

Report on Regents' Lecturer José Saramago Department of Spanish and Portuguese University of California, Los Angeles

The Department of Spanish and Portuguese of the University of California, Los Angeles welcomed Portuguese writer and Nobel Laureate José Saramago to the UCLA campus for a series of public events held on April 22nd, 24th and 26th, 2002, at the Tom Bradley International Hall. The event was sponsored by the Office of the Chancellor and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and was part of the Regents' lecturer series which invites internationally distinguished writers and scholars to UCLA.

The event was opened by Professor Gerardo Luzuriaga, Chair of UCLA's Department of Spanish and Portuguese, who welcomed the Nobel Laureate and outlined the main facts of his outstanding life and career. José Saramago was born in 1922 to a family of landless peasants in Azinhaga, a small village in the province of Ribatejo, north of Lisbon. For financial reasons, he abandoned his high school studies and trained as a mechanic and, before becoming a writer, held a number of manual jobs. In 1947 Saramago published his first novel, *Terra do pecado* (The Land of Sin). In 1955, he began to translate into Portuguese and continued to do so until 1981. After a break of nineteen years Saramago returned to publishing his own work in 1966 with the book of poetry *Os poemas possíveis* (Possible Poems). In the 1970's Saramago supported himself mostly by translation works, and since 1979 he has devoted himself entirely to writing. Saramago has published over 30 plays, short stories, poems, diaries, travelogues and novels, including the internationally renowned *Memorial do convento*, 1982, (*Baltasar and Blimunda*), *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis*, 1984, (*The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*), *A jangada de pedra*, 1986, (*The Stone Raft*), *A história do cerco de Lisboa*, 1989, (*The History of the Siege of Lisbon*), *O evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo*, 1991, (*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*), and *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, 1995, (*Blindness*). In addition to the 1998 Nobel prize for literature, Saramago's other awards include Prêmio Cidade de Lisboa 1980, Prêmio PEN Club Português 1983 and 1984, Prêmio da Crítica da Associação Portuguesa 1986, Grande Prêmio de Romance e Novela 1991, Prêmio Vida Literária 1993 and Prêmio Camões 1995. An English translation of his latest novel *A Caverna* (*The Cavern*) will be published

in October of this year.

Professor Luzuriaga's introduction was followed by welcoming remarks by Geoffrey M. Garret, Vice Provost of International Studies who celebrated Saramago's outspoken commitment to ethical and social issues. Professor Ana Paula Ferreira, University of California, Irvine, then spoke of Saramago's unique literary work, drawing particular attention to the author's resonant style of fiction that embraces reflections on the plight of the individual in society. The author himself elucidated on his own distinctive style and process of writing in his opening Regents' lecture entitled "Da memória à ficção através da História" ("From Memory to Fiction through History").

While recognizing contemporary historiography as a theoretical reference for the conception and organization of his literary work, Saramago described his novels as a "hermeneutic activity exercised upon memory." His writing, he suggested, "obeys a process of rereading and reinterpreting a memory of the past" in which official history is only one systematized part. Spaces of indeterminacy opened up by official history require a fictional rewriting whose objective is to weave in voices and stories that were omitted from the fabric of history. This reflection on the fictional rewriting of history led Saramago to consider the role of the author in contemporary fiction. Far from accepting academically sanctioned notions and theories that may promote the usurpation or abdication of authorial presence, Saramago emphasized writing as a profoundly "personal expression," allowing for the possibility of reclaiming the author's responsibility in elaborating strategies that configure texts. This affirmation of authorial presence also marks the "transformation of personal identity in which the works enrich the memory of the author with the experience of his characters." For Saramago, therefore, writing is a passage of memories that involves the author. This passage is not chronological and ordered but is organized according to a "chaotic dispositoin" in which it is necessary to seek and to find meaning. It is in the heterogeneity of this personally informed past that Saramago sees the possibility of the confluence of different times and spaces and of making personal memories and histories intelligible and meaningful to all. (A full length translation of Saramago's lecture is available through Professor Beth Marchant, University of California, Los Angeles).

On April 24th, Saramago read selections from his novels *O evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo*, *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, *Todos os nomes*, 1997, (*All the Names*), and his most recent work *A caverna*. The author's

Portuguese readings were followed by readings of English translations by Brent James and Maite Conde, graduate students of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, UCLA. The second day of events was concluded by a book signing session.

The last day of the Regents' series presented a roundtable discussion with José Saramago and panelists Professor Claude Hulet (UCLA), Professor Carlos Quicoli (UCLA) and Ana Paula Ferreira (UCI), chaired and moderated by Professor Eduardo Dias (UCLA). The discussion allowed for a number of questions from the public. These included literary questions from the responsibility of the author and his relationship with the reader to the reconfiguration of Portuguese national identity in Saramago's fiction as well as political and social questions such as the role of the left in today's political climate with specific reference to the recent upsurge of the far-right national front in France. Following the conclusion of the series, all participants were invited to join a closing reception held at the Bradley International Hall.

Saramago is a writer of outstanding international stature both for his literary style and his outspoken commitment to important and pressing political and social issues. The Regents' lecture allowed an audience at UCLA to interact with, and listen to, this independent and radical individual whose influence stretches far beyond the field of literary production. The three day event was a memorable occasion for all who attended.

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