



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies



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Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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Death with Interruptions:
José Saramago on
Necropolitics and
Resurrection

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Death with Interruptions:
José Saramago on
Necropolitics and
Resurrection

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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José Saramago is known for “speculative”
fiction: using fiction to explore
the consequences of a hypothesis,
however outlandish it may appear.

Death with Interruptions (As Intermitências da morte, 2005) opens with the notion that, in some small un-named country, one day people simply stop dying.

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What happens next?

Death's defeat should in principle be
a cause for celebration.

“And death shall have no dominion.
Under the windings of the sea
They lying long shall not die windily;
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not
break; [. . .]
Split all ends up they shan't crack;
And death shall have no dominion.”

(Dylan Thomas)

The prospect of immortality or eternal life
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The prospect of immortality or eternal life has driven mythology and religion.

Many of today's tech billionaires have dedicated millions to the vision of "making death optional" (Tad Friend).

But the thought experiment in Saramago's novel suggests that generalized immortality would be far from utopian.

More importantly, the point of any speculative fiction is less to tell us how things would be, than to enable us to reflect on how things are.

Saramago points to the way in which politics relies upon mortality and is structured around the administration of death; against life's proliferating excess it wages a proxy war in which two multitudes face each other.

He also, as the book continues, considers the role of writing and the relationship between art, closure, and performance. As death herself becomes a scribe, writing is identified with setting limits or bounds, but reading provides even the most stylized of texts with an afterlife.



POLITICS AS NECROPOLITICS

“With all hope lost, with the doctors helpless in the face of the implacable medical evidence, the royal family, hierarchically arranged around the bed, waited with resignation for the matriarch’s last breath.” (2)

“And then, as if time had stopped, nothing happened. The queen mother neither improved nor deteriorated, remained there in suspension, her frail body hovering on the very edge of life, threatening at any moment to tip over onto the other side, yet bound to this side by a tenuous thread.” (3)

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass.” (Antonio Gramsci)

Everything remains in the balance, in
perpetual suspense.

“an endless sequence of kings lying in their beds awaiting a death that would never arrive, a stream of half-alive, half-dead kings who, unless they were kept in the corridors of the palace, would end up filling and finally overflowing the pantheon where their mortal ancestors had been received.” (88)

Calls for a republic would be irresistible.

Immortality would be the death
of the monarchy.

“Some citizens, zealous of their right to know the truth, are asking themselves, and each other, what the hell is going on with the government, who have so far given not the slightest sign of life.” (6-7)

“Which means, thought the prime minister when he finished reading the statement, that the noose is well and truly round our necks.” (9)

“Let me turn the question back on you,
what will the state do if no one
ever dies again.” (12)

“The aforementioned state coffers would be unable, with no end in sight, to continue paying old age and disability pensions.” (90)

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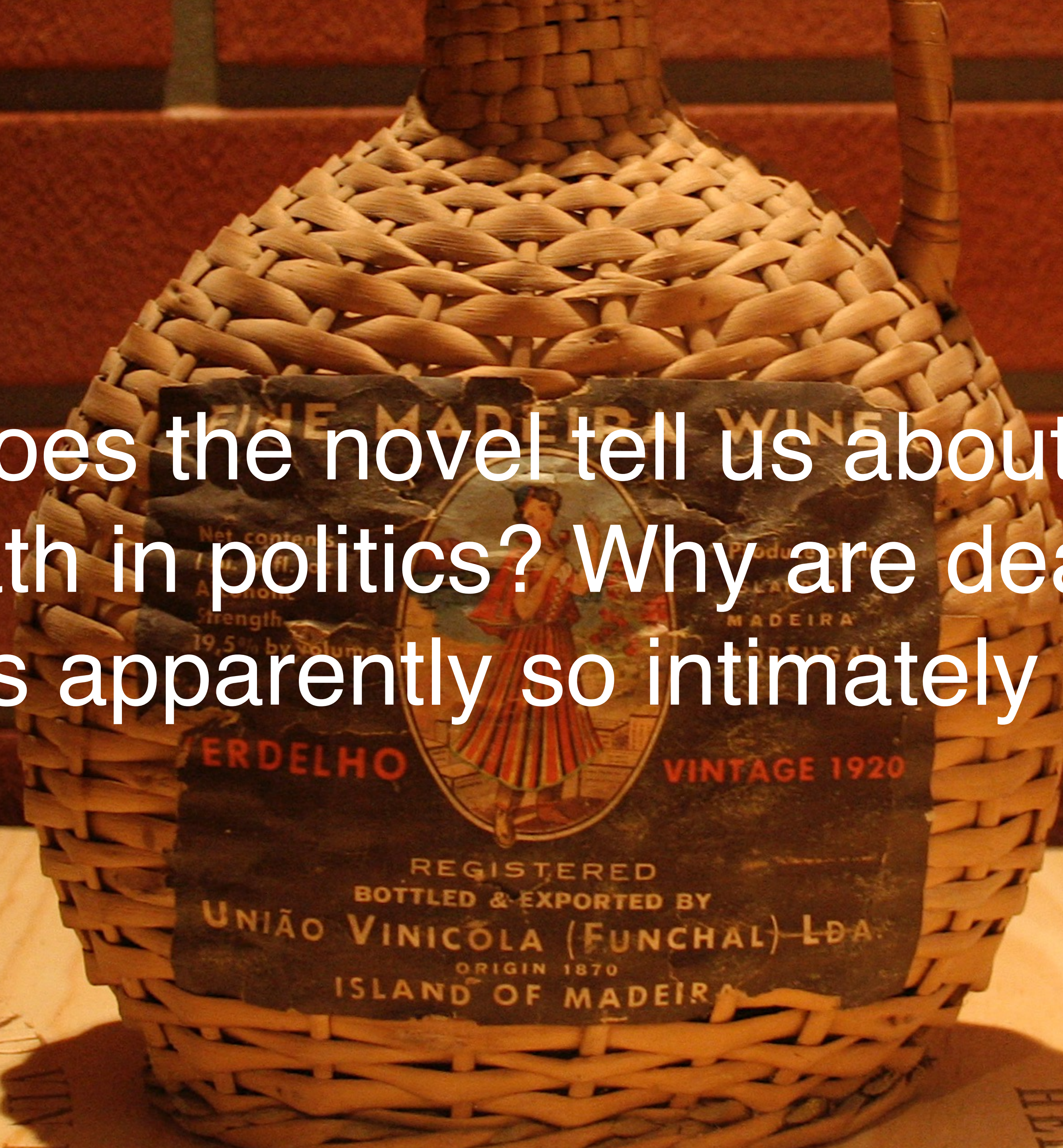
“What I’m referring to is a coup d’état, a revolution.” (91)

“If we don’t start dying again,
we have no future.” (93)

Now that death is no longer on the scene,
what is starkly revealed is how much the
powers that be depended upon it.

What does the novel tell us about the role of death in politics? Why are death and politics apparently so intimately linked?

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Saramago's novel suggests that
all politics is ultimately necropolitics.

“To kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.” (Achille Mbembe)

In *Death with Interruptions*, the abolition of death brings sovereignty to its limit.

**“Death is [. . .] the very principle of excess.”
(Georges Bataille)**

“Death is [. . .] the very principle of excess.”
(Georges Bataille)

In this novel, however,
it is life that is excessive.

The problem facing the nation is the incrementally increasing surplus of the very old, which undermines the state's efforts to administer and rationalize life.

“Some call us the maphia, with a ph,
Why the ph, To distinguish us
from the original mafia.” (47)

Politics returns surreptitiously, with collective mobilization of agonizing bodies beyond international borders, as a secret agreement to set one form of excess (one multitude) over and against another.

“Sometimes the state has no alternative
but to find someone else to do
its dirty work.” (92)

Saramago seems to be telling us that this is in fact how politics always works: managing and redistributing surplus, with the help of willing accomplices working in the shadows where necessary.



READING AS RESURRECTION

The seven months that death's unilateral truce had lasted produced a waiting list of more than sixty thousand people on the point of death." (117)

“I feel it my duty to admit that I was wrong,
and that has to do with the cruel and unjust
way in which I used to proceed,
taking people’s lives by stealth, with
no prior warning.” (110)

“From now on everyone will receive due warning and be given a week to put what remains of their life in order, to make a will and say goodbye to their family.” (110)

“a little more charity and patience” (121)

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No longer cold, impersonal, and unfeeling,
death proposes to become
a little more human.

“She has neither eyes nor ears for the cries of despair and anguish uttered by the men and women who, one by one, are being warned of their imminent death, feelings of despair and anguish which, in some cases, are having precisely the opposite effect to the one she had foreseen. . . .

. . .because the people condemned to disappear are not sorting out their affairs, they are not writing wills, they are not paying back taxes, and as for saying their farewells to family and close friends, they are leaving that to the last minute.” (139)

“the newspapers have outdone themselves in furious attacks on her, calling her pitiless, cruel, tyrannical, wicked, bloodthirsty, disloyal and treacherous.” (139)

Knowing and being forewarned as to when you are going to die turns out to be more of a burden than death creeping up on you unawares.

Death emerges from the process
enacting the role of a minor bureaucrat.

“I’ll be in another fine mess if people start receiving their notifications at the wrong time, either early or late.” (203)

“She wrote and wrote, the hours passed and still she wrote, there were the letters, there were the envelopes, and then she had to fold the letters and seal the envelopes.” (203)

“Death did indeed work her fingers
to the bone, because, of course,
she is all bone.” (204)

“One has to update the means and the systems one uses, to keep up with the new technologies, by using e-mail, for example [. . .] perhaps I’ll try it some day, but until then I’ll continue to write with pen, paper and ink, it has the charm of tradition, and tradition counts for a lot when it comes to dying.” (152)

“At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. [. . .] He wrote on silently, palely, mechanically.”
 (“Bartleby, the Scrivener”)

“I would prefer not to”
 (“Bartleby, the Scrivener”)

Death likewise becomes a writing machine.

“This expert, basing himself on representations of death in old paintings and engravings, especially those showing her bare cranium, would try to replace any missing flesh, restore the eyes to their sockets [. . .]. Death, in her features, attributes and characteristics, was unmistakably a woman.” (141)

“Death had simply failed to master even the first rudiments of writing [. . .] given the chaotic syntax, the absence of full stops, the complete lack of very necessary parentheses, the obsessive elimination of paragraphs, the random use of commas and, most unforgivable sin of all, the intentional and almost diabolical abolition of the capital letter.” (122)

“Death writes like José Saramago.”
(James Wood)

“Death writes like José Saramago.”
(James Wood)

“Saramago again asks us to reflect on the
storyteller’s godlike powers” (James Wood)

“Death is the ultimate form of closure
plotted within the closure of form.”
(Garrett Stewart)

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plotted within the closure of form.”
(Garrett Stewart)

“Death in narrative yields, by yielding to,
sheer style.” (Garrett Stewart)

Saramago's characteristic long, meandering sentences may postpone the period, the "full stop" that puts an end to them, but they cannot delay that ending forever.

Something always escapes.

The latter parts of *Death with Interruptions* are dedicated to the point at which the bureaucratic machine breaks down, and the one letter that fails to reach its destination.

“The wretched cellist, who, ever since his birth, had been marked out to die a young man of only forty-nine summers, had just brazenly entered his fiftieth year.” (157)

“Life is an orchestra that is always playing,
in tune or out, a titanic that is
always sinking and always
rising to the surface.” (189)

“With his dog lying at his feet, at that late hour of the night, surrounded by books, sheet music, scores, he was johann sebastian bach himself.” (237)

Art may not be able to evade death,
but through performance it can be
a vehicle of resurrection.

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but through performance it can be
a vehicle of resurrection.

Copying or interpreting (repeating, however
mechanically or imperfectly) gives
new life to formed matter.

Here the book concludes—a conclusion it cannot avoid, albeit a circular one in that the book's last line is the same as its first.

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But what happens next?

So long as someone still picks it up
and reads it, then the book gains
a brief afterlife, an endlessly replayable
life after death.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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