

## JOSÉ SARAMAGO. THE SEED AND THE FRUITS

*If humankind is incapable of organising the world economy in such a way that we can satisfy the needs of a humanity that is dying of hunger and so many other things, can we be said to be truly human? We who fill our mouths with the word "humanity" have not, I believe, yet reached the stage of being fully human. Perhaps one day we will, but we still have quite a way to go. We can see what's going on in the world and it's terrifying. We live alongside all that negativity as if it didn't matter; horror, violence, death, especially the death of others, are all made to seem utterly banal. [...] And this state of affairs will continue until people's consciences are properly aroused. Much of that process of "banalisation" is intended to keep us all in a state of total apathy and will-lessness, in order to diminish our capacity to intervene as citizens.*

Canarias<sup>7</sup>, Las Palmas, 20 February 1994

[Interview with Esperanza Pamplona]

José Saramago's literary work is both highly demanding of the reader and very personal and it always asks thought-provoking questions. He was a late starter as a novelist, but his long literary apprenticeship as writer and reader equipped him, from the 1980s onwards, to produce the kind of fresh, original novels that brought him the Nobel Prize in 1998 (the first time it had been awarded to a Lusophone writer). Dense and ironic, intelligent and sceptical, tender and sarcastic, devastatingly critical, all his novels are concerned with demystifying the conventional view of history and with speaking out against the errors of modern life, always taking as their starting point the essential human qualities - solidarity, compassion and respect for others and their opinions. His strong author-narrator is a constant feature of his work, true to his belief that novel and novelist are one, and he thus created a literature that combines strongly-held political views with bold, visionary, erudite metaphors. He was a brilliant story-teller, but also had the kind of restless mind that was somehow able to remain in touch with the turbulent heart of the contemporary world, laying bare its faults and questioning its values.

Saramago, who never made any secret of his communist beliefs, became an international figure as a writer and as a champion of freedom, human rights and social inclusion, driven always by the desire to build a fairer, more humane society. His political engagement led to him taking on the role of dissatisfied intellectual, one closely involved in the burning issues of the day, which he often approached from unconventional angles that went counter to the majority view. He called for an individual and collective ethic that would give priority to the dignity of the individual rather than to interests based solely on hierarchy, power or economics. Saramago was a passionate advocate of civic responsibility, keen to place the citizen on the same level as the writer. As he put

it: “I may be a Marxist and a card-carrying Communist, but I take great pains not to turn my novels into political pamphlets. I have certain ideas and preoccupations and make no distinction between myself as writer and myself as a citizen. I think it’s time that we writers went out into the world again and occupied the place we once held and which is now filled by the radio, the press and by television. We must encourage humanitarianism and spread the knowledge that thousands and thousands of people are still living in abject poverty.”

*La Provincia*, Las Palmas, 3 March 1994

[Interview with Javier Durán]

During his long life he was, then, a polemicist, a self-confessed pessimist and a brilliant, vociferous activist, as well as the creator of a large body of literary work which embraced the novel, theatre, poetry, journalism and autobiography. This exhibition, *José Saramago. The Seed and the Fruits*, reveals how that prince of literature, Saramago, had his roots in the literary labourer whose careful, methodical work – during the hard, dark years of the forties, fifties and sixties in Portugal – laid the foundations for his future brilliance. This collection of manuscripts, documents, first editions and hundreds of translations into more than forty languages takes the visitor on a journey through Saramago’s literary production and its ideological and social context.

Some displays have an audiovisual element intended to open still more doors into the dense, rich Saramagoan world. The layout of the exhibition allows for a variety of ways into the author’s life and work, and visitors may choose their own route, depending on which aspect most interests them in his literary and intellectual universe, a universe that is as broad and seductive as it is multifaceted.

*Our main task is to make ourselves more human. In their book entitled *The Holy Family, Marx and Engels* say something that cries out to be put into practice: “If man is shaped by circumstances, then we must shape those circumstances humanely.”*

José Saramago, 1999

Fernando Gómez Aguilera