

SURROUNDED BY THE SPECTERS OF MARX – SARAMAGO IN CENTRAL EUROPE¹

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Abstract: After winning the Nobel Prize, José Saramago quickly gained global recognition as a prestigious literary figure. However, his introduction into the local literary traditions outside the Portuguese-speaking world began several years before. This article examines the reception of Saramago's works in Central Europe and offers a comparative analysis of the Polish, Czech, Slovakian, and Hungarian cases. The novels of the Portuguese author, who consistently defined himself as a convinced communist, first appeared in the Central European literary scenes during a politically complex period, when the nations in the region were undergoing a process of redemocratization and started to distance themselves economically and culturally from the legacy of socialism. By exploring the relationship between semi-peripheral literary traditions and the global circulation of world literature, this article delves into the history and politics of Saramago's reception in these four countries and compares the ways how the local literary fields reacted to his novels and public figure.

Keywords: José Saramago, world literature, Central Europe, Nobel effect, semi-periphery

Resumo: Depois da atribuição do prémio Nobel José Saramago rapidamente tornou-se um verdadeiro escritor global. Porém, os seus romances começaram a aparecer em traduções fora do campo literário lusófono bem antes, ou seja, a sua inscrição no horizonte da literatura mundial já se tinha iniciado quando recebeu o Nobel. Presente artigo analisa a receção da obra saramaguiana no espaço cultural da Europa Central e elabora uma interpretação comparativa da receção polaca, checa, eslovaca e húngara. Os livros do autor português que ao longo da sua carreira sempre fazia questão de se definir como um comunista convencido começaram a surgir na Europa Central num período politicamente conturbado quando os países da região entraram no processo da redemocratização e queriam distanciar-se tanto

¹ My sincere thanks are due to Mark Sabine and Rui Gonçalves Miranda for discussing these ideas at the University of Nottingham. I am also grateful to my Central European colleagues – Karolína Valová, Silvia Slaničková and Anna Działak-Szubińska – for their help and insights.

cultural como economicamente do legado do socialismo. Partindo da questão das relações entre tradições literárias semiperiféricas e a circulação global da literatura mundial, o artigo procura analisar a história e as políticas da receção em quatro países e compara como os respectivos campos literários reagiram aos livros e à figura pública do autor.

Palavras-chave: José Saramago, literatura mundial, Europa Central, efeito Nobel, semiperiferia

Saramago's first translations appeared in the cultural space of Central Europe during the years of redemocratization when, after the socialist era, the region started to reshape its socio-economic and cultural reality and strove to renegotiate not only its political identity but also its relations with the West. The reception of the Portuguese author, therefore, could not be devoid of certain political connotations and tensions. The present article seeks to describe and interpret the dynamics of the reception of José Saramago's works and his public figure in Central Europe and analyzes the political and cultural discourses that have been playing a decisive role in his reception over the past three decades. In my analysis of the reception, I attempt to identify a set of political and cultural factors that contributed to Saramago's canonization or rejection in the local literary fields. In spite of the fact that Central European literary systems share certain characteristics,² the way they reacted to what we will call "the Saramago phenomenon" is far from homogenous. The dissimilarity of the reactions, in my opinion, can lead us to a series of conclusions regarding the importance of the political heritage of the socialist era in the process of integrating foreign language authors and translated literature into the local literary traditions, as well as about the changes in the relations between these semi-peripheral literary traditions and the global circulation of world literature. As such, departing from the cultural situation of the Central European countries in the post-socialist period, I will map the history of Saramago's reception and compare the patterns of the Polish, Czech, Slovakian, and Hungarian cases, and also seek to understand the differences and the underlying political, literary, and institutional discourses.

"In recent decades, Central Europe has undoubtedly again become a fashionable term."³ However, the exact definition of Central Europe still remains slightly blurry and

² Zoran Konstantinović and Fridrun Rinner, eds, *Eine Literaturgeschichte Mitteleuropas* (Innsbruck-Wien: Studien Verlag, 2003), 9-19.

³ Andrea Bölcskei, 'Central Europe as a historical, cultural, social and geopolitical concept today', *Onomastica Uralica*, 12 (2018), 235.

unstable. There is a series of distinctive criteria to determine which countries can be classified as Central European and which cannot. Different geopolitical, geographic, historical, cultural, and linguistic narratives, sometimes hand in hand with economic and political interests, produced diverging concepts about Central Europe and the essence of Central Europeanness.⁴ The present article will not participate in the ongoing debate about the concept of Central Europe; it accepts a historically motivated, but rather cultural definition which identifies the region as the countries of the political and cultural alliance of the so-called Visegrád Group, namely, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. Regarding this recently forged (1991), though historically grounded partnership whose roots lead back to medieval times, Maria Todorova highlights that it was during the 1980s, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the signs of the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc started to surface, that several prominent intellectuals from Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia started to theorize regarding the question of a distinct Central European identity between the countries of the Socialist Bloc. Given the particularity of the historical situation and the strong will to break free from the Soviet Union, the Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs, the Polish essayist and poet Czesław Miłosz, and the internationally recognized Czech writer Milán Kundera attempted to define the essence of a certain Central European identity in cultural and historical terms in opposition to Russia.⁵ Of the three works focusing on the same topic it was Kundera's essay that gained more visibility and popularity on a global scale. The Czech intellectual, who after his immigration to Paris and the successful shifting of the language of his books from Czech to French managed to overcome his position as peripheral writer and turned into a widely acclaimed global novelist with Central European origins, defined the region as the Europe of small nations that have been living in the shadows of huge Western and Eastern Empires, but which have always been part of the so-called West. What characterizes this "other Europe", the Europe of the small nations, is a shared culture and a series of shared historical experiences from the Medieval period up to the decades of state socialism. These countries are culturally and historically inseparable from the Western narrative of Europeanness; however, as victims of subsequent tides of political oppression, they developed a profound suspicion of the Hegelian concept of history and modernity as discourses of power.⁶ Following Kundera's line of reasoning, Sabrina P. Ramet describes Central Europe as an "in-between space" that shared most of the key phases and elements

⁴ Lonnie Johnson, *Central Europe. Enemies, Neighbors, Friends* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3-13.

⁵ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 147.

⁶ Milán Kundera, 'Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale', *Le Débat*, 27 (1983), 17.

of its cultural development with the West, such as the Christianization, the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the emergence of modern nation states, the bourgeois revolutions of the 19th century, and the cataclysm of the world wars.⁷ Despite taking part in the aforementioned constitutive moments of Europeanness, the region had developed a certain degree of backwardness, mostly in economic and social terms, which made Central Europe the semi-periphery of the continent,⁸ a buffer zone between the center and the most peripheral East, defined by orthodox Christianity, Byzantine despotism, feudalism, and a much more modest penetration of Enlightenment-based modernity. I find this shared experience of being a semi-peripheral culture decisive in the relation between the Central European literary systems and the Lusophone literary system. As Itamar Even-Zohar emphasized before the rise of a strong cultural and academic debate regarding the concept of world literature in the 2000s, the global literary polysystem which is constructed by a set of interrelated canons, forms, and discourses, is highly hierarchical, which means that “we have no choice but to admit that within a group of relatable national literatures, such as the literatures of Europe, hierarchical relations have been established since the very beginnings of these literatures. Within this (macro-) polysystem some literatures have taken peripheral positions.”⁹ Franco Moretti further extended Even-Zohar’s insights on the deeply hierarchized character of the global literary macro-system, explaining that the celebrated openness and emancipatory drive of the new world literature concept is actually highly delusional. Hence, the global circulation of world literature literally reproduces the inequality of the international capitalist system and maintains the division of core, semi-periphery, and periphery.¹⁰ If we take into account Moretti’s warning regarding the dynamics of world literature, the direct communication of the peripheries and the semi-peripheries seems to be vital, inasmuch as it bypasses the core and challenges its economic and cultural position, as well as the traditional structures of dependence of the (semi)peripheries of the center. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ influential essay points it out, Portugal since the 17th century is an exemplary case of a semi-peripheral country in the modern world system of global

⁷ Sabrina P. Ramet and F. Peter Wagner, ‘Post-socialist models of rule in Central and Southeastern Europe’, *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989*, ed. by Sabrina P. Ramet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14.

⁸ Borut Rončević, ‘Path from the (Semi)Periphery to the Core: On the Role of Socio-Cultural Factors’, *IES Proceedings*, 1 (2002), 7.

⁹ Itamar Even-Zohar, ‘The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem’, *Poetics Today*, 11.1 (1990), 50.

¹⁰ Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), 55-56.

capitalism.¹¹ The presence of Portuguese (language) literature in the Central European literary systems, and vice-versa, accentuates the importance of the semi-peripheries and can lead to the recognition that the institution of world literature is permeated by relations of economy and power. This kind of direct communication between the semi-peripheries and the peripheral cultures can contribute to what Paulo de Medeiros calls “world literature as a form of resistance”,¹² an alternative method of literary circulation which does not subject itself to the gravitational force of the center, but rather creates new trans-literary connections outside the circles of the global cultural and economic trends. In my opinion, the early reception of Saramago and the publication of the first translations throughout the 1990s in Central Europe reflected this idea of the interrelated (semi)peripheries. However, after the ever-growing international popularity of the author and his inclusion in the canon of world literature, the context of the reception transformed and it turned into the dominant center/periphery relation. In what follows, I am going to look at the different national cases of the reception and will try to follow the transformation of Saramago from a semi-peripheral writer to a global author in the local literary markets and consciousnesses, as well as the political discourses surrounding his figure, which, as I have stated above, played a decisive role in the process of reception.

The first translated excerpts and the first Saramago book appeared in 1988 and 1989 in the Central European region. In late 1988 the Hungarian literary journal *Nagyvilág* [The Great World] published a four page-long fragment from *A Jangada de Pedra*, followed by a short biographical note on the author. As far as I am concerned, this small biographical record and the translation are the very first examples of Saramago’s presence in Central Europe, which suggests the Hungarian case being the role of pioneer. The publication of the entire novel didn’t take long, since the following year Magvető, the prestigious Hungarian publishing house with an interestingly varied profile of foreign language authors, decided to release the book. In the same year the Slovakian translation of *O Memorial do Convento* was published in Bratislava. In my opinion, the fact that these first translations appeared in the year of the redemocratization is extremely significant. 1989 is a crucial date in the recent history of Central Europe given that it brought not only political freedom, but also a far-reaching restructuring of the economy, societies, cultural industry, and relations to the West. The transformation of the cultural discourses, along with the adoption of neo-liberal values

¹¹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ‘Entre Prospero e Caliban: Colonialismo, pós-colonialismo e inter-identidade’ *Entre Ser e Estar: Raízes, Percursos e Discursos de Identidade*, ed. by Maria Irene Ramalho and António Sousa Ribeiro (Porto, Afrontamento, 2001), 23-24.

¹² Paulo de Medeiros, ‘11 ½ Teses sobre o Conceito de Literatura-Mundial’, *Via Atlântica*, 35.1 (2019), 318.

in the economy and in the book market, had a deep impact on the publication of foreign language literature, and the reception of Saramago's oeuvre can be seen as an exemplary case regarding the logic of these changes.

While in Hungary the appearance of *Jangada de Pedra* opened the way for the systematic publication of Saramago's novels, in Slovakia – at the time still Czechoslovakia – the promising literary fortune of the Portuguese author suffered a paralysis and was resumed only ten years later and without significant success. The Slovakian translation of *O Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, published in 1999, and the following publication of *História do Cerco de Lisboa* (2003) and *A Viagem do Elefante* (2010) presumably had to do with the post-Nobel hype around the author and the inevitable reaction of the local book markets, designated by James F. English as the famous “Nobel effect” or “the Nobelization of the markets for literary esteem.”¹³

In Poland, the very first Saramago book, *Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo* (1991), managed to cause some turmoil, and the Portuguese author, despite having several books published throughout the 1990s, had to face a certain critical resistance from both Polish intellectuals and the reading public in general. Anna Kalewska stresses that the unfavorable or sometimes even hostile reception of the 1990s had to do with Saramago's political views. The Polish scholar recalls that the aforementioned, distinguished intellectual, Czesław Miłosz, who at the time was one of the most renowned representatives of cultural life in Poland, confessed openly in the press that in his estimation, Saramago should have not received the Nobel Prize; in fact, he hated the Portuguese author for writing in a trendy, playful, post-modern style and for being an outspoken communist.¹⁴ In post-socialist Poland, where after long decades of repression and forced secularization Catholicism had started to bloom again and 95% of the population declared itself religious,¹⁵ an openly anti-clerical author who rewrites the canonized story of Jesus Christ and questions the legitimacy of the construction of the famous Mafra convent evidently couldn't expect a supportive reception. Jerzy Brzozowski, analyzing the changes of Saramago's Polish reception and perception, relates the initial critical distance (“frieza”, that is “coldness” in his words) with a set of interrelated phenomena whose origins can be traced back to the process of post-1989 redemocratization and the ensuing transformation of the economic, cultural, and political landscape. He calls

¹³ James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige. Prizes, awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 302.

¹⁴ Anna Kalewska, ‘Camões, Pessoa, Saramago i inni. O literaturze portugalskiej w Polsce po 1989 roku’, *Między oryginałami przekładem XVI: Strategie wydawców, strategie tłumaczy*, ed. by Jerzy Brzozowski and Maria Filipowicz-Rudek (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2010), 82.

¹⁵ Konstanty Gebert, ‘Poland since 1989: muddling through, wall to wall’, *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989*, ed. by Sabrina P. Ramet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 148.

attention to the fact that the preferences of the reading public regarding foreign language literatures went through notable changes in the post-socialist period.

“(…) at the time when Poland recently came out of the socialist system there was a change regarding the expectations of the public. The people wanted to read works that were previously unavailable due to censorship or copyright issues (it was either hard to obtain the copyright, or “Western”, and mainly American, authors and agencies had a certain reluctance in dealing with Polish publishers that belonged to the communist state). After the political transition and the ensuing transformation of the book market which finally underwent privatization, the demands changed together with the offer: suddenly the literature of Latin American and Iberian authors, so appreciated by the former regime, disappeared, and the number of works written by French authors noticeably declined: the more desired cultural products became those of North America.”¹⁶

[na época em que a Polónia acabava de sair do sistema comunista, mudaram as expectativas do público, que desejava ler obras até então inacessíveis por motivo de censura, ou por direitos autorais difíceis de conseguir (tanto por causa de valores, como das reticências de autores e agentes “ocidentais”, sobretudo americanos, a negociar com as editoras polacas pertencentes ao Estado comunista). Diante daquela viragem política, e da mudança subsequente do mercado do livro, afinal privatizado, mudou tanto a demanda, como a oferta: de repente, quase desapareceu do mercado a literatura dos autores latinoamericanos e ibéricos bem vistos pelo regime anterior, diminuiu também sensivelmente o número de obras dos autores franceses: os produtos culturais mais desejados passaram a ser os de proveniência norte-americana.]

We can see here how the political transition induced not only the process of restructuring of the book market, but also a significant change concerning the role of foreign language literature in the Polish literary system. Drifting away from the historically grounded, traditional Francofonia and from the semi-peripheral and peripheral preferences of Iberian and Latin-American authors, the freshly liberalized cultural market shifted towards the center

¹⁶ Jerzy Brzozowski, ‘Presença de José Saramago na Polónia’, *Studia Iberystyczne*, 18 (2019), 56.

and started to replace its field of references according to the cultural and economic logic of Western capitalism. This shift from the (semi)peripheries and from the secular obsession with French literature to English-language authors had to do with the post-1989 compensatory mechanisms and with the urge to finally be part of the Western world after long periods of cultural and political isolation and marginalization. “For the Polish audience, the change of 1989 was as significant as the one experienced after 1945 (the political annexation of Poland by the Soviet regime), or 1957 (a short-term revival of freedom known as “thaw”).”¹⁷ A certain, sometimes overly naïve belief in the models of Western modernity, combined with a strong and long-standing will to fight the cultural and economic backwardness coming from the semi-peripheral position of Central Europeanness, drove the audience and the book market away from its traditions and led to a new hype around books, authors, and cultural products coming from the English speaking world and identified as the epitome of global culture. According to Michał Paweł Markowski, the inherent drama of the relations between Polish literary culture and world literature has to do with a permanent clash of two conflicting tendencies: first, a national drive toward the articulation of the local and the inscription of this regional element into the European tradition, and second, the overcoming of the national forms and thematics through the construction of a cosmopolitan horizon.¹⁸ Taking into account this primordial neurosis that has haunted Polish culture since the beginning of Enlightenment-based modernity, it is not surprising that after long decades of censorship and cultural isolation behind the Iron Curtain, the cosmopolitan drive led to a change of focus regarding the presence of foreign language authors in the literary system. This shifting of cultural horizons in the post-socialist era, alongside the aforementioned ideological reservations and reluctances, together contributed to the initial “coldness” of Saramago’s reception throughout the 1990s. Brzozowski recalls that after the attribution of the Nobel Prize in 1998, the *crème de la crème* of Polish intelligentsia of the period (Wisława Szymborska, Sławomir Mrożek, Adam Zagajewski, Julia Hartvig, Tadeusz Różewicz, etc.) remained silent and didn’t celebrate the international success of an author who came from a similarly semi-peripheral position. The silence of the most influential Polish writers takes on a new meaning if we bear in mind the unfavorable reception of Dario Fo’s Nobel Prize in the previous year due to political reasons. We can assume that the silence coming from the greatest representatives of Polish literary culture can be explained with the same political reluctance. The international recognition of “the communist and anticlerical Saramago could

¹⁷ Michał Paweł Markowski, ‘Polish Neurosis and the World Literature’, *Polish Literature as World Literature*, ed. by Piotr Florczyk and K. A. Wisniewski (New York-London -Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 27

¹⁸ Markowski, ‘Polish Neurosis and the World Literature’, 19-18.

seem to some as another provocation coming from the jury of Stockholm.” [o galardão para o comunista e anticlerical Saramago podia parecer a alguns outra provocação do júri de Estocolmo].¹⁹

However, as Brzozowski accentuates, entering the new millennium we can verify a significant change in the evaluation of the Portuguese author in the Polish cultural field. After the attribution of the Nobel Prize, Saramago started to be referenced in the press not only as an excellent story-teller and an exemplary representative of a blooming international post-modern canon, but also as a great humanist, whose “strange political convictions should rather be forgiven” [um grande humanista, a quem se deve apenas perdoar as convicções políticas estranhas].²⁰ In the past two decades nearly all of Saramago’s novels appeared in Polish translation, and the Portuguese writer has turned into a successful author in Poland, a real longseller, whose novels are published in several subsequent editions year after year, *O Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* being the most popular novel with eleven editions to date. The famous Nobel effect undoubtedly contributed to the winds of change concerning the figure of Saramago. Hence, as Mark Sabine observes, the prize brings a significant growth both at the level of material capital and symbolic capital of an author. Such a highly fetishized international literary prize “conserves or even augments the ‘aura’ surrounding the text, its author, and the exalted intellectual realm that these represent, even as it imbues the text and its author with the suspense, drama, and, increasingly, the celebrity glitz that guarantees the attention of mass media and potential book-buyers.”²¹ It seems, though, that thanks to these significant changes in the author’s image, Saramago started to be seen much more as an exemplary global writer whose fame and symbolic capital simply overshadowed his political convictions. As a direct result of the Nobel Prize, Saramago had been included in the pantheon of world literature, which evidently and instantaneously affected his international reception, and in Poland managed to break the walls of the initial ideological resistance.

However, as Paulo de Medeiros points out in a recently published study, Saramago’s inclusion in the high ranks of world literature and his canonization as an unquestionably honorable global author, who from a peripheral language and culture managed to arrive to the center and to hold an indisputable position amongst the greatest voices of international postmodernism, is far from unproblematic.²² Hence, the very notion of world literature has

¹⁹ Brzozowski, ‘Presença de José Saramago na Polónia’, 61.

²⁰ Brzozowski, ‘Presença de José Saramago na Polónia’, 62.

²¹ Mark Sabine, ‘Saramago and the »Nobel Effect«: On literature as cultural capital, and the activist-author as global celebrity’, *Saramago: After the Nobel*, ed. by Paulo de Medeiros and José N. Ornelas (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022), 14.

²² Paulo de Medeiros, ‘Saramago and World-Literature’, *Saramago: After the Nobel*, ed. by Paulo de Medeiros and José N. Ornelas (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022), 37.

never been politically, culturally, or ethically neutral,²³ which means it cannot be separated from the question of politics and is always infused with ideology. We must take into account the relation between Saramago's clearly anti-hegemonic and anti-establishment political views and the very establishment of world literature. Medeiros recalls Harold Bloom's devastating opinion on Saramago's comments regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, when the acclaimed literary critic whose name is tied to the shaping of the so-called Western canon, said with an overtly condescending tone that despite being one of the greatest living writers of the 21st century, Saramago's political views are simply unacceptable and unworthy for a contemporary global author. It is worth quoting Bloom's words for several reasons: "(...) it baffles me why the man can't grow up politically. In 2007, to be a Portuguese Stalinist means you're simply not living in the real world."²⁴ First of all, we can easily detect a certain paternalistic flavour in the phrases coming from a highly renowned Western intellectual who calls another supposedly global intellectual childish for his outdated political convictions. Second of all, in my opinion, it is clearly the cultural dynamics between the center and the periphery which are at stake here. Thus Saramago is considered an excellent writer, but his political views are an evident symptom of (semi)peripheral backwardness which seems to be unacceptable in the circles of global culture and world literature. "World literature, when not simply a moniker to grace the spines of large multi-volume anthologies of the classics and thus boost their sales, could be seen as a more idealistic – because supposedly virtual – version, that in reality simply duplicated, and as such reinforced, hegemonic elite values translated into a canon. Viewed this way, Bloom's adoption of Saramago is also a kind of attempt at domesticating his clear anti-hegemonic views."²⁵ The movement from the periphery to the core thus supposes a domestication from anti-capitalist, anti-hegemonic, anti-establishment politics and the reinforcement of global scale hegemony not only in aesthetic terms but also in the question of politics. It seems that in order to enter the sanctuary of world literature, one should leave behind political radicalism and play according to the rules of the aforementioned elite values of the canon. I assume that the acceptance of Saramago in the Polish literary system – and in several other literary traditions with a high degree of political sensitivity towards openly communist authors – despite his „strange political convictions” partially has to do with this process of ideological domestication in the global canon of world literature.

²³ Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky, eds, *In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), xvii.

²⁴ Fernanda Eberstadt, 'José Saramago, the Unexpected Fantast', *New York Times* 08/26/2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/26/magazine/26saramago-t.html>

²⁵ Medeiros, 'Saramago and World-Literature', 39

The „strange political convictions” seem to have a more lingering influence in the case of the Czech and Slovakian reception. As I have noted before, the Slovakian translation of *O Memorial do Convento* was one of the first Saramago books published in Central Europe. After the 1989 edition, however, we face a serious ten-year gap in the Slovakian publications and the number of edited books – *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (1999), *História do Cerco de Lisboa* (2003), *Viagem do Elefante* (2010) – is markedly less than the fourteen Polish and the nineteen Hungarian translations. According to Silvia Slaničková, Portuguese literature is still in a marginal position in the Slovakian literary canon, and it is often labeled as “exotic”. With his four published books, Saramago is the most translated Portuguese author after Eça de Queirós.²⁶ The moderate success of Saramago in the Slovakian literary field, in Slaničková’s view, has to do with the complexity of his characteristically postmodern form of narration.

Saramago

“is not so well-known or well-read by the larger reading public. His name doesn’t appear in the world literature encyclopedias (...). Drawing inferences from the reviews of his works, this fact can be caused by the extremely demanding style of the author, which doesn’t respect the rules of punctuation and leads the readers to choose his works with less frequency.”

[O autor não é tão conhecido ou lido pelo público leitor mais vasto. O seu nome não se encontra nas enciclopédias de escritores mundiais (...). Baseando as nossas conclusões nas resenhas das suas obras, este facto pode ser causado pelo estilo extremamente exigente do autor, que não respeita as regras de pontuação, o que leva a que os leitores escolham as suas obras com menos frequência].²⁷

This explanation might seem plausible. However, if we take into account Saramago’s worldwide success and the huge number of books published and sold not only in Europe and the Americas, I assume that a merely aesthetic justification cannot explain entirely the small-scale presence of Saramago in the Slovakian canon, and we must take into account other facts, such as those of a political and institutional nature.

The Czech reception seems to have a similar pattern to the Slovakian regarding the low number of published Saramago books, which supposes again a certain resistance from

²⁶ Silvia Slaničková, ‘Receção da obra de José Saramago na Eslováquia’, (forthcoming)

²⁷ Slaničková, (forthcoming)

the reading public and publishing houses. While the first two Saramago novels appeared in Slovakian translation before the turn of the millennium, Czech publication starts quite late, after the tides of the post-Nobel hype, in 2002 with the publication of *O Memorial do Convento*, which is followed by *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (2010), *Caim* (2011) and *A Viagem do Elefante* (2018). The edition of *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* and *Caim* most likely has to do with the death of the author and the necrocultural fetishization of a dead writer in the book market. As Michela Ponzo and Vincenzo Scoppa's studies on the effects of death on the popularity of an author demonstrate, the passing of a writer can have a serious impact on the demand for their works. There is a high chance of hitting the bestseller lists shortly after death, which evidently draws the attention of the media. "(...) a writer's death increases the probability of being in the bestseller list of more than 100%."²⁸ Interestingly, the publication of *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* and *Caim* right after the passing of the author wasn't followed by regular editions, and the next book, the last one up to that point, was published only seven years later. This means that even with the death of the author and the presumed growth of his post-mortem cultural capital, the number of editions hasn't increased much, which means the access of both the Czech and Slovakian readership to Saramago's texts is limited to few translations, some of which are impossible to find even in second-hand bookshops.

Karolina Valová relates the dynamics of the Czech reception to the question of a generational change in post-1989 society. While the older generation that had direct experience with rigid state socialism, ideological indoctrination, and politically controlled cultural production maintains a strong critical distance from Saramago due to his lifelong commitment to the communist party and the underlying Marxism of his writing, the younger generations who grew up in a democratic, post-socialist country read Saramago in different ways, and instead of identifying the author as an eminent Marxist, they are focusing on the universal aspects of his writing, namely on his critique of the contemporary world and its hypocritical cultural and economic dynamics.²⁹ The reception thus reflects a certain kind of ambiguity in terms of politics which can be explained by a generational change that divides society. Even though these ideological questions seem to have less and less importance in contemporary Czech and Central European culture, the societies of the region are "still significantly sensitive to certain forms of language, for instance to Marxist terminology." [a

²⁸ Michela Ponzo and Vincenzo Scoppa, 'Famous after Death: The Effect of a Writer's Death on Book Sales', *IZA Discussion Papers* no. 15501., (2022 August), 1-2.

²⁹ Karolina Valová, 'Receção da obra de José Saramago no ambiente checo: uma problemática esquerdista', (forthcoming)

nossa sociedade ainda é significativamente sensível a certas formas da linguagem, por exemplo, à terminologia marxista].³⁰

Another deciding factor regarding a more modest reception of Saramago in the Czech and Slovakian market can be related to the relation of the national literary systems with the Portuguese literary traditions. Czech and Slovakian translations of Portuguese books started to appear only after the *fin du siècle* period. The first translations include a more marginal, dramatic poem in prose by the symbolist poet, Eugénio de Castro (1900), Luís de Camões' *Lusiads* (1902), the famous *Portuguese Letters* by Mariana Alcoforado, and several books by Eça de Queirós.³¹ In Poland and Hungary, however, the appearance of Portuguese books and authors can be traced back to the 18th century, and in both cases we can verify in the 19th century a huge degree of identification between the Romantic cultural elite and the Portuguese literary tradition, represented by the mythical figure of Camões and his exemplary national epic poem. In Poland, the first translation of the *Lusiads* was published in 1790 and made a huge impact on the first and second generation of Romanticism. The epic poem was widely read by the national intelligentsia of the Romantic era and amongst its admirers we find the most prominent figures of 19th century Polish culture, such as Adam Bernard Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Cyprian Kamil Norwid. The deeply Romantic and unfortunate life of the Portuguese author, together with the strong patriotic ideology of his masterwork which elevates a small and peripheral European nation to a mythically universal status, offered two substantial narratives of identification to the cultural elite of the country that had been deprived of its independence after the partition of the national territory between the Russian Empire, Prussia, and the Habsburg dynasty (1795).³² The complete Hungarian translation was published several decades after the Polish edition. However, due to both a partial translation and the cult of Camões' figure that spread through the different national varieties of European Romanticism, the Hungarian Romantics also embraced the *Lusiads* and its author. Furthermore, the identification with the national poet, who despite his intriguing relations to the Portuguese court saved the glory of the nation as well as the legendary manuscript, was in fact historically grounded, since the epic poem contains several

³⁰ Valová, (forthcoming)

³¹ Karolína Valová, 'Recepção do neorrealismo literário português no ambiente checo da Checoslováquia através das traduções' *e-Letras com Vida – Revista de Estudos Globais: Humanidades, Ciências e Artes (e-LCV)*, 2 (2019), 77.

³² Anna Kalewska, 'A recepção d'Os Lusíadas e o mito de Camões em Itália e na Polónia', *La spugna è la mia anima. Omaggio a Piero Ceccucci*, ed. by Michela Graziani and Orietta Abbati and Barbara Gori (Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2016), 136-137.

references to the Hungarian origins of the Portuguese royal family.³³ The Hungarian origin of the Portuguese kings who managed to break away from their semi-peripheral position and turned into Europe's economic and political pioneers in the Renaissance era filled the hearts of the politically conscious Hungarian Romantics with pride, and just like in Poland, Camões and the *Lusiads* turned into authentically patriotic symbols of a small nation which strives to achieve huge international glory and fights for its national integrity. The identification with these two deeply Romantic narratives happened in a political situation somewhat similar to Poland's, insofar as in 19th century Hungary the most acute issues at stake were questions of political autonomy and the survival of a distinctive national language and culture in the shadow of the Austrian Empire. We can thus verify a longer history of reception of Portuguese literature in the Polish and Hungarian literary fields, which is tied to the question of strong political affinities between the nations. While I am not suggesting that the history of transliterary relations could entirely define the reception of a specific author, the degree of a certain foreign language literature's presence in the national literary traditions can influence the intensity of reactions and the number of editions. Since Portuguese literature counts with a more historically far-reaching penetration into the Polish and Hungarian literary system, it might not seem so exotic or marginal as it does in the Slovakian and Czech cultural canon, as is suggested by Slaničková and Valová.³⁴

Turning back to the politics of reception in post-socialist Central European societies, we can claim that the resistance of the Slovakian and Czech markets and the initial reluctance of the Polish literary field towards Saramago is not surprising if we take into consideration not only the differing degree of penetration of Portuguese literature into each national literary tradition, but also the political and cultural situation of Central Europe in the post-socialist period. After several decades of ideological indoctrination and censorship, the right to freedom of expression was finally guaranteed again in 1989 following the collapse of the socialist regimes. The end of state-controlled cultural life and education drove societies away from Marxism and the ideological frameworks of socialist theories. In general, Marxist theorization in the Eastern Bloc wasn't a critically constructive political and social discourse in permanent transformation and self-questioning like in the West. It was first and foremost a dogmatic and official ideology imposed on society through the educational system, media, and state-organized indoctrination. While in the West Marxism had a strong emancipatory

³³ Ferenc Pál, 'Capítulo das relações entre Portugal e a Hungria: As fontes da origem Húngara nas novelas de cavalaria Portuguesas do século XVI', *De Camões a Saramago. Estudos da história da recepção da cultura e literatura Portuguesas na Hungria*, ed. by Ferenc Pál (Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2013), 23-24.

³⁴ Slaničková, (forthcoming); Valová, 'Recepção do neorrealismo literário português', 77. Both authors use purportedly the word "exotic"

potential and was associated with a deeply progressive and democratic way of thinking, in Central and Eastern Europe it represented the other side of the coin for the vast majority of society: a vague and symbolic narrative of the totalitarian regime. Whereas Marxism for Westerners meant a political position and an ideological conviction one could freely choose and assume, on the other side of the Iron Curtain it was the one and the only political discourse with which the entirety of society had to identify with in a compulsory way, leaving the state no freedom in choosing political stances.³⁵ As the recently deceased Hungarian leftist philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás accentuated, “in the popular mind »the Left« is identified with the heritage of the fallen Stalinist, national Stalinist, and post-Stalinist regimes”³⁶, which means that several years after the transition to democracy there is still a strong suspicion towards cultural products and authors directly or indirectly associate with Marxism or intellectuals who openly declare themselves communists. Since Marxism in Central and Eastern Europe is permeated by the memory of an extremely painful and oppressive past, this kind of politically active and *engagé* authors are most often seen as specters of totalitarianism, or if we want to use Jacques Derrida’s expression coined in relation to the end of the Soviet Union and the political liberation of the Eastern Bloc, the specters of Marx³⁷ that haunt the present and threaten the freedom of democracy. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that Saramago couldn’t count on a very warm welcome in Central Europe due to his card-carrying commitment to Marxism and his life-long relationship with the Portuguese Communist Party. The Portuguese writer and literary critic Urbano Tavares Rodrigues commented on the matter by saying that Saramago’s commitment to the Party always remained firm, and his ideas regarding communism did not substantially change after the collapse of the Soviet Union.³⁸

The Hungarian reception seems to be atypical in this politically saturated context filled with the specters of Marx. As I have mentioned before, to the best of my knowledge

³⁵ Györgyi Horváth, *Utazóelméletek. Angolszász politizáló elméletek kelet-európai kontextusban* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2014) 48.

³⁶ Gáspár Miklós Tamás, ‘Being on the Left in Eastern Europe’, *East or East / East-West. Cycle of Lectures about the Transition in Eastern Europe* (Barcelona: CCCB, 2001), 139. http://www.cccb.org/rcs_gene/02-complet_Nuria_dIR_11-7-2019_.pdf

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London-New York: Routledge, 2006), 15-16.

³⁸ “A sua relação com o Partido Comunista Português manteve-se sempre firme, embora José Saramago com o seu espírito crítico, algumas vezes tenha emitido juízos pessoais em discordância com a ortodoxia. (...) A sua ideia de comunismo não foi afectada pelo desabar dos regimes do Leste, nos anos 90 porque já há muito que entendia que havia erros graves no estalinismo e porque concebia o comunismo de forma mais livre e mais generosa. Mas podemos dizer que mau grado essas beliscaduras José Saramago se mantinha profundamente ligado ao seu Partido Comunista Português.” Urbano Tavares Rodrigues, ‘José Saramago e o Partido Comunista’, *Diário de Notícias* 19/06/2010, <https://www.dn.pt/portugal/urbano-tavares-rodrigues-jose-saramago-e-o-partido-comunista--1597471.html>

the very first translations in Central Europe were published in Hungarian in 1988. Curiously, in Hungary Saramago faced neither initial coldness and critical distance in the first decade of the post-1989 period, nor long term resistance from the publishing houses or the reading public. On the contrary, several books were published throughout the first decade of the post-socialist era, and we can find a vivid critical discourse surrounding the Saramaguian novel even in the early phases of the reception.³⁹ It is no exaggeration to say that Saramago had been fully incorporated in the Hungarian literary field before the Nobel Prize. Six novels had been published between 1989 and 1999—*Jangada de Pedra* (1989), *O Memorial do Convento* (1992), *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis* (1993), *A História do Cerco de Lisboa* (1997), *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (1998), and *Todos os Nomes* (1999) – and as early as 2000 the first Hungarian language monography was published, written by Ferenc Pál, one of the main translators of Saramago and head of the Portuguese Department at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest during the first decades of the new millennium.⁴⁰ The publication of Pál's monography precedes not only the edition of the first book-length study in Polish by Ewa Łukaszyk (*Pokusa pustyni. Nomadyzm jako wyjście z kryzysu współczesności w pisarstwie José Saramago*, 2005) but also David Friar's *The Novels of Saramago: Echoes from the Past, Pathways into the Future* (2007), the first major English language critical work on Saramago. This kind of deep attention to the writer and the editorial success in the pre-Nobel era is not at all exceptional if we take into account Saramago's ever-rising international fame from the late 1980s onwards. Five international prizes were conferred to him in the 1990s in Italy and the U.K., he received his first *honoris causa* doctorates from the University of Turin, the University of Seville, and the University of Manchester, and he was elected to be a member of the *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts* in France.⁴¹ However, the exemplary rapid reaction of the Hungarian literary apparatus to Saramago's international recognition seems to be quite unusual in a semi-peripheral cultural tradition in the post-1989 period. At this point, one should try to find answers for the question: what are the reasons for this atypically early incorporation of Saramago's work in the Hungarian canon?

First of all, it was in the late 1980s that a whole new generation of deeply motivated and professionally trained translators from Portuguese appeared in Hungary due to the foundation of the Portuguese Department of the Eötvös Loránd University and the introduction of the first official undergraduate and graduate programs in Portuguese

³⁹ Bálint Urbán, 'A receção Húngara da obra de José Saramago', *De Camões a Saramago. Estudos da história da receção da cultura e literatura Portuguesas na Hungria*, ed. by Ferenc Pál (Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2013), 178-179.

⁴⁰ Ferenc Pál, *A végtelen regényszöveg bővítetében. José Saramago írói portréja* (Budapest: Mundus, 2000).

⁴¹ Sabine, 'Saramago and the »Nobel Effect«, 7.

philology. The ambitions of this first generation of scholars and translators (including all three translators of Saramago, namely Ervin Székely, Laura Lukács, and Ferenc Pál, who not only translated Saramago but, as mentioned above, also wrote two academic monographs on his novels) were met with an extremely favorable perception of Portugal throughout the 1980s and the 1990s. After the creation of socialist one-party systems in the late 1940s, the countries of Central Europe and Portugal happened to be on opposite sides of the political spectrum, thus limiting political, economic, and cultural relations. The end of the Salazar regime in 1974 brought about a significant change in the pattern of relations and there has been a mutual approximation between a democratic and left-wing oriented Portugal and the Central European nations of the Socialist Bloc. After 1989, the countries of the region found themselves in a political situation quite similar to Portugal's in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution: they were small, semi-peripheral countries that after a lingering period of authoritarianism stepped onto the road of redemocratization, which meant not only the transformation of the governmental, legislative, economic, social, and cultural structures, but also a certain transfiguration of the geopolitical and national identity of the countries. Portugal, considered a historically underdeveloped and backward nation, a country that, in the words of Eduardo Lourenço, basically failed the project of Enlightenment-based modernity,⁴² managed to break away from its own backwardness and successfully renegotiate its geopolitical and cultural position in Europe after the long decades of isolation in the Salazar era. In the 1990s Portugal was no longer an isolated, semi-peripheral country in the European context. Its symbolic capital grew in a significant manner after the accession to the European Union and the organization of the EXPO World Fair. This movement away from the periphery and the symbolic integration into the center made Portugal an exemplary case of changing the geopolitical position after the process of redemocratization and of reshaping, or even rebranding, its own cultural identity as an enviable European nation. Throughout the 1990s Portugal appeared regularly in the Hungarian press as a role model due to its smooth and successful transition to democracy, the internationalization and globalization of its economy, its accession to the European Union, and the establishment of a relatively stable welfare society.⁴³ Moreover, the increased visibility of Portuguese culture in the global context made the growth of Portugal in terms of soft power evident, a process Hungary, a country with the same size and same population, doubtlessly envied and saw as exemplary.

⁴² Eduardo Lourenço, *O Labirinto da Saudade. Psicanálise Mítica do Destino Português* (Lisboa: Gradiva, 2007), 30.

⁴³ István Szilágyi, *A portugal modell* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2000) 132.

The Hungarian reading public had a deep relationship with the Portuguese literary canon at the time of Saramago's arrival in 1989, and Portuguese literature was relatively well-known thanks to the numerous editions of Portuguese neorealist novels (Alves Redol, Ferreira de Castro, Fernando Namora, Carlos de Oliveira) and to the vivid presence of Fernando Pessoa. Neorealist authors were widely published for political reasons in Central Europe, and during the decades of the socialist regime they became relatively well-known in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. The same can be said about Fernando Pessoa. By the late 1960s, Pessoa had been translated into Czech, and by the mid-1970s to Polish.⁴⁴ In Hungary, Pessoa appeared some years earlier, in 1964, and quickly became an important reference for a whole generation of late modernist poets. All of his books published until the 2000's turned into bestsellers, and his influence was quite noticeable not only in the poetic discourses of Hungarian postmodernism, but also in the theater, arts, and journalism. He turned into a cult figure of the Hungarian intelligentsia in the 1980s and some of his most famous poems were even used for marketing purposes.⁴⁵ Given the fact that Hungarian readers were not only familiar with Portuguese language authors because of the neorealist novels, but had managed to develop a more intimate relation with Portuguese literature thanks to Fernando Pessoa, it is not at all surprising that another Portuguese author who turned up in the book market in the year of the political transition had such a favorable reception.

As to the book market, one can identify a similar pattern of changes in the four countries after the political transition. The book markets ceased to be controlled by the state and went through a process of privatization which meant that the traditional policies of socialist-era publishing were exchanged for a strongly market-oriented, capitalist system. The incredible number of printed copies was reduced while the prices increased significantly. During the years of socialism, book publishing was an inherent part of the cultural politics of the system and had an important role in shaping the mindset of society.⁴⁶ With the arrival of the free-market economy, the publishing industry started to flourish, and dozens of new, independent publishing houses appeared in the market. The liberation of the cultural space supposed a significant growth in the addition of foreign language literature. Saramago arrived in Central Europe during the first decades of this complex transformation, when the liberated cultural space was still haunted by the aforementioned specters of Marx, but was at the same time trying to break away from its own isolation and backwardness and wanted to enter into

⁴⁴ Bartłomiej Basista, 'Receção da obra pessoana na Polónia', *Studia Iberytyczne*, 21 (2022), 56.

⁴⁵ Ferenc Pál, 'Pessoa na Hungria: história de uma recepção', *Pessoa Plural*, 16 (2019), 294.

⁴⁶ István Bart, *Világirodalom és könyvkiadás a Kádár-korszakban* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2002), 10-11.

the narrative of Western modernity. Saramago's reception is thus shaped by these two opposing forces: the burden of a painful past and the hope in a future defined by Europeanness and the Western models of the welfare-state. The diversity of reactions to the so-called 'Saramago phenomenon' has to do with certain political factors and with the historical pattern of inter-literary relations between the Portuguese literary canon and the Central European literary systems.

Hungary was identified in the Eastern Bloc as the "happiest barrack", since after the 1956 revolution and the subsequent years of open terror and retribution, a smoother form of state socialism was implemented in order to avoid further uprisings. The so-called "goulash communism" meant a special kind of political and economic system which brought higher living standards, a sense of relative prosperity and well-being, pseudo-consumerism, and more cultural freedom compared to other countries in the Eastern Bloc.⁴⁷ The liberal policies introduced from the 1960s onwards contributed to a gradual process of transformation into a more democratic state.

"Hungary has been marked for decades by a relative political calm. While the transformation in some countries has been accompanied by civil warfare, there not a shot has been fired. While the change of political system in some countries took place at lightning speed (collapse of the Berlin Wall, mass demonstrations on the streets of Prague, execution of the Romanian dictator), Hungary had restrained negotiations over an extended period, with the ruling politicians of the old order and the hitherto repressed opposition reaching an agreement on free elections and a new constitution. For decades there were hardly any strikes or street demonstrations."⁴⁸

In Poland, on the other hand, since the end of the 1960s there have been several strikes and demonstrations culminating in the creation of the Solidarity Trade Union, which under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa played a decisive role in the process of ending the Communist rule. Czechoslovakia managed to achieve democracy through the events of the so-called Velvet Revolution. The fact that Hungary went through a much longer and smoother transition contributed to the lack of Marxian specters haunting the 1990s. As such,

⁴⁷ Heino Nyssönen, 'Salami Reconstructed: "Goulash Communism" and Political Culture in Hungary', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 47.1-2 (2006), 153-154.

⁴⁸ János Kornai, 'Paying the Bill for Goulash Communism: Hungarian Development and Macro Stabilization in a Political-Economy Perspective', *Social Research*, 63.4 (1996) 944-945.

Saramago was able to have a more warm-hearted reception in which his political convictions didn't play an important role.

After the Nobel Prize and with the translation of the allegorical novels of the second cycle, Saramago has been perceived much more as a global celebrity author than as a representative of a semi-peripheral literary tradition. The allegorical character of his novels and the atopia and the achronia of his writing undoubtedly contributed to his canonization as an eminent representative of world literature. Mark Sabine highlights that the novels of the second cycle not only develop a general critique of postmodern societies, but also evoke a series of international genres, tropes, and thematics such as the picaresque tradition, the plague narratives, or the *doppelgänger* myth. At the same time, the allegorical novels connect with two, originally semi-peripheral traditions, namely that of Latin-American magical realism, and the tradition of the everyday uncanny of the Central European literary canon (Kafka, Čapek, Mrožek, Örkény).⁴⁹ This resemblance to the mid-European absurd probably contributed to Saramago's canonization in the Central European literary systems after the millennium. The fact that Saramago nowadays is among the most well-known and well-read international authors in Poland and Hungary is proven by the numerous editions of his works. Due to the pandemic, *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* became one of the most-read world literature novels in recent years, and in Poland, where Saramago initially wasn't accepted because of his political beliefs that recalled the memories of the totalitarian regime, it was ironically interpreted as an authentic critique of totalitarianism. The movement away from the periphery and the introduction of Saramago to the global market of contemporary fiction turned the semi-peripheral writer into a global author who is no longer tied to a specific linguistic community and whose novels are not situated in a certain (semi-peripheral) cultural tradition. However, in agreement with Duncan McColl Chesney, I believe that the current notion of world literature with its own cultural and market dynamics has to be constantly questioned and criticized, and "while we cannot and should not abandon the project of World Literature, we need to be more critical of its on-going development as a discipline and its practical formation of a canon."⁵⁰ From this critical perspective, the direct communication between the peripheries and the semi-peripheries seems to be a form of resistance, and as such bypasses the cultural and linguistic hegemony of the global literary system. Therefore, the "reperipheralization" of Saramago, a prominent member of the World Republic of Letters, could challenge the status quo and eventually lead us to rethink the current

⁴⁹ Sabine, 'Saramago and the »Nobel Effect«', 10.

⁵⁰ Duncan McColl Chesney, 'World Literature, the Canon, and the Case of Saramago', *Ex-position*, 47.3 (2022), 123.

functioning of World Literature, and to arrive at the utopia of world literature as a form of resistance.

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