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Raised from the Ground by José Saramago

review

Ursula K. Le Guin

26 December 2012

For the last couple of centuries, novels have been written mostly by middle-class writers for middle-class readers. Novels about the very poor, the oppressed, peasants, aren't generally written by or for the people they are about. Thus they tend to have a distanced, sociological air, while being at the same time terribly depressing – revelatory, grim, unhopeful and of necessity brutal. The two great American novels of the oppressed, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, are saved from that minatory coldness by the authors' passion for justice and their loving respect for their protagonists. The same is true of Portuguese author José Saramago's early novel, *Raised from the Ground* – with a tremendous bonus: the author is writing about people he grew up with, his own people, his family.

The temptation I can only partly resist in this review is to let Saramago write it. This is how he opened his Nobel lecture in 1998: "The wisest man I ever knew in my whole life could not read or write. At four o'clock in the morning, when the promise of a new day still lingered over French lands, he got

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up from his pallet and left for the fields, taking to pasture the half-dozen pigs whose fertility nourished him and his wife. My mother's parents lived on this scarcity, on the small breeding of pigs ... In winter when the cold of the night grew to the point of freezing the water in the pots inside the house, they went to the sty and fetched the weaklings among the piglets, taking them to their bed. Under the coarse blankets, the warmth from the humans saved the little animals from freezing and rescued them from certain death. Although the two were kindly people, it was not a compassionate soul that prompted them to act in that way: what concerned them, without sentimentalism or rhetoric, was to protect their daily bread, as is natural for people who, to maintain their life, have not learned to think more than is needful."

Living and working with his grandparents as a boy gave him the experience that underlies this novel, its inspiration, its motivation and its tone. In the Nobel talk he summarised it thus: "Three generations of a peasant family, the Badweathers, from the beginning of the century to the April revolution of 1974 which toppled dictatorship, move through this novel ... and it was with such men and women risen from the ground, real people first, figures of fiction later, that I learned how to be patient, to trust and to confide in time, that same time that simultaneously builds and destroys us in order to build and once more to destroy us."

Saramago left journalism and began writing novels late in his life, as if a fine old apple tree should suddenly grow heavy with fruit. This novel, published in 1980, when he was 58, both is and is not an "early work". It hasn't the complex depth of his later books, and its style is still fairly conventional (there are full stops and paragraphs), but the narrative voice is unmistakable: a mature, quiet voice, conversational and easy, often ironical or endearingly humorous, that flows forward always weaving and interbraiding with itself, wandering but never losing impetus, like a big river running through a dry land.

The breadth of his thought and sympathy, the difficult balance between the patience and trust he speaks of and his passionate political conviction give the novel a wider focus than most such testimonies of human injustice. In a passage that describes the beating of a man held as a striker, the place of torture is not, as is usual, seen as an unspeakable secret – because nothing can be kept secret. Nothing human is outside nature. Everything is connected: everything can be spoken, and can speak. An ant on the floor thinks, "His face is all swollen, his lips cut, and his eyes, poor eyes, you can't even see them for the bruises, he's so different from when he first arrived ..." When the guards throw water on the victim, we follow the water on its long travels through the depths of the Earth, into the clouds and rain, into the earthenware jug from which it is "poured from on high on to a face, an abrupt fall, abruptly broken as it runs slowly over lips, eyes, nose and chin, over gaunt cheeks, over a forehead drenched in sweat ... and thus it comes to know this man's as yet still-living mask".

Though he includes so much in his vision, Saramago knows what to leave out – and how rare that knowledge is! No flat lists of details. None of the mechanical dialogue that clogs so much narrative now. None of the luxurious lingering on suffering that's hailed as gritty realism but is more often, for both writer and reader, a self-indulgence in sadistic fantasy. The only fantasy in this novel could be seen as its unexpectedly hopeful ending. Saramago had a very high regard for truth; I think he chose to stop the story on a high point, not because he believed the ideals of social justice would ever be fulfilled – I'm not sure he "believed in" anything, in that sense – but because he judged a rational hope more useful than despair, and because he sought beauty in his art. His great book *Blindness* makes the same turn to the light at the end – but then *Seeing* turns away again.

Death in modern novels is almost ritually violent. People used to die in novels the way they do in real life, prosaically and inevitably; but we like our fictional deaths seen as acci-

dent and spectacle, not felt as an experience we're going to share. There's a death scene near the end of this book – just a man, after a lifetime of overwork and some damage from torture, dying of old age at 67. We see his death through his own eyes. I think it beats any death scene in any novel I know. Saramago's truth-telling arises from a rare combination of intelligence, fierce artistic courage and intense human tenderness.

In the Nobel talk, he said: "The only thing I am not sure of having assimilated satisfactorily is something that the hardship of those experiences turned into virtues in those women and men: a naturally austere attitude towards life ... Every day I feel its presence in my spirit like a persistent summons: I haven't lost, not yet at least, the hope of meriting a little more the greatness of those examples of dignity proposed to me in the vast immensity of the plains of Alentejo. Time will tell."

Time now gives us English-speakers the chance to see how well he worked to serve and deserve such greatness in this early novel. We already know how faithfully he followed that austere and summoning spirit through all his work.