

**Presentation of José Saramago, Ceremony to Confer Doctor of Humane Letters, *Honoris Causa* Upon José Saramago, October 22, 1999, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth**

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The wisest man he ever knew could neither read nor write, José Saramago has said. His grandfather Jerónimo was a man who lived gracefully with his animals and who, when he sensed that his death was imminent, “went out to say good-bye to the trees in his orchard, embracing each of them in turn and weeping because he knew he would never see them again.” In 1998 the Swedish Academy awarded the grandson of that illiterate but profoundly cultured man the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The prize had been so long in coming, the seventy-six year old Portuguese writer indicated at the time, that he had long since given up hope that the award would be his. He was well aware, moreover, that the Nobel was an even longer time in coming for his country and for all the Portuguese-language writers throughout the world who had preceded him over the long years. Yet, for José Saramago, the Prize had come only sixteen years after he achieved his first success with the novel known in English as *Baltasar and Blimunda* and less than a quarter of a century since he resumed the writing of fiction. (He had abandoned it after a first novel, the modest success of which landed him a job in journalism.)

Since the overthrow of the Salazar-Caetano dictatorship on the 25th of April in 1974, he has produced fiction, novels and short stories, plays and poetry, most of which have been translated into most of the major languages of the world. Until recently, he has been served especially well by his English-language translator, the late Giovanni Pontiero. Among his most trenchant

narratives, all of them available in English translation, are *The Tale of the Unknown Island*, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, *The Stone Raft*, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, *Blindness*, and, recently, *All the Names*. Each of them seems to have begun, invariably, one thinks, with the question “what if?” What if blindness was perceived to be a dangerously contagious disease? What if Saint Joseph was wracked by guilt for not having warned his neighbors that the innocents were to be killed? What if, during the fictional poet Ricardo Reis’s return to Portugal, he was visited by the spirit of the recently dead poet Fernando Pessoa, his creator? What if a clerk or lowly scribe or proof-reader had the temerity to intervene ever so slightly in the historical account he was checking by inserting before everything the single word “not,” thereby changing the course of the written record of history? What if the entire Iberian peninsula were to break off from the rest of Europe, much as a northern or southern hemisphere iceberg might, becoming a huge clod floating freely in the Atlantic, with a population that carries with it its culture, history, and social truths?

Described rightly by the *New York Times* as “a writer with an ear for the melody of human speech,” José Saramago is also a master of the wondrous and awe-inspiring narrative. While insisting that the true narrator in each book is always himself, José Saramago nevertheless brings off the near-illusionist’s trick of narrating richly and wonderfully through various voices. It is the achieved phenomenon of his prose that his characters always strike us as being in motion (an achievement that owes nothing to easy psychologizing or the surrender to the sirens of paradigmatic rationalizing), an accomplishment that accounts for the strong flow of narrative that carries one along with it. In *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, for example, he reimagines as a narrative the life of the historical Jesus, not as the Son of God, but as a human being. He follows closely the outline of the story everyone knows, but inferentially working out the details of the dust and dirt of his everyday life. He searches in what must have been the human dimension of the life of Joseph the father, with its oppressive sense of moral responsibilities fulfilled or evaded. What José Saramago always does is to provide, in its fullest sense, what the writer Henry James called the true fictional effects of “felt life,” that is, the very feel of life as lived. Everyone knows what happened mythically and emblematically, but he reverses the usual process of the magic realist by humanizing—that is, by making ordinary—that still, and now somehow, enhanced extraordinary life. He provides thus the missing

narrative, the unwritten narrative that might have preceded those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

In *Blindness* José Saramago turns everyday actuality into an extraordinary reality in which a breakout of a batch of sudden, unexplainable, mysterious blindness triggers widespread fear and terror, leading immediately to the exercise of the institutional power to coerce, segregate, round-up, intern, and punish. Here he allegorizes the sins of the victims of the Holocaust, reimagining thereby all holocausts—including those, still unimagined, that yet await us.

José Saramago is a moralist, a rather broadly political moralist, to be exact. But this longtime champion of the people, champion of the cultural and spiritual values of nations, chooses to show more than he will tell, inspiring his readers to trust the truth of the tale while efficiently deflecting all focus away from its inspired teller. It is with humility and pride that one can welcome to the University of Massachusetts, this honored but also honoring place, José Saramago, this native of Portugal, this honorable and honest citizen of the realm we know as humankind.