

**José Saramago: O Ano de 1998. Colóquio-Letras
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Colóquio-Letras, which in recent years has published a number of monographic issues on individual authors, has dedicated its most recent double-numbered edition (151/152) to the Nobel Prize winner José Saramago. Carried out under the direction of Maria Alzira Seixo, from the outset the issue's size and extravagant aspect make it quite impressive. To say that it is an edition of 500 pages about Saramago and his work is insufficient to describe the colorful and diverse profusion of essays interspersed with memorabilia, reproductions, and facsimiles of every kind. In reality, it is a luxurious and jubilant volume. Its title—*José Saramago: O Ano de 1998* (*José Saramago: The Year 1998*)—adeptly captures the celebratory tone that characterizes this collection.

In her presentation of and justification for this collective work, Maria Alzira Seixo notes that Portugal's first Nobel Prize winner stands in need of an essential critical bibliography, as there is only a limited number of published volumes dealing with his work. (It should be noted here, and with reason, that, curiously enough, the only existing bibliography of Saramago was published in German by Orlando Grossegesse.) The editor continues by saying that one aspect of this lack of critical work is that it has given rise to areas of Saramago's writings concerning which nothing, or at least no systematic research, has been done—"from his poetry to his short stories, from his chronicles to his novels, from his plays to his journals, from his writings of uncertain genre to his dramatic compositions written as opera libretti" (12). For various reasons, the editor's objective for this volume was to fill these important gaps and, even if not totally successful, the result has clearly validated the attempt, since all of us know very well how difficult such collective projects are in our literary and critical environment, just as we know that each of us is, in some way, a participant in them.

The essays nearly cover the whole of Saramago's work. "Saramago: uma elaboração em torno da metáfora da pedra" ("Saramago: an elaboration of the metaphor of the stone") by Luciana Stegagno-Picchio; an attempt at a framework for Saramago's poetry (Fernando J. B. Martinho); two studies

concerning *Os Poemas Possíveis* (*Possible Poems*) (Maria de Lourdes Cidraes and Cristina Serôdio); two other studies about his chronicles (Isabel Moutinho and Adriana Alves de Paula Martins); two on his theatrical works (Luiz Francisco Rebello, Christine Zurbach and Graziella Seminara); and two on the nature of the voyage, voyages and the voyager (Tânia Franco Carvalho and Maria Luísa Leal). After these, there are a variety of studies concerning his fiction, whether relative to specific works or to themes—e.g., “writing as the site of memory” (Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva) and “the poetics of speech and writing” (Maria de Lourdes Cândia Martins)—some of which pay particular attention to history (Ana Paula Arnaut, Ettore Finazzi-Agrò, Isaura de Oliveira and Agripina Carriço Vieira), but also others that strike at the construction of fictional characters (Horácio Costa), “the two Saramagos” (Vítor Viçoso) and “the construction of the multitude” (Vibha Maurya). Still others are dedicated to the intersection between writing and life, the purpose of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (Jean-Marc Moura), and also annotations for a reading of the notebook about the writing of *The Stone Raft* (by the editor of this volume), as well as essays dedicated to other minor writings (by Américo António Lindeza Diogo, who writes about *O Ano de 1993* [*The Year 1993*], and Margarida Braga Neves, who deals with Saramago’s short fiction).

The most recent works by Saramago deserve particular individual attention: *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (Douwe Fokkema and Wladimir Kryszinski), *Blindness* and *All the Names* (Isabel Pires de Lima, Leyla Perrone-Moisés, Ana Monner Sans, Adrián Huici and Jean Bessière). Finally, we have his journal, *Cadernos de Lanzarote* (*Lanzarote Notebooks*), about which the collection has two studies (Juan M. Ribera Llopis and Fernando Venâncio).

The collection’s tone is serene and restrained, yet reverent and admiring. The occasion is celebratory: there is neither room for dissidence nor for problematic critical analyses. Even Fernando Venâncio, who habitually produces praises plaited with thorns, has in this volume a bridled and tame essay.

Intermingled with this richness of reflections and commentaries we find an unpublished short story and a notebook for *The Stone Raft* reproduced in facsimile, an “intimate” illustrated journal of Saramago’s wife Pilar del Río from the days of the glorious celebration in Stockholm, many photographs and, last but not least, drawings by Bartolomeu Santos and photographs by Bário Piçarra. The list continues, beginning with a *Memorandum on the*

Nobel Week, original in its every aspect, and ending with reproductions of pages from various manuscripts.

It is rather difficult, if not practically impossible, to comment on all of the papers within this volume. To comment on some of them at the expense of others would be unfair. Taken as a whole, however, the essays present an overall unity in Saramago's writings, in particular those that address Saramago's so-called lesser works. It becomes apparent that the idea of the "two Saramagos," mentioned by others, but here specifically addressed by Vítor Viçoso, simply does not survive close scrutiny. Saramago clearly and ardently expresses his worldview, with its concomitant ethical dimension, through his writing. If he cannot be interpreted theoretically to be a strict, fundamentalist Marxist, this worldview spans his entire opus, as his writings are traversed by a line of thought and a string of ethical concerns included even in the speech he wrote for his Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm.

Saramago himself has disavowed all attempts to identify cleavages, ruptures, or breaks in his works, and has openly supported the critics who privilege readings of his writing where unity prevails: a unity of mind and heart, a unity of worldview and its ethical dimension, and a unity not to be belayed at the aesthetic level even when substantive stylistic changes in his writing can be identified. Saramago too makes note of his change of style in reference to *Levantado do Chão*, where he has pointed out that some twenty pages into the novel his writing developed new level of expression, the literary language that so much distinguishes him from all of his contemporaries. But stylistic evolution aside, Saramago yet supports criticism that favors analyses of the unity within his writings.

Hence, the inappropriateness of the postmodernist label that has frequently been attributed to Saramago. Though touched upon in some regard, overall within this volume of papers there is nothing that seriously supports a reading that would place such a label on him. Of course, the authors of these essays were concerned with other issues than an attempt to provide an overall assessment of Saramago's complete opus; nonetheless, the papers reinforce the impression that a unity exists beyond the aesthetic dimension where substantial narrative changes can be detected in his writings. Supported here is Saramago's often repeated claim that there is no split between the author and the narrator, a claim that implies a deeper concern on his part, namely, that there is no split between Saramago the citizen and Saramago the artist, nor between Saramago the journalist and

Saramago the novelist, nor even between Saramago the poet, Saramago the diarist and Saramago the columnist. This volume, having privileged the less studied areas of an impressive opus, has provided a great body of criticism in support of Saramago's contentions in this regard. As such, this collection becomes an important set of tools to help scholars of Saramago and the interested reader to reconstruct the author's heart and mind.

In sum, a volume of this kind is, in fact, a collector's item (and the author of this critique is pleased by the fact that for writing these few lines he will have the right to a copy of it). Its almost coffee-table book appearance should not, however, lead one to assume that it is merely a decorative work. In all actuality, it contains essays that everyone should read. If some of its collaborators had already relegated to other publications the most interesting commentaries that they possessed concerning Saramago's work, it should leave no doubt that the wave of new contributors to this collective discourse pertaining to Saramago's writings constitutes a more than sufficient reason for this special number of *Colóquio-Letras* to remain, both in the short and in the long term, *the* text for obligatory reference.