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The Gospel According to José Saramago: a Comparative Study of Critical Reception in Portugal, United States, and Canada

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Graduate Program in Comparative Literature
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOSÉ SARAMAGO: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CRITICAL RECEPTION IN
PORTUGAL, UNITED STATES, AND CANADA**

(Spin title: The Gospel According to Saramago: a Study of Critical Reception)

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Bruna Reis

Graduate Program

in

Comparative Literature

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts**

**School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada**

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
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ABSTRACT

Portuguese writer José Saramago (1922-2010) is well-known for controversial, challenging, and thought-provoking novels. In this study, I analyze the critical reception of his works in his home country, where *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991) was excluded from participation in the European Literary Prize on ideological grounds, and in the United States and Canada, where *Blindness* (1995) brought a wave of uniformly positive response until the publication of *Cain* (2011), perceived negatively as a didactic tool to convince readers of the unviability of Christianity.

This examination is framed by Iser's theory of aesthetic response. More specifically, I focus on the concepts of *virtual dimension of the text*, *passive synthesis*, and *negation* in order to reflect upon the transmission of ideology through the writing of literature, and the impact of the reader's personal convictions upon interpretation and reception. From the perspective of the reading process espoused by Iser, I argue that, in the case of Portugal, the religious reception of *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and *Cain* is negative because the reader's personal convictions compromise the formation of the *textual virtual dimension* and the processes of *passive synthesis* and *negation*. In the case of English-speaking North America, my argument is that Saramago's anti-religious ideology, offered through didacticism in *Cain*, changes a scenario of overwhelmingly positive response to negative opinions on the novel. In this case, it is not the reader's but Saramago's personal convictions that interfere with the reading process.

Keywords: Critical Reception, Reader Response, José Saramago, Wolfgang Iser, Portuguese Contemporary Literature, Ideology

DEDICATION

To Nathan,
who was born while I was pursuing this academic degree.
I love you beyond words.

E se não fossem suas palavras
Para diminuir a grandeza assustadora
De uma oportunidade?
Para me mostrar que eu também posso
Que é suficiente o que eu acho metade?

Dos resultados eu sinceramente me admiro
“Até parece, eu já sabia”
O que me falta depois de tanto rascunhar
É um pouco do teu sorriso de ousadia

Hoje acordei para me questionar:
Será que eu teria chegado até aqui?
Onde estariam engavetadas minhas folhas
Amarelando sem teu apoio
Sem tua fé e gentileza, Davi?

And to José Saramago,
who taught me the importance and beauty of questioning.

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INTRODUCTION

Publicly, José Saramago (1922-2010) was a man of few but profoundly controversial statements, a self-proclaimed Communist, Marxist, atheist, and humanist. The Portuguese writer's involvement in social causes and the sharp criticism of any form of power -- political or religious -- and of the institutions responsible for its exercise was also transposed to his acclaimed, Nobel Prize-worthy literary creations. This steady literary and social adherence to his convictions undoubtedly consecrated Saramago internationally. This ideology, however, has been the subject of discussion among several interpretive communities, especially in Portugal, to the extent that Adriano Schwartz, a literature professor in Brazil, hopes that the "ideological load" attached to him in his lifetime will gradually become detached from his works after his passing in 2010. Schwartz recognizes that the writer's self-proclaimed ideology "contaminated" his international -- and national, I would add -- repercussion.

Saramago's insertion into the Portuguese literary scene was and remains turbulent and his position in the canon is controversial and, at times, unaccepted. His 1991 novel *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo*¹ (*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, 1993) -- considered by some critics to be one of his best works -- shocked a good portion of Portuguese society. In a traditionally Catholic country, Saramago published a book that portrays Mary not as the venerated virgin of religion, but as a narrow-minded mother of nine children. In the novel, Jesus leaves his house after his father's death by crucifixion, and begins an apprenticeship with none other than the devil himself, provocatively called

¹ From this point on, I will refer to this novel as *Evangelho*. I will also mention the titles of other novels in Portuguese and, when necessary, the translated title will appear in parentheses followed by the year the translation was published.

“pastor.” God is a vengeful, blood-thirsty, egocentric being whose only purpose is to attract more followers in order to satisfy his vanity. His son, Jesus, neither understands nor accepts the need for him to die for humanity and tries to sabotage God’s plan. The only good thing that happens to this confused, immature Jesus is his passionate and intensely sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene, a prostitute. For all these reasons, Saramago’s novel was excluded from participation in the prestigious European Literary Prize by the Portuguese government. The writer then opted for self-exile in Lanzarote, a Spanish island off the African coast, and thus an already complex relationship with his countrymen intensified.

In 2009, Saramago published *Caim* (*Cain*, 2011), his last novel, and the 1991 polemics were revived. In this work, after killing his brother and being cursed by God to be a wanderer, Cain travels through time and witnesses problematic and much debated events recorded in the Old Testament, such as God’s order that Abraham should kill Isaac to prove his faith, and the destruction of Sodom. Saramago’s portrayal of God is the same as in *Evangelho*, and Cain, much like Jesus, has a highly sexual relationship with Lilith, who was supposedly Adam’s first wife, not recorded in the Bible. In the end, while in Noah’s ark, Cain throws everyone overboard, which leads to Noah’s despair and suicide. With this ending, Saramago suggests that the end of Christianity is the solution to many of the problems and conflicts of contemporary society or that it should have never existed in the first place. The large number of books, articles and reviews against these novels led me to focus on religious reception in Portugal in order to understand the sometimes virulent criticism of his work. I explore this further in the second chapter.

With the translation of *Memorial do Convento* in 1987 (*Baltasar and Blimunda*), Saramago enjoyed his first wave of attention in the United States and in Canada. The second came with *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira* (1995, *Blindness*, 1997) and the Nobel Prize in 1998. From *Memorial* to the 2008 novel *A Viagem do Elefante* (*The Elephant's Journey*, 2010), Saramago received steady positive and admiring response in North America. With *Caim*, however, this scenario changed. In North-American reviews of the novel, critics comment on Saramago's didacticism as an unpleasant, unnecessary and disappointing aspect of the writer's last work. I explore this further in the third chapter.

Having these different frameworks in mind, in the present study I analyze Saramago's reception in Portugal, and in the United States and Canada relying on Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response. More specifically, I focus on the concepts of *virtual dimension of the text*, *passive synthesis*, and *negation* in order to reflect upon the transposition of Saramago's ideology into his literature through didacticism, on one hand, and how the reader's ideology influences and shapes reception on the other. My justification for this theoretical approach is contained in the first chapter.

In the case of Portugal, I argue that the combination of the reader's convictions and Saramago's transmission of ideology through literary didacticism account for the predominantly negative reception among religious readers. In the case of English-speaking North America, I argue that Saramago's didacticism accounts for the abrupt change in reception prompted by *Caim*. In order to attest that the influence of Saramago's didacticism upon reception is not beneficial, I focus on a specific and strong Portuguese interpretive community that has received his works in a predominantly negative manner and contrast the results with the differences in reception in the United States and Canada, where

response to Saramago's work is uniformly positive (with the exception of *Caim*). These North-American countries appear together here because of the high level of similarity in the responses analyzed and also because the timeline of Saramago's appearance and solidification as an artist is the same in both countries (chapter 1, *infra*).

It is well-known that 'ideology' is a controversial and problematic term due to the overwhelming variety of definitions and interpretations it invites. For instance, even though Warren Frederick Morris wrote *Understanding Ideology* with the purpose of shedding some light upon this concept, he affirms already on the first page of the preface that "there is no clear consensus on a concept of ideology" (vii). He then offers a variety of approaches, from the political sciences to psychology, thus exposing the fluidity of the term. For the purposes of this study, ideology as defined in *The Oxford Dictionary* suffices: "a system of ideas and ideals forming the basis of an economic or political theory; the set of beliefs characteristic of a social group or individual" (707).

It is important to emphasize that my focus here is not on ideology itself, but on the way it is transmitted through Saramago's literature on one hand, and how it guides and shapes interpretation and reception on the other. In other words, I will neither oppose nor defend the writer's political and religious point of view, and the same is true of religious reception in Portugal: it is not my intention to offer a critique of this interpretive community's belief system. In short, I am interested in the act of reading as process and the functions and effects of convictions in the creation of meaning. For these reasons, the general concept of ideology used here does not derive from any specific field of inquiry.

Nevertheless, a few introductory words on Saramago's ideology (or belief system) are necessary in order to have a general understanding of the convictions that shaped his

literature. He was, in his own words, an “ateu empedernido” (“a hard-core atheist”, Castanheira), a “comunista hormonal” (“a hormonal Communist”, *La Jornada* 19 Jun 2010), and in his diaries he offers his reasons for agreeing with Marx. In regards to institutionalized religion, “não me tiram nem sequer um grama ou um átomo da minha raiva contra a igreja católica” (Castanheira).²

When speaking of the transposition of ideology to literature, one could justifiably argue that I am mistaken in confusing the statements articulated by Saramago’s characters or narrator with the author’s convictions. However, the writer himself repeatedly affirmed that he was unable to understand the theoretical debate around the separation of narrator from author. For him, “a figura de narrador não existe (...) só o autor exerce função narrativa real na obra de ficção, qualquer que ela seja, conto, romance ou teatro”³ (*Revista Ler* 28). While this claim may or may not be generalizable to literary fiction as a whole, I accept Saramago’s affirmations with respect to his own works, and regard any opinion expressed in his novels that resembles his publicly-stated convictions as his own.

Given the hostile environment created in Portugal by Saramago’s novels that refer directly to the Bible (chapter 2) and the writer’s success in English-speaking North America (chapter 1, 3), the initial aim of this study was to compare and contrast religious reception in all three countries in order to examine the responses elicited by *Evangelho* and *Caim* in a traditionally Catholic country and their counterparts where Catholicism is not predominant. In regards to Portugal, the focal point remained the same (chapter 2), but the type of reception to be analyzed further in the United States and Canada was modified for a

² “no one will remove from me one gram or one atom of my anger against the Catholic Church”. (From this point on, short translations will be included in the body of the text, and longer translations will appear in footnotes. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.)

³ “the figure of the narrator doesn’t exist (...) only the author exercises a real narrative function in the fictional work, be it a short story, a novel or a theatre play”.

variety of reasons: the scarcity of reviews produced from a religious perspective (Catholic or not)⁴ which do not resemble the outrageous response in Portuguese response in the slightest; Saramago's late reappearance in the English-speaking North-American literary scene with *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira*; and the critics' general focus on national books or works written in English.

Another initial idea that was changed in the course of this project was the inclusion of Brazilian responses in the corpus to be analyzed. As Klobucka correctly points out, there is "an unflagging interest in Saramago among literary critics in Brazil, where for many years already he has been the bestselling Portuguese author" (xx). Following Saramago's death, a plethora of newspaper articles that recounted his amicable relationship with the country were published. His friendship with Moacir Scliar and Jorge Amado, and the fact that Saramago decided to publish *Evangelho* and *A Viagem do Elefante* in Brazil before he did so in his home country were constantly mentioned as signs of the writer's affection for the country. After the 1998 Nobel Prize, Saramago has been constantly called "ours" by Brazilian readers owing to the approximation provided by language (de Sá Capuano). It seems, then, that the exclusion of Brazil from this study needs explanation.

Although Brazil is an officially Catholic country, *Evangelho* and *Caim* were overwhelmingly well received. On November 06, 1991 the most circulated magazine in the country, *Veja*, published Roberto Pompeu de Toledo's seven-page euphoric article on

⁴ For examples of responses from a religious perspective in the USA and Canada see Gabriel Meyer's article on the *National Catholic Register*, Gerald T. Cobb's "A Dilemma of Identity", "Citizenspeak", "Excavating Plato", "Life Eternal?", and Joseph Bottum's "Aesop Gone to Seed."

Evangelho. Pompeu de Toledo affirms that Saramago “é o melhor escritor vivo da língua portuguesa” (“is the best living writer of the Portuguese language”, 90) and goes on to praise his style (91), his narrative techniques (95), the portrayal of Jesus as a radical humanist (91) and to deem “genial” Saramago’s most famous sentence in the novel, “é preciso ser-se Deus para gostar tanto de sangue” (“one has to be God to like blood so much”, 94). Despite the content of the book and the article, which would be enough to incite a few outbursts⁵, only two short responses were sent to the magazine three weeks later.

Angry religious responses, as the ones penned by Professor Felipe Aquino, are definitely a part of this panorama, but the texts usually refer to Saramago’s public statements instead of discoursing about the writer’s literature. Aquino, for instance, was furious at Saramago’s affirmation that “the Pope is cynical” (*Terra* 14 Oct 2009). His text, entitled “Carta ao Dr. Saramago” (“Letter to Mr. Saramago”) was published in different magazines and websites under different titles, but he fails to allude to even one of the writer’s works. At the end of his text, Aquino affirms that he does not hate Saramago; in fact, Aquino “forgives” the writer and calls him “brother” (03).

From a literary perspective, *Evangelho* and *Caim* did not receive nearly as much negative attention as in Portugal. In fact, religious response in Brazil has generated mellow scholarly articles that draw on the potentially positive possibilities of a new interpretation of the world offered by Saramago in his Bible-related novels. Examples of this approach are Johnny Artur dos Santos’ “O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo de José Saramago: Um Convite à Releitura da Identidade Cristã” (“The Gospel According to Jesus Christ by José

⁵ In his scholarly article, Frederico Helou Doca de Andrade questions the superficiality of the article published by *Veja* and a similar text released by another important magazine, *Isto É*.

Saramago: an Invitation to a Re-reading of Christian Identity”) and Paulo Sérgio Carlos’ “Caim de José Saramago: Um Possível Diálogo Entre Crentes e Descrentes” (“Caim by José Saramago: a Possible Dialogue Between Believers and Non-Believers”). Dos Santos argues that, with *Evangelho*, Saramago meant to criticize not only religion *per se* but also the images of God formed by Christian tradition over time. He concludes that “a obra de Saramago pode ajudar a reinterpretar a identidade cristã ao abandonar a imagem de um deus sacrificador em prol de um Deus amoroso.”⁶ Similarly, Carlos believes that, with *Caim*, the writer “pretende lutar contra uma apresentação banalizada da Bíblia e que, infelizmente, constitui uma leitura comum de muitos cristãos em nossos dias.”⁷ The scholar also affirms that the author in question suggests that people abandon violence, discrimination and this oppression of a terrible god in favor of solidarity, fraternity and kindness. Carlos perceives a humanism in the novel that is also detected by North-American readers up to *A Viagem do Elefante* (2008). With *Caim*, however, the scenario changes, as I argue in the third chapter.

In Brazilian non-religious response, the focus on the possibilities of new interpretations is also pursued. Examples of scholarly texts that draw on this theme are Marcos Aparecido Lopes’ “Deus e o Diabo na Hermenêutica de Saramago” (“God and the Devil in Saramago’s Hermeneutics”) and Robson Lacerda Dutra’s “In Nomine Hominis.”

⁶ “Saramago’s work might aid in the reinterpretation of Christian identity by abandoning the image of a god given to sacrifices in favor of a loving God”.

⁷ “Saramago intends to fight against a vulgarized presentation of the Bible, which, unfortunately, constitutes the common reading among many Christians nowadays”.

Some religious readers regard *Evangelho* as Saramago's attempt at comprehending, accepting and possibly making peace with God. For instance, Mark Carpenter believes that *Evangelho* should not be read literally. Implicitly,

a intenção primordial do autor não foi ferir os cristãos. Sua obra é um lamento.

Ouvimos na voz do narrador certa melancolia - lamenta que não pode aceitar o cristianismo por barreiras intelectuais e aparentes contradições internas, mas que, se pudesse, a vida faria mais sentido (107).⁸

Similarly, Waldecy Tenório contends that, in *Evangelho*, Saramago goes through a spiritual process that results in a “grande reflexão teológica” (“grand theological reflection”, 304). He also believes that Saramago's acceptance of Jesus is a sign of a spiritual struggle, even though in reality this acceptance has nothing to do with the Christian, divine version of Jesus but with a reportedly historical man. Tenório concludes that “entre Saramago e Deus há um sentimento que podemos chamar de nostálgico (...) um [está] procurando o outro” (“between Saramago and God there is a feeling we may call nostalgic (...) they are looking for each other”, 304). Brazilian religious response, then, is essentially the opposite of Portuguese texts produced from this perspective, as I demonstrate in the second chapter.

This overtly optimistic reception, almost devoid of any analytical criticism, also characterizes non-religious response. For instance, even though *Caim* was written as a clear critique of biblical inconsistencies, scholar Cláudio de Sá Capuano goes to the extent of

⁸ “the author's primordial intention was not to hurt Christians. His work is a lamentation. We hear in the narrator's voice a certain melancholy – he laments that he cannot accept Christianity due to intellectual barriers and apparent internal contradictions, but that, if he could do so, life would make more sense”.

affirming that “não há no livro um único posicionamento crítico em relação às incoerências do texto bíblico” (“in the book there is not one single critical position in relation to the incoherencies of the biblical text”).

Saramago’s reputation is so well-established in Brazil, that, in short, the excluding factor about this country is that responses to Saramago are uniformly positive and mostly a-critical, regardless of the interpretive community. A variety of factors explain the writer’s acceptance. First and foremost, the Nobel Prize is generally regarded by Brazilian readers as an honor bestowed not only on the writer or his country, but on every Portuguese-speaking nation, as I mentioned earlier. Second, even though Brazil is still a predominantly Catholic country, religiosity is exponentially less embraced and defended than in Portugal. Arguably, Brazilian readers generally do not relate to the acerbic criticism of religion present in *Evangelho*, and perhaps even find it fair based on the imposition of this same inflexible religion through the process of colonization initiated in Brazil by the Portuguese Crown over 500 years ago. This hypothesis also arguably explains the novel’s success in the country: it was the best-seller book by a Portuguese writer until the publication of *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira* in 1995, which accounts for 25% of Saramago’s sales in Brazil out of a total of 1.4 million copies (Sousa).

Taking into account the overtly positive scenario of reception in Brazil thus presented, the inclusion of this country would be unfruitful for my purposes, as it did not witness any particular event that significantly impacted reception (as it is the case in Portugal) nor did it present a substantial shift in response (as it is the case in English-speaking North America). In addition, it does not fit into the reception frame either of Portugal or of United States and Canada. For these reasons, Brazil is an entirely separate

case study for reception and, if included here, would surpass the scope of an investigation undertaken at a Master's level.

Considering Saramago's intricate and puzzling writing style, another intriguing approach to studying his reception is the impact of translation upon English-speaking North-American reception. This angle, however, is enough material for a separate examination as well. Moreover, American and Canadian reviewers comment profusely on the high quality of the translations penned by Margaret Jull Costa, Saramago's official translator after Giovanni Pontiero's death. Ian Stavans mentions that *A Caverna* (*The Cave*, 2000) was "lucidly translated" ("Is José Saramago an Anti-Semite?" 90); Nedra Crowe-Evers read *As Pequenas Memórias* (2006, *Small Memories*, 2010) in "finely translated prose" (62); Jonathan Keates regards *A Caverna* as "brilliantly rendered in Margaret Jull Costa's agile English version"; and Richard Eder thinks that *A Viagem do Elefante* was "skillfully translated." Both translators, Pontiero and Jull Costa, are celebrated professionals who received an extensive number of awards for their work with Saramago's novels. For these reasons, I have not included issues pertaining to translation in the third chapter, although the facts mentioned above should not prevent other scholars from pursuing this interesting matter.

Finally, this study is divided into three chapters: chapter one presents an overview of Saramago's reception in the countries selected, a literature review and a description of the theoretical approach; in the second chapter I examine Portuguese religious reception with the aid of Iser's *virtual dimension of the text*, *passive synthesis*, and *negation* to argue that a reader's rigid convictions compromise the experience with a literary artwork; in the third chapter I analyze the writer's reception in the United States and Canada also relying

on Iser's aforementioned terms, but the focus here is shifted from the reader's radical convictions and their effect on the actualization of a text to the transmission of the writer's ideology through didacticism. In this last case, however, my focal point is not a specific interpretive community but rather the novel *Caim*.

The strong reactions – both positive and negative – elicited by Saramago's works provide a fertile ground for the study of literary reception as well as of the functioning of the reading process, as it is manifested by both academic and non-academic readers. As we will see, it is as much the man as his works which become the focus of debate – or, rather, the works are perceived as vehicles for the author's ideology and judged according to their conformity with or distance from the reader's own belief system. While, as I have stated, this conflation of the ideology of text and author is not mistaken in the case of Saramago, the excesses, both in the literary expression of his ideology and in its reception, provide insights into the function of literature as a tool for social criticism that are not as easily identified in less extreme cases.

CHAPTER 1

An Overview of Saramago's General Reception, and Theoretical Approach

Before proceeding to the examination proposed, it is important to understand the general reception of Saramago's works in Portugal, in the United States, and in Canada with their peculiarities and cultural aspects. My goal here is to offer a general background against which the specific type or focus of reception that stands out in each country is pinpointed and then analyzed in the subsequent chapters, namely religious reception in Portugal and criticism on *Caim* in the USA and Canada. By general reception I mean non-religious book reviews published in magazines and/or newspapers of considerable circulation, scholarly contributions, critical biographies, death notes and books as well as opinions regarding Saramago's entire body of work, as these were abundant following his death on June 18, 2010.

It is obviously an impossible task to read all the reviews that have been published on Saramago's literature, therefore I have consulted over 50 texts in the case of English-speaking North America to form what I believe is a solid panorama of his reputation as a writer, and how he has been received, especially in the USA, a country that warmly welcomed him, as I will show shortly. I have focused mainly on reviews related to books written after the author was granted the Nobel Prize in 1998, as this is the time when critics in the United States and in Canada develop an important interest in Saramago's works. Given that the writer was already well-established in the Portuguese literary scene before this prize, reviews that date before 1998 are also part of the examination.

Considering that Orlando Grossege's annotated bibliography "Sobre a Obra de José Saramago: a Consagração e o Panorama da Crítica de 1998 até 2004" ("On Saramago's *Oeuvre*: the Consecration and the Panorama of Criticism from 1998 to 2004") provides a clear picture of the writer's reception in Portugal, I relied heavily on his detailed mapping pertaining to this country. Although it was published in 2005, the article still reflects the current situation in Portugal according to my research, even after the incredibly rapid production of books by and on Saramago, instigated by a sudden interest in the writer and his works after his passing. For this reason, Grossege informs this chapter. I have added my findings to the scholar's in order to offer a scenario of Saramago's reception that is as accurate and complete as possible.

Instead of being organized by country of reception, this panorama will be presented under four categories that have been detected in the reviews: literary reception, national-political reception, social reception, and bio-literary reception, and within these categories the most recurrent themes will be highlighted. Another category, biographical reception, i.e. comments and opinions on Saramago's personal life and public statements with no mention of his literary creations, would complete this overview. However, it is more amply practiced by religious critics, and since it does not refer to Saramago's literature, it has not been included here. The explanation of the theoretical approach that informs the present thesis succeeds this panorama.

1.1 Overview of General Reception

1.1.1 Literary Reception

Almost twenty years elapsed between Saramago's first book, the novel *Terra do Pecado* (1947, the writer was 24 years old) and his second, a collection of poems entitled *Os Poemas Possíveis* (1966). Both books were quickly forgotten, as were the volumes of poetry *Possivelmente Alegria* (1970) and *O Ano de 1993* (1975), the volumes of *crônicas*⁹ *Deste Mundo e do Outro* (1971), *A Bagagem do Viajante* (1973), *As Opiniões que o DL Teve* (1974) and *Os Apontamentos* (1976), and the short stories contained in *Objecto Quase* (1978), none of them available in English. According to Eduardo Pitta, "the [Portuguese] *establishment* ignored" Saramago (37), apparently not on literary but on political grounds. In other words, the indifference with which Saramago's works were received up to the end of the 1970s was not entirely founded on their literary quality but on exterior motives. Pitta cites Saramago's involvement with the Communist party and the 1974 Revolution in which he participated actively as instances of such motives. Add to this list the fact that, in 1966, the celebrated writer Isabel da Nóbrega left her then husband, João Gaspar Simões, "the most influential man of the Portuguese literary sphere", to live with Saramago (they stayed together for 20 years), and we can understand why Pitta portrays the writer (in a positive way) as "an intruder" in the literary circle of the time, concluding that "Saramago é um

⁹ *Crônicas* is the genre of reflections and opinions on everyday life, written from a non-fictional perspective. Portuguese newspapers usually have sections allotted to these short texts with clear identification of their authors. In Saramago's case, his *crônicas* focus on political and social matters. His last texts of this genre, initially published on his blog, are now compiled in the books *O Caderno* (2009) and *O Caderno II* (2011 - *The Notebook*, 2010.)

grande escritor a quem o Meio¹⁰ nunca perdoou não ter sido um dos seus.” (“Saramago is a great writer whom the Circle never forgave for not being one of them”, 37). The author in question would probably think that Pitta could not have said it any better.

When the 1974 Revolution managed to depose a totalitarian regime established in 1933, Saramago was working for the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* and was virtually unknown to the general reading public. After assuming the direction of the editorial team and firing several people who opposed the newly conquered democracy, he saw his own actions backfire after six months: his colleagues decided to lay him off in 1975, a blessing in disguise that prompted his decision to make a living exclusively in literature. The second novel, *Manual de Pintura e Caligrafia* (1977, *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, 1995¹¹) still encountered hostility, but *Viagem a Portugal* (1981, *Journey to Portugal*, 2000), commissioned by the publishing house Círculo de Leitores (The Circle of Readers) became a best-seller (Pitta 37), possibly due to the patriotic appeal of the title. Nevertheless, it was only with the publication of *Memorial do Convento*¹² (1982, *Baltasar and Blimunda*, 1987) that Saramago was finally consecrated as a creative writer (Pitta 37). Indeed, the impact of this ingenious novel is decisive and a lasting moment in his career. It not only secured the writer’s place as an artist in Portugal, but it also introduced him to English-speaking North America where it was received enthusiastically (Eberstadt, Goodman).

Regarding scholarly attention, literary studies in Portugal tend to focus on pre-Nobel novels because they are considered “more literary” than Saramago’s subsequent

¹⁰ *Meio* means ‘half’, ‘middle’ or ‘midst’. In this specific case, I have opted for *Circle* to refer to the literary scene Saramago entered, composed mainly of a group of prominent Portuguese writers and literary critics who were already well-established in their careers.

¹¹ All information regarding the translation of Saramago’s works into English is extracted from Fernando Aguilera’s *A Consistência dos Sonhos* (2008).

¹² Saramago received the Prize Pen Clube and the Literary Prize Município de Lisboa for *Memorial* in 1982. The novel counted six editions after one year of its first publication (Aguilera 96).

works. Among the novels published up to 2005, *Memorial do Convento* was analyzed “to the point of saturation”, and it has been the central focus of Portuguese scholarship for three decades (Grossegeesse 185). Unfortunately, these studies are rarely developed in connection to other artistic expressions or other fields of inquiry. The architect José Joaquín Parra Bañón, for instance, wrote an exceptional thesis on the architectural thinking behind Saramago’s imagination in 1999. The Portuguese writer followed the stages of the work by reading Parra Bañón’s drafts, but the latter did not penetrate into Saramaguian studies in Portugal, because, according to Grossegeesse, scholars in the country are not open to interdisciplinarity (186). Nevertheless, Bañón’s work was turned into a book in 2004 and published in Portugal, but it is rarely mentioned in bibliographies of studies on Saramago. With regard to this rarity of interdisciplinary works, *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira* (1995, translation *Blindness*, 1997) shapes the opposite scenario in English-speaking North America, as will be shown shortly.

Grossegeesse also notes that, in comparison with the interest invested in Saramago’s novels in Portugal, the short stories, poems, political writings and theatre plays are much less studied, and the same is valid for the United States and Canada. In Portugal it is a matter of opinion, as these works are unjustly devalued in the reading public’s eye due to the fact that they are commissioned, and the few critical pieces there are on Saramago’s theatre plays constantly refer back to his novels (185). In the USA and Canada, on the other hand, the paucity of criticism may simply be a matter of availability: the theatre plays *A Noite*¹³ (1979), *Que Farei com Este Livro?* (1980), *A Segunda Vida de Francisco de Assis*

¹³ Saramago received the prestigious award bestowed yearly by the Association of Portuguese Critics (Associação de Críticos Portugueses) for *A Noite* in 1979. *In Nomine Dei* was awarded the Grand Prize for Theatre in 1993 (Aguilera 86, 116).

(1987) and *In Nomine Dei* (1993), published in book format, among other texts that were published before *Memorial do Convento*, have not been translated into English. In addition, the novel is the genre that introduced and consecrated Saramago in English-speaking North America.

In an attempt to understand the rarity of criticism of Saramago's non-novelistic works, Grossegeesse suggests that the "ideological load" transposed from author to work -- i.e. Saramago's militancy against religious power over people and his communist ideals, especially acute in his *crônicas* -- is one of the reasons. This is a valid hypothesis that I will explore further, as it is also valid for criticism of the writer's novels, not in relation to quantity but to the subject matter present in the reviews gathered for this study.

Grossegeesse's hypothesis might be correct in the case of Portugal, but, in my view, the scenario would remain unchanged in North America even if some titles were made available in English, not only because the preferred genre in this continent is the novel when it comes to the author in question, as I mentioned earlier, but because it was only in the mid-1990s that Saramago stopped creating or reporting stories that were set exclusively in Portugal, with its specific history and culture, to privilege universal story lines that resonate with readers from a variety of countries. Such is the case with *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira*, *Todos os Nomes* (1997, *All the Names*, 1999), and *As Intermittências da Morte* (2005, *Death With Interruptions*, 2008), among others.

Another theme explored in the literary investigations conducted in Portugal is Saramago's use of proverbs and quotations. To cite a few examples, in *José Saramago: da Cegueira à Lucidez*, António José Borges offers a heartfelt but, at times, superficial

analysis of the use of this kind of cultural intertextuality. Contrastingly, it was treated in greater depth by Helena Vaz Duarte in *Provérbios Segundo José Saramago* and Américo Lindeza Diogo's article. In the USA, Adriana Alves de Paula Martins and Mark Sabine gather scholarly contributions on this theme in *In Dialogue with Saramago: Essays in Comparative Literature*. Because of cultural differences, North-American reviewers, such as Janice Kulyk Keefer, have to be especially aware of foreign proverbs to detect Saramago's mastery in using them.

The possible relationship between author and the narrative voice is another theme that attracts interest in general, although Saramago affirmed vehemently on many occasions that “o que o autor vai narrando nos seus livros é, tão-somente, a sua história pessoal [...] aquela que dificilmente ousaria ou saberia contar com a sua própria voz e em seu próprio nome” (*Cadernos III* 206)¹⁴. North-American reviews touch upon the matter in passing by asking whether or not Saramago is the narrator or by affirming that the narrator does not exist; that Saramago is both the narrator and the author; that he is a character through the narrator's voice and intrusions in the texts, etc. The Portuguese scholars Ana Paula Arnaut, Almeida, and Baltrusch offer academic studies on the theme (Grossegeisse 185).

¹⁴ “What the author narrates is simply his personal story [...] the one that he would hardly dare or know how to tell in his own voice, under his own name.” In Portuguese, *história* refers to a non-fictional story, and *estória* is an invented account. Here, Saramago clarifies that even his fictional works are shaped by and reflect his personal life. (*Cadernos de Lanzarote* is a five-volume collection of Saramago's diaries, published between 1993 and 1997. When quotations are necessary, I will refer to the volume in Roman numbers followed by the specific page in in-text citations. See the fourth volume of *Cadernos*, pages 80 and 191, and “O Autor Está no Livro Todo” [*Revista Ler* July/August 2010, 28-30] for examples of Saramago's opinion on the author/narrator divide.)

An interesting fact in Portugal (extendable to Brazil) is that scholars and intellectuals who develop their studies in and outside the country are frequently dedicated to Saramago's *oeuvre* permanently, making it the pillar of their careers. This list includes important contributions by David Frier, Ana Paula Martins, Beatriz Berrini, Maria Alzira Seixo, Horácio Costa, Anna Klobucka, José Manuel Mendes, Luís de Sousa Rebelo, Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva, Luciana Stegnano Picchio and Carlos Reis, among many others. Klobucka (*On Saramago*), Alves de Paula Martins (*In Dialogue with Saramago*) and Frier¹⁵ have contributed to the insertion of Saramago in the English-speaking world.

In comparison to Portuguese reviewers, American and Canadian reviewers receive Saramago and his works enthusiastically. In their opinion, the writer is “masterful, astounding, insightful, brilliant, marvelous” (Corbett), “fascinating, the most tender of writers, one of the best working today” (Caris), and “one of the greatest minds and writers of the past century” (Palen). Saramago dominates the “effective magic” (Miller) necessary to produce books that are “incredible”, “breathtaking”, “heartbreaking”, “more frightening than Stephen King, as unrelenting as a dream”, “surprisingly gripping”, “a powerful achievement” (Berrett) and that “will leave you pained, awed, thrilled, shaken” (Caris). Even at the end of his literary career, “his powers have not dimmed” (Berrett), and even with his death “his books will live on, at least for as long as society does” (Self). In short, Saramago's *oeuvre* is slowly, but certainly, finding its place in English-speaking North America.

In spite of this enthusiasm, however, there are elements of Saramago's literary creations that are not entirely accepted by the North-American reading public. His puzzling

¹⁵ Frier works at the University of Leeds, England, and has published extensively on Saramago. Even though he is not part of the scope of this study, it is essential to mention his admirable dedication to the Portuguese writer in question and his fellow countryman Eça de Queiróz.

writing style, for instance, with its long paragraphs and the absence of punctuation and quotation marks in dialogues is still viewed with hesitation. Nevertheless, it is perceived by the majority that comment on it as serving the purpose of novels such as *Ensaio*, in which the labyrinthine style, as understood by reviewers, mimics the chaotic situations of the scenario (Ledgard, Marchand, Murphy, Williams). Ultimately, the North-American reading public recognizes that, once one gets used to reading a Saramaguian novel, the issue of style is not an obstacle to enjoying his literature (Kulyk Keefer).

While another element common to the three countries is the concern with the difficulty of placing Saramago's novels into fixed categories, this theme is only touched upon in passing, and not one single review examined for this study lingered on this discussion. For instance, Stavans settles the issue on *Evangelho* by labeling it "a hybrid" (676). Considering the diary-aspect of *Manual de Pintura e Caligrafia* and the autobiographical tone of *Levantado do Chão* as examples, this inquiry has the potential to be permanently open-ended and unsatisfactorily answered. Personally, I share scholar Manoel Simões' opinion on this matter, offered in his review of *A Jangada de Pedra* (1986, *The Stone Raft*, 1994 - chapter 2, *infra*, 70).

Contrary to the Portuguese reading public, readers in the United States and Canada comment profusely on the lack of thematic originality in Saramago's novels. For instance, William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* and Camus' *The Plague* rarely fail to be placed alongside *Ensaio*, and *A Caverna* (2000, *The Cave*, 2002) cannot be detached from the original myth by Plato, even though there has never been any claim to "originality" on the author's part. In fact, Saramago admitted on several occasions that "aquilo que escrevo foi escrito antes, como tudo o que fazemos já foi feito há muito tempo, antes de nós. Tudo é

assim, na vida”¹⁶ (*Revista Ler*, cover). To Saramago’s credit, the majority that comment on this issue consider that the lack of thematic originality does not hinder him from creating masterpieces, superior to any previous take on the same theme (Stavans, “A Fisher of Men” 675).

Embellished adjectives are also abundant in North-American reviews of *Caim* (2009), the last book published before Saramago’s death and posthumously translated in 2011 (*Cain*). However, this novel breaks the pattern of the predominantly positive reception presented so far. To cite a few examples, John Howard Wolf touches upon originality once again, and cleverly compares Saramago to Cervantes, a writer against the church in his own time who escaped threats of Inquisition by disguising his view of this religious institution in the brilliant *Don Quijote*. For Wolf, Cervantes “expressed himself with art, humor and elevated literary technique”, and, contrary to Saramago, “created a masterpiece [...] without indulging in cheap and vulgar means.” In this harsh review, Wolf professes his own atheism in the last lines, consequently clarifying that an atheism-based work of art is not always well received by readers of similar ideology, even if it was written by a renowned and respected author. Similarly, Phil Jourdan goes to the extent of affirming that “*Cain* is unnecessary; as a work in itself it is a mess, and as a conclusion to an important career, it doesn’t seem to fit.” In comparison to *Evangelho*, as Jourdan believes, the novel in question “is a disappointment”, because it uses “all the cheap tricks that *The Gospel* mostly managed to avoid.” For the critic, Saramago’s “adolescent sarcasm and anger” transpire through the narrative fabric. Michael Hingston, who believes *Cain* is “a savage,

¹⁶ “what I write has been written before, just like everything we do was already done a long time ago, before us. Everything is like this in life.”

disruptive work”, also shares these opinions. This abrupt shift in response is my focal point in the third chapter.

Finally, Grossegeesse believes that *Evangelho* is the most famous novel outside Portugal, even more than *Memorial* (188). The reviews I have read so far lead me to think that *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*¹⁷ (1984, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, 1991) is equally well received (Ilan Stavans, for instance, calls it “a sweet masterpiece”, “A Fisher of Men” 675). And if international prizes are a measure of an author’s positive reception, *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis* brought the following to its creator, among others: the Portuguese Prémio Pen Clube (1985), Prémio Dom Dinis (1986), Grinzane-Cavour (Italy, 1987) and The Independent Foreign Fiction (England, 1993).

In addition, Grossegeesse asserts that *Todos os Nomes* and *A Caverna* were the books that confirmed Saramago’s entrance into the international canon (189). Considering that the annotated bibliography that informs this chapter embraces Portuguese (and briefly international) response up to 2005, the scholar was not able to foresee the impact of *Ensaio* in English-speaking North America after it was turned into a movie, released as *Blindness*, by Fernando Meirelles in 2008. The number of reviews available on the novel after that year support my conclusion. I cannot go as far as the scholar in question and affirm that this is the case internationally, but *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira* seems to be the decisive novel to establish Saramago in English-speaking North America.¹⁸ It certainly contributed to his

¹⁷ 20,000 copies of *O Ano* were sold in Portugal after one month of its publication (Aguilera 97). It is after this novel that the Portuguese media requests numerous interviews of Saramago (99), paying very late attention to the writer.

¹⁸ For instance, when prompted by the phrase “Blindness book reviews”, Google returns over two million results.

Nobel Prize, which, in consequence, brought 12 *Doctor Honoris Causa* nominations to the author in 1999 alone, including one by the University of Massachusetts (Aguilera 128). According to the website of the José Saramago Foundation, the writer received this distinction 38 times in a variety of countries.

Despite Saramago's repeated allusions to his "enemies" in Portugal, profusely recorded in his *Cadernos de Lanzarote* and in Miguel Gonçalves Mendes' 2010 documentary *José & Pilar*, he kept a cordial, and sometimes intimate relationship with many of the critics and scholars mentioned here. Baptista-Bastos's book of interviews, for instance, in Saramago's opinion, "é um ato de amor. De amor à verdade, sobretudo" ("is an act of love. Above all, love for truth" *Cadernos IV* 270).

1.1.2 National-Political Reception

It is well known that Portugal, Saramago's traditionally Catholic homeland, was deeply disturbed by the publication of *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo* in 1991 (*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, 1993). In alliance with the Church, the Secretary of Culture António Sousa Lara excluded the novel from the list of finalists to the prestigious European Literary Prize in 1992, affirming that the book "não representa Portugal [...] A obra atacou princípios que têm a ver com o património religioso dos portugueses. Longe de os unir, dividiu-os"¹⁹ (*Público* 25 Apr 1992). Sousa Lara's action was supported by the then prime-minister, now president, Aníbal Cavaco Silva (*Diário de Notícias* 19 Jun 2010). This episode was widely reported, and, as expected, the writer was personally offended, and

¹⁹ "doesn't represent Portugal [...] The book attacked principles that have to do with the religious heritage of the Portuguese people. Far from uniting them, it polarized them."

reacted by opting for a permanent self-exile in Lanzarote, an island off the Spanish and African coast, where he lived with his wife, the Spanish journalist Pilar del R o, until his death. Even though the writer insisted that his decision to move from Lisbon to Lanzarote had no relation to this episode, the connection has been repeatedly made by journalists, critics, and the reading public. This moment is the most important in the history of Saramago’s reception in Portugal, and it was the onset of an unavoidably tumultuous relationship between the author and his countrymen, especially political and ecclesiastical figures, as I will explain in more detail in chapter two.

Sousa Lara’s decision found echo in other parts of Portugal. To cite one example, in 1993, the city of Mafra, famous for being the central stage of *Memorial do Convento*, refused to grant Saramago a symbolic medal for this novel, “alegando que ‘estraguei o nome de Mafra’ e que o *Memorial do Convento*   ‘um livro reprov vel a todos os t tulos’”²⁰ (*Cadernos de Lanzarote* I 24).

Before *Evangelho*, Saramago had written the theatre play *A Segunda Vida de Francisco de Assis*, mentioned earlier, in which Saint Francis returns to the company he founded on vows of poverty only to realize that it was turned into a profitable organization, complete with business meetings, plans to seduce people with promises of heaven in order to get their money, and the usual administrative hierarchy. After *Evangelho*, came *In Nomine Dei* (1993). The text deals with the religious disputes between Catholics and Protestants that decimated the entire German city of M nster in the 16th century. Although both plays were built around religious themes, they did not attract nearly as much attention

²⁰ “claiming that I ‘ruined the name of Mafra’, and that *Memorial* is ‘a reproachable book in every sense.’”

as *Evangelho*, and reviews on them, despite their publication in book format, are virtually non-existent.

Following the aftermath of the reception of *Evangelho*, Saramago continued to write and to produce literature that solidified his reputation as a masterful artist. *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*, *Todos os Nomes* and *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira*, in particular, are the novels that continue to perpetuate the writer's positive reception not only in his homeland but also internationally. But despite his growing solidification in the Portuguese literary sphere, Saramago was always pessimistic and skeptical about reception in his own country, as an entry in the first volume of *Cadernos de Lanzarote* shows. Pondering the overwhelming affection and attention his works received in Spain, Saramago reflects:

É uma boa compensação para a relativa indiferença da crítica e da ensaística portuguesa, que, ressalvadas as excepções conhecidas, não têm conseguido acertar os seus passos de dança com a minha música. Para muita gente maior e menor, a minha existência no quadro da literatura portuguesa actual continua a ser uma coisa incompreensível e custosa de roer, de modo que andam a comportar-se como se ainda alimentassem a esperança de que [...] eu venha a desaparecer um dia destes levando comigo os livros que escrevi e deixando tudo como estava antes. (50)²¹

²¹ “It is a good compensation for the indifference of Portuguese criticism, which, excluding the known exceptions, has not been able to dance to my music. To many people, influential or not, my existence in the current Portuguese literary scene continues to be something incomprehensible and hard to accept, since they behave as if they still nourished the hope that [...] I will disappear one of these days, taking with me the books I have written and leaving everything as it once was.”

Even though international recognition was a comfort to Saramago (his diaries provide a clear picture of his numerous trips and worldwide engagements), Orlando Grossegesse maintains that “internationalization” has been a negative factor in his national reception, as the Portuguese people in general tend to be patriotic and to regard internationalization as de-nationalization. This phenomenon is more acutely perceived by the scholar in relation to Saramago’s involvement with social causes in Spain and Mexico (189).

Apparently, the most prestigious Portuguese literary prize, the “Grande Prémio da Associação Portuguesa de Escritores” (Grand Prize of the Portuguese Association of Writers), granted to Saramago in 1992 (Grossegesse 181) was not regarded by him as a sign of his acceptance in his home country. Similarly, Prémio Camões, awarded to writers from Portuguese-speaking countries, and to Saramago in 1995 (181), did not change his pessimism in relation to his acceptance in the country. Neither did the highest honour bestowed by the Portuguese government, the title of Comendador da Ordem Militar de Santiago da Espanha, received by Saramago in 1985 (Aguilera 99).

The Nobel Prize in 1998 forged a moment of peace between Saramago and Portugal, with a variety of public tributes in his honor that were not enough to make him return to Lisbon (which, I believe, was not the government’s intention in any case.) In fact, he remained skeptical of any positive reaction from the Portuguese sphere during his lifetime. His daughter Violante supports his position in *José & Pilar*. The indifference perceived by Saramago became especially acute with the realization that the operas inspired by his novels, namely Azio Corghi’s *Blimunda* (1990, based on *Memorial*), *Divara* (1993, based on *In Nomine Dei*), and *La Morte di Lazaro* (1995) would never be staged in Portugal, despite their success in Italy and Germany.

This noticeable indifference was counterbalanced not only by the prizes mentioned earlier, but by the official apology the Prime minister Durão Barroso offered to Saramago in 2004 due to the exclusion of *Evangelho* from the European Literary Prize list of finalists in 1992. The year 2004 also marks the creation of the “José Saramago Chair” at the Universidad Autónoma de México with the purpose of disseminating Portuguese culture and language (*Diário de Notícias* 19 June 2010). In spite of the importance of these recognitions to any author’s career, Saramago’s relationship with his country retained its intricacies.

Considering all this, it is safe to affirm that Saramago’s insertion and permanence in Portugal’s literary sphere has always been problematic, not only on his side (the harshness of Saramago’s pronouncements is equally well known), but also on its political counterpart. To illustrate this delicate relationship, congressman Mário David’s comment that Saramago “deveria abdicar da cidadania portuguesa” (“should abjure his Portuguese citizenship”) following his public affirmations about the Bible is especially significant (*Jornal de Notícias* 20 June 2009). On the other hand, the author’s concern with the negative aspects of his country is especially present in his books: while some are explicitly polemical, others subtly and craftily ironize Portugal, in all its spheres, through piercing narratorial comments.²²

In 2009 the Portuguese media placed Saramago in the spotlight again, for the same reasons that instigated the 1992 episode. Shortly before the publication of *Caim* in the same

²² The ironic commentary in regards to Portugal has been Saramago’s trademark from his very first book. *Terra do Pecado* (1947), for instance, criticizes Portuguese Catholic morals, and *Levantado do Chão* (1979) is filled with sarcasm in relation to the government’s voluntary indifference to the work conditions endured by extremely poor families abused by wealthy farm owners.

year, the author publicly affirmed that “a Bíblia é um manual de maus costumes, um catálogo de crueldade e do pior que há na espécie humana”²³ (*Jornal de Notícias* 20 June 2009.) These statements were enough to rekindle the flame of the polemics initiated with *Evangelho* 17 years earlier. The religious community, contrary to what Saramago had predicted, did not remain silent, as I will further describe in the first chapter.

Despite this turbulent scenario, Saramago’s long-held dispute with the Portuguese government did not affect all political figures, as Durão Barroso proved with his initiative of apologizing for the *Evangelho* episode. While president Cavaco Silva did not show up at the writer’s funeral in June 2010, opening another public can of worms, José Sócrates, the Prime Minister, lamented the writer’s death affirming that “Saramago era um motivo de orgulho para Portugal. Deixa uma grande obra que dignifica o país” (“Saramago was a reason for pride for Portugal. The grand *oeuvre* he left us dignifies the country”, “Reações à Morte de José Saramago” *Visão* 18 June 2010). In addition, *Jornal Expresso*, one of the most important newspapers in Portugal, reported on June 22, 2010, four days after Saramago’s death, that the sales of his books rose almost ten times in the country. *Caim*, *A Viagem do Elefante* and *Memorial do Convento* were the most wanted titles.²⁴

Another sign of Saramago’s prominence is the fact that his works are part of the syllabi in high schools and universities, especially the ones that dialogue with Portuguese

²³ “the Bible is a manual of bad habits, a catalogue of cruelties and of the worst there is in human nature.” A short video of Saramago’s opinion of the Bible was posted on the website of the newspaper *O Público* on October 19, 2009.

²⁴ In a recent trip to Lisbon, I asked a saleswoman at Leya, one of the largest bookstores in Portugal, whether *Claraboia* (1953), Saramago’s last posthumously published novel (2011, not translated into English), was selling well. She replied that “everything written by Saramago sells well and quickly.”

history directly: *Memorial do Convento, História do Cerco de Lisboa* (1989, *History of the Siege of Lisbon*, 1996) and *Viagem a Portugal* (Grossegese 89). These novels entered into the educational canon in the 1990s, appearing in textbooks of Portuguese Language, History and Literature. Nevertheless, Grossegese is not optimistic about this. He believes that the consequence of including Saramago's literary creations in the Portuguese school system is the production of textbooks that oscillate between the "didaticismo vulgar" ("vulgar didacticism") and "especialização acadêmica" ("academic specialization", 189).

Finally, even though Saramago never hid his anger towards capitalism and his opinion that the United States was the example *par excellence* of its dire consequences for humanity, these factors did not impact his reception negatively in this country or in Canada. In fact, out of all the reviews penned by North-American critics, only Jonathan Ledgard mentions that "Saramago disliked America and cars." For this reason, there are no major events or facts to be recorded here pertaining Saramago's national-political reception in English-speaking North America.

1.1.3 Social Reception

Following the 2008 movie version of *Ensaio*, recorded in English and entitled *Blindness*, this specific novel suddenly became interesting material for articles published in a variety of fields in the United States and Canada. It has incited a fervent debate among the scholars in disability studies, for instance. Ben-Moshe and Deborah Gallagher offer their insights on the novel in the academic magazine *Disability Studies Quarterly* from the perspective of Sociology and Special Education. Ben-Moshe argues that *Ensaio* "is a pure rhetorical

device reinforcing a binary of dis/ability in which sight/ability is superior. Any political criticism regarding the need to accommodate different ways of sensing the world is never expressed in this moralist tale”, and also, “In *Ensaio*, the newly blind are guided by nothing other than their own prejudice. The blind in the novel are seen as helpless [...] and their demeanor is presumed to lead to the destruction of civility.” While Ben-Moshe’s matter-of-fact negative article mirrors her academic background in teaching about depictions of blindness as a misleading metaphor in movies and books, Gallagher, in response to Ben-Moshe, assumes a more “distant” and pensive perspective, slow to label the book as another erroneous depiction of blindness in society.²⁵

In agreement with Ben-Moshe’s review is “The Urgency of Optimism”, an address delivered by Marc Maurer at the Banquet of the Annual Convention of the National Federation of the Blind in 2008. Saramago does not occupy much of his text, but his brief opinion is strong. He believes that the Portuguese author

selects blindness as his metaphor for all that is bad in human thought and action
 [...] To give a man who writes such foolishness the Nobel Prize for Literature
 belittles what has often been regarded as a prestigious award [...] The description in
Blindness is wrong – completely, unutterably, irretrievably, immeasurably wrong.
 That such falsity should be regarded as good literature is revolting and amazing [...]
 We will not let José Saramago represent us, for he does not speak the truth.

²⁵ See the following articles for interesting and fresh insights on *Ensaio*: Beatriz Priel’s “Thinking Extreme Social Violence: the Model of the Literary Plague”, Michael Keren’s “The Original Position in José Saramago’s ‘Blindness’”, Hania Nashef’s “Becomings in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the barbarians* and José Saramago’s *Blindness*”, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley’s “The Excremental Gaze: Saramago’s *Blindness* and the Disintegration of the Panoptic Vision”, and Werner von Koppenfels’ “‘These Irritant Bodies’, Blinding and Blindness in Dystopia.”

Christopher Danielsen, a spokesman for the organization, added that blind people “face a 70 percent unemployment rate and other social problems because people don’t think we can do anything, and this movie is not going to help at all.” With over 50,000 members, the NFB planned to protest against the movie at the entrance of movie theatres in 21 states in the United States (*Eye Sight and Eye Health*). There are no records of the protest, but, in any case, the movie was not prevented from being screened. Interestingly, *Ensaio* did not have this repercussion in Portugal, in the same way that *Evangelho* did not cause nearly as much commotion in the United States as it did in Saramago’s home country. (Here, of course, it is necessary to consider the relative indifference adopted by English-speaking North-American response after *Baltasar and Blimunda* in 1987.)

The comparison is also valid for Saramago’s view of Israeli actions in the Palestine territories as similar to the reality of Auschwitz. While visiting Ramallah with the International Delegation of Writers, Saramago affirmed that “Ramallah is the barracks of the camp, and the Palestinians are the prisoners inside” (Leiter, Petras). This statement provoked a worldwide reaction that, in some places, affected reception. Ilan Stavans points out, for instance, that “in the lucid Hebrew translations he [Saramago] was a favorite, but newly published and used paperbacks of his *oeuvre* were immediately returned to stores in Tel-Aviv, Haifa, and other metropolitan areas, as a sign of protest” in Israel (“Is José Saramago an Anti-Semire?” 88). While the Jewish community in the United States regarded the statement as a frontal attack and produced a plethora of comments on the episode²⁶, this

²⁶ For examples of responses to this incident see Robert Leiter’s “Bad Left, Good Left” in *Jewish Exponent* (04 April 2002) and David Frum’s “Death of a Jew-Hater” in *The National Post* (19 June 2010). James Petras supports the writer’s comparison in “Palestine: the Final Solution and José Saramago” in the *Canadian Dimension* (2002).

incident did not reach notoriety in Portugal. This response, however impacting, relates to Saramago's public statements and not to his literature, and that brings me to the fourth type of reception.

1.1.4 Bio-literary Reception

Unfortunately, the most recurrent type of reception in Portugal does not concentrate on Saramago's literature but on his personal life, political ideas, anticlericalism, atheism, and controversial public statements. This is especially evident, as chapter two will show, in religious reception. In this specific point lies the main difference between popular reception in Portugal and in the United States and Canada, both general and religious: North-American reviews do not fail to mention that Saramago was a communist, an atheist, a socialist and a man who stood against the power of religious ideology over people, but Saramago's ideology is often regarded as fruitful motives for his creation (chapter 3, *infra*), whereas Portuguese criticism, more often than not, departs from Saramago's literary works to concentrate on his personal choices and public appearances. This is what I call bio-literary criticism.

Although less frequently than the Portuguese critics, English-speaking North-American critics have also produced harsh comments on Saramago's ideology and its transposition to literature, especially in the case of *Caim*. Tim Gebhart, for instance, thinks that "*Cain* is undoubtedly tendentious". This point, as I mentioned earlier, will be pursued further in the last chapter of the present study. As an example of pure biographical criticism, Jeff Jacoby holds the strong opinion that "Saramago's communism should not

have been indulged, it should have been despised. It should have been as great a blot on his reputation as if he had spent the last 41 years as an advocate for murderous repression and cruelty.” In his article, Jacoby does not use one single sentence to comment on Saramago’s literature, and prefers to attack the writer’s political position.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Adriano Schwartz argues that, with Saramago’s passing, the “ideological load” attached to him will gradually become detached from his works, and that this factor “contaminated” Saramago’s international repercussion. Interestingly, that is precisely the case in Portuguese religious reception. Grossegeisse also mentions that the “ideological load” is what keeps critics away from *Folhas Políticas* (1976, translation not available), for instance. He also believes that, internationally, this same “ideological load” brought about “the euphoric consecration” around Saramago (183). “Euphoric consecration” is indeed the best description for Harold Bloom’s feelings towards the writer, but, contrary to what Grossegeisse suggests, this euphoria is not attached to Saramago’s ideology. On a death note published by *Time Magazine* on July 05, 2010, Bloom writes:

The Achilles’ heel of this brilliant and skeptical intellect was that he had grown up in Salazar’s Portugal, a fascist dictatorship. By the time he was a young man, the Salazar dictatorship -- which was fascist through and through -- was at its height and really awful indeed. It drove him into the only effective resistance, the Communist Party of Portugal, which for decades was a bastion of unredeemed Stalinism. *Yet* Saramago wrote marvelous novels. He was a permanent novelist. He was too a charming and irreverent fellow. I will miss him. (My italics)

Clearly, Bloom is aware of the influence of Saramago's political choices in his literature, which did not prevent the scholar from deeming the Portuguese author "Person of the Year 2010" (*Time* 15 Dec 2010). Similarly, David Frier recognizes that "the author's political beliefs, in some shape or form, are a significant element in all of his works" (qtd. in Bloom 47). Similar responses to Bloom's and Frier's in North America form the corpus analyzed in the third chapter.

The information displayed so far is summarized in the comparative table at the end of this chapter.

1.2 Theoretical Approach: Understanding Saramago's Reception through an Iserian Perspective

Even though "the vogue has diminished for reader-response criticism as a separate method" (Parker 316), and in spite of the very difficulty of regarding this approach as such, reader-response theory is, in my view, the most appropriate way to examine response to Saramago, a writer who constantly calls for his reader's participation in the act of reading in order to create meaning. In my understanding, this is precisely Iser's premise in discoursing about reception: every aspect of the reader's life when in contact with a work of art matters, from biographical data to information about the writer's life, from the culture in which he/she is inserted to his/her subjectivity, from his/her psychological formation developed in a life span to information offered in the moment.

In the case of the examination proposed here, it is clear that Saramago's Nobel Prize, his well-reported involvement in causes of social justice, his affiliation with the Communist party, his professed atheism and controversial public statements are elements, I argue, that cannot be divorced from the reader's horizon of expectations, especially in Portugal. Moreover, because Saramago's literature invites the reader to fill in gaps, to supply information in the process of reading, and to rely heavily on his/her experience to formulate meaning, I believe that to properly understand Saramago's reception, it is necessary to regard it "as the result of an interaction between text and reader" (*The Act of Reading* 83), and to change the focus from the novels themselves to "the act of reading as process" (84).

For these reasons, I aim at understanding Saramago's reception relying on Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response with focus on the concepts of *virtual dimension of the text*, *passive synthesis*, and *negation*, defined in the following chapter. I also draw on supplementary texts such as Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Robert Holub's *Reception Theory* and Robert Parker's chapter on reader response in *How to Interpret Literature*. For the purposes of my thesis, I am especially interested in Hans Jauss' broader view of literature's engagement and dialogue with society (although I do not explore Jauss' theory any further, given that he was more interested in the relation between literature and history and how this interplay affected reception over a long period of time) and in Iser's more concentrated attention to an individual text and how one reader receives it. Since I am dealing with groups of readers, Stanley Fish's notion of *interpretive community* is especially helpful in the case of Portuguese religious reception. As Fish explains,

members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities will disagree because from each of their respective positions the other "simply" cannot see what is obviously there: this, then, is the explanation for the stability of interpretation among different readers. (15)

This is precisely the case exposed in chapter two (*infra*).

This project seeks to contribute to studies of Saramago's critical reception, a niche that counts a scarce number of investigations. José León Machado's doctoral thesis *Conflitos de Interpretação Face ao Romance de José Saramago O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo* (1994, *Conflicts of Interpretation on José Saramago's Novel The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, not translated) is possibly the earliest contribution to this theme. However, Machado's work is not available even at the library of the University of Minho in Portugal, where the thesis was defended. Consequently, it is not possible to know Machado's angle in pursuing this theme: is it a study on the conflicts he detected by reading reviews on the novel? Is it a list of the ways one can approach Saramago's book based on his own interpretation? Does a theoretical framework shape the study? The difficulty of access is unfortunate, for Machado's work, mentioned by Saramago in the second volume of *Cadernos* (146), would shed light especially on the second chapter of the present thesis.

Another rare example is Grossegesse's annotated bibliography, used extensively in this chapter. Besides offering a short-term panorama of the studies dedicated to the writer's *oeuvre*, as I have shown, the scholar also recognizes that Saramago's entrance into the

international canon should incite fruitful inquiries in the field of reception studies. Even though he excludes this area from his own investigation “for reasons of space” (189), his study is a crucial contribution, apparently not seen in this light by its author.

The third and last study I have encountered is Rosemary Conceição dos Santos’s 2006 doctoral thesis *A Recepção Crítica de Todos os Nomes e O Homem Duplicado* (*The Critical Reception of All the names and The Double*, not translated), which offers useful information regarding Saramago’s reception in Brazil. Followed by her book *Saramago: Metáfora e Alegoria no Convento* (*Saramago: Metaphor and Allegory in the Convent*, 2004), dos Santos comes close to my purposes by focusing on two concepts from reception theory in her analysis, *horizon of expectations* and *effect*, and by applying them to the journalistic and academic reviews published by the most prominent newspapers in the period of 12 months from the date of publication of Saramago’s aforementioned targeted novels. Her thesis is justified by the recent phenomenon in Brazilian press of the mingling of academic criticism and newspapers reviews, which came to be called “cultural journalism”, a hybrid genre that she later develops in the course of her thesis. In this aspect, then, our focus differs: whereas dos Santos is concerned primarily with the medium, I am interested in the actual reader’s response regardless of the media through which it is communicated.

Nearing the conclusion of her study, dos Santos asserts the nonexistence of a common point between newspapers reviews and academic criticism due to the diversity of the horizon of expectations among the reviewers selected. This discovery, however, might be deduced right from the beginning of her endeavor. The academics, for example, seemed to focus on the notion of identity in *O Homem Duplicado*, which is, in her opinion, the

author's intention when writing the book, instead of on the exhaustive debate around genetics and cloning pursued by the majority of newspaper critics. Dos Santos seems engaged in "defending" Saramago from the (rare) negative criticism received for this novel when concluding that her work points to the

necessidade de uma formação cultural mais ampla dos jornalistas e acadêmicos que trabalham com a crítica [...] A falta de originalidade destes textos críticos não deveria ser atribuída às limitações de espaço que jornais e revistas acadêmicas reservam para a crítica, mas à precariedade de sua própria formação cognitiva.”
(161)²⁷

Having provided these clarifications, I proceed to focus on religious reception in Portugal (chapter 2), and on the reception of *Caim* in the USA and Canada (chapter 3) in the context of Iser's notions of *virtual dimension of the text*, *passive synthesis*, and *negation* in order to reflect upon the interplay between ideology and literature and its effect on Saramago's reception.

²⁷ “necessity of a wider cultural formation of journalists and scholars who work with criticism [...] The lack of originality of these critical texts should not be attributed to the limitations of space that newspapers and academic journals reserve to criticism, but to the precariousness of their own [journalists' and scholars'] cognitive formation.”

TYPE OF RECEPTION	PORTUGAL	UNITED STATES/ CANADA
National-political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Evangelho</i> is excluded from the European Literary Prize in 1992; apologies are offered in 2004; - 2009: Saramago's opinions on the Bible and the church preceding the publication of <i>Caim</i> revive debate; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No major event detected.
Literary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Saramago's first books are virtually ignored by critics; - 1981: <i>Viagem a Portugal</i> is a best-seller. <i>Memorial</i> (1982) consecrates the writer; - Literary studies are concentrated on pre-Nobel novels; - Dialogue with other fields of inquiry or studies from other areas of expertise is rare; - Scholars remain dedicated to the analysis of Saramago's <i>oeuvre</i> throughout their careers; - In the 1990s there was a sudden interest in the "construction of the author". Renewed attention to Saramago's earlier works; - Critics view Saramago's "internationalization" negatively; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Memorial</i> introduces Saramago to English-speaking North America. <i>Ensaio</i> confirms his entrance into the canon; - The Nobel Prize is mentioned in every single review; - Focus on post-Nobel novels; - <i>Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira</i> incites a plethora of publications by different fields of inquiry; - Harold Bloom considers Saramago "the best contemporary writer"; - Lack of originality and intricate writing style are often pointed out, but Saramago thrives in spite of these factors; - Several <i>Doctor honoris causa</i> appointments; - <i>Caim</i> disappoints critics;
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Saramago's literary criticism of society does not prompt as much mainstream response as his treatment of religious themes; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Ensaio</i> is turned into a movie in 2008: negative reception from the Society of the Blind and scholars in Disability Studies; - The Jewish community does not appreciate Saramago's comparison of Israeli action in Palestine to Auschwitz;
Bio-literary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Saramago's communism and atheism are not favorable to reception; - Reviews frequently deviate from Saramago's literary works to his personal choices; - Saramago's ideology interferes with his literature negatively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scholar and popular critics are aware of the interplay between literature and ideology. Positive opinions about its effect on the writer's literature until <i>A Viagem do Elefante</i>. Response changes with <i>Caim</i>.

Table 1: Summary of Saramago's Reception in Portugal, United States, and Canada.

CHAPTER 2

A Battle of Ideologies: Portuguese Religious Reception

No disinterested reader, free of ideology and of creed, is going to forgive Saramago's God for the murder of Jesus and the subsequent torrents of human blood that will result.

Harold Bloom (ed.), *José Saramago*, 72

2.1 Themes and Exceptions

In the previous chapter, I mentioned the social commotion that ensued from the publication of *Evangelho* (1991) and *Caim* (2009) and the perhaps excessive involvement of Portuguese society in these episodes, especially church representatives and religious readers. In the present chapter, I proceed to analyze the responses produced by this particular *interpretive community* (Fish 15) to the novels mentioned above. I argue that the prevalent criticism concerning the negative interference of Saramago's ideology with his literary creations is itself offered from a highly ideological perspective, and that this interplay has not benefitted either side involved in this question.

The reviews found on *Caim* are scarce in comparison to *Evangelho*, and this fact might lead to the conclusion that it did not affect Portuguese society in the least. This, however, is not the case: it suffices to mention a special edition of the magazine published by the Cultural Department of the Portuguese Catholic Church (*Observatório da Cultura*) entitled *A Biblia, Horizonte da Fé e da Cultura* (*The Bible, Horizon of Faith and Culture*)

in November 2009, dedicated to gathering opinions by religious and non-religious people on the importance of the Bible to humanity and its use by Saramago, in light of his public affirmation that “the Bible is a manual of bad habits, a catalogue of cruelty” (*Jornal de Notícias* 20 June 2009). This special edition, combined with the extensive criticism on *Evangelho*, point to the fact that religious critical reception is an adequate, although not exclusive, niche to be addressed in the examination of the writer’s reception in his home country.

In the first chapter, the method of theme isolation was useful to determine the categories that stand out in general reception, and it is applied here as well. After careful examination, the most recurrent themes in the corpus of reviews from a religious perspective are, with a few examples in parentheses: a) Saramago’s lack of knowledge of the Bible and Christian precepts, which leads the writer to fail in his supposed attempt to undermine Christianity (Gonçalves 17, Veira Mendes 45); b) his superficial and purely literal interpretation of biblical passages that produce, in turn, shallow literary works (Gonçalves 17, Oliveira 07, Vieira Mendes 149); c) the lack of novelty in his unorthodox treatments of the Bible, resulting in negative comparisons to authors who are considered superior to Saramago in undertaking the task of exposing the fragility of Christianity’s foundations (da Silva Pereira 271, Pereira do Barral 09, Simões’ “Saramago Evangelista do Ressentimento”²⁸ 410-411); d) Saramago’s questionable eligibility for the Nobel Prize

²⁸ Simões offers an impressive list of previous literary works, from a variety of periods, to argue that Saramago’s attempt is not original, and, therefore, should not receive so much attention, as it is a mere addition to what he calls the “Portuguese anticlerical tradition” (416), of which the main exponents are Gil Vicente (414), Eça de Queirós, Camilo Castelo Branco and Fernando Pessoa (415), respected names indeed. Simões concludes that José Régio and Peguy are infinitely superior to Saramago (419). In addition, the scholar catalogues critical responses by church representatives or influential laypeople that contributed to the detection of the most recurrent themes in religious reception.

(Gonçalves 17, *Observatório da Cultura* 16); e) the commercial and lucrative purposes of publishing controversial books in a traditionally Catholic country (Vaz Pinto 527, “Evangelista do Ressentimento” 407, Pereira do Barral 05, Gonçalves 17, Vieira Mendes 39); and f) the radically ideological nature of his literary works, mainly *Evangelho* (1991) and *Caim* (2009).

Close examination of the critical texts reveals that the religious response to Saramago is predominantly negative, and although Portuguese religious reception is not monolithic, positive reviews from this perspective are indeed extremely rare. To cite the few examples gathered for this study, the Catholic newspaper *Fraternizar* published an enthusiastic review of the play *In Nomine Dei* (1993), praising the writer’s attention to the pivotal role of women in religion (13), going against the opinion that the play is blasphemous (11), and strongly advocating that it is not a manifesto against God, but against Power (capitalized in the article), which is usually exercised, the critic recognizes, by selfish church representatives (11, 13). The anonymous text, probably written by Father Mário de Oliveira²⁹, the newspaper’s director, goes to the extent of affirming that Saramago’s atheism is less the author’s personal choice than the fault of the Catholic church (11, 13), and that his posture is “mais evangélica do que a religião e o culto de muitos ‘religiosos’ sem entranhas de misericórdia”³⁰ (12). In addition, *In Nomine Dei* is a

²⁹ Oliveira wrote the beautifully crafted and heartfelt *O Outro Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo* (*The Other Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, 2005, not translated) in order to offer his view of Christ’s message. Contrary to other critics, Oliveira only mentions that his work was incited by Saramago’s novel and does not dwell on the latter’s misconceptions or faults in regards to biblical interpretation. Since it is not a direct critical response, it is not included in my analysis but it definitely deserves to be acknowledged.

³⁰ “more evangelical than the religion and the rites of many merciless ‘religious’ people” is an approximate translation. What the critic intended to say was, literally, that mercy was not part of these religious people’s guts.

book “ainda mais conseguido do que o anterior ‘Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo’” that showcases Saramago’s “maestria literária, verdadeiramente soberba”³¹. De Oliveira concludes that, unbeknownst to Saramago, God is in this book (13).

In Nomine Dei also pleased Manuel Simões, the most prolific religious critic of Saramago’s works I have encountered. In “Saramago ‘Em Nome de Deus’” (“Saramago ‘In the Name of God’”), the scholar praises the writer’s uncannily masterful use of the biblical style of writing (144), the positive feminine presence already alluded to by de Oliveira (141), and concludes that it is a “triste história de proveito e exemplo” (“a sad story that we should benefit and learn from”, 140). Despite the fact that Simões detects the author’s ironic ideological interference with the characters’s voices, which “nem sequer está disfarçada” (“is not even disguised”, 147) and proceeds to cite examples of Saramago’s well-known statements following the scandal around *Evangelho*, his review is positive.

As a rare example of a positive response to *Evangelho*, Friar Bento Domingues believes that this novel is “em primeiro lugar uma obra literária e é a sua densidade estética que deve ser analisada [...] Parece-me que, ao subverter o Evangelho, Saramago talvez não tenha sido blasfemo, acabou por reencontrar o espírito do Evangelho”³² (qtd. in Crisóstomo de Medeiros Gonçalves Matos Flores 203).

Considering that the positive response exemplified by the texts I have mentioned so far is an exception to the rule, I proceed to analyze a corpus of negative religious reviews

³¹ “even more accomplished than the preceding *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo*” that showcases Saramago’s “truly superb literary mastery”.

³² “in the first place, a literary work, and it is its aesthetic density that must be analysed [...] It seems to me that, with the subversion of the Gospels, Saramago might not have been blasphemous, he ended up re-encountering the spirit of the Gospels”.

with a focus on theme f), that is, the radically ideological nature of his literary works³³ and the transposing of Saramago's ideology onto his novels. My argument is that this specific group of readers is not only aware of the interference of the writer's ideology with his literary creations but cannot detach their own ideology from their interpretations either, and this interplay has significantly impacted Saramago's reception by an interpretive community that relies on values incorporated into the lives of a significant portion of Portuguese society.

From the point of view of reader response theory, an examination of Iser's processes of *virtual dimension*, *passive synthesis*, and *negation* are especially helpful to explain this battle of ideologies, how it shapes the reading process, and how it interferes with the actualization of the work of art. For the purposes of comparison, this chapter is divided into the three following sections: religious reception of religion-based books, religious reception of non-religion-based books, and non-religious reception of religion-based books.³⁴

³³ A surprisingly high number of religious readers allude to Saramago's use of publicity to raise sales of his novels. *Caim*, especially, is seen as "a publicity stunt" (see *Observatório da Cultura*, online, for examples.) Publicity, then, comes second to ideological interference as a theme in religious critics' perception. Some scholars, such as Manuel Simões, revert this situation to the Church's benefit. After recognizing that Saramago used the Portuguese translation of the Bible by the Capuchinho Missionaries to compose *In Nomine Dei*, he advises "os editores para que se alegrem com esta excelente publicidade implícita e, se possível, tirem partido dela" ("the editors to rejoice with this excellent implicit publicity and, if possible, benefit from it"). (144-145)

³⁴ See chapter 1 *infra* for a summary of non-religious reception of non-religion-based books.

2.2 Religious Reception of Religion-Based Books

I have already mentioned in chapter one that Saramago's first books were quickly forgotten by the reading public in Portugal. Reviews that date back over 40 years are rare, and, for this reason, João Maia's "Crónica de Poesia" (1966) is valuable. In his analysis of Saramago's *Os Poemas Possíveis*, Maia is quite taken with the simplicity of the author's words, and goes to the extent of concluding that Saramago is on a par with "os filósofos da meditação do tempo e os poetas no canto à eternidade. E são os dois trabalhos mais difíceis que os de Hércules"³⁵ (544). However, as much as Maia believes in Saramago's talent, "nos poemas em que afloram sugestões religiosas, José Saramago é poeta inferior e esses poemas bem podia expungí-los. Só lucrava o livro"³⁶ (542). Certainly unbeknownst to him, Maia paved the path that would be diligently followed by religious reception in the years that followed his article.

Twenty-five years after this review, some readers were offended with *Evangelho* to the extent of paying to have editions of their own books published and distributed. The National Library in Lisbon houses interesting samples written by people whose anger and disgust towards the novel impede them from producing cohesive work. Generally, such is the case with popular response. Already on the first page of *O Que é o "Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo" de José Saramago?*, for instance, Pereira do Barral, a non-academic reader, frees himself from the insult provoked by this work with a short summary offered already on the first page, transcribed as follows, with the abundant original italics:

³⁵ "the philosophers that meditate on time and the poets that praise eternity. And both tasks are more difficult than Hercules".

³⁶ "in the poems in which religious hints blossom, José Saramago is an inferior poet, and he could certainly expunge these poems. The book would only benefit from it".

1. *Literariamente* – é um “Bluff”.
2. *Historicamente* – uma Nódoa.
3. *Socialmente* – um Ultraje à Civilização Universal.
4. *Religiosamente* – não chegando a ser uma *Blasfémia* às claras, por vir camuflada sob vestes de sátira literária, é um *Insulto* a toda a Civilização Cristã e Humana.
5. *Lusibericamente* – uma *Vergonha* Nacional e Ibérica.
6. *Esteticamente* – uma *Bofetada* imbecil e Covarde em Camões, em Santa Teresa e em S. João da Cruz; e uma *Tristeza Literária* para esquecer no Inferno de Dante.³⁷

The desire for expression of deep feelings is clear, but the mode of representation, i.e. the insulting tone towards Saramago, strips the work of any seriousness. A similar response by a Brazilian woman identified solely as Maria was sent in a letter to the writer’s house and included in his diary. The highly offensive document occupies seven pages, but one short extract exemplifies the tone that permeates it:

Teu livro, vou tocar fogo para que eu não contribua contigo [...] és ímpio, um verme. É pena não existir nos dias de hoje a inquisição, pois nesta altura já não existirias, pois já terias sido queimado em praça pública e eu assistiria de camarote, terias o mesmo destino do teu livro. (107)³⁸

³⁷ “Literarily, it is a ‘bluff’; 2. Historically, a stain; 3. Socially, an outrage to universal civilization; 4. Religiously, not going to the extent of being a clear blasphemy, because it is camouflaged under the cloak of literary satire, it is an insult to the entire Christian and human civilization; 5. ‘Luso-iberically’, a national and Iberian shame; 6. Aesthetically, an imbecile and coward slap in Camões, Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross; and a literary sadness to be forgotten in Dante’s Inferno”. (*Lusibericamente* is an adverb that does not exist in the Portuguese language. Pereira do Barral intended the *lusi* part of this invented word to refer to the Portuguese portion of the Iberian Peninsula specifically, and *ibericamente* to the Peninsula as a whole.)

Another extreme response is José Moura de Basto's *Deus é Grande e José Saramago Seu Evangelista* (1993). The optimistic title, *God is Great and José Saramago His Evangelist*, hides this common reader's angry enterprise against Saramago and *Evangelho*. Moura de Basto opposes the writer's comments in the Portuguese media, passages of the novel and facts of Saramago's personal life with a blatantly offensive opinion that occupies 105 pages. Moura de Basto touches upon the main themes found in the religious critical reviews but, again, ideological criticism overpowers his text. He believes that only a Portuguese mind would be able to create a literary work as hideous as *Evangelho*, but not just any mind, "tinha de ser um cérebro³⁹ comunista" ("it had to be a Communist mind", 99). Moura de Basto imagines "o gozo⁴⁰ que foi para este escritor comunista-atheu" ("the extreme joy it was to this communist-atheist writer") to have completed and published the novel in question, and concludes, somewhat dramatically, that "Judas entregou Jesus, José Saramago crucificou-O" ("Judah betrayed Jesus, José Saramago crucified Him", 105).

The initial idea of dividing this chapter in two sections, popular and scholarly reception, was proven unnecessary after the surprising discovery that the differences in criticism between these categories are not radically pronounced. Neither are distinctions between responses produced by professional critics and non-professional readers. While scholars certainly do not utilize the offensive writing style shown above and have access to

³⁸ "I will set fire to your book so I will not contribute with you [...] you are wicked, a worm. It is too bad the Inquisition does not exist nowadays, because you wouldn't exist by now, because you would have been burned in the public square and I would watch it in the front row, you and your book would have the same destiny." In the second volume of *Cadernos de Lanzarote*, Saramago concludes that the moral author of the letter is the Roman Catholic Church (108).

³⁹ The word *cérebro* means "brain", but it might also be used as "mind", depending on the context.

⁴⁰ The word *gozo* might be translated as "extreme joy", but it also means "orgasm", depending on the context. In this case, the choice of words does not clarify its intended meaning and invests Moura Basto's affirmation with sexual connotations.

theories of literature, theology and other fields of inquiry, their criticism falls on the same elements that attract popular readers. Interestingly, even when scholarly criticism praises Saramago's works from the literary, social or another perspective, it inevitably defaults to a critique of the writer's ideology, which also occurs in popular criticism. Some examples from both spheres are worth mentioning: Eleutério de Carvalho, "nem cientista, nem teólogo" ("neither a scientist nor a theologian", 05), thus a popular reader, concludes his book⁴¹ with the opinion that *Evangelho* is "uma obra superior da literatura portuguesa contemporânea [...] Apesar da minha profunda discordância quanto ao conteúdo"⁴² (45). Despite the recognition of Saramago's talent, then, de Carvalho's entire book is built around the last bit of this affirmation, more precisely against the writer's political ideology.

Similarly, the concluding remarks of Fernando Cardoso Ferreira's Master's thesis are entirely concentrated on the writer's ideology. Ferreira thinks that Saramago's "orientação ideológica [...] é fluida, dúbia, inconstante, porque, em nossa opinião, muito personalizada e endeusada"⁴³ (100). He admits, however, "a presença de algumas coordenadas ideológicas constantes [...] tais como: o pensamento de fundo marxista; o materialismo ateu; a desmitificação dos mitos [...] o papel do destino na condução da história [...] o absurdo do mal e do sofrimento"⁴⁴, which leads the scholar to conclude that Saramago is "um pensador situado na pós-modernidade à procura de uma identidade

⁴¹ *A Saga de Cristo Segundo a Teomania (Christ's Saga According to Theomania)*, 1992.

⁴² "a superior artwork of Portuguese contemporary literature [...] Despite my profound disagreement in regards to its content."

⁴³ "ideological orientation is fluid, dubious, inconstant, because it is, in our opinion, too personalized and deified."

⁴⁴ "the presence of some constant ideological coordinates [...] such as: the Marxist thinking; the atheistic materialism; the de-mystification of the myths [...] the role of destiny in guiding history [...] the absurd nature of evil and suffering."

profunda”⁴⁵ (101). Nevertheless, the positive light in which some scholars view Saramago quickly fades when considering the entire panorama of religious response. In his article on *Evangelho*, published on the scholarly journal *Communio*, for instance, Noronha Galvão completely ignores any possibility of analysing the novel positively. He proceeds to pose the complicated question of truth based on the premise that “é diante de um romance ideológico que nos encontramos” (“we are faced with an ideological novel”, 176).

The samples presented so far point to an encompassing similarity in scholarly and popular criticism: the focus on Saramago’s ideology as an object of critique. Considering that this group points fingers at this specific element, it may be assumed that the writer’s atheism is the focal point of discussion. Surprisingly, Saramago’s adherence to Communism and Marxism is the target, and atheism is implicitly subordinated to his political choices. Although Carreira das Neves, a theologian and Franciscan Bible scholar, finds *Evangelho* “estupendo e agradável” (“stupendous and pleasant”), he immediately wonders whether “no inventário de horrores não faltarão os seis milhões de mártires do Nazismo e os quarenta e mais milhões de mártires do Comunismo chinês, cambojano e outros”⁴⁶ (qtd. in Simões “Saramago Evangelista do Ressentimento” 412). Similarly, critic Vasco Pulido Valente assumes that ““o comunista Saramago não se esqueceu sem dúvida de uma outra civilização nascida de um ‘equivoco’, de uma ‘boa nova’ perversa.”⁴⁷ Father

⁴⁵ “a thinker situated in post-modernity in search of a profound identity.”

⁴⁶ “the six million martyrs of Nazism and the forty plus million of martyrs of the Chinese, Cambodian and other Communisms are not missing from this inventory of horrors.”

⁴⁷ “the Communist Saramago undoubtedly did not forget another civilization born from ‘a mistake’, from perverse ‘good news’ that generated an incomparable ‘river’ of blood and pain”. The words in quotation marks are taken from Saramago’s *Evangelho*. Valente might be referring to the writer’s support of political regimes adopted by the Soviet Union, among others.

Vaz Pinto joins Valente's voice and asserts that "é curioso que não conheço indignação de Saramago sobre as atrocidades incomparáveis de Estaline ou de Mao"⁴⁸ (528).

This comparative questioning of the author's ideology is prevalent in reviews penned by religious readers, including Vieira Mendes (11) and Pereira do Barral (06), among several others. For his part, Saramago affirmed that the Pope is cynical (*Diário de Notícias* 25 Oct 2009), that Jews are actually atheists (*Cadernos* I 113), that Catholics do not read the Bible (*Público* 18 Oct 2009), that no one believes less in God than the theologians (*Cadernos* I 246), and that God is "a autodilaceração da humanidade" ("the autodilaceration of humanity", *Cadernos* V 11). And these affirmations are only a sample of the opinions the writer unreservedly shared during interviews and public appearances. In his literary works, it suffices to mention *Evangelho* as a whole and to say that, in *Caim*, Saramago calls God "a son of a bitch" (69, translated version).

By offering these examples of response and public statements, I have attempted to show that Saramago's literary and social encounters with this specific group have always been a battlefield. But how does the ideology espoused by author and reader shape the reading process and its outcome from the viewpoint of response theory? How does it interfere with interpretation, acceptance, and/or refusal of an artwork? It is at this point that Iser's reflections come to aid.

Considering that Iser believes in the socially formative character of literature (i.e. the transformation that literary works bring through a questioning of societal values, one of the rare common points with Jauss), and that Saramago wrote *Evangelho* and *Caim*

⁴⁸ "it is curious that I am not aware of Saramago's indignation in relation to Stalin's or Mao's incomparable atrocities."

prompted by the “desespero de quem vê a explicação do universo entregue, ainda hoje, para consumo popular, aos dogmas absurdos e às crenças irracionais de todas as Igrejas”⁴⁹ (*Cadernos II* 38) in an attempt to shake the rigidly Catholic mentality of Portuguese society, it seems appropriate to draw on Iser’s reflections in this case study, especially because “however individual may be the meaning realized in each case, the act of composing it will always have intersubjectively verifiable characteristics” (*The Act of Reading* 22).

From the outset, Iser’s theory poses a challenge to comprehension: the overwhelming number of terms borrowed from other scholars and fields.⁵⁰ In his admirable critical introduction to reception theory, Robert Holub unequivocally ponders “whether this terminological overload accomplishes any purpose other than short-circuiting the reader’s intellectual system” (100). Consequently, analysing responses through Iser’s postulate in one chapter is an impossible task. I partially agree with Holub’s opinion, hence my focus on the concepts of *virtual dimension*, *passive synthesis*, and *negation*.

In *The Act of Reading*, Iser is concerned with identifying different kinds of readers, such as the implied reader, the hypothetical reader (27), the contemporary reader and the later reader (78), among others. For the purposes of this study, I consider critics in Portugal,

⁴⁹ “desperation of someone who sees the explanation of the universe given, even up to this day, to popular consumption, to the absurd dogmas and the irrational creeds of all the Churches”.

⁵⁰ By praising Freud’s use of concepts from a varied range of theories to avoid “a closed system of terminology” that fatally comprises an “imperialistic philosophy”, Iser himself is postulating something so rigid as to be called “a model” (53). He implicitly attempts to justify the drawing of terms from different fields (39). Counter to his intentions, surely, his criticism of Norman Holland’s “embarrassing vagueness” (42) also applies to his own theory, in which concepts as broad as “nature” and “code” are never fully explained, and when they are, as it is the case with “system” (71), such concepts are utilized for a confusing multiplicity of purposes. Further considerations on Iser’s theory will be offered in the concluding remarks of the present study.

in the United States and in Canada to be what Iser names “real readers”⁵¹, real people inserted in society, since “whatever judgments may have been passed on the work will also reflect various attitudes and norms of that public, so that literature can be said to mirror the cultural code which conditions these judgments” (28), and that is precisely the case with Portuguese religious response to Saramago’s literature, as we have seen. Because this concept is one of the clearest in Iser’s terminology, I shall not dwell on its definition any longer.

It is well-known that Iser regards the reading process as a dynamic interaction between text and reader. For him, “in literary works [...] the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader ‘receives’ it by composing it” (21). The composition, or “actualization” of a text, happens through a series of schemata offered by the text, guidelines to be followed by the reader in order to reach the meaning⁵² of a literary artwork. Although this interaction might seem arbitrary in that the reader needs to abide by what the text offers⁵³, Iser believes that freedom is exactly what is available in the reading process because it invites the reader’s constant participation in decoding the literary message

⁵¹ Iser regards the ideal reader as “a structural impossibility” (28). He then proceeds to explain that the one-size-fits-all implied reader is “a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him: this concept prestructures the role to be assumed by each recipient, and this holds true even when texts deliberately appear to ignore their possible recipient or actively exclude him” (34). I do not deny the existence of a reader’s “presence” in the text, but because the reader I am dealing with cannot be detached from empirical reality, and because the notion of implied reader invites a completely different type of analysis, the concept of real reader is more fitting for my purposes.

⁵² Iser strongly advocates against the “classical norm of interpretation” that looks for a hidden single meaning in the text (22).

⁵³ Similarly, in his “Literature in the Reader”, Fish mounts his argument “on behalf of the reader and against the self-sufficiency of the text.” Later, he recognized that, through this perspective, “in the course of it [the reading process] the text becomes more and more powerful, and rather than being liberated, the reader finds himself more constrained in his new prominence than he was before” (07).

through choices that must be made regarding the various textual perspectives (themes) that arise during the act of reading. The repertoire, i.e. the cultural system of a particular society, is taken from empirical, extratextual reality and transposed onto the literary text in order to form what Iser terms the “background” responsible for creating an aura of familiarization to be shattered during the reading process (defamiliarization). This is how the text invites the reader’s speculation, and that, in turn, culminates in a deep reflection, on the reader’s part, on the deficiencies of that particular social/cultural system. This is why literature is socially formative for Iser (Holub 68). In this scenario,

the literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination. (*The Act of Reading* 192)

In examining Portuguese religious critical response, the formation of the *virtual dimension* through the reader’s input is compromised by the fact that *Evangelho* and *Caim* were based on the *virtual dimension* of another text: the Bible. For nearly 100% of religious critics (and for a number of non-religious critics as well), this dimension cannot be set aside when reading the aforementioned novels. In this sense, there is little room for virtuality in the reviews: the *virtual dimension* of the Bible is not only the site of a high degree of consensus among critics, but also, and more importantly, accepted as the *real* dimension, superimposed on Saramago’s literary accounts. A passage from the non-professional reader

Vieira Mendes' *O Evangelho da História e o Jesus da Fé, Contra as Ficções Romanescas de José Saramago* (*The Historical Gospel and the Jesus of Faith, Against José Saramago's Novelistic Fictions*) speaks for other reviews:

[É] o próprio autor do “Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo” que situa o seu texto no âmbito da realidade e não da mera ficção. Basta comprovar que a obra em causa respeita as personagens reais, a um tempo certo, a um lugar determinado e identifica todos os elementos que na narração intervêm, de forma que não restam dúvidas de que se trata de uma autêntica reinterpretação de algo passado e real. E, se Saramago quer servir-se de pessoas reais, deve então aceitar a exigência que tal opção implica, deve aceitá-las tal como são ou foram e não como ele, escritor, teria desejado que tivessem sido. Pode criar um novo cenário, com actores imaginários ou um enredo fantástico, mas não lhe é moralmente lícito servir-se de uma personalidade autêntica e atribuir-lhe um papel não só distinto como absolutamente contrário à sua vida e obra.⁵⁴ (151)

Prior to this affirmation, Vieira Mendes recognizes that Saramago never intended his *Evangelho* to replace the Bible, and that the writer should not be penalized for lack of

⁵⁴ “It is the author of *Evangelho* himself who situates his text in the scope of reality and not of mere fiction. It suffices to attest that the work in question pertains to real characters, in a specific moment, in a determined location and identifies all the elements that intervene in the narrative, just so there is no question that it is an authentic reinterpretation of something past and real. And, if Saramago wants to make use of real people, he must then accept the demands that such an option implicates, he must accept them just as they are or were, and not as he, the writer, wishes they had been. He may create a new scenario, with imaginary actors or a fantastic plot, but it is not morally licit to use an authentic person and attribute to him [Jesus] a role not only distinct but absolutely contrary to his life and work”.

“scientific exactitude.” Nevertheless, “está em causa uma transgressão ética e não uma mera questão religiosa” (“an ethical transgression and not a mere religious matter is in question”, 152). Even though there is a general recognition that Saramago’s novels are fictitious, then, the consensus that he had insufficient knowledge of the Bible, that his narrative confuses historical data, and that his use of biblical passages was not honest still remains.⁵⁵

In speaking of the Bible as the *virtual dimension* of *Evangelho*, I do not mean that the Bible is fictitious. The question of whether or not the Bible is fictitious or historically true incites debate, but, in this case, such a discussion is irrelevant, since, according to Iser, “fictional texts constitute their own objects and do not copy something already in existence”, and therefore, biblical stories and characters do not have “the *total* determinacy of real objects” (*The Act of Reading* 24, my italics). What matters is that the Bible ultimately requires religious faith for its acceptance, and that this faith undeniably leads religious critics to take it as reality and as the “real” dimension in opposition to other works that draw on its accounts.

Two other processes are involved in the formation of the *virtual dimension*: anticipation and retrospection (194). For Iser, textual sentences open up a variety of perspectives (themes), paths that the reader will choose to follow over others in the reading process, which collectively form a horizon of possibilities and comprise the scholar’s well-known “theme-and-horizon structure” (97). If one of the momentary themes is relegated to the background, it is still part of the horizon of perspectives, and it might become central later on or end up being excluded altogether. While the sentences create anticipation for what is to come, they also prompt the reader to “look back” in retrospection in order to

⁵⁵ See the opinions gathered in *Observatório da Cultura* (online) for examples of such claims.

modify, exclude or add pieces to the literary puzzle he/she is assembling (67). Now, if the *virtual dimension* is compromised by the religious reader's acceptance of the Bible as the "real" dimension of the novel, it follows that in this specific interpretive community anticipation and retrospection work differently as well, operating in two spheres: intra and extra-textually.

In regards to the anticipation aroused by facts extraneous to his literary works, Saramago's controversial public statements and literary militancy against religious power certainly play a role, but it is into his novels that the writer pours generous doses of his ideology, which, in turn, affect anticipation. *Caim*, for instance, subverts Genesis from its very first page:

Quando o senhor, também conhecido como deus, se apercebeu de que a adão e eva, perfeitos em tudo o que apresentavam à vista, não lhes saía uma palavra da boca nem emitiam ao menos um simples som primário que fosse, teve de ficar irritado consigo mesmo, uma vez que não havia mais ninguém no jardim do éden a quem pudesse responsabilizar pela gravíssima falta, quando os outros animais, produtos, todos eles, tal como os dois humanos, do faça-se divino, uns por meio de mugidos e rugidos, outros por roncões, chilreios, assobios e cacarejos, desfrutavam já de voz própria. Num acesso de ira, surpreendente em quem tudo poderia ter solucionado com outro rápido fiat, correu para o casal e, um após outro, sem contemplanções, sem meias-medidas, enfiou-lhes a língua pela garganta abaixo.⁵⁶ (09)

⁵⁶ "When the lord, also known as god, realized that adam and eve, although perfect in every outward aspect, could not utter a word or make even the most primitive sounds, he must have felt annoyed with himself, for there was no one else in the garden of eden whom he could blame for this grave oversight, after all, the other animals, who were, like the two humans, the product of his

The internal and external negative anticipation, both prompted by passages like the one above and by Saramago's statements (51 *infra*), are eventually fulfilled: harshly negative views on God, the Church and the Bible are expected and subsequently delivered on each page of *Caim*, and in a more subtle and masterful mode in *Evangelho*. Consequently, this explicitness affects retrospection in a negative way. It is in this sense that the *virtual dimension* of the text is continually blurred by a constant comparison to the supposedly real dimension of the Bible. And because the *virtual dimension* is not 'successfully' formed in this process of negative anticipation and retrospection (i.e. this specific reading group does not follow the given textual schemata), the reader's experience is one of frustration and indignation. The author, however, according to Iser, is not to blame, for

the impact this [virtual] reality makes on him [the reader] will depend largely on the extent to which he himself actively provides the unwritten part of the text, and yet in supplying all the missing links, he must think in terms of experiences different from his own; indeed, it is only by leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience that the reader can truly participate in the adventure the literary text offers him. ("The Reading Process" 194-195)

divine command, already had a voice, be it a bellow, a roar, a croak, a chirp, a whistle or a cackle. In an access of rage, surprising in someone who could have solved any problem simply by issuing another quick fiat, he rushed over to adam and eve, and unceremoniously, no half-measures, stuck his tongue down the throats of first one then the other". (Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. Harvill Secker, 2011. Jull Costa is Saramago's celebrated official translator. In this passage, however, "his tongue" would be more properly translated as "the tongue", as the original does not suggest that God stuck his own tongue down Adam and Eve's throat.)

This explanation is crucial to my argument because it accounts for the interference of ideology with the experiences a literary work may offer. In religious criticism, not only are the missing links (or “gaps”, as Iser calls them, *The Act of Reading* 184) fulfilled in a heavily ideological manner (when the critic actually reads the text before criticizing it), but the elements given by the text are not accepted owing to the permanent comparison of Saramago’s text to the Bible and to religious ideology.

Also central to the formation of the textual *virtual dimension* is the process of *passive synthesis*. Iser explains that “a reality that has no existence of its own can only come into being by way of ideation, and so the structure of the text sets off a sequence of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader’s consciousness” (*The Act of Reading* 38). This image-building process is termed *passive synthesis*, and “the actual content of these mental images will be colored by the reader’s existing stock of experience, which acts as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed” (38). In religious critical reception, with its actualization of a literary work permanently attached to the Bible (never a referential background, but a foreground) and with the attribution to it of a “real dimension”, *passive synthesis* is especially problematic when it comes to ideating biblical characters, especially Jesus Christ, as Vieira Mendes’s excerpt has already shown. Even though “fictional language provides instructions for the [...] production of an imaginary object” (64), this is complicated by Saramago’s crystal clear recourse to the Bible, for his Jesus might be imaginary, but the critics’ Jesus is not only ideated but also idealized, and herein lies a crucial difference not always perceived by Portuguese religious readers.

Leaving aside the heated debate around Saramago's portrait of Mary in *Evangelho* not as the virgin the Catholic religion idealizes but as the extremely passive and subservient mother of nine children (Vieira Mendes 60, Moura de Basto 99), critics were even more offended by the writer's depiction of Jesus. Vieira Mendes, for instance (and again), angrily entitles one of the chapters of his book "E Jesus Cristo Ressuscitou, Dr. José Saramago?" ("And Did Jesus Christ Resurrect, Mr. José Saramago?"), before offering allegedly documented data on the veracity of Christ's resurrection. Similarly, Eleutério de Carvalho finds it difficult to accept a Jesus confined to the "material dimension" shaped by Saramago's Marxism, Communism and scientific materialism (08-09); Pereira do Barral thinks that the writer transformed Jesus "de *Salvador*, em *Palhaço Humano*" ("from Saviour into a human clown", 06), and Pulido Valente regards this Jesus as reduced "com grotesca simplicidade a uma mágico curandeiro quase mudo" ("with gross simplicity to an almost mute witch doctor", qtd. in Simões "Saramago Evangelista do Ressentimento" 412).

Considering that *passive synthesis* requires the reader's active participation, "image-building will be regulated by his competence and his familiarity with the systems referred to" (*The Act of Reading* 145). Interestingly, this affirmation does not account for the uncanny similarities in popular and scholarly reception. Regardless of the level of familiarity with the religious code that permeates Portuguese society, responses only differ in the writing style, i.e. a more or less insulting tone, as I have previously mentioned.

Arguably, any other religion-centred artwork written by Saramago would probably receive the same response in Portugal. It is at this point that Iser clarifies the disservice readers do to a textual *virtual dimension* with the difference between *passive* and *predicative synthesis*: "passive differ from predicative syntheses in that they are not

judgments. Unlike judgments, which are independent of time, passive syntheses take place along the time axis of reading” (150). Leaving aside the problematic assertion of the independence of judgement from time in general, for the purposes of the actualization of a literary text, *passive synthesis*, contrary to anticipation and retrospection, is confined to the world of the text and should not have any extraneous component. In this case, however, *passive synthesis* is compromised by *predicative synthesis* for the reasons I have mentioned so far, because it is not restricted to the world of the text, and because of the interference of extraneous facts about the author that are not (or, according to Iser, should not be) in any way related to the time axis of reading.

An interesting consequence of this interference with the formation of the textual *virtual dimension* and with *passive synthesis* is that the reader’s absorption into an image that takes him/her out of empirical reality, *irrealization* (140), is still accomplished, for the world of the text, the world of the Bible, and the reader’s stock of experience are not to be equated with empirical reality, (i.e. an individual’s insertion into everyday life -- I will return to this point shortly.) And all this impacts *negation*, the last of Iser’s terms to be addressed here.

Negation is another textual effect with a dual function, for it might occur intra- or extra-textually. *Primary negation* should denote a deficiency in the social system evoked in the text and perceived by the reader, who, in turn, becomes aware of the codes that orient him/her in empirical reality. This newly-acquired awareness comprises *secondary negation*. Through this *secondary negation*, the prevailing code is transformed into a detached object of speculation, and the reader “therefore becomes open to experiences which had been excluded by [his/her] projections as long as they remained valid” (*The Act of Reading* 224).

Considering that Portuguese society regards Christianity as the ideal social code, and that this code has its “rules” laid out in the Bible, the deficiencies denoted through *primary negation* are still apprehended by the reader, who agrees that the Bible is used to justify the abuse of religious power in society, but *secondary negation* is generally not fulfilled. The strong ideological tone of the reviews denotes the impediment of this detachment from ideological positions necessary to recognizing the supposed shortcomings of the religious code.

Now, considering Iser’s reflections, a distinction between the world of the Bible, which the reader regards as Saramago’s object of critique in the novels, and the empirical reality of a society based on the scriptures, which is, in fact, the writer’s object of critique, is necessary. The problem is that Saramago criticizes the social codes of his home country by drawing on the written code it abides by. Thus, the distinction between which reality is to be reflected upon is blurred. Comparatively, let us recall that Saramago censured the violent use of this code in *A Segunda Vida de Francisco de Assis* (1987) and *In Nomine Dei* (1993), but because his focus was the actions of greedy and murderous men who justified themselves with the use of God’s name, therefore excluding the Bible and its divine figures from his animadversions, the plays received positive reviews, mentioned previously in this chapter. In this case, the writer clearly denounced the deficiencies of his cultural/social code without recourse to the Bible.

Having said all this, what is the final consequence of the constant imposition of a reader’s ideology onto a literary text? Iser clarifies:

The more committed the reader is to an ideological position, the less inclined he will be to accept the basic theme-and-horizon structure of comprehension which regulates the text-reader interaction. He will not allow his norms to become a theme, because as such they are automatically open to the critical view inherent in the virtualized positions that form the background. And if he is induced to participate in the events of the text, only to find that he is then supposed to adopt a negative attitude toward values he does not wish to question, the result will often be open rejection of the book and its author. (qtd. in Holub 98)

Unfortunately, this is precisely the case in Portuguese religious reception. It would not be fair, however, to relegate the responsibility of a failed communicative interaction entirely to the reader. When pondering about the few responses to *Caim*, for instance, and the reluctance or lack of interest in reading this novel in comparison to *Evangelho*, the notion of *confirmative effect* comes to mind. A *confirmative effect* is nothing more than the confirmation of an expectation aroused by the text. For Iser, any effect “is a defect in a literary text. For the more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose, so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us” (“The Reading Process” 192). This *confirmative effect* is indeed true of *Caim*, and it actualizes the negative expectations aroused by the bitter sample Saramago offered with *Evangelho* seventeen years earlier and his well-known statements about the Bible and the church. As Pulido Valente affirmed after the publication of *Caim*, “de Saramago – suponho – não se esperava melhor” (“Of Saramago – I suppose – nothing better was expected”, *Observatório* 05).

Although Saramago's viewpoint should be clear enough with the beautiful *Evangelho* and his militancy against any form of power, *Caim* indeed reads like a thesis, and it is undoubtedly inferior to the 1991 novel exactly because of what Iser has proposed: it has a didactic purpose, one that reinforces the writer's negative view of Christianity, especially the doctrines of the Catholic church. What should a reader expect, for instance, after the very first page of *Caim*, previously transcribed here? Although the aesthetic object, the final product of the reader's interaction with a text, "cannot be identified with any of its manifestations during the time-flow of reading" (*The Act of Reading* 109), *Caim* actually incites this identification.

Manoel Simões detected this didactic purpose already in *Evangelho*. Through what he perceives as Saramago's distortion of biblical data that supposedly justifies an ideological system ("Saramago Evangelista do Ressentimento" 410), Simões concludes that "os diabos' históricos e existenciais que povoam o consciente ou o inconsciente do grande mestre da língua portuguesa acabam por empurrá-lo para um romance que pela tese e mensagem não andarão longe do panfleto"⁵⁷ (412), a trait that is more widely perceived in *Caim*. If the literary text "does not consist in giving a determinate solution to the determinate problems posed, but it is the transformation of events into the discovery of the virtual cause" (228), *Caim* does not follow this description. In other words, the reason that led Saramago to write this novel should not be exposed in the text but unveiled by the reader, thus actively involving him/her in the formulation of this cause and the necessity to reflect upon it in order to modify its shortcomings. However, with the assassination of

⁵⁷ "the historical and existential 'devils' that populate the conscious or the unconscious of the great master of the Portuguese language end up pushing him towards a novel which, by its thesis and message, is not far from the pamphlet." *Panflete* refers to a type of literature that aims at convincing the reader to adopt an intended posture. The term is widely used to refer to political discourses.

every human being that was saved in Noah's ark by the character that names the novel, Saramago suggests the destruction of Christian ideology altogether as a solution to Portuguese societal problems, and such a clear-cut remedy does not leave much to the reader. In this sense, Iser warns that "if a literary text organizes its elements in too overt a manner, the chances are that we as readers will either reject the book out of boredom or will resent the attempt to render us completely passive" (*The Act of Reading* 87). And resentment is indeed the word to describe religious critics' feelings towards this didactic purpose. It is what Pereira do Barral clearly felt at the realization that Saramago intended to "matar a Deus e a seu filho Jesus Cristo" ("kill God and his son Jesus Christ", 14) in *Evangelho*.

Do these considerations point to a failed act of communication between Saramago and his readers? Clearly, there is an optimistic tone to Iser's mention of the "adventure the literary text offers" (*The Act of Reading* 194-195). The impression is that this adventure will frequently be pleasant and it will achieve its purported goal of leading the reader to reflect upon the deficiencies of the society and culture he/she belongs to. In the specific case of religious readers and Saramago's works, there is certainly not much enjoyment, as the reviews demonstrate, but the experience, albeit negative, cannot be excluded from this process. Every time a reader refuses the worldview presented by the text (Iser rarely mentions the author), a process of reflection is attached to the achievement of this decision; in other words, a negative response to a literary text is as socially formative as a positive one.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider Iser's belief that, in our interaction with a literary text, "we inevitably have to start out with certain expectations, the shattering of

which is integral to the aesthetic experience” (“The Reading Process” 198). In the case of *Caim*, and Saramago’s religious-based works in general, it so happens that the shattering of expectations (anticipations) rarely takes place. Still, “as we read, we react to what we ourselves have produced, and it is this mode of reaction that, in fact, enables us to experience the text as an actual event” (*The Act of Reading* 128-129). This refers back to my opinion about the socially formative function of a negative experience resulting from the reader’s interaction with an artwork. Despite this attribution of agency to the reader, and to finalize this discussion on the failure or success of this type of interaction, for Iser “a successful relationship between text and reader can only come about through changes in the reader’s projections” (*The Act of Reading* 167), certainly an arbitrary view of the reading process.⁵⁸

While the sharp criticism of *Evangelho* undoubtedly denotes an engagement with the novel, albeit difficult and unpleasant, a large number of religious critics prefer not to read *Caim* at all before judging the novel. This attitude is explicitly based on the bitter sample Saramago offered in 1991 and on the controversial public statements around the time of the publication of *Caim*. In Joaquim Gonçalves’s article, for example, the bishop of Vila Real compares Saramago to Miguel Torga (another Portuguese writer) to the latter’s advantage. He cites passages of Torga’s texts, praises the title “A criação do mundo” (“The Creation of the World”), and concludes that Torga “respects the Bible” (17). In Saramago’s case, however, Gonçalves does not cite passages or characters. His assertion that “quando apareceu o livro de Saramago, viu-se logo que ele não queria conhecer a Bíblia, nem

⁵⁸ Iser’s theory has incited much criticism, especially on the arbitrariness of his method. Stanley Fish, for instance, finds problems with his notions of determinacy and indeterminacy (Holub 101-106). Iser addresses some of these questions in passing in *The Act of Reading* (24).

literária nem religiosamente”⁵⁹ is dubious because he could be referring to his own experience with the novel and/or alluding to Saramago’s public pronouncements (17).

In a more explicit manner, Vaz Pinto opens the 169th number of the magazine *Brotéria* with a two-page note entitled “Infelizmente, Saramago” (“Unfortunately, Saramago”) in order to address the tumultuous publication of *Caim*. He plainly states that he did not read the novel, and that his declarations are solely aimed at Saramago’s opinion of the Bible (527). Similarly, the rabbi Eliezer di Martino affirmed that the Jewish people would not be scandalized by Saramago’s treatment of the Bible in *Caim*, and admitted that he did not read the book, since “temos milhões de autores que fazem um grande esforço para dizer coisas más sobre religião, sobretudo as religiões bíblicas”⁶⁰ (*Público* 19 Oct 2009). Here we have highly ideological responses elicited by Saramago’s highly ideological position. In this scenario of excesses, Vaz Pinto shares Jesuit António Lopes’s conclusion that “tais subversões do Evangelho, pelo seu radicalismo tão frontal, em vez de levarem a um autêntico diálogo de reavaliação, são mais próprias para não ser tomadas a sério”⁶¹ (qtd. in “Saramago Evangelista do Ressentimento” 411).

⁵⁹ “when Saramago’s book [*Caim*] came out, it was clear that he didn’t want to get to know the Bible, neither literarily nor religiously.”

⁶⁰ “we have millions of authors that make an enormous effort to say bad things about religion, above all about the biblical religions.”

⁶¹ “owing to such a frontal radicalism, such subversions of the gospels, instead of leading to an authentic dialogue of re-evaluation, are not to be taken seriously.”

2.3 Religious Reception of Non-Religion-Based Books

Not surprisingly, the number of reviews of Saramago's novels that do not address religious matters directly is significantly reduced. Considering that the writer's atheism has been less criticized than his alliance to Communism and Marxism, as I have shown up to this point, religious response has been inconsistent in regards to its focus. In accordance with this tendency, the explicit criticism on the harmful development of capitalism in *A Jangada de Pedra* (*The Stone Raft*), for instance, could easily incite responses from readers who regard Saramago's ideology as an interference with his literary creations. Similarly, the suggestion that the casting of almost 100% of blank votes would force the government of an unnamed country to re-think priorities and listen to people's demands in *Ensaio Sobre a Lucidez* (*Seeing*) is another fertile opportunity for ideological criticism. Thus, the comparison between the number and the content of reviews produced by religious critics on *Evangelho* and *Caim* and Saramago's other novels point to a biased position on this interpretive community's part. If the problem, as was argued in reviews on *Evangelho* and *Caim*, was indeed the writer's Communism and Marxism, then criticism of other novels should be as abundant.⁶² "Why is Cipriano a potter?" asks Ian Carter in his review of *A Caverna*. "Because he works with clay. This allows his Maker to play with vaguely sacrilegious notions about creation" (128). But because this connection is not explicit in this specific novel, Portuguese religious reception has either not noticed it or decided not to produce inflamed reviews. In this case, it is tempting to accept Fish's affirmation that "meanings are

⁶² Father Vaz Pinto started a debate with Saramago about *Evangelho* by recognizing that "existem preconceitos em certas pessoas – o que é uma estupidez – que, ao saberem que é membro do PCP, já não lêem as suas obras" (Coimbra) ("there is prejudice in some people – which is a stupidity – who, upon knowing that you are a member of the Portuguese Communist Party, won't read your works").

the property neither of fixed and stable texts nor of free and independent readers but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of a reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce" (322).

Following this comparison, reviews of other novels are generally positive. In "A Jangada de Pedra' Utopia Ibérica", Manuel Simões shows his enthusiasm for this novel. He recognizes that José Saramago "é dos escritores que mais solicitam a constante acção participativa do leitor"⁶³ (405). For the scholar, this novel is a "livro intemporal – acrónico, digamos pretensiosamente!" ("a timeless book – out of time, let's say pretentiously!" 408). Even though Saramago manages to criticize religious ideology somehow in all his novels, as I mentioned in the first chapter, Simões does not comment on similarities he perceives between *A Jangada de Pedra* and biblical passages, nor on how they were incorporated in the novel. About the writer's ironic comments on the false relics kept in the Cathedral of Valence, Simões is quick to explain that "quanto ao sal do baptismo informamos Saramago que foi suprimido no novo Ritual em uso"⁶⁴ (409), but this is far as he goes in reviewing the novel from a religious perspective. Following the trend of comparing the author to other writers, Simões approximates Saramago to Gabriel García Márquez (410) in that "o histórico e o fantasioso contaminam-se agradavelmente" ("history and fantasy contaminate one another pleasantly", 409).

In addition, Simões recognizes the uselessness of attempting to fit Saramago into one literary category: "no caso de escritores da envergadura de Saramago, as etiquetas deste

⁶³ "is one of the writers who mostly require the constant participative action of his reader."

⁶⁴ "in regards to the salt of baptism we inform Saramago that it has been supplanted in the current ritual."

gênero são inadequadas”⁶⁵ (410), an opinion quite different from the ones on *Evangelho* and *Caim*. Simões concludes that, in *Jangada*, “formula-se muito bem a solidariedade universal deste mundo [...] O mistério nos une sem remédio”⁶⁶ (412)

In the reviews of Saramago’s religion-based novels, brief comparisons to other works written by him are not uncommon. The usual aim of placing religion-based novels next to non-religion-based works is to comment on the superior quality of the latter. In this sense, while criticizing Saramago’s superficial and literal interpretation of the Bible to create *Caim*, Joaquim Gonçalves manages to comment positively on *Ensaio*: “Se lêssemos desse modo primário o seu livro *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira* reduzi-lo-íamos a um livro fedorento e cheio de excrementos humanos, em vez de ver aí uma metáfora da histórica degradação do homem no nazismo, no estalinismo e no consumismo”⁶⁷ (17). Whether or not this comparison is positive to *Ensaio* precisely because Gonçalves detects criticism against the ideology frowned upon by religious critics is a matter open to discussion.

As a last example, critic Joanna Courteau’s review on *Ensaio* comments on the influence of Padre António Vieira⁶⁸ on Saramago. In accordance with Simões, Courteau also perceives the constant necessity for the reader’s involvement, which leads her to feel that the writer in question “privilegia o leitor, tratando-o como um ser inteligente e bem informado” (195), a reader who “não só compreende, mas concorda com esta mensagem: o

⁶⁵ “in the case of writers of Saramago’s stature, labels of this type are inadequate.”

⁶⁶ “the universal solidarity of this world is formulated very well [...] Mystery unites us without remedy.”

⁶⁷ “If we read his book *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira* in this primary way we would reduce it to a stinky book, full of human excrements, instead of seeing there a metaphor for men’s historical degradation in Nazism, Stalinism and consumerism.”

⁶⁸ Portuguese Jesuit (1608-1697) whose sermons denote a rare mastery of the Portuguese language and are still part of high school syllabi in Portugal and Brazil. I acquired a 2008 edition of his sermons during a recent trip to Lisbon, a fact that points to his importance in the literary scene to this day.

mundo está de facto numa condição lamentável”⁶⁹ (198). Drawing on a passage that touches upon blindness from Father Vieira’s “Sermão da Quinta Quarta-Feira” (“Sermon of the Fifth Wednesday”), Courteau concludes that “é a nós, os escribas, os teóricos da literatura e cultura, que se dirige Saramago com as palavras tão fortes do Padre António Vieira, esperando, contra toda a esperança, que de entre nós ‘saia um cego alumiado’”⁷⁰ (199).

In short, religious reception of non-religion-based books tends to be positive and praiseful of Saramago’s merits. The fierce admonition against ideology, found in responses to *Evangelho* and *Caim*, is virtually absent.

2.4 Non-Religious Reception of Religion-Based Books

My focus on religious reception certainly does not reflect the opinion on Saramago’s works by the Portuguese reading public as a whole. As I mentioned before, this is only one of the niches to be explored. I have argued that religious criticism of Saramago tends to be ideological, and that more attention has been paid to his public statements about the Bible than to the novel *Caim*. Paulo Ferreira da Cunha recognizes this (07), and it was around this premise that his article on religious freedom was written following the 2009 polemics. For purposes of comparison, this section deals with reviews written on *Evangelho* and *Caim* from non-religious perspectives.

⁶⁹ “privileges the reader, treating him as an intelligent and well-informed being”, “not only comprehends, but also agrees with this message: the world is indeed in a lamentable condition.”

⁷⁰ “it is us, the scribes, the theoreticians of literature and culture, whom Saramago addresses with Father António Vieira’s strong words, hoping, against all hope, that ‘an illuminated blind’ will come out from among us.”

With the exclusion of analyses centred on theological veracity and exegesis, non-religious critics regard *Evangelho* as one of Saramago's masterpieces and as a work that, ironically, comes much closer to the Christian message than the majority of religious biblical interpretations in Portugal. For instance, Vanda Maria Gouveia Fernandes Gouveia's M.A. thesis led her to conclude that

o discurso do romance, radicado em valores que no fundo são genuinamente cristãos e profundamente comprometidos com uma visão comunitária e ecuménica dos povos, consagra a dignidade absoluta da vida a partir de uma reflexão naturalista e humanista que se pode entender como uma religião universal por excelência.”⁷¹ (172)

Similarly, Fernando Venâncio comments on the proximity of Saramago's gospel to the ones penned by Luke, Mark, Matthew and John, the four evangelists, for a variety of reasons, such as his mastery of biblical writing style and the sincerity of an attempt to supply the 18-year gap in Jesus's life that is not told in the Bible. As a consequence of the intermingling of fantasy and canonical factuality, Saramago “atinge um efeito de real que é autenticamente prodigioso” (“achieves a reality effect that is authentically prodigious”, 289). This is only one of the reasons that contribute to Venâncio's opinion that “algumas páginas deste *Evangelho* são das mais primorosas que o Autor escreveu” (“some pages of

⁷¹ “the discourse of the novel, rooted in values that are genuinely Christian and profoundly compromised to a communitary and ecumenical view of the peoples, consecrates the absolute dignity of life from the point of view of a naturalist and humanistic reflection that might be understood as a universal religion *par excellence*.”

this *Evangelho* are the most exquisite that the author has ever written”), pages that carry “uma perturbadora beleza” (“a perturbing beauty”, 290).

Surprisingly, *Caim*, on the contrary, unites religious and non-religious readers in the opinion that this novel is inferior to *Evangelho*, and for the same reasons that made the selections of most prominent themes in religious criticism possible (03 *infra*). These views combined denounce the extent to which Saramago’s didacticism interfered negatively with his literary art. For instance, Carlos Quiroga affirms that “no *Evangelho* havia desafio [...] mas havia também dosagem, ordem” (“in *Evangelho* there was challenge [...] but there was also dosage, order”, 01-02), and that this preoccupation disappears in *Caim*, a story “por vezes infantil” (“at times childish”, 02). João Céu e Silva, Saramago’s close friend and a literary critic recognizes that, in *Caim*, “‘deus’ surge cru e sem a beleza narrativa de *Evangelho*” (“‘god’ appears raw and without the narrative beauty of *Evangelho*”).

Considering “the inexhaustibility of the text” (“The Reading Process” 193), in the future, when more time will have elapsed since the publication of *Caim*, and critics read the book another time, the first reading “may be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections”, and “in establishing these interrelations between past, present and future, actually cause the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections” (“The Reading Process” 192). For the time being, however, there is a consensus among critics regarding *Caim*, which is also true of readers in Canada and in the USA: it is not the end of career expected of Saramago.⁷²

⁷² *Observatório da Cultura* showcases a variety of opinions on *Caim* from a non-religious perspective. By relying on a literal interpretation of the Bible to compose this novel, some critics think, Saramago comes dangerously close to the Fundamentalist religious ideology he criticized. See especially Fiolhais (03) and Oliveira (06).

In conclusion, Saramago and the church representatives unarguably carried out a dense and constant dialogue throughout the writer's life, as it is amply recorded.⁷³ He was constantly available to discuss religious matters with church representatives, but unfortunately, always inflexible and skeptical of any arguments posed during these encounters, as Ferreira da Cunha points out (12). Similarly, such meetings were seen by the church not as an opportunity to re-evaluate Portugal's past and present from a non-theistic perspective but to tentatively convince Saramago of the applicability and veracity of the Christian faith. Maria Estela Guedes regarded these debates as an example set by the church "de uma cortesia que só documenta o seu papel civilizador" ("of a courtesy [politeness] that only documents its civilizing role", quoted in Simões "Saramago Evangelista do Ressentimento" 413), because, apparently, Saramago was not civilized enough.

In conclusion, the relationship between Saramago and his Portuguese religious readers was always a battle of inflexible ideologies punctuated by multiple monologues instead of true dialogue. As I have argued, drawing on Iser's theory, neither side was victorious when it came to achieving social and literary interaction.

⁷³ See Castanheira's "José Saramago: O que me Vale, Caro Tolentino, é que Já Não Há Fogueiras em São Domingos" (*Expresso* 25 Oct 2009) for a heated debate between the writer and the theologian José Tolentino Mendonça, with whom Saramago discussed religious matters several times.

CHAPTER 3

“A Disappointing End”: Responses to *Cain* in the United States and Canada

3.1 General Considerations

In the first chapter I outlined the most recurrent themes in American and Canadian reviews. I also mentioned that, in general, this interpretive community has received Saramago’s works enthusiastically, but I also pointed out that *Cain*⁷⁴ frustrated the expectations of a significant portion of readers. In fact, the differences in reception in comparison to Saramago’s previous novels are acute. If the writer in question seemed to be so well-established in these countries to the point of meriting a whole book dedicated to his work, written by such a respected contemporary critic as Harold Bloom⁷⁵, and if more than ten of his novels have received consistently positive reviews (with rare exceptions, of course), why does *Cain* stand apart from Saramago’s perceived literary genius? What factors account for such an abrupt change in the writer’s reception in North America?

My starting point is a similarity perceived in responses produced in Portugal, Canada and United States to compose the present chapter: the negative reception of *Cain*. In this sense, the application of Iser’s selected concepts (*virtual dimension of the text*, *passive synthesis* and *negation*) pertains to an analysis that begins with a more general

⁷⁴ Since the reviewers mentioned in this chapter use the titles of the novels in English, I will proceed in the same manner in order to avoid confusion.

⁷⁵ Ian Carter remarks in a rather comic tone that Bloom’s interest in Saramago “is high praise for an avowed Marxist writer from Harold Bloom: that fractious defender of the canon, a man celebrated for his thundering anathemas on Marxist, feminist, and post-everything approaches to literature.” (125)

corpus, a group of reviews of a variety of Saramago's novels, and is then concentrated in reviews exclusively on *Cain*. My focus here, then, is not on a specific group of readers, as in chapter II, but on a specific novel. My argument is that the didactic purpose exposed in the previous chapter is the negative element that compromises the processes of *virtual dimension of the text*, *passive synthesis* and *negation*, and consequently accounts for the stark change in reception. For this purpose, I have considered popular and scholarly reviews as well as academic articles. For the reasons outlined in the introduction, religious reception is not included here.

3.2 “Only the daring enlightens”: Positive Reception

If the twentieth-century ended in 1991, then Saramago has a good claim to being the greatest and, what is more, the most necessary political novelist of the twentieth-century, so far. (Kunkel 142)

As I affirmed in the first chapter, *Baltasar and Blimunda* (translated in 1987) received significant international critical attention and brought Saramago his first wave of recognition in North America. Nevertheless, some critics consider *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984, translation 1991) the decisive work of fiction for the writer's insertion into the literary scene in the USA and Canada. Literary critic D.T. Max, for instance, believes that “Saramago's work has had two peaks, one in the mid 1980s with the subtle and masterly modernist novel ‘The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis’ (...) and another in the mid 90s when his writing was characterized by a sun-bleached plainness that led to his

brilliant parable of societal decline, ‘Blindness’”. Undoubtedly, *Blindness*⁷⁶ incited the second wave of attention on Saramago, but I maintain that *Baltasar and Blimunda* is the novel that initiated North-American interest in the writer’s works, as confirmed by Fernanda Eberstadt’s article and Walter Goodman’s review of the novel.

As Saramago became even more recognized with *Blindness*, the general reading public came to regard him as “a staunch defender of the role of literature to both serve and be perceived as public discourse.” With the Nobel Prize, “his international visibility greatly amplified”, and “he could be seen (...) shuttling the globe and making globally publicized statements on behalf of the many political causes that have attracted his attention and support” (Klobucka xii). In addition, Saramago thought that, as an author, his duty was “escrever. Mas como um escritor é também um cidadão, intervir na sociedade, como cidadão que é” (“to write. But since a writer is also a citizen, [his duty is] to intervene in society as the citizen that he is”, *José & Pilar*). Therefore, any reader minimally acquainted with Saramago’s position as a writer and his literary creations cannot but notice that his social and political convictions shape his novels, and the reading public in the USA and Canada is not an exception. In the reviews collected for this study, for instance, not one reviewer fails to mention Saramago’s ideology. To cite one example, Benjamin Kunkel contends that the writer in question, “who joined the Portuguese Communist Party in 1968, when it was still outlawed, has been a political novelist from the start” (142). In this sense, this chapter seeks to examine how his ideology is perceived, what impact it has on reception, and why.

⁷⁶ This novel incited responses not only from critics, scholars and aficionados of literature, but from a variety of fields of inquiry in North America (chapter 1, *infra*), a trend in reception that, so far, has been a differentiating factor in comparison with Portugal.

While the reader's religious convictions and the writer's transmission of his own ideology through didacticism created a hostile environment for Saramago in Portugal, in the United States and in Canada readers are generally "emotionally detached" from the contents of his novels. This, of course, is due to a variety of reasons, the most obvious being that Saramago's harsh literary criticism of social systems does not apply directly to North America. In other words, the political stand and public statements that created so much controversy in his home country are distant from an American reader dealing with *Gospel* in New York, for instance. Secondly, while Saramago's Communism is still perceived as a threat by the reading public in Portugal, as chapter 2 shows, in the United States and Canada this very threat, i.e. ideology, is what invests the writer with an aura of admiration, for it is not seen as pure Communism in the potentially negative sense present in reviews by Portuguese religious readers, but as humanism (Rollason 114), as a passion for the defense of humanity and an urgent request that humans treat each other compassionately. For all these reasons, North-American reviews of Saramago's works, purged of the heated ideological passion present in the previous chapter⁷⁷, are more objective and significantly more positive.

In this sense, the most significant difference between Portuguese religious reception and North-American reception lies in the perception of how Saramago's ideology shapes his novels. Both interpretive communities are acutely aware of the writer's religious and political convictions, but whereas in Portugal the negative focus was on the didacticism of this transposition of ideology onto literature, in North America the same transposition is

⁷⁷ It is important to recall the reactions of the blind people to *Ensaio* and of Jewish people to Saramago's comparison of Palestine to Auschwitz (chapter I, *infra*.) In addition to their social (instead of literary) focus, these responses are exceptions in Saramago's North-American reception.

perceived as beneficial to Saramago's literary creations. The following responses illustrate my point.

In his review of *All the Names* ("Rising Out of Dust, a Glimmer of Hope"), Richard Eder, a prolific critic of Saramago, ponders: "That Mr. Saramago is a Communist – the very rare communist who in all senses is a great writer – is probably significant", yet "*there is nothing ideologically programmed in his fiction*" (my italics.) Eder thinks that, overall, the fact "that he is an atheist is more important", since "his various versions of God are tested, rebuked and sometimes persuaded by his lowly heroes." Interestingly, from the perspective of a supposedly non-religious reader, in this case Richard Eder, Saramago's atheism is more important than any other of his convictions in shaping his novels, whereas Portuguese religious readers, as I explain in the previous chapter, regard his Communism as the essential (negative) factor.

Eder returns to this question of convictions and literature in his response to *The Cave* ("A Capitalism Just as Stifling as Stalinist Communism"). For him, Saramago's perceived ideology does not interfere negatively with the novel because it is subordinate to artistry:

Other novels by Mr. Saramago, a Portuguese writer who is (neither incidentally nor constrictingly) a Communist, create a dehumanizing institution as their target. In "Blindness" it was the fetid prison, worthy of Hieronymus Bosch (...). In "All the Names" it was the swelling Registry of the Dead; in "The History of the Siege of Lisbon", the tyranny of official history; in "The Stone Raft", the smug prosperity of a unified Europe. It was not just these balefully inflected situations that earned Mr.

Saramago the 1998 Nobel Prize in Literature. It was also the delicate and outrageous humanity (a thing much harder to devise) of a handful of characters who set themselves up in pacific and explosive resistance.

For this reason, Eder concludes, somewhat dramatically, that Saramago's "human voices wake us and we live." Here, again, the writer's Communism is not detected on its own: it is accompanied by humanism. Eder affirms again in "The Diminishment of Discovering One's Double", a review of *The Double*, that the novel in question is a perfect example of "Mr. Saramago's idiosyncratic post-Marxist dialectic: materialist but only as a way to ground the soul."

The same premise shapes scholar Ian Carter's engaging "José Saramago: Latterday Tolstoy?", a review essay on *The Cave*⁷⁸. The scholar believes that the Portuguese writer practiced "self-conscious fiction-as-sociology" (130) and affirms that

His own life experience shapes his novels, set against bio-socio political events: Salazar's rise in *A Year in the Death of Ricardo Reis*, that regime's intrusively inept surveillance policies in *All the Names*, Portuguese Catholicism's dead hand in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, the Iberian peninsula's frail mooring rope to the rest of Europe in *The Stone Raft*. (125)

Similarly, critic Jonathan Ledgard recognizes that "Saramago was a Communist. He believed there was a new totalitarianism of multinational companies. 'To be a Portuguese

⁷⁸ Carter is Professor of Sociology at the University of Auckland (New Zealand). Because his considerations on Saramago's works echo those of American and Canadian readers, I have exceptionally included his essay here.

Stalinist' well into the 21st century 'means you're simply not living in the real world', the critic Harold Bloom has said. True enough. *Yet* when Saramago picked up his pen, a richer world was made" (my italics).

Undoubtedly, Saramago took upon his shoulders the responsibility of awakening his readers to the drastic situation of our world. He has done so while offering exceptional entertainment through his novels. As Carter points out, "Saramago's politics are here too [*The Cave*], but in much subtler forms than arguments about 'globalization' suggest" (128). This is perhaps the reason why the writer incites the reader to think about reality: not because he wrote a manifesto or a political tract, but because his purpose was disguised by the brilliant fiction he produced.

Nevertheless, the purpose is not always hidden. In his review of *Seeing*, Rafferty points out that "Saramago, crafty old lefty that he is, understands that ridicule is a terrifically effective weapon, and in 'Seeing' he makes it his business to turn repression into farce." The critic warns, however, that "the drawback of this brand of political humor is that it has a tendency to turn smug and self-satisfied, and Saramago, I'm afraid, is not immune to that affliction." This is an affirmation that foreshadows response to *Cain*.

As a rebuke to the criticism exposed in chapter 2 (*infra*), Ilan Stavans, a Mexican novelist, literary critic and professor in the United States, defends Saramago against attacks, especially religious, on the interference of ideology with his creations in his review of *Gospel*:

Those accusing Saramago of blasphemy for portraying Jesus as a Communist (a questionable attack) (...) forgot something altogether crucial: as a literary genre, the

novel retains a loyalty to the secularist and cynical views it was born with during Erasmus's age; any historical figure metamorphosed into a novelistic character thus becomes an expression, a mirror of the container it inhabits. (676)

He sets the tone of this affirmation with a positive outlook on the intermingling of Saramago's ideology and literature:

As a young Communist, he [Saramago] found it virtually impossible to publish under the António de Oliveira Salazar dictatorship of 1932-68, but after the bloodless coup of 1974 brought a modicum of press freedom, he exploded into Portugal's intellectual arena. Since then, with his pen, Saramago has over the past few decades publicly re-evaluated Iberian history, offering insightful, at times uncomfortable reflections on Portugal's religiosity and daily behavior. (675)

Although Stavans is an admirer of Saramago's work, he produced a text of a significantly different tone in 2004. Following Saramago's comparison of the situation in Ramallah to the camps in Auschwitz (chapter 1 *infra*) and his connection of the episode with the story of David and the giant Goliath in the Bible, the critic published a text which was partly a literary review of *The Cave* and partly a critique of the writer's public statements regarding Israel and Ramallah, entitled "Is José Saramago an Anti-Semite?". Stavans reflects upon Saramago's ideology in his literary career and his responsibility as a public figure. In relation to the "unformulated" aspect that informs *The Cave*, the critic recognizes that "in the hands of a lesser writer, one more pamphleteering in his nature, this premise would

easily evolve into a predictable critique of capitalism” (90), and comments on Saramago’s mastery in the use of metaphors and allegories. For Stavans, Cipriano Algor, the main character who battles capitalism in the aforementioned novel,

is a concrete person, yes, but he is also an abstraction. In Saramago’s pen, this device works superbly, infusing the novel with an excess of meaning that makes it irresistible. But the same device fails miserably when Saramago works outside the boundaries of fiction. The Middle East is no doubt a quagmire of signification, but an intellectual of his stature ought to know better than to inject malleable biblical allusions into a process that in and of itself is frighteningly volatile. (91)

Despite Stavans’ harsh criticism of Saramago’s pronouncements about politics in the Middle East, the important point here is that the critic maintains his opinion that the transposition of the writer’s political convictions into his novels is effective and pleasing. On the other hand, outside the boundaries of fiction, Stavans even felt the necessity to “discuss his overt ideology with colleagues across the map” (88-89). What Stavans perceived as a serious social fault in Saramago’s use of “malleable biblical allusions” as a public person of whom more was expected, is also regarded as literarily inappropriate for readers of *Cain*. This novel is the example *par excellence* of Saramago’s constantly repeated affirmation that the narrator and the author are one and the same person, but already at the end of his essay of *The Cave*, Stavans is unable to differentiate Saramago the intellectual from Saramago the novelist (94).

In Carter's conclusion -- that "*The Cave* is a dazzling achievement. It reads as a novel, but it also is a sophisticated Marxist tract directed against protean capitalism's latest manifestation" (129) -- lies my core argument: the "dazzling achievement" of Saramago's literary creations happens whenever his political and social convictions are not preached in a didactic manner to his readers. If the reader is led by the text to discover the writer's argument through his/her experience with the book, as Iser postulates, and if this argument is not overtly exposed, readers are indeed the formulators of meaning. If, on the other hand, a text does not offer any possibility of participation in the production of meaning on the reader's part, he/she will resent this attempt at "education", and this is precisely the case with *Cain*, as I will show shortly.

Following the translation of *The Elephant's Journey* in 2008, the Canadian magazine *Macleans* published a conclusion about this novel ("An Elephant Worthy of Cervantes") that is both right and mistaken: "For a great writer's epitaph, it doesn't get any better than that." The mistake is that *The Elephant's Journey* is not Saramago's epitaph, as *Cain* appeared one year later. The correct point is that, according to North-American reception, it did not get any better indeed.

3.3 The Common Ground: Didacticism in *Cain*

I suspect even most atheists, of which I am one, will find themselves siding with the believers here, and demand a greater subtlety of thought than can be found in this novel (Phil Jourdan).

In the introduction to this study, I briefly recounted the plot of *Cain*. Scholar John Murphy completes my summary by attesting that this novel essentially “upends the Old Testament through furious prose, ideological passion, and desiccated places.” These three elements suffice to incite a positive response from Murphy. Nevertheless, of these three components, mentioned by the majority of North-American reviewers, ideological passion, transmitted in a didactic tone, is precisely what turns *Cain* into an unpleasant and crude tale. But before reflecting upon the impact of this novel on response in the United States and Canada in light of Iser’s theory, some examples of positive response to the work in question are necessary. In the following reviews, Saramago’s readers acknowledge the positive influence of his ideology in this specific novel.

Robert Pinsky, a literary critic, believes that *Cain* is “clearly less Christian than Marxist (Saramago was a member of the Portuguese Communist Party) and more tragic than Marxist, [it is] based on a born storyteller’s fascination with the moral aspects of his craft.” *Publishers Weekly* distinguishes the novel from the others reviewed on the same page with a red star and goes against the grain in the opinion that “Cain’s vagabond journey builds to a stunning climax that, like the book itself, is a fitting capstone to a remarkable career” (27). Finally, *Kirkus Reviews* finds it “a pleasing, elegantly written allegory” (2060). These responses are, I repeat, exceptions. I depart from these, then, to focus on the overwhelmingly negative reception of *Cain* and to analyze it through Iser’s theory in order to explain this shift in response.

If the reader’s ideology in Portuguese religious reception prevented the work of art from arriving at the completion of the basic processes that ultimately formulate its meaning, defamiliarization is an example of an aim successfully achieved in *Cain*, despite the

reader's perception of Saramago's transposition of ideology into his creation through didacticism. This defamiliarization, however, does not always contribute to an overall positive experience with the novel in question. Christian Williams, for instance, grants that "even if *Cain* wasn't such a nimble, pleasurable read, it would still be valuable for the way it makes the familiar unfamiliar." Here Williams comments on the accomplishment of a positive defamiliarization that, nevertheless, does not add significantly to his contact with the novel.

On the other hand, professor John Murphy believes that "Mr. Saramago can extract the core of the [biblical] story. He polishes it, in prose that *forces a reader to look at it differently*, as Cain inserts himself into the biblical narrative and wedges himself into these patriarchal stories to undermine their presumptions and prejudices." My italics here point to a function of defamiliarization implicitly recognized in both responses, despite the divergence in opinion: the formation of a *virtual dimension* of the text, which, in unison with other textual guidelines to be followed and actualized by the reader, will culminate in the socially formative function of literature, i.e. the laying bare of a flawed social/cultural system to be then scrutinized by the reader. This process, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, happens when the reader recognizes the deficiencies of these systems and is able, therefore, to "detach" him/herself from them in order to reflect upon them. The social or cultural system, then, not the text and not the artwork⁷⁹, becomes an object in itself, brought forth by literature.

Another element shared by both the responses shown above, despite their

⁷⁹ For Iser, the work of art is not to be equalized with the text. "The literary work has two poles (...) the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader." Because of this polarity, the work of art "must be inevitably virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader." (21)

differences in relation to defamiliarization, is that the Bible is clearly recognized in Saramago's work but, contrary to Portuguese religious reception, it does not become the foreground of the text. Obvious as this affirmation may be, the Bible, in the case of English-speaking North-American reception, is perceived as it should be according to Iser: as a component in the formation of a background that should result in the defamiliarization that is central to the formation of the *virtual dimension* of the text. This interpretive community comprehends the literary repertoire as Iser formulated it; it "has a two-fold function: it reshapes familiar schemata to form a background for the process of communication, and it provides a general framework within which the message or meaning of the text can be organized" (*The Act of Reading* 81). In this sense, one of the crucial elements in the process of communication between text and reader, the world of the text, is not compromised.

Although Catholicism is not the main religion in the United States and Canada, Christian postulates shared by Catholics and Protestants alike are also ingrained in society. Envisioning an image of God, for instance, would incite relatively similar results in these readers' minds. Consequently, an English-speaking North-American reader coming from a cultural background dominated largely by Judeo-Christian tradition conceptualizes God in a way that clashes with Saramago's version of this divine entity. However, "the iconic signs of literature constitute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate *instructions* for the *production* of the signified" (*The Act of Reading* 65). Despite Iser's affirmation, this process is much more complex than simply following "instructions." Thus, while Portuguese religious readers did not follow textual guidelines to compose the Saramaguian Jesus, North-American readers found

problems with the depiction of God in *Cain*. In this aspect, the process of *passive synthesis* and, consequently, *irrealization*, the reader's absorption into the image created (*The Act of Reading* 140), are compromised. Nevertheless, the factor that compromises *passive synthesis*, in this case, is not the juxtaposition of an idealized image of God to Saramago's, as was the case with Jesus in Portuguese religious reception, but *how* the textual instructions for the production of this signified are given. In other words, Saramago's didacticism is what prevents *passive synthesis* from functioning as envisioned by Iser.

The difficulty in "producing" God and Cain through Saramago's overtly explicit didacticism is what leads Jordan to affirm that the writer himself is, in this book, "as petty as the God he denounces." Similarly, scholar John Wolf concludes that, in *Cain*,

the rule of heaven is a parody, a joke, and god (his god) is irresponsible and cruel – don't trust him. Saramago could have written a short essay, and in so many words, transmitted this message of his, without having to wrap it up in the swaddling clothes of a false fiction.

An example that further illustrates my point is the opening quotation of this section, written by Phil Jourdan: it signifies that even when a reader shares atheist inclinations with the writer in question, and would arguably be more able to envision Saramago's far-fetched God, didacticism is still "resented" by readers, as Iser points out (*The Act of Reading* 87). In relation to *passive synthesis*, then, non-religious North-American response finds a common ground with Portuguese religious reception with the difference that a pre-existing idealized image of Jesus interfered with the process in Portugal, and Saramago's

didacticism prevented its achievement in the United States and Canada.

Another common point among readers in these countries, the approximation of *Cain* to fundamentalist texts⁸⁰, is voiced by Barber in his opinion that the writer “has left behind story telling for a flat polemic [...] Saramago’s writing here comes down to, in my evaluation, the same sort of strident tone as found in any other fundamentalist writings”, an opinion identical to several reviews contained in the *Observatório da Cultura* (chapter 2, *infra*). Moreover, the fundamentalist tone is identified as Saramago’s own in *Cain*. Consequently, readers are able to connect the didactic purpose not only to the main character, to the narrator or to Saramago the writer, who created greatly admired novels, but to Saramago the ordinary man, thus intensifying the perception of the transposition of his rigid, extra-literary values onto this literary work. This ‘transparency’, in my view, is not tolerated by the reader, and it is what leads Jordan to affirm that “there’s nothing driving the narrative forward except Saramago’s anger.” “This bitter nihilism”, reflects scholar and lawyer Amos Friedland, “is Saramago’s own.” Similarly, Laura Eggertson, a Canadian freelance writer, thinks that the author’s “tone throughout is not just skeptical, but sometimes bitter.” Williams goes further in affirming that the writer’s “smirk is practically audible during some of his retellings, and he can occasionally lapse into the gleefully destructive tone of a teenager discovering his first biblical inconsistency”, which turns *Cain* into “a slim, self-satisfied book.” Interestingly, other critics detect an immature tone

⁸⁰ Fundamentalism is not the only point of approximation detected in Portuguese religious reception and North-American response to *Cain*. For instance, Philip Marchand’s opinion that “on a deeper level, Saramago’s narrator has no more appreciation of the language of myth than the average reader has knowledge of Swahili” speaks to Portuguese readers’ concern in regards to the importance of myth and its dismissal by Saramago in *Observatório da Cultura*.

permeating the novel. In agreement with Williams, Jordan believes that *Cain* “hasn’t got a pinch of subtlety, and the irony has been replaced with adolescent sarcasm.”

Even when a critic had already detected Saramago’s disguised didacticism in some of his previous novels and expected to see it again in *Cain*, as it is the case with Friedland, anticipation overrules retrospection, to the reader’s disappointment:

Saramago [...] does not yield even a tenuous space for reconciliation ‘between brothers.’ This is perhaps unsurprising given Saramago’s pessimism regarding humanity in his didactic ‘parables’ - *Blindness*, *Seeing* and *The Cave*. Yet I had hoped for more nuance and subtlety in the final novel from the man who wrote *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, *All the Names* and *Death with Interruptions*.

Needless to say, anticipation and retrospection work differently in the reading process undertaken by readers in the USA and Canada in this case study. While Portuguese religious readers had no high expectations in relation to *Cain* after *Gospel* and Saramago’s public statements that challenged Portuguese religious morale (chapter 2 *infra*), anticipation and retrospection here are deeply frustrated with the novel in question. With *Cain*, Saramago’s last and expectedly most mature novel, North-American readers anticipated a work similar in literary quality to *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984), “probably Saramago’s best novel” (Irwin); or a “cryptic and ingenious novel” such as *History of the Siege of Lisbon* (White); or to *Blindness*, “surely his masterpiece so far” (Banville). This anticipation, obviously, is nourished by the retrospection of engaging and thought-provoking previous reading experiences. Interestingly, then, in this aspect, this international

interpretive community carried clearly positive and trusting expectations to an exponentially higher degree than readers in the author's own country.

As I mentioned in the second chapter of this study, Portuguese criticism on *Cain* has been written by individuals who openly declare that they have not read the novel. If their experiences with *Gospel* left them with a bitter aftertaste, *Cain* would indeed confirm the negative expectation aroused by the 1991 novel. At this point, it is important to recall Iser's statement that "any confirmative effect is a defect in a text" ("The Reading Process" 192), as this notion has a double negative effect on criticism in North America. Given that the positive expectations are not confirmed by the literary text in question, it is the confirmative effect, which, in this case, would supposedly not be perceived as a defect, is not achieved. With the very first page of the novel, already transcribed in the previous chapter (57), denotative of Saramago's didactic purpose, anticipation is also frustrated and the reader is led to modify it in accordance with what the text offers. After this first page, some ingenious and amusing episodes unravel, such as Adam and Eve's discovery of a completely different and pulsating world outside the Garden of Eden and their first meal as a couple independent of God, composed of dry crackers and lovingly shared in an atmosphere of excited expectation for what is to come. These episodes, however, are not enough to dissuade the reader from building a negative anticipation of a bluntly open attack against religion, which is unfortunately confirmed and regarded as a defect.

As a measure for anticipation and retrospection, Canadian and American reviews on *Cain* frequently mention *Gospel* as a comparative work that determines what is wrong in Saramago's formula for his 2009 fictional treatment of biblical episodes. Jourdan voices other critics' opinions in this frustrated comparison: "Saramago showed how deeply he

could cut with his 1991 masterpiece, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, a troubling, fascinating retelling of the gospels. In that book, biblical contradictions became a source of delight. With *Cain*, the source book is the Old Testament, but instead of delighting, *Saramago chooses to bully and preach at us.*” My italics in this last sentence point to my core argument in this chapter: the hyper negative reception of Saramago’s didacticism, which seriously compromised the potentially warm reception of his much-awaited last novel.

Up to this point, I have attempted to explain how Saramago’s didacticism interferes with the formation of the *virtual dimension of the text* and with the process of *passive synthesis*. In accordance with the analysis proposed and partially developed in the second chapter, *negation* is the last of Iser’s concepts to be addressed here. It is important to recall that, according to Iser’s theory, there are two types of *negation*: primary and secondary. As I clarified previously, “*primary negation* should denote a deficiency in the social system evoked in the text and perceived by the reader” (chapter 2, *infra*). Through *secondary negation*, the reader “becomes aware of the codes that orient him/her in empirical reality”, and from this perspective, the code becomes a detached object of speculation (chapter 2, *infra*). *Primary negation*, then, refers to a perceived deficiency in a social system in general, and *secondary negation* invites an individual re-evaluation of the sufficiency of that code in the reader’s everyday life. In relation to Portuguese religious criticism, this *primary negation* is achieved with *Gospel* but not with *Cain* (chapter 2, *infra*), and *secondary negation* is neither achieved in *Gospel* nor in *Cain*. Owing to different reasons, the scenario for *secondary negation* is also true of North-American reception of this last

novel, which confirms that Saramago's pamphleteering message was not received positively regardless of the correspondence of the reader's beliefs to those present in *Cain*.

Arguably, a literary text that alludes to the turbulent and highly complex situation of religion in society will find little opposition to its premise in Portugal, in the USA and in Canada. That religion has been used to justify the most hideous acts of destruction among human beings is a scarcely disputable fact. In this aspect, and to this day, one frequently connects Catholicism to the Inquisition and the Crusades, and Islamic religions to the violent repression of women, suicidal bombings, and crushing fundamentalism. The *primary negation* brought by a literary encounter with *Gospel* and its three pages of martyr's names and their violent deaths will certainly guide the reader to conclude that, yes, something is wrong with religion-based social systems that still condone violent and hypocritical actions in the name of God or Allah, even though this violence is despised by a large portion of religious people. Through the portrayal of a pacific and pacifist Christ, who even refuses to sacrifice a physically imperfect lamb to a fascist God, Saramago implicitly pointed to a social solution that would aid human beings in their relationships with each other in *Gospel*: compassion and love, without recourse to divine beings whose existence have never been proven and who only serve to suppress human nature.

In *Cain*, *primary negation* functions in the sense that it exposes the inconsistencies of biblical episodes, of God's nature, and, consequently, of any thought or social system based on these stories. If God loves all, Saramago asks, why was Cain's sacrifice not accepted while his brother's was? Why were the innocent children in Sodom also consumed by fire? What is the essence of a divine love that requires Abraham to sacrifice his own son? And what type of God corrects his own mistakes by wiping out his own

creation from the face of the Earth by sending a flood, without considering the free will it supposedly had? These are valid and unanswered questions, posed and debated by intellectuals, believers and non-believers for centuries. And Saramago, a respected and extraordinarily talented writer, returns to these same questions with a heavy dose of didacticism that interferes with *secondary negation*.

In order to experience *secondary negation*, the reader needs to “construct” the work of art, the meaning, the message. According to Iser, a significant part of the power of fiction lies in this ability to force a reader to reflect upon his/her everyday life and the systems that surround and shape it through invented characters and created worlds. In the case of *Cain*, this created world fades into the background of a narrative dominated by the author’s bitter opinion of institutionalized religion and its foundational text. In other words, fiction is misused. It exposes the overtly formulated. Consequently, *Cain* might be regarded as a simple vehicle of the angry convictions espoused by Saramago. In this scenario, the “formulated” takes over, and that, in turn, is prejudicial to the literariness of the work in question. In this sense, the “militant atheist” and “hardline Stalinist” (Eder’s review on *Cain*) facets of the writer arguably overpower his art. For this reason, Eder, whose words have been used in favor of the writer in this chapter, concludes that

in this last book the aged author seems to have lost some of his transforming magic, and perhaps even his interest in his principal character [...] The episodes succeed each other mechanically, with Cain’s role being to witness and denounce God’s actions as cruel, arbitrary, and often incompetent as well.

With Saramago's ideology present in the text to an exaggerated extent, *secondary negation* is not achieved, since his own voice, as I mentioned earlier, overpowers the reader's ability to formulate his/her own critique of a social system; the role of the reader has been usurped by the author. In fact, one could argue that, if *secondary negation* should evoke and invalidate mental images in order to make the reader aware of the opinions and system that orient him/her (*The Act of Reading* 224), it is successful to invalidate positive mental images of Saramago's previous novels, characters and literary achievements. Therefore, in this case, *secondary negation* does not present a social system as an object of scrutiny, but the author himself, albeit temporarily.

But does Saramago's didacticism entirely account for the reading public's heartfelt disappointment in North America? In my opinion, if it is not the sole factor, it is surely the main one, although Iser would probably see this scenario differently. He would shift some of the responsibility for the negative reception of *Cain* to the reader:

[T]he real reader⁸¹ is [...] given a role to which he must then adapt and so 'modify himself' if the meaning he assembles is to be conditioned by the text and not by his own disposition. Ultimately, the role of the text is to exert a modifying influence upon that disposition, and, so, clearly, the text cannot and will not reproduce it. (*The Act of Reading* 153)

Even though the meaning derived from the text by readers in the USA and in Canada is too subjective and not always clearly stated in the reviews, it is safe to affirm that it *is*

⁸¹ In chapter 2 (*infra*), I have explained the definition of 'real reader' and my reasons for adopting this terminology among the types of reader presented by Iser in *The Act of Reading*.

conditioned by the text, since their disposition towards a novel penned by Saramago is transformed and frustrated with *Cain*. Interestingly, contrary to the apparently optimistic role attributed to the text by Iser, that is, to effect a potentially positive influence over the reader, *Cain* does exert, albeit differently, a modifying influence upon the reader's disposition: readers in this interpretive community are incited to modify their opinion about Saramago and to instantly compare this novel to previous works. This influence, in my view, is indeed positive. It is subjectively formative in that the reader is prompted by his own frustration to remove Saramago from a previously established deified position as a writer and to evaluate the impact of *Cain* upon his/her general opinion of the author. It is socially formative, as Iser postulated, in that the overall reception of this novel indeed presents "intersubjectively verifiable characteristics" (*The Act of Reading* 22), which points to the explicit rejection of didacticism and "a final solution" to what institutionalized religion represents nowadays in Saramago's literature by the majority of readers in this specific interpretive community. This is one of the few instances where Iser's overtly optimistic view of the reading process is justified: even when the literary text apparently fails by frustrating a reader's expectations and providing an apparently negative reading experience, it still has the power to transform, in one way or another, the individuals that are involved in this communicative pact. In his own words, the reader "is caught [...] between his discoveries and his habitual disposition. If he adopts the discovery standpoint, his own disposition may then become the theme for observation", and if, as it is the case in Portuguese religious reception, "he holds fast to his governing conventions, he must then give up his discoveries" (*The Act of Reading* 218).

In addition, even though I have argued up to this point that *Cain* has fatally guided North-American readers to a uniformly negative reception, Iser again points to the reader's participation in this process. As a consequence of the frustrated anticipation I have described above, "the reader begins to negate his own disposition – not in order to revoke it, but temporarily to suspend it as the virtualized base for an experience of which he can only say that it seems self-evident, because he has produced it himself through his own discoveries" (*The Act of Reading* 218-219). Considering that Saramago's own negation shapes his writings, in an ideal scenario for this process to develop during the axis time of reading, "the reader should ideate the cause governing the negation in order to formulate what had been left unformulated" (214).

Owing to its impact on the outcomes of the reading process, the role of *negation*, especially *secondary negation*, in formulating what *should be* left unformulated is crucial not only for the reading process itself, but for reception. Without the indeterminacy which allows readers to engage in the process of formulation, the socially formative function of literature might be compromised. As Iser explains, "if a reader is made to formulate the cause underlying the questioning of the world, it implies that he must transcend that world, in order to observe it from the outside" (*The Act of Reading* 230). In the specific case of *Cain*, this formulation was seriously compromised not only by Saramago's didacticism but by a categorical refusal to read the novel in Portugal. In North America, however, the reader's ideological position is generally not explicitly formulated, and didacticism thus accounts for the unfulfilling of *secondary negation*. This, in turn, is transformed into a refusal to "observe the world from the outside", because there is nothing to be observed,

everything was laid bare by the literary text. It is in this sense that the communicative process between text and reader turns into a monologue.

Nevertheless, considering that “communication in literature [...] is a process set in motion and regulated not by a given code but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment” (*The Act of Reading* 168-169), *Cain* did not communicate with Saramago’s North-American readers, it simply informed them of an already known militancy against institutionalized religion. This is why, in my opinion, Jourdan affirms that “*Cain* is unnecessary” -- its pamphlet-like message is a confirmation not a communication. Calling God “a son of a bitch” (69) and killing every human being in Noah’s ark is explicit enough. Through blunt sarcasm and free-flowing anger, no part of Saramago’s ideology is concealed, and, ultimately, this didactic purpose compromises his potentially positive critical reception.

3.4 The Effects of *Cain* on Overall Reception

In his reading of *Blindness* and *Seeing* as one single work, scholar Christopher Rollason concludes that, with the assassination of the doctor’s wife in the latter, “totalitarianism may yet install itself in the hearts and minds of a whole dehumanized population [...] Against so fearsome a prospect, what stands most firm is the critical vision irrevocably embodied in the work of art” (118), a vision carefully and subtly crafted throughout both novels, and presented more overtly in *Seeing*, but still without the heavy didacticism present in *Cain*.

The responses analyzed here, including the one shown above, contradict Ian Carter’s opinion that “while sometimes noting Saramago’s personal political beliefs

(usually to disparage them), reviewers rarely connect those beliefs with his novels' arguments" (125). In fact, as I attempted to show in this chapter, readers are aware of Saramago's convictions, be they political, religious or social and their transference to his literary creations. Until *The Elephant's Journey*, this transaction is well received; with *Cain*, it is resented and criticized.

In conclusion, if "Saramago has said that all his books are in a sense chapters of one single book" (Rollason 115), *Cain* is surely not the awaited final chapter. Although Saramago considered this novel his best book (Castanheira), his North-American audience does not share this opinion. Nevertheless, despite the negative reception of *Cain*, Saramago had already carved a place for his works in the English-speaking world before this novel. It surely disappointed many, as this chapter demonstrates, but the writer will still be remembered as "that increasingly rare creature, an organic intellectual" (Carter 124), a writer who seemed "to produce masterpiece after masterpiece like clockwork" (Graham 34). Through his thought-provoking creativity, Saramago still "teaches us how to read not only the novel's but the world's fine print" (Graham 35). Let us hope that his earlier ingenious novels⁸², such as *Levantado do Chão* (1979), are translated into other languages soon and invite more speculations into Saramago's fictional (but deeply ingrained in reality) world.

⁸² *Claraboia* (1953) is Saramago's last posthumously published novel (2011), also not translated.

CONCLUSION

The following conclusions result from my attempt to examine Saramago's reception in Portugal, in the United States and in Canada through Iser's concepts of *virtual dimension of the text*, *passive synthesis*, and *negation*: in Portuguese religious reception, *the virtual dimension of the text* is blurred by what readers consider to be the historical, real dimension, of the Bible. Similarly, the process of *passive synthesis* is compromised by the superimposition of an image of Jesus and Mary idealized long before the act of reading of Saramago's characters. *Primary negation* is achieved with *Evangelho* but not with *Caim*, and *secondary negation* is compromised in both novels by the reader's constant imposition of religious convictions upon the literary work or, in the case of *Caim*, by a categorical refusal to read the novel after the negative experience with *Evangelho*. In short, the reader's transference of religious convictions onto the literary work compromises not only the experience of reading but also critical appreciation and reception.

In the case of the United States and Canada, in relation to *Caim*, defamiliarization, although not always perceived as positive, is successful and allows, at times, for the formation of the textual *virtual dimension*. In *passive synthesis*, however, the ideating of the figure of God is compromised by Saramago's didacticism regardless of the reader's religious beliefs. The didactic tone also interferes with *secondary negation*, given that the object of scrutiny is not a social or cultural system, but the author himself and his convictions. This interpretive community recognizes Saramago's voice in his works, and consequently attributes the overtly sarcastic tone and the excessively formulated viewpoint not to the novelist but to Saramago the common man.

The examination of Saramago's Portuguese religious reception has demonstrated the negative results of rigid ideology both on the writer's and the reader's part, in opposition to the overall positive English-speaking North-American response, where ideology on the writer's part was perceived but on the reader's side somehow controlled to arrive at a more objective appreciation of Saramago's art. Does this mean then that the author's work was approached mistakenly in Portugal and correctly in the United States and Canada? And if Saramago is considered one of the best writers of the past and the current centuries by readers in North America, despite *Caim*, does that mean that positive response can be equated with literary quality? And can literary quality be measured by the result of the interaction that occurs during the reading process?

These questions would provide enough material for another thesis, and they occupied Iser's thoughts as well. Considering the scenario I presented above, he clarifies that "the difference between the so-called right and wrong approaches relates only to the nature of the result [response], and so the question arises as to whether the real problem does not lie in the fact that we tend to equate a work of art with a result, rather than in the quality of that result" (*The Act of Reading* 26). Unfortunately, this extract is a brief part of Iser's introduction to his theory of aesthetic response and was not addressed again in depth. Regardless of the approach and the result, I argue, literature still performs its socially formative function according to the material herein analyzed.

Since Iser's theory has been used throughout this study, some conclusive remarks pertaining to its application seem appropriate. First, although ingeniously formulated, Iser's model relies on an idealized reading process: it implicitly postulates an ideal reader, an ideal text and an ideal interaction between them. The reader is allowed to actualize the text

in any way only as long as he remains within the limits of the schemata offered. Regardless of the meaning produced at the end of this interaction, it will always be construed by the reader, and herein lies his/her postulated agency. Since *every* fictional text uses the same schemata and triggers the same processes, and a socially formative function is inherent to *every* text, one can safely deduce that this interaction will therefore always be positive. In this sense, “Iser’s model vacillates between normative presentation and utopian projection” (Holub 99).

When the foreground-background structure of the text is reversed, i.e. the intended background becomes a permanent foreground, as in Portuguese religious reception, Iser suggests that surprise is the only reaction that will result from this switch. Moreover, he again believes in a positive, socially formative aspect of it, as “the background becomes the ‘figure’, and the reader’s surprise indicates that he now begins to perceive the system he is caught up in” (*The Act of Reading* 95). This, however, is not what happens in religious reception, for instance. I believe there are several other possible reactions to the background-foreground switch, but Iser’s belief in this “element of surprise” offers a good notion of what Holub meant by “utopian projection.”

Another series of questions arise for future speculation, but the most intriguing, in my opinion, comes from Iser’s concept of consistency-building, which he explains as follows:

As a structure of comprehension it depends on the reader and not on the work, and as such it is inextricably bound up with subjective factors, and, above all, the habitual orientations of the reader. This is why modern literary works are so full of

apparent inconsistencies – not because they are badly constructed, but because such breaks act as hindrances to comprehension. (*The Act of Reading* 18)

If consistency-building depends solely on the reader, is there no bad literature? Why can't apparent (and, at times, flagrant) inconsistencies signal a badly constructed text? And if the blanks "should be construed not as a deficiency but as an indication that the textual schemata must be combined, as this is the only way a context can be formed that will give coherence to the text and meaning to the coherence" (*The Act of Reading* 184), are all texts intrinsically coherent? These are questions to be pursued further.

Despite these remarks, even Iser's "utopian projection" should be appreciated, for his model exposes the difficulty of describing the reading process, which is so personal and relies on a multitude of factors, culture and ideology being two of them, as I have attempted to demonstrate. To Iser's credit, he states repeatedly that he is aware of this difficulty while explicating his theory, and yet the attempt is worthwhile. And if he postulates that a reader's epistemological background should be suspended during the act of reading, he allows that if the reader gives up his repertoire altogether and becomes passive, there is no tension, and, therefore the scheme of comprehension is broken⁸³ (*The Act of Reading* 37).

Finally, in my view, Iser has offered a thoroughly comprehensive attempt at understanding the reading process, not only concentrating on the reader and his/her role in the actualization of the text, but also on the text itself, deeming these two elements equally important during the reading process. Despite the charges laid against them, it is unfortunate that Iser's reflections have not been scrutinized in more depth. Taken out of the

⁸³ This scheme may be roughly summarized as follows:

Reader → repertoire of historical norms and values → tension arising from the text → processing → comprehension.

revolutionary context of the 1970s German academia, this theory was questioned, which is a positive sign of interest and dialogue, but soon relegated to a dusty corner of North-American libraries. At least such is the case in Canada. In this continent, Stanley Fish's reflections have obfuscated Iser's, even though it would only be beneficial if these and other theories of the interaction between text and reader co-existed, if only for the fact that studies that rely on Iser's insights are scarce and not encouraged by academia. Moreover, reading is an act that we, as scholars, perform all the time.

To conclude, this study has been an organic entity from the very beginning. It has guided me (instead of the other way around) towards a reflection on the consequences, usually negative, of interpolating one's ideology with the act of writing in a didactic manner, and/or with the act of interpreting and receiving a literary work. Although summed up in these three lines, this interaction between ideology and literature is much more complex than it appears, for it has no quick solution and no ideal method, and each proposed approach, in turn, invites different responses. I cite Iser as the example *par excellence* of an attempt to understand and formulate this process and the plethora of positive and negative responses his work has incited. I reach the end of this study with several answers and perhaps an even larger number of questions. But, above all, I finish with a solidification of my deep appreciation for Saramago's and Iser's legacies, which, I hope, will be pursued in further studies.

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APPENDIX 1: SARAMAGO'S WORKS TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

Original Title	Year	Translation	Year
<i>Manual de Pintura e Caligrafia</i>	1977	<i>Manual of Painting and Calligraphy</i>	1995
<i>Viagem a Portugal</i>	1981	<i>Journey to Portugal</i>	2000
<i>Memorial do Convento</i>	1982	<i>Baltasar and Blimunda</i>	1987
<i>O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis</i>	1984	<i>The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis</i>	1991
<i>A Jangada de Pedra</i>	1986	<i>The Stone Raft</i>	1995
<i>História do Cerco de Lisboa</i>	1989	<i>History of the Siege of Lisbon</i>	1996
<i>O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo</i>	1991	<i>The Gospel According to Jesus Christ</i>	1993
<i>Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira</i>	1995	<i>Blindness</i>	1997
<i>Todos os Nomes</i>	1997	<i>All the Names</i>	1999
<i>O Conto da Ilha Desconhecida</i>	1997	<i>The Tale of the Unknown Island</i>	1999
<i>A Caverna</i>	2000	<i>The Cave</i>	2002
<i>O Homem Duplicado</i>	2003	<i>The Double</i>	2004
<i>Ensaio Sobre a Lucidez</i>	2004	<i>Seeing</i>	2006
<i>As Intermitências da Morte</i>	2005	<i>Death With Interruptions</i>	2008
<i>As Pequenas Memórias</i>	2006	<i>Small Memories</i>	2010
<i>A Viagem do Elefante</i>	2008	<i>The Elephant's Journey</i>	2010
<i>Caim</i>	2009	<i>Cain</i>	2011
<i>O Caderno</i>	2009	<i>The Notebook</i>	2010

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