

Introduction: Saramago's World

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... we would understand much more about life's complexities if we applied ourselves to an assiduous study of its contradictions, instead of wasting time on identities and coherences, seeing as these have a duty to provide their own explanations.

José Saramago, *A Caverna*

For many decades, José Saramago has been a staunch defender of the role of literature to both serve and be perceived as public discourse. When, in October 1998, he became the first Portuguese-language author to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, his conviction was supported by the assurance that, at any rate, this particular writer's literary discourse was guaranteed to be widely (and globally) publicized. If, as Wlad Godzich has claimed, the severely limited possibility of *public discourse* in the contemporary world is compensated by the ever-multiplying variety of ways to *publicize discourses* ("Workshop"), Saramago has taken full advantage of the opportunities offered in this respect by the Nobel prize as probably the most effective institutionalized instrument of publicity that high literary discourse which is produced worldwide has at its annual disposal. His international visibility greatly amplified, Saramago could be seen in the last two years shuttling the globe and making globally publicized statements on behalf of the many political causes that have attracted his attention and support. One of the most recent instances of his internationalist engagement is the foreword he wrote for *Our Word is Our Weapon*, a volume of selected writings by

Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), one of a series of statements Saramago has issued in recent years—before and after the Nobel Prize—on behalf of the Chiapas rebels. In that text, he described the international dimension of the Mexican tragedy in the following terms: “No matter how much of an attempt has been made to reduce the question of Chiapas to merely a local conflict... what is being played out in the Chiapas mountains and the Lacandon Jungle reaches beyond the borders of Mexico to the heart of that portion of humanity that has not renounced and will never renounce dreams and hopes, the simple imperative of equal justice for all” (xxi). This statement may be seen as an encapsulated expression of Saramago’s characteristic viewpoint, both as a writer and as a public intellectual: it conjugates a local and a global perspective (an aspect to which I will return); it projects an image of humankind (or, at any rate, of its progressive “portion”) as a morally responsible and forward-thinking community; and it strikes the high utopian note in its insistence on the “simple imperative of equal justice for all,” in an emblematic illustration of what Orlando Grossegeesse, in the article included in this issue, describes as Saramago’s “materialist Messianism.”

In his summary outline of some key methodological issues concerning the process of globalization, Godzich refers to the radical restructuring of the social imaginary taking place in the world today in topographic terms: as a loss of collective *stakes*, understood in the figurative sense of the expression as “shared interests,” but also, and above all, in the precise sense of boundary markers defining and protecting a territorial domain shared by a stable, settled community (“Workshop”). The current progressive weakening and dissolution of such boundaries, objectively verifiable in technological, economic and political terms, manifests itself, at the same time, in a profoundly subjective manner, as a disappearance of multiple, uniquely differentiated horizons that various communities might claim as their own and theirs alone: “When the whole planet is your frame of reference, then there is no horizon, this supremely subjective notion of boundary” (Godzich, “What Happened to My Horizon?” 2). Against this destabilizing background, it has become perhaps more vitally important than ever for social and cultural collectives (be they territorially rooted or, as is increasingly common, deterritorialized as diasporic or virtual aggregations) to engage in what Arjun Appadurai has described as the new social practice of imagination: no longer ideologically suspect entertainment for the masses or an elite pastime of little

general consequence, “the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (31).

Modern Portuguese society has had powerful, historically and politically determined, reasons of its own to engage, over the past two and a half decades, in what can be described as a complex renegotiation of identity, whose motivation and expression have tended to be articulated in predominantly spatial terms. Two key events of that period have been the country’s loss of its African colonies following the 1974 Revolution of Carnations and, twelve years later, its incorporation, along with Spain, into the administrative fabric of the European Community. In a very short course, Portugal has traversed a route leading from international ostracism and isolation (as the world’s only surviving colonial empire) to full absorption in a closely knit transnational organism, and from a historical destiny that consisted, according to Salazar’s propagandists, in being Europe’s enterprising threshold and protective bulwark to a contemporary reality as one of Europe’s underdeveloped, peripheral dead ends.¹ It is no wonder therefore that grappling with imaginative implications of such a violent unsettling of the national space has taken place on many levels, from ongoing political and philosophical polemics all the way to popular culture, with Portuguese literature, in particular the novel, playing a prominent role in the process of “restaking,” so to speak, the newly constituted territory of the national imagination.

Saramago’s career as a successful novelist—to be distinguished from his career as a writer—has coincided almost precisely with the post 25 de Abril reformulation of collective Portuguese identity. Having debuted in 1947, at the age of twenty-five, with the novel *Terra do Pecado* (briefly but insightfully discussed in this issue by Horácio Costa), he then abandoned for thirty years the genre that was to bring him later such remarkable achievement, publishing, in the meantime, several volumes of *crônicas* and columns originally written for the newspapers *A Capital*, *Jornal do Fundão*, *Diário de Lisboa* and *Diário de Notícias*. Between 1966 and 1975 he also produced three volumes of poetry (*Os Poemas Possíveis*, *Provavelmente Alegria*, and *O Ano de 1993*); and in 1978 his short stories were collected and published under the title *Objecto Quase* (for a complete listing of Saramago’s literary works see the Bibliography). Saramago’s return to the novel—the genre he

now practices almost exclusively, albeit with significant exceptions, such as the novella *The Tale of an Unknown Island* (1997) and the successive volumes of his diary, *Cadernos de Lanzarote*—had thus been slow but by no means idle. When in 1976 Saramago published his second novel, *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, it was tellingly subtitled “Ensaio de Romance,” a label translatable into English as both a “novel-essay” and a “rehearsal for a novel.” This designation points to Saramago’s often repeated assertion that he is not really a novelist, but rather an essayist who writes novels because he does not know how to write essays (Reis 46); however, at the same time it also emphasizes the notion of writing as an apprenticeship, a laborious process that must be faced with patience and humility if it is to fructify in a mature, accomplished product.²

The chronological coincidence between the period of post 25 de Abril “restaking” of the territory of Portuguese collective imagination and the golden age of the writer José Saramago’s literary creativity is a complex notion; several of the essays gathered in this issue address Saramago’s engagement with the history and contemporary reality of his country in terms that question and clarify, without simplifying, the ideological charge of his fictional interventions. Unsurprisingly, the novel most often evoked by the critics interested in addressing Saramago’s literary politics and his attitude with regard to the transformations undergone by his country and his region turns out to be *The Stone Raft* (1986), a magic-realist utopian fable published in the year of Portugal’s and Spain’s accession to the European Community, in which the Iberian Peninsula, by a freak and incomprehensible accident of nature, becomes detached from Europe and, having progressed along a somewhat idiosyncratic trajectory (it takes a detour to avoid crashing into the Azores), ends up stationary in the middle of the southern Atlantic Ocean, half way between Africa and South America. As Ellen Sapega has noted, many contemporary Portuguese novels rely on spatial metaphors, thus indicating “a common desire to comment on the abrupt changes and discontinuities that have characterized recent Portuguese national experience” (181). Among Saramago’s novels, *The Stone Raft* is certainly the most explicit and insistent in its reliance on topographic tropes, as well as in its referential framing in a contextually specific, contemporary reality. The improbable, centrifugal voyage of the Peninsula, which results in a global reorganization of geopolitical space, is paralleled by multiple centripetal dislocations of its inhabitants: as the novel unfolds, these migrating masses of

Iberians coalesce into new, experimental “ethnoscapes,” central building blocks of what Appadurai (extending Benedict Anderson) calls “*imagined worlds* ... the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe” (33; original emphasis). *The Stone Raft* may therefore be read as, first and foremost, an ethnographic parable dedicated to exploring (in a historically and culturally situated context) “the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world” (Appadurai 52).

For more on *The Stone Raft* and its complexities and contradictions, which to a considerable extent reflect the complexities and contradictions that may be said to inform the political and aesthetic attitudes espoused by its author, I direct the reader to the essays by, particularly, Orlando Grossegeese, Mark J. Sabine, and Maria Alzira Seixo. My reason for singling out this particular novel for discussion in the limited space of the editor’s introduction is that what I have described above as its primary project finds a continuation of sorts in Saramago’s latest work of fiction, published in November 2000 (and therefore too recently to have been addressed by any of the articles gathered here): the much anticipated *A Caverna* [The Cave].

The first novel by Saramago published since his 1998 Nobel Prize, *A Caverna*, completes what the writer himself has described as a trilogy of narratives, with its first two installments represented by the novels *Blindness* (1995) and *All the Names* (1997); these three works form (in the words of Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva’s essay included in this issue) “a triptych reflecting humanity’s quest for meaning in the midst of its end-of-millennium crisis.” Following Saramago’s grand cycle of historical novels published in the 1980s (which extends to the 1991 *Gospel According to Jesus Christ*), these three works mark a different course and occupy a distinct place in the Portuguese writer’s *oeuvre* (see, in particular, David Frier’s essay for a comprehensive commentary on *Blindness* and *All the Names*). Nevertheless, as Seixo’s provocative take on *The Stone Raft* and *Blindness* demonstrates, they can be shown to relate on many levels to Saramago’s earlier works; from my perspective, it is in particular between *The Stone Raft* and *A Caverna* that the web of correspondences thickens to the point where their comparative and contrastive reading becomes something of an imperative.

A Caverna tells the story of Cipriano Algor, a sixty-four year old, village-dwelling potter, who sells the bulk of his earthenware products to the

otherwise nameless Center, an enormous shopping and residential compound located in the nearby, likewise nameless metropolis. The apparent location of the Center *within* the surrounding urban fabric is at several points challenged by the narrative discourse, where the Center is implied to absorb and contain, and even to replace, the city itself, as it constantly expands its voracious and far-reaching periphery. Cipriano's daughter Marta is married to Marçal Gacho who commutes from the village to the Center, where he works as a security guard, for ten-day shifts; the young couple long for Marçal to become a resident guard and be allowed to live at the Center, thus ending the tiresome cycle of their periodic separations. As the narrative unfolds, the relocation of the entire family (including Cipriano) to the Center is contemplated and, for a period of three weeks, actually carried out. This implies the abandonment of the old man's traditional way of life and manufacture; the pressure to abandon them has been, indeed, exercised by the Center itself, since its commercial representatives have cancelled Cipriano's contract: they prefer to stock mass-produced plastic imitations of his earthenware vessels instead of the genuine articles.

A Caverna preserves many elements of the scenarios of urban dystopia painted by Saramago in *Blindness* and *All the Names* (and prefigured in the much earlier *O Ano de 1993*, which Kenneth Krabbenhoft considers in this issue). However, it no longer gives them exclusive rein over the destinies of the novel's protagonists: here, the dystopia represented by the sinister, Big Brotherish Center is contrasted with the utopian space of Cipriano's homestead, which is organically fused with his potter's workplace. If I call the novel's representation of Cipriano's living and working space "utopian" rather than "realist" (after all, households like his still do exist here and there in rural Portugal), it is because the narrative discourse itself insists on its almost impossibly anachronistic nature:

We have already seen how the clay is mixed here in the most old-fashioned manner, we have seen how rustic and even primitive are these potter's wheels, how the kiln outside preserves signs of an antiquity inadmissible in the modern times, which, in spite of the reprehensible deficiencies and intransigence that characterize them, have proven benevolent enough to admit, until now, the existence of a pottery such as this one side by side with a Center such as that one. (147; my translation)

As an unapologetic leftist of the old school (and to this day a card-carrying Communist) who came into his own as a writer at the ripe age of sixty-something, and by plunging into the ambivalent waters of postmodern metafictional poetics, Saramago is, not unlike his country and his region, a complicated hybrid, and both *The Stone Raft* and *A Caverna* reflect this hybridity at many levels.

In *The Stone Raft*, it may be detected in the narrative's contrapuntal treatment of events on the macro level (predominantly dystopian), where references to mass media, satellite images and computer-generated models of the wayward Iberia abound, and on the micro scale (predominantly utopian), where the novel's five protagonists evolve, in their travels, toward a distinctly premodern *modus vivendi*, the most telling symbol of which is perhaps the exchange of their original mode of transportation, a Citroën Deux Chevaux, for a covered wagon pulled by two actual horses. This is less a sign of a nostalgic escape from modernity than an acknowledgment of the heterogeneous makeup of contemporary Iberian societies (which is perhaps particularly true in the case of Portugal) as semiperipheral, intermediate formations, whose distinguishing characteristics may be summarily qualified as "pre-post-modern" (Santos 89), containing elements of asynchronic stages of development and a corresponding variety of relationships between their social agents.

In *A Caverna*, the "pre-post-modern" counterpoint is updated for the new millennium, as its author paints, with narrative brush strokes that are alternatively (and sometimes simultaneously) broad and fine, an allegorical satire of the totalitarian assumptions of global consumer capitalism. In the end, however, it remains as unresolved as the conclusion of *The Stone Raft*, where the reinvention of (Iberian) locality in its new global (postcolonial) context is left open-ended, albeit, at the same time, pregnant (literally) with hope and opportunity. Like the women of the Iberian Peninsula in *The Stone Raft*, Cipriano's daughter Marta is also expecting a child as the novel comes to a close, and it is her refusal to let it be born in the sterile and suffocating atmosphere of the Center that propels the family to abandon their new residence. They recognize, however, that Cipriano's pottery has no future either; as Marta comments, "we're finished with the Center, the pottery had already met its end, from one day to another we have become like strangers in this world" (347). Therefore, *A Caverna's* last paragraph finds the novel's protagonists (who, in a trademark Saramago move, include the long-widowed Cipriano's new love, Isaura) piled together with their belongings into the old

man's delivery truck, about to hit the road in search of a new life "far away from here" (347). If, on the basis of *The Stone Raft*, Saramago could still be suspected of clinging to what Bruce Robbins diagnoses as "the romantic localism of a certain portion of the left, which feels it must counter capitalist globalization with a strongly rooted and exclusive sort of belonging" (3), the darker, more disillusioned closure of *A Caverna* leaves little room for such alternatives. It does, nevertheless, allow for a preservation—however tentative and vulnerable to critical scrutiny—of the dialectical concept of "rooted cosmopolitanism," which also appears to be guiding Saramago's recently magnified career as an international public figure. As Mitchell Cohen describes it, rooted cosmopolitanism "accepts a multiplicity of roots and branches and . . . rests on the legitimacy of plural loyalties, of standing in many circles, but with common ground" (483). The rickety panel truck of an old, unemployed potter, advancing toward a new life in an unknown, faraway location thus supplants the impossible, floating "stone raft" of Saramago's utopian Iberian homeland in providing a fictional blueprint for such a rootedly cosmopolitan world whose horizons, if any, have yet to be imagined.

This sixth issue of *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies*, dedicated to José Saramago, was conceived with several interrelated objectives in mind. Given the scarcity of published Saramago criticism in English, however, the issue's primary goal is to provide the growing audience of non-Portuguese speaking readers and students of Saramago with a wide selection of in-depth analytic approaches to his major works, adding up to a comprehensive and theoretically informed overall perspective on the writer's work, with particular emphasis on his novels. Therefore, all articles were either originally written in or translated into English, and the references to Saramago's works also follow the English translations of his novels by Giovanni Pontiero and, more recently, following Pontiero's untimely death in 1996, by Margaret Jull Costa.³ At the same time, however, the editors' intention was that this volume should account for, reflect, and enter into a critical dialogue with the spectacularly flourishing field of Saramago criticism published in Portuguese. The international cast of contributors includes thus many, if not most, prominent and widely recognized critics of Saramago's work, whose pioneering research has already become an indispensable reference to the many who have followed in their steps (and who are also well represented in this issue).

Following George Monteiro's eloquent presentation of José Saramago during the *honoris causa* ceremony at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in

October 1999, and Saramago's address at the same ceremony, the first four articles offer synthetic and panoramic approaches to the study of the Portuguese author's novels; the progression of their subject matter is also roughly chronological, spanning half a century from *Terra do Pecado* (1947) to *All the Names* (1997). In "Saramago's Construction of Fictional Characters: From *Terra do Pecado* to *Baltasar and Blimunda*," Horácio Costa relies on his comprehensive understanding of Saramago's *período formativo* in tracing a complex evolutionary trajectory within the writer's work. Adriana Alves de Paula Martins dedicates her essay on "José Saramago's Historical Fiction" to one of the central issues in Saramago scholarship, assessing the writer's literary representation of the Portuguese national past in terms of an original typology that comprises the main trends of postmodern historical fiction. Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva's critical meditation "On the Labyrinth of Text, or, Writing as the Site of Memory" considers another key aspect of Saramago's novels published in the 1980s: their intertextual engagement with the Portuguese, Iberian, and generally Western cultural tradition. Finally, David Frier's essay, "Righting Wrongs, Re-Writing Meaning and Reclaiming the City in Saramago's *Blindness* and *All the Names*," discusses the allegorical turn that Saramago's fiction has taken in the more recent years and analyzes the two novels' insistence on the individual moral responsibility for the construction of a better society.

Further contributions focus on selected crucial aspects of the Portuguese writer's multifaceted literary identity. It is Saramago the moralist who emerges, above all, from Kenneth Krabbenhoft's "Saramago, Cognitive Estrangement, and Original Sin?" and from Harold Bloom's "The One With the Beard Is God, the Other Is the Devil." Saramago the Iberian is the object of Orlando Grossege's discussion in "Journey to the Iberian God: Antonio Machado Revisited by Saramago" and, from a different angle, of Mark J. Sabine's "'Once But No Longer the Prow of Europe': National Identity and Portuguese Destiny in José Saramago's *The Stone Raft*." And it is Saramago the writer, who has always surreptitiously challenged the solidity and coherence of personal and political identity postulated by his celebrated public superego, Saramago the Author, that emerges from the two concluding essays, with their, respectively, postcolonial and feminist focus on difference and displacement at work in Saramago's texts: Maria Alzira Seixo's "The Edge of Darkness, or, Why Saramago Never Wrote about the Colonial War in Africa" and Ana Paula Ferreira's "Cruising Gender in the Eighties (from *Levantado do Chão* to *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*)."

Following George Monteiro's translation of a short story by Saramago, the four publications discussed in the Reviews section offer collectively both a representative and superlative sampling of the latest in Saramago criticism in Portugal and Brazil: the monumental tribute to the Nobel Prize winner presented by the journal *Colóquio/Letras* in its special double issue (reviewed by Onésimo T. Almeida); *Diálogos com José Saramago* by Carlos Reis, perhaps the most inspired and inspiring among the several volumes of Saramago interviews already available (reviewed by Mark J. Sabine); Maria Alzira Seixo's prize-winning collection of her essays on Saramago, *Lugares da ficção em José Saramago* (reviewed by Ana Sofia Ganho); and Beatriz Berrini's *Ler Saramago: o romance* (reviewed by José Ornelas), a book that testifies to an unflagging interest in Saramago among literary critics in Brazil, where for many years already he has been the bestselling Portuguese author.

Notes

¹. In more recent years, of course, Portugal's political and economic standing in Europe has greatly improved. Already in the second half of the 1980s, the country's economy grew faster than that of any other of its fellow European Community members for several consecutive years; to quote but one assessment, in 1992 *The Wall Street Journal* would praise Portugal's exemplary transition from "dirt-poor dictatorship to stable and increasingly prosperous democracy" (Gumbel A11).

². It is interesting to note (as many have done) that the second edition of *Manual*, released by Caminho in 1983, and therefore after Saramago had been catapulted into the literary spotlight with the 1980 *Levantado do Chão* and, particularly, the 1982 *Memorial do Convento* (later to be translated into English as *Baltasar and Blimunda*), did not carry the subtitle "Ensaio de Romance." It is almost as if Saramago had performed an act of anachronistic historical intervention—a device on which his novels (particularly *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*) frequently rely—upon his own work: by 1983, this novelist was no longer "rehearsing" anything, he was performing with great confidence, center stage and facing a crowded, increasingly enthusiastic audience.

³. The editors gratefully acknowledge the permission granted by the journal *Colóquio/Letras* to reproduce, in English translation, two of the essays originally published in its 1999 issue dedicated to Saramago: Horácio Costa's "Saramago's Construction of Fictional Characters: From *Terra do Pecado* to *Baltasar and Blimunda*" and Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva's "On the Labyrinth of Text, or, Writing as the Site of Memory."

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