

**Maria Alzira Seixo. *Lugares da ficção em José Saramago*. Col. Temas Portugueses. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1999.**

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Maria Alzira Seixo is without a doubt one of the foremost critics of the works of José Saramago in Portugal and abroad, as well as his most assiduous reader since the times when the name "Saramago" did not command the praise it does today. *Lugares da ficção* confirms this, as it includes essays both on texts by Saramago, the publication dates of which go as far back as 1966, and on others as recent—as of January 1999—as his then-latest novel *All the Names*.

This volume consists of a collection of short to medium length texts previously presented to the public in the form of chapters of books, papers given at conferences, and articles published in academic journals and in the weekly periodical *Jornal de letras*. The exception is the last essay, written with this book in mind. Thus, *Lugares* does not constitute a whole, nor were the texts re-edited with a unified context in mind. The main consequence is the frequent reiteration of information on the writer and the chronology of his books, which could perhaps have been avoided by including this information only in the introduction instead.

*Lugares* opens with a chronological summary illustrating tensions and preoccupations in Saramago's writings, which Seixo links to questions of genre, by pointing out the writer's shift from the chronicle and poetry to the novel. In this process, the idea of progression or qualitative evolution is implied; Seixo, contrary to a general and unnamed number of other critics, does not dismiss Saramago's poetry as unworthy literary attempts, considering them instead as representing points of departure for a reflection on the literary experience developed further in the writers's works: from the genre of the chronicle, the fundamental characteristic Seixo retains is that it is a form of "journey," something that later will be said about the novel as well. While analyzing the four main novels that had been published by the time of her essay's original publication in 1987 (*Levantado do Chão*, *Baltasar and Blimunda*, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* and *The Stone Raft*), Seixo draws two important conclusions, one regarding the

constitutive nature of the category of time in Saramago's "novelistic form," insofar as it is through the writer's particular conception of the conjunction between time and human agency that alterity becomes a platform for dialogue; the second conclusion points to fiction as the best way to access "truth," making the novel "the most adequate genre to the expression of the world and of mankind" (39).

The following essay, on *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, opens a series tackling the issues of historical representation and history writing, while a few other essays later in the volume turn to questions of structural organization. Ultimately, as becomes more visible towards the end of *Lugares*, the critic aims at placing her analysis and Saramago's literary production within the broader, international context of contemporary fiction, which signals her background in comparative literature, but also serves to "legitimize" Saramago's work. With regard to the novels included in the first category, Seixo does not consider them "historical novels," as she makes sure to state as clearly as possible; interestingly, it is on the basis of the effect of reading, as a type of uncanniness, that she discusses, instead, similarities with the fantastic in the representation of that "other" time (54). In the essay that follows, however, the critic does not develop the analysis of temporality hinted at earlier. Towards the end, a few remarks, stylistic in nature, are made, pointing out some implications of the punctuation and parataxis in the text.

Thus, the attempt to theorize an approach does not quite follow through and will only be resumed, albeit all too briefly, in the essay "José Saramago e o tempo da ficção." Nevertheless, history is examined as a subject of writing: with regard to the ambiguity between the "written" and "writing," and therefore also with regard to the potential for alteration and failure, such as in the case of the insertion of the "not" in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*; as a sum of other, smaller, collective, and individual writings/stories; from the perspective of the "orality of writing," and the link between prosody ("ritmo") and the collective, a context where the proverb is seen as a "voice of the times." A bit of wisdom that surely deserves more of an elaboration, and which is inadequate as an ending, is that History touches closely upon literature (82). As a result, history is reduced to literature, if not even eclipsed altogether in the process.

"Factualidade da ficção: Ricardo Reis e Pessoa em Saramago" proceeds in a seemingly opposite way insofar as it assumes writing as fiction and searches

for the factual reality in it. Things are not quite as simple as that, however. The critic's focus is on a certain notion of "fact" as the basis for the fictional process of the novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, and the relation of such facts to the mechanisms at work in a historical novel. Seixo further uses Lubomir Doležel's notion of "literary transduction," and Alan Bailin's "semantic deviation" to illuminate the model of historical reading at stake here. Nevertheless, it would have been helpful to use other terms to break the circularity of words like "fiction" and "fictional fact," and to investigate further the (non)existence of Herbert Quain as an example of the play around "fact," especially given Borges's legacy in this matter. This constitutes the main problem of the essay, detracting from the validity and interest of what the critic is arguing.

Seixo returns briefly to the role of history with "Saramago e o tempo da ficção," placed towards the end of the book. The criteria behind the organization of *Lugares* are clearly more chronological than thematic, or the piece would have been grouped with the earlier essays devoted to the same subject in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, *Baltasar and Blimunda*, and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. This constitutes after all the bulk of Seixo's reflection.

"Crónica sobre um livro anunciado," and "Os espelhos virados para dentro," both on *Blindness*, are part of the second, distinct group of essays that are not focused on historical representation. The latter provides the depth of analysis of the narrative and constitutive process of this novel that the first one, probably for reasons of readership, does not include.

Seixo first focuses on a few "clusters of meaning." These are, namely, the allegorical level of meaning, the way characters are developed, the symbolism of colors, and the role of women, in this order. All these aspects are explained in a straightforward manner except that of the allegorical meaning, which in the end might be read as a sign of Seixo's difficulty in interpreting Saramago's style and allegorical language in *Blindness*, a complex and intriguing novel.

The preoccupation with the meta-fictional dimension is revealed in the analysis of the narrator's presence and function, its "enunciative presence," which is unrelated to its role of *telling* the story, but rather sets the stage for the distinction structuring the narrative: the textual vs. the narrative beginning, or "incipit." The critic insists on the importance of symbolic

elements such as color to link "textual" elements unrelated to the plot to those elements directly related to the story line of the text. One might say that, for all the emphasis placed on their significance, colors end up not signifying much in the end, but that is precisely Seixo's point. The fact that reality is not described in different terms in the beginning and at the end of the book leads her to conclude that the writer can only warn the reader about the results and consequences of the given situation, but is powerless to fix anything just because his characters have recovered their sight. Such seem to be the limitations of fiction and the true "allegorical" significance of this book. However, the fact that the main characters keep a certain degree of spiritual awareness gained from their blindness certainly does not leave matters "the same" as at the beginning.

Another issue of great importance mentioned is the relation of Saramago's narrator to the narrators of both Romantic and postmodernist novels. Unfortunately, Seixo does not return to this topic, and thus one is left with an important question, and no answer in sight as to how she would relate Saramago's "narrational superiority" both to Romanticism ("ironic modality") and to postmodernism.

Instead, the critic recalls the distinction between the textual and narrative "incipit," stressing the gap between the two (rendered as the odd-sounding "descoincidência," a nonexistent word in Portuguese), which she sees as producing a multiplicity of discourses that is responsible for the originality of the book, insofar as it questions the very category of the novel (109). It is as if, by insisting on the clear separation of narrative and "digression," the critic momentarily forgot, against her better judgment, that the history of the novel indeed incorporates a reflection on the genre just as much as frequent interruptions of the act of telling. At another level, when discussing the episode of the characters' bathing in the rain, Seixo observes that in this passage the narration has more than one mode, even though she has stated earlier that the narrator is "omniscient and testimonial" (109), without ever tracing the varying degrees of his "knowledge" and lack thereof.

Another analytical focus is the pause in the narrated action, and the functional role it plays, equated literally with those moments when the characters' movements are limited to increasingly more confined spaces. Seixo's analysis is valuable and meticulous, and is complemented by the two sections following it, which concentrate on the characters' movements as

organizing the narrative action, and, conversely, on scenes of immobility. In this context, the ekphrastic mode and the meta-commentary on writing become more visible, as the critic demonstrates through an intelligent choice of scenes upon which to comment. Unfortunately, for the most part only general conclusions are drawn, when the reading could have been enhanced by a review of theoretical texts on ekphrasis (e.g., the relationship between writing, description and movement on the one hand, and the traditional immobility of painting vs. resistance to linguistic apprehension and temporality on the other).

Between the conclusion, and a brief return to the role of history in Saramago's fiction, Seixo includes a reflection on *All the Names*, "O caso da mulher desconhecida." She starts by pointing out Saramago's use of Baroque techniques and traits. These aesthetic presuppositions have their natural continuation in the reflection on Symbolism, a rather narrow but usual one, as in previous moments in *Lugares*, which indicates a clear and exclusionary opposition between the Baroque and Symbolism. The brief analysis of the spaces visited in the novel is subordinated to the principle that the main character follows a journey ("percurso") which is that of the quest for knowledge, the meaning behind a name, and existence. At the narrative level, Seixo remarks on its greater distance from the characters' world, due in part to the fact that the narrator has both a more descriptive function as well as a solitary existence, generating a more intense inner monologue and a less fluid sentence.

Conveying a particular and specific message of redeeming social value to the readers is always part of Saramago's overarching purpose, Seixo argues, even if the "daily life" is absent from his novels and the tendency to use "allegorical" and "abstract" language can make such a transparent reading difficult. This is compensated, in the critic's eyes, by Saramago's use of "concrete," or easily identifiable, settings (128), as well as of powerful human feelings and emotions. Instead of seeing this "ambiguity" between the "lesson" to be drawn and the fact of its encryption as a problem, Seixo considers it as a sign of the careful architecture of the novels, best seen in the meta-fictional reflection Saramago carries out on writing, representation, and time. The conclusion lies in the peculiar, instantly recognizable pattern of "Saramago's sentence," which seizes the author's preoccupations, establishing a clear causal link between form and content (130-31).



The last essay, "Lugar e deslocação em José Saramago," was written in 1999 as a conclusion to *Lugares da ficção*. It reevaluates Saramago's work, once again from the poetry to the chronicles, the short stories, and the novels. This time, however, the novels are seen through the prism of a poetics of "place." The shift from a poetics of time to one of place is further justified by invoking Paul Ricoeur's work. Gradually it becomes clear that the multiple meanings of "lugar" are better understood in relation to dislocation, process, and even journey through the "ideas and the poetic motifs" and "the gesture of knowing" (167), all signs that Seixo's reading has turned more hermeneutic over time.

Upon reaching the end of *Lugares*, one has to wonder what the overall goals of the author were, and for whom the book was originally destined. Seixo is a well-known academic in Portuguese and Comparative Literature in Portugal who, very clearly, also enjoys reading José Saramago. From the academic or scholarly point of view, the book pursues questions fundamental to the original work of this contemporary Portuguese writer through a patient close reading. It would have been desirable, nevertheless, for Seixo to sustain a more thorough discussion of the concepts, implications, and theoretical contexts of the critics she invokes, specifically regarding Doležel's and Ricoeur's hypotheses on history and fiction; the same applies to Compagnon's and De Certeau's. Finally, the seamless transition from chronicle to novel begs further investigation, since the subjects of enunciation in the two genres are not equivalent. Acknowledgment of the "polemic" around the status and figure of the narrator (regarding this polemic, see Abel Barros Baptista's article in *Ler* 43 [1998]) would also have added to a constructive discussion of an important topic in Seixo's writings.

Some of the book's formatting might have been presented better had the work been revised thoroughly: small mistakes (a mysterious digit occasionally appearing at the bottom of the page), quotations not followed by a page number, bibliographies not thorough and uniform, book titles given in distinct styles. These problems, however, do not take away from the importance of *Lugares*. It goes without saying that it deserves a place of its own in the critical literature about Saramago (which is, surprisingly, not so abundant after all, particularly if we consider longer studies), as it draws both the untrained eye, as well as the more critical one, to fundamental issues raised by this unsettling body of work.

Moreover, *Lugares* incorporates an undeniable component of pleasure. The long, dense, at times beautiful, though not always intelligible, passages are to some extent a result of the desire not to exclude from the reading the pleasurable impression the book caused on the particular reader that Seixo is. And to have some of those intricate sentences and ideas developed further, perhaps avoiding the long parentheses, would have worked to the critic's advantage, as well as to the reader's. Helas, to convey the "joy of reading" has become an increasingly difficult task. Therefore, if a larger public begins to read a few books by Saramago, *Lugares da ficção* will have been worth while.