

“A VIAGEM DO ELEFANTE (THE ELEPHANT’S JOURNEY)” : José Saramago’s “THE TEMPEST”?

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“A Viagem do Elefante” (“The Elephant’s Journey” – not yet available in English), published in 2008, is José Saramago’s latest novel, and he has said it may be his last. In its warmth, geniality and good humour, as well as its joyful exploration of the resources of the Portuguese language, it does indeed have a feeling of farewell to literature that might recall Shakespeare’s in “The Tempest” (“Our revels now are over”), and, like the play in which Shakespeare bids adieu to the stage, this mellow work is, ultimately, a comedy in which threats never quite come to fruition and no-one dies untowardly.

Saramago recounts what is in itself a true story, the journey of an Indian elephant and his retinue across land and sea, plain and mountain, all the way from Lisbon to Vienna. It was in 1551 that King João III of Portugal gifted an Indian elephant to his cousin the Archduke Maximilian of Austria, son-in-law of the Emperor Charles V. Saramago thus returns to the genre of the historical novel in which he wrote so memorably in “Memorial do Convento” / “Baltasar and Blimunda”. That novel, set in the eighteenth century, focused on the Portugal of the Inquisition, though not excluding the wider European world, in, for instance, the figure of Domenico Scarlatti. The new novel starts in Portugal but fans out through Spain and Italy to its Austrian finishing-point: more pan-European, it also takes in, as no previous Saramago novel had done in significant fashion, another wider world, that of empire. The book’s twin heroes are, beyond all doubt, the elephant Solomon (Salomão or Solimão) and his mahout or keeper (in Portuguese, “cornaca”), Subhro (later absurdly renamed Fritz), a Bengali Indian and nominal Christian convert, arrived in Portugal via Goa. The dignified and resourceful figure of Subhro is a fictional vindication of the ordinary person recalling other such characters in Saramago’s work – Blimunda, Lídia in “O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis” / “The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis”, or the optician’s wife in “Ensaio sobre a Cegueira” / “Blindness”. Through Subhro, too, Saramago engages as he had never done before with the culture of India, as when, in inquisitorial Portugal, Subhro recounts the story of the elephant-headed Hindu deity Ganesh.

As in “Memorial do Convento”, Catholicism is a lurking presence in the pages of a narrative this time set in an earlier period, that of the Council of Trent (happening while the tale unfolds), the Counter-Reformation and the ideological counter-offensive against Protestantism. The Inquisition threatens, but while the church throws up both an absurd attempt at exorcism and a fake miracle involving the elephant, here, in marked contrast to the tragic finale of the earlier novel, no-one actually falls into its institutional clutches, and the “alien” Subhro reaches destination safe and sound. There is, meanwhile, some implicit intertextuality with Saramago’s interrogation of biblical orthodoxy in “O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo” / “The Gospel According to Jesus Christ”, as in passages rewriting the stories of Lazarus and the Gadarene swine.

If “A Viagem do Elefante” marks Saramago’s return to the historical novel – far more successfully than Salman Rushdie’s recent damp-squib stab at that genre in “The Enchantress of Florence”, and on a par with Amitav Ghosh’s remarkable tour de force in “Sea of Poppies”, it also finds him engaging in the art of (purposive) comedy to a greater extent than in any other of his novels, the black humour of “O Homem Duplicado” / “The Double” included. Here we may identify a

continuity with its predecessor, “As Intermittências da Morte” / “Death at Intervals”, whose second half marked a new departure combining Gothic fantasy in the mode of E.T.A. Hoffmann with an exuberant high comedy. If the author’s intuition is that this elephant’s odyssey may be the last in a long and distinguished line of novels, then we may join with him in crowning this empathetic feat of narration as, indeed, the Portuguese Nobel laureate’s very own “The Tempest”.