

Is It Time to Return to the Author? Between Omniscient Narrator and Interior Monologue

José Saramago

Lanzarote, the Canary Islands

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José Saramago,

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Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 2.3 (2000)

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Abstract: Nobel laureate of 1998 José Saramago, in his essay "Is It Time to Return to the Author? Between Omniscient Narrator and Interior Monologue" (trans. from the Portuguese and French by Roumiana Deltcheva), presents a short yet passionate treatise in defense of the "author" both as an individual and as a writer. For Saramago, the literary text as such exists because of the author, his or her thoughts, perceptions, and emotions, which in turn are reflections of the author's external environment and inner world. Saramago goes further to suggest that the reader's attraction to the literary narrative goes beyond the mere reading of the story unfolding before his or her eyes, in the unconscious quest to uncover its author. While accepting the premise that the authors of the past remain in the present by virtue of the texts they have left behind the living author can and should be judged not solely as a writer, but even more so as a social and ethical individual. Saramago stands in opposition to many in the current landscape of literary studies whose approach is to dissociate the authorial voice from the voice of the actively engaged writer and citizen.

José SARAMAGO

Is It Time to Return to the Author? Between Omniscient Narrator and Interior Monologue

Time and again, whenever the causes of a man's brilliant victory or absolute failure are examined, there is always someone to utter an irritating phrase whose incessant use has turned it into a classical maxim, *cherchez la femme*. What this means, here, is that for better or worse, a man is nothing without a woman, The Woman. From this vantage point, it would appear, the male, left to himself, is the image of the most perfect innocence. I digress for a moment here: I do not recall having heard so far the analogous phrase -- whenever the causes of the failure or victory of a woman are in question. No one ever says, *cherchez l'homme*. Perhaps the significance of this fact is that women always succeed more effectively than men to be in control on their way to triumph or, on the other hand, to lick and heal their wounds alone, the wounds of body and soul that life bestows on them right, left, and centre. End of digression. I proceed.

Indeed, in order to understand what flows before my eyes, I have always had the need to look for that which is found upriver, preferably at the source, and, above all, I admit it, in order to find my small path (solely my own...) in the forest of material available to us to observe and to describe. In comparative literature, I find a wide variety of themes, for example literature and identity; foreign and internal influences; literary genres, language, and culture; literature and other forms of cultural expression; regional studies; methods and paradigms of comparative literature and cultural diversity. Rarely do I find the word author. Strange, this. Then I say to myself: "Let them (you) speak about what well- or little-known authors, who have become literature, did. As for me, perhaps I might be able to say something about what an author is." So here I am, alone with my theme, strictly speaking, alone with myself.

I have to begin with an explanation I consider important. As far as my conscious intentions go - and I believe there are no other -- the question posed at the beginning of my brief presentation is neither gratuitous nor intended to be polemical. First, it is not gratuitous because it takes into account without any preliminary rhetorical stipulation, my personal qualms and bafflement regarding the true identity of my narrative voice, the voice that in the books I have written conveys what I, ultimately and unconditionally, believe to be simply the thinking of the author that I am, of the person that I am, my own thinking or, alas, the thinking of so many others, from whom I have borrowed to satisfy my needs as narrator. Neither is my question polemical, albeit in its very formulation it contains implicit recognition of more or less evident conceptual weaknesses because it does not intend to use the tactic of diversion of having other things on one's mind to evade the problems of the subject matter keeping in line with the good old manoeuvre of displacing the discussion along a more favourable plain.

In fact, if I am offering this alternative -- which puts face to face the somewhat elaborate techniques and contemporary uses of "interior monologue," on the one hand, and the much simpler, familiar techniques of the "omniscient narrator" used since the beginning of time, on the other -- it is because I believe that, after all, any narrative process, whether it has already been conceived or is to be conceived, always has and will continue to have but one goal: Each one of them separately and all of them taken collectively constitute a medium of research and of expression that aspires towards universality. In addition, these processes are nothing more than tools to be used by the author, in sequence or in a more complex way, to express his or her own thinking. It goes without saying that when I say "thinking" I also include the impressions, perceptions, emotions, dreams, that is, the "visions" of the external and the internal world without which the so called "thinking" would become, at least in my view, inoperative.

The authentic "omniscient narrator" acts, in my opinion, as a god who is not satisfied only with what has happened and is in the process of happening: From the first event, from the first perception, from the first idea he or she knows the immediate and remote consequences, temporal and spatial, that this idea, event, or perception will have. He or she must organise his or her discourse much like, if you allow the analogy, a driver of a quadriga who must not only hold the reins and monitor the reactions of four horses to the stimuli of the ride, but must also remain

aware of the potential bumps on the road, of the route he is supposed to follow, and of the enlightening signs that are being transmitted to him by a mechanism even more fragile than it appears to be. Needless to say, this is the mechanism of reporting, never stable, never strictly linear, potentially predisposed to turn into something else at any moment. Anyone, who wishes to, could embellish things to his or her taste, but the fact is that in general, what we, who write, do, can be summarised in two words: Tell Stories. It is also possible to say, indeed, it has already been said, that novelists, playwrights, even poets, are here to tell the story of those who neither are nor will ever be poets, playwright, or novelists.

Perhaps this is so, who am I to refute it?; yet, I do find a dose of intellectual vanity in this claim. Going a bit further, what I truly believe is that the novelist, the playwright, the poet tell, not exclusively, of course, their personal story, which is by no means the same as stating that they decided to turn writers one day merely to tell us consciously and with the obligatory impudence about their petty lives....

In my opinion, each word in itself is a story. The words we utter between the moment we get out of bed in the morning and the moment we go back there at night, as well as the words of dreams or those that try to describe dreams, all constitute a story that is concurrently rational and crazy, coherent or fragmentary, and as such can at any moment be structured and articulated into a story, whether written or not. Because, even when we do not write, we live as characters, yes, we live as characters of the story that we are. Let us remember that the author tells all this with a double intention, which is at times evident, at times obscure: Clear and transparent, in the first place, because it is necessary that the story he or she tells be "recognised" as such at every stage by the reader; yet, it must also be concealed behind the familiarity of what we call conscience in order to augment and draw attention to the resonant effects that this disguise may evoke. Let us also remember that the storyteller is, in any case, in some way a conjuror, an unapologetic and unrepentant conjuror, who has no other excuse but his or her genius, if he or she had this extraordinary luck at the exact moment of distribution of cosmic grace. He or she always tells the same stories, fully aware of the fact that they are nothing more than a string of words, suspended in an unstable equilibrium, frail, always hovering towards the non-sense which attracts them, either freed or still retaining some kind of structure, for the filthy ghost that always lurks around the corner, the chaos that relentlessly threatens all our conventions and the key to which is incessantly on the verge of being lost.

Nevertheless, we should not forget that just as absolute truths do not exist, neither do absolute lies. If every truth inevitably carries in itself some falsehood, no lie is so false as to disallow at least some element of truth. Any lie, thus, will contain two kinds of truth: Its own straightforward, so to speak, truth about its own contradiction ("If I am a liar and I am saying so, I am telling the truth"), and another truth, which the lie conveys, voluntarily or not, regardless of whether this truth, in turn, constitutes a part of the lie or not. Similar to a cogwheel, each of these two forces sequentially sets in motion the force that negates it. I know of no other perpetual movement. Whether by projecting the appearance of truth or by distorting the truth of appearance, we go through life telling stories. However, and here I am finally getting to the crux of the matter, the story that should be of the greatest interest to the reader, contrary to what the material evidence of the text suggests, should not be the one that appears to be proposed by the narrative he or she is getting ready to read.

How is this possible? What do I mean by this? I proceed with my explanation. A book is not made up solely of characters, of events, of quests, of surprises, of stylistic effects, of acrobatic demonstrations of technique. A book is, above all, that which may be found and identified in it as the author, its author. I wonder if what compels the reader to read is not the secret and undeclared hope of discovering, in the book, the invisible and omnipresent person of, say what you may, the author. This hope is autonomous of the story that will be told, which the reader usually awaits in a state of mind reminiscent of obedience. As I understand it, the novel is a disguise that at the same time hides and reveals the features of the novelist. That is not to say that the reader should turn into a detective or a geologist searching for clues or probing into chthonic layers, at the bottom of which, like a suspect or a victim, or a fossil, the author would be found hiding. Much

to the contrary. The author is in the book, the author is the book, even when the book does not succeed in being the whole author. It was not simply with the intent to shock the society of his time that Gustave Flaubert declared that he was Madame Bovary. It appears to me that, in fact, he did nothing more than shatter a door that had always been open. Meaning no disrespect to the author of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, it is possible to claim that this statement is outrageous not in its excess, but in its lack: Flaubert neglected to emphasise that he was also Emma's husband and lovers, that he was the house and the street, that he was the city and its denizens, of all ages and circumstances, who inhabited it, for the image and the spirit, the flesh and blood of everything had to pass in its entirety, through one single individual, namely Gustave Flaubert, the author.

Emma Bovary is Gustave Flaubert because without him she would be nothing, she would not exist. And if you allow me to mention another name following the reference to the author of *L'éducation sentimentale*, I would add that I am, although few be these characters, Blimunda and Baltasar in *Memorial do Convento (Balthasar and Blimunda)* and not only am I Jesus and Mary Magdalene, or Joseph and Mary, in *O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo (The Gospel According to Jesus Christ)*, but I am god and the devil, who are also present there. Ultimately, we always tell our own story, not the story of our life, our so called biography, but the other one, which we find difficult to tell using our own names, not because it brings us excessive shame or excessive pride, but because what is great in human beings is too great to be told with words, even when there are thousands of them, and because what usually makes us petty and mediocre is so ordinary and commonplace that we would not be able to find anything new that would touch a chord in that noble or petty human being that the reader is. It is perhaps for these and other similar reasons that in their stories certain authors, among whom I believe I could include myself, favour not the story they live or have lived, but the story of their memory with its exactness, its weaknesses, its lies that are at the same time truths, its truths that do not prevent them from being lies. This is the only story that we can tell honestly because in reality we know no other.

So what do we do? Should we really return to the author? Yes, in my opinion, yes, but not, mind you, to the author as such, dissociated, as we often see him or her today, from his or her social and ethical being. I am afraid that the words I am about to say will sound old-fashioned. What I am offering here is a kind of reconciliation, an enthusiastic return to the concrete figure of the man or woman behind each book, for without this concrete individual literary text would simply cease to exist. It is this woman and this man that interest me above all, not to tell me how they were able to write their great or small works -- more likely than not, they themselves would not know the answer -- not to enhance my knowledge or to guide me with their lessons -- almost always, they are the first ones not to follow them -- but simply to tell me who they are in this society that we are, they, I, we all are. What I ask is that they be there every day, visible, above all audible, as citizens of the present, which is ours, even though as writers they reckon to be working for the future. The problem, if it really exists and is not merely a belated and unappealing figment of my imagination, is not to be found in the presumed death of the causes of social, political, or ideological tenor, which, at a certain time and with aesthetic results as diverse as the intentions, led literature to what has been deprecatorily called commitment.

The problem is, if you want me to put it bluntly without beating around the bush, that in general, the writer today refuses any kind of commitment, except naturally what he or she calls, if he or she is candid enough to admit it, "the personal and exclusive commitment to his or her work." I would even dare to claim that many theoretical frameworks that surround us today, irrespective of their elegance and insight, end up -- even when this is not their implicit or explicit objective -- providing intellectual escapes, diverse ways to conceal, in our own eyes, the bad faith and profound malaise of a group of people, we, the writers, who, after having assumed for a long time that they were the beacons of humanity, now affirm the irrevocable darkness of the creative act, the obscurantism of resignation, and the abdication of civic duty. And I suggest that after his or her death the author be judged on the merits of what he or she did. But, while he or she is still here, present, alive, allow me tell you that we have the right to judge him or her on the merits of what he or she is.

Note: The above essay, José Saramago, "Is It Time to Return to the Author? Between Omniscient Narrator and Interior Monologue" (trans. Roumiana Deltcheva), is published in Portuguese "Entre o narrador onisciente e o monologo interior: Deveremos voltar ao autor" and in French "Entre le narrateur omniscient et le monologue intérieur. Faut-il retourner à l'auteur?" in *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature comparée à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Milan V. Dimic, and Irene Sywenky. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999. 183-93.

Author's profile: José Saramago received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1998. To date he has published over thirty works in a variety of genres such as short stories, novels, poems, libretti, essays, diaries, and travelogues. To date, in English translation his texts include *All the Names* (trans. Margaret Jull Costa), *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (trans. Giovanni Pontiero), *Blindness* (trans. Giovanni Pontiero), *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (Giovanni Pontiero), *Baltasar and Blimunda* (trans. Giovanni Pontiero), *Cuadernos de Lanzarote (1993-1995)* (trans. Eduardo Naval), and *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (trans. Giovanni Pontiero). José Saramago resides on Lanzarote, the Canary Islands.

Translator's profile: Roumiana Deltcheva received a Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Alberta in 1999. In her work, Deltcheva concentrates on Central and East European literature and culture, film-literature relations, media studies, and identity politics and post-colonial issues and she has published in these areas widely. At present she is an independent scholar residing Montréal. E-mail: <rdeltche@yahoo.com>.