

JOSÉ SARAMAGO

(Azinhaga, 16/11/1922 – Lanzarote, 18/07/2010)

Novelist, poet, critic, chronicler, playwright, librettist, translator and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998, José Saramago produced a body of dramatic writing that whilst not extensive, was incisive. Drawing its references from history and defined within a dialectical perspective, it contains the concerns of his fiction.

He was born in Azinhaga (Golegã) into a humble rural family, receiving the name and nickname of his father, José de Sousa, known as «Saramago». He lived in Lisbon from his early childhood, after his parents moved there in search of work. Economic difficulties forced him to leave the Liceu Gil Vicente and move into technical training and he began his working life as a mechanic, later becoming a public sector worker in different institutions.

In 1947 he published *Terra do pecado*, his first novel, but only returned to literature in 1966 with the publication of *Os poemas possíveis*, his first book of poetry. However, from 1955, he went to work for the publishing company Estúdios Cor, where he was employed full time from 1959. At that time, he also began working intensely as a translator, translating more than 60 titles in 20 years. It was also during this time that he published as a literary critic in various periodicals (*Seara Nova*, 1967-1968), as an author of chronicles (*A Capital*, 1968-1969; *Jornal do Fundão*, 1971-1972) and editorialist (*Diário de Lisboa*, 1972-1973, where he directed the newspaper's literary supplement). He had joined the Portuguese Communist Party in 1969, at that time operating underground, and in 1975 he was removed from his job as assistant director of the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* over political differences resulting from the 25th November coup. It was at this point he decided to live by translating and writing his own original texts, which would consecrate him as one of the greatest authors of the Portuguese language.

In relation to theatre, he was an accidental playwright and his debut into this genre began with *A noite* (1979). At the time «utopia was taking refuge in the theatre» (as stated by Benite in 1998: 21) and the Companhia de Teatro de Campolide staged the play. It was directed by Joaquim Benite, who remembers the writer's involvement: «he sat through a lot of rehearsals, discussed the text with us, marvelled at the adventure, of the words he had written in the physical space of the stage » (Benite 1998: 21). It was dedicated to Luzia Maria Martins, who had challenged him to write the play and suggested the theme (Zurbach 1999: 153) – the reactions and antagonisms that emerged as reports of the revolution reached the newsroom of a Lisbon newspaper on the night of the 24th to the 25th April 1974. It was defined by Maria Alzira Seixo as a «celebration, an anthem to a time in the present that clears away the past, a gradually constructed writing of euphoria» (Seixo 1987: 34).

A year later, Joaquim Benite directed *Que farei com este livro?* (1980), the title of which recovers the question - what will I do with this book? – attributed to Luís de Camões, and which sets the theme for the plot: the conflicts the 16th century poet came up against with the institutions – the Court and the Inquisition – when publishing *Os Lusíadas* during a time of oppression. Besides constituting a «dramatization of disenchantment», the text would be a «satire on the vulnerability of the writer, which

exists in all times but, perhaps, more in ours» (Seixo 1987: 35). At the end, the question that Camões asks himself, he addresses to the public: «what will you do with this book?». As Luiz Francisco Rebello points out: it is in the reading of the epic poem that «the solution to the conflict, the surpassing of the obstacles in which it was generated, the transition to the future reside » (Rebello 1980: 167).

In the following years, Saramago accrued international successes as a novelist (*Levantados do chão*, 1980; *Memorial do convento*, 1982; *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis*, 1984), but returned to the theatre with *A segunda vida de Francisco de Assis* (1985; Teatro Aberto, 1987). In this play the saint is transported into the present day and presented to the order he founded, now transformed into a capitalist enterprise. Maria Alzira Seixo detects the dramatization of loss in the piece: « loss of the meaning of words, of acts, of ceremonies, or more precisely, of the reasons to fight, of the loss of this time [...]» (Seixo 1987: 36-37).

At the end of the '80s he began a productive collaboration with the composer Azio Corghi that resulted in librettos for operas, as well as cantatas and oratorios for symphony music: *Blimunda* (1989, «lyrical opera» based on *Il memoriale del convento*; Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 1990); *I sogni di Blimunda* (1992, «suite for vocal octet» based on the opera; Rome, Teatro Valle, 1995); *Divara (Wasser und Blut*, 1993, «musical drama», transposition of the play *In Nomine Dei*; Münster, Städtische Bühnen Münster, 1993); *La morte di Lazzaro* (1995, «dramatic cantata» inspired on *Il memoriale del convento*, *Il Vangelo secondo Gesù* and *In Nomine Dei*; Milan, Church of S. Marco, 1995); *...sotto l'ombra che il bambino solleva* (1999, «poem for reciting/sung voice and orchestra» extracted from *L'anno mille* 1993; Florence, Teatro Goldoni, 1999); *Cruci-verba* (2001, «for recitation and orchestra, reading and commentary of *Il Vangelo secondo Gesù* [...] about the *Via Crucis* by Franz Liszt»; Münster, Städtische Bühnen Münster, 2002); *De paz e de guerra* (2002, orchestration «of the poetic text»; Roma, Parco della Musica, 2003); *Il dissoluto assolto* (2005, «musical theatre» based on the play *Don Giovanni ou O dissoluto absolvido*; Lisbon, Teatro São Carlos, 2006); *Poema sinfonico* (2006, «seven scenes of the opera *Blimunda*»; Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 2007) (Aquafredda 2010: 27-31). *In Nomine Dei* he exposes the bloody religious war that was unleashed in the 16th century between Catholics and Protestants in the city of Münster, highlighting the insanity of fanaticism. *Don Giovanni ou O dissoluto absolvido* revisits and subverts one of the most fascinating myths of Western culture, expounded in different languages and countries from *El burlador de Sevilla* by Tirso de Molina to the present day.

In her analysis of Saramago's dramaturgy, Christine Zurbach discovers «the essential traces of the author's writing, namely: the clear presence of the universe of reference (in history and society) in his fiction and the relevance of his vision and critical point of view in a poetic discourse about the world and its irremediable disorder» (Zurbach 1999: 152).

Plays and adaptations of his narrative work have been produced and presented regularly on Portuguese and international stages, of which the most memorable include, *Memorial do convento* (CTA-Companhia de Teatro de Almada, 1998, dramaturgy by Miguel Real and Filomena Oliveira), *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* and *Jangada de pedra* (O Bando, 2004 and 2013 respectively, with dramaturgy by João Brites), *História do cerco de Lisboa* (CTA, 2017, dramaturgy by José Gabriel Antuñano).

The José Saramago Foundation was created in 2007 with the aim of furthering and defending the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a cause which the thoughts, works and actions of the writer have always embraced, as well as, of course, managing and disseminating the author's literary creation.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

AQUAFREDDA, Pietro (2010). «Il "mio" Saramago per MUSICA@ piccolo romanzo di Azio Corghi» in *MUSICA@* n. 20, Novembre-Dicembre, pp. 27-31. Retrieved from <http://rivista.consaq.it/online/20_10/MUSIC@_n20_NovembreDicembre2010_27-31_scrittoriemusica1.pdf> (last accessed: 26 March 2018).

BENITE, Joaquim (1998). «Memorial de "A noite"» in *Jornal de Letras, Artes e Ideias*, n.º 731, 14 October, p. 21.

MANZONI, Teresa (1998). «E a palavra se fez música» in *Jornal de Letras, Artes e Ideias*, n.º 731, 14 October, p. 18.

REBELLO, Luiz Francisco (1980). «Posfácio (talvez) supérfluo» in *Que farei com este livro?*. Lisbon: Editorial Caminho.

SEIXO, Maria Alzira (1987). *O essencial sobre José Saramago*. Lisbon: INCM.

ZURBACH, Christine (1999). «A voz de José Saramago no seu teatro» in *Colóquio/Letras*, n.º 151/152, Janeiro, p. 151-162. Retrieved from <<http://coloquio.gulbenkian.pt/bib/sirius.exe/issueContentDisplay?n=151&p=151&o=p>> (last accessed: 8 March 2018).

SITOGRAPHY

Fundação José Saramago:

<<https://www.josesaramago.org/>> (last accessed: 15 February 2018).

Rita Martins

Sebastiana Fadda

Translated by Amanda Booth