

## Literature as history: José Saramago's 'O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis'

By Christopher Rollason, Ph.D, 1999 – rollason54@gmail.com

\*\*\*

José Saramago followed up 'Memorial do Convento', his highly successful novel of the eighteenth century published in 1982, with 'O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis' ('The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis'), which appeared in 1984 ('Obras de José Saramago', 3 volumes, Porto: Lello e Irmão, 1991, vol. III, pp. 345-745; all translations into English by the present writer). This novel explores a more recent period of Portuguese history, namely the 1930s - the epoch of the consolidation and entrenchment of the Salazar dictatorship and the 'Estado Novo' regime which lasted from 1926 to 1974. Against a background of nationalist obscurantism in Portugal, civil war next door in Spain and increasingly bellicose fascism in Europe, this novel reconstructs the imaginary identity of Ricardo Reis, one of the pseudonyms, or 'heteronyms', adopted by the poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935; Pessoa's poems are signed variously under his own name and those of three fictitious poets invented by himself - Álvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro and Ricardo Reis - while his most important prose work, 'O Livro do Desassossego' ('The Book of Disquiet'), is credited to another alter ego, Bernardo Soares). Starting out from the 'biographical' indications supplied by Pessoa himself (Ricardo Reis is a doctor who lived for years in Brazil), Saramago imagines the character returning to Portugal in December 1935, and traces his daily life over the nine months up to his death. Reis arrives in Lisbon, rents a hotel room and then an apartment, gets involved with two women, Lídia and Marcenda, is followed by the police, and engages in metaphysical disquisitions with the ghost of the recently-deceased Fernando Pessoa. As in 'Memorial do Convento', Saramago's technique combines realist and non-realist elements, but this time adding to the brew a strong intertextual and metatextual element: the names Marcenda and Lídia both derive from Pessoa's 'Odes de Ricardo Reis', and, indeed, Saramago's whole novel is built around the reconstruction of another writer's fictional personage, imagined in dialogue with his creator.

It may at first sight seem strange that Saramago, the committed communist, should have chosen to focus his reading of Pessoa and his epoch on Ricardo Reis, of all Pessoa's heteronyms the most detached from the everyday world of human struggle. Reis is, according to Pessoa, a classicist and traditionalist who left Portugal for Brazil after the founding of the republic in 1910 ('se expatriou espontaneamente por ser monárquico' - 'he left his country spontaneously because of his monarchist beliefs' - letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, 13 January 1935, in Pessoa, 'Sur les hétéronymes' (bilingual Portuguese/French edition), Le Muy (France): Éditions Unes, 1993, p. 60). The 'Odes de Ricardo Reis', amply quoted across Saramago's novel, are neo-classical and pastoral,

affirming the virtues of non-engagement from a pedestal of olympian detachment. Pessoa's imaginary poet evokes Epicurus, 'sereno e vendo a vida/à distância a que está' ('serene and viewing life/at its due distance'), and declares: 'Sábio é o que se contenta com o espectáculo do mundo' ('Wise is the man who contents himself with the spectacle of the world') (Pessoa, 'Odes de Ricardo Reis', Lisbon: Publicações Europa-América, 1988, pp. 103, 104); the latter phrase is, indeed, quoted by Saramago as one of the epigraphs to his novel. According to the Portuguese critic David Mourão-Ferreira, 'Ricardo Reis ... sintetiza toda a sabedoria do passado, todo o património moral da tradição humanística' - 'Ricardo Reis synthesises the entire wisdom of the past, the entire moral heritage of the humanist tradition' (Fernando Pessoa: 'O Rosto e as máscaras: textos escolhidos', ed. Mourão-Ferreira, 2nd edn., Lisbon: Edições Ática, 1978 - 'Prefácio', p. 14), while the Italian novelist and Pessoa scholar Antonio Tabucchi, writing in French, has said: 'Reis choisit de ne pas choisir ... l'idéal de Reis est un temps immobile, un monde immobile' ('Reis chooses not to choose ... his ideal is an immobile time and world') ('La Nostalgie, l'automobile et l'infini: Lectures de Pessoa', Paris: Seuil, 1998, pp. 32-33). This neo-pagan epicureanism is far removed indeed from the Marxist notion of interpreting the world in order to change it: there is clearly an irony at work in Saramago's text that will receive full elucidation only at the end.

Saramago's writing in this novel is densely intertextual. The constant presence of Fernando Pessoa and the recurrent references to Luis de Camões, Portugal's national poet (1524-1580), suggest the design of writing a text that will stand in the direct line of the Portuguese literary tradition. At the same time, Portugal's literature (like its history) is signified in its relation to larger currents in the wider world. Ricardo Reis' nocturnal wanderings across Lisbon may recall the Bernardo Soares of Pessoa's 'O Livro do Desassossego' (also quoted in the epigraphs), but, with their meditations on mortality, they also strongly suggest the roving of James Joyce's Leopold Bloom, in another rainswept port capital on the periphery of Europe. Another ghost stalking Saramago's prose is that of an Argentinian of Portuguese descent, Jorge Luis Borges. Ricardo Reis arrives in Lisbon on a ship that began its voyage in Buenos Aires (p. 351), and throughout the novel is trying, in vain, to finish reading a book - in English - called 'The God of the Labyrinth', by the Irish writer Herbert Quain (p. 363), which he borrowed from the vessel's library and failed to return. Both book and writer are imaginary, but they have a previous existence in the pages of Borges, who wrote a pastiche 'critical essay' on the 'work of Herbert Quain' - including 'The God of the Labyrinth' - ('Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain' - 'Examination of the work of Herbert Quain' (1941), in 'Ficciones', Madrid: Alianza, 1971, pp. 81-87). Borges, in that same text (p. 87), even claimed the phantasmagoric Quain as a virtual heteronym, the 'author' of his own story 'Las ruinas circulares' ('The Circular Ruins' - op. cit., pp. 61-69), in which a man discovers he is no more than a character in someone else's dream ('comprendió que él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo' -

‘he realised that he too was an appearance, that another was dreaming him’ - p. 69) - as Ricardo Reis, too, is ultimately an imaginary being dreamt by another, by Fernando Pessoa. Saramago grounds his novel, then, in a literary tradition which is at one and the same time classical and modernist, Portuguese and international.

The intertextual dimension extends, indeed, to Saramago’s own writing, and to the novelist’s own life-as-text. The name ‘Marcenda’ resembles ‘Blimunda’, both morphologically and in its unusualness, as the narrator points out: ‘este nome de Marcenda não o usam mulheres, são palavras doutro mundo, doutro lugar, femininos mas de raça gerúndia, como Blimunda, por exemplo, que é nome à espera de mulher que o use’ (‘this name, Marcenda, isn’t borne by women, we’re talking about words from another world, another place, feminine nouns of the tribe of gerunds, like Blimunda, for example, which is a name waiting for a woman to bear it’ - pp. 684-685). Marcenda herself, too, is physically imperfect, with a withered arm that leaves her effectively one-handed, like Baltasar; and she hails from Coimbra, the city of the priest Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão. Lídia, the barely literate hotel chambermaid, recalls the illiterate Blimunda in her poised yet daring vivacity. At certain moments in the text, the narrator recalls other elements from ‘Memorial do Convento’: the convent of Mafra (p. 401), the flying machine of the inventor-priest (p. 670). On a different plane, the imaginary Ricardo Reis reads the real ‘Diário de Notícias’, a newspaper of which the real José Saramago was once deputy editor; and, as he explores the press, he reads of floods in the ‘concelho’ (local government unit) of Golegã (p. 368), which - though the text does not say so - happens to include a village called Azinhaga, which is, of course, José Saramago’s birthplace ...

In this novel of poetic creation, another key dimension is Saramago’s constant questioning and stretching of the Portuguese language. His dense and intricate expression, even as it reconstructs a world culturally familiar to his Portuguese readers, makes that same world strange by interrogating linguistic convention. Across the novel, Saramago’s writing plays with the conventions that govern words, pausing self-consciously to reflect on: double meanings (‘como ele muita outra gente descia ... para assistir à passagem do ano, acaso passará mesmo, sobre as cabeças deles e nossas voará um risco de luz’ - ‘like him, large numbers of people were on their way down ... to be there for New Year’s Eve (in Portuguese, ‘a passagem do ano’) - perhaps the year will pass literally, and a streak of light will pass over their heads and ours’ - p. 415); synonyms (‘teria de comprar uma tulpia, um abajur, um globo, um quebra-luz, qualquer destas palavras servirá’: this sentence tells the reader that Ricardo Reis intends to buy a lampshade, lists four different synonyms, and comments: ‘any of these words will do’ - p. 553); antonyms (‘houve fregueses que lhe deram, rusticamente, a vez, e por esta urbanidade pôde Ricardo Reis comer, mais depressa do que esperava’ - ‘some of the guests rustically gave up their places for him, and

thanks to their urbanity Ricardo Reis was able to lunch earlier than he'd expected' - p. 640); and even grammatical gender ('nas traseiras do prédio há quintais com ... coelheiras e galinheiros, olhando-os reflectiu Ricardo Reis no enigma semântico de ter dado coelho coelheira e galinha galinheiro, cada género transitando para o seu contrário, ou oposto' - 'at the back of the building there were allotments with ... rabbit-hutches and chicken-coops, and looking down, Ricardo Reis reflected on the semantic enigma that had produced (the feminine noun) rabbit-hutch from (the masculine noun) rabbit and (the masculine noun) chicken-coop from (the feminine noun) chicken, each gender giving rise to its contrary, or opposite' - p. 552). An enormous range of registers of Portuguese are reproduced and parodied: the conventions of everyday politeness ('quando quiser alguma coisa é só dizer' - 'if there's anything I can do for you, just say so' - p. 549; 'quando tornar a precisar da gente, patrão, estamos sempre ali' - 'if you need us again, sir, we're at your service' - p. 551); the commonplaces of gossip ('ontem veio cá uma, agora está lá outra ... mudou-se faz amanhã oito dias e já lá entraram duas mulheres ... em toda a semana ele só saía na hora do almoço' - 'one woman yesterday, another one today ... he only moved in a week ago tomorrow, and two women visited him already ... and all week he's only ever gone out at lunchtime' - p. 583); journalistic stereotypes ('não faltam por esta cidade lugares onde a festa continue, com luzes ... e animação delirante, como os jornais não se esquecem de dizer' - 'and nor does the city lack places where the festivities carry on, with bright lights ... and delirious animation, as the newspapers always say' - p. 417); and, on a more sinister level, the political clichés of the Salazar regime, the stock phrases of empire and authoritarian nationalism ('império temos, e dos bons, com ele até cobriríamos a Europa e ainda sobraria império' - 'we have an empire, and a fine one too, which could cover all Europe and there'd still be some empire left' - p. 593; 'somos penhores e fiéis continuadores da grande gesta lusa e daqueles nossos maiores que deram novos mundos ao mundo e dilataram a fé e o império' - 'we are the tokens and the loyal continuers of the great exploits of Portugal, and our ancestors who gave new worlds to the world and spread the faith and the empire' - p. 727).

The act of writing, as manifested in the different voices of Reis, Pessoa and the narrator, is presented, then, as the end-product of generations of struggle with a centuries-old language. The linguistic and literary dimensions of the creative process are given major prominence in what is, throughout, a highly self-conscious narrative. However, it emerges with equal clarity from the pages of this book that Saramago believes writing should *also* be a form of struggle in the material and political world. As the novel advances, the political references accumulate - not only to Salazar's 'Estado Novo', but to Hitler and Mussolini, and, above all, to the Spanish civil war: the advances of Franco's troops cast a darkening shadow over the latter part of the narrative. The Portuguese taste for spectacle forms the pretext for a series of descriptive set-pieces, at first largely innocent (the 'bodo do Século' - a distribution of alms at

a newspaper office -, New Year's eve in the Rossio square, a theatre play about fisherfolk, the Carnival), but later far darker (a triumphantly meaningless pilgrimage to the shrine at Fátima, an air-raid drill and, finally, the real sinking of three rebel ships). The Fátima episode recalls the more sinister ecclesiastical occasions of 'Memorial do Convento' - the pilgrimage is presented, like the *autos-da-fé* of the earlier novel, as a business and social event and a pretext for ideological manipulation; the 'pevides', 'tremoços', 'queijadas' and 'carapaus' (pumpkin-seeds, lupin-seeds, cheese pastries and fried mackerel - pp. 639-40) offered to refresh the pilgrims come over as far more substantial - and more authentically Portuguese - than the empty objects of their devotion, concerning which ... nothing is revealed!: 'Não houve milagres. A imagem saiu, deu a volta e recolheu-se, os cegos ficaram cegos, os mudos sem voz, os paráliticos sem movimento' ('No miracles occurred. The image emerged, went on its round and disappeared again, the blind were still blind, the dumb voiceless, the paralysed motionless' - p. 649). Across the novel, the long-suffering Portuguese people itself is presented with some degree of ambivalence: the victims of manipulation are also victims of themselves. In Saramago's 1930s, as in his re-created eighteenth century, there are those like Lídia (or Blimunda) who act with initiative and awareness, and those who adhere passively to received stereotypes, or, indeed - like the hotel manager or the good housewives in Ricardo Reis' building - indirectly facilitate political authoritarianism through their mentality of small-time espionage and unrelenting gossip.

It is clear enough that, in the novel's densely evoked historical context of encroaching fascism at home and abroad, José Saramago cannot be asking the reader to endorse Ricardo Reis' aesthetic stance of neo-classical detachment. Nor, obviously, is the text uncritically validating the messianic-nationalist political position of Fernando Pessoa ('Sou, de facto, um nacionalista místico, um sebastianista racional' - 'I am, in fact, a mystical nationalist, a rational Sebastianist' - letter of 1935 to Casais Monteiro, op. cit., p. 50), as embodied in 'Mensagem' ('Message'), the sequence of historical poems published in his own name in 1934 which, apart from evoking the heroic Dom Sebastião, the Portuguese equivalent of King Arthur, affirms the mystical-maritime destiny of Portugal, imagining Afonso de Albuquerque, the conqueror of Goa, straddling the globe, 'de pé, sobre os países conquistados' ('standing over the conquered nations'), and likening the explorer Bartolomeu Dias to the legendary world-bearing giant Atlas ('Atlas, mostra alto o mundo no seu ombro' - 'Like Atlas, he displays the world, raised high on his shoulder') (Pessoa, 'Message: édition bilingue', Portuguese/French edition, preface by José Augusto Seabra, Paris: José Corti/Éditions UNESCO, 1988, pp. 78, 92). Indeed, in Saramago's novel the names Afonso de Albuquerque and Bartolomeu Dias are ironically given to two of the rebel ships sunk by the Portuguese military, thus suggesting a doomed and anachronistic revolt.

In 'The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis', the protagonist is marked as moribund from the start by the very title, while Pessoa himself, when introduced, has already become a ghost. At the end, the ultimate sterility of Ricardo Reis' detachment is made clear by the disintegration of his relationship with Lídia, as their differences are finally brought to a head by their growing disagreements over the Spanish civil war (her brother, a sailor, is also a communist). Reis' lack of commitment to Lídia seems to mirror his lack of political and humanist commitment, his refusal to side with the people. As Franco's troops proclaim 'o império da cruz e do rosário' ('the empire of the cross and the rosary' - p. 705), Lídia bitterly asks herself what she is doing in Reis' house, 'uma criada de servir que tem um irmão revolucionário e se deita com um senhor doutor contrário às revoluções' ('a servant-maid whose brother is a revolutionary, who goes to bed with a doctor and intellectual who doesn't believe in revolutions' - p. 706), and decides never to return. It may be concluded that, for Saramago, the olympian or regal detachment of a Reis (the name 'Reis' means 'kings' in Portuguese) is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of significant art, above all in a time of crisis. At the same time, however, Saramago gives dramatic form to the shifting, multiple character of artistic creation, by representing the poet Pessoa in dialogue with a split-off portion of himself; if - to quote David Mourão-Ferreira again - Pessoa's heteronyms are 'como personagens de uma peça monumental ... os quais ... se articulam num diálogo ininterrupto' ('like characters in a monumental drama ... who connect with each other in continual dialogue' - op. cit., p. 15), Saramago has gone one step further in imagining the acting-out of that dialogue. Ricardo Reis, as realised in the pages of both Pessoa and Saramago, remains but one of the many selves of Fernando Pessoa - an artist who, even if his politics are not exactly identical to Saramago's, cannot, in the multiplicity of the voices he weaves, be found guilty of aestheticism 'pur et dur'.

This novel remains, despite everything, a testimony to Saramago's admiration of Pessoa as a writer, while also showing the novelist hard at work staking out his own claim to a place in the pantheon of Portuguese literature. We may note that Pessoa, in the letter of 1935 already quoted above, speculated on his own chances of winning the Nobel ('quando ... me for dado o Prémio Nobel' - 'when ... they award me the Nobel Prize' - letter to Casais Monteiro, op. cit., p. 53), and that Saramago himself told the press, in the wake of his own award: 'Fernando Pessoa merecia mil prémios Nobel' ('Fernando Pessoa deserved a thousand Nobel prizes' - 'Público', 10 Oct 1998). 'The Year in the Death of Ricardo Reis', a novel which could not have existed without Pessoa, may be seen, in a sense, as having secured a share in Portuguese literature's first Nobel for the deceased poet, by a circuitous, back-door route.

As a final note on the intertextual dimension of Saramago's work, it may be worth observing that his works have become a fertile presence in the writing of some of his most admired contemporaries. Saramago's recreation of the

Pessoa-Reis relationship is, surely, a textual factor behind Antonio Tabucchi's short prose piece 'I tre ultimi giorni di Fernando Pessoa: un delirio' ('The Last Three Days of Fernando Pessoa: A Delirium', 1994), in which the dying Pessoa is visited in hospital by each of his heteronyms in turn, Reis included. Salman Rushdie's novel of 1995, 'The Moor's Last Sigh', includes an Indo-Portuguese character named Blimunda ('The Moor's Last Sigh', London: Jonathan Cape, 1995, p. 13), and Rushdie himself has admitted: 'Roubei-lhe [a Saramago] a Blimunda' ('I stole Blimunda from him [Saramago]' - interview with Clara Ferreira Alves in the Lisbon weekly 'Expresso', 4 Nov 1995, magazine section, p. 96). 'Memorial do Convento' seems also to have left its traces in Gabriel García Márquez's novel of 1994, 'Del amor y otros demonios' ('Of Love and Other Demons') - another tale of the Inquisition, this time in the Americas, which mentions a volume of Voltaire in Latin, 'traducido por un monje de Coimbra' ('translated by a monk from Coimbra' - 'Del amor y otros demonios', Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1994, p. 155) - a reference which indirectly recalls another heterodox monk from Coimbra, Saramago's Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão. We may conclude that José Saramago has, indeed, made a major contribution, in the wake of Fernando Pessoa, to cementing the international credibility of Portuguese literature in our century.

\*\*\*

All translations into English in this article, from Saramago and from other non-English sources, are by the present writer.

\*\*\*

This is part of the English version of a longer essay on Saramago which I published in Portuguese in May 1999 in No 12 (paper and Internet versions) of the magazine Farol (Viana do Castelo, Portugal, No 12, May 1999, pp. 55-70 and: <http://www.farol.nortenet.pt>).