

**1000 Pages Later. The Historian and Death: a Confusing Equation<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The present article proposes to analyze the relationship between history/the historian and death. Starting with the evident increase in the number of articles, books and historical research on death, one could ask whether this relationship exists, whether this relationship is different in the context of other sciences analyzing death and dying. Thus, a series of possible correlations based on the idea that history could not exist without the event of death are surveyed with direct references to ideas formulated by Paul Ricouer, Jacques Derrida or Michel de Certeau. Later on we shall refer to the historiography of death and the critiques of this (especially the works of Philippe Ariès). The present discussion repeats a series of aspects comprised by an article by Antoon de Baets referring to the historians' responsibility towards the past generations (these in the quality of deceased persons). A series of concepts such as *death education* and its impact on history, and the particular relationship between the historian, as a person/researcher, and death, as the main object of his analyses are also analyzed. Consequently, the confusing equation of the analyzed relationship is emphasized. This is dictated by the cohabitation of death and history as becoming and science, and, on the other hand, by the impossibility of comprising it completely in a single analysis of this type.

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<sup>1</sup> In memory of the late John D. Morgan (Canada) with gratitude for the help and encouragement he gave me several years ago to continue to analyze death as a historian. 1000 pages years later refers to my doctoral dissertation dedicated to the analysis of death in Transylvania in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the first synthesis dedicated to this subject in Romanian historiography –, a thesis published in two volumes, with almost 1000 pages.

*“To consider death as an incident,  
while in reality it is something  
immense”*

Cesare Pavese (1907–1950)

*“Revenge... is the best meal served cold”*  
Kataklysm, *In the Arms of Devastation* (2006)

### **1. Regarding a word which does not exist in Romanian and cannot be translated into other languages**

Tudor Octavian, the writer who has a column in the third page of the daily newspaper, *Jurnalul Național* (National Journal), underlined a reality referring to death which I am going to quote from memory. On the occasion of a book fair organized in Bucharest this year a large number of products on death were offered for sale. In his opinion, such a situation appeared as if people or some educated people had arrogantly told God: *“Old fellow, we think we have solved your enigma!”* Naturally, Tudor Octavian is not a historian and therefore he could not have known the fact that interest in this domain is considerably increasing in contemporary Romanian historiography too. However, his observation, beyond its evident irony, is worthy of mentioning. It characterizes in general the reality of the phenomena: there are many writings on death in our country too, which without discussion raises the question whether there is or there is not a taboo regarding the event of death and the phenomenon of dying in the present.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, historical research on death is not a novelty either in occidental historiography or in Romania. But in the latter case the situation is quite peculiar. Almost non-existent before 1989 and not because of some ideological commandments, but rather to a *thematic conformism*, such investigations have been regarded as exotic and “unserious” after 1989. Moreover, such academic observations have put the person interested in such a domain in an unpleasant position. He had to justify his choice of subject many times, which did not happen in the case of other subjects. And such a situation was disturbing since it was, after all, a more or less assumed attempt to discourage such investigations. Despite the fact that recently there has been a considerable increase in the domain, the old “treatment” allotted to

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Walter, “Modern Death: Taboo or not Taboo?”, in: *Sociology*, 25, 2, 1991, pp. 292–301.

researchers keen on this subject did not disappear, rather it was transformed. It became a special type of mockery, inventing words, “congratulations” and epithets meant to provoke “academic” smiles. We refer to “mortologie” (deathology) and “mortologi” (deathologists), words which do not even exist in the Romanian language, nevertheless they are sufficient for a specific type of slander, or, in this case, for treatment and verdict alike. However, the situation denotes another reality: by referring to such congratulations those who have neither the capacity nor the interest to understand the relevance of these preoccupations indirectly recognize the ascension of this domain in Romanian historiography. But, at this point, we must mention one of the defining aspects of the present day Romanian historiography on death: *the quantitative increase of the studies in the domain does not necessarily mean a qualitative increase*. This aspect warns all those who in a way or other are impassioned of this subject to be prudent and modest.

On the other hand, the interest in this field in other historiographic areas can be demonstrated by introducing another relevant segment, beyond the considerable amount of books and studies published in the domain: the introduction of the subject into the syllabus of different occidental universities, implying evidently another stage in its evolution, namely its institutionalization as a discipline. Thus, at least two published articles describing this experience, including the students’ reactions regarding this theme, are extremely relevant for the present discussion. These studies show how opportune these innovations are and how this can be introduced, omitting from the essence of the equation the exoticism of the theme.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. History/historian – death?**

This entire situation generates, in the present case, a simple reflection on the domain: is there some kind of special relationship between the historian, as an analyst and the representative of a branch of science, on the one hand, and death, as a moment, on the other hand?

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Stroud, “Reflections from Six Feet under the Field: Dead Bodies in the Classroom”, in *Environmental History*, 8, 4, 2003, pp. 618–627; Laura Cruz, “Morbid Fascination: Teaching the History of Death”, in *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 9, 2, 2005, pp. 115–119. In the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj Napoca, Professor Toader Nicoară has been conducting a special course and seminar entitled *Death and Attitudes towards Death in the Modern Age* for several years in the Department of History.

How could this relationship be explained? Which would be the aspects it consists of? All these questions, though seemingly insignificant, become important when related to the profile of contemporaneity and to the proper nature of history as a profession. Of course, it would be unnecessary to discuss the evident relationship between death and other sciences, such as philosophy, medicine, psychology, sociology etc. These relationships are far more visible and can be more easily maintained. The cases of philosophy and medicine seem to be from the beginning the clearest in the domain. In the first case we speak about probably the oldest image of philosophy, as the discipline which directly deals with the investigation and attempted explanation of death.<sup>1</sup> In the second case we emphasize one aspect of contemporaneity: **the medicalization of death**. The latter has been a long process<sup>2</sup> and it has had an essential impact on the actual world view.<sup>3</sup> But the issue of the medicalization of death can be easily understood by referring to the actual model of good death. This can only originate therefore from the medical model, which evidently imposes special attitudes towards death. Nevertheless, in the particular case of history or of the historian, things seem to be more difficult to question, due to the multiple explicative ramifications which may occur. Moreover, such a discussion is subjected to speculation, evidently able to swerve both the direction of the discussion and its meaning.

On the other hand, the relationship between the different sciences and death, dictated by their nature and implicitly their interests

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible to define a history of philosophy which has dealt with the issue of death more or less intensively.

<sup>2</sup> Medicalization is a concept which appeared in the scientific literature in the '70's. It describes a process through which everyday life came under medical domination and supervision. Medicalization means to define a problem in medical terms, using the medical language for description, to adopt a medical framework for understanding it and to use medical intervention to solve it. As a phenomenon, medicalization can be related to two characteristic events of the modern societies: secularization and, on the other hand, the transformation of the medical profession's status. Peter Conrad, "Medicalization and Social Control", in *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18, 1992, pp. 209–215.

<sup>3</sup> The main events of life (birth, sexuality, menstruation, menopause, old age, death) and deviant behaviour (madness, alcoholism, homosexuality, transsexuality, child abuse etc.) have been medicalized. But while in some cases medicalization is total (birth, death), in other the process has been realized only partially or minimally (menopause or sexual dependence). *Ibid.*, p. 212.

and relevance in society, determines, after all, the character of the existent relationships.

The ideas or the reflections regarding the problem of history/the historian and death have not been analyzed separately up to this time. Only some of its characteristics have been recorded, constituting a field with some essential reference points, as sense and opening. These reference points often stated that the modality of including death into the historian's preoccupations is only a pretext for a historiographic analysis in this domain, in which the realizations, failures and perspectives of the domain are surveyed.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, such directions seldom tried to reach the core of the problem, and did not formulate the fundamental interrogation-explanation of the equation.

At the same time, it can be observed that even the domains of a science can ramify when we speak about death. In the particular case of history, as it has been underlined, the research in this domain has been increased by the interdisciplinary context. Thus, the direct and indirect contacts between death and a history interested in anthropological, archaeological, artistic, architectural, theological, legal or medical issues as well are important episodes. All these fields of study increased the appetite of history, as a science for additional or specific views focused on dying and death.<sup>2</sup> Here, the idea of rediscovering death after 1960, formulated by Michel Vovelle,<sup>3</sup> is important, though, it seems that, from the point of view of the interpretation, the French historian went too far.

In my opinion, the relationship between history/the historian and death is a special one, though it does not reach the same amplitude as philosophy in this domain. From the beginning we must emphasize that death as a subject for historical research would be only one of the themes that can be discussed. It has considerably progressed since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the influence of the models offered by the *Annales* School in its third stage (besides the parallel developments in the Anglo-Saxon area) being fundamental. On the other hand, to write about death, from a historical point of view, implies a *double risk*. Firstly, there

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<sup>1</sup> See for the case of Romanian historiography Toader Nicoară's recently published study, "Istoricul și moartea. Un itinerar" (The Historian and Death. An itinerary), in *Caietele de Antropologie Istorică* (Bulletin of Historical Anthropology), 5–6, III, pp. 6–12.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction, in *Death in England. An Illustrated History*, Peter C. Jupp and Claire Gittings (eds.), Manchester University Press, pp. 2–3.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Vovelle, "Rediscovery of Death since 1960", in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 447, pp. 89–99.

is the danger of being “totally” fascinated by this sensational subject. In this case the investigation can be included in the specific genre of spectacular history, rather than a history emphasizing change and analytical relevance. Therefore, we may say that to investigate this domain is *fashionable*, the signs of this fashion being discernible in present day Romanian historiography too. On the other hand, the other risk refers to the nature of historical investigation, namely that it depends on sources. Despite some groundless opinions which state that a Romanian history of death cannot be written because the sources are too few, the truth is quite the contrary, such a history can be written without any difficulty, the sources being quite numerous. I am not going to present them in detail; I only say that this multitude of sources may seem overwhelming for the historian at a certain point. But, on the other hand, the sources can be characterized as stereotypical – as in the case of funeral sermons, information to be found in the press, in wills etc. –, and this counterbalances the former fact. The discussed themes can be similarly numerous, starting with the meaning of natural death in a certain age, violent death or the correlation of diseases and death, and ending with special themes such as the perception and treatment of corpses or the imaginary of the otherworld. From this perspective, history is investigated by means of the event of death, considered an invariant rather than a reverse action.

Similarly, interesting elements of the present discussion may be revealed by the way in which death as a subject is introduced into historical researches. I am not going to dwell on this problem, pointing only out that such an investigation would illustrate suggestively how the qualitative is re-conquered by the quantitative. Such an equation presupposes a series of extremely stimulating special interrogations, as directions of analysis. Consequently, in Paul Ricoeur’s and Michel de Certeau’s opinion, death may be understood as the silent mediator of historical writing.<sup>1</sup> At the same time the fact must be also underlined that the development of historical studies on death happened concomitantly with the reinvigoration or integration of the theme in other branches of science. For example, it is not a coincidence that the first investigations in the domain by Philippe Ariès were effectuated in parallel with the publication of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s study, *On Death and Dying* in 1969 in the USA. From this perspective, it is worth emphasizing that the reinvigoration of the research on death started in 1956 with the

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Cruz, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

organization of the first interdisciplinary conference in this domain by Herman Feifel, an event which took place without the historians' participation.<sup>1</sup>

Generally, one of the factors supporting the special relationship between the historian and death seems to be the **nature of the historiographic operation** itself. It has the aspect of an ulterior alteration of some historical realities. Thus, such a task constitutes, according to Paul Ricoeur, "the scriptural equivalent of the rite of burying, interring." Therefore, with the risk of a forced interpretation, history may be defined rather as the science of the dead, than a science of the living. Consequently, the history/historian–death relationship seems to be not rudimentary but imperiously defined. Therefore, as a conclusion of the present discussion up to this point, on the coordinates of a counterfactual history, we may say that if **it were not for death, we would not have history**, the future being granted on coordinates differing from the normal ones. Emil Cioran, for example, hinted at such a dilatation stating that history seems only to be the dynamism of victims or of the dead. Such an image was successfully exploited in literature too by José Saramago. He imagined a country where, from a given moment on, none dies, a problem which creates numerous confusing and unpleasant situations.<sup>2</sup>

The demographer Carl Haub's ideas clarify the present discussion at this point. He estimated in an essay that the total number of the people born since the dawn of humanity to the present day would be 106 billion. Out of this 6 billion are living and 100 billion are dead.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, if we group people into these two categories, living and dead, it results that historians and history as a science give the same status to both categories as potential subjects of study. In the same order of ideas, history as a science has an advantage over other sciences regarding the investigation of death: **"historians have a special position, since, as a rule, only they study systematically all the dead in the course of the ages"** (they investigate theoretically all the deceased, both the famous

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<sup>1</sup> Pau Ricoeur, *Memoria, istoria, uitarea* (Memory, History, Forgetting), Translated by Ilie and Margareta Gyuresik, Timișoara, Amacord, 2001, pp. 444–446.

<sup>2</sup> José Saramago, *Intermitențele morții* (The Intermittencies of Death), translated by Georgiana Bărbulescu, Iași, Polirom, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Antoon de Baets, "A Declaration of the Responsibilities of Present Generations toward Past Generations", in *History and Theory*, 43, 2004, p. 130.

ones and the unknown).<sup>1</sup> In comparison, the interest of sociologists, psychologists etc. seems to be limited to a precise segment, temporally speaking.

Theodor W. Adorno's opinions are relevant here. According to him death and history form a constellation, their existence being reciprocally conditioned.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the culture–death relationship, highlighted by Jacques Derrida, reveals its substance. It seems to continue Paul Ricoeur's statement on history, completing the empty spaces of the interrogation: "culture in itself, culture in general is, first of all, even a priori, the culture of death. There is no culture without the cult of the ancestors, without the ritualization of pain and of sacrifice, without institutionalized places and modalities of burial, even if they are only for ashes and incineration. The concept of culture may seem synonymous with culture of death, as if the expression culture of death were a pleonasm or a tautology. But only a redundancy may make legible the cultural differences and the network of frontiers. For each culture implies a treatment of death, each deals with the end in accordance with a different partition."<sup>3</sup> Louis-Vincent Thomas expressed a similar idea too, but in a more detailed manner. This refers to a superstructure and evidently long run constructions: "1. The entire society wants to be immortal and that which is called culture is nothing else than an organized group of beliefs and rites with the aim to fight efficiently against the dissolving power of collective and individual death; 2. Society more than individuals, exists only in and through death. 3. Death becomes one of the most important revealers of societies and civilizations, therefore a means for questioning and criticizing them."<sup>4</sup> Anyway, Derrida, it seems, criticizes Philippe Ariès and Louis-Vincent Thomas, though his critique was much more virulent in the latter's case.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136–137.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton, New York, Routledge, 1973, pp. 361–366.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Apories*, Paris, Galilée, 1996, pp. 56–61.

<sup>4</sup> In original: "Toute société se voudrait immortelle et ce qu'on appelle culture n'est rien d'autre qu'un ensemble organisé de croyances et rites, afin de mieux lutter contre le pouvoir de la mort individuelle et collective. La société, plus encore que l'individu n'existe que dans et par la mort. La mort, du moins l'usage social qui en est fait, devient l'un des grands révélateurs des sociétés et des civilisations, donc le moyen de leur questionnement et de leur critique." Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Mort et pouvoir*, Paris, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1999, pp. 10–12.



His accusation refers to the comparisons used by them, which, for example, introduced African models into the discussion (Louis-Vincent Thomas). These did not suit at all, according to Derrida, the occidental model of dying and death.<sup>1</sup>

At this point the role of history, and in particular of the historian becomes fundamental, for this could transform itself/himself – in dialogue with the representatives of the other sciences – into an “instrument” for developing the core of the problem, namely, the deep structures of the different systems of death. A retrospective look, a thorough analysis would be preferred, this making easier to take into consideration change, continuity, and resistance to modifications in the short run, or – in the ideal case – in the long run. This would rather be a pursued goal, which would put the “craft” of the historian and death as the subject of his investigations in a different light. In fact, the historian can easily deviate from the main line of analytical interrogation. These deviations are due to the difficulty of such an analysis. Thus, in an essay dedicated to the problem of death and war, David Cannadine reached the conclusion that **a history of death, as a writing is as complicated as a history of life**. John McManners seems to have expressed himself more clearly in this domain. He used direct terms, expressing his reserve towards the domain: “La Rochefoucauld’s famous observation: that it impossible to look directly at the sun or at death applies, in a different sense to its original meaning, to the historian, who when he writes about death always turns out to be writing about something else.”<sup>2</sup> The famous English historian of medicine, Roy Porter also observed this situation, positioning the historians’ preoccupations in the domain of death: “But when the historian tries to stare death in the face and penetrate to its essence, pure and simple, the subject vanished before his eyes.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the same English historian considers that death is an extremely difficult subject for historians, for none of them experienced it, and its probable consequences (for example afterlife) cannot be tested. Therefore, the historian rather watches death as a subject of research

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bernasconi, “Whose Death is it anyway? Philosophy and Cultures of Death”,

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/4/bernasconi.html> accessed on November 6, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Apud Neil Small, *Death and Difference*, in David Field, Jennifer Lorna Hockey, Neil Small, *Death, Gender and Ethnicity*, New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> Roy Porter, “Death and the Doctor”, in *Medical History*, 26, 3, 1982, p. 335.

from an oblique angle. Thus, from such a perspective, the history of death would be rather a history of dying or of dying persons, or, more simply, of those who survived the moment of death. To such effect Roy Porter integrated a series of works dedicated to the investigation of death by historians such as Philippe Ariès, John McManners or Joachim Whaley. His conclusion is worthy of mentioning in its full extent since he emphasized the fact that the historians of medicine should be familiar with the interests of the historians of ideas and of those preoccupied by social events.<sup>1</sup>

History as a science can also be perceived in the terms of a commemoration or as the image of a present which becomes past, leaving its traces for the future.

In Michel Vovelle's opinion death is a term which a historian must ineluctably face. This affirmation can be explained by the fact that death, as an invariant, unceasingly changes its exposition and meaning. Thus, it becomes an essential test for evaluating people's attitude, behaviour and collective representations. Consequently, death proves an immutable truth through which man discovers himself, creating a reflex meant to conceive and understand life. Despite this fact the human being loses himself in the problem – he reduces death to its biological coordinates or to the level of an inevitable passing. According to Michel Vovelle, death as an invariant becomes “a constant test of collective sensibilities”, but this test is ambiguous, since death, being a “compulsory passing”, permanently causes deflections, cheats or appearances through which it reveals itself.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between history and death is described in direct terms and in the particular conditions of some actual analyses. We are referring here to the concrete situation when, in a certain historic period or even event, the crude reality of death is much above the usual average. We are not speaking only about the periods of war, we are referring mainly to the concept of *necropolitics*, happily devised as an explanation by a South-African researcher.<sup>3</sup> Being the reverse of biopolitics, *necropolitics* is a concept which regards life as a negative value, dangerous for the political order which therefore must be eliminated. More simply, *necropolitics* means the use of death as a

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 341.

<sup>2</sup> La mort dans l'histoire. Entretien avec Michel Vovelle, in Serge Bureau, *Aujourd'hui, la Mort*, Quebec, Radio Canada, Chaîne culturelle FM, 1996, pp. 10–12.

<sup>3</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, in *Public Culture*, 15, 1, 2003, pp. 11–40.

weapon by the political management, manifested in extreme forms such as racism, the colonial system (considered to be the roots of *necropolitics*), the Holocaust or genocide (some forms referring inclusively to the totalitarian communist systems). In the case of such a “criminal” state<sup>1</sup> the historian must consider death not only as the silent mediator of history, but rather the result, the blackmail object and main aim of the State or the Political Power.

At the same time, the whole discussion regarding the relationship between history and death raises another question: the problem of time. The classical definition of history given by Marc Bloch – the science of men in time<sup>2</sup> – delimits the problem. Nevertheless, this becomes ambiguous if we refer to the meaning of time, of the relationship between death and time outlined in philosophical reflections. Therefore, if the idea of death negates the idea of future, such an idea of future can be obtained through an act of collective imagination, a point where the historical narration is important. Consequently, the “construction” of death is parallel with the construction of time, and, implicitly, with that of history.<sup>3</sup>

### **3. Philippe Ariès or how to write or not to write a history of death**

We should also mention in our discussion the critique of the historical research investigating death and dying in the course of time. Besides criticism originating from the interior of the historians’ guild, there are also external critiques. The case of Philippe Ariès’ famous works seems to be the most relevant and best known in this domain. For the first category we can mention Lawrence Stone’s and Thomas Kselman’s critiques. According to British historian Lawrence Stone the parameters used by Ariès are too vague to delimit the changes that occurred in the course of time. These parameters are interconnected and therefore the French historian gives even less attention to long term

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<sup>1</sup> Yves Ternon, *Statul criminal. Genocidurile secolului XX* (The Criminal State. The Genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), translated by Ovidiu Pecican, Liliana Popovici, Iulian Doboși, edited and introduced by Ovidiu Pecican, Iași, Institutul European, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft. Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of Men who write it*, translation and introduction by Joseph R. Strager, New York, 1952, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Idea formulated by Zygmunt Bauman which echoes inclusively in Benedict Anderson’s work. See Paolo Palladino, “Caveat Emptor: On Time, Death and History in the Late Modernity”, in *Rethinking History*, 8, 3, 2004, pp. 403–416.

changes. Moreover, the demographic evolution, as a support for the attitudes towards death, is neglected, as well as the importance of the social factors. Some ignored aspects of the Renaissance and Enlightenment (deism, atheism) and the neglected popular beliefs referring to death and corpses should have been taken into consideration as well, and the treatment of culture as a unique variable also requires amendments. Moreover, the medicalization of death criticized by Ariès would be based on a false romanticism regarding the golden age recorded in the past at the level of family life. Similarly, the medicalization of death was not determined by the doctors' ambitions, but by a general consensus.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand Thomas Kselman analyzes Philippe Ariès' and Michel Vovelle's works and opinions in parallel. He observes therefore a clearer conceptualization of the research object and a better verification of the data in the latter's case.<sup>2</sup> Among external critiques the opinions expressed by Norbert Elias, Pierre-Philippe Druet or C. W. M. Verhoven are remarkable. The analysis made by Norbert Elias presents Ariès' contributions as being stimulating, but liable to criticism. Thus, the French historian selected the facts subjectively, based on a preconceived idea: in former ages people died in peace and calmly. Consequently, Ariès understands history as a simple description and therefore he is incapable of showing the changes correctly.<sup>3</sup> The Dutch C. W. M. Verhoven also formulated an acute criticism. He distinguished between the models of narrated death (existent in literature), thought death (philosophy) and real death. In this way, the mistake committed by Ariès was to superpose and interchange these three models.<sup>4</sup>

The criticism formulated by Pierre-Philippe Druet appears much better positioned. He analyzed the French and Anglo-Saxon thanatological literature. His great merit is that he regarded Ariès' ideas in a wider context, making reference to studies in medicine, sociology or anthropology. Thus, Ariès' work is placed beside writings signed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Jean Ziegler, Edgar Morin, Louis-Vincent

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited*, London and New York, Routledge & Kegan, 1987, pp. 399–410.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kselman, "Death in Historical Perspective", in *Sociological Forum*, 2, 3, 1987, pp. 591–597.

<sup>3</sup> Norbert Elias, *La solitude des mourants*, traduit de l'allemand par Sibylle Muller, suivi de *Vieillir des mourants. Quelques problèmes sociologiques*, traduit de l'anglais par Claire Nancy, Paris, Collections Detrois, 1998, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Apud Wim Dekkers, "What Do We Call Death? Some Reflection on the End of Life in Western Culture", in *Ethical Perspectives*, 2, 3, (1995), p. 192.

Thomas, etc., each of them illustrating the development of the scientific interest in death in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Medicine was represented by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, according to whom the refusal of death counterbalances the anxiety of death. The sociological approach dilated by Jean Ziegler was opposed to methodological and psychological individualism, explaining death in the terms of alienation and class struggle (a Marxist view, otherwise). Druet placed the socio-historical analyses carried out by Philippe Ariès, Edgar Morin and Louis-Vincent Thomas between these two extremes. They were characterized by the fact that their analyses presented individualism, actually, as a main explicative factor. Therefore, in Ariès' case, we speak about nostalgias, in Edgar Morin's about lyrical pan-scientism, and Louis-Vincent Thomas' writings were in fact, according to Druet, some heterogeneous compilations. Thus, according to Pierre-Philippe Druet progressive or regressive individualism cannot serve as a necessary explanation for death these days.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the equation can be set up inversely as well, namely by presenting the historians' critical evaluations regarding the investigations of death and dying realized by other sciences. This criticism would mainly object the exclusion of historical aspects from some particular sociological research. Thus, without this dimension the discussion of some concrete cases of death cannot be complete. We are referring to delicate subjects such as suicide or human incinerations and crematories in the modern age.

At the same time, Heidegger's philosophical system, for example, can be put on historical coordinates, which leads to surprising questions and conclusions. It is what Christopher Ellis has done in a recently published article, contrasting the Heideggerian "philosophy" of death with Philippe Ariès' famous scheme presenting the evolution of the attitude towards death in a period longer than 1000 years. His conclusion showed unequivocally that out of the four times/attitudes established by the French historian only two would fit into Heidegger's schemes. We refer to the models of "one's own death" and that of "forbidden death", corresponding to the models of confrontation with and escape from death in the Heideggerian philosophy. The two other times of Philippe Ariès' analysis, namely tamed death and the death of the other do not fit into Heidegger's system. Thus, the model of the other's death would not fit,

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre-Philippe Druet, *Pour vivre sa mort. Ars moriendi*, Paris, Editions Lethielleux, 1981, pp. 149–161.

taking into consideration that in Heidegger's work this would be of secondary importance. In the second case the incompatibility occurs in the Heideggerian equation of anxiety and being-towards-death.<sup>1</sup>

Some changes have occurred since Michel Vovelle or Philippe Ariès wrote their famous works. This is what the French sociologist Patrick Baudry observed analyzing the thanatological literature of 1970s and 1980s comparing it with the present one. In the former period thanatological discourse would have been characterized, in his opinion, by its equally critical and contestant character. Consequently, at that time death was defined and investigated as a taboo of western societies, and moreover there was some kind of "return" towards archaic societies, which pointed out a lost naturalness. The behaviour in the face of death in the past was perceived as a kind of "golden age" from the point of view of the outlined attitudes. Therefore, the conclusion drawn with reference to that age indicated the negation of death by the western society, considered as self negation. This idea appeared irrespective of the adopted denominations: thanatophobe and murderous society (Louis-Vincent Thomas), cannibalistic and thanatocratic society (Jean Ziegler) or the concept of wild death (Philippe Ariès). The conclusion was evident, according to Patrick Baudry, however, in my opinion, it is slightly forced: in conformity with the refusal of death, but satisfying its appetite for exoticism and curiosity with the sensational aspect of death, such a society admitted only a small scientific community to make serious researches in this domain. In comparison, according to Baudry, present day thanatological literature tries to apply the view of controlled emotions and reactions before death. Such a sense is based on an individual logic, trying to ensure, by means of a medical and psychological discourse, an optimal handling of death, so that the passage into eternity should be an intimate business and as little terrifying as possible. Summing up the two moments, Patrick Baudry penetrated to the core of things: "The anthropological and historical discourse was critical and disturbing. The 'specialized' discourse has become conformist and ordered."<sup>2</sup> The French sociologist based his affirmation on the success of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' theories, but he

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ellis, "Static and Genetic Phenomenology of Death", in *Contretemps*, May 2, 2001, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> In original: "Le discours anthropologique ou historique était critique et dérangeant. Le discours 'spécialiste' est devenu conforme et arrangeant." Patrick Baudry, *Le place des morts. Enjeux et rites*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1999, pp. 19–23.

ignored the fact that this was not a recent “achievement”. Moreover, Patrick Baudry did not take into consideration that the development of the anthropological and historical investigations of death in the ‘70s and ‘80s happened in parallel with similar developments in the domain of psychology or medicine (see the success of the *hospice* services and of *palliative care*).

If we accept the idea of the importance of death in history and of the special status of the deceased in history, the issue of the historians’ responsibility towards them appears. Such a problem seems to be surprising, but it is, for example, the object of an extremely serious analysis undertaken by the Dutch historian Antoon de Baets. In an article published in *History and Theory* in 2004, he seriously raised this question and attempted to offer clarifying answers. Thus, Baets made surprising interrogations, for example: what does a deceased person represent and whether such a person has any rights, aspects passed through the filter of the historian’s craft. Moreover, he resorts to surprisingly well chosen sources for his demonstration, such as the *Declaration of Human Rights*. Thus he formulated a *Declaration of the Responsibilities of Present Generations towards Past Generations* consisting of several articles and based on a series of parameters. But the starting idea is the sensibility of deceased persons who have no rights and responsibilities, which fall to the living. Such an idea was based on 5 points in Baets’ opinion: deceased persons have a special status among human beings and among different things; they preserve some human and personal directions after their passing (aspect connected to their lack of defence and vulnerability, plus their need for protection); the interests, preoccupations, declarations can be extended beyond life; the mutual network of rights and responsibilities does not cease to operate at the moment of death (personal legacy continuing the relationships after death). Finally, the last one of these points shows that humanity is a whole. Therefore, the dead and the living are two groups sufficiently similar to “talk” to them as members of the same community. Consequently, the dead have dignity and therefore they deserve respect and protection, an issue serving as a credible basis for the responsibility assumed by the living towards them. Such responsibilities are passive and negative, active and positive (some favouring refrain, others intervention); they are moral and legal, universal and not specific. On the other hand, the groups representing the deceased have at least three sets of problems to deal with when they establish their protective strategies:

1. who has the right to represent them? (the answer: the historians,

mainly); 2. there is the risk of misinterpreting the wishes of the deceased; 3. the theme of memory abuse, where historians are more conscious of the risks than the other groups.<sup>1</sup> In such a milieu formulated Baets the *Declaration* which has four parameters; the body, personality, general responsibilities and adjacent rights. The *Declaration* phrases precise responsibilities such as the necessity of inhumation and incineration (according to the deceased person's will), the right to memory, to the correct analysis of the acts and wills expressed in the course of one's life and finally the necessity to protect the dignity of the dead, which is a condition of the historian's profession.<sup>2</sup>

Another problem in the relationship between history/historian and death is its adaptation to the domain of the so called *death education*. In fact, this is not an adaptaion, but rather an integration. Present in Philippe Ariès' works, but in a slightly exaggerated formulation, *death education* implicitly presupposes a reference to history, as a modality of understanding its evolution and purpose. Having its own history, where existentialism as a philosophical current represented probably the most important impulse,<sup>3</sup> *death education* always implies a resort to history. For example, some of the "classic" aims of this direction seem to correspond exactly to the historical direction of reflection and behaviour before the ultimate future.

#### **4. In first person singular**

At a personal level, however, things seem to change, becoming more complicated. We refer to the relationship between the historian as a person/researcher and death as a branch of his scientific preoccupations. Resorting to reflections on death, originating from other senses than those characteristic to the science of history, is essential, since, at this point, the first person singular becomes the centre around which the construction is built. We may speak about a series of incommodities and annoyances which appear around the historian having such preoccupations. They can expand in directions favouring the devise of scenarios, due to the subject of the pursued analysis.<sup>4</sup> For example,

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<sup>1</sup> Antoon de Baets, *op. cit.*, pp. 136–138.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141–152.

<sup>3</sup> W. Warren, "Death Education: An Outline and Some Critical Observations", *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 1, XXIX, 1981, pp. 29–41.

<sup>4</sup> The person who analyzes death makes experiments, investigating constantly the modes and levels of death: "we consciously and continuously explore the imaginary worlds of death and we are never tired to invent new ones." Mircea



meditating more deeply on the subject we observe that it is not pleasant, after all, for a historian, an analyst of death, to realize that his entire work is built on the tears and pain of death recorded in the past. Such a situation requires prudence and, as a main instrument, the ability to handle the sources and the conclusions which these sources may determine. On the other hand, the analysis undertaken in the domain may irritate the researcher's environment starting with his family and up to the academic environment where he is active. Of course, this observation does not hold true only to the historian, but it is a real problem in the case of other sciences as well. It is worth mentioning as a factor which defines profiles and often disturbs the work. Thus, the historical investigation of death becomes the image of an **impropriety**, discussing the pain, tears and anxiety of a certain past period.

From this perspective, Vladimir Jankélévitch's explanations are essential. In his opinion, we discuss death in first, second and third person. In the last case the event of decease is identified as an abstract and anonymous death, problematic without being mysterious; it is an object as any other. Death, therefore, can be analyzed or described since it represents the summit of non tragic objectivity. The theme is thus anonymous and acephalous, the theme of an indifferent death, being in the end a principle of serenity.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, from this perspective the historian analyses exactly death in the third person, situated however in a past, speaking from a temporal point of view. Hence, in this case the subject of death can be analyzed since it is not a cause for anxiety. However, in the long run it can have negative effects. More simply said, it can be observed the fact that, on an individual level, historians generally ignore that which they write about and such a statement is not made clearer for a historian in this domain than in the investigation of death!

At the opposite pole gapes the inevitable "possibility" of death in the first person – cause for anxiety, situated only in future, constituting the end of all, the total and definitive end of personal existence and the

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Eliade, *Ocultism, vrăjitorie și mode culturale. Eseuri de religie comparată* (Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Trends. Essays in Comparative Religion), translated from English by Elena Bortă, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1997, p. 59.

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Tratat asupra morții* (Treaty on Death), translation by Ilie and Margareta Gyuresik, Timișoara, Amacord, 2001, p. 16. The impossibility of knowing death in first person singular we encounter in Martin Heidegger's or Emmanuel Levinas' works.

end of the whole universe, of the world and of history. Between the two is situated death in the second person, as a proximal limit of alterity.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, as Patrick Baudry also emphasized in one of his books – dedicated to the subject of pornography but applicable as an observation also to the situation of the person who analyzes death –, I, as a historian, am situated inside what I am doing, namely in the “object” and not in its proximity.<sup>2</sup> Such an idea seems essential for any historian of death in my opinion, despite the multiple ways in which one accomplishes his research: I think that to analyze death, from a historical or non-historical point of view, signifies, until a future and inevitable “clash”, a kind of tightrope walking... There is, however, a kind of counterbalancing for such a situation. This has rather the character of a stimulant in the realization of an analysis on death. It has also a general character and focuses on the idea of youth, as age, which permits the analysis of death since it excludes the event of decease from among its probabilities. The situation was emphasized by Mircea Eliade, who drew a parallel between the lack of synthesis, the lack of originality and the idea of sacrifice or the compensation of courage and continuous righteousness of youth compared with old age.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, for a historian it is more simple to write a history of death while being young, than having arrived to the autumn of his life, since he finds a foolish courage in that which Jankélévitch called the “indeterminacy” of the date of death.<sup>4</sup>

In another direction it must be underlined that there is also another sense comprised in the relationship historian/history and death.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23–33.

<sup>2</sup> “The person whose study we are discussing cannot be situated in the proximity of an interesting theme. He is situated without difficulty ‘in’ the object (the same thing happens also in the case of the investigations of death). From here originates the hostility which he can cause and which can choose the path of negation. The innovative and applied character of the investigation will be minimized. It will be repeated to him as a well learned lesson that the objectivity of science cannot be caught off-guard. He will be asked to say that he will preserve that scientific character which protects the researchers, presupposing that he himself is not enough protected. He will be told: you speak about obsessions, affects, anxieties, excitations hard to suppress.” Patrick Baudry, *Erotismul și pornografia* (Eroticism and Pornography), translated by Alina Mihaela Bănuț, Iași, Eurosong & Book, 1998, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Despre tinerețe și moarte* (On Youth and Death), in Idem *Arta de a muri* (The Art of Dying), Magda and Petru Ursache (eds.), Iași, Moldova, pp. 237–238.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

This appears as an illusion, referring to the proper nature of historical investigation. We refer to the impossibility of comprising all the dimensions of death in such an analyzes, starting with the false idea that death is a reality completely verifiable, delimitable or measurable. The analysis of suicide in a certain historical time and space is extremely suitable as an example,<sup>1</sup> despite the inadvertencies it can be charged with.<sup>2</sup> Death can be therefore categorized as an event which is unlike others. Such a statement has its meaning, its special flavour when we speak about a historical investigation: death is not in the order of cognition, being the par excellence unthinkable, there are no representations of death but representations of the irrepresentable.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these, the particular situation of history as a science complicates things further: the distinction between a real past and the historical cognition of that past.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

The question which occurs at the end of the present discussion reiterates the theme given in the title: why would the answer to the relationship between history/historian and death be a confusing equation. The answer depends on several factors stated and analyzed so far. The first factor refers to the domain of certitude: without death there would not exist history which is, on the one hand, the becoming of humanity, and, on the other hand, science; the historian is one of the main “guardians” of the legacy and the treatment accorded to the cohort of the deceased. The second factor concerns the side of incertitude, consisting of several elements: a historical analysis, of death in this case, is by its

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to the tendency showed by the suicide’s family to camouflage the act. Such a circumstance distorts to a certain point the historical analysis of suicide due to the sources which evidently will disguise the act. See Georgia Noon, “On Suicide”, in *Journal of History of Ideas*, 39, 3, 1978, pp. 371–372.

<sup>2</sup> “Any suicide, since it is a suicide, is impressive. I am surprised how people try to find motives and causes to hierarchize suicide or search for different justifications for it, when they do not depreciate it. I cannot imagine a more imbecile problem than that which would refer to the hierarchy of suicides, which would refer to suicides committed for a higher cause or those committed because of a more vulgar cause etc. Is not taking your own life impressive enough to make any search for motives seem petty?” Emil Cioran, *Pe culmile disperării* (On the Zenith of Despair), Bucharest, Humanitas, 2002, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Baudry, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Von Leyden, “Categories of Historical Understanding”, in *History and Theory*, 23, 1, 1984, pp. 57–83.

own nature incomplete, since the historian builds his construction only on sources which a past has transmitted to him. Therefore, the historical approach is based on a triple selection made by: the person contemporary with the event, attributing a certain informative value to the document or not; the archivist – who, in most cases, keeps only the “pieces” considered worthy of interest in order to become part of the archival patrimony; the researcher/the historian – selecting only that which he considers relevant for his analysis. In fact a person contemporary to an event cannot know what a researcher will be interested in tomorrow, the day after tomorrow or on some future day.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, we introduce into the equation the main subject of the analysis – death, an event which cannot be experimented in first person and which, in another sense, often leaves behind incomplete testimonies as sources. In this case the incertitude is double, since analyzing death **the historian can usually see only the tip of the iceberg**, and on the other “shore” of his analysis, **he cannot pass through the looking glass**. He cannot offer certitude in the interpretation and explanation of an event such as death...

Nevertheless, beyond these uncertainties, a history of death is necessary under the special conditions when such a history is only a history of self-referentiality: who we are, where we are going, how we prepared once and how we prepare now for the event of death.<sup>2</sup>

We can certainly analyze death in several ways, as historians or as the representatives of other scientific disciplines. Starting with the simple idea that there is a multitude of modalities in which the event happens or with the numerous conceptions connected to it, one reaches the analytical knot of the theme: the investigation of the attitudes towards death.<sup>3</sup> Thus, several directions can be analyzed and all these become only an enthusiastic urge to continue the historical investigations in this domain. Moreover, the inherent difficulties of the theme are a hard trial for a young historian, since death remains the unknown; there is a demarcation line impossible to pass: my death and the death of the others or in a community death becomes a part of the traditions and of the “narration”, implying, of course, responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, if we place face to face a traditional, a modern and a postmodern system of death,

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<sup>1</sup> Joël Guibert, Guy Jumel, *La socio-histoire*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1999, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas J. Davies, *A Brief History of Death*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Wim Dekkers, *op.cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> Hirano Junya, “Communicative Thanatology. Death as Responsibility in Community”, in *Kyushu Communication Studies*, 3, 2005, pp. 17–39.

clarifying their particularities in order to understand their evolution,<sup>1</sup> at the level of a national historiography dedicated to death, these only increase the “appetite” for investigation. We have sketched here only some of the relevant elements of the discussion, and this could be continued with an uninterrupted series of arguments. In fact, we can only discuss the responsibility we, historians, as the representatives of the present, have towards past generations<sup>2</sup> and in this sense the death–history “chemistry” becomes the primary level of reflection.

There is an image of death which has been haunting me for a very long time, namely the image of an *insatiable mouth*. I do not know whether this representation is the most appropriate for others, but for me, a person who has been in “concubinage” with the theme for several years, it is dominant. In this same “picture” I see thus something which catches the scent of, gapes implacably at, tastes, devours, gradually chews and then swallows dreams, loves, sorrows, joys, hate, future and hope, leaving behind only cataracts of tears. But these cataracts of tears dry up little by little, as the last flickers of a poor candle end, forever due to the passing of time passes and, mainly, due to oblivion...

Translated by Ágnes Korondi

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<sup>1</sup> Lyn H. Lofland, *The Craft of Dying. The Modern Face of Death*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publication, 1978, pp. 17–38; Glennys Howarth, *Death & Death. A Sociological Introduction*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007, pp. 15–40.

<sup>2</sup> Antoon de Baets, *op.cit.*, passim.