

LOOKING FOR THE ROGUE: DEMOCRATIC AUTOIMMUNITY IN JOSÉ SARAMAGO'S *SEEING*

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Abstract

This paper explores José Saramago's novel 'Seeing', which depicts an unnamed country in crisis following a mass casting of blank votes, from the perspective of Derrida's concept of (democratic) autoimmunity. For Derrida, democracy is an inherently aporetic concept, leaving democratic regimes potentially open to renewal and reevaluation but also to self-destruction. Democratic governments may, for instance, react to a (perceived) threat against democracy with measures that themselves undermine democracy, as in Derrida's examples of Algeria in 1992 or the post-9/11 USA. The paper argues that a similar mechanism is underway in 'Seeing', where the government restricts democracy, including declaring a state of siege and even carrying out a terrorist attack in the capital, in an attempt to protect a democratic system which they perceive as being threatened by rogues in the form of the so-called 'blankers'.

As Derrida suggests, the relationship between literature and democracy is an intimate, even symbiotic one, so that: "There can be no literature without democracy and no democracy without literature."¹ In this sense, literary works cannot be created and published without democratic openness and freedom of expression. Moreover, literature, with its "unconditional right to call everything to account"² plays a vital role in the discussion and questioning inherent in and necessary to democracy, "in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy."³

From this perspective, the novels of José Saramago can be understood as actively participating in the democratic process in that they are "interventions into society presenting and debating ethico-political questions and problems," effectively rendering them "a form of

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Passions: An Oblique Offering: On the Name*. Trans. David Wood (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), p. 28.

² Zlatan Filipovic, "For a Future to Come: Derrida's Democracy and the Right to Literature," *Journal of East/West Thought*, Vol. 3, no 1, p. 13

³ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 32.

political action.”⁴ Saramago himself sees his writing as inseparable from his political involvement as a citizen:

As citizens, we all have an obligation to intervene and become involved, it's the citizen who changes things. I can't imagine myself outside any kind of social or political involvement. Yes, I'm a writer, but I live in this world and my writing doesn't exist on a separate level.⁵

This political involvement is perhaps most obvious in his later, more allegorical novels such as *Seeing (Ensaio sobre a Lucidez)*⁶ or *Blindness (Ensaio sobre a Cegueira)*⁷; indeed both of these “essays in novel form” explore the nature of “the political.”⁸ In this context *Seeing*, a sequel to *Blindness*, questions and calls into account democracy itself.

Blindness, which depicts a country in the throes of an epidemic of white blindness, focuses on the maintenance of human relationships in the context of the breakdown of the state and “the smooth social function of civility, decency, law and order.”⁹ *Seeing* is set in the same unspecified country, which may or may not be Portugal,¹⁰ four years after the end of the epidemic of white blindness and the restoration of democracy. Like *Blindness*, *Seeing* also deals with what, in the novel, is frequently termed as an ‘epidemic’; not, this time, an epidemic of white blindness but rather one of white paper, in the form of the mass casting of blank ballots.

Seeing opens on an election day in the capital, when, it later turns out, 70% of the voters cast blank votes. The election is repeated eight days later, in accordance with national law; however, this time the proportion of blank votes, at 83%, is even higher. The government, in what is supposedly an attempt to rescue the democratic system, accordingly declares a state of siege in the capital, reminiscent of the state of emergency in *Blindness*. Thus, the government effectively abolishes the population’s democratic rights and freedoms, and attempts to track down the purported ringleader behind the ‘plague’ of the blank votes. On this basis, as explored further below, this paper attempts to read *Seeing* in terms of Derrida’s concept of autoimmunity, interpreting the novel as the story of a democratic government which, in the name of preserving democracy, actually ends up destroying the very democracy it seeks to protect.

As Rancière points out, even as they seek to impose democracy on other countries democratic governments “unrelentingly complain that democracy is ungovernable, that the democratic government is threatened by a mortal danger which is the excess of democratic

⁴ Carlo Salzani and Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, “Introduction: Proteus the Philosopher or Reading Saramago as a Lover of Wisdom,” in Carlo Salzani and Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte (eds.), *Saramago's Philosophical Heritage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 6.

⁵ Stephanie Merrit. “José Saramago Interview: Still a Street Fighting Man,” *The Guardian*, 30 April 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/apr/30/fiction.features1>

⁶ Literally, ‘An Essay on Lucidity’.

⁷ Literally, ‘An Essay on Blindness’.

⁸ Jim Jose, “A Brutal Blow against the Democratic Normality: Unlearning the Epistemology of the Political,” *Social Identities*, Vol 20, no.6 (2017), pp. 718-729.

⁹ Duncan McColl Chesney, “Re-Reading Saramago on Community – *Blindness*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 62 no. 2 (2021), p. 221.

¹⁰ José Saramago, *Seeing*, translated by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 81.

life.”¹¹ According to Rancière, there are two possible readings of this situation; the democracy in question may be a false one characterized by corruption, duplicity, and lies. Alternatively, with reference to Derrida's concept of autoimmunity, he notes that it may instead point to a fundamental “difference inherent in the concept of democracy itself, a difference that prevents democracy from being achieved as a form of government.”¹²

A reading of the (un)democratic situation in *Seeing* from the first perspective described above would certainly seem to be apt, particularly given Saramago's view that “People live with the illusion that we have a democratic system, but it's only the outward form of one. In reality we live in a plutocracy, a government of the rich.”¹³ Indeed, in her analysis of *Seeing* Bernardino states that ‘Saramago's interpretation of democracy is not a matter of doubting democracy, but rather an utter disbelief in those that take power and use it to keep the machine working, i.e. to maintain a *status quo* that perpetuates power in the hands of oligarchies.’¹⁴

However, without discounting such an interpretation, there is little evidence in the novel itself, despite the electorate's mass rejection of the *status quo*, that the democracy in question is especially corrupt *before* the phenomenon of the blank ballots. It is argued here, then, that *Seeing* can also be understood from the second perspective described by Rancière above, that of democracy as characterized by incommensurable differences and therefore unachievable as “democracy always carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction.”¹⁵ The Prime Minister in *Seeing* uses the same metaphor when he argues that the blank voting could propel the country towards:

the ultimate disaster...the possibly definitive collapse of a political system which...carried within it...in its vital nucleus, in the voting process itself, the seeds of its own destruction or, a no less disquieting hypothesis, a transition to something entirely new and unknown, so different that we would probably have no place in it.¹⁶

In this light, *Seeing* can arguably be read as a satirical meditation on the potentially quasi-suicidal nature of democracy itself. As Jose, for instance, notes, for Saramago “totalitarianism is already lurking in the heart of representative democracy insofar as ever-increasing invocations of state power in the name of the people are its preferred solutions to crises.”¹⁷ On this basis, this paper attempts to explore *Seeing* through a discussion of Derrida's concept of autoimmunity, which he describes as “that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, “Should Democracy Come? Ethics and Politics in Derrida,” in Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (eds.), *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2009), p. 275.

¹² Ibid, p. 275.

¹³ Stephanie Merrit, “José Saramago Interview.”

¹⁴ Ligia Bernardino, ‘The Threshold of Democracy in José Saramago's *Seeing*’. *Gragoatá Niterói*, Vol. 23 No. 45 (2018), p. 331.

¹⁵ Alex Thomson, “What's to Become of ‘Democracy to Come’?,” *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 15 no. 3, 2005. <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.505/15.3thomson.html>

¹⁶ José Saramago, *Seeing*, pp. 162-167.

¹⁷ Jim Jose, “A Brutal Blow,” p. 727.

its own immunity.”¹⁸ Although Derrida’s concept of autoimmunity is broad in scope – indeed he extends it to “life in general”¹⁹ – he uses autoimmunity largely to refer to “deconstruction in the political realm.”²⁰

In this framework, primarily in *Rogues (Voyous)* which was published just a year before *Seeing*,²¹ Derrida emphasizes the autoimmune nature of democracy,²² which derives from the fundamental semantic undecidability inherent in the term democracy itself. As discussed further in the following section, autoimmunity here refers to a threat to democracy, a quasi-suicidal drive, which comes from *within* democracy itself.²³ ²⁴ Interestingly, in a 2004 article, Saramago also suggests that democracy is in the process of committing a kind of autoimmune suicide: “Western democracy has entered a phase of retrograde transformation that it cannot halt and will foreseeably bring about its negation. No one need take responsibility for killing it: it is committing suicide.”²⁵

Autoimmunity, then, refers to “an enemy which is not external: it is not a virus or bacteria”; it is, rather, ‘an internal enemy.’”²⁶ ²⁷ ²⁸ In the case of democratic autoimmunity,

¹⁸ Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 100.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 187; on the relation of Derrida’s view of immunity and autoimmunity to “life-affirmation” see Rossen Roussev, “Feminism, Deconstruction, and Literary Criticism: A Deconstructive Feminist Reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Novel *The Scarlet Letter* with the Help of Alice Jardine and Jacques Derrida,” *Global Conversations: An International Journal in Contemporary Philosophy and Culture*, Vol. 4 (2021), more particularly, pp. 68-69, 81.

²⁰ Dimitris Vadoulakis, “Autoimmunities: Derrida, Democracy and Political Theology,” *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 48, No.1 (2018), p. 30; for an application of Derrida’s concept of autoimmunity to political events in literature see Yasemin Karaağaç, “Hostility, Hospitality, and Autoimmunity in Kadare’s *The Fall of The Stone City*,” *Global Conversations: An International Journal in Contemporary Philosophy and Culture*, Vol. 4 (2021), pp. 11ff, 20ff.

²¹ In this regard, these works can be understood at least in part as a response to 9/11 and the ensuing events, including the USA’s curtailing of civil liberties and the so-called ‘war on terror’, which was arguably also an important influence on Saramago’s *Seeing*.

²² Importantly, democracy for Derrida generally refers not only to a particular form of government but to a whole political culture including equality, rights, freedom of speech, protection of minorities from majority oppression. (Alex Thomson, “What’s to Become of ‘Democracy to Come’?,” p. 5).

²³ Alex Thomson, “What’s to Become of ‘Democracy to Come’?,” p. 3.

²⁴ Importantly, however, as will be discussed in the following section, autoimmunity can be an opportunity as well as a threat.

²⁵ José Saramago, “The Least Bad System is in Need of Change: Reinventing Democracy,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 17 August 2004, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/27/070.html>

²⁶ Dimitris Vadoulakis, “Autoimmunities,” p. 29.

²⁷ While autoimmunity is a medical term, Derrida justifies his use of the term in the political context by underscoring that immunity was originally a political/juridical term which was borrowed into the medical vocabulary. As Derrida points out, the word ‘immunity’ derives from the Latin *munus*, referring to the common community. Thus, to be immune (*immunis*), is therefore to be ‘freed or exempted from the charges, the service, the taxes, the obligations’ of a community; it is still used in a similar sense today in the context of parliamentary or diplomatic immunity. [Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 72].

²⁸ While autoimmune disease in medicine refers to a situation where the immune system attacks the body, however, autoimmunity for Derrida also involves the immune system attacking itself. Derrida’s autoimmunity, can then

Derrida, writing in the era of the USA's so-called 'war on terror',²⁹ represents this figure of internal enmity as "the rogue or *voyou*."³⁰ However, for Derrida it is never entirely clear who these enemies of democracy are, as "the worst enemies of democratic freedom can, by a plausible rhetorical simulacrum...present themselves as staunch democrats,"³¹ while, as is discussed further below, every democratic state is (potentially) a rogue state, so there are (no) more rogue states. In this context, then, this article undertakes a (perhaps impossible) search for the internal enemies of democracy, the rogue(s) or *voyou(s)*, in *Seeing*.

Derrida and Democratic Autoimmunity

For Derrida, democracy, ever since its ancient Athenian origins, has been a "concept that is inadequate to itself, a word hollowed out in its center by a vertiginous semantic abyss."³² This semantic indeterminacy enables the term democracy to be appropriated by many different types of government, as is perhaps underscored by the wide variety of regimes that today call themselves democratic. While this openness or 'hospitality' which is characteristic of democracy can potentially prove an opportunity for self-perfection, it also risks leaving democracy vulnerable to those who wish to put it to an end.³³ Indeed Derrida argues that no enemy of democracy today, at least outside the Islamic world,³⁴ can refuse to call himself a democrat,³⁵ so that even "Le Pen and his followers now present themselves as respectable and irreproachable democrats."³⁶ Thus, "the great question of modern parliamentary and representative democracy, perhaps of all democracy, is that the *alternative to* democracy can always be *represented* as a democratic *alternation*."^{37 38}

In this sense, the figure of the internal enemy is crucial in understanding democracy's autoimmune tendencies. This enemy does not necessarily have to be a 'real' enemy; rather it is a figure who is incommensurable with ipseity' and which "regulates the discourses about power, violence and force."³⁹ Indeed rogues (*voyous*) themselves are internal enemies represented as "rebels, agitators and insurgents." However, labelling someone (or a state) as a rogue is "never neutral, but always a performative judgment, an accusation, or an interpellation.

imply both a quasi-suicidal self-destruction and a lack of protection from the Other which, like unconditional hospitality, may potentially prove to be a risk or an opportunity.

²⁹ During this period, the US frequently referred to states which it perceived as promoting terrorism or as enemies of democracy as 'rogue states', a term which was translated into French as '*états voyous*'.

³⁰ Dimitris Vadoulakis, "Autoimmunities," p. 29.

³¹ Jacques Derrida. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford. Stanford University Press, 2005).

³² Jacques Derrida. *Rogues*, p. 7.

³³ Samir Haddad, "Derrida and Democracy at Risk," *Contretemps: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 4 (2004), p. 33.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 2.

³⁵ Alex Thomson, "What's to Become of 'Democracy to Come,?'," p. 5.

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 30.

³⁷ Emphasis in the original.

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, pp. 30-31.

³⁹ Dimitris Vadoulakis, "Autoimmunities," pp. 33-34.

To judge someone to be *voyou* is to “place them outside the law and to ally yourself with the law.”^{40 41}

Derrida's concept of autoimmunity can thus be understood as part of the attempt to counter the “forgetting of *stasis*” which lies at the heart of democracy.^{42 43} As has been suggested, then, the “semantic abyss” or *stasis* inherent in the concept of democracy potentially harbors the seeds of its own autoimmune destruction. In other words, democracy contains internal tensions or challenges to its *ipseity*, including, and perhaps most notably, those between democracy and sovereignty, and between freedom and equality.

Regarding the *demos*, a key tension is that between inclusivity and exclusivity; any attempt to define the *demos* on the grounds of demographic or geographic conditions is ultimately exclusionary, so that “one electoral law is always at the same time more and less democratic than another.”⁴⁴ Related to this, democracy contains a tension between freedom, defined as “unconditional, indivisible, heterogenous to calculation and to measure,” and equality; thus “Derrida points to a primary suspension of freedom within the very concept of democracy.”⁴⁵ Aristotle's solution to this quandary was that each equal participant should govern in turn; this is translated, in modern terms, into the democratic election.^{46 47} However, the election clearly implies a compromise, as liberty is limited in a cyclical fashion in order to safeguard equality, so that the two goals of equality and freedom are never completely fulfilled, at least not simultaneously:

liberty and equality are only reconcilable in a roundabout and alternative manner, in alternance; the absolute freedom of a finite being (it is of this finitude that we speak here) is equally divisible [partageable] only in the space-time of a taking-in-turns.⁴⁸

In these turns, freedom risks not only being suspended but even destroyed so that, for instance, fascist and totalitarian governments can (and have been) elected; moreover, as is discussed further below, the democratic process can be suspended by the government itself in the name of protecting democracy.⁴⁹

A related autoimmune “aporetic embrace”⁵⁰ is that between democracy and sovereignty, the relationship between which is “mutually inseparable and incompatible” as both “appear unconditional.”⁵¹ For Derrida, “a pure sovereignty is indivisible or it is not at all”; it

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, pp. 64-65.

⁴¹ Alex Thomson, “What's to Become of ‘Democracy to Come’?,” p. 5.

⁴² Dimitris Vadoulakis, “Autoimmunities,” pp. 34-35.

⁴³ Dimitris Vadoulakis emphasizes that this *stasis*, or civil strife, is *etymologically* inherent in the term democracy itself. He bases this on Laroux's insight that the *kratos* in democracy signifies not only rule but also struggle.

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, pp. 35-37

⁴⁵ Pheng Cheah, “The Untimely Secret of Democracy,” in Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (eds.), *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2009), p. 78.

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 46.

⁴⁷ Samir Haddad, “Derrida and Democracy at Risk,” p. 33.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁹ Pheng Cheah, “The Untimely Secret of Democracy,” p. 78.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

can be understood in terms of Schmittian political theology in that it associates force, power and violence with “the right of the strongest, and then justifies force in the name of the health and the protection of the polity.”⁵² Democracy, then, needs sovereignty in order to rule effectively; however, in the process it also closes off and essentializes the *demos*:

In its very institution, and in the instant proper to it, the act of sovereignty must and can, by force, put an end in a single, indivisible stroke to the endless discussion. This act is an event, as silent as it is instantaneous, without any thickness of time, even if it seems to come by way of a shared language and even a performative language that it just as soon exceeds.⁵³

In this sense, sovereignty betrays the universality of democracy, so that “as soon as there is sovereignty, there is abuse of power and a rogue state”;⁵⁴ in other words, *every* state, democratic or otherwise, is potentially a rogue state. Moreover, as soon as sovereignty begins to justify itself, as it must do in a democracy, it is no longer pure and itself undergoes an autoimmune de(con)struction: “the autoimmunity with which sovereignty at once sovereignly affects and cruelly infects itself.”⁵⁵

However, the autoimmune openness of democracy, while potentially destructive, can also provide an opportunity for criticism and renewal. As Derrida notes, “autoimmunity is not an absolute ill or evil. It enables an exposure to the other, to *what* and *who* comes.”⁵⁶ This openness is linked to the fact that democracy “is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history and its name.”⁵⁷ From this perspective, democracy’s autoimmunity thus contains a chance or promise, opening democracy up to change and reinscription, in the form of the ‘democracy-to-come’.

Indeed, for Derrida, there is a promise, a historical inheritance, inscribed in the concept of democracy itself: “equality, freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press.” However, this promise of an authentic democracy “is never embodied in what we call democracy,”⁵⁸ and indeed will never exist as a “past, present or future regime”⁵⁹ as it will *always* be characterized by an autoimmune indeterminacy:

it will always remain aporetic in its structure (force *without* force, incalculable singularity *and* calculable equality, commensurability *and* incommensurability, heteronomy *and* autonomy, indivisible sovereignty *and* divisible or shared sovereignty, an empty name, a despairing messianicity or a messianicity in despair, and so on).⁶⁰

⁵² Dimitris Vadoulakis, “Autoimmunities,” p. 35.

⁵³ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵⁸ Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, “Politics and Friendship: A Discussion with Jacques Derrida,” 1997.

<http://www.dariarothmayr.com/pdfs/assignments/Politics%20and%20Friendship.pdf>

⁵⁹ Michael Naas, “‘One Nation . . . Indivisible’: Jacques Derrida on the Autoimmunity of Democracy and the Sovereignty of God,” *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 36 (2006), p. 40.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p.86.

Derrida's concept of the democracy to come is not, then, a Kantian regulative idea; rather, it can be likened to "the *khora* of the political."⁶¹ Thus, importantly, the 'to come' of democracy to come does not simply refer to "a future democracy correcting or improving the actual conditions of the so-called democracies." Instead, the 'to come' here refers to a promise, duty or injunction "that is 'to come' immediately."⁶² Moreover, the democracy to come is not necessarily a regime; democracy is "not confined to the political in the classical sense," or to citizenship or the nation state. It can, instead, refer to any experience characterized by openness to and respect for the Other, equality and justice.⁶³

This (relatively) optimistic view of democratic autoimmunity in the form of the democracy to come is arguably prevalent in *Politics of Friendship*. However, Derrida's emphasis appears to switch to the *pervertibility* of democratic autoimmunity in *Rogues*,⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ so that we can 'not only criticize, we can restrict democracy in the name of democracy.'⁶⁶ In other words, in *Rogues* Derrida argues that threats to democracy can come from democratic governments themselves, who may put democracy at risk through curtailing democratic rights and freedoms, particularly in situations where democracy is already under attack.⁶⁷ A key question, therefore, for Derrida is whether a democracy must "leave free and in a position to exercise power those who risk mounting an assault on democratic freedoms."⁶⁸

In this context, Derrida cites the example of the 1992 Algerian election which was cancelled by the government due to fears that a popular radical Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FSI), would abolish democracy if it came to power. In the face of this threat the government decided "in a sovereign fashion to suspend, at least provisionally, democracy *for its own good*, so as to take care of it, so as to immunize it against a much worse and very likely assault."⁶⁹ In this sense, the suspension of the election is autoimmune, a "suicide in order to prevent a murder."⁷⁰ Thus, as Johnson notes:

Algerian democracy effectively 'secreted' its own auto-antibodies, in the forms of both anti-democratic (Algerian) martial law and anti-democratic (Islamist) revolutionary violence, each asserting some right to the claims of democratic legitimacy.⁷¹

Another important example is that of the US government's response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In his interview with Borradori, which took place shortly after the attacks, Derrida

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 82.

⁶² Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, "Politics and Friendship."

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Leigh M. Johnson, "Terror, Torture and Democratic Autoimmunity," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 38 No. 1 (2012), p. 112.

⁶⁵ Alex Thomson, "What's to Become of 'Democracy to Come?'," p. 1.

⁶⁶ Marguerite La Caze, "Terrorism and Trauma: Negotiating Derridean 'Autoimmunity'," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (2011), p. 610.

⁶⁷ Samir Haddad, "Derrida and Democracy at Risk," p. 29.

⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p.34.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

⁷⁰ Alex Thomson, "What's to Become of 'Democracy to Come?'," p. 1

⁷¹ Leigh Johnson. "Terror, Torture and Democratic Autoimmunity," p. 113.

discusses these events in terms of autoimmunity.⁷² What we have here is that governments such as that of the US fight against what they see as forces that are attacking what they value – a relatively stable, orderly, and open society underscored by democracy, freedom, and the rule of law. However, arguably, in attacking these terrorist forces, they are themselves destroying the very values that they were seeking to uphold through attacks on privacy, human rights and personal freedom. In this sense, then, Derrida notes that, in the context of its supposed “war” with so-called “rogue states” the US, together with its allies, *itself* behaved like a rogue state.⁷³

Going Rogue? The Autoimmunity of Democracy in Seeing

As mentioned above, *Seeing* opens in a polling booth on a stormy day when very few people have, as yet, left their homes to vote. In an uncanny (un)foreshadowing of the mass casting of blank votes, the supposed abstention is considered a threat to the democratic system; however, commentators note that the capital city seems to set a good example for the rest of the country:

just when the spectre of an abstention on a scale unparalleled in the history of our democracy had seemed to be posing a great threat to the stability not just of the regime but, even more seriously, of the system itself... As for the three parties involved in the election, the parties on the right, in the middle and on the left, they...issued congratulatory statements in which...they affirmed that democracy had every reason to celebrate.⁷⁴

Despite the eventual turnout, however, the election day ends with a shock when it is revealed that seventy percent of the votes cast were blank. The blank vote is not a literary invention on Saramago's part; in his adopted country of Spain, for instance, they are formally counted and accepted. It is important to emphasize here that a blank vote is not an abstention, so that “what is at stake is neither a nulling nor a voiding, and certainly not not-voting.”⁷⁵ This difference is pointed out by Saramago himself in an interview:

Abstention means you stayed at home or went to the beach. By casting a blank vote, you're saying that you understand your responsibility, you have a political conscience and you came to vote, but you don't agree with any of the existing parties and this is the only way you have of saying so.⁷⁶

As Vanhoutte notes, critics have often compared the blank voters in *Seeing* to Melville's character Bartleby the Scrivener who answers every question with ‘I would prefer not to’. In

⁷² Derrida dissects that this autoimmune response occurs into three overlapping ‘moments’. The first ‘moment’ is when the USA is attacked by terrorists who were at least partly ‘home grown’ within its own borders. The second moment is one of traumatic repression of the events, which allows the trauma itself to be regenerated, sparking fear of a future, and even worse, traumatic terrorist attack. The third moment is that responding to terrorism by attacking so-called ‘rogue states’, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, in turn provides legitimation for further terrorist attacks. (Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, pp. 85-172); (La Caze, “Terrorism and Trauma.” pp. 606-608).

⁷³ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 112.

⁷⁴ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 15.

⁷⁵ Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, “Bye Bye Bartleby and Hello *Seeing*, or On the Silence and the Actualization to Do ... Not,” in Carlo Salzani and Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte (eds.), *Saramago's Philosophical Heritage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 241.

⁷⁶ Stephanie Merrit, “José Saramago Interview.”

his 'non-action and non-refusal' Bartleby has become, for many political philosophers, a symbol of the power of passive resistance.⁷⁷ Žižek, for instance, states that "José Saramago's novel *Seeing* can effectively be perceived as a mental experiment in Bartlebian politics."⁷⁸ However, Vanhoutte points out that the blank votes in *Seeing* cannot easily be read *a la* Bartleby as a "non act that intends to counter a frail but possibly oppressive political regime"⁷⁹ because, as has already been suggested, the blank voters are *actively* taking part in the democratic process so that "the action undertaken by the population of the former capital ... consists of positive action."⁸⁰ Indeed, then, the blank votes can be understood as a "refusal to refuse to participate."⁸¹

Thus, rather than a rejection of democracy itself, the phenomenon of the blank ballots in *Seeing* can be better read, as Saramago himself indicates, as a protest against the available candidates and parties, those of the left, the middle, and the right. In this sense, the blank voters' decision can perhaps be understood in terms of democracy's inherent openness as a system that "welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of autoimmunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility."⁸²

However, the government in *Seeing*, the party on the right, portrays and perhaps perceives the blank votes as a threat to the democratic system. In consequence, it decides to impose a state of emergency on the country in order to counter what the Prime Minister describes as "a brutal blow against the democratic normality."⁸³ Later, the defense minister denounces the blank voters as terrorists; "what we are facing is terrorism pure and unadulterated; it may wear different faces and expressions but it is, essentially, the same thing."⁸⁴ The supposed enemy, then is an internal one, the most terrifying kind, as Derrida points out: "The worst, most effective terrorism... is the one that installs or recalls an interior threat at home and recalls that the enemy is also always lodged on the inside of the system it violates and terrorizes."⁸⁵

Nevertheless, it is not so much the fact that blank ballots have been cast that bothers the government – this is, in fact, legal in the unnamed country – but it is rather the sheer quantity of the blank votes that supposedly poses a threat to the democratic system:

the sole crime of these people was to cast blank ballots, it would be of little importance if only the usual ones had done it, but there were plenty, there were too much, almost all of them, what does it matter that it is your inalienable right if you are told that such a right has to be used in homeopathic doses, drop by drop, you cannot walk around with a full bowl overflowing with blank ballots.⁸⁶

⁷⁷ Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, "Bye Bye *Bartleby*," p. 236.

⁷⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 180.

⁷⁹ Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, "Bye Bye *Bartleby*," p. 234.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁸¹ Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, "Only the country of the blind will have a king. On Žižek's non-lucid reading of Saramago's Essay on Lucidity [Seeing]," *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2013), p. 7.

⁸² Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 187.

⁸³ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 27.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸⁵ Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, p. 188.

⁸⁶ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 56.

The government decides to call a second election; in the meantime, it begins an attempt to gather intelligence on the motives behind the blank ballots by monitoring the polling stations and recording the voters' conversations in the hope of tracking down a purported ringleader. However, as Zivin emphasizes, due to an unhappy mixture of human and technological error, "the more the police record and analyze the conversations of voters, hoping to identify a guilty party responsible for the voting conspiracy, the more their efforts prove futile."⁸⁷

In this context, in an "echo of Guantánamo Bay,"⁸⁸ 500 people are arrested at random to be interrogated further, submitted to lie detectors and possibly torture. Although there are no actual torture scenes in the novel, the narrator suggests the hypothetical possibility of the use of torture by the government;⁸⁹ "Were this innocent man to be interrogated tomorrow, we tremble at the mere thought of what could happen to him..."⁹⁰ Far from being an anathema to democratic states, however, Johnson argues that torture, together with terrorism, is an inherent component of democracy, as borne out by democracy's autoimmune tendency to secure itself even at the cost of using "anti-democratic" methods such as torture.⁹¹

In the second election, an even larger 83% of the votes turn out to be blank. In this context, the President describes the blank votes as a "modern-day black death" (or rather, the prime corrects him, a "blank death") threatening the "stability of the democratic system, not simply, not merely, of one country, this country, but of the entire planet."⁹² In the aftermath of the disastrous election results, the government lifts the nation-wide state of emergency but declares an even harsher state of siege in the capital alone, where the blank voting has occurred. Thus, it is the capital city which is, effectively, declared rogue or *voyou*, an enemy of the democratic system. Indeed, as Derrida points out, there is an intimate connection between the *voyou*, originally a Parisian term, and the capital; "the *voyou* milieu is first of all the municipality, the polis, the city, indeed the capital city. And when one speaks of *voyous*, the police are never very far away."⁹³

However, during the discussions preceding the imposition of a state of siege on the capital, the Minister of the Interior perceptively notes an important semantic difficulty:

We all know that siege means blockade or encirclement, isn't that right... Therefore declaring a state of siege is tantamount to saying that the country's capital is besieged, blockaded or encircled by an enemy, when the truth is that the enemy, if I may call it that, is not outside but inside.⁹⁴

Thus, of course, the use of the term siege in this situation is more appropriate than the interior minister lets on; it is the government itself, rather than the inhabitants of the capital, which turns out to be the chief enemy of democracy, the main *voyou*. However, from the

⁸⁷ Erin Zivin "Seeing and Saying: Towards an Ethics of Truth in José Saramago's "Ensaio sobre a Lucidez," *SubStance* Vol. 41, No. 1(2012), p. 112.

⁸⁸ Maria Aristodemou, "Democracy or Your Life! Knowledge, Ignorance and the Politics of Atheism in Saramago's *Blindness* and *Seeing*," *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (2011), p. 175.

⁸⁹ Erin Zivin, "Seeing and Saying," p. 112.

⁹⁰ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 23.

⁹¹ Leigh Johnson, "Terror, Torture and Democratic Autoimmunity," p. 107.

⁹² José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 51.

⁹³ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 66.

⁹⁴ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 52.

government's perspective the rogues are clearly the blank voters. In an attempt to persuade the supposed rogues, "the degenerates, delinquents and subversives who had cast the blank votes of the error of their ways," the state of siege is "proper... not merely for show," including "a curfew, the closure of theatres and cinemas, constant army patrols, a prohibition on gatherings of more than five people, and an absolute ban on anyone entering or leaving the city."⁹⁵ Realizing that, as its offices are in the capital, the government itself will be among the besieged, it decides to relocate out of the city, along with the army and the police. The Prime Minister portrays the plan as a "painful" remedy for a "fatal" disease;⁹⁶ as Saramago's narrator points out, from the government's perspective the exodus was,

a flight from the virus that had attacked the majority of the capital's inhabitants, and given that the worst is always waiting just behind the door, might well end up infecting all the remaining inhabitants and even, who knows, the whole country.⁹⁷

The 'worst' here is reminiscent of Derrida's concept of 'the worst to come', a virtual or future trauma not only resulting from a past event but compounded by "the undeniable fear or apprehension of a threat that is *worse* and still *to come*."⁹⁸ For Derrida, such a virtual trauma underscored the USA's autoimmune (over) reaction to the events of 9/11, and was deepened further by the realization that the threat was no longer an external and easily identifiable one.⁹⁹ The same is arguably true of the government's overreaction to the supposed threat posed by the blank ballots in *Seeing*, framed not only as a menace to democracy in the country but worldwide, "the tip of the iceberg of a gigantic, global destabilization plot."¹⁰⁰

As the Prime Minister declares the siege, he justifies the government's measures as responding to the (supposed) threat to national security posed by "the action taken by organized subversive groups who had repeatedly obstructed the people's right to vote."¹⁰¹ Here, then, the government asserts its sovereignty, which Derrida defines as the indivisible and absolute "power to give, to make, but also to suspend the law; it is the exceptional right to place oneself above right, the right to non-right."¹⁰² Indeed, the Minister of Defense, for instance, views democratic rights not as inalienable but as something which must be 'deserved' and therefore suspendable: "Rights are not abstractions... people either deserve rights or they don't, and these people don't, anything else is just so much empty talk."¹⁰³

Although the government asserts its sovereignty ostensibly in the name of democracy, in doing so it constrains the democratic freedom of the *demos*. Moreover, the immunity, the absolute nature of sovereignty is also destroyed the moment the government seeks to justify itself, which it must do, at least in a democratic system:

⁹⁵ José Saramago, *Seeing*, pp. 50-51.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.67.

⁹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, pp. 104-105.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁰⁰ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 32.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰² Jacques Derrida . *The Beast and the Sovereign (Vol. 1)*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), p. 16.

¹⁰³ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 53.

To confer sense or meaning on sovereignty, to justify it, to find a reason for it, is already to compromise its deciding exceptionality ... to compromise its immunity... But since this happens all the time, pure sovereignty does not exist ... it is always in the process of autoimmunizing itself, of betraying itself by betraying the democracy that nonetheless can never do without it.¹⁰⁴

In *Seeing*, too, the government's sovereignty turns out to be far from indivisible and absolute, despite the siege conditions it imposes on the capital. This is indicated by the fact that it has to justify its imposition of the state of exception not only to the nation but also to the 'international community', which it does in the name of protecting democracy. Faced with the continued peaceful coexistence of the city's inhabitants, however, the government seeks to stir up unrest in the capital, using 'agents provocateurs' to create "the kind of unstable situations which might justify, in the eyes of the so-called international community...the move from a state of siege to a state of war."¹⁰⁵

The state of siege imposed by the government is, then, increasingly brutal, trampling on the democratic rights and freedoms of the capital's inhabitants until, as Bernardino notes, they seem almost to be reduced to "bare life" in Agamben's terms.¹⁰⁶ Thus "what looked like a democratic regime rapidly becomes a dictatorship" so that "democracy becomes a farce, a mere word through which the Government imposes a state of siege."¹⁰⁷

In this sense, as a suspension of democracy carried out in the name of protecting democracy, the situation in *Seeing* can perhaps be compared with Derrida's examples of the Algerian government's postponement of democratic elections "in order to save a democracy threatened by the sworn enemies of democracy,"¹⁰⁸ or the USA's infringement of democratic rights and freedoms following the 9/11 attacks.¹⁰⁹ However, as has been discussed above, it is very unlikely that the blank voters in Saramago's novel ever really wished to overthrow the democratic system, a system in which, as has been discussed above, they actively participated. Moreover, no evidence is uncovered, despite the government's best efforts, that the blank ballot phenomenon was a co-ordinated action headed by some terrorist group.

The government's (over)reaction in *Seeing* goes beyond its imposition of the state of siege and its use of propaganda when it actually carries out a terrorist attack in the capital. This act of terrorism, the planting of a bomb in the former capital city's main overground metro station which ends up killing more than 30 people, is undertaken in an attempt to foment unrest among the populace against a supposed terrorist group behind the blank voters.¹¹⁰ As was arguably the case of the USA in the wake of 9/11, the government in *Seeing* employs "terrorism ... in the service of 'securing' the very democratic principles that ostensibly prohibit those practices."¹¹¹ As Johnson argues, the relationship between democracy and terror is an intimate

¹⁰⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁵ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁶ Ligia Bernardino, "The Threshold of Democracy," p. 321.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.321.

¹⁰⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹⁰ José Saramago, *Seeing*, pp. 112-116.

¹¹¹ Leigh Johnson. "Terror, Torture and Democratic Autoimmunity," p. 107.

one, as can be borne out by a glance at the history of modern democracy, one of the founding moments of which was Robespierre's Reign of Terror.¹¹²

As Derrida puts forward, then, "'murderous' attacks from the outside of democracy and 'suicidal' attacks from within it are quite often indistinguishable."¹¹³ In *Seeing*, public opinion regarding who actually carried out the terrorist attack is mixed. A minority of newspapers and some of the city dwellers do suspect that the government is behind the attack, including the leader of the city council who resigns as a result. However, the majority of newspapers blame the attack on "some terrorist group with some link to the insurrection by the blankers."¹¹⁴

What is striking, despite the state of siege and the terrorist attack, is that the government does not succeed in stirring up violence among the inhabitants of the capital. While there is a demonstration following the bombing, it is a peaceful one, resembling a display of mourning more than a protest march. The demonstration does, however, provoke many who voted for the party on the right to seek to leave the city. When they attempt to do so, the government persuades them that it is their patriotic duty to return to the city in the name of defending democracy; the Prime Minister instructs the Interior Minister to,

tell them that all those who voted for the parties who built the current political system, including, inevitably, the party in the middle, our direct competitor, constitute the first line of defense of all democratic institutions.¹¹⁵

Even when the would-be refugees return to the city, the expected conflict between them and their largely 'blanker' neighbors does not break out; instead there is solidarity, as the latter help the returnees to carry their belongings home, including the "tea service ... the silver platter ... the painting and ... grandpa."¹¹⁶ Indeed, despite the suspension of the law and the absence of governing authorities in the capital, life in the city continues to function much as before, with people paying their rent, food still available in the supermarkets, and even the refuse continuing to be collected.¹¹⁷

Bernardino, for instance, attributes the extraordinary show of solidarity among the capital's inhabitants to their experiences four years earlier during the plague of white blindness depicted in *Blindness*, which has taught them to look for new ways of living together in society.¹¹⁸ In *Blindness*, despite the failure of the state and the return to a quasi-Hobbesian 'state of nature' in the city, the small yet motley group led by the ophthalmologist's wife, the only character to maintain her sight during the epidemic, develops a sense of solidarity and belonging. This is, however, based not on a shared identity but, as McColl Chesney explains,

¹¹² Ibid., p. 116.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 111.

¹¹⁴ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 117.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 132.

¹¹⁷ Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, "Bye Bye *Bartleby*," p. 240.

¹¹⁸ Ligia Bernardino, "The Threshold of Democracy," p. 331.

on “fundamental, ethical values” such as “generosity and altruism, dignity and self-respect, trust and responsibility, respect for others and for the dead.”^{119 120}

The peaceful cohabitation and solidarity among the inhabitants of the capital in *Seeing* does not, however, provoke any softening in the government’s approach. Indeed, in its desperation to uncover a rogue organization behind the blank ballots, the government fixates upon the figure of the ophthalmologist’s wife who, as noted above, was a key character in *Blindness*. In that novel, mysteriously immune to the white blindness, she commits a murder in the chaotic context of the epidemic, killing the ringleader of a gang who raped and exploited the other inhabitants of the quarantine hospital before leading her group to safety. In *Seeing*, four years after the end of the plague of white blindness, a member of the group she helped ultimately betrays her by writing an anonymous letter to the government suggesting that she may be the ringleader behind the blank ballots. This accusation is based on a mysterious and illogical connection between the enigma of her immunity to the blindness epidemic and the mystery of the blank ballots.¹²¹

Despite this extremely flimsy ‘evidence’ the government, in its desperation to uncover a supposed plot behind the blank votes, seizes on the accusation, imagining the doctor’s wife to be the leader, the chief rogue, of what Derrida calls a *voyoucracy*, a kind of state within the state:

a corrupt and corrupting power of the Street, an illegal and outlaw power that brings together into a voyoucratic regime, and thus into an organized and more or less clandestine form, into a virtual state, all those who represent a principle of disorder ...of plotting and conspiracy, of premeditated offensiveness or offenses against public order.¹²²

The government consequently sends a police team, a superintendent accompanied by an inspector and a sergeant, into the city to interrogate the woman and her acquaintances. In this context, the ophthalmologist’s wife herself ironically points out to the police superintendent just how ridiculous these assertions are:

And I am to blame for what happened ... And how did I get the capital’s majority of the population to cast blank ballots, putting flyers under their doors, by midnight prayers and witchcraft, by spreading a chemical product in the water supply network, by promising each person the first prize in the lottery, or by spending what my husband earns in his office to buy votes.¹²³

Although the doctor’s wife has effectively become “a kind of public enemy number one,”¹²⁴ it gradually becomes clear to the superintendent that no proof whatsoever linking her to a terrorist organization behind the blank ballots is forthcoming; neither is there any evidence that such an organization exists. Following a conversation with the Minister of the Interior, who

¹¹⁹ Duncan McColl Chesney, “Re-Reading Saramago on Community – *Blindness*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 62 No.2 (2021), pp. 213.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹²¹ José Saramago, *Seeing*, pp. 171-172.

¹²² Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 66.

¹²³ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 237.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

orders him to create evidence against her, the superintendent has a crisis of faith.¹²⁵ When the Minister of the Interior informs him that the newspapers will soon publish an exposé of the conspiracy, the superintendent responds by giving a newspaper his own version of the facts, which is later published before the government confiscates all copies of the report and shuts down the newspaper.

The novel ends with the shooting of the superintendent, followed by that of the doctor's wife, a heroic savior figure in *Blindness*,^{126 127} and her dog Constant, the "dog of tears," who "unleashed a terrifying howl" as his mistress is shot.¹²⁸ Thus, the novel ends on a particularly depressing note as, as Rollason points out, with "the disappearance of the last lucid woman, totalitarianism may yet install itself in the hearts and minds of a whole dehumanized population."¹²⁹

The howling of Constant, the only character to be named in the entire novel, is also important here. As Salzani and Vanhoutte argue, dogs play a key role in Saramago's fiction, often acting as an almost supernatural guide to the human characters. This is particularly true of Constant who, as the only seeing character apart from the doctor's wife in *Blindness*, literally acts as a guide dog to the blind characters.¹³⁰ In addition dogs often play a vital part in Saramago's social critique; their howling, in particular, denotes a pacific revolt which can be likened to that of the blank voters.¹³¹ The shots, along with Constant's howl, are overheard, significantly, by two blind men; the novel ends with the following exchange between them: "Did you hear something, Three shots, replied another blind man. But there was a dog howling too, It's stopped now, that must have been the third shot, Good, I hate to hear dogs howl."¹³²

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Thus, Constant's death, and the cessation of his howl, can perhaps be understood as the silencing of pacific political protest, as represented by the blank voters in the novel, as the defeat of lucidity by blindness. However, the death of the howling dog connects to the epigraph of the novel, "Let's howl, said the dog," which Saramago explains as follows: "We are the dogs, and it's time that we start howling."¹³⁴

¹²⁵ Jim Jose, "A Brutal Blow," p.724.

¹²⁶ Christopher Rollason, "How Totalitarianism Begins at Home: Saramago and Orwell," in Mark Sabine and Adriana Alves de Paula Martins (eds.), *Dialogue with Saramago: Essays in comparative literature* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 2006), p. 16., <http://yatrarollason.info/files/SaramagoandOrwell.pdf>

¹²⁷ Jim Jose, "A Brutal Blow," p. 726.

¹²⁸ José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 307.

¹²⁹ Christopher Rollason, "How Totalitarianism Begins at Home," p. 16.

¹³⁰ Carlo Salzani and Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, "Saramago's Dogs: For an Inclusive Humanism," in Carlo Salzani and Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte (eds.), *Saramago's Philosophical Heritage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 196.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

¹³² José Saramago, *Seeing*, p. 307.

¹³³ The meaning of the blind man's hatred of howling dogs is, however, ambiguous, as Jose notes: it is unclear whether the blind man is someone who hates dogs, or, alternatively, if he is simply relieved to see the suffering of a fellow creature come to an end. ("A Brutal Blow," p. 728).

¹³⁴ Carlo Salzani and Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, "Saramago's Dogs", p 197.

Conclusion

In contrast to *Blindness*, *Seeing* ends on an apparently pessimistic, even depressing, note.¹³⁵ In its response to a perceived threat to democracy, the government attacks the very rights and freedoms associated with that democracy, resorting to ‘arch-authoritarian’ means including the imposition of a “state of siege, censorship, espionage, arbitrary arrest and indefinite detention, bombs planted by government agents.”¹³⁶ In other words, in its pursuit of the supposed rogue behind the blank ballots, the state, in its crushing of the population’s democratic rights and freedoms, effectively itself becomes a rogue state. This culminates in the killing of the doctor’s wife, the superintendent, and the dog Constant, three characters who arguably represent political ‘lucidity’.

Despite the government’s authoritarian turn and the less than optimistic end of the novel, however, the message of *Seeing* is perhaps not entirely a hopeless one, as several commentators including, for example, Jose,¹³⁷ Vanhoutte,¹³⁸ or Bernardino,¹³⁹ have pointed out. Although the novel ends with the death of the three ‘lucid’ characters, many other ‘lucid’ men and women, characters “who have seen the light”¹⁴⁰ remain alive. These are, of course, the blank voters and, more broadly, the ‘ordinary’ inhabitants of the capital city.

Far from either simply being indifferent to or rejecting democracy outright, the blank voters demonstrate a desire to *question*, and presumably to improve, the democratic system. In this sense, the voters’ action can perhaps be understood in the context of the *opportunity* provided by democratic autoimmunity in the form of the democracy to come. Rather than some ideal future regime, Derrida describes the democracy to come as “a militant and interminable political critique” which protests against “every political abuse, every rhetoric that would present as a present or existing democracy, as a *de facto* democracy.”¹⁴¹ In this sense, then, “even a state that appears to be drawing rapidly away from democracy may in fact be exposing itself even more to the possibility of what remains to come.”¹⁴²

This is reflected in the extraordinary solidarity shown by the population of the capital who, regardless of how they voted in the elections, live together in peaceful cooperation despite the government’s attempts to stir up unrest among them. In this sense, these city dwellers perhaps come closer to fulfilling the promise of democracy, which for Derrida can refer “to any kind of experience in which there is equality, justice, equity, respect for the singularity of the Other at work.”¹⁴³ than any so-called democratic regime. While the ending of *Seeing*, like the democracy to come, is left open,¹⁴⁴ a glimmer of hope, a promise, remains amidst the ruins of a rogue state. This hope, reflected in the city dwellers’ search for a more truly democratic way of life, is also passed on to the reader as an exhortation to take up the howl of the dead dog

¹³⁵ Jim Jose, “A Brutal Blow,” p. 726.

¹³⁶ Christopher Rollason, “How Totalitarianism Begins at Home,” p. 15.

¹³⁷ Jim Jose, “A Brutal Blow,” p. 726.

¹³⁸ Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, “Bye Bye *Bartleby*,” p. 240.

¹³⁹ Ligia Bernardino, “The Threshold of Democracy,” p. 331.

¹⁴⁰ Jim Jose, “A Brutal Blow,” p. 728.

¹⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 86.

¹⁴² Alex Thomson, “What’s to Become of ‘Democracy to Come’?,” p. 7.

¹⁴³ Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, “Politics and Friendship.”

¹⁴⁴ Jim Jose, “A Brutal Blow”, p. 728.

Constant, to question and challenge the democratic regimes we live in, to respond to the injunction of the democracy to come. In Saramago's words,

It's not a question of replacing one government with another, or others. It's a question of putting democracy, authentic democracy, at the heart of the discussion, of refounding the concept based on people's real needs, and of searching for a way to avoid a collapse which buries the yearning for liberty and dignity, makes the human being more vulnerable and leads him to the precipice.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ José Saramago, "Refundar la Democracia. Entrevista," *Sin Permiso*, 2 February 2005, <https://www.sinpermiso.info/textos/refundar-la-democracia-entrevista>