

**LANGUAGE GAMES AND EXISTENTIAL CERTAINTY:  
WITTGENSTEIN AS A PROTOTEXT OF SARAMAGO'S  
POSTMODERN NARRATIVE**

JUEGOS DEL LENGUAJE Y CERTEZA EXISTENCIAL:  
WITTGENSTEIN COMO PROTOTEXTO DE LA NARRATIVA  
POSMODERNA DE SARAMAGO

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**Abstract:** The renowned Portuguese author José Saramago, in his postmodern novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984) a work that exemplifies all the key features of his autopoetics, such as pronounced intertextuality, the revaluation of tradition and history, and the deconstruction of mythological layers – multaneously develops a highly distinctive approach to language, particularly in relation to meaning and the limits of what can or cannot be expressed through language. Within this complex narrative structure, Saramago's philosophy of language emerges as one of the central narrative strategies through which the latent interplay between reality and fiction is explored, most notably in the dialogues between Ricardo Reis and the deceased Fernando Pessoa, culminating in Reis's final decision regarding the world to which he belongs. The influence of one of the most representative thinkers of the 20th century, Ludwig Josef Wittgenstein (1889–1951), is evident in the fundamental modeling pattern of this narrative structure. It is most clearly reflected in the concept of the so-called "language game" and the philosophical understanding of existential certainty. Accordingly, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and *On Certainty (Über Gewissheit)*, 1984) can be regarded as proto-textual frameworks for this intellectual novel, offering interpretative perspectives through a multitude of symbolic codes which, on the phraseological level, reveal the contextual polysemy inherent in the protagonist's linguistic expressions.

**Keywords:** José Saramago, Ricardo Reis, Ludwig Wittgenstein, linguistic (im)potence, signifier, signified, intertextuality, language game.

**Resumen:** El célebre autor portugués José Saramago, en su novela posmoderna *El año de la muerte de Ricardo Reis* (1984), obra que condensa de manera paradigmática todos los rasgos esenciales de su autopoética —como la marcada intertextualidad, la revalorización de la tradición y de la historia, así como la deconstrucción de las capas míticas—, desarrolla simultáneamente una aproximación sumamente singular al lenguaje, especialmente en lo que concierne al sentido y a los límites de lo que puede o no puede ser dicho. En el seno de esta estructura narrativa compleja, la filosofía del lenguaje de Saramago se manifiesta como una de las estrategias narrativas centrales mediante las cuales se explora el juego latente entre la realidad y la ficción, particularmente a través de los diálogos entre Ricardo Reis y el difunto Fernando Pessoa, diálogos que culminan en la resolución final de Reis respecto al mundo al cual ha de pertenecer. La impronta de uno de los pensadores más representativos del siglo XX, Ludwig Josef Wittgenstein (1889–1951), se revela como una matriz estructural fundamental de la novela. Dicha influencia se evidencia con especial claridad en el concepto del denominado “juego del lenguaje” (*language game*) y en la comprensión filosófica de la certeza existencial. En este sentido, *Investigaciones filosóficas* (1953) y *Sobre la certeza (Über Gewissheit)*, (1984) pueden ser concebidas como marcos prototextuales de esta novela intelectual, ofreciendo perspectivas interpretativas a través de una pluralidad de códigos simbólicos que, a nivel fraseológico, revelan la polisemia contextual inherente a las expresiones lingüísticas del protagonista.

**Palabras clave:** José Saramago, Ricardo Reis, Ludwig Wittgenstein, (im)potencia lingüística, significante, significado, intertextualidad, juego del lenguaje.

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*But the truth is that it is not enough  
to carve a name into stone – yes, the stone  
remains, gentlemen, he was saved – but the  
name, if we do not read it every day, fades,  
is forgotten, erased.*

José Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*

## INTRODUCTION

*The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*<sup>1</sup> is the novel is the work of one of the most prominent Portuguese and global authors of the second half of the 20th century, Nobel laureate José Saramago. The novel, which continues to attract the attention of literary theory and criticism even decades after its initial publication (Ivanković 1998; Reis 1998; Reis et al. 2000; Pontiero 2005), stands as one of the central and most significant texts within the vast and rich literary oeuvre of José Saramago. Through its distinct narrative strategies, the chosen novelistic structure emerges as a leading example of Saramago's poetics. The entire novel may justifiably be described "as the longest and most complex quotation in world literature" (Lukashevskaya, 2009, p. 135).

In the spirit of Saramago's recognizable language play, as well as in the realms of intertextuality and metatextuality – his relationship with both other texts and his own—the novel asserts itself as a unique intellectual project, a carrier of the poetological paradigm that defines Saramago's literary biography as a whole (Nadyarnykh, 2008, p. 91).

The literary game initiated by the renowned Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935) and one of his heteronyms, Ricardo Reis, is extended in Saramago's novel, where this fictional figure is not only embodied, but elevated to the role of protagonist within a new intertextual structure. Originally conceived as part of Pessoa's heteronymic project, Ricardo Reis was one of over seventy distinct 'doubles' the poet created – each endowed with a unique biography, psychological profile, worldview, and literary style (cf. Talan 2013; Perugi 2007). Pessoa's heteronyms engaged in complex relationships: some were relatives, acquaintances, or situated in hierarchies of master and disciple; they translated, cited, or critiqued one another's work – even drawing horoscopes for one another (Vukadin, 2019, p. 101).

For Pessoa, the fragmentation of identity was not merely an act of inventing names or characters – it was rooted in a deeply philosophical and poetic worldview defined by ongoing ontological fracture and the supremacy of the imaginary over the real (cf. Talan, 2013). In doing so, Pessoa

<sup>1</sup> The novel *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis* was first published in 1984, with the Serbian translation by Jasmina Nešković.

essentially created an entire literary epoch within Portuguese literature. Each of his heteronyms was 'gifted' in a particular poetic mode, perfecting distinct literary forms. Each had a unique life – and a unique death. Only Ricardo Reis remained 'unburied': Pessoa never assigned this literary figure a final biographical closure, a marked beginning or end. Saramago took it upon himself to do so (cf. Lukasheskaya, 2009, p. 135–139).

Through metaphysical, philosophical, and poetic dimensions, Ricardo Reis, in Saramago's hands, acquires the features of a real character – living independently of the Creator, the narrator, and Pessoa himself – while preserving the psychological contours envisioned by the poet. Saramago does not deviate even from Pessoa's nihilistic image of the human being as a *postponed corpse that procreates (cadáver adiado que procria)* (Pessoa, 1989, p. 35), drawing inspiration – directly or indirectly – from Nietzsche or, more subtly, from C. Pessanha, key figures who influenced the so-called 'Orphic generation' of Portuguese poets (Talan, 2021, p. 100–101).

Postmodernist visions of the world involve a unique reconfiguration of dominant literary principles – not through their destruction, but through the reorganization of prior conceptions of history, myth, and social reality. Key characteristics of postmodernism include deconstruction, resistance to realism, skepticism toward ideology and science, the 'death of the author', rewriting of history, playful aesthetics, and a distinct sensitivity to the nature of language itself (cf. Hasan, 1983; Kristeva, 1986; Watkins, 1978; Hutcheon, 1996; Joković, 2002; Butler, 2012; Zobenica, 2018).

In Saramago's fiction, techniques grounded in metaphor, irony, paradox, and pronounced intertextuality – along with multi-layered and polysemous narrative structures that foreground the role of the reader as an active participant in fictional reality—represent dominant modeling devices that create a defamiliarized novelistic structure. While a pronounced 'orientation toward other texts' marked avant-garde art, it ultimately triumphed in modernism (Oraić-Tolić, 1990, p. 5). If we define the avant-garde as 'an era of great verbal experimentation' (Vojičić-Komatina, 2013, p. 174), characterized by a rupture with all things traditional and the rejection of strict literary form, then postmodernism may be seen as a 'narrative laboratory' (Butor, 1975, p. 480–482), where attention shifts from *creating* a literary text to the *process by which the text is created* – a process understood as play, with play itself being the dominant aesthetic principle

of postmodernism.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the central tenets of *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and *On Certainty* (*Über Gewissheit*, 1984) by Ludwig Josef Wittgenstein (1889–1951), focusing on their interpretation of the philosophical symbolism of language games and the certainty of naming, through the lens of intertextuality in which the chosen literary work actively dialogues with texts from the philosophy of language. The subject of analysis is José Saramago's postmodern novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (*O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*, 1984). In deconstructing the semantic dimensions of the concept of intertextuality, this study draws upon definitions of intertextuality such as those provided by Julia Kristeva, who is the conceptual originator of this postmodern narrative technique:

The term inter-textuality denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of “study of sources,” we prefer the term transposition because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of thethetic—of enunciative and denotative positionality. If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality), one then understands that its “place” of enunciation and its denoted “object” are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated. In this way polysemy can also be seen as the result of a semiotic polyvalence—an adherence to different sign systems. (Kristeva, 2024, p. 59–60)

The concept of intertextuality first emerged in the works of Julia Kristeva<sup>2</sup> (1986, p. 34–61). Kristeva's development of this concept builds upon Mikhail Bakhtin's exploration of the ‘dialogical nature of words’ (Bakhtin, 1979). Indeed, Bakhtin contends that every word is intrinsically dialogical in relation to the object it represents. When employed within a contemporary context, it assumes a dialogical function not only with the object but

<sup>2</sup> The Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, psychoanalyst, feminist, and novelist Julia Kristeva, in her writings from 1966 and 1967 — *Bakhtin, the Word, the Dialogue, and the Novel* (*Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman*, 1966, published in 1967 in the journal *Critique*; Eng. *Word, Dialogue, and Novel*, 1980, 1986) and *Problems of the Structuring of the Text* (*Problèmes de la structuration du texte*, published in 1968).

also in relation to the reply or response it evokes. Dialogicality becomes particularly pronounced when external words are introduced, as these words, placed in a new context, may precipitate substantial transformations in the original text. This is due to the fact that words, when recontextualized, undergo restructuring and reinterpretation, taking on new meanings and layers of significance (Bakhtin, 1979, p. 172, 173, 227).

In this light, the phenomenon of intertextuality is as ancient as culture itself, grounded in humanity's enduring need to assess, reevaluate, critically interrogate, and reconsider acquired knowledge. Consequently, one text, when integrated within another literary work, can serve to deepen its semantic complexity, activating the role of the reader as a witness to universal insights that resonate across diverse temporal and cultural dimensions. This intertextual interplay not only enriches the interpretive process but also underscores the dynamic and fluid nature of meaning, perpetually reshaped by the dialogical engagement between texts.

### ***THE GOD OF LABYRINTH***

The relationship to the past, aimed at gaining a clearer perspective and vision of the present moment, constitutes a form of historicism, rooted both in literature and in the science of language. Thus, the central focus of this study is the protagonist of the novel *The God of the Labyrinth*, Ricardo Reis, and his relationship with language. He is not only a carrier of an ideological standpoint but also a representation of this ideology embedded within the phraseological layer of the narrative structure.

*The God of the Labyrinth*, a book that Ricardo Reis perpetually reads yet fails to finish, metaphorically leads the reader into the 'labyrinth of language'. This space operates according to the principles of language as a system, one that contains an infinite number of levels and sub-levels, 'signs and meanings' that interpenetrate and, at times, dialectically negate one another. Trapped in the inherent incapacity of language to express the essence of being, Ricardo glorifies its role, equating language with humanity itself. Thus, the labyrinth becomes discernible even within the deepest and most hidden parts of the body:

*And within the body there is total darkness, yet blood reaches the*

*heart, the brain is blind, yet it can see, it is deaf, yet it hears, there are no hands, yet it grasps; man is, evidently, his own labyrinth.* (Saramago, 2003, p. 83)<sup>3</sup>

In the poetics of José Saramago, the labyrinth is a tangled knot, a 'spider's web' (Saramago, 2003, p. 77), representing a primary postmodern vision of the world upon which the novel's multilayered narrative is built. The labyrinth, therefore, sometimes symbolizes the impossibility of escape, while at other times it represents protagonists who, through their intellectual freedom, become outcasts from conventional existential reality. Thus, Saramago introduced the labyrinth as a leitmotif within individual works, and across his entire literary corpus, it serves as a constant, expanding its meanings on a metatextual level. This expansion deepens its significance in a way that aligns with the postmodern crisis of literary character identity, an expected narratological strategy. The concept of the labyrinth in the chosen text points to a profound issue concerning existential uncertainty. It becomes an ideological starting point, indicating a path that requires a guide, either in the form of a 'cane for the blind or some other form of light' (Saramago, 2003, p. 78), confirming the author's established play with paradox, while also unveiling central themes explored in subsequent literary works, such as Saramago's novel *Blindness* (*Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, 1995).

Researchers observe the symbolic multilayeredness of Saramago's labyrinth:

Nestas páginas encontram-se, como dissemos, os três elementos narratológicos essenciais, que estão na base do romance: o símbolo meio-psicanalítico, meio-policial do labirinto; a leitura do jornal, que aparece emrepetidos episódios, como instrumento de documentação e reflexão histórica, por parte de uma personagem que, de certa forma, acaba de

<sup>3</sup> All selected quotations from the novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, as well as from Wittgenstein's works (*Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*; The following English edition was also consulted for the translation Hacker, P. M. S. & Schulte, Joachim (eds.). *Philosophical Investigations*. 2009. Wiley-Blackwell; Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *On Certainty*. Translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, WileyBlackwell, 1991), were translated from Serbian into English by one of the authors of this paper, the Anglicist Milena Mrdak Mićović.

voltar à vida, e isto poucos meses antes de deixá-la para sempre; finalmente, a mentalidade apolítica, ou melhor, anti-política, do protagonista, que se exprime com clareza inusual na ode dos jogadores de xadrez. (Perugi, 2007, p. 46)

The labyrinth in Saramago's work appears at moments when the protagonist seeks to decipher his own actions, noticing their inconsistency, incorrectness, and the instability inherent in human nature. Yet, he surrenders to these actions, driven by primal needs such as the desire to be loved. His relationship with his beloved, Marsenda – young, physically fragile but intellectually akin to his being – is somewhat idealized, whereas his connection with the 'real' woman, the hotel maid, Lydia, is raw, plainly grounded in physical attraction. The attempt to impose a hierarchical order, some semblance of structure within the labyrinth (waiting, reading, measuring, examining, correcting, taking the labyrinth, observing... Saramago, 2003, p. 218), along with the author's distinctive stylistic technique of stringing linguistic constructions into a singular syntactically unorthodox long sentence, enumerating mundane events and actions – from the simplest (sleeping, napping, waking... Saramago, 2003, p. 218) to the most intimate – signals the uncertainty of Ricardo Reis's fate, which is concealed within the central metaphor of *The God of the Labyrinth*. Despite his attempts to impose meaning and consistency upon his daily rituals, the labyrinth ultimately embodies his existential dilemma:

*Such are labyrinths, they have streets, passages, and dead ends; some claim that the most reliable way to escape them is always to turn to the same side, but this, as we know, is entirely contrary to human nature.* (Saramago, 2003, p. 77–78)

Saramago, like many modernist and postmodernist writers – first and foremost Jorge Luis Borges perhaps most closely aligned with Julio Cortázar (Jovović, 2021), constructs his literary text as a linguistic experiment based on the principle of the labyrinth. In contrast to Jorge Luis Borges, whose narrative conceptualizes the labyrinth as a metaphor for the solitary individual disorientedly wandering through space in search of an exit, in Saramago's work the labyrinth emerges as a transformative experience – an initiatory journey wherein solitude becomes the condition for an encounter with the self (Pinheiro Sotta, 2020, p. 211).

This mirrors Wittgenstein's concept of the *language game*, according to which language is a 'labyrinth of paths':

*We can regard our language as a sort of ancient city: a labyrinth of streets and squares, old and new houses, and houses added to in various epochs, all surrounded by numerous new suburbs with proper, regular streets and uniform houses. (PI, §18)*

Ricardo Reis never exits the labyrinth. By sheer coincidence, he selects *The God of the Labyrinth* and, according to the book – this semantic code based on religious symbolism on the surface level – he ironically engages with it, for in its fictional reality it belongs to the detective genre. However, he returns to it, unconsciously, time and again. Trapped within the streets of Lisbon, he seeks order and structure, reviving the past as he looks for an escape from the hotel labyrinth, only to ultimately discover that the labyrinth is himself – *Man is, evidently, his own labyrinth.* (Saramago 2003, p. 83). In this manner, Saramago constructs a multilayered labyrinthine creation, wherein the primary meanings of the text are complicated through various narrative techniques – such as the introduction of numerous quotes, intertextuality, monologues, and pronounced self-referentiality – thus building a hypertext where the experience of the narrated story is enriched by new interpretations that shift depending on the direction chosen by the reader:

*You come from one side and can find your way; you come from another side to the same place and no longer know where you are. (PI, §203). The books on the shelf, the little that he brought with him, some classic Latin he had long since stopped reading regularly, a few leafed English poets, three or four Brazilian authors, barely a dozen Portuguese authors, and among them one that belonged to the library of Highland Bridge. He had forgotten to return it before disembarking. At this time of day, if the Irish librarian noticed its disappearance, he would not hesitate to deliver scathing accusations against the Lusitanian homeland, the country of slaves and thieves, as Byron once said and now O'Brien repeats. From these minor, local causes, great and far-reaching consequences on a global scale arise, but I am innocent, I swear, it was only a forgetfulness, nothing more. He placed the book on the table by the headboard, to finish reading it, if he felt like it in these days. It is called *The God of the Labyrinth*, its author is Herbert Kem (A wordplay based on the homophony of the surname Quian and the*

*pronoun quem [kem] in Portuguese, meaning ‘who’)—pay attention, Ken, Kem, an author who emerged from anonymity simply because someone found him at Highland Bridge. But now, if there is no other copy aboard, we have yet another reason to ask, Kem. The dullness of travel and the attractive title enticed him, the labyrinth and its god, which god is it, what kind of labyrinthine god, but it turned out to be just an ordinary crime novel, a worn-out tale of a murder and an investigation, the criminal, the victim, or maybe the reverse, if the victim can exist before the criminal, and finally, the detective, all three accomplices in death. And I must tell you that the reader of detective novels is the only one who truly survives the story he reads. In the end, every reader reads any story as if he himself is the only true survivor.* (Saramago, 2003, p. 17–18)

This, according to the theory of citation (Oraić Tolić, 1990, p. 21–22), i.e., the type of subtext – intrasemiotic and interliterary citation – depicts the ring-like structure of events. The symbolism within the prologue of the story touches upon the seemingly omnipresent and endless power of literature and written words in general, which manifest in various ways depending on the perspective taken, that is, the contextual meaning applied. This once again emphasizes the oppositional language game, where the unknown author, *Kem* (Who?). Again, the principle of language game the narrator directly refers to emerges from obscurity and is fortuitously saved from the oblivion that would otherwise inevitably follow “in future voyages.” On the other hand, the same unconscious mistake that brings *The God of the Labyrinth* into the world, thanks to Reis, becomes the subject of condemnation by the Irish librarian. The ironic play of coincidence, alongside the already noted religious codes, suggests to the reader the potential direction of discovering truth, certainty, only to later reveal, through self-referentiality, that it concerns an insignificant novel of modest literary achievement – a crime novel.

The phenomenon of irony that Saramago animates in his story about the detective genre, through the character of Ricardo Reis, via pronounced intertextuality assuming the role of Creator, Fernando Pessoa, constantly points to Bakhtin’s view of the addressee of every utterance (1980), i.e., the calculated nature of utterances aimed at specific potential feedback. Within the context of value interpretation of literary genres, the author succeeds in using the mechanisms of irony, along with polyphonically structured

voices, to reach the imagined 'horizon of expectations' of the recipient (cf. Stojanović, 2003, p. 102).

## THE MIRROR REFLECTION

Within the poetics of postmodernism, alongside the labyrinth as its central symbol, the motif of the mirror – more precisely, the *reflection within the mirror* – emerges as an equally significant narrative and symbolic element. Establishing a pivotal parallel between life and death, that is, between himself and the late poet Fernando, who notably lacks a reflection, Ricardo Reis experiences his first ephemeral *glimpse* of a reflection during a moment of almost baroque theatricality, vividly rendered as a stage-like vision. In a fleeting, nearly imperceptible instant, as he passes through the hotel lounge, he is confronted by an 'incomprehensible apparition' (Saramago, 2003, p. 21), wherein:

*Ricardo Reis sees himself reflected, as one among the countless beings that inhabit him, yet equally fatigued. (Saramago, 2003, p. 21)*

Further, Saramago deepens the mirror's symbolism as Reis gazes into its deceptive surface:

*Ricardo Reis lowers the newspaper and looks at himself in the mirror, at that surface which deceives us doubly, for it depicts a space endowed with depth while simultaneously negating it, offering us only a flattened image in which nothing truly transpires, where nothing is real, where only the external and mute reflection of persons and objects persists: a tree leaning over a lake, a face seeking itself in the water – neither the tree nor the face disturbing or even touching the surface. The mirror, this one and all others, offers nothing but illusion; it remains inviolate from humanity, showing us only what we are, or what we once were, like one who, on the eve of war in 1915, admired the uniform in the mirror more than himself, unaware that he would never again glimpse his reflection there. Even this is vanity, albeit without permanence. Such is the nature of the mirror: it both accepts and rejects. Ricardo Reis averts his gaze, shifts his position – whether it is he who rejects the mirror, or the mirror that rejects him, remains uncertain. Perhaps it is Reis who rejects, for he, too, is a mirror. (Saramago, 2003, p. 43)*

Interpreted as a conduit to truth, self-realization, wisdom, intellect, and

the soul, the mirror image within this narrative structure signifies a manifest yet transitory world (Lampić, 1999, p. 230). It stands as a simulacrum of truth: a representation of reality that simultaneously underscores the dichotomy between form and substance and reflects humanity's perpetual striving to grasp the essence of existence. The construction of Ricardo Reis's character thus incorporates complex semantic and narratological strategies. Notably, the motif of the double (Ricardo → Fernando), alongside the polyphonic layering of perspectives (Ricardo → 'within whom countless others reside'), aligns with Saramago's distinctive stylistic paradigm, wherein certainty is perpetually destabilized – echoing Wittgenstein's admonition against the philosophical entrapment of repetitive assertions that preclude analytic resolution (PI, §31).

At times, the mirror may indeed harbour the only visible truth, concealed within a discourse we are prone to dismiss (cf. Foucault, 2007). Before the 'tree of knowledge of good and evil', words and their meanings dissipate into an elusive dimension immediately upon articulation:

*[...] and then came that second conversation, before the mirror, before the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, yet there was nothing there to know, it sufficed merely to gaze as extraordinary words exchanged their reflections, beyond the reach of the ear, as though it were but a duplicated image, a mirrored movement of lips. Perhaps in the mirror, another language is spoken, perhaps in that crystalline space, words are uttered with meanings altogether different, though gestures, like shadows, repeat themselves. Yet, the conversation is wholly altered, lost in some unreachable dimension. Ultimately, even what was spoken here is lost, leaving only fragmented memories—disconnected, incoherent shards from which the entirety of the dialogue cannot be reconstructed. This explains why yesterday's emotions cannot be rediscovered in those of today; they remain irretrievably scattered along the way, like shards of a shattered mirror – fragments of memory. (Saramago, 2003, pp. 156–157)*

Here, the archetypal connection between the leitmotifs of the mirror and the labyrinth becomes most apparent, their metaphors rooted in memory as 'shards of a shattered mirror'. These motifs are woven along the paths of language and signification, which are themselves lost within an unfamiliar, otherworldly realm of existence. This wholly postmodern narrative tech-

nique dislocates the temporal dimensions, discards the conventional order of discourse, and seeks truth within the mirror's reflection—wherein the fragments of memory are reassembled to construct truth as the sole certainty. In the novel's particular instance, this truth manifests as Ricardo's concealed love for Lídia, thinly veiled as pity for her physical infirmity – her immobile arm – within the cloistered world of the hotel.

In *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, Saramago exploits the real heteronym of Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa to introduce a metatextual parallel between the poet-physician (Ricardo Reis) and the deceased poet (Fernando Pessoa), whose existence, both literary and biographical, unfolded within the interplay of the real, the oneiric, and the transcendental. On the intertextual level, Ricardo Reis embodies multiple 'reflections of reality and fiction', as he represents one of Pessoa's most renowned heteronyms – an alter ego of the poet himself (Pessoa, 1999). Pessoa, acclaimed for crafting entire poetic personae and composing substantial bodies of work under each name, elevated pseudonyms into heteronyms, the most famous of which include Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, and Ricardo Reis (Ivanković, 1998, p. 116). Pessoa's own assertion that, in his mirror, he perceived multiple reflections – his heteronyms – is fully realized within Saramago's narrative universe, wherein Ricardo Reis is portrayed as 'the one in whom countless others dwell' (Saramago, 2003, p. 222). The mirror thus offers an array of realities, refracting Ricardo's melancholic quotidian existence:

*The mirror resembles an aquarium; as he crosses the lounge [...] he sees himself within that greenish depth, as though treading the ocean floor amidst the wreckage of sunken ships and the corpses of drowned sailors. It is high time he surfaces, to reclaim his breath.* (Saramago, 2003, p. 91)

### **LANGUAGE GAME – NAME – CERTAINTY**

The interpretation of *The Signs and Meanings of Ricardo Reis*, based on the *language game* theory developed by one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), stands as an indicator of the extent to which the postmodern

era was inspired by his reflections on the philosophy of language. By abandoning the conception of language as a mere picture of the world, as presented in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1987), Wittgenstein paved the way for an understanding of meaning as grounded in the practical use of language within specific life contexts.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces the notion of the *language game*, a conceptual framework that governs the entirety of linguistic practice, analogously to the process of acquiring a mother tongue. This is particularly evident in the early stages of naming objects, wherein “the pupil repeats the words after the teacher” (PI, §7). Such an approach to language use is mirrored in the act of naming itself, as well as in the proliferation of variant forms of a single term, as exemplified by the various designations of Lisbon:

*The children of foreigners, endowed by nature with an abundant curiosity, wish to know the name of this place. Their parents inform them, or perhaps their nannies – nurses, bonnes, Fräuleins – or a passing sailor does so: Ližboa, Lisbon, Lisbonne, Lissabon – four distinct pronunciations, not to mention the intermediate and imprecise variants. Now the children know what had previously been unknown to them, and yet they already somehow knew it: nothing, in fact, but a mere name, approximately enunciated, one that merely compounds the confusion within their young minds, marked by the inflections of Argentinians, Brazilians, and Spaniards, who, even as they faithfully inscribe Lisboa in their Castilian or Portuguese orthographies, nonetheless articulate something wholly other than what we are accustomed to hearing and recording in script. (Saramago, 2003, p. 8)*

What meaning is to be attributed to a given word? – This is the very interrogation with which Saramago inaugurates his novel, thus prefiguring the Wittgensteinian proposition concerning the ‘ineffability of semantics’, a cornerstone of the principles and paradigms governing the language game. This game perpetually unfolds across an inexhaustible array of novel contexts, each of which necessitates the continual reconstitution of rules and interpretative frameworks (cf. Jovović, 2020, p. 124). Essential to this understanding is the recognition that the language game is underwritten by constitutive rules, the transgression of which would precipitate the disintegration of language as a systematic order of signs or symbols. What

emerges from Wittgenstein's theory of language games – and simultaneously constitutes a fundamental tenet of José Saramago's poetics – is the so-called *theory of naming*, adumbrated in *Philosophical Investigations* and further elaborated in *On Certainty*<sup>4</sup> (1988), Wittgenstein's final discussion of language may well be seen as the foundation upon which José Saramago constructs the intricate semantic architecture of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. Not only does Saramago dedicate numerous existential inquiries within the novel to the principle of 'the structure of naming', but he also extends this thematic focus across many of his other works, positioning the act of naming and its ontological uncertainties as a central philosophical concern. While naming appears to offer the sole epistemic certainty, Saramago problematizes this notion from an ideological perspective, casting doubt upon the stability of meaning itself.

From the prologue to the epilogue, Ricardo Reis persistently meditates upon the symbolism of names and the broader process of nomination, not merely within the humanistic and poetic domain to which he belongs, but also in the realm of linguistic philosophy – examining both the meanings that arise within quotidian discourse and those that emerge contextually through use. In this respect, his reflections align closely with Wittgensteinian postulates, particularly the concept of the *language game*, wherein 'speaking a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life' (cf. PI, §23). Guided by this fundamental Wittgensteinian thesis, Saramago persistently confronts his heteronymic protagonist with the dogmatic question of the essence of language and the meanings that are unveiled when a particular linguistic form is situated within a broader, intertextual context – one that reveals the full spectrum of social, cultural, and even civilizational dynamics. This is vividly illustrated in Ricardo Reis's recurrent semantic analyses of everyday linguistic constructions:

*No, not at all, you have the right of way, said the fat man as he stepped aside. Thank you, Your Excellency. Such an interesting expression, 'You have the right of way.' If we were to take every word literally, Ricardo Reis ought to go first, he, who carries within himself countless others.* (Saramago, 2003, p. 21)

<sup>4</sup> The original title: *Über Gewissheit* (1984).

*The lawyer of the celebrated athlete declared that his client had undergone major gender reassignment surgery; in a few days, she would be a proper man, as if born that way. It is time, he added, to consider changing her name. What name will she choose, one wonders... (Saramago, 2003, p. 23)*

*The list of Portuguese nationals who died in Brazil during the first two weeks of December – none of the names mean anything to me. I am under no obligation to mourn, no reason to wear black. And yet, the fact remains: a great many Portuguese have died there. (Saramago, 2003, p. 23)*

*I have a female fox terrier, a mongrel, who has whelped twice and both times devoured her entire litter. [...] What name should be given to this creature? Neither Diana nor Lembarda will do. And what purpose is there in giving names to crime and its motives? Yet Ricardo Reis, obstinate, finally settled upon an appropriate name, inspired by Ugolino della Gherardesca, the cannibalistic count who devoured his children and grandchildren – a grim tale recorded in the chronicles of the Guelphs and Ghibellines, and immortalized in *The Divine Comedy, Inferno, Canto XXXIII*. Let her be called Ugolina, this mother who eats her own offspring, so depraved that her belly does not quiver as she tears with her teeth the warm, soft flesh of helpless young creatures. ‘Ugolina, do not kill me, I am your child. (Saramago, 2003, p. 24)*

At times as part of his inner monologue, though more frequently through commentary on the day’s news, Ricardo Reis unveils and critiques social reality.

Conversely, Ricardo exhibits a marked disinterest in personal, crucial, and fundamentally consequential moments, frequently positioning himself as a silent, detached observer:

Reiscria poucos e superficiais vínculos sociais durante a sua estadia em Lisboa. Comporta-se como um ser à parte da vida cotidiana da cidade. Quase não conversa com ninguém, exceto breves palavras que troca com Salvador, gerente do hotel, conversas mais longas, porém não menos reservadas, trava com Lídia e Marcenda, as duas mulheres com quem vai experimentar sentimentos desconhecidos até então. Apenas com o “vulto” de Fernando Pessoaé que mantém conversas mais demoradas e reveladoras de seus subterfúgios e mistérios, até porque Pessoa aparece sempre disposto a provocar pequenos desmascaramentos de Reis,

acusando-o de ser esquivo e pouco prático em suas relações com as mulheres. Embora seja um habitante do mundo dos vivos, Ricardo Reis parece rejeitar a vida. Claramente ele opta pela postura de neutralidade de quem assiste aos fatos sem envolvimento com eles. Os jornais são companhia diária para o médico português recém-chegado do Brasil. Nas páginas dos folhetins ele se informa sobre as decisões do governo, sobre as reivindicações populares, sobre greves, protestos, índice de desemprego e tudo o que compõe o cenário político e a vida real da cidade de Lisboa. (Muniz and Barbosa, 2013, p. 20)

In a narrative style characteristic of Saramago – with its flowing, unbroken sentences – he intertwines fragmented pieces of daily journalism, from trivial personal ads to deeply unsettling reports, constructing a tapestry of semantically diverse information. These portray Reis, the poet-philosopher, as a critical observer of the cultural, political, and ideological fabric of his time – one in which he seldom finds personal resonance. Yet, consistency emerges on the linguistic plane, manifesting in his persistent need to interpret names, concepts, and their meanings, striving to uncover the profound logical nexus between signifier and signified.

‘If we were to take every word literally’, Ricardo muses – suggesting that if we adhere to the primary, denotative meanings of words, perhaps we might perceive some truth about Ricardo himself, ‘he who carries within himself countless others’. This philosophical unease regarding interpretation and the polysemic nature inherent to language swiftly alternates with moments of social observation. Although Reis surveys the disparate paradigms of contemporary life, he invariably returns to the name as the primordial locus of suffering: gender transition necessitates a change of name; conversely, the nameless deaths of Portuguese emigrants in Brazil absolve him of mourning. The grotesque image of the mother dog devouring her litter functions as a potent parable – through paradoxical and hyperbolic imagery, intertextual references to Dante’s *Inferno*, and the invocation of Count Ugolino, the traitor and cannibal. Ultimately, it confronts the question of whether crime itself demands a name, arriving at a grim conclusion. Here, the semantic link between monstrosity and annihilation, between name and existential act, is powerfully reinforced.

The figure of the Italian nobleman and political figure, Ugolino della

Gherardesca<sup>5</sup> In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the figure of Ugolino represents both suffering and a moral dilemma. In Saramago's work, Ugolino, as a mother, and her cruelty serve as a clear allusion to social reality, fitting into the broader narrative of Saramago's novels that, from an ideological standpoint, provide a sharp critique of society, liberalism, and political leaders – ideologues who treat individuals with the same cruelty Ugolino shows toward her children. The particular expressiveness of the linguistic expression is achieved through a religious atmosphere, which paradoxically intertwines with the most brutal act of the cannibalistic female, ending with a prayerful tone: *Ugolino, don't kill me, I am your child*.

By using the character of Ricardo Reis, the author creates a clear intertextual allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (La Divina Commedia), specifically the thirty-third canto of *Hell*, and the story of the count who dies a martyr's death, starving alongside his children and grandchildren. This becomes an example of an illuminative type of citation, as the quoted text creates a new and unexpected meaning, with the narrator engaging with the prototext in the form of an equal intertextual dialogue. As typical of postmodernist poetics, old cultural codes are either renewed or refuted, cultural hierarchies are dismantled, and, consequently, the role of the reader is reinforced through self-referential markers that compel the reader to follow the author's lead and learn the rules of his original 'citation game'. (Oraić Tolić, 1990, p. 46)

## LINGUISTIC (IN)COMPETENCE – WITTGENSTEIN, CHOMSKY, SARAMAGO

The protagonist of the novel often engages in linguistic debate at a super-

<sup>5</sup> Count Ugolino della Gherardesca is brought to life in Canto XXXIII of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The historical background concerns Count Ugolino, who belonged to a powerful Pisan family and, together with his son-in-law Giovanni Visconti, conspired to overthrow the Ghibelline government, favoring the Guelphs. After their plot was uncovered, both were exiled. However, Ugolino later experienced a significant political rise, becoming the supreme ruler of Pisa in 1285. During political struggles and confrontations, his relationship with his grandson weakened, and in 1288, the Ghibelline leader Ruggieri deposed Ugolino from power and imprisoned him, along with his two sons and two grandsons, in a tower where they all perished from hunger. (Alighieri, 2004: 666, §XXXIII)

ficial level, interpreting the structure from the perspective of grammar, focusing on the simple arrangement of sentence constituents. This approach frequently aligns Wittgenstein's theory more closely with linguistics in the traditional, structuralist, and Saussurian sense, rather than with a philosophical exploration of language. Both Saramago and Wittgenstein, akin to Noam Chomsky<sup>6</sup>, in the theory of language games, a distinction is made between the *surface* and *deep structure* of a text.<sup>7</sup>

The proximity of the two theories is reflected both in the aforementioned structures and in the model of the *ideal language* (cf. Jovović, 2021, p. 586). Remaining on the level of grammaticality, i.e., the surface structure, Ricardo Reis illuminates and analyzes formal sentence features:

*After a night of fierce frost, a terrible storm, to use those words already formed and so intertwined, the first two somewhat loosely, but equally suitable, so there is no point in wasting time coming up with new ones...* (Saramago, 2003: 25)

*From the street Terreiro do Paço only a few meters separate it, we would write, only a step divides them, were it not for that homophonic ambiguity...* (Saramago, 2003, p. 25)

*Pay attention to the curious expression, 'fall[ing while rising from the table]...' (Saramago, 2003, p. 249)*

*He returns to the farewell speech, unable to believe that it was addressed to Fernando Pessoa, who had truly died, if we consider the*

<sup>6</sup> Noam Chomsky, a linguist, psychologist, and mathematician, is the creator of the primarily most influential linguistic theory of the 20th century, known as transformational, generative, or transformational-generative grammar. Through this theory and his work *Syntactic Structures*, he exerted a profound influence on psycholinguistics, which can be regarded as a true revolution in its further development. Chomsky's key works include: *Syntactic Structures* (1957), *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (1964), *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965), *Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar* (1966), *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought* (1966), *Language and Mind* (1968), and, co-authored with Morris Halle, *The Sound Pattern of English* (1968). In addition to these books, he has published numerous specialized and theoretical papers in linguistic, psychological, and philosophical journals, as well as in various interdisciplinary volumes.

<sup>7</sup> In the use of a single word, a distinction could be made between surface and deep grammar. What immediately impresses upon our consciousness when we use a word is the manner in which it is applied in the construction of a sentence, or rather, it could be said to be the part of its use that we can apprehend by ear. – Now, compare deep grammar, for instance, in the word 'imply,' with what we can infer based on its surface grammar. It is no wonder that one finds it difficult to navigate this distinction. (PI, §664)

*unanimous matching of reports, but due to grammatical and lexical ambiguities that he would disregard, they knew him too superficially to have the right to address him in such a manner... they took advantage of the death... just pay attention... to that adjective 'noble,' my God, what an idiotic epitaph, with an apology for this crude word when the speaker had before him the noun 'death,' which makes everything else redundant, especially the rest, which is, after all, very little, and as 'noble' means refined, gallant, stately, elegant, pleasant, polite, as the dictionary says, that collective place of words, then even death can be said to be refined, or gallant, or stately, or elegant, or pleasant, or polite... (Saramago, 2003, p. 30)*

*While observing them, Ricardo Reis tries to solve the semantic puzzle of why a chicken gave rise to a chicken coop, while, for example, a horse led to a stable, how is it that from one species comes another, opposite, or contrary, or complementary, depending on the point of view and the current mood. (Saramago, 2003, p. 30)*

Engaging in a refined lexical analysis, based on specialized linguistic terminology, such as homophonic ambiguity (separating by a few meters/only a step) or collocational combinations (terrible storm), Ricardo interprets the nuanced meanings that, within the selected context, partially create paradoxical combinations (e.g., noble death, falling while rising) or lead to a certain communication noise, i.e., the disruption of denotative meaning. The idea that relations in language reflect those in the world, expressed in a highly expressive, ludic function (cf. Katnić-Bakaršić, 2000, p. 20), is demonstrated by Reis at the morphological-derivational linguistic level, when interpreting the names of a chicken and its derived chicken coop, as well as a horse and its stable, which resulted in a grammatical gender change. This illustrates that the interpretation of language—specifically names and words—captures the attention of the protagonist in his continuous philosophical dilemmas, serving as one of the means through which Ricardo Reis perceives the world. This, after all, aligns with the fundamental philosophical framework of the creator of the “language game” theory, where we can discuss the structure of language and the structure of the world, with language mirroring the world.

The pronounced fragmentarity of the literary text, characteristic of postmodernism (cf. Reškovic, 1988, pp. 62–66), is achieved on the syntactic level, as it calls into question the very principles of combining linguistic

units, even at the sentence level. However, the problematization of the laws governing how language functions as a system, and the protagonist's internal unrest and discord, arise from his linguistic (in)competence, which reaches its climax multiple times. Thus, the phraseological perspective becomes the foundation for the psychological profiling of Saramago's protagonist. In contrast to the surface structure and Ricardo's interpretation, which remains at the level of grammatical or semantic analysis of lexical units, there are numerous examples demonstrating that, for him, language symbolizes far more substantial meanings and logic that are not perceived when simply dissecting linguistic units, signs, or words.

The deepest philosophical analyses addressing the nature and origin of language and the essence of human existence in Ricardo's reflections are often intertwined with the concept of "names," the so-called theory of naming, inspired by Wittgenstein's assertions on certainty (cf. Wittgenstein, 1988). Therefore, the following excerpts serve as representatives of Saramago's implicit poetics and, in general, his view on language:

"... but the truth is that it is not enough simply to carve a name into some stone; the stone remains, yes, gentlemen, it is saved, but the name, if it is not read every day, fades, is forgotten, erased. [...] Ricardo Reis stops before the monument to Eça de Keroš, or Kejroža, if we were to strictly follow the orthography used by the owner of that name, and here, we see how different ways of writing can be, yet the name is still the least of the problems. It is astonishing that both spoke the same language, yet one is Reis, the other Esa. It is likely that it is the language that selects the writers it needs, using them to express but a small fragment of its wealth. When language has expressed everything and falls silent, I am keenly interested in how we will live. The first difficulties begin to emerge, or perhaps they are not even true difficulties but rather countless and contradictory layers of meaning, unstable paths, new crystallizations. When we say, for example, 'Through the rough nakedness of truth, the transparent veil of imagination,' the statement appears clear and obvious, a child would understand it and repeat it in an exam, without error. But the same child would also understand and repeat with equal conviction a new statement: 'Through the rough nakedness of imagination, the transparent veil of truth,' and this second statement requires far more contemplation, for isn't it true satisfaction to imagine imagination as bold and naked, and truth, merely translucent? If wise proverbs, turned upside down, become the rule, what kind of world will we build from

them? It is truly a wonder that people do not lose their minds every time they open their mouths to say something.” (Saramago, 2003, pp. 51–52, the emphasis N. J. & M. M.)

The name is one of the key symbols in Saramago’s poetics, whether it appears in the theory of citation, as a postmodern principle, or as an auto-poetic characteristic, sometimes introduced through a minus process (as in the novel *All the Names*, 1997) or by bringing to life already fictional characters (like Ricardo Reis). The domain of phonetic and sound structure of words and their meanings, tracing Saussure’s parallel between the signifier and the signified, i.e., the formal and semantic structure, the plane of expression and the plane of content (Saussure, 1996), is examined in the peculiar union that involves one and the same name, one concept signified in multiple ways. In this, Saramago, like Wittgenstein, asks:

“Do you know, or do you just believe that you are called L.V.?” (OC, 79)  
“When I ask, ‘Do I know, or do I just believe, that I am called...?’ it does me no good to look at myself. However, I could say: not only do I never doubt that this is my name, but I couldn’t be sure of any judgment if I began to doubt it.” (OC, 79)  
“[...] And what if it turns out that what I have never doubted was a mistaken assumption? Would I react as when a belief is shown to be wrong? Or would it knock the ground out from under me...?” (OC, 80)

By linking two diverse texts and genres, based on postmodernist intertextuality, merging the fields of the philosophy of language and literature, principles of logic and creative imagination, we are on the trail of a very distinctive approach that addresses the phenomenon of language from multiple levels, all of which confirm the thesis of meaning hidden in the laws and context of individual uniqueness and the ubiquitous linguistic power that shapes consciousness. This, Saramago’s thesis about syntactically correct, yet semantically debatable language construction—*Through the rough nakedness of imagination, the transparent veil of truth*—bears a remarkable resemblance to Noam Chomsky’s linguistic formulation—*Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*, which, in the framework of generative-transforma-

tional grammar, is interpreted as a meaningless semantic structure.<sup>8</sup> In the realm of literary text, Saramago conducts a kind of linguistic experiment, starting from the primary meaning of words and using seemingly absurd constructions to build a distinctive narrative structure that rests on principles which encourage the reader to uncover new meanings hidden in the unspoken layers of the artistic text. Therefore, the interpretation of such a text depends not only on its context but also on the extra-contextual reality in which each reader exists. By activating the phatic function<sup>9</sup>, the writer opens numerous paths, akin to a labyrinth, and through powerful self-referential techniques, he leaves a profound vision of omnipotence – of names, language, and literature. Just as a name carved in stone holds no value outside of context, outside of use, so too does language and literature require the reader for survival; without the reader, both language and literature, and even the name itself, fade into oblivion.

The philosophical and linguistic thesis about the connection between language and thought, about their mutual interpenetration and influence, sometimes evident even in their reciprocal opposition, manifests in the oxymoronic combinations found in Ricardo Reis's reflections as the 'power' and 'impotence' of language to express or 'conceal' thought:

*He was right, that Frenchman, when he said that words were given to man to conceal what he thinks; it seems he was right, for these are questions on which no final judgments should be made. What is certain, however, is the fact that we cannot find anything better than words to express what we call the word thought. (Saramago, 2003, p. 194)*

<sup>8</sup> The concept of transformation refers to a grammar that employs transformations, i.e., formal operations in the form of rules that transform a given structure into another structure (Chomsky, 1977: 13). Generative grammar has the task of generating, i.e., producing grammatically correct sentences of a language according to explicit instructions. In Noam Chomsky's theory, syntax is the central component of linguistic description, and the term grammar carries a broader meaning than in traditional usage, as it encompasses not only syntax and morphology but also other levels of linguistic structure. Chomsky provided two examples to illustrate the autonomy of syntax: *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously, and Furiously sleep ideas green colorless.* (Chomsky, 1979, p. 88), (cf. Jovčić, 2024, pp. 13–25)

<sup>9</sup> The function oriented toward the channel, which serves to establish, prolong, or terminate communication. (Katnić-Bakaršić, 2000, 17)

This linguistic game also recalls another one from the beginning of the novel, or rather, one that is present in all of Saramago's works: the game of life and death. After visiting Pessoa's grave, Ricardo encounters the figure of the famous poet, who, following their first posthumous meeting, visits him exactly nine months later. The semantic unity is symbolically established with the act of birth and the symbiosis of balance, where the physical being develops for nine months but cannot be seen, and the manifest form of the deceased who, after death, exists in the physical world for nine months, living in thoughts and memory, after which comes oblivion, unless the "name" is preserved as the only certainty (Wittgenstein, 1988), for 'being and existing' (Saramago, 2003, p. 81) do not share the same meaningful order in understanding reality.

## CONCLUSION

From its very emergence and crystallization in the latter half of the twentieth century, postmodern literature has embodied a spirit of rebellion, mirroring the postmodern epoch itself, which – as a cultural phenomenon – precipitated transformative shifts across a wide spectrum of social realities. Postmodernism, as Linda Hutcheon insightfully remarks, 'both constructs and deconstructs the very phenomena it engenders – whether in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, television, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, or historiography' (Hutcheon, 1996: 16–17). Within this turbulent cultural matrix, José Saramago's intellectually charged postmodern novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984), hailed as 'one of the grandest quotations' in the history of world literature (Lukashevskaya, 2009: 135), emerges as a paradigmatic narrative model that reveals the multiple dimensions of this still-resonant literary and societal epoch.

Standing at the confluence of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1966, 1967), theories of citationality (Oraić-Tolić, 1990), and the philosophy of language (Wittgenstein, 1980, 1988), Saramago's novel unfolds as a dialogical and polyphonic structure. Its polysemous narrative fabric not only re-examines

but also deepens the symbolic densities of prior texts, thereby enacting a dynamic semiotic reconfiguration. The orientation towards external texts, while rooted in avant-garde aesthetics, eventually prevailed over modernist imperatives and solidified as a defining axis of contemporary culture and postmodernism itself (Oraić-Tolić, 1990, p. 5). In this manner, the trajectory from an 'epoch of great verbal experiment' culminates, in Saramago's work, in a veritable 'laboratory of narrative', wherein the emphasis shifts from the mere production of text to the epistemology of its production. Creation thus becomes an act of play – specifically, a Wittgensteinian language-game – which, as the principal aesthetic strategy of postmodern poetics, foregrounds the inherent fluidity of meaning.

The signs and meanings that structure Saramago's poetics, as interpreted here, arise from a distinctive, critically attuned perspective on language and the regulatory mechanics of linguistic systems. His sustained engagement with the analysis of meaning and the function of linguistic units across varying contexts reflects a deeply philosophical interrogation of the logical architectures that underpin human experience. This intellectual posture, anchored in late twentieth-century linguistic theory, bears witness to the intimate intersection of literary creativity and linguistic inquiry. Interpreted through its dominant symbolic prisms – the labyrinth and the mirror – and refracted through the concepts of 'language games and certainties', the novel opens an exceptional space for linguistic-stylistic, semiotic, and philosophical reflection on the (im)potency of language within the contours of the estranged, hyper-constructed fictional reality inhabited by Reis, animated with Saramago's inimitable narrative mastery.

In the final analysis, Saramago's text compels us to confront the essential paradox of postmodern existence: the simultaneous emancipation and entrapment within language. Language here is no mere vehicle of meaning but an existential horizon – at once labyrinthine and revelatory – that frames human understanding in an era defined by the erosion of absolutes. Thus, the novel stands not only as an artefact of literary postmodernism but also as a profound philosophical meditation on the social conditions of meaning-making in the contemporary world.

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