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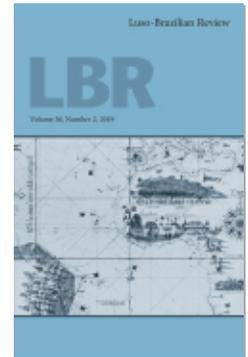
José Saramago: History, Utopia, and the Necessity of Error

by Mark Sabine (review)

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Sabine, Mark. *José Saramago: History, Utopia, and the Necessity of Error.* Cambridge: Legenda, Salisbury House, 2016. 271 pp.

Mark Sabine's *José Saramago. History, Utopia and the Necessity of Error* is a book many scholars interested in Saramago's work have looked forward to for a long time. The volume is an important contribution to the yet sparse existing critical bibliography on Saramago published in English, despite the fact that a large number of his books are already translated into this language and that there is an increasing international academic interest in his work. Sabine is one of the most prominent experts on the fictional production of the winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature. If the genesis of the volume is related to Sabine's PhD research nearly two decades ago, *José Saramago: History, Utopia and the Necessity of Error* constitutes a long, mature, and theoretically well-anchored study on the evolution of the Portuguese writer's work as well as Sabine's growth as a literary scholar.

Despite focusing his attention on Saramago's novelistic production of the 1980s, a remarkable prolific decade that would be decisive to Saramago's consecration as one of the major writers of the twentieth century, Sabine examines the five novels that constitute his corpus in perspective: *Levantado do chão* (*Raised from the Ground*, 1980), *Memorial do convento* (*Baltasar and Blimunda*, 1982), *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis* (*The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, 1984), *A jangada de pedra* (*The Stone Raft*, 1986), and *História do cerco de Lisboa* (*History of the Siege of Lisbon*, 1989). In other words, by drawing relevant parallels between these works with Saramago's previous and later production, Sabine sheds a new light on the 1980s novels, thus bringing relevant new critical insights to existing scholarship on Saramago's work.

The volume presents a solid and well-designed introduction in which Sabine explains his interest in the novels under analysis and discusses his theoretical and methodological options to examine the texts and to put them into dialogue. In his introduction Sabine provides the reader with a detailed account of the historical and cultural context of Portugal during Salazar's authoritarian regime and after the 1974 April Revolution when Portugal faced the challenge of (re)writing the nation and confronting the public representations of national memory disseminated during Salazar's long dictatorship. This contextualization is complemented by the reference to major conceptual models of Marxist and post-structuralist Marxist thinkers that informed Saramago's work, and to which Sabine returns to throughout the chapters, with a particular focus on the ideas of Gramsci, Adorno, Marcuse, and Amílcar Cabral. This historical, cultural, and ideological contextualization is key to the reader's understanding of how and to what extent the novels under analysis constituted an engaged aesthetic response to the need to rethink the national imagery and to forge a cultural identity stemming from historical consciousness and from the need to exercise a responsible

citizenship in a moment of historical transition. Moreover, in his introduction Sabine situates the 1980s novels within the diverse framework of historical fiction taking into account the different models deriving from historians' new positioning towards history making and narration modes and its impact on the literary rewriting of history and the novelists' drive to question and deconstruct grand narratives.

It is also in the introduction that the reader learns about the importance of the error in Saramago's work, a central element in Sabine's book as the title of the volume attests. Drawing from a reference to the "necessity of error" found in *Memorial do convento*, Sabine demonstrates how the reflection on error is key to his characterization of Saramago's "aesthetics of 'alienation,' of dissonance, dissent and unresolved dialectical oppositions" (Sabine, 19), through which the Portuguese novelist attempts not only to deconstruct hegemonic historical narratives in epistemological and ideological terms, but also to suggest the need for a "revised socialist 'micropolitics'" (Sabine, 26), as his late production would demonstrate. The reflection on the necessity of error also proves to be central to the analysis of the self-reflexive dimension of Saramago's novels from a comparative perspective that is put into relief by Sabine along the chapters and in the afterword, and through which it is possible to discuss the increasing complex web of aesthetic codes used by Saramago along the diverse cycles of his career.

Having little room here to discuss each one of the chapters dedicated to the 1980s novels, it is worth pointing out that they are not simply presented according to their chronological publication. They are consistent analyses that reflect the evolution of Sabine's understanding of Saramago's work and of the increasing number of critical works dedicated to the Portuguese writer's literary production. If history, utopia and the necessity of error are the starting point coordinates to examine each novel, in his chapters Sabine puts into relief the innovative level of each novel in terms of narrative modes, aesthetic complexity, and the novelist's demands put on the reader, as the latter has been, since *Levantado do chão*, progressively invited to reflect critically about the past and to act in the present. It is in *Levantado do chão* that Sabine found the motto that, to a great extent, is the common thread that connects the novels published in the 1980s. The idea that "tudo isto pode ser contado de outra maneira" [all of this can be told in a different way] (*Levantado do chão*, 14; Sabine, 32) pervades the five novels in discussion, and announces the richness of Saramago's narratological innovations, through which it is established a "creative dialogue that the text mediates between author and readers" (Sabine, 249).

A final note is due to comment on the afterword in which Sabine summarizes his contribution to the debate on the relationships between Saramago's 1980s novels and his works of the 1990s and 2000s. Besides referencing some of the major critical works that cross these texts, Sabine suggests important new perspectives of analyses that may bring some fresh air to the latest criticism on Saramago's works that, unfortunately, is mostly characterized by lack of novelty and dissent after the writer's death. The proposal of an analysis from the perspective

of Benjaminian readings seems to be particularly enticing and provocative. The same can be said of the problems raised by “Saramago’s characterization of contemporary women and of the agenda and methodology of female emancipation” when these issues are considered from the perspective of socialist and post-Marxist feminist thinking of the last three decades (Sabine, 248). Despite acknowledging that Sabine had no further room to elaborate on and expand the critical avenues he pointed out to in the afterword, its short extension seems to be the main fragility of the volume, as Sabine’s reader becomes expectant for the developments of such insightful approaches and eager to read Sabine’s next critical volume on Saramago’s work.

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