RANDOM HOUSE @BOOKS

Cain José Saramago

Contents

Cover Also by José Saramago Dedication Title Page Epigraph Chapter 1 Chapter 2 Chapter 3 Chapter 4 Chapter 5 Chapter 6 Chapter 7 Chapter 8 Chapter 9 Chapter 10 Chapter 11 Chapter 12 Chapter 13

Translator's Acknowledgements Copyright

ALSO BY JOSÉ SARAMAGO IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Fiction

The Manual of Painting and Calligraphy
Baltasar & Blimunda
The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis
The Gospel According to Jesus Christ
The History of the Siege of Lisbon
Blindness
All the Names
The Tale of the Unknown Island
The Stone Raft
The Cave
The Double
Seeing
Death at Intervals
The Elephant's Journey

Non-fiction
Journey to Portugal
Small Memories



José Saramago Cain

TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE BY MARGARET JULL COSTA



By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.

Hebrews 11:4 Book of Nonsense When the lord, also known as god, realised that adam and eve, although perfect in every outward aspect, could not utter a word or make even the most primitive of sounds, he must have felt annoyed with himself, for there was no one else in the garden of eden whom he could blame for this grave oversight, after all, the other animals, who were, like the two humans, the product of his divine command, already had a voice of their own, be it a bellow, a roar, a croak, a chirp, a whistle or a cackle. In an access of rage, surprising in someone who could have solved any problem simply by issuing another quick flat, he rushed over to adam and eve and unceremoniously, no half-measures, stuck his tongue down the throats of first one and then the other. From the texts which, over the centuries, have provided a somewhat random record of those remote times, be it of events that might, at some future date, be awarded canonical status and others deemed to be the fruit of apocryphal and irredeemably heretical imaginations, it is not at all clear what kind of tongue was being referred to here, whether the moist, flexible muscle that moves around in the buccal cavity and occasionally outside it too, or the gift of speech, also known as language, that the lord had so regrettably forgotten to give them and about which we know nothing, since not a trace of it remains, not even a heart engraved on the bark of a tree, accompanied by some sentimental message, something along the lines of I love eve. It's likely that the lord's violent assault on his offspring's silent tongues had another motive, namely, given that, in principle, you can't have one without the

other, that of putting them in contact with the deepest depths of their physical being, the so-called perturbations of the inner self, so that, in future, they could, with some authority, speak of those dark and labyrinthine disquiets out of whose window, the mouth, they were already peering. Well, anything is possible. With the praiseworthy scrupulousness of any skilled craftsman, making up with due humility for his earlier negligence, the lord wanted to make sure that his mistake had been corrected, and so he asked adam, What's your name, and the man replied, I'm adam, your first-born. Then the creator turned to the woman, And what is your name, I'm Eve, the first lady, she replied rather unnecessarily, since there was no other. The lord was satisfied and bade farewell with a fatherly See you later, then, and went about his business. And, for the first time, adam said to eve, Let's go to bed.

Seth, their third child, will only come into the world one hundred and thirty years later, not because his mother's womb required that amount of time to complete the fabrication of a new descendant, but because the gonads of father and mother, the testes and ovaries respectively, had taken more than a century to mature and to develop sufficient generative power. It must be pointed out to our more impatient readers, first, that the fiat was given once and once only, second, that men and women are not sausage machines, and, third, that hormones are very complicated things, they can't just be produced from one day to the next, nor can they be found in pharmacies or supermarkets, you have to let matters take their course. Before seth came into the world, cain had already arrived, followed, shortly afterwards, by abel. By the way, one must not underestimate the intense boredom of all those years spent without neighbours, without distractions, without some small child crawling about between kitchen and living room, with no other visitors but the lord, and even his visits were few and very brief, interspersed by long intervals of

absence, ten, fifteen, twenty, fifty years, so we can easily imagine that the sole occupants of that earthly paradise must have felt like poor orphans abandoned in the forest of the universe, not that they would have been able to explain what the words orphan and abandoned meant. It's true that every now and then, although again not with any great frequency, adam would say to eve, Let's go to bed, but their conjugal routine, aggravated, in their case, due to inexperience, by the complete lack of alternative positions to adopt, proved to be as destructive as an invasion of woodworm to a roof beam. You hardly notice anything from the outside, just a little dust here and there falling from tiny holes, but, inside, it's quite a different matter, and the collapse of something that had seemed so sturdy will not be long in coming. In such situations, there are those who say that a child can have an enlivening effect, if not on the libido, which is the work of chemicals far more complex than merely learning how to change a nappy, then at least on feelings, which, you must admit, is no small gain. As for the lord and his sporadic visits, the first was to see if adam and eve had had any problems setting up house, the second to find out what benefits they had gleaned from their experience of country life and the third to warn them that he would not be back for a while, because he had to do the rounds of the other paradises that exist in the heavens. Indeed, he would not appear again until much later, on a date that has not been recorded, in order to expel the unhappy couple from the garden of eden for the heinous crime of having eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This episode, which gave rise to the first definition of a hitherto unknown concept, original sin, has never been satisfactorily explained. Firstly, even the most rudimentary of intelligences would have no difficulty in grasping that being properly informed about always preferable to being ignorant, something is especially in such delicate matters as good and evil, which

could put anyone at risk, quite unwittingly, of being consigned to eternal damnation in a hell that had not yet been invented. Secondly, the lord showed a lamentable lack of foresight, because if he really didn't want them to eat that fruit, it would have been easy enough simply not to have planted the tree or to have put it somewhere else or surrounded it with barbed wire. Thirdly, it wasn't because they had disobeyed god's instructions that adam and eve discovered they were naked. They were already stark naked when they went to bed, and if the lord had never noticed such an evident lack of modesty, the fault must lie with a father's blindness, an apparently incurable infliction that prevents us from seeing that our children are, after all, neither better nor worse than all the others.

A point of order. Before we continue with this instructive definitive history of cain, undertaken unprecedented boldness, it might be advisable to introduce some clarity into the chronology of events. So, let us begin by clearing up certain malicious doubts about adam's ability to make a child when he was one hundred and thirty years old. At first sight, if we stick to the fertility indices of modern times, no, he clearly wouldn't, but during the world's infancy, those same one hundred and thirty years would have represented a vigorous adolescence that not even the most precocious of casanovas would have sneered at. It is, moreover, worth remembering that adam lived until he was nine hundred and thirty years old, thus narrowly missing being drowned in the great flood, for he died when lamech was still alive, lamech being the father of noah, the future builder of the ark. He would, therefore, have had the time and leisure to make all the children he did make and many more if he had so wished. As we said earlier, adam's second child, born after cain, was abel, a handsome, fair-haired boy, who, having been the object of the best proofs of the lord's esteem, met a very sticky end indeed. The third child, as we also said, was called seth,

but he will not form part of this narrative, which we are writing step by step with all the meticulousness of a historian, and so we'll leave him here, just a name and nothing more. There are those who say that the idea of creating a religion was born in his head, but we have given abundant attention to such ticklish matters in the past, with reprehensible levity, according to some experts, and in terms that will doubtless prove deleterious to us when it comes to the final judgement at which everyone will be condemned, either for doing too much or too little. We are only interested now in the family of which father adam is the head, although he proved to be a very bad head, and we really can't put it any other way, since all it took was for his wife to offer him the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil and our illogical first patriarch, after a certain amount of persuasion, more for appearance's sake than out of any real conviction, duly choked on it, leaving us men marked for ever by that irritating piece of apple that will neither go up nor down. There are also those who say that the reason adam didn't manage to swallow the whole of that fateful fruit was because the lord suddenly turned up, demanding to know what was going on. Now before we forget about it completely or before our continuation of the story renders the fact redundant because it comes too late, we will tell you about the stealthy, almost clandestine visit the lord made to the garden of eden one hot summer night. As usual, adam and eve were sleeping, naked, beside each other, not touching, a deceptively edifying image of the most perfect innocence. They did not wake up, and the lord did not wake them either. He had gone there with the intention of correcting a slight flaw, which, as he had finally realised, seriously marred his creations, and that flaw, can you believe it, was the lack of a navel. The pale skin of his babies, untouched by the gentle sun of paradise, was too naked, too vulnerable, and in a way obscene, if that word existed then.

Quickly, in case they should wake up, god reached out and very lightly pressed adam's belly with the tip of his forefinger, making a rapid circling movement, and there was a navel. The same procedure, carried out on eve, produced similar results, with the one important difference that her navel was much better as regards design, shape and the delicacy of its folds. This was the last time that the lord looked upon his work and saw that it was good.

Fifty years and one day after this fortunate surgical intervention, which gave rise to a new era in the aesthetics of the human body under the consensual motto that everything about it can always be improved, disaster struck. With a crack of thunder, the lord appeared. He was dressed differently from usual, in keeping perhaps with what would become the new imperial fashion in heaven, wearing a triple crown on his head and wielding a sceptre as if it were a cudgel. I am the lord, he cried, I am he. A mortal silence fell over the garden of eden, not a sound, not even the buzz of a wasp, the barking of a dog, the trilling of a bird, or the trumpeting of an elephant. Nothing, only the chattering of a flock of starlings that had congregated in a leafy olive tree, there since the garden was first created, and which suddenly took flight as one, so many, hundreds, if not thousands of them, that they nearly obscured the sky. Who has disobeyed my orders, who has eaten of the fruit of my tree, asked god, fixing adam with a look that can only be described as coruscating, a word which, though highly expressive, has sadly fallen out of use. In desperation, the poor man tried in vain to swallow the tell-tale piece of apple, but his voice refused to come out, neither fore nor aft. Answer, said the angry voice of the lord, who was brandishing his sceptre in a most threatening manner. Plucking up his courage, and conscious of how wrong it was to put the blame on someone else, adam said, The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of that tree and I did eat. The lord turned on the woman and

asked, What is this that you have done, The serpent beguiled me and I did eat, Liar, deceiver, there are no serpents in paradise, Lord, I did not say that there were serpents in paradise, but I did have a dream in which a serpent appeared to me, saying, So god has forbidden you to eat the fruit of every tree in the garden, and I said no, that wasn't true, that the only tree whose fruit we could not eat was the one that grows in the middle of paradise, for we would die if we touched it, Serpents can't speak, at most they hiss, said the lord, The serpent in my dream spoke, And may one know what else the serpent said, asked the lord, trying to give the words a mocking tone that ill accorded with the celestial dignity of his robes, The serpent said that we wouldn't die, Oh, I see, the lord's irony was becoming more and more marked, it would seem that this serpent thinks he knows more than I do, That is what I dreamed, my lord, that you didn't want us to eat of that fruit because we would open our eyes and know good and evil just as you know them, lord, And what did you do, you fallen, frivolous woman, when you woke from this delightful dream, I went straight to the tree, ate the fruit and brought some back for adam, who also ate, It got stuck just here, said, adam, touching his throat, Right, said the lord, if that's the way you want it, that's the way it shall be, from now on you can bid farewell to the good life, you, eve, will not only suffer all the discomforts of pregnancy, morning sickness included, you will give birth in pain, and yet you will still feel desire for your husband, and he shall rule over you, Poor me, said eve, what a bad beginning, and what a sad fate will be mine, You should have thought of that before, and as for you, adam, the ground is cursed because of you, and in sorrow will you eat of it all of your days, it will bring forth only thorns and thistles, and you will have to eat the herbs of the fields, only by the sweat of your brow will you manage to grow enough to eat, until you return to the ground out of which you came, wretched