# ROMANCE STUDIES:
# Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present

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## *Death with Interruptions:* José Saramago on Necropolitics and Resurrection

Portuguese writer José Saramago is known for "speculative" fiction: using fiction to explore the consequences of a hypothesis, however outlandish it may appear. His most famous novel, *Blindness* (1995), for instance, depicts an epidemic of blindness, to ask what would happen if humans suddenly lost the faculty of sight. In *Stone Raft* (1986), the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) breaks off from Europe and starts drifting across the Atlantic Ocean. Saramago's most controversial novel, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991), reimagines the life of Christ in all its humanity—falling in love with Mary Magdalene, for instance. And *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. What happens next?

Death's defeat should in principle be a cause for celebration. It has long been a dream that death should, in Welsh poet Dylan Thomas's words (quoting Paul's epistle to the Romans), "have no dominion" (*Collected Poems* 77). The prospect of immortality or eternal life has driven mythology and religion. As reported in the *New Yorker*, many of today's tech billionaires have dedicated millions to the vision of "making death optional" (Tad Friend, "Silicon Valley's Quest"). 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—with a style uncannily like Saramago's own—writing is identified with setting limits or bounds, but reading provides even the most stylized of texts with an afterlife.

### *1. Politics as Necropolitics*

One of the first signs that things are not exactly normal is that the Queen Mother, in what seem to be her last moments, with "the royal family, hierarchically arranged around the bed, wait[ing] with resignation for the matriarch's last breath," shows surprising stamina: as the day continues, she "remain[s] 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" (2, 3). Everyone is ready for the imminent announcement of the royal demise, but it never comes! We may be reminded of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's analysis of an interregnum, that time at which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (*Prison Notebooks* 33). As the old Queen remains sclerotic but stubbornly holds on to life (albeit a bare life), everything remains in the balance, in perpetual suspense. Later, this becomes a matter of public concern: that a land where the monarch never dies would in time witness "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.

The Coronation of Inês de Castro, posthumously crowned Queen of Portugal in 1361

Meanwhile, as it becomes clear that the aged royal is not the only one to be teetering at death's door without quite going through it, the people anxiously await a response on the part of the government, the only body in the kingdom (it appears) that has "so far given not the slightest sign of life" (7). Indeed, the Prime Minister is one of the few who still fear imminent extinction, feeling "the noose [. . .] well and truly around our necks" (9). That evening, he receives a call from the country's Catholic Cardinal, who is almost as worried: "What will the state do if no one ever dies again"? the Prime Minister is asked (12). Later, the King himself, troubled with the thought that "state coffers would be unable, with no end in sight, to continue paying old age and disability pensions" asks for an audience. What if generalized immortality were to lead to "a coup d'état, a revolution"? Though he tries to allay the monarch's concerns, the Prime Minister concedes that "if we don't start dying again, we have no future" (90, 91, 93). Now that death is no longer on the scene, what is starkly revealed is how much the powers that be depended upon it.

Saramago's speculations on death aim to shed light on the way we live now. What then does the novel tell us about the role of death in politics? Why indeed are death and politics apparently so intimately linked? Pause the video here, and write down some thoughts. While you do that, I'll have a glass of Madeira, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Madeira

The wine made in the Portuguese archipelago of Madeira (off the coast of North Africa) is fortified with brandy or neutral grape spirits. Historically, this both stabilized the wine for export and appealed to the tastes of consumers in the Caribbean and the United States. A further distinction of Madeira wine is that (unlike, say, port or sherry) it is also heated as part of the production process, and partially oxidised by being exposed to air. As early as the late-seventeenth century, travellers reported that Madeira "has one very particular and odd Property, that the more 'tis expos'd to the Sun-beams and heat the better it is, and instead of putting it in a cool Cellar they expose it to the Sun" (qtd. in Liddell, *Madeira* 28). The result is that it is both artificially aged and resilient against further degradation, in almost any environment. As Alex Liddell comments, Madeira is remarkable for its "apparent capacity to survive over centuries as a wine which can be drunk with pleasure" (188). It is as though the drink had cheated the pernicious effects of extreme old age.

Saramago's novel suggests that all politics is ultimately what postcolonial critic Achille Mbembe calls "necropolitics." For Mbembe, "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" ("Necropolitics" 11-12). In *Death with Interruptions*, the abolition of death thus brings sovereignty to its limit. But Mbembe draws on the French Surrealist Georges Bataille, who argues (Mbembe tells us) that "Death is [. . .] the very principle of excess" (15). 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. The government therefore turns to a clandestine criminal organization that calls itself the "maphia" ("Why the ph, To distinguish us from the original mafia" [47]), who arrange to transport the aged and infirm out of the country, to jurisdictions where death does still claim dominion. Politics thus 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 Prime Minister tells the King, "the state has no alternative but to find someone else to do its dirty work" (92). But in so far as this stratagem is designed to return things back to something like normality, 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.

*2. Reading as Resurrection*

Almost exactly halfway through the novel, and seven months after the onset of "death's unilateral truce" (117), the plot takes a turn. As announced in a statement that the Prime Minister is enjoined to read live on national television, death (now personified) proposes a new regime: "I feel it my duty to admit that I was wrong." The suspension of mortality is to come to an end; people's lives will once more have their limit. But in the new dispensation, "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). This is presented as a kinder and fairer way to proceed, an approach characterized by "a little more charity and patience" (111). No longer cold, impersonal, and unfeeling, death proposes to become, perhaps, a little more human.

As, however, with death's earlier suspension of activity, the consequences of this new policy are unexpectedly adverse in that they have "precisely the opposite effect [. . .], 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." Hence, far from providing death with a friendlier and more positive image, newspapers are full of "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.

Further, death emerges from the process enacting the role of a minor bureaucrat. Her time is spent managing files and writing letters to all those who are to prepare themselves for their imminent end. "I'll be in another fine mess," she thinks, "if people start receiving their notifications at the wrong time, either early or late." She therefore "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"; she "work[s] her fingers to the bone" although perhaps this is no surprise in that, as the narrator notes, "of course, she is all bone" (203, 204). Endlessly writing by hand, on antique violet-coloured paper that she folds into violet-coloured envelopes—she does consider employing "new technologies, by using e-mail, for example," but decides to "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)—she comes to resemble a nineteenth-century office clerk. She is not so far removed from Bartleby, for instance, the eponymous protagonist of Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener," who is initially distinguished for the "extraordinary quantity of writing" he is capable of producing, "silently, palely, mechanically" and "with no pause for digestion," until one day, much like death in Saramago's novel, he suddenly and inexplicably gives it up, with no more justification than the repeated refrain: "I would prefer not to" (9, 10). Death likewise becomes a writing machine.

What kind of writing does death produce? The first letter to appear is the one sent to the Prime Minister announcing the new vision for forewarned expiration. Similarly hand-written like the many letters to come, this missive is pored over by experts for signs of death's personality and character. It is a graphologist who determines that the letter's author is a woman—a fact apparently confirmed by an eminent forensic scientist's

reconstruction of the skulls that represent death "in old paintings and engravings" (141). A grammarian is also consulted, who laments the poor quality of death's prose: "death had simply failed to master even the first rudiments of writing." Death is no stylist; her writing is far from literary. And the evidence for this is "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). But the irony, as critic James Wood notes, is that these same idiosyncrasies are also notable features of this very novel: "Death writes like José Saramago." For Wood, this shows that Saramago is "ask[ing] us to reflect on the storyteller's godlike powers" ("Death Takes a Holiday"). Yet it may also suggest an intuition that, as critic Garrett Stewart argues, all sentences are "death sentences" in that they give form—beginnings but also endings or closure—to content: "death is the ultimate form of closure plotted within the closure of form"; "death in narrative yields, by yielding to, sheer style" (*Death Sentences* 6, 3). 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.

But something always escapes, and 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. Death is so intrigued and frustrated by this failure, that she goes out into the world incognito to investigate the man who refuses to be forewarned of his passing, who remains oblivious to death's attempts to communicate with him: a "wretched cellist, who, ever since his birth, had been marked out to die a young man of only forty-nine summers, [but who] had just brazenly entered his fiftieth year" (157). Death follows him, shadows him, attends his rehearsals, listens to "life [. . .] an orchestra that is always playing, in tune or out, a titanic that is always sinking and always rising to the surface" (189). Finally, she introduces herself to him directly, goes to his house, and asks him to play. When he does so, "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*. Copying or interpreting (repeating, however mechanically or imperfectly) gives new life to formed matter. Seduced, death enters the man's bed, and then later burns the (unread, dead) letter informing him of his fate. 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. But what happens next? So long as someone still picks it up and reads it, then it gains a brief afterlife, an endlessly replayable life after death.

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Song: Queen, "Who Wants to Live Forever"