

JOSÉ SARAMAGO: A TRIBUTE

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As I write, it is Saturday, 19 June 2010, and one day since José Saramago left us ('Nobel laureate José Saramago dies, aged 87' – Richard Lea, 'Guardian', 18 June 2010 - www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jun/18/jose-saramago-writer-nobel-dies). I am still trying to come to terms with the absence of the Portuguese writer's voice, as novelist and as commentator on our times.

The sheer range and variety, genetically and thematically, of Saramago's remarkable shelf of novels is extraordinary. The dense referentiality and sense of place of 'O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis' / 'The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis' is light-years away from the depersonalised nightmare of 'Ensaio sobre a Cegueira' / 'Blindness'. The worlds of his two very last novels – the genial comedy of 'A Viagem do Elefante' / 'The Elephant's Journey' and the despairing bleakness of 'Caim' / 'Cain' - could not have been further apart. And yet there was a remarkably consistent, trademark 'Saramago style', manifested in the long sentences and the avoidance of quotation marks and initial capitals.

As a novelist Saramago will remain an obligatory reference: for Harold Bloom, he was the greatest novelist of our day, in any language. Vital too, however, is his career as polemical intellectual straddling the globe. For Portuguese and Lusophone literary culture he will always be special, as the first and so far the only writer from Portugal or in Portuguese to win the Nobel. Exiled on Spanish soil, in the Canaries, he became a constant presence in literary Spain, as much a part of his adoptive as of his native culture. Known throughout the Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking worlds, in Italy and in France – and even in the hard-to-crack Anglophone market, especially after the success of the film of 'Blindness' – he had, thanks also to his indefatigable travels and constant public profile, become an instantly recognisable emblem of the engaged writer.

I feel personally affected by this loss: my own relationship with his work was perhaps an especially close one since, unlike Bloom or indeed most of his Anglophone admirers, I read his books, as they came out, in the original, and so was able to appreciate his remarkable sense of the Portuguese language and its expressiveness and eloquence. Over the years I have been the author of a number of articles, reviews, book chapters and encyclopaedia pieces on the master and his work. I met Saramago twice, at a lecture of his in Brussels in 1999, and in Lisbon in 2006 at the launch of a volume of comparative studies of his work to which I was a contributor. His presence was unforgettable.

The tributes will go on thronging in: José Saramago meant many things to many people all over the world, but my own feeling is that we have lost a major intellectual, a novelist whose gaze extended far beyond the realm of literature and who spoke to us in a trenchant, uncompromising voice, standing up for the truth as he saw it – a voice that was as powerful and multiform as those of intellectuals like Walter Benjamin, George Orwell or Edward Said. In an epoch dominated by the siren tones of postmodernist relativism and crude subjectivism, we deeply need the likes of Saramago - intellectuals of solid beliefs and concrete values, who continue to uphold a vision of human advancement. José Saramago is irreplaceable, but his work will remain as a source of constant inspiration, a beacon lighting up humanity however dark the skies.