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Amazing Grace

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Review Domini continued from previous page -----College, we're reminded). The line carries a whiff of satire, but not enough; it fails to snap off our guide's lifted pinkie. And he is a guide, often pausing for explanation, like most of the men and women here. The conflicts cause the gray-flannel dwarf to scream. "The French Lesson," the longest story, keeps us at such a clinical distance that its punches are telegraphed. Its closing detail—"The book slipped, unread, from her fingers onto the floor"—offers nothing new and so smacks of simple put-down: the clod has no aesthetics! At such moments, *Excitable Women* plays like a recital; it's scrupulous about the club rules and unfailingly polite. One story seems to encapsulate both what's distinguished and what's troubling about the collection—and readers should come away, I repeat, mostly impressed by the former. The stories won dazzling endorsements, from the likes of William Kennedy and Joanna Scott, and they appeared in excellent quarterlies. But consider "Samantha," a prizewinner for *Ontario Review*. The story develops a possible case of sexual harassment, gray-haired hippie prof on gold-toothed African American. Not for nothing does the title character bear the name of a witch; the girl can see

trouble coming a long way ahead, and conjure it first to dance a little closer, then abruptly to disappear. So the professor's misbehavior amounts to no more than an elliptical conversation over coffee, in a public place—though he might yet tumble into worse. So, too, Samantha's flirting with danger nearly gets talked to death; again the climax holds no revelation. On the other hand, that climax entails an act all the more vicious for its quiet understatement, and the consequences may be explosive. What's more, Samantha's concluding movements are her most inchoate; they enact rather than analyze the painful duality of her position, as a bom intellectual with a bent for art films but also black skin, dreadlocks, and a gold front tooth. The girl's "tremendously sophisticated sentences ...," the professor tells her, don't seem to "fit" her agitated soul. In this the man anticipates the misgivings of another professor, in a later story, over the dark and earring'd Lennie. Insofar as Lennie and Lowell and Samantha and others knock their bookish nay-sayers into honestly considering ye, into wholehearted and messy vitality, Boyers amounts to more than "tremendously sophisticated" himself. John Domini (www.johndomini.com) often reviews for ABR. His next book will be the novel *Earthquake I.D.* Amazing Grace Giles Harvey See ing Jose Saramago Translated by Margaret Jull Costa Harcourt <http://www.harcourtbooks.com> 317 pages; cloth, \$25.00 Perhaps out of laziness, critics compare the fiction of Jose Saramago to that of Kafka and Borges. He is, certainly, interested in the machinations of power and the apparent helplessness of the individual in the face of these machinations, and this interest often finds expression in stories of a parabolic or allegorical nature; but Saramago is more like himself than he is like any other author—always the sure sign of an authentic talent—and comparison is of no value if it does not help us to better appreciate the differentness of things. The average review of one of his novels will consist of the critic praising the Nobel laureate's incredible knack for distilling vast, unwieldy themes into gripping narratives, while simultaneously bemoaning the many stylistic "quirks" with which the reader must contend in order to enjoy the story, as though Saramago were a charming dinner guest who sometimes speaks with his mouth full. Of course, as Martin Amis says, style and content are not separable: "They come from the same place." An author's style is the expression of his deepest self. It is not his manner: it is all of him. It is where we should look, therefore, if we want to find out what makes Saramago different from other authors. At first glimpse Saramago's style does appear awkwardly atavistic. His sentences—those long, loose, baggy, rambling, digressive beasts—seem to have more in common with Rabelais or Cervantes than with any modern writer. Like most antiquated things they are very easy to parody...

Dovvini continued from previous page

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"The French Lesson," the longest story, keeps us at such a clinical distance that its punches are telegraphed. Its closing detail—"The book slipped, unaided, from her fingers onto the floor"—offers nothing new and no cracks of simple put-down: the clod has no aesthetics! At such moments, *Enchanted Woes* plays like a recital: it's scrupulous about the clod's effect and, remarkably polite.

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tion—and readers should come away, I repeat, mostly impressed by the *form*. The stories won't dazzle or enrapture, from the *flow* of William Kennedy and Joanna Scott, and they appeared in excellent quarters. But consider "Suzantha," a prologue for *Onward Review*. The story develops a possible case of sexual harassment, gray-haired hippo prof on gold-toothed African American. Not for nothing does the title character bear the name of a witch; the girl can see trouble coming a long way ahead, and conjure it best to dance a little closer, then abruptly to disappear. So the professor's misbehavior amounts to no more than an elliptical conversation over coffee, in a public place—though he might yet tumble into worse. So too, Suzantha's flirting with danger nearly gets talked to death; again the climax holds no revelation. On the other hand, that climax entails an act all the more vicious for its quiet understatement, and the consequences may be explosive. What's more,

Suzantha's concluding movements are her most inchoate; they crum rather than analyze the painful duality of her position, as a born intellectual with a bent for art films but also black skin, crooked teeth, and a gold front tooth.

The girl's "intentionally sophisticated sentences . . ." the professor tells her, don't seem to "fit" her ignited soul. In this (or most) critiques the misgivings of another professor, in a later story, over the dark and cunning of Lennie. Instead as Lennie and Lowell and Suzantha and others knock their bookish way-says-our-honesty considering *you*, into what's-hearted and money vitality. Beyond amounts to more than "intentionally sophisticated" himself.

John Dovvini (www.johndovvini.com) offers reviews for ABR. His next book will be the novel Hawthorne L.D.

AMAZING GRACE

SEEING

Jose Saramago
Translated by Margaret Jull Costa
Harcourt
<http://www.harcourtbooks.com>
317 pages, cloth, \$25.00

Perhaps out of laziness, critics compare the fiction of Jose Saramago to that of Kafka and Borges. He is, certainly, interested in the mechanisms of power and the apparent helplessness of the individual in the face of these mechanisms, and this interest often finds expression in stories of a parabolic or allegorical nature; but Saramago is more like himself than he is like any other author—always the true sign of an authentic talent—and comparisons is of no value if it does not help us to better appreciate the differences of things. The average review of one of his novels will consist of the critic praising the Nobel laureate's laudable knack for distilling vast, unwieldy themes into gripping narratives, while simultaneously bemoaning the many stylistic "quirks" with which the reader must contend in order to enjoy the story, as though Saramago were a charming ditzergoat who sometimes speaks with his mouth full. Of course, as Merrin Amis says, style and content are not separable: "They come from the same place." An author's style is the expression of his deepest self. It is not his manner: it is all of him. It is where we should look, therefore, if we want to find out what makes Saramago different from other authors.

At first glimpse Saramago's style does appear awkwardly staccato. His sentences—those long, loose, baggy, rambling, digressive beasts—seem to have more in common with Rabelais or Cervantes than with any modern writer. Like most antiquated things they are very easy to parody, as I will briefly demonstrate:

The minister of public sanitation, or rather, to be more precise, the ex- or former minister of public sanitation, for as we saw in the previous chapter his heated altercation with the president, while not a formal statement of resignation, has

certainly had the effect of bringing to an abrupt end his long term of public service. The former minister of public sanitation, then, as I was saying, when he witnessed the crowd's peaceful and harmonious behavior felt, to use the time-honored expression, a breath of fresh air, or, to put it in more refined and philosophical terms, experienced an ineffable sensation of spiritual and ontological renewal.

Readers familiar with Saramago will say that he is slightly less circuitous than this, but only slightly.

Seeing contains many pleasures, not least of which is a reminder of the genius of common language.

So what is he up to? Isn't literature supposed to be about making it new? Witness all the great prose stylists— which is to say, just about (although not quite) all the great novelists—since Flaubert have striven for the virtues of accuracy, economy, and idiosyncratic expressions and have tried, as Proust puts it, to see the world "with new eyes." Saramago deliberately embraces profusion, vagueness, and the ready-made formulations of cliché. When the children of Flaubert do use cliché— Joyce springs most obviously to mind—it is to show how it limits and enforces the imaginations of the character in question. In the talk-show clapnet of *Ulysses* (1922), Gerty MacDowell contemplates the "dull white void in her heart" . . . [p]iercing to the core, and immediately we understand that the phrase "belongs" not to Joyce but to the young woman whose mind has been disenchanted by the clichés of popular romance novels. On the other hand, we know when Joyce is being Joyce: "His listeners held their cigarettes poised to heat their smokes according to frail stuffs that blossomed with his speech." This is how great writers express themselves. They do not, so far as we know, say, as Saramago writes in *Seeing*: "There was a sense of unease which, to use the vernacular expression, you could have cut with a knife."

It is important to remember that Saramago is less interested in individuals and in the drama of language than most writers. He is interested in the idea of individuals and clearly feels it is important

that they continue to exist—the protagonist of *All the Names* (1997), a government clerk, makes it his mission to rescue a single woman from the essential deadness of bureaucratic anonymity—but he rarely attempts to represent them in the way that Henry James and Virginia Woolf do. What takes precedence in his imagination is the drama of society and the struggle of the collective against the repressive forces of power and, of course, against itself. It seems appropriate, then, that his style—"there it is, like a fight knot we can't undo". "Perhaps this reasoning is wrong, but since when has reason ruled human decisions": "To the minister of Defense [...] the declaration of a state of emergency seemed pretty 'small beer' (all from *Seeing*)—should denote not a singular vision of the world but a collective one. His sentences describe a communal reality, a democracy of perception. They do not so much parody as amplify the dialect of the tribe.

In *Blindness* (1995) Saramago told the story of an unnamed city whose inhabitants— all formerly unimpaired—fall victim to an epidemic of contagious white blindness. *Seeing* picks up the action four years later, when 83% of the city's population cast blank votes in a municipal election. The various attempts of the crowd, bumbling, paranoid government to control and explain this "v. In search on the very foundations of representative democracy," and the population's unswerving and uniform phobically comradery, as Saramago would put it, the meat and bread of the novel. The government imposes a state of siege—the people fall in unison; the government flees the city, warning that a state of anarchy will ensue—the people continue to believe as normal; the government detentes a bomb at the central railway station, hoping to inspire fear of terrorism—the people hold a peaceful demonstration. In short, the government, like most of the great comic characters in the history of the novel, like all human beings in Freud's vision of the universe, indulge in an expensive and exhausting passion for ignorance: all the blank votes actually represent is the feeling that the "choice" offered by the democratic system is not real enough to be worth making. The feeling will surely resonate with Americans and people living in other Western democracies.

This resonance aside, the story does present a

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