

TRAVELING THROUGH TIME AND SPACE: SARAMAGO, CERVANTES AND THE CHIVALRIC TRADITION

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Abstract || This article traces José Saramago's mobilization of the Cervantes' *Don Quijote* (1605) in *A Jangada de Pedra* (1986), an act that, at first glance, seems to invoke a shared Iberian literary heritage. I argue, however, that in fact Saramago problematizes any notion of being that is necessarily connected to territory. I trace Saramago's mobilization of Spanish literary patrimony, arguing that Saramago effectively dissolves all sense of borders, homeland and nation, eschews modernity and positions his novel in a European context, not simply a Portuguese or Iberian one. Through the lens of cosmopolitanism, I argue that Saramago questions ideas of home, of truth, and of knowledge, rewriting the medieval chivalric in the form of a modern-day travel narrative.

Keywords || *Don Quijote* | *A Jangada de Pedra* | Cosmopolitanism | Comparative Literature | Iberian identity.

The premise of José Saramago's *A Jangada de Pedra* (1986), that the entire Iberian Peninsula breaks off from Europe along the Spanish-French border, seems to acknowledge a mutual Iberian heritage shared between Spain and Portugal, one that is recovered once the landmass is isolated from its continental and cultural European associations. In fact, Saramago goes to great lengths to invoke a shared literary heritage by, most prominently, borrowing themes and iconic moments from Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote* (1605). However, while the invocation of a united Iberian identity seems to be the obvious and immediate consequence of Saramago's literary appropriation, indeed the author seems to undermine this very assumption throughout the novel. Rather, Saramago makes it impossible to articulate any unilateral sense of Iberian identity despite combining the two country's literary traditions. Instead, he problematizes Spain and Portugal's relationship with Europe as a whole, explicitly evoking a heterogeneous Iberia rife with regionalism and conflicting political interests. Saramago, by mobilizing Spain's literary heritage in the midst of a massive geological event, evokes a sense of belonging not necessarily tied to territory and enacts an examination of identity that traverses national and ethnic borders.

In this study I will trace Saramago's mobilization of Spanish literary patrimony through the lens of cosmopolitanism, arguing that Saramago effectively dissolves all sense of borders, homeland and nation, eschews modernity and positions his novel in a European context, not simply a Portuguese or Iberian one. Previously, Francis Lough has concluded that "the ambiguities and uncertainties which pervade the whole work question the epistemological premises of such an [Iberian] identity" (2002: 157). I would like to expand upon this concern for epistemology that arises in Lough's study and call attention to what I believe to be at the core of *A Jangada de Pedra* and *Don Quijote*—the journey—and thus examine how travel, and travel writing, functions within a specific system of knowledge that challenges any official institutionalization of factuality and sense of "being." By acknowledging what he owes to the first modern novel (if we accept Cervantes's creation as such), Saramago is able to produce a sustained meditation on the travel narrative as a genre, one that questions knowledge production while also searching for a new epistemological framework, emphasizing the experiential instead of the presumed. In both Saramago and Cervantes, the characters embark upon a quest for knowledge and truth that transforms them into tourists in their own land, resulting in a palpable paradigm shift. By questioning basic tenets such as homeland, borders, displacement, idealism, perspectivism and even epistemology, Saramago's novel becomes unavoidably and intentionally Cervantine, perhaps even quixotic.

When Saramago references the journeys of Don Quijote and Sancho

Panza, one might conclude that in doing so the author is simply paying a literary homage, rather than making a greater philosophical claim about the nature of Iberian identity. Of course, Saramago manifestly recognizes what he, and any other author writing today, owes to Cervantes' innovations within the genre of narrative in Western literature. Yet critics such as María Fernanda de Abreu, struck by the number of references to Cervantes in *A Jangada de Pedra*, have contented themselves with merely calling attention to these moments, focusing only on their similarities and without engaging in a cogent analysis of the implications of such literary borrowing. An activity of this sort certainly lends to a robust study, as the instances in which this is the case are numerous. Nonetheless, I hope to avoid this impulse and instead examine the overarching, theoretical connotations of Saramago's use of Cervantes, rather than simply making a list of comparisons.

Underpinning both Saramago's modern tale as well as Cervantes' early modern creation is the theme of the "staycation;" that is, the protagonists of both novels explore their own familiar surroundings with the eyes of tourists, confining themselves to a specific geography that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. What becomes salient over the course of their journey is the sort of knowledge that they pursue, and how the way that they travel reveals their intentions. For one, Don Quijote is a notoriously ill-prepared traveler. He has no money, rides an aging and hardly trusty steed, and imitates the chivalric tradition of the knight errantry that, already by his time, is anachronistic. Fueled by the tales of Amadís de Gaula, the spectacularly famous knight of lore whose tales were very much in vogue in Spain during the 16th century, Alonso Quijano, in renaming himself Don Quijote, embarks upon a years-long adventure throughout Spain nearly a century after the chivalric's widespread popularity has ended. Don Quijote hopes, simply, to recreate the epic battles and voyages of Amadís, to embody the chivalric ideal. But he is no knight; he is the everyman. And his hometown could, in theory, be any town. He comes from a place so unrecognizable and unmemorable that Cervantes himself refuses to identify it by any specific toponym. Saramago emphasizes this same generic and simplistic quality of his characters in the first chapter of *A Jangada de Pedra*, which takes place "em um lugar de Portugal de cujo nome nos lembraremos mais tarde" (1986: 10). Here Saramago transliterates Cervantes' words almost verbatim, whose first line of the *Don Quijote* reads: "En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme" (2014: 54). Lough, again speaking of an Iberian sense of identity (or lack thereof) finds that already by his first page Saramago is alerting the reader to the epistemological difficulties with which his text will grapple (2002: 162). Saramago, like Cervantes, willfully rejects truth and fixity by refusing to make clear the journey's beginning, rendering it inconsequential and eroding any sense of certainty, and, therefore, any possibility for a sense of identity that is

tied to geography or homeland.

Because the protagonists from both novels embark from small inconsequential towns in Spain and Portugal, the emphasis that these authors place is not on the precise location of the journey's beginning (or end), but rather what is in the middle, the path itself. Like Don Quijote, Joana, Joaquim, Pedro, María and José of *A Jangada de Pedra* set upon their voyage with no final destination, no exactitude, and little planning, yet empowered by a sense of great adventure and necessity. Their trajectory is decided spontaneously and motivated by a quest for information and truth amidst great confusion and sheer implausibility. Every branch of science has failed to explain the geographic catastrophe that sets the novel forth. And although the characters are incredulous of even their own culpability in the matter at hand, they cannot deny that at some level their actions are far too coincidental to go unexamined, “[...] como todas as coisas deste mundo estão entre si ligadas, e nós a julgamos que cortamos ou atamos quando queremos, por nossa única vontade, esse é o maior dos erros,” Saramago’s narrator reminds us (1986: 328). They may not know why they have come together, but they do know that they absolutely must see the Pyrenees cleave from France and watch Gibraltar’s rocky cliffs drift away, two monumental geologic instances that boldly mark their separation from the other countries of Europe. The characters decide they must travel to the locations of their (in)consequential and (in)advertent coincidences, not knowing why, exactly, and all the while guided by an almost animalistic magnetism. Attempting to put together the pieces of a supernatural puzzle, Saramago’s travelers are not content to simply hear of these monumental events on the radio or to watch them on television, just as Don Quijote is not contented to simply read of other knights’ grand adventures alone in his library. They must see them for themselves, in a supreme act of Baroque *desengano*.

For Saramago’s characters, just as for Cervantes’ baroque beings, seeing is believing. That an event so catastrophic and so unfathomable could have happened for equally inconceivable reasons (or for no reason at all) provokes a deep-seated epistemological crisis within the Peninsula. The narrator, the protagonists, even the peripheral characters of *A Jangada de Pedra* find themselves glued to media outlets, grasping at any and all explanation for this event. Yet even a convergence of the greatest minds and the most advanced scientific technology fails to meaningfully explain the calamity. In Saramago’s world, in which traditional centers of knowledge have failed, it is implied that the only absolute and authentic form of knowledge is that of the self, of one’s humanity and of the ties that bond us, “not *through* identity but *despite* difference” (Appiah, 2006: 135, original emphasis).

By valuing an experiential sort of knowledge over an official version of Truth, Saramago's narrative refutes the existence of any genuine or certain epistemology, most especially if its transmission is top-down. Time and time again throughout the pages of *A Jangada de Pedra*, Saramago questions such basic and conventional epistemological frameworks like cartography, geography, topography and technology. Saramago's narrator concedes:

A península cai, sim, não há outra maneira de o dizer, mas para o sul porque é assim que nós dividimos o planisfério, em alto e baixo, em superior e inferior [...] ainda que devesse causar certo espanto não usarem os países de abaixo do equador mapas ao contrário, que justiceiramente dessem do mundo a imagem complementar que falta. (1986: 316)

Interrogating the fundamentals of knowledge itself, Saramago defamiliarizes what is north and what is south, inverting Western "knowledge" such that it becomes unrecognizable and untrustworthy. And it is amidst this epistemological shakeup that his characters must completely reacquaint themselves with the world. But despite this completely unexplainable geological phenomenon, it eventually begins to mediate their experiences and their learning.

The irony of this project, however, is inescapable: Saramago, an outspoken Nobel Prize winning author, certainly crafted himself as a public intellectual, and therefore writes from an incontrovertibly lettered perspective. Throughout the novel he showcases his extensive knowledge of topography, linguistics and other academic fields outside of literature. In this sense *A Jangada de Pedra* itself becomes the product of a man who seems to be writing against himself, as well as against the knowledge he has spent a lifetime imbibing. Because Saramago as an intellectual figure is unavoidably a member of the precise institutions he mocks, he presents the reader with a dialectic: Official knowledge, or Truth, threatens experiential and personal truths, or perspectivism, and results only in ambivalence and uncertainty. Saramago contends, in true postmodernist fashion, that any objective or absolute sense of history and truth is impossible and, like the characters themselves, we ought to question the very conduits of information themselves. Certainly perspectivism and the existence of multiple truths is one of the most basic and salient messages of *Don Quijote*, and for this reason Saramago's utilization of the text becomes even more poignant. When Sancho, for example, refutes Don Quijote's claim that the windmills are not indeed giants trying to defeat him, he replies, resolutely, "Bien parece [...] que no estás cursado en esto de las aventuras: ellos son gigantes; y si tienes miedo, quítate de ahí, y ponte en oración en el espacio que yo voy a entrar con ellos en fiera y desigual batalla" (Cervantes, 2007: 107).

In conjunction with this unique vision of the world, Cervantes' *Don*

Quijote can be considered the first (post)modern novel. Indeed Saramago undoubtedly owes much of the structure of *A Jangada de Pedra* to Cervantine innovation and seems to acknowledge his literary inheritance through established, sly references to the Spanish Golden Age. For example, Saramago's novel is episodic such that it evokes the chivalric romance, as each chapter often deals with specific incidents rather than crafting a singular, tightly wound plot. Its deviances into the lives of isolated and secondary characters like that of Roque Lozano imitate Cervantes' use of interpolation in the story of the "Curioso Impertinente" or the Captive's Tale in the *Quijote*, both of which have nothing to do with the book's title character but are employed without undermining its overall coherence. Saramago's narration similarly wanders, straying away from his five protagonists to resituate the narrative on a macro level, reminding us of the magnitude of the events unfolding and its effect on the rest of the world, without allowing the reader to lose her focus. Deviations and interruptions in plotlines create suspense and obligate the reader to wait patiently for loose ends to be retied.

When action is suspended in *Don Quijote* it is usually due to the fact that the entire story is an encountered manuscript, found incomplete and un-translated. Further, the chivalric romance was always in search of new techniques and novelistic innovations, such as parody of other genres and literary reappropriation (Cuesta Torre, 2007: 555). The parodic effect of Cervantes' literary appropriations depend on his contemporary (and present-day) reader's ability to recognize chivalric tradition, and similarly, Saramago displays his own knowledge of literary heritage, imploring his readers to do the same. Yet both novels diverge from the chivalric in one important manner: that of Christianity. Don Quijote "never engages in the typical enterprise of a Christian knight: the forcible conversion of a 'pagan' (i. e., Moslem or idol-worshipping) knight, usually after defeating him in battle," and similarly Saramago avoids discussion of religion, a theme which seems likely to arise in the event of unexplained catastrophes (Whitenack, 1993: 64).

Previous studies have noted the episodic nature of *A Jangada de Pedra* without drawing a connection between the chivalric and the modern travel narrative. Mary L. Daniel observes that the novel consists of "the interwoven journeys of a nucleus of five individuals whose paths cross within the national boundaries of Spain and Portugal to form the texture of what may be called the plot of the novel, if indeed there be a plot" (1991: 537). It is, in fact, difficult to briefly articulate the general plot of the novel without avoiding the simple mention that it is about the Iberian Peninsula breaking away from Europe. But to answer as such is ignoring what any reader knows to be true—the novel is about so much more than simply a geological event; it is about philosophical and abstract humanistic concepts,

about the nature of knowledge and reason, as articulated through the lives of five seemingly random characters. Furthermore, if one were to briefly state the plot of *Don Quijote*, it is equally insufficient to state that it is merely the tale of a Spaniard gone mad; surely that could not be all that happens in over 1000 pages. Further, in both instances there are a multitude of plotlines and events occurring simultaneously, undertaking questions fundamental to humanity and dialoguing across language and culture.

In spite of the rhizomatic plotlines and the ambivalence of both Saramago and Cervantes' novelistic beginnings, and despite the authors' refusal to precisely designate a point of departure, each pays great attention to a very specific topography that clearly denotes the travelers' route. Doing so incorporates into the plot a verisimilitude otherwise impossible, and a veracity that conflicts with the very improbability of their storylines. This is indeed in tune with the travel narrative as a genre, which often goes to great lengths to augment the authenticity of the protagonist's trajectory by mentioning recognizable toponyms, while not necessarily attempting to verify the events themselves. In fact, the very act of naming is, in essence, a type of knowledge in and of itself. The reader of a travel narrative, precisely because of the obsessive identification of towns and roads and landmarks, has an acute sense that time has passed. Armed with only a second-hand description of the journey, one could easily craft a map of the characters' trajectories. For example, one could create a geography of Don Quojite's "salidas," and certainly the same could be done for the characters in Saramago's novel.

Conversely, not only through the landscape but also through the pages of the book itself does the reader trace the characters' paths. Michael Mewshaw observes, "even the languages of travel and of literary criticism overlap. In both cases we speak of setting out, starting off, making transitions, taking detours or digressions, doubling back and approaching events or destinations from different points of view" (2005: 5). For Saramago, travel, physical movement, becomes a type of writing, an alternate text that traces its way through space to reconsider the fundamental themes of epistemology and landscape. Reading the lines of a text, the audience makes their way through the winding road of the story, deciphering a narratological code and making decisions about how, exactly, to find their way to the ending. The act of reading, of scanning one's eyes across the page begins to imitate precisely how a person moves through the complicated web of a city. Mewshaw's commentary, when juxtaposed against Saramago and Cervantes' defiant postmodern narrative meanderings, reminds us of Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City," who asserts that the walker moves in ways that are never absolutely defined by a city's organizational system. Crafting supremely postmodern narrative structures, both Iberian authors refuse conventions, reject absolutes,

and consequentially not even the best-laid plans are able to contain neither their authorial trajectory nor that of their spontaneous traveling protagonists. Yet no matter which way these fictional travelers choose to go, certainly for Don Quijote it is the act of finding out and the desire for clarification and reaffirmation that fuels his wanderings. From adventure to adventure went the knight errant of Cervantes's time, but like Saramago's protagonists Don Quijote was also in search of greater meaning, "el caballero parte para un peregrinaje sin rumbo que en definitiva es una búsqueda de sí mismo" (Rico, 2014: 1193).

Cervantes' postmodern writing style, an eclectic mix of various literary traditions, takes cues from the baroque tradition, a genre perpetually obsessed with the theme of *desengaño*, disillusionment in the sense of seeing through false appearances. Considering especially that the publication of *Don Quijote* comes within the midst of the Morisco expulsion of 1609, a major preoccupation of Golden Age and of baroque literature in general was with seeing through appearance towards an ultimate truth of being. Thus, to see things as they really are drives much of the literature of Cervantes' time. Don Quijote himself asserts that, "es menester tocar las apariencias con la mano," that we must not rely solely upon our vision but quite literally touch and feel so as to decipher the true essence of life. But Saramago seems to imply that *desengaño* is impossible, that despite our best efforts we will never find an absolute Iberian identity, in this instance, just as we may never arrive at an absolute sense of European identity, for example. Or maybe for Saramago the ultimate *engaño* is that of the nation itself, for the characters of *A Jangada de Pedra* create and function within a communal, anti-capitalistic mini-society, in which modern technology (notably, their car, a Deux Chevaux) has failed them. The infrastructure of the State has meanwhile also broken down, and thus by disregarding modernity and government, Saramago infers that the only path to *desengaño* is by looking inwards instead of outwards. Further, advancements in technology such as firearms and the consolidation of formal armed forces contributed to the decline of knight errantry throughout Europe, thus contributing to Don Quijote's anachronism. Yet for Saramago, it is precisely the failure of modern science that urges his characters to circle back upon the past, upon themselves.

In Saramago's tale, as for Cervantes', the trope of the quest or adventure as a source of experiential knowledge becomes a way for each author to explore how movement and displacement, whether it is of a person or of the land itself, transforms the traveler. Notably, Cervantes spent years in an Algerian prison and fought in the battle of Lepanto, and therefore it comes at no surprise that displacement and travel are ubiquitous in his writings. Don Quijote himself tells Sancho that "Paréceme, Sancho, que no hay refrán que no sea verdadero, porque todos son sentencias sacadas de la misma experiencia,

madre de las ciencias todas” (2007: 224). Saramago also turns to experiences he had while traveling as literary inspiration throughout his life. His book *Viagem a Portugal* (1985) is a collection of *crónicas* composed during his sojourn through each of the regions of Portugal. Saramago writes through the eyes of a foreigner, defamiliarizing his own homeland for the reader and for himself. In making reference to Cervantes’ *Quijote* as well as to Homeric accounts of travel, Saramago places himself within the realm of the great masters of travel writing. As María Fernanda de Abreu asserts, “quiere ser incluido en él: un linaje de aventuras homéricas, de historias de hadas o (y) embrujos o (y) andantes caballerías. Narrador, esto es: autor y contador de tales aventuras” (2002: 10). Abreu goes on to note that, similarly, Saramago is not simply trying to imitate or playfully evoke Cervantes, but rather he hopes to point out a particular lineage to which he owes a great deal not only as an author, but also as an author in Iberia.

Just like Saramago and Cervantes themselves, the characters of *A Jangada de Pedra* are flung outside the realm of the known and must leave their lives, perhaps even themselves, behind. The journey and its effect on the wanderers themselves reveal how a landscape informs a culture, a country, and its inhabitants. In landscape history is inscribed; it objectively and subjectively represents culture such that it conveys a meaning in and of itself. Nevertheless, as the cultural geographer Don Mitchell reminds us, “one of the chief functions of landscape is precisely to *control* meaning and to channel it in particular directions. Yet, that said, it is also certainly the case that in landscape meaning is contested every step of the way” (2000: 100). Thus, landscape can function either in the absolute, official realm of knowledge production and dissemination, or else, when contested, its meanings become transitive and unstable. Saramago’s novel demonstrates this possibility when regional identities become moot once the Peninsula has become separated, while simultaneously they seem to become ever more important. In one sense, the specific part of Spain or Portugal that a character calls home loses some significance simply because their separation from Europe has eliminated internal difference. Conversely, when Pedro finds out that Roque is from Andalusia, for example, they immediately bond over this shared heritage, highlighting precisely these ideological underpinnings of the land to which Mitchell refers. Nonetheless, the characters seem to lose their familiarity with their surroundings once the Peninsula breaks away, as up becomes down and south turns to north. They must reacquaint themselves with the world in a manner mediated by unexplainable phenomenon and through unconventional epistemological methods, both factors that cause them to deconstruct and question their territorial identities.

The conclusion of both novels finds the characters with a newfound clarity that they lacked at the beginning of their journeys. Unfamiliarity

begins to breed familiarity, and similarly the disconnection from Europe that they experience foments connectedness amongst the characters. Don Quijote returns to his town in La Mancha defeated, renouncing his delusions and in a depressing state of *desengaño* that finally closes the novel. Meanwhile, the five protagonists of *A Jangada de Pedra* continue their journey indefinitely as Saramago's novel closes on a decidedly inconclusive note. By the last page, Pedro has died, the Peninsula's movement has ceased, but yet the journey is certainly not over. The stone raft itself may have come to a standstill, but the internal wanderings of its inhabitants will continue indefinitely beyond the space of the novel.

The unsettling effect of Saramago's ambivalence towards absolute ideals of identity and epistemology is undone by the stability of the end of the novel, when his protagonists seem to find a restored faith in humanity and for the future despite their liminal geographic positioning. Furthermore, the female protagonists have all become pregnant, signaling not only rebirth but an opportunity for the reinterpretation of history and historiography with a new generation. And let us not forget the romantic storyline that weaves its way through the entire novel, inspiring hope and proving that even the most unlikely of characters can find common ground and, even, love. Love, a most human emotion, motivates two of Saramago's characters just as Don Quijote's meanderings are inspired by his obsession with Dulcinea. Because of the meaningful relationships that connect his characters, Saramago does not strand the reader in a pessimistic or existential crisis once their stories come to an end, which serves to counteract the uncertainty of the Peninsula's movements. In a final homage to existentialism, Saramago asserts that experiential knowledge is perhaps more reliable than information mediated through official channels, just as Cervantes similarly unveils the hypocrisy of State-sponsored institutions, such as the Church officials who egregiously and unfairly destroy Don Quijote's library. For Saramago, these same systems fail to explain or solve the Peninsula's rupture in *A Jangada de Pedra*, motivating his characters to set forth on their adventures.

The trope of movement and travel, whose roots lie wholly in the chivalric, helps Saramago to question the nature of history, historiography, and epistemology in a distinctly modern context. Saramago undertakes a modern reexamination of knight errantry in the form of a contemporary travel narrative. In *Cosmopolitanism*, Appiah writes, "We do not need, have never needed, settled community, a homogenous system of values, in order to have a home" (2006: 113). Saramago's character Roque Lozano similarly finalizes his own journey in a manner that reimagines home in a universal sense: "Agora volto para casa, não será por tanto andar a terra às voltas que ele deixou de estar no mesmo sítio, A terra, Não, a casa, a casa está sempre onde estiver a terra" (1986: 311).

Willful rejections of territory, reality and knowledge challenge and erode notions of truth and identity within the framework of the nation. In bypassing so-called book knowledge, Saramago's characters choose to prioritize alternative knowledge sets – carnal knowledge, street smarts, and experiential learning. And although the Peninsula has stopped, at least temporarily, the journey is seen as more than the brief wanderings within each cover of the book; indeed, it is life.

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