

Review of José Saramago, CAIM -

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THE MYTH OF CAIN REWRITTEN BY JOSÉ SARAMAGO: A LOST OPPORTUNITY?

José Saramago, *Caim*: Lisbon: Caminho, 2009 (novel in Portuguese; English translation not yet available) – 182 pages, soft covers, ISBN 978-972-212-076-0

This review offers some brief lines of thought on *Caim* (*Cain*), the last in a long line of novels by the Portuguese writer and 1998 Nobel laureate José Saramago (1922-2010). This novel does not yet exist in English, but will no doubt soon join virtually all its predecessors in that language: it has already proved a best-seller in Portugal and Spain.

José Saramago was a national icon in Portugal, where his death in June 2010 was commemorated with two days' national mourning, and was equally revered in neighbouring Spain, his adopted country of residence (in later years he lived in the Canary Islands). He also had a tremendous following in Latin America, Italy, France and elsewhere, being seen as an ambassador for Portuguese culture and the Portuguese language and respected as much for the outstanding merits of his literary works (mostly novels) as for his outspoken and often controversial political statements. In India, works of Saramago's have appeared in Hindi and Bengali translation.

Saramago's work has also made considerable inroads into the English-speaking world, notably with the apocalyptic novel *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (*Blindness*, 1995), also made into a successful film. The novelist, famously an unreconstructed communist and convinced atheist, was never a stranger to controversy, and indeed, with *Caim* might seem even to have gone out to court it. This novel totally reverses the relaxed mood that had been created by its immediate predecessor, the genial comedy *A Viagem do Elefante* (*The Elephant's Journey*, 2008): it is one of its author's blackest works, perhaps only to be compared with the totalitarian nightmare *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez* (*Seeing*, 2004) in its harshness.

Saramago returns to the critique of the Judeo-Christian belief-system that he had begun in the notably controversial *O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo* (*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, 1991), a sardonic rewriting of the Christian Gospels which drew the highest of praise from America's notably demanding critic Harold Bloom (a long-term Saramago admirer who has, indeed repeatedly named him the greatest novelist of recent times). In *Caim*, Saramago does for the Judeo-Christian Old Testament what he did in the earlier novel for the New Testament Gospels, revisiting biblical narratives with the unforgiving eye of an atheist. The

ideological project is crystal-clear. Its aesthetic success and conceptual coherence are for the reader to decide.

As in *O Evangelho*, in the new novel Saramago offers an atheist's judgment on the Judeo-Christian God (in Portuguese, "o senhor" – "the Lord"), perceived as a capricious and irrational tyrant. Here, he focuses on the figure of Cain from the biblical Book of Genesis - Cain, firstborn son of Adam and Eve, brother and murderer of Abel, the first killer of another human being and type of the wanderer and exile. The Nobel laureate thus places himself in a long line of Western writers who have, with varying degrees of orthodoxy or scepticism, revisited the Cain myth, among them Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, Lord Byron, Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, George Eliot, and, in Portugal, Jorge de Sena. The narrative conceit, arguably more ingenious than imaginative, that holds Saramago's book together is the appearance of Cain the wanderer as a character – onlooker or participant – in a whole sequence of other Old Testament stories (this obviously without biblical licence). Thus, Saramago revisits key episodes from Genesis and other books of the Old Testament: the Tower of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham and Isaac, Moses and the golden calf, the fall of Jericho, the sufferings of Job, etc. The characters are virtually all scriptural, with the major exception of the eminently non-biblical Lilith, a figure from parascriptural lore - according to some Adam's first wife, but here Cain's lover.

The narrative on the whole stays fairly close to the biblical stories (Cain's apocryphal participation apart), until the culminating episode, a radical rewriting of the story of Noah's Ark with a shock ending - whose full details I leave the reader to discover, but which reeks, again, more of over-ingenious sleight-of-hand than of coherent plotting. I will reveal that the book's conclusion is bleak and despairing in the extreme. Meanwhile, however, I would draw attention to what Saramago has *not* done in this novel.

The biblical myth of Cain is in itself ambivalent in the extreme. Cain sheds the first human blood, but humanity's first shedder of blood as such is not Cain at all but his brother Abel, with his animal sacrifice to God which contrasts with Cain's plant offering. The indelible mark on Cain's brow is a sign of his crime, but also a warning from God that no-one may lay hands on him. Cain's punishment is not to wander forever, as many have erroneously supposed, but to wander for a certain period until he settles down and becomes the founder of the first city, named Enoch. There, his descendants invent and practise the arts and crafts of metallurgy, stockbreeding and music. Even if the Cainites are presumed to have perished later, in Noah's Flood, the arts they invented remain. Cain and his descendants thus have a Promethean side to them - an aspect explored, indeed, by Hugo and Eliot in their respective poems "La Conscience" and "The Legend of Jubal", but not taken up by Saramago. Equally, Byron, in his two poetic dramas *Cain: A Mystery* and *Heaven and Earth*, makes an eloquent case for Cain's heritage as cultural rebel and questioner of authority.

In *Caim*, Abel's brother and killer plays the role of eternal vagabond, but not that of founder of cities and arts. The city of Enoch appears in Saramago's narrative, as does Cain's son of the same name, but in this version the city already existed, presided over by its queen Lilith, when Cain arrived, and his seed through Enoch goes nowhere. Saramago has, quite simply, ignored the Promethean potential of the Cain-figure as rebel and founder of arts, and for all its insistent critique of Judeo-Christian theology, his novel, I would argue, ultimately suffers not only from a melodramatic trick ending but also from an over-stress on the figure's more conventional wanderer aspect. Such a contention would, of course, need to be illustrated in detail from exhaustive comparison with the biblical sources and with other literary

representations of the story. The feeling of the present reviewer is that such an analysis would probably find Byron's critique of the Cain myth to be profounder and more powerful than Saramago's. Nonetheless, *Caim*, which has proved to be the last in its author's line of distinguished novels, will (albeit far from being the best of Saramago's works), in the very finality of its position, certainly stand there, immovably, at the latter end of the Saramago canon as a monument to the Portuguese writer's ever-dissatisfied, ever-questioning critical spirit.