

## "A VIAGEM DO ELEFANTE" : José Saramago's "THE TEMPEST"?

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In this brief piece, I offer the reader a few reflections on "A Viagem do Elefante" José Saramago's novel published in 2008. At the time of publication, the author told the world it might be his last novel. In fact, as we know, he has already followed it in 2009 with a new novel, "Caim". Nonetheless, I believe "A Viagem do Elefante" does have a certain valedictory feel to it: even if no longer chronologically Saramago's last work, in its warmth, geniality and good humour, as well as its joyful exploration of the resources of the Portuguese language, it conveys a sensation of farewell to literature that might recall Shakespeare's "The Tempest". Like that play - also chronologically not quite Shakespeare's last work, but the one in which we find him bidding adieu to the stage ("our revels now are ended") - Saramago's mature and mellow novel is, ultimately, a comedy in which threats never quite come to fruition and no-one dies untowardly.

Saramago recounts what is in itself a true story, the journey of an Indian elephant and his retinue across land and sea, plain and mountain, all the way from Lisbon to Vienna. It was in 1551 that King João III of Portugal gifted an Indian elephant to his cousin the Archduke Maximilian of Austria, son-in-law of the Emperor Charles V. Saramago thus returns to the genre of the historical novel in which he wrote so memorably in "Memorial do Convento". That novel, set in the eighteenth century, focused on the Portugal of the Inquisition, though not excluding the wider European world, in, for instance, the figure of Domenico Scarlatti. The new novel starts in Portugal but fans out through Spain and Italy to its Austrian finishing-point: more pan-European, it also takes in another wider world, that of empire. The book's twin heroes are, beyond all doubt, the elephant Solomon (Salomão or Solimão) and his mahout or keeper (in Portuguese, "cornaca"), Subhro (later absurdly renamed Fritz), a Bengali Indian and nominal Christian convert, arrived in Portugal via Goa. The dignified and resourceful figure of Subhro is a fictional vindication of the ordinary person recalling other such characters in Saramago's work – Blimunda, Lídia in "O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis" or the optician's wife in "Ensaio sobre a Cegueira". Through Subhro, too, Saramago engages as he had never done before with the culture of India, as when, in inquisitorial Portugal, Subhro recounts the story of the elephant-headed Hindu deity Ganesh.

As in "Memorial do Convento", Catholicism is a lurking presence in the pages of a narrative this time set in an earlier period, that of the Council of Trent (happening while the tale unfolds), the Counter-Reformation and the ideological counter-offensive against Protestantism. The Inquisition threatens, but while the church throws up both an absurd attempt at exorcism and a fake miracle involving the elephant, here, in marked contrast to the tragic finale of the earlier novel, no-one actually falls into its institutional clutches, and the "alien" Subhro reaches destination safe and sound. There is, meanwhile, some implicit intertextuality with Saramago's other interrogations of biblical orthodoxy - in "O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo" and now also in "Caim" - as in the passages that rewrite the scriptural narratives of Lazarus or the Gadarene swine.

If "A Viagem do Elefante" marks Saramago's return to the historical novel - certainly far more successfully than Salman Rushdie's recent damp-squib stab at that genre in "The Enchantress of Florence", and on a par with Amitav Ghosh's remarkable tour de force in "Sea of Poppies" - it also finds him engaging in the art of (purposive) comedy to a greater extent than in any other of his novels, the black humour of "O Homem Duplicado" included. Here we may identify a continuity with its predecessor, "As Intermitências da Morte", whose second half marked a new departure

combining Gothic fantasy in the mode of E.T.A. Hoffmann with an exuberant high comedy. This elephant's odyssey, following in the footsteps of a long and distinguished line of works, may indeed, in its empathetic comedy, be crowned the Portuguese Nobel's very own "The Tempest".