

José Saramago

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Portugal's Nobel laureate in literature, died on June 18th, aged 87

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THE epiphany occurred some time in the late 1970s, when José Saramago, tall, spare, ascetic, professorial in bearing though in fact self-taught, already in his mid-50s but not yet known, realised that the book he was writing would never take wing unless he wrote it as if he spoke it. He began, then, as he laboured over his tale of the daily grind of peasants in the vast burning plains of Portugal's Alentejo, digging into the dry stones and gravel until their arms bled like Christ's on the cross, to tell the story orally, marking punctuation almost wholly with commas because that was how words came out of mouths, flowing along inexorably like making music, often for pages at a time.

Punctuation, he said, was like traffic signs, too much of it distracted you from the road on which you travelled, and if you wondered, Wouldn't writing be rather confusing without it, he would say No, it was like the constant wash and turn of the sea, sounding even more sibilant in Portuguese than in English, or like a journey taken by a traveller, every step linked to the next and every end to a beginning, or like the press of time, no sooner coming than going, never stopping in the present, which consequently never existed. In any case his novel "Levantado do Chão", "Raised from the Soil", marked his breakthrough, the voice that became Saramago's, and after that he was famous.

Or somewhat better known, at least. The award of the Nobel prize in 1998 caused foreigners to ask Who the devil is this, and many Portuguese to reply that he was a

haughty old Marxist, a signed-up communist for 30 years, always inveighing against the IMF and the EU and lamenting that the Portuguese revolution of April 1974 had never gone far enough, just dwindled into social democracy. He had been chucked off the staff of *Diário de Notícias* for being too hardline left, and had taken to writing sprawling, tremendous, fantastical, sometimes terrifying books about blindness and the lies of history and the force of love, which had gradually won prizes but not, still, crowds of readers. One of his novels, “The Gospel According to Jesus Christ”, had been condemned as heretical in 1992 by the ministry of culture, after which he had gone to the Canaries in exile and a huff of sorts. In his Nobel speech Mr Saramago increased the general confusion by presenting himself as “the teenager”, “the apprentice” and “the proof-reader”, morphing into characters from his past and his books, because he said they had become implanted in him, and they were all the voice he had.

Yet the voice he remembered most was that of his grandfather, an unlettered swineherd of the sandy Ribatejo, telling him stories of revelations, fights and adventure as they lay together under the fig tree and the stars came out in its branches. The dignity and persistence of landless peasants, like his own parents, were themes of several of his books, and though he called them ants, they were ants that raised their heads, that were not irreversibly downtrodden by landlord or estate owner or secret police or priests, but could still make the future if they wanted to. His bedbugs sipped the blood of kings, “no better or worse than that of the other inhabitants of the city”, and his patient woodworm weakened the chair in which António Salazar, dictator of Portugal for most of Mr Saramago’s life, had the stroke that killed him and toppled the regime.

The flying machine

His other great theme was freedom, the questioning of established truths, as when his proofreader Raimundo in “The History of the Siege of Lisbon”, dared to change the textbooks by inserting the word *não*, not, in a crucial place. His lovers defied authority, and his women, who were often pregnant, carried the still-to-be-created future stirring inside them. In 1982 his 18th-century lovers, Baltasar and Blimunda, took to the skies in the *Passarola*, a flying machine powered only by human will, in which they could soar over court, church, Inquisition and the whole stink of Lisbon:

The wind is now south-easterly and blowing fiercely, the earth below sweeps past like the mobile surface of a river that carries with it fields, woodlands, villages, a medley of green, yellow, ochre, and brown, and white walls, the sails of windmills, and threads of water over water, what forces would be capable of separating these waters, this great river that passes and carries everything in its wake, the tiny currents that seek a path therein, unaware that they are water within water.

In the end he was a pessimist, believing that most people were afflicted with the blindness of deliberately not seeing, particularly in Portugal, where many still waited for a Messiah to save them, and where the long-term decay of the country had been masked for years by the flotsam of old imperial dreams. In “The Stone Raft” he cut Iberia free and let it float towards Utopia, over that alluring adventuring sea out of which his hero Luís de Camões had sailed in 1570 with “Os Lusíadas”, Portugal’s greatest epic poem, only to find that no one at court cared to read it. But future

generations had made Camões great. And so José Saramago hoped against hope, clinging to his Marxist dreams when they had been given up for dead, trusting in the tide of never-ending time to take his words to people who would say, This is useful, this has changed us, we can see.