

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DEATH

Irina PETRAŞ

Editor
Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House

“...suddenly they’ll see I am not...” (folk song)

We are in a period of value recovery and value retrievals. I think an uninhibited reading of the *origins* of Romanian literature would be of much help. I also think (and this is an assumption) that the compulsory ambiguity of the last decades taught us to hide, more than was necessary. The great classics and the writers of the interwar period assumed responsibility and, consequently, reflected on the world and their relations to life and death. We who are living in the second half of the century have gradually *got rid* of individuality and the real, lucid, intrinsic splitting of the being. The political regime steadily helped us in this. We lived in an artificial splitting which was an excuse for the fragility of both sides: the fault was always of someone else. The “elders” of our literature experienced completely the basic dissymetry of the passing body and the infinite mind. We persisted in considering them passing, leaving eternity to politics or, recently, to the groups of priests...

*

The *reform of death* has become a social reality and a sociological subject only in the last few decades; poetry has always dealt with it. If we agree with Emmanuel Lévinas that “human life is the disguise of physiological movements”; it is “decency, hiding, covering and unveiling at the same time” the mortal seed by the inevitable *association* of contraries (see *La Mort et le Temps*, 1992), then poetry (and creation in general) is the final, sublime *decency*. (There is a strange affinity between correspondance and order - decency - and

passing away, death: *decedere* is akin to *decere* and to collapse and agreement, *decidere*.) The subject of love, life and death is in fact one and the same eternal subject: *death*. It is the only subject which cannot be experienced directly; however, it implacably impregnates all the others. Every love-poem, patriotic poem or poem about nature is a *song about death*. The *ineffable* in a poem comes from this effort to mould into words that which is without a being (“The most terrible thing is that death is not death”, says Maurice Blanchot). Love, man’s communion with nature and his relation to home are necessary myths but once invented they can also be experienced directly; they are noble and operative on a historical level as they set up *belongings* to forget finitude and basic loneliness. We devise *harmonies* to console us for the fundamental disharmony: death. It is absolute; it can be approached only by *relation*. Poetry is between these two extremes: its language speaks about experiences concocted by an ambiguous syntax which could reveal, in exceptional moments, a bit of the Great Meaning. Lines like “I did not think that I will ever learn to die” or “A rumour came from the impenetrable darkness” were born in such moments. The role of poetry is to receive this rumour and to prepare, by a subtle reform of death, man’s liberation from his fears, that is, to promote his creative coexistence with death.

“It is not sufficient that the shadows of death revive in spite of us: we must *willingly* bring them to light.” (Georges Bataille)

*

The paradox of parting is that you cannot be close unless you move away, withdraw from a *part* of yourself, your “unity”. Montaigne thought, after Cicero, that philosophy meant preparing yourself for death. To take aim at things, to fix your eyes on them means to part with the confused, “collective” state of non-thought. Contemplating your passing body and thinking of it in a *detached* way fills your “apprenticeship in death”. Fixed eyes condemn, that is, they push until exhaustion and require answers. Ivan Ilyich recognizes himself - to the extent he is able to do it - only in the moment when he submits

himself to this condemnation, the moment when he is *compelled* to *willingly* bring the shadows of death to light.

*

The “*comme il faut*” life of Ivan Ilyich does not foresee death. Abraham or any other peasant died when he was “old and had enough of life” (see Max Weber, *Sociological Essays*), because he was part of an organic cycle of life and death. The civilised man places himself in an infinite progress; none of the periods of his life dominated by knowledge is the last and definitive; there is always another step to take. Even in case of a mediocre *progress* limited by habits and prejudices - as in the case of Ivan Ilyich - death is meaningless; it simply appears to be “without any sense.” Agony is fertile in the existential order. The great fear looks for relief in diverse attitudes. Ivan Ilyich begins *to be* only now when he is on his way to cease *to be*. Burials made him happy other times, because death looked always upon “Caius”. Sickness and death can be confronted with the thought of unanimity nourished by the vanity of knowing that “It is all the same for them. But they will also die. Fools!” The wisdom acquired this way is soon dispelled when the signs of his illness compel him to face death overtly. “The fools”, those who are still innocent, obscure death; therefore the dying, experiences an atrocious loneliness. The only reality is that of the *ugly* and *horrible* death, the impossibility of avoiding it. Returning to childhood is the return to previous ignorance, when the “stone-fall to death” did not begin yet, not on the level of the conscious, at least. Death as a natural law (“stone-fall”) refers to the fact that finitude is natural; it is implacable because it does not succumb to the jurisdiction of the civilised man who has recently become master of his own deeds. It modifies the perspective on the meaning of life of he who is only *tired* of life, but never *satiated*. Everything seems to be an “immense, horrible delusion”. Ivan Ilyich lived according to deceptive norms. The quantity of accumulated “decency” is useless and unredeeming. There should have been another scale of values, a *qualitative* selection which

would make the “passing shadow” (*Macbeth*) consistent. In the moment of his death Ivan Ilyich ascertains with relief: “It is over. (...) Death does not exist any more.” (Feurbach says that “Death is the death of death.” Only the feeling of death *exists*.) Death means agony, pre-death. Fear is not aroused by the *state of being dead*, but the very moment of passing *beyond*. When serious illness makes it foreseeable, fear is almost unbearable. The moment of fear is the only way to “experience” mortality. Both “innocent” life and death are deserts. Cioran’s opinion is that Ivan Ilyich teaches us that “real life begins and ends with agony”.

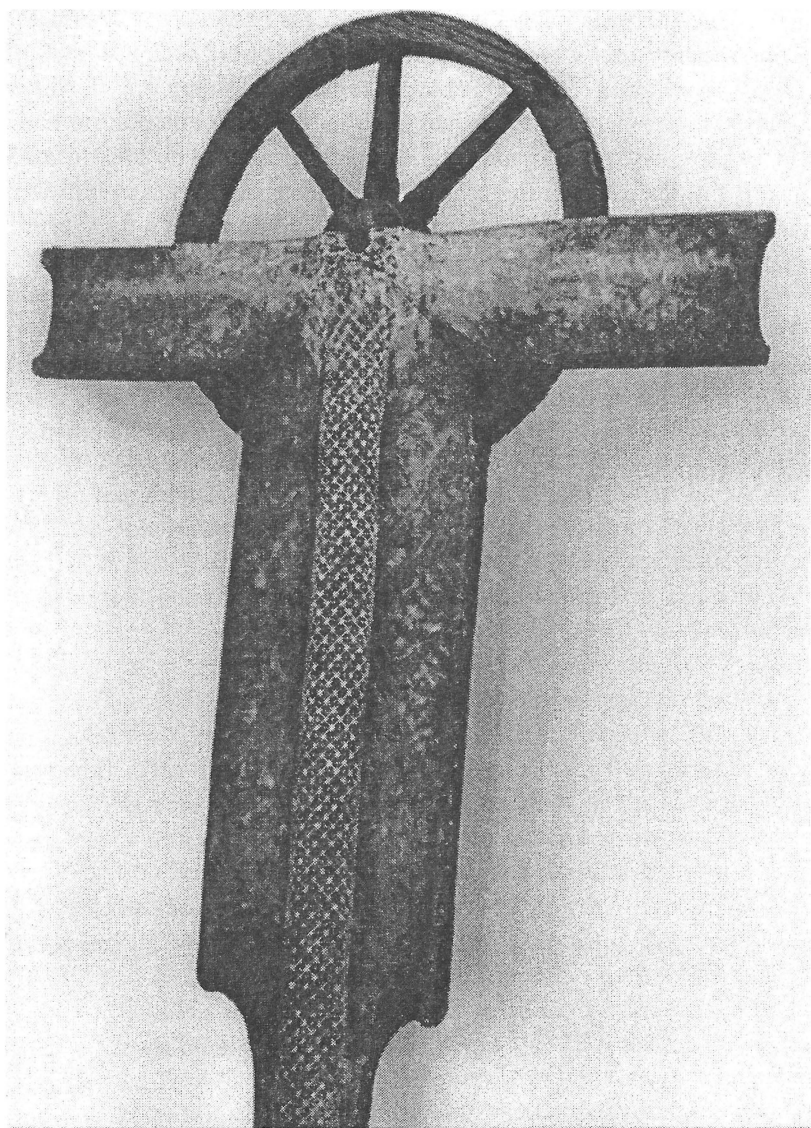
Înainte de moarte (Before Death), a short story written by Marin Preda¹, deals with the oscillation between terrible uncertainty and the fear of certainty concerning the moment of death. Stancu Stăncilă is dying, like Ivan Ilyich. As a member of a dying species he knows he will die. It is no news for him that all the people from the village will die. It is the pain he feels that transfers collective death into the narrow and uncomfortable space of individual death. The answer of the doctor is his last refuge, just as for Ivan Ilyich. Stancu Stăncilă wants to know if he still lives - he answers himself that he “is dying”, but, as he is still member of a community and relates to a tradition, he is eager to know the moment of his death so that he can “be prepared”. He hopes that the scene he is playing has exorcising power. He thinks that accepting death and not being surprised by it can keep it at a distance: “dying” can be a “long wait”. It might even be *life* itself. Therefore he insists: “Why is it so hard to tell me ‘Look, that will be the moment when you have to prepare yourself and then it’s over!’?” When his pseudo-exorcism fails - the doctor tells him that he will die before autumn - Stancu Stăncilă violently reclaims his right to the *hora incerta*, betraying that he is “unwise” face to face with his own death: “How do you know? (...) In the name of God, how do you know... How, how?” He retrieves, in fact, the uniqueness and the secret nature of his destiny. He thinks that he alone can feel,

¹ The subject of death in Marin Preda’s writings is analysed in a subtle way by Mircea Zăciu, in *Commentatio Mortis* (see *Clasici și contemporani*, EDP, Colecția Akademos, 1994)

in privileged conditions, his death. The access of the other, a stranger, to a private mystery which is inaccessible to himself, is unacceptable.

Ivan Ilyich and Stancu Stăncilă represent completely different worlds. The former, the townsman, is alienated from nature; he is the man in progress (even if minor and old-fashioned) who has invented responsibilities towards the others. The fear of death makes him wish that others recognise his state as they are also victims of a mendacious ritual of obscuring shameful death. Stancu Stăncilă, who is more close to nature, is angry because others recognise his state. The encounter with death should be lonely and discreet as are all natural acts. Therefore all the characters of Marin Preda repeat the gesture of turning their backs to the world in the moment of death. This is a sign that they are no more present, perhaps even a hope that death itself will not find them.

*



Shirt for Horia,

Marcel MUNTEANU

“The individual opposes death: by this gesture he refuses the end of nature which can be clearly read in decomposition; his supernaturalism which looks for an escape, also proves this rejection of nature. He pretends to be an angel, but his body is of an animal; it putrefies and disintegrates like that of any other animal... He is a man and therefore unadapted to nature within himself; he dominates it but is also dominated by it. This *nature* is the human species, which, just as the other species, lives by the death of individuals: this reveals not only the lack of an exterior, a general adaptation of man to nature but also a lack of intimate adaptation of the human individual to his own species.” (Edgar Morin)

Man is surprised by death because the knowledge of death is not innate as it appears to be with other creatures, and society does not deal with preparing him for death. Prosperity, success and progress are all defined by hiding the finitude. “The disinherited of nature”, as E. Morin says, is born completely unprepared for life. He has to learn what is specific to man (language, social behaviour) and also that which is innate to other animals (walking, swimming, breeding, etc.) He is unprepared, but, fortunately from the point of view of his perspectives, also undetermined, open to any experience, ready for any form of “forgetting death”. Man’s reconciliation with nature within him would only be possible if there was a reform prescribing the enlightenment of death as a condition of fulfilment as an individual. “Learning to die” could perhaps be the slogan of the future.

*

“The bitter, wordly, egotistic wailing about the disadvantages of old age” - a decayed form of *memento mori* identified by Huizinga in the “decline of the Middle Ages” - corresponds to the non-wailing of the “consumer” of our days, which is similarly “bitter, worldly, egotistic” in its obstinate blindness. The macabre involvement in a

subject which can not be ignored has been an emotional answer to the fear of death, just as the “spectacle” of violent, accidental death proliferates today alarmingly with a similar, but opposite substratum. The hysterical emotion of the Middle Ages is repeated reversely by the simplified and merciless non-emotion displayed on TV or on the street.

*

Emmanuel Lévinas (*La Mort et le Temps*) considers human life *decency*, a “disguise of physiological movements”. It is hiding and covering, but also uncovering, given the association, the relation which it presupposes. The gestures of the others are decipherable signs which enable the relation, that is, life. As long as the others have a face, they will depend on me. We all survive on account of a “conspiracy”. We know pre-ontologically what *to be* means and accept the meaning of this verb along with the questions, problems and secrets linked to it.

Death, which “cuts off” the relation, seems to us indecent. It no more hides the absence but shouts it out with the impenetrable silence of the mask by which the face is replaced. This “unanswering” of death is responsible for all cultural scenarios referring to mortality. As the “unanswering” is unbearable and generates fear it must be “hushed up”. (When my daughter was a few months old and got a doll, she experienced prematurely this fear. The doll near her seemed to have the “decency of life”. The delighted babbling of the child interrupted, there was fear in her eyes - the immobility of the doll could no longer be ignored. Her sobbing which followed the experience of the “unanswering” was the expression of the prevailing fear of man banished and expelled from a *relation* meant to justify existence. The anxiety which is more and more generalised today, in the epoch of the void, is not far from the “indecent” reification of the human being.)

*

The moment of death (“l’instant du décès”) or “the Point of Death” ceased to be “punctual”. It can no more be identified with certainty (which was undermined, otherwise, by the fear that the dead, angry from one reason or another, could return to disturb the peace of the living - the main aim, even if unadmitted, of the complicated rituals was the comfort of the living, not the dead, the reconciliation of the living with the unfulfilment of their relation to the dead.) The Romanian language speaks about the “hour of death”, suggesting in advance that death is not punctual. The biological science of our days considers death a process, not an event. Although, the halt of which vital function marks the ensuing of death is not yet clear, it is known, for example, that three hours after the heartbeat stops, the retina still reacts to pilocarpine, the skin is still alive for 24 hours, the bone for 48, the arteries for 72. The organism is considered dead as a whole but most of its cells are still alive. Medical technology is able to maintain breathing, heartbeating, nutrition and secretion for a practically unlimited time, though the *brain is dead*.

If we consider the whole of the organism, it is more logical to treat death as a permanent feature of life. The death of cells begins in fact with birth (if not earlier); the disfunction of certain organs is partial death. Even a superficial glance can persuade us that the process of death is as long as life (Saint Augustine already knew that “man dies when he is born”). Death means also the “state of being dead”, which defines the point from where there is no return. The terminology has to be cleared up. If we oversimplify matters we could say that in ordinary peoples’ minds “death” is the point where there is no return, the event of passing from the state of being alive to that of being dead. Death for the “wise” means the very duration of life, the process of the slow and irreversible slide beyond. They do not forget the whole past and also imagine the appearance of the *beyond*, the humanisation of nothing.

George Călinescu defined in *Zgomotul liniștei* (*The Noise of Silence*, paper presented at a conference in Brăila, 1948) the mechanism of the occurrence of events in places where “nothing happens”. The epic elephantiasis blows up the most insignificant details; silence itself becomes noisy in its stubborn resistance of the passing of time. “The moth in the lace” equals cosmic catastrophes, the copious comment upon it puts an end to its anonymity and self-sufficiency.

Nowadays there is a “silence of the noise”. The avalanche of events loses credit. The quantity and shrillness of sensational news immunises the ear of the individual. Everything grows old quickly, falls into monotony and becomes meaningless. Death itself is an accident (we live in the epoch of accidents, says Octavio Paz), an item of news in brief and finally, a *nothing*. The thrill of the intimacy of thinking of death has no place in a world of gadgets and automated mechanisms. The rattling of everyday catastrophes resembles silence. The modern self which is always projected in the exterior, disappears. A third person, an entity takes its place, which is lost in anonymity, in the desperate search for a personal difference. The TV creates the illusion of the *direct* experience of death, concealing the fatally indirect, second-hand nature of this experience; it discourages any attempt to live together with one’s own death, the idea of our end, the simultaneousness of life and death.

*

Death is a *natural* event, just as birth, hunger, thirst and sex are; it is *social* alongside the episodes of human *praxis*; and it is *cultural*, perceived as an *appearance* meant to explain and justify it. Death is not a *event*, in fact. It accompanies the being from the first moment of its embrionic life as a basic feature, therefore it is rather a *process*, whereas the grave as a cultural act, is a *maieutics*. Taking refuge in the *moment* of death, the mark of mortality which is imprinted on the being from the beginning, is ignored. Isolating death within the space of events is a way to exorcise it. As Freud observed, the insistence on

the occasional, accidental character of death overshadows the necessity and intrinsic nature of it. Breaking the verbal taboo is insufficient. We talk easily and openly about the most violent forms of death; the TV and newspapers display it with an almost suspicious greed, when the clear and lucid conscience of mortality is not favoured. The haste in asking “why did he die?” when we hear the news of a demise proves our incapacity of realising our destiny.

The idea that man “dies because he is alive” is unacceptable and even inaccessible to the modern consumer, the reified “immortal”. It is not the subconscious that claims immortality as a consequence of the disharmony between the passing body and the spirit which is able to think about eternity and to work for it through culture. The “immortal” of the end of the millenium silenced the voices within him (or they were silenced). Manipulated by the ideology of semblance (see Jean Baudrillard) he wears only masks, one upon the other, in the more and more serious absence of an ontic support. He is a simple Consumer, a slave of his appetite. The lesson of Horace - “Every day you must think that this is your last day, and you will be grateful for the day you did not hope for” (Epistles, I) - cannot win him over.

*

The *neutrino* is a particle which *passes* (“On ne demeure qu’en passant” - Stanislas Breton) through the whole universe but you can see only its *traces*; the masks, appearances and “embodiments”, that is. The invisible man reveals himself by masking himself. Emptiness is his safest hiding-place. The neutrino would be dead without its *traces*. Just as death, which passes everywhere but never “shows” itself for anybody. When everything is revealed, there is nobody to “see” it. Second-hand experience surpasses the importance of all direct experiences, because the latter *are given* for anybody, whereas the former requires interpretation, competence, “fixed glance”.

Otherwise, you die anyway, but not by *your* death. Death, similar to the text (in Umberto Eco’s view) is a *lazy mechanism* which “lives”

on the surplus of meaning attributed to it by the addressee. Without the text (death), everything is silent.

*

Freud says (in *Civilisation and Its Discontents*) that man suffers because of his own body, destined to decay and decomposition, which sends its destructive signs by pain and anguish; secondly, because of the exterior world which was not formed for man and is full of invincible forces, which can be annihilating, and thirdly, because of society, the others. The individual who is so much threatened, looks for his happiness (often synonymous with the absence of a too great unhappiness) by means of self-delusion. The game of adaptation and selection characteristic to the normal individual is hindered by these delusions which mean "leaving the game", "the battle of life". Alongside drugs and psychosis, the most desperate forms of self-delusion, there is also religion, comfortable, lasting and "injurious" which itself means to renounce the facing of the sufferings inherent to life. Religion imposes its own way of achieving happiness and immunity to suffering; its technique "consists of lowering the value of life and deforming in a frenzied manner the image of the real world, which presupposes the intimidation of intelligence. Compelling its adepts to psychic infantilism and forcing them to share a mass delirium, religion can free many people from an individual neurosis, but nothing more. As we have seen, there are many ways which lead to happiness or those forms of it which are accessible to people, but neither of them is absolutely certain. Religion itself might not keep its promise. When the believer invokes the 'unsuspected ways of God' he implicitly proves that nothing was left to him but submitting himself unconditionally to suffering; this is his last and only comfort and happiness. And if he can do this, doubtless he could have done it without this subterfuge."

Drugs, psychosis and religion means wriggling out of responsibility. Face to face with the "unanswering" death, life should be the answer. Any delay in answering or assuming responsibility

affects the completeness of life. It does not affect its comfort, although absence - any subterfuge is an absence - can hardly be considered comforting. When your whole self is missing, nobody can realise the (good or bad) quality of your state.

Nobody can *answer* on my behalf without “diminishing” me. Not even Christ.

*

Collective imagination resorts to feminine embodiments when describing death. This might be the consequence of the fact that life and death are always felt to be feminine. All that gives birth is feminine, therefore taking away life must also belong to that “sphere”. The woman was satanised by the agency of the Church. This might also be an explanation. Death, Evil *par excellence* is surely feminine. In such a misogynist perspective they stand for the Female.

Romanian folklore adds a piece of compassion to this portrait. Death often appears as an old woman who tries hard to fulfil her duty. The belief in the power of life is so strong that taking away one’s life becomes a difficult task; it is viewed with sympathy, dismissing the aim of this tiring work. Doing and un-doing are both human “jobs”. Therefore the “householder” in Creangă’s short story does not hesitate to haggle with Death itself; she is also a poor peasant, has the same troubles and is just as cunning as he is. In this view, death is part of the everyday scheme (which is rooted in eternity). It is not “tamed”, as in the case of primitive societies, but it is *intravital*, in a new, unconfirmed way.

*

The truth that the dead exist only because the living can invoke them, is sometimes embarrassing. As there is no clear and fixed “standard” to the “mourning for the dead” (the community judges you, the survivor, by the pain you *show*), there is a “shift of responsibility” to the dead (“It is very hard for the dead when you

mourn for them”) for the comfort of the living (who are survivors in their turn, too). This reference is an excuse, an exoneration which will probably be accepted by the community. Every community that has lost one of its members is suffering, and the imagined remedies function as in the case of psychic diseases. Obscurely “guilty” for the death of their fellow, the members of the community accept psychiatric “subterfuges” unconditionally and with good faith, calling on self-induced motivations. Their mourning ceases, not because the pain is not made to measure the loss, but because the tears prevent the dead to pass quickly *beyond*, to find peace, as some traditional folklore tells it. The *relation* continues even after death. We need the *other’s* consent, even if it is imaginary.

*

“Death comes only once, but you can feel it in every moment of your life. It is more difficult to understand it, than to endure it.” (La Bruyère)