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***‘LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME; DO NOT HINDER THEM, FOR TO SUCH BELONGS THE KINGDOM OF GOD’
– PORTUGUESE CHILDHOOD RELIGIOSITY AND ITS
PORTRAYAL IN VALTER HUGO MÃE’S O NOSSO REINO***

Keywords: Valter Hugo Mãe; *O nosso reino*; childhood; religion; Portuguese identity; Fátima

Abstract: Religion has always been a huge factor of Portuguese national identity and was strongly emphasised and enforced as essential to it under the Estado Novo (1933-1974). However the protagonist of Valter Hugo Mãe’s *O nosso reino* (2004), even at the early age of eight, or perhaps because of it, questions the apparent omnipotence of the Church and the infallibility of religion. His distrust of Church officials demonstrates how his innocence allows him to see through the corruption afflicting the Portuguese Church. His faith appears to be pure and untouched by societal expectations, which apparently means that he can faithfully interpret God’s message, and so is perceived to be a type of angel by those around him, forcing him to confront what Freud terms his ‘primary narcissism’. At other times he is also interpreted as some kind of demonic force, which certainly demonstrates a restrictive binary identity that superficially appears to be emblematic of religious belief. His decision to become a saint means that he can be seen to represent Erik Erikson’s homo religious, who is “always older, or in early years suddenly becomes older, than his playmates or even his parents and teachers and focuses in a precocious way on what it takes others a lifetime to gain a mere inkling of: the questions of how to escape corruption in living and how in death to give meaning to life” (Erikson 261). This paper will examine how Valter Hugo Mãe is portraying the instability of definitive religious categories within Portuguese society, particularly when the beliefs that shape those categories are manipulated according to the political desires of the State and their allies within the Church.

Introduction

Contemporary Portuguese author Valter Hugo Mãe¹ is becoming increasingly prominent in both Portuguese and global terms; his work examines a wide variety of characters and subject matters, and is increasingly drawing academic attention because of the skill and complexity of his narratives. The focus of this article is the representation of childhood religiosity in his 2004 novel *O nosso reino* (our kingdom), a novel that is based around the psychological and spiritual development of eight year old Benjamim, growing up in the period of Portugal’s transition from the dictatorship of the Estado Novo to democracy, and how the portrayal of this protagonist interrogates contemporary Portuguese socio-cultural norms. To better comprehend how Mãe is subverting both representations of children and religion, this article will begin by contextualizing the

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¹ The author has elected to only use lower case letters throughout his work, and so this style choice will be adhered to.

narrative, through an examination of the importance of the miracles of Fatima within the Portuguese imaginary, the different versions of Portuguese religiosity and how thereafter children became associated with possibilities as religious vessels. The huge upheavals within Portuguese society over the past hundred years mean that literary representations of both childhood and religion have begun to represent these societal shifts. Within the novel the protagonist is on a quest to become a saint, but is ultimately unsuccessful, and rather than portraying the child as a conduit for miraculous activities, Mãe is demonstrating how strong religious belief can be a result of psychological change and trauma, but he also explores the effects that supposedly miraculous events have on the surrounding society.

Portuguese religion(s)

Portugal is, and has been for centuries, a predominantly Roman Catholic country, and under the Estado Novo their religion was upheld as one of the central tenets of Portuguese nationality, as part of the trilogy of God, Fatherland, Family, as an Estado Novo Prime Minister confirmed, stating that “the Catholic religion [...] was, since the beginning of Portuguese history, the formative element of the soul of the nation and the dominant trait of the Portuguese people” (Salazar 212). One of the fundamental elements of contemporary Portuguese Catholicism was based around the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to children at Fátima in 1917. The significance of these events were huge and massively beneficial for the Church in Portugal, which had been undergoing problems for over a century, having become incapable of playing the prominent role it had previously held in society (Dix “As esferas seculares” 13). The Republican government officially separated the Church from the State in 1911, symbolizing how far the Portuguese had moved from the “golden age” of Portuguese Catholicism, from around the beginning of Portuguese maritime expansion to the Pombaline era (Dix “As esferas seculares” 13). However, the Portuguese modern period, in spite of official moves away from religion, actually burgeoned an upsurge in popular religious participation (as well as revolutionary political activities) which was concreted by the events at Fátima, when it became “a national preoccupation and a historically transformative event” (Bennett).

The intense public reaction to these apparitions is indicative of a public perception of Portuguese instability throughout the period and the need for a positive attribute to focus on. The portrayal of Portugal as a place where miracles happen also ties in to the long-held beliefs of their providential destiny, based around their self-perception as a great imperial nation in the period of the Discoveries and subsequent fall from grace after the death of Dom Sebastião. Since that period millenarian theories have captured the public imagination, particularly in periods of crisis, and so the Fátima apparitions came to serve as evidence of the presence of God in Portugal, but this belief was initially more prevalent among the Portuguese people rather than in the Church itself. This enabled a new variation of Catholicism to emerge, combining Marian beliefs and conviction in the spiritual destiny of Portugal, one that was not entirely attuned with the orthodox Catholicism of the Portuguese Church (Dix “As esferas seculares” 15-16). However, the Church “utilized the phenomenon of Fátima for its own reconfiguration and affirmation and that the 1917 apparitions today symbolize one of the most important pillars of Portuguese Catholicism”

(Dix “As esferas seculares” 16),² and so the apparitions worked towards cementing the importance of the Church back into the Portuguese imaginary at a socio-historical juncture when stability was really needed. The chaotic political situation and successive government changes meant that the Portuguese population were once again looking for a saviour, and this time, God had answered their call. This highlights the question raised by Vries about the intervention of humans in the apparently supernatural, and to what extent these events are manipulated and interpreted to serve specific purposes; in this case, as the extraordinary event of Fátima was so embellished by the Portuguese Church, it loses the very nature of the miraculous:

How should we understand the relationship between these two elements - or, as Derrida has it in 'Faith and Knowledge', the 'two sources' - of the miraculous, between their representation or presentation of a supposedly extraordinary event, on the one hand, and their artificiality and technicity, on the other? How do these two features form two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the same phenomenon, whose givenness - and, as it were, 'saturation-' we take for granted, as witnesses, spectators, or viewers? (Vries 48)

Academics have highlighted the extraordinary upsurge in Marian apparitions throughout the nineteenth century, and it is not my intention here to question the veracity of these claims but instead to examine how these apparitions were utilised by the Portuguese elite to manipulate the rest of the population. Historians have already argued this point, with some even going so far as to say that “without Fátima, Salazar would not have been possible” (Barthas and Fonseca 179), believing that these apparitions had created such a strong resurgence in the belief of the providential destiny of Portugal that an authoritarian government was able to take hold. There is no question that Salazar used these apparitions to his advantage as he portrayed himself to the Portuguese as a deeply religious “father of the nation”, devoted to the Virgin of Fátima, and he cultivated the image of Fátima as integral to Portuguese national identity, equating both this religious destiny of the Portuguese and himself with the centrality and importance of the Estado Novo (Bennett). If Salazar’s dictatorship and Marian beliefs were seemingly so intrinsically linked, the question becomes what happens to these beliefs in the aftermath of the dictatorship, when once again, the Portuguese population suffered significant upheavals politically and socially.

On the road to democracy, Portuguese governments made huge attempts to distance themselves from the Salazarist era. In terms of Fátima, this meant that the MFA (Armed Forces Movement) wanted to replace religious for revolutionary zeal, a move that was almost universally unpopular, as, fearing yet more political and social disruption, particularly from atheist left-wing agents, many Portuguese “looked to Mary rather than to Marx” (Manuel 14). So in this transitional period Fátima continued to constitute one of the three F’s of *portugalidade* alongside fado and football, an image constructed under the Estado Novo but which still resonates as symbolic of national identity. However, although interest in Fátima appears to have remained strong up to the present day, there are questions over what importance it still holds for the Portuguese themselves, particularly as the apparitions became increasingly well-known around the world, meaning that it was no

² This translation, and all subsequent translations from Portuguese into English, are the author’s own

longer a place of pilgrimage for the Portuguese alone. It must also be taken into consideration that there has been a trend among young people in particular in the Americanised Western world to reject any kind of religious identity and become secular, and although this has also been evident in Portugal, it is by no means to the same extent (Castells xix), with the majority still identifying themselves as Catholic even if they do not actively practice (França). In the Portuguese case the decline in religious activity must be seen as a direct consequence of the end of the Estado Novo in 1974, as throughout this regime Salazar placed the utmost importance on religion, enforcing Catholicism as the “religion of the Portuguese nation” in the Constitution of 1933 (Franco 405) and the Catholic Church was one of its biggest supporters and enforcers, partly because the regime had restored to it many of the privileges it had lost under the previous republican regime (Gallagher 397). After this enforced religious identity, it would perhaps be seen as understandable if many Portuguese began to reject religion entirely, however, superficially at least, Portugal remains predominantly Roman Catholic, with 84.5% identifying themselves as such in 2001. This obviously does not demonstrate a complete picture in terms of religious identity as an abstract belief is not the same as practicing on a regular basis; José Machado Pais categorised Portuguese Roman Catholic believers into two groups, of which 43% were “ritualistic, moralist and traditional” and 46% were “nominal, individualistic and tolerant” (Pais, Cabral and Vala). This implies that less than half of these believers practise Roman Catholicism in accordance with the orthodox values of the Portuguese Church, however the acceptance of more “individualistic” practice demonstrates contemporary moves towards intra-faith plurality in order to adapt to recent socio-cultural changes, although some would argue that this plural religiosity has played an integral role in Portuguese religious identity for many centuries (Dix “Roman Catholicism”). The revolution of 1974 heralded a type of renaissance and re-evaluation of many aspects of Portuguese identity, and with religion such a prominent feature for many years, this would also be under intense scrutiny from the personal all the way through to the national perspective. The period during and following revolutions is often allegorised using childhood and adolescence in postcolonial literature, where these characters are utilised to critique and question national identity (Bharat 12), and this is why Mãe has constructed the character of Benjamin; a child on the cusp of adolescence. In terms of religiosity, children have a tendency to almost exclusively follow the beliefs of their parents unquestioningly (Weiss Ozorak), whereas for adolescents their spirituality becomes a personal identitarian aspect to explore, and they are also subject to a much greater variety of external influences and socio-cultural factors (Trommsdorff); a transition that has clear parallels to the sheltered nature of the Estado Novo in contrast with the more open Portugal after the revolution.

The imagined Portugal of *O nosso reino*

O nosso reino is set in this transitional period of 1970s Portugal, but this context is deliberately underplayed in the novel and only mentioned briefly, as the school teacher explains to the children that “the men that controlled the country were sent away, now the ordinary people are working to see who will control it” (Mãe 98), and later, teenagers are portrayed enjoying their apparent new-found freedom, “at that time, after the 25th of April, many people thought that the liberties were greater, much greater, than they had hoped” (Mãe 104). The relegation of such a key event in Portuguese history to the margins of the

novel begins to demonstrate Mãe's representation of minor or subaltern character and events, in opposition to the imperial master narrative that had previously been so prominent in the literary sphere in particular (Vakil), and in particular the imagined community constructed under the Estado Novo, that was ethnically and religiously homogenous, based around state-oriented ideals of masculinity and patriarchy. Mãe is using religion as a symbol for the search of a new national identity for Portugal itself, as the characters are searching for validation in their belief in a higher power that will unite them as a community. The town is therefore intended to be a microcosm of the imagined space of Portugal, as although a variety of religious beliefs are presented, all are subsumed under the umbrella of Catholicism in one form or another, demonstrating the relative homogeneity of the country that allowed it to be (particularly under the Estado Novo) one of the "imagined communities" described by Benedict Anderson, "because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 6) – yet the relegation of Benjamim and his mother to "outside" demonstrates the myth of this united community. The town is the only imaginable existence for the protagonist, Benjamim, and many of the inhabitants; Benjamim's mother even warns him "never go beyond the road of the town, where the trees begin is the end of the world, there is nothing to see there" (Mãe 11). It is also reminiscent of the rural villages idealized by the Estado Novo, as demonstrated by the contest in 1938 to find the "most Portuguese village in Portugal", and Ellen Sapega states that by "[u]niting simple rural villagers with local elites, the contest exalted the authenticity of local traditions and dismissed any impact that cosmopolitan or 'non-Portuguese' influences had on the national character" (Sapega 146-7). Although in the novel the class of the characters is not described explicitly, their religious differences symbolize the necessity of multiple identities within a community, yet such characters must strive for a common goal, which in the novel is heaven, metaphorising the Portuguese national project.

The protagonist of the novel, who is also the first-person narrator telling his story at an unspecified later date, is an eight year old boy called Benjamim describing the lives of himself and his extended family in a small town in Portugal. As this family grows ever smaller when people either die or leave, Benjamim begins to see his world differently, in particular after he jumps off a rock and does not die. This incident leads himself (and others around him) to believe that he possesses special spiritual qualities that ensured his salvation, and he asserts that he believes his vocation is to become a saint, as he tells his best friend Manuel:

and now i want you to be the first to know the resolution i have taken to combat all of the evil that exists, to fight against those who want to hurt or kill us, i have decided to give myself to god through the only manner in our reach, i will make all of my acts an act of goodness, until inside of me all that is good manifests itself and i will be good as well, i will be a saint. (Mãe 30)

This resolution is a reaction to a series of events that Benjamim believes have come to the town, like a plague, because its members have not been behaving as they should, and these events include: the loss of many fishermen at sea (Mãe 10), the appearance of a servant in his home who he believed to be monstrous (Mãe 12), the death of his grandmother (Mãe

22), throwing himself off a rock (Mãe 26) which resembles the previous suicide of a mother in the same location (Mãe 27). His decision to make all his acts “an act of goodness” brings forth questions surrounding the dichotomy between good and evil, and his subsequent actions in the novel exacerbate the meaning of ‘good’ and how many factors are involved in its interpretation. Superficially, and from a traditionalist Portuguese perspective, being ‘good’, at least in part, means conforming to and behaving in accordance with the values of the Church, but it quickly becomes clear that Mãe is questioning these values.

Catholicism is inextricably linked to the institution of the Catholic Church, which is represented in the novel by padre Filipe. It is clear from the beginning that Benjamim is afraid of the priest and all that he represents. As he goes to confession, he tells the priest that he does not need to confess because he has already done so to God, thereby inadvertently questioning the rituals of the Church, and subsequently, the institution itself. The priest then hits him, and Benjamim states that “i would die that day, i thought, as a priest beating a child could only be the work of death” (Mãe 17). He and his best friend then decide that they must kill the priest, as he “dominated the church and, by some mysterious process, had the right to decide who lived and who died” (Mãe 17). This fear of the workings of the Church portrays an understanding beyond his years, a demonstration of the *homo religiosus* examined by Erik Erikson, that is “always older, or in early years suddenly becomes older, than his playmates or even his parents and teachers and focuses in a precocious way on what it takes others a lifetime to gain a mere inkling of: the questions of how to escape corruption in living and how in death to give meaning to life” (Erikson 261). Throughout the novel, Benjamim is endeavouring to understand the difference between good and evil on his own terms rather than those dictated by the Church. His association with various supposed miraculous occurrences around the town meant that others had come to consider him almost saintly, especially due to his apparent ability to fly, ‘the light shone upon my skin, lifting my body into the air’ (Mãe 73). However, they are disappointed when his ‘powers’ desert him, as when Dona Tina hoped Benjamim would revive her son, “but he did not give him life” (Mãe 92). This demonstrates a type of pack mentality and a desire to seize upon any entity that will provide hope – however, it is also clear that the other members of the community are not so willing to question the Church itself, as they merely transfer their rituals to Benjamim, by leaving dead vermin at his door and continually harassing him. Benjamim begins to believe that this transference of desperation indicates the presence of the devil, because it is wrong to ask things from God (Mãe 99).

Mãe emphasises the importance of religion and spirituality to the townspeople by portraying the antithesis of the godly and miraculous; characters that seem to represent the presence of evil, and the reactions they provoke. One of the features of Benjamim’s nightmares is ‘the saddest man in the world’, who has become a feared legend within the town, living just outside of it in the so-called ‘end of the world’. Manuel tells Benjamim that the saddest man in the world “must eat people and in his stomach transforms them into ferocious vermin that come out of his ass at night... these creatures were terrible vermin, coming out of there full of legs and red in fires and infinite flames” (Mãe 12), after being caught with a stick in the ass by the saddest man in the world. This imagery ignites Benjamim’s imagination, and he has many surreal fantasies, including seeing a light shining in people’s asses when they are not conforming to societal norms (not being

‘good’), which he fears will attract the attention of the saddest man in the world. Some of his fantasies appear to come true and are subsequently designated miracles by the townspeople. The most significant of these happens when he goes “to the other side of the town, walking out to the tree grove, until the darkness absorbs my body” (Mãe 72). Out of this darkness emerges “a dog with head ablaze, a wild black animal like a puma, angry with men, coming from a secret hiding place on the slope, carrying out the forces of the devil, so they said” (Mãe 72). This image of the black dog is highly symbolic within European literature in particular, where its association to the supernatural realm has long been established as a “gate-keeper of the world of the dead” (McKinlay 11). In the novel, this black dog apparently causes a miracle to happen, as “from the dog came the day” (Mãe 72), meaning that “in our kingdom time jumped” (Mãe 73), “it was the day that there was no night, that nobody forgot” (Mãe 74). The townspeople attribute this apparent miracle to Benjamim, and are thankful because the extra day seems to signal wealth and prosperity. This extraordinary event remains embedded in their minds, and they begin to call on Benjamim to perform miracles for them, relying on him for the salvation of their town. One of the miracles he is asked to perform is to save Carlos from impending death by Carlos’ (and Manuel’s) mother, Dona Tina, who wants him to save Carlos’ soul as well as his body (Mãe 87). This is hugely problematic for Benjamim because he actually caused Carlos’ paralysis in the first place after becoming angry with Carlos when he calls his aunt a whore, although he does not admit this, saying that “a heavy hand came from the air that pushed Carlos to the bank below with his legs hitting the rocks” (Mãe 57).

Benjamim’s inability perform miraculous acts on demand means that he comes to be viewed with suspicion, and is gradually excluded from his community as the townspeople cannot comprehend his transformative identity, therefore becoming more like the saddest man in the world, who was considered “completely different” (Mãe 9). Superficially, it appears as if Benjamim’s childish innocence allows him to cultivate a ‘purer’ view of religion, as he appears to be developing his interpretation outside of societal norms. However, by placing himself (or being placed) in the position of a ‘miraculous’ child, Benjamim is being forced into confronting what Freud terms his “primary narcissism”, because his fellow citizens idealise him by projecting their illusions of the miraculous onto him, thereby effectively trying to prohibit him from moving into a rational state. Through the character of Benjamim, Mãe, although apparently criticizing the Church, is actually using it as a symbol to represent the oppressive nature of Portuguese society under the Estado Novo, and the difficulties faced by anybody who transgressed the moralistic conventions imposed at the time.

The ‘innocence of childhood’

Although today we tend to assume that children are naturally innocent, and it is as they reach maturity and are influenced by members of their society that they become reasonable and representable beings, academics now believe that childhood itself is actually a recent invention by adults. This is the result of the values of the Enlightenment, and the projection of purity onto children in order to invoke a sense of nostalgia for a supposedly more innocent previous time. However, previously, children were viewed differently in society, and some even go as far as to state that they were regarded as being “full of evil” until the thirteenth century (DeMause). Therefore, it can be asserted that the notion of childhood is constructed by a certain society that is imposing its own

expectations, and problems arise when a child does not fulfil these, which is exactly what Benjamim does in the novel. This means that he is simultaneously feared and revered by his extended family, a situation that the church intends God to inspire amongst its followers, but as Benjamim is a physical being rather than a supernatural entity, he provokes very different reactions. His father is incapable of dealing with his son's transgressions, and so beats him, flees the household and is mostly absent throughout the novel; even when he returns he is "a vague image that would evaporate at any moment by abandoning us again" (Mãe 113), and he is eventually never to return again (Mãe 140). While living there, Benjamim's father is a feared presence due to his abusive and alcoholic nature: "it was not the first time he flew into a fury. i knew this could happen at any moment" (Mãe 71), and Benjamim describes an incident from previous years where his father had beaten him, and he believed that he was going to die (Mãe 71). If we take a Freudian perspective, it could be suggested that Benjamim has embarked upon his quest to become a saint due to the absence of a positive paternal figure in his life; although he has a father and a grandfather, neither of these figures appear to be fulfilling their role adequately, which leaves him with a feeling of helplessness that Freud suggests is the 'origin of the religious temperament' (Freud 19).

From his father's perspective, Benjamim has come to represent all that has gone wrong within his family:

my father said, if in this house there is no respect i will take care of it. he was not talking just about me, and it was almost not about me, it was my tia candida doing things with senhor Francisco, the memory of my grandparents being tarnished, what they would see from above... it was because of this i was under this attack. (Mãe 70-1)

Benjamim believes he is being punished because of his aunt's affair, who had transgressed societal norms by having sex and becoming pregnant outside of wedlock, and who had apparently always been different due to her intelligence and by having a job and remaining single (Mãe 43-4). The town as a whole takes a dim view of this relationship, but Benjamim's mother in particular is angry and hurt by the sin she feels has been committed (Mãe 52), and it appears that the sin of adultery was proved by the death of the baby born from this relationship (Mãe 146), thereby demonstrating and legitimizing the apparent rectitude of the Portuguese Church. However, Benjamim is actually being punished, particularly by the priest and his father, because he does not acquiesce willingly and unquestioningly to the views of the Catholic Church, and is also representative of the antithesis of their ideals by being a "bastard" (Mãe 139), thereby threatening the traditional patriarchal hierarchy of Portugal. The women in the novel appear more willing to support his alternative spirituality, and this may be due to traditional associations of the feminine with subversive forces, as throughout history women have been recognised as particularly susceptible to demonic temptations due to their supposed biological inferiority:

Blurring into these popular beliefs in women's nocturnal spirit world were conventional gendered wisdoms, which associated women with natural deception, inordinate vanity, and insatiable lust – a set of inferiorities, counterposed to idealized male virtues, that "harnessed [women] to the active promotion of evil in the world." (Palmer 57)

It is not possible to detail here the many ways that women have been believed to be influenced prejudicially by evil forces, but the female characters in *O nosso reino* are no exception, particularly Benjamin's mother. She is a clearly troubled woman, as her family leaves her one by one either through death or choices that force them to leave her domestic sphere, and throughout the novel she herself disappears at night-time, refusing to see or speak to anybody. Her decline is dramatic, and it appears that she has been drawn in by the dark forces that control the night, where it is "a time and place of instability in which strivings for the unattainable produced the undoing of men and women" (Palmer 394). While she longs to keep her family with her, they all leave, and she becomes despondent in life. Perhaps this is why she allows Carlos' mother to take Benjamin to invoke the spirit of her dead son, where seven women circle Benjamin, grunting and groaning, while Dona Tina makes Benjamin wear Carlos' shirt and calls the name of her son (Mãe 116), a ritual clearly more akin to witchcraft than to Catholicism. This is a very frightening experience for Benjamin, and the nightmares that have afflicted him throughout the novel become intermingled with his experiences in real life, to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Supernatural visions take on physical form in the town, as when after his mother disappears after jumping off a rock - a legend develops that her body was split into two, with half going to heaven and half going to hell (Mãe 148-9). The women in the novel are punished for subverting patriarchal norms, by either losing a loved one, being forced to the margins of society, or, in the case of his mother, losing a grip on reality, "and she kissed me on the head and said, help me, i am at the bottom of a hole and i can only sometimes get out of it" (Mãe 112), and ultimately dying. One of their 'sins' is that rather than forcing Benjamin to remain in his innocent, childish state, these women appear to acknowledge that not all children are the same, and do not necessarily have to exemplify the role that has society has constructed for them.

Variations on a religious theme

Other characters within the novel represent different versions of religiosity, and appear to participate in what Caroline Bretell calls 'Folk Catholicism' which "is rooted in this contract such that manifestations of religious practice (embodying both belief and behaviour) are neither totally of the orthodox institution (represented by its priests) nor totally of the people" (55-6). The differing religious practices are predominantly represented by female characters, and range from traditional domestic rituals to practices that almost resemble witchcraft. Benjamin's grandmother "prayed to her Christ that he take the fancies out of his head" (Mãe 14), however he expresses consternation over what these statues represent, as he watches his grandmother blocking her daughter from praying to her statue, "this is mine, don't ask for anything that i don't want, get out of here. this was ridiculous, yes, any Christ is everybody's, but what she told her was this, if you want, buy one, this one i paid for, bought by me, it is for me to pray to, not you. as if it did private miracles for her, miracles we did not know about, things we did not deserve" (Mãe 33). This practice is controversial in the Christian world, and is viewed with suspicion by some denominations because it pre-dates Christianity, however it was incorporated into Catholicism by Constantine, demonstrating, just like the appropriation of the Fátima miracles by the Portuguese Church, the integration of the popular in order to attempt to maintain religious hegemony. Although some believe that this practice "constitutes an act of idolatry" (Whyte 187), it could equally be argued that "[t]he fact that a Catholic kneels

before a statue to pray does not mean he is praying to the statue... Statues and other “graven images” are used to recall to the mind the person or thing depicted” (Keating 41). By drawing attention to this contentious aspect of Catholic doctrine, Mãe is demonstrating the necessity of questioning the hegemonic status quo, as well as the fact that its doctrines and practices are constructed by the elite. These statues are meant to represent Christ within the domestic environment, and this deeply affects some of the characters in the novel, such as Dona Ermelinda, who is having an affair with Benjamim’s grandfather, and whose sin “made her ashamed in front of the christs” (Mãe 34), and “she made the sign of the cross hurriedly passing by the christs of the house” which was a “gesture of vice, without attention” (Mãe 138). Benjamim can see that these statues have power over people due to what they represent, which is not Christ but the power of the Catholic Church and the elite, and for this reason, upon seeing one of the house’s statues broken on the floor, thought about “throwing it to the ground, to see if turning the porcelain to dust would release such a divine, and such a demanding, representation from such disfigured forms of gratitude by humiliating it” (Mãe 97), illustrating that he recognizes that people do indeed have power over these objects because they are able to destroy them, but it depends on their willingness to do so; in this case, Benjamim, returns the statue to its box, unable to overcome long-held beliefs and customs.

Although Benjamim uses the statues of Christ in a similar way to the other characters at some points in the book, when he believes that a crisis has been reached in the town, he gathers all of the statues in his room, placing them in a circle in order to summon God to fulfil the wishes of the townspeople (Mãe 125). This could be a pagan ritual, as they also use the circle “to separate sacred space from other space” (Shanddaramon 34), and another character, Dona Tina, uses rituals that could be considered akin to witchcraft. This demonstrates the adaptation of Catholicism by individual worshippers, and how, particularly in times of desperation, people feel the need to reach beyond their own religion, perhaps implying that it alone is not enough. Dona Tina tried to make others believe that she had spiritual powers, as she “was delirious, she rolled her eyes trying to convince that she was communicating with the other world” (Mãe 47). Spiritualism is another contested area of Catholicism, as summoning spirits was at times considered demonic, in spite of the fact that many saints and ‘miracles’ originated in spiritual phenomena. Therefore, “direct communications from the Beyond were not out-of-bounds for Catholics, and some apparitions were warranted. It all depended on who was communicating with whom, on this side and the other of the great divide between the temporal and eternal worlds” (Kugelmann 140). It appears as if Dona Tina’s interference with the ‘other side’ begins to cause her problems, as she fights with a ghost (Mãe 103) and attempts to cast a spell to invoke the spirit of her dead son Carlos into the body of Benjamim (Mãe 116). She eventually is physically affected, with her mouth permanently closed so that she is silent and begins to waste away slowly; Benjamim’s mother tries to prevent him from going to see her as “she will die because she has excused herself from god... it was for a sin committed, and in a dirty house the soul will suffer” (Mãe 117). Dona Tina’s affliction is perceived as a punishment from god as she has strayed from traditional religion, and is therefore marginalized by her former best friend. This is in spite of the fact that her frailty is caused by grief and she would need support. In this manner, Mãe demonstrates the damage that can be caused by adhering to a belief system without questioning it.

There are only three characters that come from outside of the village in the novel: senhor Hegarty and Benjamim's two uncles. All three are portrayed as different in a superficial sense, but this difference is met with very different responses by the townspeople. senhor Hegarty seemed to simply appear at the edge of the village, "a white giant, the size of houses resembling an intense light or an angel. senhor Hegarty was albino and measured almost two metres" (Mãe 20), and it was partly because of him that Benjamim realized there was a world outside of the town, as he came from England, a country he had heard about at school (Mãe 53). His ability as a singer in church meant that he was accepted and even revered by others, "our strange and beautiful senhor Hegarty, the man with the voice of angels, the man with the voice of god" (Mãe 40), because "singing also is a gift of seeing with the mouth things that only god knows" (Mãe 70). His apparently miraculous capabilities mean that he remains an outsider because the townspeople believe that they cannot reach his level of godliness, and Benjamim believed that "senhor Hegarty passing through lands [was] like proof of something bigger. a respite for the fearful at the end of life. a hope of things on the other side" (Mãe 137). However, Benjamim's uncles, having chosen to leave the town and the country of their own volition, remain marginalized in the town and even within their family, "they seemed like men from other parts, strange, dandified, with green and yellow vests, trousers with bizarre stripes, white shoes, socks with a doll design, sunglasses, and other things never seen on the men of our town" (Mãe 106-7), and "they stayed very hidden away, because the people of the town laughed at them and how they were dressed" (Mãe 108). In spite of the fact that they both had wives in France, their cosmopolitan appearance means that Benjamim has come to think of them as 'poofs', but he does not understand what homosexuality means, stating that he "was perplexed by such delicacy and something seemed so wrong to me" (Mãe 108-9), believing that these subversive actions would lead to them also being captured by the saddest man in the world. Raewyn Connell states that "[t]he dominant culture defines homosexual men as effeminate" (Connell 161), and homosexuality was considered subversive by the Estado Novo, when "'the practice of homosexual acts,' were designated 'vices against nature'" (Abranches 51). By classifying his uncles as 'poofs', Benjamim is psychologically marginalizing them because he cannot understand them and they are not welcome in his home. Within a given society, it is easier to exclude those that do not conform to the norm, and in the religious society portrayed by Mãe, anybody that is not working towards the collective goal of entering paradise shall be condemned, in accordance with the doctrines of the Catholic Church, which states that "any sexual activity that deviates from divinely ordained and 'wisely arranged natural laws' and which is not open to the transmission of life is morally wrong" (Dillon 55), and many of the townspeople are not conforming to these laws.

Conclusion

In *O nosso reino*, Valter Hugo Mãe uses the child protagonist Benjamim to demonstrate the ramifications of transgression from patriarchal Portuguese society. He is thereby questioning the institutions and norms constructed by this society, to allow for a reappraisal of Portuguese identity that includes subaltern elements. Therefore, it can be said that the medium of literature has allowed Valter Hugo Mãe to analyse the relationship between childhood and religion, and to deconstruct traditional Portuguese assumptions

about both. The apparent miraculous capabilities of these supposedly innocent beings were implanted into the Portuguese imaginary with the occurrences at Fátima in 1917, and these beliefs were perpetuated and even strengthened under the Estado Novo. Although Marian belief does not appear to have weakened, *O nosso reino* is symbolic of contemporary questioning of long-held national beliefs, representing gestures towards a new interpretation of Portuguese national identity itself.

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