

**Carlos Reis. *Diálogos com José Saramago*.
Lisboa: Caminho, 1998.**

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The etymology of the word *interview/entrevue* permits an alternative definition to that of a two-way verbal exchange. To interview (from Latin, INTER- + *videre*, via Old French *entrevue*) could also be considered as the act of *viewing between* things: scrutinising the spaces amongst the obvious, the superficial, the familiar in order to perceive what remains undiscovered. When José Saramago describes the experience of being interviewed as one of being besieged in the “Encerramento” that he contributes to *Diálogos com José Saramago*, he appears to entertain such a definition: “[a]s perguntas, ou batem no muro que todo o entrevistado é, e ressaltam trazendo mecanicamente a resposta, ou abrem nele uma brecha” (161). An interviewer’s key skill, Saramago indicates, is the ability to look between those parts of the wall already tested, to single out the less stable areas and to dispatch address questions which that the besieged interviewee cannot deflect. Where a wall is breached, “o entrevistado terá de olhar devagar para o interior da ferida, não porque não tenha apreendido a pergunta, mas porque necessitará apreender-se a si mesmo” (161): effectively, the interviewee must inter-view himself/herself. When Carlos Reis’s interrogatory skills extend to leaving his “defesas ... em campo raso,” Saramago finds himself “a perder-se tanto mais quanto mais supusesse ter-se achado” (162), and forced to contemplate formerly unrecognized aspects of himself and comment thereupon.

Casting Reis’s volume as a blow-by-blow History of the Siege of José Saramago, Saramago evokes Raimundo Silva’s discovery (in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*) that each successive seizure of the citadel of History must be challenged in order for the true complexity of past events to be illuminated. The reader is encouraged to view Reis as a besieger of the accepted account of Portugal’s Nobel laureate. Reis himself claims that the “refutação da existência de uma realidade singular ou de uma História irreversivelmente fixada” (23) is the rationale of all Saramago’s fiction. The corollary conviction that a biographical profile of an author can be as much a “veículo de subversão de imagens estabelecidas” (26) as that the author’s work itself is the

raison d'être of this elegant, incisive and hugely significant contribution to the burgeoning stock of Saramago interviews.

Saramago is adamant that the vast and varied range of interviews he has given since publishing *Levantado do Chão* in 1980 does not invalidate attempts to uncover new perspectives. The meticulous investigations of Juan Arias in *El amor posible*, or of Baptista-Bastos in *Aproximação a um Retrato*, do not alter the fact that “todas as respostas são e hão-de ser sempre incompletas, que por muito que o entrevistado possa chegar a entrever-se, outro muro ao fundo estará a levantar-se por trás daquele que as perguntas fizeram mais ou menos cair” (162). Each successive appraisal of the author must yield to reappraisals that will draw out distinct, but equally authentic, answers to questions of the nature of the author and the signification of his/her work.

Even so, one might reasonably ask whether another full-length volume of conversations could make a substantial addition to the existing body of work. The answer, in the case of *Diálogos com José Saramago*, is a resoundingly positive one. The eight discussions, framed by individual contributions from interviewer and subject, make optimal use both of Reis's expertise as analyst and historian of literature and ideology in twentieth-century Portugal, and of his clearly abundant sympathy with Saramago's output and opinions. These qualities equip Reis to lift his interviews to the level of spirited, erudite dialogues. Not only is he at least as thorough as his predecessors, he also succeeds in eliciting from his subject answers that combine Saramago's customary discursive grace with a particular degree of precision. The result is as illuminating as it is entertaining. It is a study that will stimulate all categories of reader whom Reis seeks to address, “do leitor corrente dos romances de Saramago ao estudioso da sua obra, passando pelo professor que trabalha com os seus textos e o estudante que (supostamente) os lê” (9). In addition, this volume vindicates Saramago's claim that each new interview produces a new perspective on its subject, by inviting the reader to contextualize Saramago's *oeuvre* within the Portuguese literary canon while eliciting Saramago's own re-visiting and re-viewing of that canon.

Saramago himself pays tribute to Reis's literary knowledge and intellectual sympathy in equal measure. Reis, he claims, eyes him throughout the interviews “com uma doce e irónica curiosidade, porque conhece quase sempre a resposta antes que lhe seja dada, ou é capaz de adivinhar o mais interessante dela quando a não conhece toda” (161). Indeed, Reis has

evidently done his homework. He arrives in Lanzarote armed not merely “de gravador, bloco-notas e benevolência” (31) but with a clutch of well-chosen quotes from Saramago’s previous interviews and an impressive familiarity with the full gamut of the author’s output over a fifty-year time span. He applies this knowledge shrewdly, readily proposing textual examples that elucidate the more opaque of Saramago’s epigrammatic dicta. When he suggests that Saramago’s contention that “a História é parcial e parcelar” (83) “[p]oderia ser uma epígrafe para o *Memorial do Convento*,” the author enthusiastically concurs. It is easy to agree that Saramago’s most widely read novel provides the most helpful and appropriate illustration of his desire to highlight the gaps in the historical record, and restore some of the data that previous historians rejected as irrelevant. The same discussion demonstrates Reis’s sensitivity to the two seemingly contradictory impulses within Saramago’s historiographical novels: an “eventual correção ou compensação da História” and “uma reinvenção da História ou ... uma sua reinterpretação” (86). Although Reis understands how these impulses are harmonized, he nonetheless holds Saramago to an explanation.

Here and throughout the discussions, Reis scores not so much through his commendable persistence, but through knowing the answers he seeks, and formulating questions that will secure those answers promptly yet fully. Frequently, Reis marshals his inquiries into a sequence that allows Saramago to take the discussion first one way, then another, before being pinned down on a key point. The discussion of whether a text can ignore, defy or slavishly promote a given ideology is exemplary (72-75). Saramago’s response ranges widely, from relating his belief that literature “não pode ... viver fora da ideologia” to a consideration of the phenomena of censorship, party policy and authors’ political allegiances. While Reis welcomes these meanderings, he is not diverted from his ultimate goal: an explanation of how Saramago the author of texts that reject unstinting allegiance to a party line coexists with Saramago the Communist Party activist. Saramago’s response is unequivocal: “mesmo que eu não esteja a dizer naquilo que escrevo ‘Viva o Partido!’ é fácil ao leitor atento entender que o autor que ele está a ler pensa de uma maneira determinada” (75).

Reis also manages to satisfy the demands of a heterodox readership through deft variations of his interviewing style, and by addressing key issues through an approach that permits one answer to be expressed in more than one manner. He tackles Saramago’s representation of time in narrative

fiction by quoting in full the author's description of "tempo poético" (from "Do canto ao romance, do romance ao canto," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 71.1 [Jan. 1994]: 119-23) as "simultaneamente linear e labiríntico," and by then requesting an explanation of this oxymoron. His reward is a considerably more technical account of how "a escrita do romance permite ... dar [uma] sensação de linearidade, mas ao mesmo tempo encontrar nela [uma] espécie de turbilhão interno que é, pela sua própria definição, labiríntico" (135-36).

The epithet "labyrinthine" is not, however, applicable to *Diálogos com José Saramago*. The sequence of interviews progresses neatly from discussion of themes and ideologemes to consideration of the architecture of Saramago's writing and back again, but not before Reis's lucid prefatory essay, "O autor em construção," and the semi-biographical material of *Diálogo* 1 have provided a thorough induction into Saramago's world. The weightier topics of ideology and historiography are broached in *Diálogo* 2 and *Diálogo* 3. Here Reis—for the sake of the "harmonia global desta indagação" (79)—covers some well-trodden ground yet succeeds in opening up new avenues to an understanding of Saramago's conception of History. Quoting lines from the essay "História e Ficção" back at their author, Reis is rewarded with the beautiful image of time as a canvas upon which "tudo está ao lado de tudo, numa espécie de caos, como se o tempo fosse comprimido e além de comprimido espalmado ... como se os acontecimentos, os factos, as pessoas, tudo isso aparecesse ali não diacronicamente arrumado, mas numa outra arrumação caótica, na qual depois seria preciso encontrar um sentido" (80). With this conception of an obviously unrealizable representation of the totality of the past, Saramago presents another novel demonstration of how "a História é parcial e é parcelar."

The "questões ... mais técnicas" (91) of *Diálogo* 4 allow Saramago to assess the mechanics of novelistic production, including his attempts to "traduzir uma simultaneidade ... dizer tudo ao mesmo tempo" in order to present his view of history in a narrative format, and his strategy, in *Levantado do Chão*, of writing "como se eu estivesse a contar às pessoas que me contaram as suas histórias essas mesmas histórias" in order to expose how our perceptions of past events are conditioned by the subjectivity of their participants and witnesses. *Diálogo* 5 investigates his output in other genres in roughly chronological order, and leads into *Diálogo* 6's consideration of the inevitable generic overlap between the novel and, in particular, the

philosophical or historical essay. Together, these discussions test Reis's thesis that Saramago is less a jack of all literary trades and more a novelist who "irrompeu (o termo não é excessivo) para a escrita do romance" only after a thirty-year apprenticeship of writing journalism and poetry. This assessment—and Reis's identification of the "ensaio de romance" *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* as the last of the formative works—are only half endorsed by Saramago. As he prefers to put it, "[p]rovavelmente não sou um romancista; provavelmente eu sou um ensaísta que precisa de escrever romances porque não sabe escrever ensaios" (46).

Frequently, Reis concludes a discussion by asking Saramago to comment on current discursive commonplaces: the End of History, the Death of the Novel, the Death of God, the Death of Ideology. It is as refreshing to read Saramago's droll confession that "eu tenho notado que nós temos uma tendência para dizer que as coisas morrem" as it is to be told, half a page later, that to talk of the death of ideology "é o discurso mais ideológico que há" (76). *Diálogo 7's* review of matters religious, political and moral adds intellectual meat to these bones, before Reis uses the concluding *Diálogo virtual* to put Saramago in dialogue with his literary ancestors. Replacing questions with quotations from Garrett, Antero, Eça, Pessoa and Carlos de Oliveira among others, Reis provides a lighthearted culmination to the serious scholarly undertaking of gauging Saramago's position within the Portuguese literary canon. From his opening essay onwards, Reis has remarked similarities between Saramago's works and those of Eça (9) and Garrett (117). His chosen quotations now serve to reinforce a notion of Saramago as heir to a specifically Portuguese tradition of literary radicalism: not simply a writer who rejects the "idiotice do Ricardo Reis" that claims that "[s]ábio é o que se contenta com o espectáculo do mundo" (160), but also a man passionate in defence of his country's cultural individuality, yet dismayed by its prevailing "mesquinhez," which, he believes, still justifies Garrett's observation that "a terra é pequena, e a gente que nela vive não é grande" (145-46).

Yet the breadth of Reis's inquiries, and the detailed responses they provoke, prevent such an appraisal of Saramago from becoming reductive. On page 70 Saramago warns that writers whose work is not continuously re-examined and debated "vão a caminho da invisibilidade. O Camões transformou-se numa coroa de louros e num olho fechado, e o Fernando Pessoa é um chapéu, uns óculos e um bigode." No doubt he recognizes that

he is himself in peril of being reduced to a Nobel medal, horn-rimmed specs and a Lanzarote suntan. By acquiescing to besiegement by an expert interviewer who leaves no stone unturned, Saramago grants his readers and admirers greatly enhanced opportunities for a more sophisticated reformulation of his self and his work.