

**Beatriz Berrini. *Ler Saramago: O Romance*. Lisboa: Caminho, 1998.**

José N. Ornelas

Even before José Saramago was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998, many critical works on the author had already appeared, providing invaluable insights into one of the most fascinating and acclaimed Portuguese writers of the twentieth century. Among these, Beatriz Berrini's *Ler Saramago: O Romance* (1998) must be singled out. Berrini, a well-respected Eça de Queirós scholar, published her collection of critical essays in the same year that Saramago was honored by the Swedish Academy with the world's highest literary prize. Her text is constituted by seven long chapters analyzing the author's work, followed by a short epilogue, an interview with José Saramago, and a series of photographs interposed between the critical section of her book and the interview. Although the majority of the photographs are in color, a few are in black and white, especially some where the author is the object of the photograph. There is a two-fold purpose for the inclusion of the photographs in Berrini's text: firstly, to show Saramago in his natural environment, starting with his humble beginnings in rural Ribatejo and ending up with photographs that reveal his growing literary prestige prior to his being distinguished with the Nobel Prize; and, secondly, to link some of the author's novels to the spaces that happen to be the focus of the stories told in those narratives. The later group of photographs depicts life in the Alentejo of *Levantado do Chão*, the opulence associated with the nobility in eighteenth-century Portugal, as it is referenced in *Baltasar and Blimunda*, the many different images of Portugal in the middle 1930s that relate to the oppressive climate of fascism in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, and, finally, a certain Lisbon ambience that reminds the reader of the city's Muslim past. Medieval Lisbon is one of the privileged cultural, social and political sites of Saramago's *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*.

Berrini's choice of photographs, which imbue specific spaces, geography and also the Portuguese nation with a set of traits, images and values, is intimately related to her selection of Saramago's novels for analysis. Each of the three novels mentioned above, *Levantado do Chão*, *Baltasar and Blimunda* and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, is the object of study of a particular

chapter. In these three chapters, Berrini offers various critical perspectives on Saramago's novels through an exploration of their ideological, historical and cultural frameworks. She argues convincingly that her critical reading or, as she puts it, her "voyage" through Saramago's works, is also a voyage through Portugal's past and present. Indeed, her main critical interest is in those novels that offer fascinating and provocative insights into the complex relationships that have shaped and are the foundation for the construction of Portuguese national and individual identity. Although she is of the opinion that *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* marks a turning point in Saramago's evolution from a novelist grounded in his roots to one that veers into more universal avenues, exemplified by such novels as *Blindness* and *All the Names*, she nevertheless concentrates most of her critical energy on those novels where Saramago tries to define, articulate and highlight the rich complexities of those roots and, in the process, challenge and question the figures of authority who insist on denying that heritage is subject to a constant interplay of continuity and transformation.

The book also includes four other chapters that do not focus on just one of Saramago's novels: the introductory chapter and three other essays. One of the latter concentrates on the crucial and powerful role that women play in the Portuguese writer's novels; it is entitled, unsurprisingly, "Mulher, Mulheres" ("Woman, Women"). Another is an in-depth examination of the relationship between the titles of the novels and the themes and topics that are developed in them, which is coupled with a comparison of the title with the novel's close in order to shed further light on the choice of title and to suggest further readings and interpretations of the work. Still another interprets critically the magical and fantastic qualities of many of the author's narratives and relates them to an allegorical bent present in several of them.

Berrini does attempt to give the reader a broad picture of Saramago's novels by exploring not only the many complex relationships between the narrator and the narrative itself, and but also between the narrator, reader and characters. She also delves into the many dialogical connections between Saramago's narratives and other literary and non-literary works, especially the Bible and classical texts of Portuguese literature. However, it is still quite obvious that her central focus is on the representation of history in the author's narratives and on the manner by which transformations in history continuously redefine the configuration both of

the Portuguese space and its cultural practices and, consequently, of the Portuguese identity. Many critics before Berrini, including Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva in her pioneering book, *José Saramago entre a história e a ficção: uma saga de portugueses* (1989), had already analyzed the link between fiction and history in the author's novels and his interest in revising Portuguese history through a process of recuperation of the political and cultural significance of historical memory on behalf of those who had never occupied a place in the official record. In a sense, Berrini, like many other scholars of Saramago's vast literary production, seems attracted to particular aspects of the author's works: his reading of history from the perspective of those without history, his mapping of the historical attempts of the voiceless to take into their own hands the transformation of their own circumstances, his undermining and subversion of the ideological fictions by which the dominant classes can and do script and trope the identities, values and cultures of the oppressed, as well as dismiss their cultural productions as inconsequential. Even Berrini's choice of novels for critical examination shows exactly where her interest lies. She barely touches upon *Blindness* or *All the Names*, two novels that she considers to have greater universal and global appeal than the others, because they are more abstract and more concerned with seeking solutions for the problems that affect the world through a discussion of ideas. Her preference for those among Saramago's novels that (re)imagine Portugal as a configuration of political, ideological, social and cultural intersections in need of continuous historical reappraisal is more than evident in *Ler Saramago*.

In *Ler Saramago: O Romance*, Berrini reveals not only her in-depth knowledge of biblical narrative through the many connections that she establishes between Saramago's novels and the Bible, but also shows her familiarity with classical, as well as contemporary literary texts. Moreover, she is conversant with both Portuguese and Brazilian literatures. Her many literary references make for an entertaining and fascinating commentary, although at times her ability to converse intelligently with other texts forces her into digressions that frequently obfuscate the task at hand, that is, the analysis of Saramago's narratives. Her reflections on the limits and/or the relationship between fiction and history that appear throughout *Ler Saramago* are a case in point. For example, on pages 12-26 she reflects on this particular topic by citing the views of several important Portuguese

writers, including Eça de Queirós, Oliveira Martins, Alexandre Herculano, and Fernão Lopes. Reading about these writers' views of the borderlines between fiction and history is indeed enriching and enthralling, but ultimately her digressions shortchange Saramago's views on the same matter. She is able to inscribe the author within a very old Portuguese tradition in which history and fiction vie with each other for the representation of Portuguese reality, but she would have accomplished much more by reflecting comparatively on the subject, that is, by showing the similarities and the differences between Saramago and the authors mentioned previously. Such an approach would contextualize more effectively the relationship between Saramago and other Portuguese writers, and it certainly would give a greater meaning to those links, while also showing how the Nobel laureate has challenged established views on the limits between history and fiction.

In Berrini's provocative and incisive book on Saramago, there is what I would consider a very glaring omission. Although already by 1998 a remarkable number of articles and books had appeared analyzing and theorizing about the vast literary production of the Portuguese writer, none of these articles or books is really incorporated in *Ler Saramago*. Berrini's very short bibliography includes only two of these many reference works; both are cited in her text, but neither one can be considered a major contribution to the understanding of Saramago's literary production. I do not have a plausible explanation for this omission, except for the possible fact that Berrini did not want to be influenced by others in her very personal reading of Saramago's novels. However, I am also fully aware that my explanation is probably without any substance, since *Ler Saramago*, in many ways, has definite affinities with other critical works that had appeared prior to 1998, which clearly indicates that Berrini was very much conscious of this body of critical work. Whatever the reason for the omission, it undoubtedly detracts from the value of her critical text. Many of Berrini's arguments would have been strengthened and reinforced if she had dialogued with other critics of Saramago's work, especially those that have dealt with the limits between fiction and history, the relationship between fiction and the real world, the many complex links in the triad narrator/text/reader, or, as Saramago would prefer, *author/text/reader*, the dialogical connections with other texts, and finally the incorporation of magical and fantastic elements in the writer's works. The lack of an inter-critical dialogue or other critical referents in

Berrini's text weakens some of her arguments; some of her positions and many of the enigmas present in the writer's novels would have been clarified through a dialogue with other critics.

As I have mentioned before, Berrini's *Ler Saramago* traces a voyage through Saramago's novels with special emphasis on those that privilege incursions into the construction of Portugal and Portuguese identity. She is very eclectic in her approach to the author's works, given that she incorporates many critical perspectives into her discussion. Her book, notwithstanding its apparent lack of integration with the voices and ideas of others who have written on Saramago, offers an invaluable venue for the understanding of Saramago as a novelist. Berrini's text, written in a very clear and accessible language, is a significant contribution to the already substantial body of critical work on the Portuguese Nobel laureate. The book engages intelligently with Saramago's novels at the level of the literary and, at the level of the extra-literary, it dialogues with and explores the conceptual concerns that crosscut the articulation and the (re)imagining of Portuguese history and identity in Saramago's novels.