

Reviews

Atkin, Rhian. *Saramago's Labyrinths: A journey through form and content in Blindness and All the Names*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2012.

In *Saramago's Labyrinths*, Rhian Atkin guides us through an exploration of the theme of the labyrinth in the Portuguese writer's oeuvre, with a particular focus on the novels *Blindness* (*Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*) and *All the Names* (*Todos os nomes*). Atkin's writing, in a style that will engage both specialists and non-specialists, introduces the reader to the general theoretical framework behind labyrinths, their history and symbolism, applying it to Saramago's novels. The novels are usually challenging to the reader (both because of form and content) and require a high degree of dedication in their exploration. With her book, Atkin sheds light on the philosophical, ethical and epistemological dimensions of these texts, supplying the reader with concepts and arguments that will ultimately help them in the discovery they set out to make when reading Saramago's work—the discovery of the self. Through the labyrinthian structure of their stories, characters and themes, both novels invite a constant questioning of the reader's time and place and a refusal of hierarchies and established power, always purposely forcing the reader into a state of confusion and disorientation. The labyrinth thus emerges as the most appropriate metaphor for the *ethos* of the Saramaguian texts, and this is highlighted by the choice of two of his most labyrinthine novels—especially *All the Names*, normally overlooked in comparison to his more commercially successful works.

In the introduction, the reader is presented with a differentiation between labyrinths. Atkin identifies them as being *unicursal* (with one path leading to a hidden centre) or *multicursal* (having several pathways). She also pinpoints the existence of a third, more literary, type of labyrinth, originally identified by Umberto Eco—the *rhizomatic* labyrinth. Particularly useful for literary studies, the *rhizomatic* labyrinth has no defined centre; its pathways lead into other pathways in an ever-increasing unfolding of labyrinths of infinite potential. This

concept, tied to a revisitation of the Cretan labyrinth and its Minotaur, forms the Ariadne's thread that will guide the reader in the following chapters. They function as a key to a better understanding of the journey (aptly mentioned in the subtitle as a journey through form and content) that Saramago's novels entail.

Next, and bearing in mind the two concepts already introduced, she proceeds to a close reading of the two novels, unearthing the labyrinthine imagery that emerges. Carefully balancing references to other Saramago's novels and metatextual information from different sources (e.g. several interviews with the author), Atkin follows different paths and identifies several false centers to the labyrinths, these ever-shifting centers being indispensable to the Saramaguian literary project. Warning of the presence of a mythical Minotaur, who turns out to be none other than the reader, she plunges into the multiple layers of the routes followed by Sr. José (in *All the Names*) and the group of blind people led by the doctor's wife (in *Blindness*). Following their physical movements through the confined spaces of the registrar's building and the asylum, the enigmatic journey of Sr. José in the cemetery and the larger expedition that both undertake when out in the city, she unfolds pathways that "do not just bifurcate, but actually plurifurcate ..." (39). She also pays attention to the internal journeys the characters make over the course of the novels' plots, and the internal change that is the product of such journey. This is a very relevant point, as it illustrates the aims and ethical concerns of the author's novels: to produce change and challenge any form of established power and truth by seeking the actual reward that waits at the end of the journey(s)—a reward found within ourselves.

The two chapters that follow are mazes that lead inwards and outwards, respectively. "A Maze of Words" explores the novelist's distinctive style and how it contributes to the labyrinthine construction of the novel. Punctuation, sentence structure and the use of free indirect style are characteristics that contribute to a harmonization between style and content in Saramago's novels and highlight the disconcerting intent behind them. The aural dimension of Saramago's narration also comes to the fore, an important aspect of the writer's attempt to undermine the apparent infallibility of his own narrative voice and cast doubt on the reliability of any narrator. The exploration within the inwards maze of the stylistic and aesthetic realm of these two novels draws parallels between the

journey of the reader and the journey of the writer, defining the process of writing as labyrinthine itself, reinforcing the themes of search and self-discovery.

The final chapter, “A Maze of Works,” an outwards maze which travels through a comprehensive corpus of Saramago’s texts, takes on the task of identifying overlapping rhizomatic pathways between his novels. “A Maze of Works” is one of the most interesting chapters in the book and aims to expand the labyrinth by detecting the interconnectedness of the author’s novels. This *intratextual* exercise benefits the reader with an informed approximation between the characters of his novels, especially between Blimunda (from “Baltazar and Blimunda”) and the doctor’s wife and Sr. José and Raimundo Silva (from *History of the Siege of Lisbon*).

Rhian Atkin’s book *Saramago’s Labyrinths* is an indispensable read and a solid contribution to Saramaguian studies. Her exploration of the labyrinthine theme calls attention to the qualities of Saramago’s writing, qualities that permit us to reassess reality and to challenge the boundaries and limitations of knowledge. Saramago’s labyrinth is, thanks to Atkin’s insights and the tools she provides the explorer with, not one without escape. The active explorer will come out of the labyrinth rewarded, having overcome the Minotaur of his own self.

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