

Fernando Arenas *.Utopias of Otherness. Nationhood and Subjectivity in Portugal and Brazil.*

The multi-faceted and semantically heterogeneous title of this literary and cultural study by Fernando Arenas (Associate Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese studies at the University of Minnesota), clearly reflects the book's structure and thematic content in which a multiplicity of critical issues intertwine. Far from being an exercise of a mere polymath, this work exemplifies Arenas's fluent and controlled juxtaposition of various forms of discourse, through which he achieves the basic aim of the book, namely the presentation of a "model of literary and cultural criticism that is significantly informed by the insights of history, geopolitics, critical theory, sociology and philosophy" (XXIX).

Though from an academic standpoint this volume can be situated squarely in the field of (Latin American) Cultural Studies, its programmatic conception owes much to the hermeneutic virtues that the interdisciplinary epistemological approach of Comparative Literature affords

Indeed, the very sequence of words Arenas selected for the title, further emphasised in the choice of the lettering used on the cover, suggests that his polymorphic argument regarding "utopia", "nationhood" and "subjectivity" is delimited both in philosophical terms (hence "otherness") and geopolitically (hence "Portugal and Brazil"), thereby containing the key conceptual entities within a thematic scope that otherwise might haven

proven too broad. One of the most original and productive facets of the book – not immediately visible on the basis of a merely cursory reading – consists in its heuristic inquiry into the philosophical notion of “otherness”. Broadly signifying the ontological and axiological implications of the conscious subject’s relationship with alterity, “otherness” is a term that thinkers such as Levinas, Attridge and Derrida, for example have invested with a varied spectrum of meanings – anthropological, sociological, aesthetic – the respective main features of which Arenas comprehensively summarizes (103-105). Accordingly, the polysemous term of “otherness” is heuristically explored on at least four different levels throughout the study: (1) sociologically, to denote the postmodern social condition with its multiplication of differing subjectivities; (2) politically, to signify citizenship in a post national era and the consequent loss of the collective sense of territorial belonging and of communitarian exclusiveness; (3) culturally, to qualify the positive meaning of the concept of utopia in so far as it continues to evoke the necessary ideas of human freedom, justice and solidarity; and (4) critically, by giving an account of narrative utopian strategies and thematic fictionalizations that have been undertaken by contemporary Portuguese and Brazilian writers.

The theoretical apparatus of Arena’s book incorporates intellectual debates on postmodern globalization and in so doing demonstrates its effects of this ongoing process on the redefinition of our ideas of nationhood, gender,

sexuality, utopia, with particular reference to Portuguese and Brazilian political, sociological and cultural discourses. Thus, the thematic axis of this study is constituted by the author's tracing of the evolution of these ideas, not only in the context of the national history of each one of these countries, but also in terms of their intertwined intercultural connexions and with regard to their individual relationships towards the world at large. Using personal critical judgments, that are both accurate and succinctly expressed, as well as being well-grounded both in arguments of key critical thinkers and in a set of well-chosen literary readings, Arenas is able to specify the paradigmatic shift that occurred in the late twentieth century from the grandiose and all encompassing, "macrological way of thinking" (XXX) to the multifarious, fragmented, "micrological" mode of conceptualizing.

Arenas provides the reader unacquainted with Luso-Brazilian studies with the basic data required to clarify the issues under discussion, much of which through extensive and informative notes at the end of each chapter. The author's overall argument is conceived so as to begin with a critical historical perspective that is subsequently developed and deepened via illustrations that have either a cultural and/or a literary focus. Arenas' argument begins (in Chapters I and II) with a generalized level of theorization both on the emergence of Portugal and Brazil as distinct national identities and on their entwined but contradictory intercultural

relations, the origins of which lie in the particular colonial relationship established between the two countries. Subsequently (in Chapters III and IV) the author confines the scope of his argument to two case studies of lusophone writers representative of gay and feminist writing - the Brazilian Caio Fernando Abreu, and the Portuguese Maria Isabel Barreno - whose literary work metonymically exemplifies the ideological and epistemological paradigm shifts that have taken place in Portuguese and Brazilian cultures, giving particular emphasis to the continuous redefinition of the idea of nationhood. The final chapter, the most clearly conceived within the realm of literary comparativism, pursues a multi-layered analysis of discreet forms of discourse – literary, cultural and philosophical – in order to focus on recast modes of utopian expression to be found in the writing of lusophone authors, such as Vergílio Ferreira, Clarice Lispector, Maria Gabriela Llansol and José Saramago.

The unfolding of Fernando Arenas' multi-faceted study is coherently pursued through a demonstration, at the level of the history of ideas and its correlated cultural-aesthetical formations, of the shift from the modern grand narratives or metanarratives –“overarching and universally applicable explanations of humanity's origins, historical evolutions, reason for being or purpose and destiny” (92) – to the postmodern proliferation of manifold “micronarratives” each reflecting diverse aspects of human identity (gender, sexuality, class, nationality, for example). The plan of the

book itself reproduces this transitive logic of exposition – i.e. from “the macro to the micrological” – in so far as it begins with a discussion on the political-philosophical concept of nationhood that is structured around a critical revision of the grand narratives on Portuguese and Brazilian national identities and their subsequent theoretical deconstruction, and evolves into an analytical reading of literary texts featuring key aspects of human subjectivity.

According to Arenas, the grand narratives that chart the formation of Portuguese and Brazilian national identities are marked by a utopianism – whether primarily of an idealized, symbolic and/or intellectual variety – that can be detected perhaps more in the representations of historical and geopolitical specificities of these countries than in the colonial bond that linked the two territories for the more than three centuries that separate Portugal’s “discovery” and “loss” of Brazil in 1500 and 1822, respectively.

In the case of the Portuguese nation, this utopian tinge to the grand narrative is the result of the territorial expansion and empire construction that “took place in essentially three distinct major historical and geopolitical stages: the sixteenth century (Asia and the Indian Ocean), seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Brazil) and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Africa)” (5). Throughout this long expanse of time, the dialectics between nation and empire were symbolically strengthened to the point of legitimizing a “messianic manifest destiny” (10): this was

achieved not only by literary means (the epitome being the sixteenth century epic poem *The Lusiads* by Luis de Camões is) but also by way of millenarian utopian myths of the patriotic and popular type, as expressed, for example, in the national longing for the second coming of the “messiah” King Sebastian, the sixteenth century Portuguese monarch whose defeat and death in the Crusade against Islam brought his nation under the Spanish yoke, as well as via the publications of more speculative philosophical essays – a tradition continued by twentieth century poets such as Teixeira de Pascoaes and Fernando Pessoa and by intellectuals as Agostinho da Silva and António Quadros. At the very dawn of the maritime expansion, “counternarratives” (such as the seventeenth century *Tragic History of the Sea*) began to question this meta-narrative, depriving it of some extent of its utopian content; then came the “countermyth” of national decline, nurtured by the nineteenth century Portuguese intelligentsia; then the deconstructionism favoured by historiographers (José Mattoso), sociologists (Boaventura Sousa Santos) and critical essayists (Eduardo Lourenço) reflecting on the power of the myth. The end of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974 brought with it the collapse of what was left of the colonial empire, resulting not only in the end of the paradigm of the messianic-utopian concept of nationhood but also the urge to redefine it on new terms. According to Arenas, two new utopian designs emerge at this time: firstly, the Portuguese Revolution of April 1974 April with its short-

lived, idealist, left-wing dream of a state nation evolving to a stage of social development without classes; secondly, Portugal's entry into the European Union in 1986 with its hopes and opportunities of joining one of the world's economic and political centres. On the other hand, the emerging of so-called "lusofonia" – a post-colonial community of Portuguese-speaking nations – constituted a sort of metamorphosis of the metanarrative of empire. For Arenas "the myths associated with maritime expansion and "discoveries" [...] *lusofonia*, and Europe together form a Portuguese utopian constellation that shapes the national imaginary now and will continue to so for the years to come"(98-99).

Evidence can also be found in several macrological studies in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science, published since the 1930s, of the same idealizing propensity towards the representation of Brazilian nationhood, according to Arenas. This idealization becomes most evident, in spite of comprehensiveness, originality and insights provided by some of those studies, in the conceptual formulations of "racial democracy" (Gilberto Freyre) and of "the cordial man" (Sérgio Buarque de Holanda) that have been propounded to characterize both Brazil's racial and cultural heterogeneity and the dominant social and psychological type of human beings ostensibly to be found there. In the middle of the twentieth century, two closely interrelated myths seemed to run parallel, each contributing to the dominant idealized narrative vector. Both expressed utopian hope,

simultaneously influencing Brazil's collective imaginary and feeding the specific expectations of the Brazilian elite. The first was the myth of modernization and the second the myth of "Brazil, country of the future" (Stefan Zweig'), the latter, in Arenas' view, a historically and culturally determined latter-day avatar of the sixteenth century Christian utopian identification of Brazil with the "earthly paradise".

As with the macrological approaches to Portuguese national identity, Arenas highlights that Brazilian utopian myths and grand narratives representing nationhood have been put to the test by the empirical reality brought about by the economical, social, political, cultural dynamics of its history. They have also been submitted to intellectual revision by literary and cultural critics (António Candido, Roberto Schwarz, Silviano Santiago), a process that has been accompanied by a proliferation of "micrological" perspectives that account for "multiple and competing versions of nationhood, democracy and modernization" (22) in a contemporary Brazil that is profoundly marked by the asymmetry between its remarkable cultural achievements (in line with the utopian dream of modernization) and its dramatically unfulfilled promise at the economic and social level (at odds with that same aspiration).

The Portuguese and Brazilian writers whose literary work Arenas chooses to examine in what turns out to be a summary yet highly proficient analysis have all addressed themes in which these grand narratives and mythical

figurations are to some degree cast in doubt. The authors variously contradict, diminish or reshape the idealized content of the grand narrative, in a number of ways, for instance, by undermining the cultural paradigm of the Portuguese seafaring empire or by rejecting abstract monologic forms of representing nationhood in Brazil. At the same time, a diversity of new social modes of being is engendered in these works, with the authors reflecting on key aspects of human identity, many of which in the past have been repressed or marginalized, such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity.“

In the final chapter of his book Arenas undertakes a well-grounded and original reflection on the polymorphous meaning and plural uses of the concept of utopia. Here the aim is to highlight how contemporary literary Portuguese and Brazilian discourse have come to represent “small utopian visionings” within the context of a postmodern world marked by the weakening of “foundationalist thought structures” and by the exhaustion of grand narratives and utopian models. In accordance with the logical structure of his study, he begins by providing a general yet critical inventory of the meanings of utopia. For Arenas it may constitute “an intellectual product, a form of rhetoric, an abstract ideal, a means to knowledge, a weighty philosophical argument, a fantastic adventure story, a blueprint for an ideal society, the work of social theorists or a literary form put to the service of social analysis and criticism” (90). He then

proceeds to specify utopia according to his own highly selective meaning - “a small [...] visioning marked by a sense of yearning and hope” (91).

Thus, instead of pursuing a comparative literary analysis of a series of Portuguese and Brazilian writings that may arguably belong to the canonical genre of utopia, Arenas brings together under the heading “utopias of otherness” texts that have not been written as imaginary blueprints of ideal societies, but that exhibit both the ethical and ontological traits of otherness and hope, texts “that have privileged the subject’s relationship with the *other* in the forms of family, a loved one, a community or a reader” (87). By emphasising the importance in his own specific concept of utopia of (a) the ethical in Levinas’ concept of otherness and (b) Bloch’s ontological principle of hope, Arenas, not only rehabilitates its positive meaning beyond the limits of textual representation but also preserves what is worthwhile about the concept of utopia once “the foundationalist thought structures” and grand narratives have collapsed – namely, a sense of continuity in the open ended project of human perfectibility.

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