

Book Review

Sabine, Mark. *José Saramago: History, Utopia, and the Necessity of Error.* Legenda, 2016.

José Saramago's artistic engagement with the so-called historical record has captured critical attention since the earliest substantive contributions to his work, the first of which, by Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva, was published in 1989, the same year *História do cerco de Lisboa* appeared. The fascination was, and continued to be for years to come, with the author's apparent postmodernist approach to the commonsense of historical truth in the sequence of five novels published in the 1980s. *José Saramago: History, Utopia, and the Necessity of Error*, by Mark Sabine, both draws from and contributes in valuable ways to this critical tradition. Beyond reasserting the author's continuing commitment to a revolutionary socialist worldview, Sabine demonstrates through the detailed analysis of each of the five novels in question—*Levantado do chão*; *Memorial do convento*; *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis*; *A jangada de pedra*; and *História do cerco de Lisboa*—the revisions that such a commitment entails in the face of the increasingly equivocal (and enabling) authoritarian forces of neo-liberalism and globalization that exclude subaltern voices.

Mark Sabine, Associate Professor of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies at the U of Nottingham, has been studying the novels of Saramago since his Ph.D. thesis while also pursuing research on a number of subjects related to contemporary Portuguese and Lusophone African literatures and visual cultures—focusing in particular on issues of cultural and gender identities. The study of the latter is seamlessly integrated into his analysis of Saramago's historically revisionist novels by attending to how each represents, in ever more provocative ways, the egalitarian challenge of the micro-political. In addition, Sabine's knowledge of a wide range of literatures and traditions of thought beyond the strictly Lusophone as well as his adeptness at comparative perspectives—his co-edition with Adriana Martins, *In Dialogue with Saramago: Essays in Comparative Literature* (2006), is well known—distinguish the present

book in that it systematically sheds light on the dialogues that Saramago's texts maintain with a host of others, from Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* to Miguel de Unamuno's *Por tierras de Portugal y España*.

In the introduction, Sabine discusses the emergence of Saramago's fiction within and in response to several historical, literary, and intellectual contexts. As he does so, he goes over the scholarship that has contributed to its understanding from those different perspectives. Particular attention is given to Bakhtinian polyphony and carnivalization and postmodern historiographic metafiction. It is in a passage from *Memorial do convento* that Sabine finds the self-reflective aesthetic key to reading Saramago's novels of the 1980s, calling for rule-breaking and disruption, or "the necessity of error," in exploring received (historical) narratives. He identifies five "error effects" that align with five broad aesthetic operations—and their political implications—at work in each of the novels focused upon in the subsequent five chapters.

Although the study of a single novel takes center stage in each chapter, discussions of historical details, philosophical and theoretical ideas, and literary echoes both inform and magnify the textual analysis at hand. References to novels from Saramago's later period—among others, to *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*—are plentiful, thus providing an ampler and more organic reading of the different ways in which Saramago negotiates between a certain Marxist ideological steadfastness and the experimental freedom invited by poststructuralist views of history, community, and human emancipation, to name a few. Also, each chapter recaps the analysis of the previous chapter or chapters while anticipating one or more of the points that are still to be made in relation to the next novel under focus. Aided by clear prose and organization, and never succumbing to the temptation of theorizing for its own sake, the book is both logical and compelling. One can hardly read one chapter without being a bit more curious to read the next, while the sequence of critical argumentation relative to how Saramago gets closer and closer to the crux of it all in the intimate, day-to-day relations of affect between singular human beings rises to be the most notable accomplishment of the book. That alone makes up for what are, at times, slightly too detailed and lengthy discussions of intertexts or comparative analyses between Saramago's texts and those of other writers and thinkers.

The question of José Saramago's representation of history or, perhaps more rigorously, the philosophy or philosophies of history to which those

representations may adhere have not been the focus of Saramaguian scholarship for almost two decades now. However, a book that revisits the topic while bringing it to a newer and arguably more complex synthesis is likely to be welcomed by specialists and non-specialists looking for a critical grounding in the author's initial and decisive novels of the 1980s.

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