

MEETING WITH JOSÉ SARAMAGO AT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Brussels, 23 March 1999

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On 23 March 1999, José Saramago made his first visit to the European Parliament since the historic moment of 8 October 1998 which consecrated him as Portugal's first-ever Nobel literature laureate. The 76-year-old novelist addressed MEPs, officials and the public in a two-hour meeting-cum-debate organised by the GUE parliamentary group (Group of the United European Left), on the initiative of its Portuguese members.

Over 300 people attended the meeting, which was chaired by the Spanish MEP Mr Alonso Puerta, the group's chairman. The proceedings were in Portuguese and Spanish, but the full range of interpretation was on offer to a multinational audience. Introducing the Nobel prize-winner, Mr Puerta stressed that José Saramago is not only a literary but also a political figure, whose long-term commitment to the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) is legendary. The Nobel award, Mr Puerta declared, represented a triumph both for the novelist himself and for the Portuguese language.

Mr Sérgio Ribeiro, MEP, who is a close friend of the writer, paid homage to José Saramago on behalf of the members of the GUE Group, and expressed his enormous satisfaction at his visit, and at the Nobel award, which had finally repaired a long-standing injustice. He read out an extract from Mr Saramago's novel 'A Jangada de Pedra' ('The Stone Raft'), pointing up the brilliance with which the author satirises the discourse and formalisms of bureaucracy and power. Mr Ribeiro stressed that the Nobel laureate's novels have profound roots in actual life, and communicate a powerful message of hope for humanity.

José Saramago began his address by evoking the modern universe of bureaucracy and recalling the figure of Franz Kafka. He felt that if there are three writers who represent the spirit of the twentieth century, they are: Kafka, for his exposure of the dehumanising forces at work in our world; Fernando Pessoa, for his perception that the individual self is in reality multiple; and Jorge Luis Borges, whose literature of ritual announces a world itself composed of rituals. He explained that in his own novel, 'Ensaio sobre a Cegueira' ('Blindness'), he had striven to express his own perception of that dehumanised modern reality which Kafka's work foreshadows: his main purpose in this novel was 'to denounce the perversion of human relations'. He had been asked by numerous film directors for permission to film this novel, but the answer was no: he felt that a film of his book would reduce it to a mere spectacle of sex and violence and - as had happened with Umberto Eco's 'The Name of the Rose' - deprive it of its entire intellectual content.

The writer expressed his customary discontent with the condition of the world, which, he believes, is dominated by a spirit which is 'at the least conservative, if not downright reactionary'. The state must respect the individual, and each individual must respect the essential difference embodied in the other. He explained that his latest novel, 'Todos Os Nomes' (in French, 'Tous les Noms'; not yet translated into English), the tale of a bureaucrat employed at the registry office in an unnamed, imaginary country, should be read as a meditation on otherness: the other, who may appear to be our adversary, can also become the path through which we discover our own authentic self.

Mr Saramago stressed that to write out of commitment does not mean an obligation to produce moralistic literature: rather, all his books are an attempt to show the reader who he, José Saramago, is, and confront others with his particular vision of the world. Literature will not save the world, but it is made out of multiple human experiences and sufferings. The Nobel laureate eloquently denounced today's neo-liberal society, in which to be born confers no inherent rights, as a world which is absurd; indeed Kafkaesque, thanks to the 'contamination of relationships by the perversion of the human'. He concluded by affirming the crucial humanist vocation of the writer: 'The profession of the writer is the profession of being a man or a woman, a human being.'

A wide-ranging and animated debate followed, with the participation of numerous MEPs as well as members of the public. The questions ranged from the political to the specifically literary. Asked why he had left the French Basque Country out of 'The Stone Raft', the novelist explained that the subject of this novel was the Iberian peninsula as such and only the peninsula (with the sole exception of Gibraltar). To a question focusing on 'O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis' ('The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis') and the intellectual detachment of its aloof protagonist (based on a creation of Fernando Pessoa's), he replied that, indeed, he had written that novel to refute the position of the non-engaged intellectual, but also to make his peace with that same position. In reply to a question on the element of intertextual reference between his own novels - as where 'The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis' evokes characters and events from the not obviously related 'Memorial do Convento' ('Baltasar and Blimunda') - he expressed his belief that we are all intertextual beings, and suggested that all his books may legitimately be read as chapters of one greater book.

It is not every day that literature is discussed at the European Parliament, still less in the articulate and perceptive fashion in which one of Europe's greatest living writers illuminated multiple aspects of his own work, in this fecund dialogue with the public. In a place normally seen as a theatre of political debate, José Saramago's visit shed new light on the interrelation - complex, dynamic and in no sense reducible to dogma - between the literary and the political, the world of the arts and the world of everyday human struggle: an interrelation of which Portugal's Nobel laureate has become, through his labour as a writer and his practical activity, a supreme exponent for our difficult times.

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