

SARAMAGO, OS SEUS NOMES; UM ÁLBUM BIOGRÁFICO

Alejandro García Schnetzer & Ricardo Viel (orgs.). *Saramago, os seus nomes; um álbum biográfico* (Lisboa: Porto Editora, 2022). 351 pages. Print.

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Saramago, os seus nomes [Saramago, his names], as the subtitle states, is not a photobiography—a very common and celebrated genre in Portugal—but ‘a biographical album,’ a symbiosis between an album and an anthology, featuring numerous images and photographs while giving more weight to selected texts by José Saramago than to certain illustrations. This volume complements other recent ones, such as Joaquim Vieira's *Rota de vida* (2018), Tomás Guerrero's *O neto do homem mais sábio* (2020), and Miguel Real and Filomena Oliveira's *As 7 vidas de José Saramago* (2022), as well as earlier works like *La consistencia de los sueños* (2008) by Fernando Gómez Aguilera, which also leans towards biography and an attempt to sketch a portrait. This album, which António Guterres calls a ‘photobiography’ in the preface, and which starts with José [Saramago] and ends with Pilar [del Río], is unique, distinguishing itself from the previous ones by being a kind of Saramago index that ‘gathers more than 200 key names in the trajectory of José Saramago’ (p. 9). This list of names is divided into four parts:

- ‘Espaços/lugares’ [Spaces/places], which is a map or itinerary from Azinhaga to Mars, passing through Alentejo, Brazil, and Palestine (where Saramago denounces, in a 2007 text, ‘the genocide that the Palestinian people have been victims of for the past sixty years’ [p. 82]);
- ‘Leituras/sentidos’ [Readings/senses], which is a constellation of works and creators, from Fernando Pessoa (with a previously unknown photograph) to Don Quixote, including Eliseo Diego, Maria João Pires, and Mafalda (shortly before learning of the Nobel Prize award, Saramago told Quino: ‘Mafalda was my Philosophy teacher’ [p. 176]);
- ‘Escritas/criações’ [Writings/creations], which is a collection of fictional characters, themes, and historical figures, from Romeo and Juliet to April 25, 1974, including

Salvador Allende, God, and the *cão das lágrimas* [dog of tears] ('I would like to be remembered as the writer who created the character of the dog of tears' [p. 219]);

- 'Laços/pessoas' [Ties/people], which is the section dedicated to certain affinities, from the grandparents, Josefa and Jerónimo, to José Rodrigues Miguéis, including Isabel da Nóbrega, Zeferino Coelho, and Rita Levi-Montalcini (of whom Saramago read *Elogio de la imperfección* in Spanish and about whom he wrote in 2008, less than two years before he died, 'When I grow up, I want to be like Rita' [p. 320]).

As the volume's two excellent editors, Alejandro García Schnetzer and Ricardo Viel, state, this is a partial, representative selection: 'not *all the names* are here' (p. 9). And it would be impossible for them to be. Each reader will miss some names they find important (for me, Raul Brandão, Africa, the *New Portuguese Letters*, Saudade, Future, for example); but in *Saramago, his names*, we already have 200 key names that allow us to remember, know, and discover José Saramago through more than 300 graphically enjoyable pages (the graphic design is by Raul Loureiro).

To create this book, García Schnetzer—an Argentine editor and writer—and Viel—a Brazilian journalist and director of communications at the José Saramago Foundation—conducted a comprehensive rereading of Saramago's work, decided to give voice to the biographed (*Saramago, his names* is "Saramago by himself"); gathered about 500 images and 1500 texts from various archives, including the author's own estate; and performed intensive research and consultations. The result, a biographical album like *Cortázar de la A a la Z* (2014), is at once a tribute, an almanac, an act of devotion, an atlas, a pastime. This is an album that can be read sequentially or randomly, continuously or discontinuously, seeking to understand the dialogues that traverse the four interrelated sections, 'whose development follows a thematic and temporal cadence that is not strict,' a cadence similar to Saramago's idea of history, 'where everything happens simultaneously; everything that happens is happening' (p. 9).

Saramago is an immense and ever-expanding territory. A territory difficult to traverse in its entirety, like Pessoa and other major authors. In the preface to the catalog of an exhibition of portraits of Fernando Pessoa, Saramago wrote:

Of a person named Fernando Pessoa, what we already know of Camões is becoming justified. Ten thousand portrayals, drawn, painted, modeled, sculpted,

have ended up making Luís Vaz invisible. What remains of him is what is left: a drooping eyelid, a beard, a crown of laurels. It is easy to see that Fernando Pessoa is also on his way to invisibility [...]. Perhaps that, who knows, is the perfect destiny of poets, to lose the substance of a contour, a spent gaze, a wrinkle in the skin, and dissolve into space, into time, vanishing among the lines of what they managed to write.

There are perhaps fewer portrayals of Saramago than of Pessoa, but he could also vanish among ‘the lines of what he managed to write’. To avoid such invisibility, or such swift invisibility, books like this one by Schnetzer and Viel are indispensable, as they help us endow the author with historical reality and ‘the substance of a contour,’ the person who, in this case, was named Saramago. The person who began traveling and writing relatively late, who fought many battles, who was outraged by many injustices, who considered his own civilization dead: ‘What no one doubts is that the civilization we have been, was not only mortal but is dead. And it is not only dead, but decided, in its final days, to demonstrate how useless it was. The proclamation of this uselessness is being made in Sarajevo (and in how many more Sarajevos?) in the face of Europe's cowardice’ (p. 77). Saramago is his novels, his names, but also his texts and acts of intervention. And his letters, many still unpublished, of which we have glimpses in this biographical volume.

For those for whom Saramago is that immense, almost ungraspable territory, the names in *Saramago, his names* are crucial coordinates for orientation, they are entries to a greater name that is also the name of a common plant: *raphanus raphanistrum*. A name built from other names, *Saramago, his names* is an anthology, a summa of names, an ‘I’ that contains multitudes.