

The Second Coming: prophecy and utopian thought in John Milton (1608-74) and António Vieira (1608-97)

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ABSTRACT

Persuasive intentions and rhetoric strategies in Vieira's *discurso engenhoso* tend to corroborate the main options of the new political power born with the Restoration of Portuguese independence; but what seems obvious in many of his sermons is critically modulated in *História do Futuro, Esperanças de Portugal, Quinto Império do Mundo*, an heterodox document of his version of the providential destiny of Portugal. On the other hand, in *Paradise Lost* Milton represents large masses in movement, the vast cosmic space, the energy of revolt and conflict, and the eminence of religious devotion; but his grand design is, in the context of the English Restoration, a tormented lamentation for the defeat of "the rule of the saints" and a daring attack on the new regime. In *História do Futuro* and *Paradise Lost*, the texts that will be the focal point of this paper, prophecy and millennium do not go without political commitment, sense of community and prospective utopian representations. And if the great expectations of a temporal Fifth Empire and the pursuit of "a paradise within" may be regarded as corresponding to the same frame of mind, the messianic kingdom of the Portuguese Jesuit and the New Jerusalem of the English Puritan, however, testify to the divisive presence of the sword of the Gospels: the unwavering Christian faith splits once again in inimical heterodox visions of the Second Coming. This paper will attempt to compare these different visionary experiences and approaches to the justification of "the ways of God to men".

The seventeenth century corresponds, in English society and literature, to an arduous passage from a visionary and theocentric age to a time of profane and worldly references. A general statement as this cannot summarize the bewildering ways of Stuart England, but it suggests at least the tremendous range of the transformations that took place there and then at all levels: after the reign of Elizabeth I and its "autocracy by consent" came the uncertainties and anxieties of the rule of James I, to a great extent a legacy of religious, economic and political contradictions of the Tudor age. The explicit pursuit of

absolute power, answering the prevailing tendencies in Europe, the vital differences progressively opposing the divine rule of kings, stressed with dramatic evidence in the reign of Charles I (1625-1649), and the claims of a challenging Parliament representing economic interests and expressing political and religious options which clashed with the centralizing pressure of the crown, would lead to the civil war, the imprisonment, trial and execution of the king and to the brief experience of the Commonwealth. It was also the time of dissent and popular enthusiastic involvement in religion and politics, of Presbyterians, Independents, Levellers, Fifth Monarchists, Ranters and Seekers and all sorts of sectarian or radical groups, and newly inspired prophets proclaiming the Second Coming. The Millennium met the utopian vision and brought it down from the abstract domain of fictional construction to the immediate issues of political, constitutional and religious confrontation. The Restoration would come next, a period full of doubts and ambiguities but simultaneously open to the brave new world of pragmatism and materialism, the promising realm of democracy and capitalism which the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 or the foundation of the Bank of England in 1694 would strikingly validate.

Paradise Lost is a text of strong persuasive intention, explicitly proclaimed in the first invocation of the poem – "assert eternal providence/ And justify the ways of God to men" – suggesting here two prominent narrative fields: the rebellion of Satan and his defeat, with the manifestation of the invincible power of the Creator, and the disobedience of the first two human beings, who could not learn the lessons of the subversion and overthrow of the accursed angel and could not resist their inordinate desires and the most immediate pulsions of their nature. Book IX is a tragic microstructure, as the invocation itself insinuates in its most basic structural dramatic features – characters, action and place. And both the adventure of Satan (the subject matter of the framing narrative and of the admonishing voice of Raphael) and the story of Adam and Eve, the heart of the poem and the focal point of convergence of the several narrative lines, are not a distant mythical evocation. In the loss of Eden lies also the painful Republican memory and the daily experience of those who lost their revolution and the great expectations of the imminent Second Coming. Adam and Eve, "hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow," leave Paradise and initiate history, that long procession of iniquity and dangers (the History of the Future, in the framed narrative of Michael) that finds in the Restoration its most recent episode. What is easily perceived is the disconnection between the optimistic vitality of the doctrinal texts and pamphlets and the melancholic intonations of an epic that seems to stress even in the syntactic inversion of its title the very idea of loss. In fact, ten years was the time of composition of *Paradise Lost*, a large period of fluctuations in promises and convictions that the text

forcibly inscribes. The context of the poem underlines a lonely and resolute voice, as the reading of the invocation of Book VII, the most personal of them all, clearly identifies: in the night of an unpropitious time, verses grope for an ideal reader, "...fit audience...though few." Cultivating that intimate and irreducible land about which Michael tells Adam almost at the end of the narrative - "...then wilt thou not be loath/ To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess/ A Paradise within thee, happier far" (XII. 585-587) is what is left to the defenders of the "good old cause and of the rule of the saints."

But this manifest devotional stance doesn't rule out different readings: the doomed Satan is splendid in his revolt and his sufferings (Milton "was of the devil's part without knowing it," in Blake's known formula) and the sumptuous and free beauty of Eden has much in common with the dishevelled hair of the gorgeous Eve; imagination, sense of independence and curiosity link the accursed rebel and the woman, and the human characters become more complex and fascinating in their rejection of innocence and their resolution for experience and disobedience.

Paradise Lost chronicles the erasure of an epoch and the emergence of another: it is baroque in the ambition of its grand design, in the representation of the energy of the universe, in its tensions, in the large and powerful masses in movement and conflict; it is neoclassic in the solid balance of its conception and in the circular structure of the action, and perhaps also in the plain style of the last two books (the History of the Future), in a deliberate contrast with the rhetorical excesses and the inflamed attitudes of the first two "Books of Satan."

The Portuguese historical framework is dissimilar and also deserves to be outlined here. The thrilling adventure of expansion and discovery would soon be followed by serious predicaments and threats. Indeed, the "apagada e vil tristeza," the sad and vile decline had been already denounced by the epic poet that in the late sixteenth century registered the meeting of the West and the East and celebrated the voyages and discoveries of a small nation of brave sailors and conquerors; but *Os Lusíadas* is also the chronicle of the indian summer of a powerful nation and of the erosion of ancient glories, later miserably substantiated in the loss of political independence. The supremacy of Castile had been supported by the convincing argument of the invading army of the Duke of Alba and the encouraging response of important sectors of the Portuguese nobility to the Iberian dual monarchy, perhaps the sole remedy for disaster at home and in the colonies. But such an option would imply new commitments: the episode of the Spanish Armada (1588) or the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) document the outstanding role of Spain on the stage of European rivalries and impose categorical loyalties on the new subjects of King Philip. Besides, the growing imperial crisis would demand the strengthening of efforts towards integration and the

notorious reinforcement of authority, which generates the dangerous collapse of great expectations and the winter of discontent among the Portuguese. Small wonder, then, that in the cultural context of the baroque, pervaded by fervent attitudes and exuberant and intense emotions, prophetic voices and Messianic dreams claim their powerful rights to revive the old myths of the providential role of a kingdom to be regenerated by the mysterious “encoberto”, the long expected ruler fallen in the disastrous battle of Alcácer-Quibir.

This is the cultural and political background of António Vieira. He was born, like Milton, in 1608, in a middle-class family of humble condition. Still a little boy, he follows his father to Brazil where later, in São Salvador da Baía, he enters the religious order founded by Ignatius de Loyola. The Dutch occupation of the town forces the departure of a significant part of the inhabitants, and that will give the novice the opportunity to live for twelve months in an Indian village, an event of decisive importance in the ideas and options of the young Jesuit. In fact, his evangelical calling and his dedication to the dignity of the natives, added to the traditional vows of obedience, chastity and poverty, will contribute to the prospect of a Christian utopia of heterodox features. Native communities bring to mind the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel – an ominous hint that later contacts with Jewish thought and the exiled *gentes da nação* would dangerously authenticate – as these long-established people, ignorant of the Gospels and beyond good and evil, are the living argument for the exciting vision of an utopia to be built by the redeeming proselitism of the children of Loyola in the jungle of the New World.

At the same time, the young jesuit preacher, in the “Sermão pelo Bom Sucesso das Armas de Portugal contra as de Holanda” (Sermon urging the Victorious Outcome of the Portuguese against Holland) (1640), did not hesitate to confront the equivocal divine will that seemed to favour the “perfid calvinist” and desert His followers, the Portuguese and Spanish loyal fighters. Later he would translate providencialism into the lusocentric messianic promise of the *Quinto Império*, the Fifth Monarchy intended to rule till the final apocalyptic conflagration. This will occur after the recovery of Portuguese independence and the taking over of new responsibilities by the devoted councillor of John IV, his royal agent in the courts of Europe, and defender of *marranos* and recent converts to the faith, the *cristãos novos*, those industrious and frequently affluent people, now repressed or exiled, but certainly the invaluable potential allies of the kingdom. The unacknowledged but recognizable version of the visionary shoemaker of Trancoso, Gonçalo Anes Bandarra (1500-c.1555), was already manifest in the “Sermão dos Bons Anos”, in 1642, but circumstances demanded now a very pragmatic election: the redeeming ruler was no more to be found in the

unhappy Sebastian, since he would never return in a cold foggy morning, as stated in the popular belief. He was close at hand, he was John IV himself. During captivity (Babylon was a somewhat extravagant but always operative analogy) Bandarra had been among the Portuguese a kind of Jeremiah, but afterwards he came to be seen as an heretic and his *trovas* (ballads) a serious offense of Jewish extraction against sound doctrine. The jesuit who advocates tolerance towards the forced converts (*cristãos novos*) and the diplomat who meets the famous and dangerous Menasseh-ben-Israel in Holland will be in fact very naïf and improvident: he places at the disposal of the dominican friars – and therefore of the Inquisition – the trump card of persecution and revenge. This trump card would be a letter sent in 1659 from the Amazonian jungle to the priest André Fernandes, bishop of Japan and confessor of Queen Luísa de Gusmão, widow of John IV (who had died in 1656). In it the jesuit missionary restores Bandarra's cryptic teachings and proclaims the Hopes of Portugal, the Coming of the Fifth Empire of the World and the imminent resurrection of John IV. The letter was seized and the Inquisition opened the prosecution in an adverse political context (the *coup d'état* of Vieira's enemy, the Count of Castelo Melhor, would oust the queen from power, and replace her regency by the rule of the feeble-minded Alfonso VI).

The legal suit lasted three years (from 1663 to 1667), and this was the time for the culprit to prepare his defense, which he did, by submitting to the inquisitorial court two long texts – *Representação Primeira* and *Representação Segunda*. Most probably this was also the time for the old priest to persevere in an old project began perhaps in 1649.

História do Futuro, Esperanças de Portugal e Quinto Império do Mundo (History of the Future, Hopes of Portugal and Fifth Monarchy of the World) is an unfinished work: the author had seven books in mind but only two, of which the second remains unfinished, survived. The *Livro Antepimeiro*, which introduces the work and which should be considered as part of the treaty, intends to justify in some detail its crucial lines of argument: the historical, biblical and national foundations of the prophetic vision, with the enunciation of its canonical and non-canonical sources, and the reiteration of the original calling of the Kingdom of Portugal. The oxymoron given in the title was certainly not to be read as an extravagant proposition: prophecy had been repeatedly confirmed by events, and the nexus between precedent and prophetic belief had therefore a strong rational and religious basis. The treaty is explicitly addressed to Portugal and to the Christian reader, and the awareness of divine authorship of human history, in the specific frame of reference of the Restoration and the glory promised to the chosen nation, is made of obvious relevance even to the deceived and obstinate enemies of Portugal, who should not fight against the ways of God

with men. The idea of the Fifth Monarchy of the World, an age of bliss that should follow the Assirian, the Persian, the Greek and the Roman Empire (the latter founding its contemporary expression in the Empire of the Habsburgs), was not the product of vagaries and unsubstantial dreams. Events had shown the truth of the visions of Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and David. The unique achievement of the Portuguese in modern times was clearly inscribed in the sacred texts, and Vieira now recapitulates the teachings of the biblical prophets. No wonder that Isaiah is seen as a chronicler of the kingdom. A profuse biblical illustration validates the providential role of Portugal in these glorious prospects. The Fifth Empire, which would be simultaneously spiritual (and ruled by the Pope) and secular (and so also ruled by the Portuguese king), would destroy the power of the Turks and introduce a time of happiness and peace, of conversion of heretics, gentiles and Jews, preparing the coming of the Anti-Christ and the final apocalyptic conflagration: "Think not that I came to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

The great expectations of the Fifth Empire and the pursuit of a "paradise within" may be regarded as the product of the same frame of mind; however, the messianic kingdom of the Portuguese Jesuit and the New Jerusalem of the English Puritan testify to the divisive presence of the sword of the Gospels. The unwavering Christian faith splits once again in inimical heterodox visions of the Second Coming.

One can perhaps say that the return to the inexorable ways of the world hit the poet harder than it did the preacher. Poetry had to be the field of resistance when the poet, back in the land of Egypt, had to meditate upon the reasons why God had forsaken His elected nation.

The Book of Genesis and the Revelation had been the main biblical sources of *Paradise Lost*; it is Luke and the Book of Job which become the sources of *Paradise Regained*, the short epic in four Books published in 1671. The issue here is the pursuit of identity and the hero is Christ himself. The narrative action doesn't take place in Eden, it is in the wilderness that Christ responds to the Fall of Adam and Eve and of the English nation. The text resumes the thematic reference of "... the better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom" of verses 31 and 32, Book IX, of *Paradise Lost*, or the "model of Christian hero" of *The Reason of Church Government*, and the climax of the action is the epiphanic moment when Christ, on the pinnacle of the temple and in a gesture that prefigures the Crucifixion (that is how we can picture him, at least) raises his arms and seals the fall of Satan into the abyss. *Samson Agonistes*, also published in 1671, is a tragedy based on the familiar narrative of the Book of Judges. It is designed according to the classical tradition and it reenacts the quest for self-knowledge and the revelation of a providential calling. The protagonist, precariously placed

between the Adam of *Paradise Lost* and the Christ of *Paradise Regained*, demolishes the pagan temple and buries his enemies under the ruins. The blind hero and Israel, Milton, the blind bard, and the English: does the text insinuate that political victory is still possible?

Vieira had to compromise, since the ways of the Lord were for him the ways of His triumphant Church. But his faith in messianic dreams was strong as a rock. If John IV dies without accomplishing his promised mission, he is bound to resurrect; if realities dismiss this heretical possibility, election moves to the inept Alfonso VI (to whom Vieira dedicates his *História do Futuro*), then to the sons of Don Pedro, the regent of the kingdom, and finally to the usurper himself, when he ascends the throne in 1683. It is perhaps noteworthy that António Vieira faces the inquisitorial court without abjuring his beliefs and propositions, and it goes without saying how convenient recantation would have been for him; rather let the venerable divines clarify the errors and misjudgement of the humbler culprit. And in *História do Futuro* the Jesuit priest assumes the orthodoxy and sound doctrine of his arguments: the invocation of names and precedents liable to support his authorized vision is really obsessive and breathtaking. Finally, in his *Clavis Prophetarum, De Regno Christi in terris consummato*, a long treaty left unfinished, he moderates the enthusiasm of his former views. Now he writes in Latin, the universal language of the Church and of Christendom, and, in spite of the survival of heretical tinges in this cry from afar (from Brazil, where he would die in 1694), such as the role given to Jews and their rites in the Second Coming, the fact is that the immediacy of change dissolves into the abstraction and dilation of a long spiritual growth as prerequisite for an utopia made insubstantial when compared to its former pragmatic dimension.

What is left of him has above all to do with the artist, not with the visionary theologian or philosopher. One can certainly grant that faith could move hills and mountains, but the truth is that it can no more rule the ways of our profane world. Neither can old institutional loyalties. The erosion of the Jesuit legacy and of one of the most notable children of Loyola would later be documented in the devastating action taken by the enlightened minister of King John V against the Companhia de Jesus and in the celebrations that systematically have been acclaiming the memory of the “divine marquis” of Pombal and ignoring or vilifying the old Jesuit. Positivism, liberalism, individualism and democracy have put an end to a visionary and tormented age.

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