

## POETRY AS A KENOTIC EXERCISE IN JOSÉ TOLENTINO MENDONÇA'S 'THE DAYS OF JOB'

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersection of theology, literature and spirituality in José Tolentino Mendonça's *The Days of Job*, focusing on poetry as a kenotic exercise of self-emptying (*kenosis*). By engaging with biblical literature, particularly the Book of Job, Mendonça reimagines poetic language as a space of vulnerability and transformation that resists ideological rigidity and fosters ethical openness. The study explores how Mendonça's poetics resonates with Michel de Certeau's *heterology*, Michel Foucault's notion of *political spirituality*, and Giorgio Agamben's critique of the loss of poiesis in modernity. In dialogue with patristic interpretations of Job (Gregory the Great, Basil of Caesarea) as well as contemporary philosophical readings (Fredric Jameson, Antonio Negri), this work argues that Mendonça's poetry enacts a theological aesthetics of resistance in which language becomes an instrument of spiritual and ethical reconfiguration. In this framework, poetic expression is not merely an aesthetic exercise, but a radical way of inhabiting suffering, silence and longing, echoing Job's existential questioning as a source of meaning and creative resilience.

### Keywords

Theology and literature; Contemporary Portuguese poetry; José Tolentino Mendonça; Political spirituality; Spiritual exercises

DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2025.5

*There must be ways to go further  
the small failure  
now take half a dozen steps  
but blindfolded  
to see life...<sup>1</sup>*

José Tolentino Mendonça  
*Frontier Theory*

## First Words...

One of the strong lines of work in Portuguese-language theology and religious studies has developed in dialogue with literature. Of the almost forty international research groups on this dialogue between theology, studies of religion and literature, almost half are developed in Portuguese-speaking groups, especially in Brazil, but with a great deal of dialogue with Portugal, and with Portuguese-speaking African countries. However, the research carried out in these Lusophone groups is not restricted to Lusophone authors but rather indicates a great interest in the field, and in particular the great demand for this dialogue comes from outside theology.<sup>2</sup> Two expressions of this interaction can be seen in ALALITE – Latin American Association of Literatures and Theologies, founded by Argentina, Chile and Brazil, but with associated countries from Europe, with a strong presence from Portugal and Spain; and in the journal that derives from the association called *Teoliteraria* – Journal of Literatures and Theologies.<sup>3</sup> Many dialogue models have been developed over the last four decades.<sup>4</sup>

Currently in Portugal, a perspective of public theology has been developed, as a task of thinking about theology in the intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> All the poems by José Tolentino Mendonça used here are free translations by the author of the article.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Villas Boas, 'Teologia e Literatura: A construção de um campo de estudos sobre religião e linguagem,' in *Religião: Linguagens*, ed. C. E. B. Calvani and C. C. Bezerra (Curitiba: Editora CRV, 2020), 115–127.

<sup>3</sup> *Teoliteraria* – Journal of Literatures and Theologies: <https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/teoliteraria/issue/view/2919>

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Cantarella, 'A produção acadêmica em Teopoética no Brasil: pesquisadores e modelos de leitura,' *Teoliteraria – Revista de Literaturas e Teologias* 8, no. 15 (2018): 193–221. doi: 10.19143/2236-9937.2018v8n15p193-221.

debate that involves cultural and social issues in the country, in order to also offer Portuguese citizens literacy about religious phenomena and how theological interpretation takes place within each phenomenon. It has been working with an archaeology of theological knowledge, in which literature has a historical role of being a heterological actor and an important element of political spirituality as a form of genealogy of ethics in resistance to the processes of resistance of genealogies of power that evoked political theologies.

In this sense, the figure of José Tolentino Mendonça has played an important role in the dialogue between theology and literature, as well as in the dialogue between theology and society. Portuguese, born in 1965 on the island of Madeira, with a childhood in Angola, he was ordained a priest in 1990 and completed his doctorate in biblical theology in 2004. He was appointed to the episcopate in 2018, and as archbishop takes on the role of archivist and librarian of the Holy See. In 2019 he was appointed to the cardinalate, and in 2022 he was appointed Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education. Throughout his ecclesiastical career, however, Tolentino has become one of the great voices of contemporary Portuguese literature, with an extensive body of work since 1990, and the winner of almost two dozen literary prizes. The purpose of this article is to develop some aspects of this dialogue between theology and literature in the work of this contemporary Portuguese author.<sup>5</sup>

The poetic exercise in José Tolentino Mendonça's *The Days of Job* is ultimately a kenotic movement, one that unfolds in the space of vulnerability, dispossession, and openness to meaning beyond fixed certainties. This article explores how Mendonça's poetry reactivates the spiritual exercises of self-emptying (*kenosis*), positioning them as a form of resistance to ideological closure and theological dogmatism. Through its engagement with biblical literature, particularly the Book of Job, Mendonça's poetics performs a double movement: first, the exposure of human fragility in its encounter with suffering, and second, the creation of a language capable of sustaining meaning in the midst of existential desolation. This poetic practice aligns with Michel de Certeau's understanding of *heterology*, a theology of difference that resists rigid identity

<sup>5</sup> This text is an adaptation of the closing conference of the International Congress 'Job: justice and suffering', held by the Centre for Contemporary Languages and Literatures (CLLC) at the University of Aveiro in Portugal.

structures, and Michel Foucault's notion of spirituality as an ethical genealogy of the self. In this sense, poetry emerges not as an ornament to theology, but as a space where theological discourse is stripped of its triumphalism and reconfigured as an exercise in listening, in making room for the silences of existence. Mendonça's approach to Job, then, is not merely exegetical or philosophical; it is an existential practice that invites a new way of inhabiting the world, a *poiesis* of faith that dares to embrace the fractures of human experience as sites of transformative possibility.

## Introduction

In the 19th century, Robert Lowth (1710–1787) rediscovered the theological importance of literary study in opposition to what he called 'metaphysical theologians' in his work *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum*, the result of his lectures at Oxford. Lowth identifies a deficit in the understanding of theological hermeneutics that ignores the importance of poetry for the composition of theological meaning, namely that 'the intimate nature of the poem' is realised in the human soul in such a way as to organise lived experiences, unite apparent discontinuities, awaken to other experiences, and sometimes has the virtue of calling existence into question. In an extensive comparative analysis of biblical literature with the Greco-Latin classics, Lowth identifies the same common characteristic, namely the aim of 'teaching by delighting' and thus producing an *inner articulation* through language, so as to make it possible to grasp an itinerary of meaning that, by changing the way one thinks, one changes the way one lives.<sup>6</sup>

St Basil of Caesarea also recommended that young Christians read the Greek and Latin classics to help them think for themselves, in direct correlation with the Gospel. However, thinking for oneself was not an isolated exercise in the individualisation of existence, but rather personalisation through the appropriation of the common heritage of *Humanitas*, which is constitutive of the participants in the human adventure, a fundamental element for the city to have a human face, an appropriate *ethos*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (London: Routledge, 1995), 549.

<sup>7</sup> Basílio de Cesaréia, *Aos jovens, sobre como tirar proveito da literatura*, intro. and trans. Miguel Cabedo e Vasconcelos (Lisboa: UCP Press, 2018), 64.

In this sense, while biblical literature in general, and the book of Job in particular, are part of this itinerary, they are one of the paths that can lead to a greater density of the fabric in which *concord* emerges over what is fundamental to life, by establishing the profound connection between poetics and politics, the influence of inspiration for feeling, thinking and acting that affects the overcoming of discord, which allows the emergence of the *polis*. This is not exactly a romantic ideal of a reconciled city, which is why a series of messianic autocracies were set up to eliminate the forms of discord that disintegrate unity, but rather it concerns the emergence, albeit temporary, of concord in a diversity reconciled around the common good and common dignity. Here poetry and politics converge in the task of building a common space in which differences are respected, just as they are diametrically opposed to the maximum expression of political chaos in its dissolution, which is war. Concord, always ephemeral, and therefore always renewable in the constant call to dialogue, constitutes, even if temporarily, a force of unity between differences for a vital space of the human condition, tension. And here the image of Job can be seen as theologically capable of not succumbing to this tension.

An important commentator on the Book of Job who grasped its political relevance was Gregory the Great (540–604). Having been elected *prefect* of the city of Rome, then the former imperial capital, it was there that he had become known to the people before deciding on the monastic life and, according to the customs of the time, having been acclaimed by the clergy and the people to take on the mission of Bishop of Rome in the midst of imperial Christianity in crisis in the sixth century. Gregory, who had found tranquillity in the monastic life, was, for seemingly divine reasons, called back to political life – this time as Roman Pontiff. His return came in the context of a power vacuum in the Eternal City, following the fall of Rome, the relocation of the imperial capital to Constantinople, and shifting political priorities, such as containing the Persian advance rather than defending Rome from Lombard attacks. The dissolution of the Senate during the Gothic Wars and the resulting exodus of Roman aristocratic families further deepened the crisis. Although Gregory, like Augustine, interprets the character Job as resigned to God's will, his exegesis entitled *Moralia in Job* places the biblical character in the context of the dissolution of *Romanitas*, the unity of the Roman world, in the emergence of various power conflicts, internally between Latins and Greeks and externally

between Romans and barbarians. In this reading, Job is the very political image of Rome, from its imperial exuberance to its decadence and abandonment. Gregory himself refers to his context as the moment when ‘the end of the world is near [*crebrescentibus termino*]’.<sup>8</sup> Gregory then sets about explaining the work to his brother monks using the usual method of the time, in which he adds to the literal exegesis an exercise in contemplation that finds a deeper meaning in the *allegory* for his contemporaries, but also adds the need to find a *moral* meaning, exemplified by testimonies from Christians who took Job as a model of life.<sup>9</sup> Given the moral crisis in which the context was situated, the very value of the wisdom of biblical letters was at risk.

Thus, despite Job’s transformation into a figure of submission to God, Gregory the Great’s allegorical interpretation remains deeply invested in uncovering moral forms of resistance to the political disintegration of Rome. Fredric Jameson observes that the method of patristic exegesis produces not only the effect of the perception of communion with God in the *anagogic way*, the source of resilience for the reader of biblical literature, but would also have an anagogic political effect among those who have the same experience, which is consolidated in the constitution of a political body from the reinvention of the way of existing with a new sense of collectivity.<sup>10</sup>

This political potential of the biblical character inspired the Italian political philosopher Antonio Negri to write *The Labour of Job* in 2003, conceiving the biblical text as a parable of human labour in late capitalism. The philosopher is obviously not concerned with the religious question as such, but with thinking about the potential for liberation and subversion that suffering possesses from the narrative wisdom of the book of Job, and thus bets on the creative persistence of workers to build new possibilities for justice.<sup>11</sup>

Negri is thus betting on the role of social creativity as a force for redemption that finds its conditions of possibility and collective strength to the extent that people come to understand each other’s pain. This

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<sup>8</sup> Gregorii Magni, *Moralia in Job – Libri I–X*, Corpus Christianorum – Series Latina CXLIII (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), I, 27–28.

<sup>9</sup> Gregorii Magni, *Moralia in Job*, I, 95.

<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Arqueologias do Futuro: O desejo chamado Utopia e outras ficções científicas*, trans. Carlos Pissardo (Belo Horizonte: Editora Autêntica, 2021), 18–25.

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*, New Slant Series – Religion, Politics and Ontology (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 48.

understanding is not just an intellectual act but has its origins in ‘suffering together’ [*patire assieme*], as a condition of possibility for creativity. For the Italian thinker, *creation* ‘is the content of the vision of God’ that Job sees. A new vision from the pain of history is already the utopian redemption that is not yet realised but requires the tension of struggle and search in order to welcome inspiration.<sup>12</sup> Innovation would then come from the ethical tension of social resistance and psychic resilience. It is in this same direction that Viktor Frankl speaks of experiences of meaning in the midst of a concentration camp, because the human condition is inherent in its desire for meaning, and to the extent that it discovers a horizon of search, like the psychoanalytic foundation of the libido that moves towards desire, existence is mobilised towards what gives it meaning. Frankl called tragic optimism the bet that despite all the absurdity, life was capable of meaning, and to the extent that existence is consumed towards the horizon that gives meaning to existence, the effect of fulfilment is found, despite the absurdity.<sup>13</sup> The poetic task, however, in Negri and Jameson’s conception, would have the anagogic purpose of uniting personal experiences of resilience into a new collective force of resistance in the exercise of understanding the challenges of one’s own time, and in it creating the conditions of possibility for redemptive creativity, less identity-based and more in solidarity.

The various interpretations of Job – from Gregory the Great’s political-theological reading to Antonio Negri’s vision of Job as a paradigm of labour resistance – offer distinct yet complementary perspectives that illuminate Mendonça’s poetic approach. Gregory’s *Moralia in Job* situates the biblical figure within the disintegration of *Romanitas*, reading Job as an image of collapsing world order and the search for moral resilience in the midst of crisis. This aligns with Mendonça’s poetics, where Job’s suffering becomes a space for reconfiguring meaning beyond institutional certainties. Likewise, Negri’s interpretation of Job as a figure of creative resistance in late capitalism resonates with Mendonça’s insistence on poetry as an ethical and political act – a practice that, like Job’s lament, refuses ideological closure and instead fosters a solidarity of vulnerability. Jameson’s reading reinforces this

<sup>12</sup> Negri, *The Labor of Job*, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Em Busca de Sentido: Um Psicólogo no Campo de Concentração*, 21st ed. (São Leopoldo: Editora Sinodal; Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 2005), 17.

by highlighting how biblical exegesis, when approached poetically, generates new forms of collective resistance rather than merely affirming pre-existing theological structures. By integrating these perspectives into his poetics, Mendonça not only reclaims the narrative of Job as a space of existential questioning but also reimagines it as a literary-spiritual exercise that resists the commodification of human suffering. In this sense, the poetic word becomes a mode of kenotic engagement with the fractures of history, transforming Job's silence into an act of radical openness to meaning beyond the discourses that seek to contain it.

### 1. Spirituality as an Ethical Genealogy in Michel Foucault

It is also in this sense that Michel Foucault bets on spirituality as ethically reflected practices of self that reinvent the subjectivity given by the time in which one lives in its discursive context. The French philosopher thus revisits the idea of spiritual exercises as political spirituality, first initiated by the need for a 'diagnosis of the decline of revolutionary desire in the West', and is interested in the 'religious origins of modern revolutions'.<sup>14</sup>

Spirituality, for Foucault, is not restricted to religious practice or ritual and/or doctrinal adherence but is prior to this and concerns an attitude towards oneself, responding to an imperative of self-transformation. There is no denying that religion can be a 'kind of welcoming structure for forms of spirituality, but it doesn't necessarily coincide with spirituality, because religion can also be part of the structure for maintaining an unacceptable reality and start to operate ideologically. The political spirituality envisaged by Foucault is a genealogy of ethics, in which a shared collective will can emerge'.<sup>15</sup>

Foucault's notion of *political spirituality* suggests that spirituality is not merely a private, contemplative exercise, but an active force that shapes subjectivity and social structures. It is an ethical genealogy – an ongoing process of self-formation through resistance to dominant power structures. In this sense, Mendonça's poetic exercises can be seen as an enactment of a *political spirituality*, in which the poetic word resists ideological rigidity and opens up a space for reimagining

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<sup>14</sup> César Candioto, *A dignidade da luta política: incursões pela filosofia de Michel Foucault* (Caxias do Sul: EDUCS, 2020), 111–112, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *O enigma da revolta: Entrevistas inéditas sobre a Revolução Iraniana* (São Paulo: n-1 edições, 2018), 20, 23.



ethical and theological commitments. Just as Job's lament challenges theological orthodoxy, Mendonça's poetry disrupts conventional modes of religious discourse, insisting on a spirituality that remains unfinished, questioning and deeply engaged with the suffering of the world.

From analysing the spiritual exercises conceived in the Greco-Roman period, and especially the first two centuries of the Christian era, the French philosopher identifies a broader conception of spirituality that is implicated in the practices of *self-care*, which include practices of reading poems, writing about oneself, meditation, but also health care, with spiritual exercises being practices of caring for the whole, in its interiority and exteriority. However, the French philosopher believes that due to what he called the 'Socratic-Platonic moment', spirituality had been reduced to an ontological-cognoscente structure expressed in the maxim of 'knowledge of oneself' (*gnôthi seautón*), with the most drastic consequence being the dissociation between spirituality and philosophy. Since then, the philosophical task has been reduced to a search for access to the truth, without the need for inner work of an ethical nature.<sup>16</sup> In this way, there is a serious risk of believing in one's own convictions, in such a way as to unlearn how to discern the depth of the wisdom they contain when called upon to make sense in new scenarios, originally conceived as a spiritual exercise of putting life into question. The moment wisdoms become certainties, we run the risk of not connecting with the people of the present time, with their new dilemmas and pains. This is where poetics, in its unity with politics as a spiritual exercise, is an exercise in reviving and reinventing the heritage of human wisdom in order to discover new ways of living.

## 2. Poetry as a Spiritual Exercise in José Tolentino Mendonça

For José Tolentino Medonça 'the poem is the spiritual act par excellence'.<sup>17</sup> In the epigraph of his *Poesia reunida*, Tolentino Mendonça can find a quote from Michel de Certeau that can be seen as a literary programme for theology: 'In its misery, theology looks at the door.' By evoking the French Jesuit, he also seems to inscribe his poetics in the perspective of conceiving it as a spiritual exercise, a dimension that

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *A hermenêutica do sujeito* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2006), 19.

<sup>17</sup> José Tolentino Mendonça, *A noite abre meus olhos*, 4th ed. (Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 2014), 214.

makes it possible to reactivate an unfinished dialogue between Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau,<sup>18</sup> as a task of discerning the present time.

Like Foucault's spiritual exercises, Certeau emphasises the process that operates in the intimate, with the exercises being a 'mode that characterises a proceeding', but it presupposes a 'desirer', in which what is in the text functions as a cypher for the music, because it is coordinated outside the text, giving voice to the desires that inhabit it and provoking in it the opening to an itinerary that allows it to reveal its deepest desires to itself. The *foundation* of Certeau's exercises 'is not the exposition of a universal truth' but 'the outline of a movement' between unveiling the spaces of the architecture of desire and silence. Recognising desires is 'the starting point of a *trajectory*'.<sup>19</sup> For Certeau, the poetic task can be seen as a heterological exercise correlated to the task of a 'theology of difference', precisely that of conceiving heterological cultural forms, analogous to a God who, being radically different in nature to the human being, does not see difference as an impediment to communion. 'Not without you' is the way in which God acts heterologically from the perspective of the French Jesuit, because he is always 'greater' [*magis*] than the limits of borders,<sup>20</sup> a heterological dynamic that is realised in literature – in the first place – as a vocation to break down walls of identity resistance in relation to the other.<sup>21</sup>

Michel de Certeau's concept of *heterology* – literally 'discourse on the other' – refers to an epistemological framework that resists totalising narratives and embraces difference as a constitutive part of knowledge. In a theological context, *heterology* implies a way of thinking about God and spirituality that does not seek to resolve tensions but to live them creatively. Mendonça's poetry responds to this dynamic by creating a theology of displacement in which the divine is encountered not in certainty but in the openness of poetic language, much like Job's engagement with suffering and silence.

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<sup>18</sup> Jean-François Petit, *Michel Foucault et Michel de Certeau: Le dialogue inachevé* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Michel de Certeau, *El lugar del otro: Historia religiosa y mística*, trans. Victor Goldstein (Buenos Aires: Katz Editores, 2007), 261–262.

<sup>20</sup> Michel de Certeau, *L'Étranger ou l'union dans la différence*, nouvelle édition établie et présentée par Luce Giard (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991), 179–188.

<sup>21</sup> Michel de Certeau, 'Heterologies: Discourse on the Other,' *Theory and History of Literature* 17 (1986), 171, 193.

Thus, spiritual exercises are kenotic exercises in the daily reinvention of space in order to empty rigid identities and make it possible for different people to live together; a movement away from self-referentiality, given the power of literature to weave alliances. It is in recognising differences that we can ‘glimpse’ the transparency of common dignity.<sup>22</sup> This transparency implies the task of learning the ‘nakedness of life’ as the realm of the common.<sup>23</sup>

It is therefore also part of a critical dialogue with contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben,<sup>24</sup> a dialogue that can be situated between the latter’s archaeology of the present time and the poet’s mysticism of the present time, both of which converge to recover the role of literature in general, and poetry in particular, as a way of revisiting the historical and cultural forms of Christianity. There is a convergence in the work of both, in that for Agamben, one of the causes of the crisis of contemporary thought is precisely the divorce between poetics and politics. To the extent that modernity loses sight of the ‘poetic status’ of humanity on earth, poetic production is reduced to the productivity of praxis. *Poiesis*, then, is overshadowed by a philosophy of *praxis*, energised by the will for justice and freedom, for a new work of art, namely the construction of a new history, understood as society. From the Italian philosopher’s perspective, both Nietzsche and Marx are not atheists but dispense with a rational theology that inhibits will and change.<sup>25</sup> *Poiesis*, transformed into *praxis*, gives a sense of mysticism to the processes of social transformation; however, it loses the dynamic of distancing itself from reality in order to re-elaborate creatively, returning to reality and inspiring praxis. By merging with praxis, *poiesis* ceases to dynamise the *polis* and becomes the ideology of praxis, creative but apologetic reason.

The exegetical and political readings of Job – whether Gregory the Great’s response to the decline of Rome, Negri’s vision of Job as a figure of resistance in late capitalism, or Jameson’s insights into the communal impact of biblical literature – highlight a persistent tension

<sup>22</sup> José Tolentino Mendonça, ‘Creio na nudez da minha vida – onde a mística e a literatura se encontram,’ in *Teopoética: mística e poesia*, ed. Maria Clara Bingemer e Alex Villas Boas (Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo: Ed. PUC-Rio/Paulinas, 2020), 34.

<sup>23</sup> José Tolentino Mendonça, *The Mysticism of the Present Moment: Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2021), 38.

<sup>24</sup> José Tolentino Mendonça, ‘The Reactivation of Paul: A Critical Dialogue on Giorgio Agamben,’ *Didaskalia* XLI, no. 2 (2011): 53–63. doi: 10.34632/didaskalia.2011.2305.

<sup>25</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *O homem sem conteúdo* (São Paulo: Autêntica, 2012).

between suffering, resilience and meaning-making. But this tension is not just a historical or theological matter; it is also deeply embedded in the ways in which individuals construct their subjectivity and ethical commitments. This is where Michel Foucault's concept of spirituality as a genealogy of ethics intersects with Mendonça's poetic vision. Foucault argues that spiritual exercises are not mere religious rituals, but constitute ethical and political practices that shape new ways of being in the world. Similarly, Certeau's notion of heterology suggests that the poetic word functions as a space of displacement, disrupting established modes of discourse to reveal an alternative logic of resistance. By engaging with these perspectives, we can better understand how Mendonça's *The Days of Job* employs poetry as an existential and political practice – one that not only responds to suffering but transforms it into a means of ethical reconfiguration.

The reduction in the importance of *poiesis* in contemporary culture, and especially its transformation into an apologetic creative reason for an ideal, produces the presence of a fetish, the substitute for an absent, inaccessible and ideal object. Agamben also evokes patristic acedia as an effect of the absence of *poesis* in order to understand a perverse *éros* in narcissism that is incapable of creative labour, a desire for meaning, but unwilling to follow the path that leads to it, a poetic unwillingness that reveals contemporary political unwillingness, because it manifests itself as ethical unwillingness, by generating a self-referential dynamic to a system and way of thinking incapable of self.<sup>26</sup>

In this sense, the evocation of naked life can be thought of from the correlation between *poiesis* and *praxis*, or how poetry can act as a space that opens up gaps in the radical immanence of the walls of politics. In Agamben, nakedness is thought of from its theological dimension<sup>27</sup> and its political ramifications.<sup>28</sup>

From a political point of view, nakedness is seen as an action of stripping under the narrative sign of an event that takes place in the temporal condition of human life and is therefore situated in the capture of the narratological core of different historical forms of political theology and not in the metaphysical-ontological register. In this way,

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<sup>26</sup> Certeau, *El lugar del otro*, 264.

<sup>27</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Nudez*, trans. Davi Pessoa (Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer – O poder soberano e a vida nua I* (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2010).

by identifying the one who is the object of the action of stripping human dignity, the question is also asked of the subject who makes this act operational in history. In particular, the Italian philosopher evokes the figure of the *homo sacer* in archaic Roman law – an individual deemed unfit for sacrificial offerings to the gods yet still ‘killable’, whose perceived insignificance renders their killing inconsequential and not legally considered homicide.<sup>29</sup> From this figure, we can think of the naked life of *homo sacer*, as a figure stripped of the dignity of rights, as well as the sovereign power of the *imperium* magistracy as a right that enables the act of stripping someone’s life. This power, which evolves from the absolute right of the *pater familiae* over his children, also resides in a theological-political dimension (*sacratio*) that legitimises the stripping away of someone’s dignity through the suppression of *civitas*, in other words, the suspension of its legal form.

From a theological point of view, ‘naked life’ is produced from the question of original sin, as the loss of the glorious garment in the narrative of the Edenic couple, with the human being having been conceived from the action that causes their divestment from grace, a situation in which the ‘opening of the eyes’ and the ‘realisation of naked life’ as a human condition takes place.<sup>30</sup> Nudity inaugurates an epistemological perspective with the opening of the eyes that makes the human being ‘know good and evil’ (Genesis 3:5),<sup>31</sup> but not as a divine being (Genesis 3:6), frustrating the ‘desire to be like God’ for learning that emerges from an *event* that causes the ‘fall’ of the ‘mind’ and the consequent realisation of the condition of being naked, a being vulnerable to the evil of the world, and doomed to the corruption of the body. In other words, nudity corresponds to the condition of being ‘disgraced’.<sup>32</sup>

However, the need to once *again veil* the condition of nudity indicates an ‘indelible residue’ of something that remains in its inapparence, in which this second veil, even in its precariousness (Genesis 3:7), indicates something reminiscent of the ‘unveilable’ nature of beauty, once resplendent, the ‘beautiful’ being that ‘to which the veil is essential’,<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.

<sup>30</sup> Agamben, *Nudez*, 93.

<sup>31</sup> All biblical texts were taken from *Biblia Sacra. Utriusque Testamenti – Editio Hebraica et Graeca* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Agamben, *Nudez*, 101; 114.

<sup>33</sup> Agamben, *Nudez*, 122.

and at the same time inaugurates the need for an infinite exercise of unveiling.

In Agamben, the ‘laying bare’ of the *magister* and *pater* has the same narrative form as the act of undressing the Edenic couple, attributed to God by the Italian philosopher. However, the narrative does not point to the direct act of God’s stripping the couple naked but rather indicates a loss of the state of grace, and the consequent divine action of re-veiling something that can only appear under the movement of unveiling, even though the veil is of the same precarious nature that resides in the condition of the created world.

In this sense, Tolentino’s notion of nudity appears more closely aligned with the act of unveiling the indelible trace of an ungraspable beauty inherent in the human condition. From a mystical perspective, insofar as it is inscribed in the perspective of the biblical author, the divine character does not eliminate the beauty of human dignity but protects it insofar as he involves it in the dynamic of unveiling, and this act of unveiling the human condition is also an experience of unveiling the theological intentionality of re-veiling the reminiscent beauty, seeing in the figure of the biblical God someone who presents himself as the carer of human frailty.

On the other hand, this dynamic that involves the mystical perspective occurs precisely through the literary strategies of the biblical narrative. This is where Tolentino sees nudity as precisely ‘where mysticism and literature meet’, the foundation of which is the ‘emptying of Christ’. The ‘mysticism of nudity’ is a kenotic spiritual exercise, and poetry is not adornment, nor is it a work of idealisation: ‘it creates a method that always leads us into the experience of the unnameable, into the silence of naked life’,<sup>54</sup> into that reminiscent beauty that can be a source of resistance to the multiple forms of political attacks that unveil human dignity.

*Kenosis*, as a theological concept derived from Pauline theology (Philippians 2:7), can here mean a process of self-emptying – an act of renouncing power, privilege or certainty in order to create space for transformation. In Mendonça’s poetics, this self-emptying is not only theological but also literary, manifested in a language that embraces fragility, silence and openness rather than imposing fixed meanings. In this sense, poetry mirrors Job’s act of facing suffering without resorting

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<sup>54</sup> Mendonça, ‘Creio na nudez,’ 30–31.

to definitive answers, allowing for a spirituality of listening rather than proclamation. Tolentino thus seems to bring the nudity of life closer to poetic practice in order to think of a kenotic exercise of nudity, in the poetic dynamics of evangelical literature, in which evil is not the final word because it is not capable of eliminating the possibility of meaning in life, despite its absurdities. There is a poetic and evangelical commitment to the indelible beauty of life, despite all the horrendous ways in which human dignity is stripped away, a beauty that is sought from the realisation of its lack, of the emergence of meaninglessness, which at the same time instigates the search for that which is vanishing. In Tolentino's literary work, there is an aesthetic and poetic task that is tributary to the evangelical vision of awakening faith in the resurrection of a beauty embodied in life that is wounded and stripped of its dignity but not extinguished and which is at the same time the source and resurrectional gesture of the emergence of a view of life as capable of meaning, despite its absurdities. This paradox requires a thirst to seek out where the beauty of life waits to be unveiled through the performative transformation of the gaze that is found in the very gesture of unveiling, literature being a way of giving form to this inexhaustible beauty, because it is indelible, even when deformed. The poetic rescue of residual beauty in naked life is also a source of political resistance in the struggle for human dignity.

If Foucault's spirituality is a practice of self-transformation and Certeau's heterology a theology of difference, Mendonça's poetic exercise can be seen as a confluence of the two – a spiritual practice that resists closure and embraces the radical openness of literature. Giorgio Agamben's critique of modernity's loss of *poiesis* reinforces this, arguing that when poetry is reduced to ideology, it loses its capacity to reimagine the world. Mendonça's poetics, however, resists such reductionism, insisting that the act of writing is a kenotic process – a stripping away of illusions in order to recover the fragile but indelible dignity of existence. This is why his engagement with Job is not merely literary or theological but profoundly existential: the biblical figure becomes a paradigm for inhabiting the void without succumbing to nihilism, for articulating meaning not in the form of doctrinal certainty but as an invitation to live poetically. It is in this space that Mendonça's poetry resonates with the tradition of spiritual exercises, offering not a solution to suffering but a mode of engagement with it, where the poetic act itself becomes a gesture of hope.

### 3. Praise of Thirst: the *Spiritual Exercises* by José Tolentino Mendonça

In 2018, Pope Francis invited José Tolentino Mendonça to give the Spiritual Exercises to the Roman Curia and the retreat was published in book form under the title *Praise of Thirst*. In this work, Tolentino brings together another aspect of this spiritual journey, namely *thirst* as a metaphor for approaching the central element of the exerciser, desire, thought of in its paradoxical density of presence in absence and therefore of the relationship between ‘distance’ and ‘attraction’, of being inhabited by a will to overcome the remoteness of what is expected, at once ‘absence’ and ‘mobilising expectation’.<sup>35</sup> In its paradoxical density, this longing for happiness is also the cause of pain, of the lack that is the reason for the search, and it is not uncommon for the tiredness of the steps to result in emptying or even dispersion. Desire is directly related to the ‘extreme vulnerability’ present in nudity, and thirst requires the willingness to achieve such nudity because it is a stripping away of that which leads to covering up, even from oneself, the deepest desires, which often exhaust our own strength in their slowness to be realised: ‘Thirst takes our breath away, exhausts us, devitalises us and makes us lose our strength. It leaves us under siege and without the energy to react. It pushes us to our limits. It’s understandable that it’s not easy to expose our thirst.’<sup>36</sup> [*free translation*].

For this existential task of getting in touch with his own thirst, which is also the terrain of mysticism, Tolentino relies on the literary tool capable of the spiritual exercise of building his own singularity:

I believe that literature can help us to ascertain the state of our thirst [...] Literature is, in fact, a sapiential tool. Perhaps we are now better realising that writers and poets are pertinent spiritual teachers and that literary works can be of enormous help on our path of inner maturation [...] Literature is an instrument of precision, as there are few because it is equal to the uniqueness, freedom and tragic nature of life (in fact, it can relate the I and the we, the ardently personal and the collective adventure, but also grace and sin, encounter and solitude, pain and redemption). Spiritual

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<sup>35</sup> José Tolentino Mendonça, *Elogio da Sede* (Lisboa: Quetzal Editores, 2018), 34.

<sup>36</sup> Mendonça, *Elogio da Sede*, 38.



life is not prefabricated: it is implicated in the radical singularity of each individual.<sup>57</sup> [*free translation*]

Tolentino's inclusion in the dialogue with Agambian political philosophy and the Certeausian look at the *door* towards the exit from the self-referentiality of the theological Tradition, in dialogue with the French Jesuit's conception of spiritual exercises and Foucauldian thought, is pertinent to a literary analysis of the Jobian elements in his poem. If, on the one hand, the French philosopher conceives the ethical genealogy from the emergence of a new subjectivity born of the agonised struggle to establish a limit that interrupts the destructive path of blindness, his primary reference is Sophoclean Oedipus. On the other hand, Certeau incorporates the tragic task and extends it to dialogue with biblical literature, with the character Job being precisely a correlate for Oedipus in the French Jesuit.

From the silence that echoes from life and the muteness of the possibility of a God, the stunned emptiness of the tragic episode is installed, which places the enclosed desire inside the existence closed by the door of fear. And here the 'experience of Job' is evoked in its nudity, which episodically reveals the total condition of the nudity of existence, and which also lays bare the friends' desire for truth and power. To the extent that the wisdom of a Tradition is wielded as a coercive weapon in order to obtain a supposed confession from the I-poetic, it disfigures its sapiential truths into 'mere generalities', which are consequently useless, vain and do not help us to live.<sup>58</sup>

However, the desolate emptiness at the moment of the deconstruction of the fleeting has not yet reached the clarity of the new horizon it yearns for, and its struggle is still arduous, entrenched in the field of the hopeful intuitions of desire in the face of the army of apologetic arguments from those who are ontologically unwilling to self-criticise. Therefore, the poetic itinerary of the nudity that inhabits emptiness does not operate a verbose re-signification of names, but rather gropes the infinite space of emptiness, seeking to dilate the analogue space of emptiness that inhabits the frame of the desiring self. There is a poetics of the sensible that resides in Job's prayer, which takes precedence over the conceptual, also present in Tolentino. The poetic self in the book of

<sup>57</sup> Mendonça, *Elogio da Sede*, 49–50.

<sup>58</sup> Certeau, *El lugar del otro*, 59.

Job says: ‘I [...] must take my soul in my hands’ (Job 13:14). The hands carry within them intelligence of everyday things and know tenderness or labour that lacks a name; they also have the ability to say what the intellect does not yet have or no longer has a vocabulary for. They only touch the void: however, what they designate is not an absence, but an aspiration or a certainty of faith.<sup>39</sup>

From the notion of spiritual exercise, there is a paradox that originates in Tolentino poetics: the poetic act takes place in recognition of its intrinsic fragility and at the same time its potential because for Tolentino the task of the ‘poem does not reach that purity that fascinates the world. The poem embraces that impurity that the world repudiates’.<sup>40</sup> After all, verses exist first and foremost ‘only/ as (poor, desolate) homage/ to what each face once was/ across the landscape’,<sup>41</sup> but they can also be doors ‘that open creakingly/ to things that don’t exist’.<sup>42</sup>

Tolentino’s poem, ‘Spiritual Exercises’, summarises the Jobian attitude to life:

There must be ways to go further  
the small failure  
now take half a dozen steps  
but blindfolded  
to see life break down in the rule of the void  
taking risks instead of the usual stumbles  
the infinite fall.<sup>43</sup> [*free translation*]

In this sense, Job’s resilient attitude lies in the strength of his weakness in believing, which unites with the still pulsating desire as a call to an act of faith: precisely the act that emptiness does not correspond to nothingness, and in doing so, transfigures the same emptiness into eloquent silence, which believes that life is still capable of meaning and therefore still believes in the poetic word in which the meaning-giving word emerges and poetically reinvents life. Job’s poetics springs from his prayer and, at the same time, a political problem that, in its insistence on justice, questions the manipulation of theological discourses to

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<sup>39</sup> Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), 23.

<sup>40</sup> Mendonça, *A noite abre meus olhos*, 202.

<sup>41</sup> Mendonça, *A noite abre meus olhos*, 112.

<sup>42</sup> José Tolentino Mendonça, *Teoria da fronteira* (Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 2017), 62.

<sup>43</sup> Mendonça, *Teoria da fronteira*, 75.

legitimise the tragedy of others. In his nudity, his prayer demands that tradition be stripped of the devices that imprison its potential for wisdom.

If tragedy was valued as a symbolic dynamic of desire and its need to establish a constitutive limit for a subjectivity that ethically decides on its own existence, the appropriation of Jobian literature in a doctrinal key encloses it in a monosemic pretence of the will to truth, which the textual investment of the Tolentine poem seems to try to rescue from such wisdom.

His movement to strip away the kenotic truths that guarantee useless certainties in order to insist on extracting a wisdom that is still pertinent to another time invites Job's poetic self to the salutary and soteriological capacity of inhabiting the darkness in order to see in it a space for listening in the silence produced by the emptiness of our usual answers. This space is configured as a poetic ritual of existence stripped of pretensions unaware of the equal condition of human nudity.

In the poem *The Days of Job*, there is a Jobian lesson in which prayer is a way of knocking on doors that open onto nothingness:

Sometimes I pray  
I'm blind  
and I see the words  
the gathering of the shadows

sometimes I say nothing  
I hold out my hands  
like a shell  
pure sign of the soul at the door

I wanted you to knock  
take them one by one  
my refuges  
these restless fingers  
in the ignorance of fire

for what time will it shelter the angels  
and what day will all the sun rise on the dunes

that's why it sometimes rains when I pray  
sometimes it almost snows on the bread [*free translation*]

In the poem above, Job's prayer is not driven by certainty but by a posture of daring and at the same time confidence in life. Sometimes prayer, in search of the fire that illuminates and mobilises desire, obtains the opposite of what it desires, in the antithesis of the desire for the weather that shelters the sun and the angels, it ends up raining when we pray, or the snow that occupies the isthmus of the high mountains ends up falling under the bread, invalidating illusion as food for our dreams. But is this not our condition, which requires us to be serene enough to accept ourselves?

## Conclusion

Cannot times of crisis also be pregnant with creativity, especially in the crumbling of old illusions and illusory certainties, especially if we strip away the self-referential forms of certainty that reduce wisdom to ideology? Job, in terms of the intersection of religious and cultural issues, can be revisited, both in Certeau and Tolentino, in his correlation with the Crucified, in which there is no resurrection of the word without inhabiting the void. It is on this journey that Jesus is presented as the one who can guide the way, but above all help 'to listen to the call behind hunger and thirst to the end'. Listening to the call of thirst is at the same time a way out of 'the delirium of self-affirmation and self-referentiality' which is a type of 'theological narcissism'.<sup>44</sup> Jesus' way is to share thirsts, and his 'beatitude of thirst' lies in transforming the thirsty into pilgrims and the thirst into a map and journey as a soteriological itinerary of our protectionist scepticism.<sup>45</sup>

The tragic reveals that all desire has is nothing and nothing is all that is needed to move desire. The Jobian stance of seeing the emptiness in nothingness invites us to dare to inhabit the discomfort of uncertain times in the certainty that poetically we inhabit the emptiness of the world, and poetically, therefore, we dare to love, to suffer, to know... in ethical insistence as a source of inspiration for existential, cultural and social-political creativity, and thus a source of resistance to the throwaway culture of our times. I wonder if the university should not be a school of prayer – a Jobian prayer, at once atheistic and reverent,

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<sup>44</sup> Mendonça, *Elogio da Sede*, 144–145; 117.

<sup>45</sup> Mendonça, *Elogio da Sede*, 164.

that teaches us to inhabit the darkness of our time through the poetic insistence of believing in the perennial fragility of life.

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