas somos nós, disse Cipriano Algor, Que quer dizer, Que somos nós, eu, tu, o Marçal, o Centro todo, provavelmente (334) o mundo, Por favor, explique-se, Dá-me atenção, escuta. A história levou meia hora a ser contada. Marta ouviu-a sem interromper uma única vez. No fim, apenas disse, Sim, creio que tem razão, somos nós” (335).*

It is quite evident that Saramago's novel is based upon Plato's text, but it is also evident that, as far the Portuguese writer is concerned, the Classical Tradition is not a prison in which his creativity becomes finally asphyxiated but, on the contrary, he is stimulated by it. Through Socrates, Plato asks Glaucon to make an effort to imagine something which is in fact incredible in order to make him understand his idealist or "ideocentric" view of life. His cave and his prisoners –I would dare to say "his almost tangible prisoners" in the mind of the Western cultivated citizens- are certainly fiction which is meant to confirm the shared identity of those image-men, icon-men, with men and women's identity of all times. Following, then, the instance of the great master, Saramago devotes himself to an audacious analogical game with the help of his fictitious story, *The Cave*, and with the help of a singular and also fictitious "speleologist", the potter Cipriano Algor. Indeed, the latter discovers the reality, a dried and almost fossilized reality, of the Platonic prisoners in the depths of the ultramodern Centre, but, at the same time, he is also capable of climbing and reaching the summit of a process of abstraction, "the world", thus leaving behind any "I", "you", "we" or even "the whole Centre". Indeed, the "untrue" Marçal of his fictitious story and the "true" readers of *The Cave* know perfectly well that the Platonic prisoners are not real, but can neutralize opposite poles that are apparently antagonistic, by thinking that perhaps what does not exist must be, paradoxically, non-existence. Furthermore, this notion

represents a desperate act of mental boldness, since, as in the case of the poster in the novel, one day our eyes might not believe what some great nearby Centre might advertise:

“And then, addressing Isaura and his father-in-law, There was a poster, one of those really big ones outside the Centre, can you guess what it said, he asked. We’ve no idea, they replied, and, as if he were reciting something, Marçal said COMING SOON, PUBLIC OPENING OF PLATO’S CAVE, AN EXCLUSIVE ATTRACTION, UNIQUE IN THE WORLD, BUY YOUR TICKET NOW” (294).

“E logo, dirigindo-se a Isaura e ao sogro, Havia um cartaz, daqueles grandes, na fachada do (349) Centro, são capazes de adivinhar o que ele dizia, perguntou, Não temos ideia, responderam ambos, e então Marçal disse, como se recitase, BREVEMENTE, ABERTURA AO PÚBLICO DA CAVERNA DE PLATÃO, ATRACÇÃO EXCLUSIVA, ÚNICA NO MUNDO; COMPRE JÁ A SUA ENTRADA” (350).

Needles to say, one must immediately flee from such a Centre: still better, one should never enter such a Centre<sup>10</sup>. Everyone must know how often and due to what

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Centre resembles a Chinese box: “Well, the best way to explain the Centre is to think of it as a city within a city” (215) (“... a melhor explicação do Centro ainda seria considerá-lo como uma cidade dentro de outra cidade” -258), although we see immediately that it deals with a singular Chinese box, since the smallest of the boxes in its inner part is paradoxically bigger than the biggest one: “I have the feeling that it’s bigger than the city, which means that the part is bigger than the whole” (215) (“... tenho a impressão de que ele é maior do que a própria cidade... sendo uma parte é maior que o todo” -259). It is almost completely closed and causes claustrophobia: “With the exceptions of the doors that open onto the outside, there are no other openings to be seen... In complete contrast to those smooth façades, this side of the building is peppered with windows, hundreds and hundreds of windows, thousands of windows, all of them closed because of the air conditioning inside” (81) (83) (“Exceptuando as portas que abrem para o exterior, em nenhuma das restantes frontarias há aberturas... Ao contrário dessas fachadas lisas, a frente virada para este lado está crivada de janelas, centenas e centenas de janelas, milhares de janelas, sempre fechadas por causa do condicionamento da atmosfera interna” -100). It is ruled by a severe discipline which Marçal wants his inferiors and subalterns to take into account: “...the whole definition and maintenance of hierarchical configurations is based on their being scrupulously respected and never contravened or transgressed, and, of course, the inevitable result of being too free and easy with one’s inferiors or subalterns is to undermine respect and to encourage licence, or, to put it more explicitly and unambiguously, it all ends in insubordination, indiscipline and anarchy” (107) (“as configurações hierárquicas se definem e se mantêm por e para serem escrupulosamente respeitadas, e nunca ultrapassadas ou pervertidas, sem esquecer que tratar os inferiores ou subalternos com excessiva confiança sempre acabou por minar o respeito e resultar em licença, ou, querendo usar palavras mais explícitas, sem ambiguidade, insubordinação, indisciplina e anarquia” -131-32). And, above all, indoors the control is absolute and menaces are not discarded: “The guard asked him for his official identity card and the card that proved he was a resident, compared his face with the photos on both, examined the fingerprints on both documents through a magnifying glass and, finally, took a print of that same finger, which Cipriano Algor, after due instruction, pressed against what was presumably the scanner of a portable computer that the guard removed from a bag he wore slung across his shoulder... take my advice, don’t come here again, it could get you in trouble, being curious once is enough, besides, there’s nothing secret behind that door... In that case, why don’t then remove the sign, asked Cipriano Algor, It acts as a lure so that we can find out who are he inquisitive ones living

scarcely pondered reasons has not been able to resist the temptation of embracing the darkness and descending into the abyss, thus being seduced by the shadows and simulacra of a false welfare<sup>11</sup>. The Platonic exhortation to freedom, to the final access to the Light which must triumph over the *tenebrae* of our material world, seems to be followed by the protagonists of this story and, of course, by their creator. Marçal and Martha still hesitate: “What are we going to do, she asked, but Marçal did not have time to respond. In a firm voice, Cipriano Algor was saying, You must decide what to do with your own lives, But I’m leaving” (282) (“*Que vamos fazer, perguntou, mas Marçal não teve tempo de responder. Em voz firme, Cipriano Algor dizia, Vocês decidirão a vossa vida, eu vou-me embora*” -335). However, as soon as they overcome that shock caused by the discovery of the tragic innermost parts of the Centre which has shaken their minds, they will understand that it is worth restoring both the authority and the common sense of elder people: “I have a child growing inside me, if, when he’s old enough to make his own decisions, he should choose to live in a place like this, he will be doing what he wants, but I won’t give birth to him here... It’s never too late to correct a mistake” (290) (“*Tenho um filho a crescer-me na barriga, se ele alguma vez quiser, quando for senhor das suas acções, viver num sítio com este, terá feito o que era sua vontade, mas, pari-lo eu aqui, não... Nunca é demasiado tarde para emendar um erro*” -344). Consequently, it is only necessary now that the powerful image of *The Cave* also succeeds in changing the mind of the man who was totally seduced by the lights projected by the Centre, its twin image: “Marçal said, I am no longer an employee of the Centre, I’ve resigned from my job as security guard... I don’t know (291) if it was for the best or for the worst, I just did what I had to” (292) (“*Marçal disse, Ja não sou empregado do Centro, pedi a demissão de guarda... Não sei se foi o melhor ou o pior, (346) fiz o que devia ser feito*” -347). However, if one bears in mind that the classical reference is the Platonic image of the cave, it does not seem audacious to think that Saramago’s pedagogy or “anthropogogy” aim is to warn us of the degraded nature of contemporary men and women. They are certainly the target of hunters of other people’s will and are frequently seduced by all the “opportunities” offered by the great showcase-Centre, while, on account of the freedom in which they have probably lived and the teachings they have received, they should be critic and “resistant”. Indeed, they are quite different from those Platonic prisoners who always had such a condition and never stared at the light. These latter individuals should be certainly dragged away by force:

‘Consider, then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly (αὐτῶν λύσιν τε καὶ ἴασιν τῶν τε δεσμῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφροσύνης), if in the course of nature something of this sort should happen to

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in the Centre” (261) (“*O guarda pediu-lhe o cartão oficial de identidade, o cartão que o acreditava como residente, comparou a cara ao retrato incorporado em cada um, examinou à lupa as impressões digitais apostas nos documentos, e, para terminar, recolheu uma impressão do mesmo dedo, que Cipriano Algor, após ter sido devidamente industriado, premiu contra o que seria um leitor do computador portátil que o (310) guarda extraíra de uma bolsa que levava a tiracolo... aceite-me un conselho, não torne a aparecer por aqui, poderia arranjar complicações para a sua vida, ser curioso uma vez basta, de resto nem vale a pena, não há nada de secreto por trás desta porta... Se é como diz, por que é que não retiram a chapa, perguntou Cipriano Algor, Serve de chamariz para ficarmos a saber quem são as pessoas curiosas que moram no Centro*” -311).

<sup>11</sup> In this respect, see e. g.: Schulenburg, C. “A Cultural Battle with the Center: José Saramago’s *The Cave* and Globalization”. *ROMANCE NOTES* 44 (3). SPR 2004, 283-291.

them: When one was freed from his fetters (λυθείη) and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn his head around and walk and to lift up his eyes to the light, and in doing all this felt pain and, because of the dazzle and glitter of the light... ‘And if’, said I, ‘someone should drag him thence by force (ἔλκοι... βία) up the ascent which is rough and steep, and not let him go before he had drawn him out into the light of the sun, do you not think that he would find it painful to be so haled along, and would chafe at it, and when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things that we call real?’ (515c-e).

So far –according to the order of my exposition-, Plato’s will and Saramago’s are quite identical or, in other words, both exhort human beings to be free and not slaves, to embrace the supreme Reality and reject its shadows or simulacra, to abandon for evermore all the prisons in which, being blind or too credulous –as in the case of the characters in Saramago’s novel-, they voluntarily become prisoners. Indeed, there may be “golden” caves, they may even be a garden of Eden so protective that we would not want to abandon them (“At the end of the avenue, on the towering grey wall blocking the road he could see an enormous white... on which these words were written in letters of a brilliant intense blue, LIVE IN SECURITY, LIVE AT AT THE CENTRE” (73) “... em letras de um azul brilhante e intenso, se liam de um lado a outro estas palavras, VIVA EM SEGURANÇA; VIVA NO CENTRO” -92). Nevertheless, one notices an essential difference, since that scene imagined by the Athenian philosopher shows a clear lack of sophistication, so that his prisoners only know the pleasure of competing with each other for the honours reserved for the individual capable of saying when the shadows of different objects will pass before his eyes (51-6 c-d). On the contrary, that other Centre imagined by Saramago must obviously appear like the hyperbole that will cause Cipriano Algor’s nausea<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, it has:

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<sup>12</sup> However, leaving aside the presumed excellences of the Centre, Saramago presents it in fact like the “centre” of three concentric circles – a cave in the end- of increasing degradation: 1) the Agricultural Belt or Green Belt: “The area... is dull and dirty... Someone gave these vast and decidedly unrural expanses the technical name of the Agricultural Belt and also, by poetic analogy, the Green Belt, but the only landscape the eyes can see on either side of the road, covering many thousands of apparently uninterrupted hectares, are vast, rectangular, flat-roofed structures, made of neutral-coloured plastic which time and dust have gradually turned grey or brown. Beneath them, where the eyes or passers by cannot reach, plants are growing” (2) (10)... els hivernacles grisos, cendrosos, lívids, deu ser per això que les maduixes han perdut el color, d’aquí no gaire seran blanques per fora com ja ho acostumen a ser per dintre i tindran el gust de qualsevol cosa que no tingui gust de res” (276) (“A região é... suja... Alguém deu a estas enormes extensões de aparência nada campestre o nome técnico de Cintura Agrícola, e também, por analogia poética, o de Cintura Verde, mas a única paisagem que os olhos conseguem alcançar nos dois lados da estrada, cobrindo sem solução de continuidade perceptível muitos milhares de hectares, são grandes armações de tecto plano, rectangulares, feitas de plásticos de uma cor neutra que o tempo e as poeiras, aos poucos, foram desviando ao cinzento e ao pardo. Debaixo delas, fora dos olhares de quem passa, crescem plantas (12)... as estufas pardas, cinzentas, lívidas, por isso é que os morangos devem ter perdido a cor, não falta muito para que sejam brancos por fora como já o vão sendo por dentro e tenham o sabor de qualquer coisa que não saiba a nada” -338-39); 2) the Industrial Belt: “They left the Agricultural Belt behind them, and the road, which grows dirtier now, crosses the Industrial Belt, cutting a swathe through not only factory buildings of every size, shape and type, but also fuel tanks, both spherical and cylindrical, electricity substations, networks of pipes, air ducts, suspension bridges, tubes of every thickness, some red, some black, chimneys belching out



“a carousel of horses, a carousel of space rockets, a centre for toddlers, a centre for the Third Age, a tunnel of love, a suspension bridge, a ghost train, an astrologer’s tent, a betting shop, a rifle range, a golf course, a luxury hospital... rain, wind and snow on demand, a wall of china, a taj mahal, an Egyptian pyramid, a temple of karnak, a real aqueduct that works twenty-fours a day... a lake... a Trojan horse, an electric chair, a firing squad... a list of prodigies so long that not even eighty years of leisure time would be enough to take them all in, even if you had been born in the Centre and had never left it for the outside world” (259).

“... *um carrocel com cavalos, um carrocel com foguetes espaciais, um centro dos pequeninos, um centro da terceira idade, um túnel do amor, uma ponte suspensa, um comboio fantasma, um gabinete de astrólogo, uma recepção de apostas, uma carreira de tiro, um campo de golfe, um hospital de luxo... chuva, vento e neve à descrição, uma muralha da china, um taj-mahal, uma pirâmide do egipto, um templo de karnak, um aqueduto das águas livres... um lago... um cavalo de tróia, uma cadeira eléctrica, um pelotão de execução... um satélite de comunicações, um cometa, uma galáxia... enfim, uma lista a tal ponto extensa de prodígios que nem oitenta anos de vida ociosa bastariam para os desfrutar com proveito, mesmo tendo nascido a pessoa no Centro e não tendo saído dele nunca para o mundo exterior*” (308).

However, as we have noted, Saramago is not a prisoner in Plato’s cave. Doubtless he has felt the impact of the Athenian master’s image<sup>13</sup>, but in fact he has been much more

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pillars of toxic fumes into the atmosphere, long-armed cranes, chemical laboratories, oil refineries, fetid, bitter, sickly odours, the strident noise of drilling, the buzz of mechanical saws, the brutal thud of steam hammers... ” (3) (“*Deixaram a Cintura Agrícola para trás, a estrada, agora mais suja, atravessa a Cintura Industrial rompendo pelo meio de instalações fabris de todos os tamanhos, actividades e feitiços, com depósitos esféricos e cilíndricos de combustível, estações eléctricas, redes de canalizações, condutas de ar, pontes suspensas, tubos de todas as grossuras... chaminés lançando para a atmosfera rolos de fumos tóxicos, gruas de longos braços, laboratórios químicos, refinarias de petróleo, cheiros fétidos, amargos ou adocicados, ruídos estridentes de brocas, zumbidos de serras mecânicas, pancadas brutais de martelos de pilão...*” -13), and 3) the City: “Once past the Industrial Belt, the city finally begins, not the city proper... what greets one are chaotic conglomerations of shacks made by their ill-housed inhabitants out of whatever mostly flimsy materials might help to keep out the elements, especially the rain and the cold” (4) (“*Depois da Cintura Industrial principia a cidade, enfim, não a cidade propriamente dita... o que aqui se vê são aglomerações caóticas de barracas feitas de quantos materiais, na sua maioria precários, pudessem ajudar a defender das intempéries, sobretudo da chuva e do frio, os, seus mal abrigados moradores*” -14).

<sup>13</sup> One notices it when reading the description of Cipriano Algor’s dream which reproduces quite literally the physical area of the cave, the personal situation of the prisoner, and the fact of making questions about the nature of the shadows: “Cipriano Algor dreamed that he was inside his new kiln (159)... his body felt like a lead weight... he was, in fact, tied to the back of the bench, tied without ropes or chains, but tied nevertheless. He again attempted to turn his head, but his neck would not obey him, I’m like a stone statue sitting on a stone bench looking at a stone wall (161)... a new shadow appeared on the wall... but the potter knew at once whose shadow it was, neither the shadow, which was darker, nor the voice, which was deeper, belonged to his son-in-law, Senhor Cipriano Algor, I have come to tell you that we have just cancelled our order for the clay figurines... I don’t want to know why you’re in there, if you fancied yourself a some romantic hero waiting for the wall to reveal the secrets of life to you, that strikes me as plain ridiculous... he knew that the dream had ended” (162) (“*Cipriano Algor*

seduced by its “attribute”, that is, by its applicability. It is well-known that the Portuguese writer does not excel precisely in paying tribute to the Ideas or unchanging and everlasting realms that deny change or transformation<sup>14</sup>, thus placed beyond (μετά) our physical world. On the contrary, joyfully anchored in the material world<sup>15</sup>, it is in it, thanks to it and never rejecting it that men and women must, in his opinion, vindicate their right, here and now, to be as happy as possible. Needless to say, the chief protagonists of Plato’s *Republic* are not craftsmen, but those who are so intellectually endowed with the wings of Philosophy as to fly over the prison of the material world and ascend towards the intelligible one, of which the former is simply a copy. It is quite understandable, then, that Saramago’s aim is to take Plato’s Ideas down from their pedestal, and, in order to remain strictly in both a human and physical realm, it will thus

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*sonhou que estava dentro do seu novo forno (193)... sentiu que o corpo lhe pesava como chumbo... o que ele estava era atado ao recosto do banco, atado sem cordas nem (195) cadeias, mas atado. Experimentou outra vez virar a cabeça, mas o pescoço não lhe obedeceu, Sou como uma estátua de pedra sentada num banco de pedra olhando um muro de pedra... uma sombra nova apareceu sobre a parede do fundo... mas o oleiro soube logo de quem se tratava, nem a sombra, mais escura, nem a voz, mais espessa, pertenciam ao genro, Senhor Cipriano Algor, vim só para informá-lo de que a nossa encomenda de bonecos de barro (196) acaba de ser cancelada... não sei nem quero saber por que se meteu aí, se foi para se dar ares de herói romântico à espera de que uma parede lhe revele os segredos da vida, a mim parece-me simplesmente ridículo... sabia que o sonho tinha terminado” (197).*

<sup>14</sup> Remember, for instance, *Timaeus* 27d-28, 3: ‘Now first of all we must, in my judgement, make the following distinction. What is that which is Existent always and has no Becoming? And what is that which is Becoming always and never is Existent? Now the one of these is apprehensible by thought with the aid of reasoning, since it is ever uniformly existent; whereas the other is an object of opinion with the aid of unreasoning sensation, since it becomes and perishes and is never really existent’ (Ἔστιν οὖν δὴ κατ’ ἐμὴν δόξαν πρῶτον διαιρετέον τάδε· τί τὸ ὄν ἀεί, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον, καὶ τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν ἀεί, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε; τὸ μὲν δὴ νοήσει μετὰ λόγου περιληπτόν, ἀεί κατὰ ταῦτα ὄν, τὸ δ’ αὖ δόξη μετ’ αἰσθήσεως ἀλόγου δοξαστόν, γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον, ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν –translated by R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> It may be useful now to remember in this respect one of his poems, ‘In the sometimes inhabited island’ (*Na ilha por vezes habitada*): “In the sometimes inhabited island that we are, there are / nights, mornings and dawns during which / we do not need die. / Then we know everything that was and will be. / The world appears explained definitively and / we are invaded by a great serenity, and the words / which mean it are said. / We raise a handful of ground and we squeeze it / in our hands. / Smoothly. / Here is all the truth we can bear. / The shape, the desires and the limits. / Then we can say that we are free, with the / peace and the smile of the one who recognizes himself and travelled / tireless throughout the world, because / he bit the soul till its bones. / Let us free slowly the earth where take place / miracles like water, the stone and the root. / Each of us is for the time being life. / Let it be enough for us” –(the translation into English is mine according to the following edition: *José Saramago. Poesía completa*. Madrid: Alfaguara, 2005, p. 415. (“*Na ilha por vezes habitada do que somos, há / noites, manhãs e madrugadas em que não / precisamos de morrer. / Então sabemos tudo do que foi e será. / O mundo aparece explicado definitivamente / e entra em nós uma grande serenidade, / e dizem-se as palavras que a significam. / Levantamos um punhado de terra e apertamo-la / nas mãos. / Com doçura. / Aí se contém toda a verdade suportável: o / contorno, a vontade e os limites. / Podemos então dizer que somos livres, com a paz / e o sorriso de quem se reconhece e viajou à / roda do mundo infatigável, porque mordeu a / alma até aos ossos dela. / Libertemos devagar a terra onde acontecem / milagres como a água, a pedra e a raiz. / Cada um de nós é por enquanto a vida. / Isso nos basta*”).

be necessary to deny the pretensions of the brain and sing hymns instead to the excellence of our hands and fingers<sup>16</sup>:

“It should be noted that the fingers are not born with brains, these develop gradually with the passage of time and with the help of what eyes see. The help of the eyes is important, as important as what is seen through them. That is why the fingers have always excelled at uncovering what is concealed. Anything in the brain-in-our-head that appears to have an instinctive, magical or supernatural quality – whatever that may mean – is taught to it by the small brains in our fingers. In order (64) for the brain-in-the-head to know what a stone is, the fingers first have to touch it, to feel its rough surface, its weight and density, to cut themselves on it. Only long afterwards does the brain realise that from a fragment of the rock one could make something which the brain will call a knife or something it will call an idol. The brain-in-the-head has always lagged behind the hands, and even now, when it seems to have overtaken them, the fingers still have to summarise for it the results of their tactile investigations, the shiver that runs across the epidermis when it touches clay” (65)<sup>17</sup>.

*“Note-se que, ao nascermos, os dedos ainda não têm cérebros, vão-nos formando pouco a pouco com o passar (82) do tempo e o auxílio do que os olhos vêem. O Auxílio dos olhos é importante, tanto quanto o auxílio daquilo que por*

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<sup>16</sup> Once again it is worth remembering another poem, ‘Declaration’ (*Declaração*): “No, there is no death. / Nor this stone is dead. / Nor is dead the fruit which has fallen: / They receive their life from the embrace of my fingers, / they breath in the rhythm of my blood, / from the breath which has touched them. / One day, too, when this hand becomes dried, / it will survive in the memory of another hand, / just as the mouth will keep in silence / the taste of the mouths it has kissed” –*idem*. (“*Não, não há morte. / Nem esta pedra é morta, / Nem morto está o fruto que tombou: / Dá-lhes vida o abraço dos meus dedos, / Respiram na cadência do meu sangue, / Do bafo que os tocou. / Também um dia, quando esta mão secar, / Na memória doutra mão perdurará, / Como a boca gaurdará caladamente / O sabor das bocas que beijou*” -251).

<sup>17</sup> And in order to prove that potters are divine beings with the capacity of giving breath and life Saramago thinks that the reference to Prometheus (*cf.* Pl. *Prt.* 320c-322d) is as useful as inevitable: “It is said that a long time ago a god decided to make a man out of the clay from the earth that he had previously created, and then, in order that man should have breath and life, he blew into his nostrils... It is a historical fact that from that memorable day onwards, the work of modelling clay ceased to be the exclusive attribute of the creator and passed to the incipient skills of his creatures, who, needless to (150) say, are not equipped with sufficient life-giving puff. As a result, fire was given responsibility for all the subsidiary operations which can... endow whatever emerges from the kilns with a reasonable semblance of life” (151) (“*Conta-se que em tempos antigos houve um deus que decidiu modelar um homem com barro da terra que antes havia criado, e logo, para que ele tivesse respiração e vida, lhe deu um sopro nas narinas... É um facto histórico que o trabalho de moldelagem, a partir daquele memorável dia, deixou de ser um atributo exclusivo do criador para passar à incipiente competência das criaturas, as quais, escusado seria dizer, não estão apetrechadas de suficiente sopro ventilador. O resultado foi ter-se assinado ao fogo a responsabilidade de todas as operações subsidiárias capazes de dar... uma razoável semelhança de coisa viva a quanto viesse a sair dos fornos*” - 182-3). “Cipriano Algor... plunged his two hands into the ashes... he grasped... the still buried head of a figurine... It happened to be the nurse. He brushed the ashes from her body and blew on her face, as if he were endowing her with some kind of life, giving to her the breath of his own lungs, the beating of his own heart” (167) (“*Cipriano Algor... e afundou as duas mãos nas cinzas... segurou... a cabeça ainda oculta de um boneco... Calhou ser a enfermeira. Sacudiu-lhe as cinzas do corpo, soprou-lhe na cara, parecia que estava a dar-lhe uma espécie de vida, a passar para ela o hausto dos seus próprios pulmões, o pulsar do seu próprio coração*” -202).

*eles é visto. Por isso o que os dedos sempre souberam fazer de melhor foi precisamente revelar o oculto. O que no cérebro possa ser percebido como conhecimento infuso, mágico ou sobrenatural, seja o que for que signifiquem sobrenatural, mágico e infuso, foram os dedos e os seus pequenos cérebros que lho ensinaram. Para que o cérebro da cabeça soubesse o que era a pedra, foi preciso primeiro que os dedos a tocassem, lhe sentissem a aspereza, o peso e a densidade, foi preciso que se ferissem nela. Só muito tempo depois o cérebro compreendeu que daquele pedaço de rocha se poderia fazer uma coisa a que chamaria faca e uma coisa a que chamaria ídolo. O cérebro da cabeça andou toda a vida atrasado em relação às mãos, e mesmo nestes tempos, quando nos parece que passou à frente delas, ainda são os dedos que têm de lhe explicar as investigações do tacto, o estremecimento da epiderme ao tocar o barro...” (83).*

The ethical geometry of Plato is clearly vertical and ascension –it is only necessary to remember that palinode in the *Phaedrus* (243e-257b)- marks the only recommendable direction. At the opposite poles of this vertical line lie the physical and ethical shadows and lights. Our souls “fell” from the intelligible world to become prisoners of matter, and this tragic descend was the origin of their walking blindly in a penumbra made of vulgar shadows or simulacra of the real Truth. In turn, what is horizontal is synonymous with ethical paralysis and this is also the position peculiar to those who, lacking the wings of Philosophy, have not been able to fly. José Saramago, on the other hand, proclaims the opposite course, that is, the conscious act of descending from the summit to the base, since only by choosing this option will we perceive the true origin of our intellectual activity and thus recognize the supreme ethical value of being rooted in matter, which is not a prison but a valuable base. Like Plato, Saramago asks us to imagine –to notice in fact- that our brain must be discovered in our fingers. Together with the great Athenian philosopher he even shares the idea that our existential adventure resembles a slow walk through darkness waiting for the revelation of what is hidden. Nonetheless, although at some point in this walk we feel already invaded by that which has an instinctive, magical or supernatural quality, supreme dignity always corresponds to the principle or ἀρχή which flows all the information to be later intellectually elaborated. If once more we recall Coleridge’s words, we will conclude that Saramago is enthusiastic about Plato’s images, but, at the same time, he is in love with that “experience” which Aristotle dignified considerably. Recovered from our ignorance like Plato’s prisoners, but, unlike what Plato wanted for them, rejecting consciously any sort of idealism or metaphysical flight, Saramago maintains that human beings must stop lagging behind distractedly, now paying attention to the data coming from tactile investigations, precisely the sort of signals that make our epidermis shiver before they reach our brains. Therefore, he does recommend the horizontal way in order to live joyfully in the material world, although he also warns us against so many caves or Centres which we cannot resist the temptation to enter. Our brains, that is, our Western contemporary societies have lagged once again behind potters’ fingers, that is, have lagged behind the centuries-old lesson provided by mud<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mud which, just because of its fragility, even demands to be treated like a human being: “... they say that fewer people are buying earthenware crockery, that some new imitation plastic stuff has come onto the market and that the customers prefer it, Well, that’s hardly unexpected, it was bound to happen sooner or later, earthenware cracks and chips, it breaks easily, whereas plastic is more resistant, more resilient, The difference is that earthenware is like people, it needs to be well treated” (21) (“... dizem que passou a haver menos compradores para o barro, que apareceram à venda umas louças de plástico a imitar e que é isso que os clientes preferem,

and Nature. Maybe we can still recognize Like Martha –he seems to suggest- that we are in error, or imitate the last great deed of Cipriano Algor and recognise ourselves as dust that must return to dust, before the ecologic and human tragedy, our dried and almost fossilized bones, being discovered by a brave speleologist at the bottom of a deep cave, confirms that there was an act of ὄβρις which could not be forgiven and became a tragedy, our tragedy.

“He got out of the van and went over the kiln... Cipriano Algor went over to the door of the house and started arranging the figurines on the ground, placing them firmly in the damp earth, and when he had put them all in their positions, he went back to the kiln... and the area in front of the house gradually filled up with figurines, then Cipriano Algor went into the pottery and very carefully removed from the shelves the defective figurines gathered there and reunited them with their sound and perfect siblings, the rain would eventually turn them into mud, and then into dust when the sun dried the mud, but that is a fate we all meet” (294)

*“Saiu da furgoneta e dirigiu os passos para o forno... Cipriano Algor aproximou-se da porta da casa e começou a dispor as estatuetas no chão, de pé, firmes na terra molhada, e quando as colocou a todas voltou ao forno... nenhum deles fez perguntas, um a um entraram também no forno e trouxeram bonecos para fora... e os bonecos iam pouco a pouco ocupando o espaço em frente da casa, e então Cipriano Algor entrou na olaria e retirou com todo o cuidado da prateleira as estatuetas defeituosas que ali tinha juntado, e reuniu-as às suas irmãs escorregadas e sãs, com a chuva tornar-se-ão em lama, e depois em pó quando o sol a secar, mas esse é o destino de qualquer de nós” (349).*

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*Não é nada que não devêssemos esperar, mais tarde ou mais cedo teria de suceder, o barro racha-se, esboicela-se, parte-se ao menor golpe, ao passo que o plástico resiste a tudo e não se queixa. A diferença está em que o barro é como as pessoas, precisa de que o tratem bem” -33).*