

Symbolic Immortality through Nature. The Deconstruction of a Myth

– A thanatological perspective* –

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Keywords: mortality, immortality, culture, myths, nature, thanatology, sociology of knowledge

Abstract: This study has two main objectives. First, it aims at reflecting on the status of immortality as a cultural product, and, thus, analysing the mechanisms by which immortality can be seen, given its tight relationship with death, as a symbolic construct as well. Second, it examines the non-religious symbolic construction of the continuation of existence in/through nature. The role of this second section is to deconstruct this myth from a point of view that merges modern thanatology with the sociology of knowledge, searching to discover and investigate the social and cultural issues entailed by immortality-through-nature. More precisely, it deals with the classic model of the continuation-through-nature, as well as with a different construction of immortality through nature – paradoxical and far-fetched – a new form indebted to the scientific discoveries of the last decades: the positivisation of death.

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Introduction – Death, culture, denial

Death represents an element of force belonging to human culture and civilisation. If culture can be defined in the most various ways,¹ different kinds of research have shown that the link between culture and death – both from the first to the second and the other way around – is permanent and fundamental.² Death is the one that challenges culture, in its most extended meaning, while it can be said that any death is already cultural.³ The relationship between death and culture cannot be easily understood, it can be subject to a logical dispersion. It is enough to think that what death does in order to enter culture and be influenced by it is a complex denial process.

* This work was supported by the Romanian National Council for Scientific Research CNCS-UEFISCDI, grant number 54/2011 – PNII TE.

¹ Ziauddin Sardar, Boris van Loon, *Introducing Cultural Studies* (USA: Totem Books, UK: Icon Books, 2007).

² Ed. Philippe di Folco, *Dictionnaire de la mort* (Paris: Larousse, 2010), 292-293. Michel Guiomar, *Principes d'une esthétique de la mort: Les modes des présences, les présences immédiates, le seuil de l'au-delà* (Paris: José Corti, 1967). Georg Simmel, *La tragédie de la culture et culture et autres essais* (Paris: Rivages poches, 1988), 64, 171-172. Jean Ziegler, *Les vivants et la mort* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), 10.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Apories. Mourir – s'attendre aux «limites de la vérité»* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 83. Michel Picard, *La littérature et la mort* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 36.

The death denial undertaken by culture can seem bizarre, even shaky from a logical point of view, because it is complicated and has a polyhedral structure. On one hand, death is not a simple component of culture; it is its vertebrate axis. To die, says Patrick Baudry, “always positions cultures in front of themselves.”¹ Thus, in this position, denying death is the immersion of autonomous content in the magma of semantics and the pragmatic role of culture. On the other hand, a new facet is added to the cultural denial of death, which comes with a reflecting function, namely a facet in which the denial of death appears with a certain degree of opacity of direct relations: culture – death. It is actually a facet which results from the accumulation of two types of denial. First of all, we can talk about the cultural denial of death as a reality hooked onto the last point, away from the reality of life. “The fundamental cultural stake is to understand that death is located in life. The fact that the idea of death cannot be fabricated unless you start with the denial to accept death as an end, and the cultural construction of this refusal involves the conversion of what cannot be named or presented into movement, in the dynamics that lead to the dynamics of life itself.”² The cultural construction brings a harmony to death and life, imposing life’s rhythms to death. Death as an end is surpassed by death as an idea; the plural form would be more correct: ideas regarding death, ideas which bring death to full life, placing it as a reverse side which cannot be removed. The basic meaning of death, namely the annihilation of the human being is deconstructed and rebuilt from meanings which go around the non-meaning of annihilation. Thus, according to this point of view, the denial of death has to do with semantics more than with structure because it begins with the (non)meaning of death and there is barely a structural move, by including death in life.

An ingredient of opacity is also another type of cultural denial of death, which might seem in contrast with the preceding one, when it is actually its completion: the cultural denial of death as an actual component of culture. “Contrary to a commonly accepted idea, rituality does not allow *the taming* of death. It is the other way around, it highlights the cultural denial of death, or, the essential denial of culture to integrate death.”³ Yes, says Jean Duvignaud, “death is masked, and it is masked by the symbols and rites which society invents in order to oppose the destruction of existence.”⁴ This time, denial is structural first of all: death has no place in culture, followed by the semantic denial carried out by death (nothing that comes after it has sense) to be converted into a denial of this denial. As a conclusion, we can see from the examination of the three types of cultural denial that all converge towards the fact that the idea of cultural acceptance of death is not about nude, pure death, it includes creating a relationship between death and life, between death and culture. It is enough to think that

¹ Patrick Baudry, *Paradoxes contemporains. Nouveaux rapports anthropologiques à la mort*, eds. Frédéric Lenoir, Jean-Philippe de Tonnac, *La mort et l’immortalité. Encyclopédie des savoirs et de croyances* (Bayard, 2004), 894. (our translation)

² Patrick Baudry, “Devant le cadavre”, *Religiologiques*, 12, automne: *Corps et sacré*, (1995): 19-29, 134. (our translation)

³ Patrick Baudry, *La place des morts. Enjeux et rites* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1999), 66. (our translation)

⁴ Jean Duvignaud, *Fêtes et civilisations, suivi de la Fête aujourd’hui (essai)* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1991), 19. (our translation)

death enters culture through the fear of death and through the harsh reality of dead bodies, in order to observe that they contain the first signs of denial which multiply through taboos or even through the denial of death. But, at the same time, we can see the functional proximity of denial and acceptance. Denial is or is created for acceptance and also the other way around, acceptance is or tends to be transformed into denial.

Because we are at the introductory stage of our study, we think that certain explanations regarding the text are necessary. This study, because it has a more synthetic character, sacrifices a series of nuances which should be rather located in an anthropological study. First of all, when we are talking about culture we mean Western (European and American) culture. In the case of Western culture, death has multiple meanings and this means that we are basically dealing with multiple types of immortality constructs. What we want to do is to observe certain mechanisms such as the ones that deal with the cultural representation of immortality (especially the one through nature), mechanisms with an extended validity and examine their social and cultural implications. Secondly, we are also writing from a critical point of view, which is influenced by sociology of knowledge, which includes a dissociation of nature from culture, maintaining, however, a certain level of caution.

The Construction of Immortality. Some Perspectives

In the part which is responsible with a certain degree of acceptance towards death or, in other words, of death's place in culture or of the thanatological dimensions of culture, the denial of death gives birth to certain cultural products such as rituals, common beliefs, myths or religions, attitudinal products, but also real products, which form an extended and varied funerary system. In the part that belongs to a more poignant denial and which would largely correspond to the cultural dimension of death, the generated cultural products are those of immortality constructs, according to Momeyer.¹ These constructs, just like their name suggests – immortality constructs – remain, however, connected to deep wires of awareness regarding the reality of death,² so that it is hard to draw a strong line, clearly stating how much of the content of these structures is acceptance of death and how much is denial (this aspect is stronger, however). In this direction belonging to the relationship between the consciousness of mortality–immortality, Jacques Derrida notices that it is not a symmetrical one, even though the line of thought belonging to immortality is a consequence of mortality. Never, says Derrida, will immortality, even in its *light* form, namely the belief in survival or return, manage to cancel out death and mortality, because it results from them and confirms them, laying down their foundation while trying to deny them, oppose them.³ Structurally, immortality is a part of culture and society, even of the spirit, and occupies the spot of the opposing term of equal power, but it is however a purely theoretical position which, in accordance with its schedule, works only in a limited manner.

¹ Richard W. Momeyer, *Fearing Death and caring for the Dying*, in *Dying, Death and Bereavement*, ed. George E. Dickinson, Michael R. Leming, Alan C. Mermann (Conneticut: The Dushkin Publishing Group, 1993).

² As shown by Edgar Morin in his explanation of the differences between mortality and immortality. Edgar Morin, *L'homme et la mort* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1976).

³ Derrida, *Apories*, 103.

Some death researchers have formulated several models, regarding the aspects of immortality constructs – highlighting the idea that these immortalities are poor from an ontological point of view, but work very well on the level of social and individual self-illusion – while in other occurrences, they and other researchers have contributed to the strengthening of these constructs of symbolic immortality, a hint to the fact that the superior eye of theory is not continuous and frequently includes as much reality as the primary insight that discovers it.¹

Augustin Dercrois, synthesising the lessons of anthropological and archaeological discoveries of graves and funerary rituals that accompany humanity like a red wire, starting with ancient times, mentions that man is the only animal who is aware of his finiteness, defining himself through his aspiration towards immortality, one of the main criteria in his demarcation from his evolutionary neighbour, the monkey.² The author sees immortality as being divided into two main categories: absolute immortality – specific to a born being, but which does not die (anymore) – and relative immortality – which is confused with the idea of identity perpetuation and persistence, in some form or the other. For absolute immortality, Dercrois thinks that the Morinian dual system of immortality is representative: through the existence of an immaterial double that survives the body and through death-rebirth or resurrection which has been used, as a concept, by several religions. Both branches of the immortality model, described by Edgar Morin³ in his fundamental book, *L'homme et la mort*, have been, as pointed out by Dercrois,⁴ the cornerstones of religious systems, the model's subcategories were often combined, such as in the Catholic religion.⁵ Concerning relative immortality, Dercrois marks then Kantian postulation of human immortality as necessary to human reason and the retreat, also Kantian, of the categorical statement of the soul's immortality as one of the historical points which offers a diagnostic, in a theoretical fashion, for the transition from absolute to relative immortality,⁶ a transition

¹ There are many examples. By unmasking their true nature as *constructs* for many types of immortality intensely circulated from a cultural and social point of view, researchers can fall into other ones. For example, Robert Kastenbaum, in his book *Society and Human Experience*, even though he was paying attention to the concepts of death and the operations dealing with symbolization that are constantly being exerted upon it, he puts into circulation, at the end of the book, strictly referring to oneself, the continuous mythology through others, through offspring, such as the inversed immortality of nature: more exactly, the apocalypse of universal extinction. Another example would be that of Jean Ziegler. Aware that death reveals nature, like it reveals culture, and unmasking the accentuation of the taboo of death on different social levels, he articulates his own beliefs within a mythology dealing with the necessity of death: there would not be freedom without death, the dynamics of culture would not exist without death (it would be impossible for other individuals to be born infinitely).

² Augustin Dercrois, *Immortalité*, ed. Philippe di Folco, *Dictionnaire de la mort*, 556-558. Robert Kastenbaum (ed.), *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (Macmillan Reference USA, 2003).

³ Morin, *L'homme et la mort*, 123–172.

⁴ Dercrois, *Immortalité*, 556.

⁵ In Catholicism, but also in the Orthodox religion, the principle of the soul's immortality meets the principle of total resurrection, mind and body.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 557.

which is a result of European materialism starting to grow beginning with the 18th century. Immortality is relative and tends to be looked for especially in immanence, becoming more distant from the resistant and already distant transcendences. The distance from relative immortality to the *ball of temporary immortality* – the author's own words, is not that great. This temporary immortality becomes more and more preferable, to the disadvantage of other types of immortality, the more research and scientific discoveries which prolong life supply more materials for us and new illusions in this matter. Dercrois pays a lot of attention to the genetic theories and discoveries which keep the old instinct of reproduction which has always animated the human species and has linked it to other species, nature, but also intervenes in a technologically assisted perpetuation and not through offspring, but through a youth that should last as long as possible. The author sees the new tendencies of configuring techno-scientific immortality as rebelliousness against institutional humanism and its foundation, even though it is eroded: the soul.¹

Ruth Menahem, in her 1973 book, advances the socio-political concept of *mythologies*.² Mythologies differ from religions and are closer to myths, because their role is to organize, in different ways, the collective defences against death. Their function is to control the disturbance caused in human beings by the anxiety of death, to humanize death – to reproduce it according to the model of life, imposing its *rhythms* – while also ensuring coherence and the power of the group they are active in. Within Western mythologies, the researcher identifies the bio-social mythology of group continuity, the mythology of nature and the mythology of art. The author sheds light on their status as cultural constructs showing that, as an example, in the case of the first Western mythology she is confronted with what it tries to claim: the right, and more than that, the obligation to have offspring, with an undeniable reality of overpopulation or, in the case of the mythology of immortality through art, with the possibility of nuclear destruction creating a *tabula rasa* out of all the artistic culture accumulated over time. What is very interesting is the fact that Ruth Menahem places the denial of death, as a paradigm of collective attitudes regarding death, as being the only one of the mythologies dealing with immortality, which are fashionable in Western society, a mythology which originates from the weakening of religion's power to offer a replacement for immortality, its power of denial. Thus, "the current mythology is based on a denial of death: man is not ontologically mortal, if man dies it is accidental, this happens only because the cure for all diseases hasn't been discovered yet."³

In his 1992 work, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*⁴, Zygmunt Bauman shows that immortality is part of culture because death, devoid of content – in Bauman's Morinian perspective – tends to be overtaken, within human collectives, to explore and build the transcendence that expands its edges. Thus, immortality completes mortality, with both being *life strategies* which are practiced either together, on different levels, or alternatively.⁵ One certainty is that for Zygmunt Bauman both mortality and

¹ Ibid., 558.

² Ruth Menahem, *La mort apprivoisée* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1973), 50.

³ Ibid., 59.

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

⁵ Ibid., 9.

immortality is contributing to the propagation of immortality constructs, only that, according to Baumann, virtually nothing is truly immortal.¹ Françoise Dastur presents these things in a similar fashion, but she highlights the role immortality holds for philosophy and for thought in general. Immortality is a stratagem, an automatically activated and inherent one, even before being the materialization of a socio-cultural action. Thus, Dastur asks the rhetorical question “could we think of human finiteness without comparing it to any type of infinity?”²

The fact that immortality has always represented a great challenge for humanity can be found in the ideas of Lucian Boia, who sees immortality as an *aggravated longevity*,³ with the concept of longevity not being identical to immortality, but included in it. More clearly, longevity contains pronounced pragmatic coordinates; it uses time in order to look for a key to immortality. That is why, in *Tinerețe fără bătrânețe* (*Eternal Youth*) the author will inventory the different forms humanity has used as *keys* within the sphere of immortality, not just forms of pure imagination that have indirectly influenced social relations regarding death and immortality – the fountain of youth, the golden age etc. – but also the forms of the imaginary directly translated into actions: the case of the postmodernist imaginary inspired by science which present clear solutions for attaining immortality: cryogenics, cloning or robotics or in case of the modern imaginary: in which the religion of health has well established norms which are asymptotically approaching immortality. Boia talks about the fact that the collective imaginary has registered, modified and influenced the way in which immortality models have been constructed socially and culturally. Together with Lucian Boia we have to open what we have called social constructs towards the imaginary. This implies signalling the dual aspect of symbolic constructs of immortality – and in an extended sense, of any constructs: mortality, fear of death etc. – actually of social constructs in general: their simultaneous social and imaginary character: “man lives on two plains at the same time: in reality and the imaginary, distinct plains, but there is permanent traffic between them”.⁴ There are three great axes that Lucian Boia identifies in the social and imaginary construct of longevity: the first axis would be a perfect transcendence outside the human being, a prototype for it would be the message of international religion. The second axis is social, belonging to collective projects. A third axis belongs to depleted projects.

Numerous critical comments can be made regarding these immortality constructs. They should not be aimed at their ontological motivation because humanity cannot face death in their absence, neither at their cultural legitimacy, because they have contributed to enriching culture, critical comments should be aimed towards their absolutization. As far as we are concerned, we do not want to criticise, but deconstruct

¹ Ibid., 174.

² Françoise Dastur, *La finitude impensable. Les philosophies devant la mort*, in eds. Lenoir, de Tonnac, *La mort et l'immortalité*, 923.

³ Lucian Boia, *Tinerețe fără bătrânețe. Imaginarul longevității din Antichitate până astăzi* (*Eternal Youth. A Cultural History of Longevity*) (*Quand les centenaires seront jeunes: l'imaginaire de la longévité de l'antiquité à nos jours*, [Les Belles Lettres, 2006]), translation from French by Valentina Nicolae (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 19.

⁴ Ibid., 7.

and highlight a certain level of instability. We want to highlight the idea that, like death, maybe even in a larger part, immortality is a cultural fact. We can understand it as a result of human creativity, as well as an application of unwritten norms or constraints.

The Symbolic Immortality through Nature

Immortality through nature is a powerful form of symbolic immortality. It could seem bizarre, because one of the main lines when defining a culture is its opposition towards nature owed to the idea that nature imposes death as an implacable law. “There is no culture, in the most general sense of the term, except for the refusal of being subjected to nature’s commands,”¹ says Françoise Dastur. Jean Duvignaud asks and states at the same time that “this fight against natural destruction, this neurotic discharge of nature, why should we not call it culture?”² Thus we are tempted to ask ourselves how it is possible that one of the main constructs of immortality is the one linked to nature. If nature contains death, how does it end up working as its opposite and be an opportunity for spiritual and existential comfort? We shall clarify these things with small steps.

Actually, the problem begins, again, from the sense and semantic instability of the word, because “the image of nature has always had a multiform action: it has influenced not only science, but also art, religion and social life.”³ The meanings of the word *nature* oscillate between a lost human identity through social sophistication or civilisation, especially through technology, and the perception of a resistance against overlapping or integration of the human being in nature or the other way around. In both cases nature, as it is understood by man contains the possibility of being converted into transcendence. The coincidence between man and nature is characterised by partiality, while nature can also have the configuration of a superior transcendence: when it is located in an ontological loss which causes nostalgia and suffering, as well as a minor and inferior transcendence: the status overcome mostly through civilization, belonging to a rudimentary, purely biological reality, but which can offer certain advantages such as relief from consequence-lesions of exhausting individualisms. This fact of the human tendency to understand and see nature as something that transcends the human individual could be a part of the explanation for symbolic immortality through nature. Having reached this point, we shall stop in order to detail the type of transcendence in which nature can be constituted. As a scheme, it has represented a spiritual transcendence for magical thought, while for the way of thought in the 18th and 19th centuries nature has taken a machinist appearance, of a transcendence lacking divinity and loaded with functioning principles. Taking a part of considerations dealing with nature named by Basarab Nicolescu in *Transdisciplinaritatea (manifest)*, partial access to magic transcendence is done through the reflection and acceptance of multiple links, while for machinist and functionalist transcendence it is done through fragmentation – namely the broken mirror – and the intuition of what a single part means for the whole.⁴

¹ Françoise Dastur, *La finitude impensable. Les philosophies devant la mort*, in eds. Lenoir, de Tonnac, *La mort et l’immortalité*, 913. (our translation)

² Jean Duvignaud, *Fêtes et civilisations*, 70. (our translation)

³ Basarab Nicolescu, *Transdisciplinaritatea (manifest)* (*Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, [New York: State University of New York (SUNY) Press, 2002]), (Iași: Polirom, 1999 [1996]), 69.

⁴ Ibid. The Chapter: *Nature’s death and resurrection*, 68–80. For Basarab Nicolescu, magical nature and Illuminist nature – which cover the significances of nature in large proportion, but not

On the other hand, it is true that culture has a complex relationship of denial with death. And seeing as to how death is frequently seen as being part of nature, a natural phenomenon, then, from this perspective, culture negates nature. And, if we think about how, until the present, death is the most prominent reality that culture has not managed to totally reshape, cancel its last word – cancel the human individual – then it is not an exaggeration to consider, that death is the most natural thing possible. There are also other ways in which nature is negated through culture, more in the sense of social and institutional disciplines, in which it is hard to establish the hidden relation that realities *needing discipline* would have with death. In essence, we have the following equation: nature is a transcendence of the human being, and, at the same time, death is tied to nature in an inevitable and definitive manner. But, in this transcendence, which is continuous (man is always, and in multiple ways, surpassed by nature: it has existed before man and will continue to exist after, if we can express ourselves this way, it is cyclical, it is born, it dies and is reborn countless times) death is local, it is transgressed by the reality of nature as a whole – for nature, death is configured as a mandatory yet passing stage.¹ This is the type of light shed on the paradox of immortality symbolic through nature. Moreover, if culture is “an answer to nature’s aggression, a helpless and at the same time symbolic attempt”² it is clear that immortality through nature, being symbolic, does not belong to nature – despite the impulse of freedom, of stepping outside of culture, which is one of the centres death produces: “dying belongs to culture as much as it belongs to nature”³ – like we would be tempted to believe but it is blocked within culture.

Things would be much simpler if a separation between culture and nature would indeed be possible. Edgar Morin considers that there is no threshold where nature would end and culture would begin, they are both present in the life of the human being as discontinued and intertwined realities.⁴ Information currents travel between them, there are also multiple bonds between them, but they are bonds which can be ignored by a superficial approach due to their instability, the way in which they are made and broken, and their accentuated dynamics. Douglas Davies discusses the relationship between culture and nature from the point of view of cultural anthropology and studies of death. The binary of culture and nature, which has created the Freudian association between death and sexuality adopted by researchers such as Ariès is not, according to Davies, anything more than a type of control over a relationship which is more difficult than it seems. The obsession to categorize, to seal, the surrounding fragments is specific to Western society, but it is not necessarily a characteristic of other societies.⁵ That is why Davies is convinced that strict limitations such as nature-human, culture-animality are not perfect and he suggests, in a subtle manner, that they should not be encouraged

all of its facets – would be followed by transdisciplinary nature. This re-interpretation of nature, this attempt to give new meaning is interesting to say the least. Transdisciplinary nature is beyond objective and subjective nature, but includes both, however in the extended sense of the terms.

¹ Mikhail Bakhtine, *L'oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Âge et sous la Renaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

² Duvignaud, *Fêtes et civilisations*, 17.

³ Ziegler, *Les vivants et la mort*, 24.

⁴ Morin, *L'homme et la mort*, 74, 105.

⁵ Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief. The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites* (New York, London: Continuum, 2002), 5.

too much. The conclusion regarding death, from here, is that death is “problematic because of the fact that it is intrinsic part of human condition”¹ and it is not natural without being cultural or animal without being human.² What Davies is saying, is that death is natural as well as cultural, or in order to arrange the idea in a more radical way: death is neither natural, nor cultural, but it cannot be thought of if you do not start from these categories, which do not belong to it, but ensure protection, even if it is limited, to the sense.³ The question remains if culture is not just that: the shape of the human being, a shape that includes it and transcends towards humanity. But, if man cannot step out of culture, being caught in it once he is born within a human community, it is certain that nature accompanies man, in different ways, throughout his life. Part of it defines him, constrains and restrains him, part of it escapes him and there is a part that surrounds him. Even though it would not be opportune to negate the inseparability of nature and culture – which is pointed out by Edgar Morin in his work – it would not be wise not to mention another derivative of the nature-culture relationship, this time not aimed towards distancing the two elements, but towards overlapping them.



Șerban Savu, *The Shepherd*, 2008, 80 x 76 cm, oil on canvas

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Basarab Nicolescu presents the situation of the quanta which is a particle and a wave, but which is actually neither a particle nor a wave in his book, *We, the Particle and the World*.

This phenomenon is often de-conspired in sociology studies, especially in those involving the Sociology of Knowledge. For example, Zygmunt Baumann and Tim May observe that “the social cultural differences produced between men and women are almost as natural as the biological differences between sexual organs and masculine and feminine procreation functions.”¹ It is only one of the cases in which the cultural passes as a natural constraint, cases which will appear as long as “the arbitrary character of norms spread by culture is not revealed. Culture shows and acts like nature as long as there are no alternative conventions. Despite all of this, we all know there are many ways to live life. We see people around us who dress, talk and act differently from us. We know there are *cultures*, not one single culture. As such, culture is incapable to contain human behaviour as if it would be a universal human condition which is devoid of alternatives. During the process, we can go through periods of doubt which ask us to explain and justify some things. These doubts can receive answers in an open and interrogative culture, but they can also spark a more extreme imposer of what is assumed to be the natural order of things.”² What is essential in the works of both sociologists is that, as long as culture will articulate itself, in human perception, as being unique, it will be easily confused with nature. There are things that belong to culture such as plurality, multiplicity, diversity through which it processes and arranges the rough data received from nature. When culture diminishes evidence of what is artificial, of its nature as a construct, to the maximum, there is a risk that it might be mistaken for reality or for the reality which is even harder to fake – nature. In the end we can state that the confusion between nature and culture is frequently a result of – such as in the case of the *thickening of reality* phenomenon Berger and Luckmann were talking about, which humans experience when they are children – a nostalgia or of a necessity to possess and integrate oneself within a stable reality, with secure laws which correspond with the desire of the human being to have *a purpose*. New meanings for the longing for naturalness which has not ceased to haunt the current era, even in the busy times of post-industrialization, technology and hyperconsumerism, embodied in concerns regarding *eco* foods and *eco* social behaviour.³ In any case, even though we have to admit that the

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, Tim May, *Gândirea sociologică (Thinking Sociologically)* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001], translation from English by Mihai C. Udma, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), 188.

² Ibid., 188-189. See: “The social order is given neither biologically nor through drifting, in its empirical manifestation from biological facts. The social order (...) is not given by man’s natural environment, even though some of its traits (for example, its economic or technological structures) can be factors in determining certain traits of social order. Social order is not part of the “order of things” and cannot be deducted from “the laws of nature”. Social order exists only as a product of human activity.” p. 78 See also: (Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, *Construirea socială a realității. Tratat de sociologia cunoașterii, (The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge)* [New York: Doubleday, Garden City, 1966]) translation from English by Alex. Butucelea (Bucharest: Editura Art, 2008).

³ Gilles Lipovetsky, *Fericirea paradoxală. Eseu asupra societății de hiperconsum (Le bonheur paradoxal. Essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation)* [Paris: Gallimard, 2006], translated by Mihai Ungurean (Iași: Polirom, 2007). Lipovetsky unmasks the way in which desire for nature and naturalness are exploited by the same hyperconsumerist society and culture against which it rises, eco consumerism is only a more sophisticated and pretentious type of consumerism. The hyperconsumerist paradigm, a socially imposed one, is not eliminated by eco consumerism, which is theoretically undermining.

inseparability between nature and culture is a certain fact, the confusion between the two can facilitate certain types of social manipulation – such as the one dealing with *natural* female and male roles, and, generally what Berger and Luckmann understand as the concept, inspired by Marxist philosophy, of *reification*: an extreme form as assuming a socio-cultural role, going as far as total identification with the role which *naturalizes* the cultural and social area it acts upon.¹

Thus, nature has the ability to coagulate itself in the socio-cultural imaginary as a transcendence and isolate death – which, and we are repeating ourselves here, exists without condemning the ensemble to being completely consensual with it, because any death is followed by (re)birth, or even simpler, death is partial and does not destroy the whole. This is the foundation through which is born the impulse to look for symbolic immortality in and through nature, an immortality which could be categorised in the Morinian model of immortality-resurrection. This impulse is often accompanied by a simple process of positivity. Nature is not just a transcendence that compensates for the devastating effect of death, it is a *good* transcendence. Up until the century of lights, the magical nature would hide demiurgic principles,² often associated with generosity, the possibility of survival – the earth of banishment is the one that enables harmonious life. Another contributing factor is that nature has always been associated with a maternal figure³. The archetype however follows attitudinal models built during major social and cultural changes. The nostalgia associated with a pure, *natural* world using the longing for the golden age of humanity as a prototype, the lost paradise,⁴ is becoming more powerful with industrialization and is becoming a neuralgic point after the world is allowed to exist as cyberspace,⁵ an extreme form of what Baudrillard identifies as the age of the simulacrum, of breaking the seal of reference and overlapping reality with its surface or mask,⁶ and after which it is realized that there is a crisis of natural resources and they are constantly threatened to be completely destroyed. It is a turning point –

¹ Berger and Luckmann, *Construirea socială a realității*, 123–128.

² Basarab Nicolescu, *Știința, sensul și evoluția. Eseu asupra lui Jakob Böhme (Science, Meaning and Evolution – The Cosmology of Jacob Boehme)*, translation from French by Aurelia Batali, third edition, (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2007 [1988]).

³ About the symbols of maternity which bring together nature and death: Morin, *L'homme et la mort*, 134. Cf.: Gaston Bachelard, *Pământul și reveriile odihnei. Eseu asupra imaginilor intimității (La terre et les rêveries, essai sur les images de l'intimité)*, translation, notes and afterword by Irina Mavrodin (Bucharest: Editura Univers, 1999 [1948]). Gaston Bachelard, *Poetica spațiului (Poétique de l'espace)*, translation by Irina Bădescu (Pitești: Editura Paralela 45, 2005 [1957]). See: Nicolescu, *Transdisciplinaritatea (manifest) (Transdisciplinarity)*. Chapter *Death and Resurrection of Nature*.

⁴ Boia, *Eternal Youth. A Cultural History of Longevity*.

⁵ See: Nicolescu, *Transdisciplinaritatea (manifest) (Transdisciplinarity)*. Chapter *Techno-Nature and Cyberspace*. Basarab Nicolescu has what could seem a surprising approach at first sight. He does not consider cyberspace to be a reality which is torn and competing with the ordinary, which has been deemed real by common agreement but, because of its quantic structure, a combination between *natural* and *artificial*. He also supports the idea that behind science, behind the entire process of the creation of science, of producing scientific discoveries in a more general sense than the one which reduces science to technology, the imaginary plays a very important role which has not been researched enough.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981).

especially in the imaginary, when the positivisation of nature begins to configure itself in new ways, even though, as we shall see, without actually breaking away from old meanings.

Natural nutrition is one of the great current myths – results of a state of uncertainty regarding Earth's natural resources, but also the results of a concrete reality, of synthesizers, preservatives and substitutes which become ingredients of everyday food impossible to eliminate. All these things create a greater discrepancy between nature and civilisation and colour the first one in very warm nuances, contributing to its positivisation. Moreover, through studies and pseudo-studies which seem to demonstrate the damage caused by human intervention in nutrition and its artificial components, nature (and its connected spheres: the natural, naturalness) tends to get rid of that quantity of death that would belong to it – the fact that we highlighted earlier, the fact that there is death in nature since ancient times, nature dies locally, but death does not kill nature itself, thus consolidating the myth of immortality through nature.¹ Eating naturally, and not only, becomes the equivalent of eating healthy food. Nature becomes synonymous with health, and the idea of health keeps the thought of death at bay. Moreover, natural nutrition is joined by other types of re-discoveries of the natural with the most powerful ones being sports and leisure.² Marketing slogans, more or less peripheral, articles such as the ones in health and nutrition magazines are full with advice regarding what and how you have to eat in order to prolong your life and how many times a day you have to practice sports. According to Zygmunt Baumann, this is about the deconstruction of mortality, specific to modern societies, through which death is fragmented into a series of *small deaths*, all with certain causes which can be combated.³ Thus, *the technical ability to live*⁴ must prevent – it can do it virtually forever – the factors which cause death, which live in a more paradoxical area, because they do not belong to humans – death comes from outside in this situation – but they also do not belong to nature which is used to find remedies *to heal* death.

Another factor which has contributed to the positivisation of nature and vitaminisation of symbolic immortality through nature has been (and to a certain extent,

¹ An interesting fact: During a careful evaluation of the popular nutritionist discourse one can notice that the methods to prevent death are more active than passive. Thus, you do not just *not eat* certain *corrupted* foods with preservatives, but you especially *do eat* the good, natural ones. The maternal nutrition function of nature is reactivated, so is the function of exploration of the human-child individual.

² Not only is eating natural foods healthy, but it is also healthy to go into nature, and practice sports. Revaluating the body is only just one of the anthropological and social methods of the modern and postmodern era. As shown by David le Breton in *Antropologia corpului* (*Anthropologie du corps et modernité* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990]), translation by Doina Lică (Timișoara: Amarcord, 2002), the model of the machinist, functionalist body belonging to a Cartesian lineage is still strong, and could be, according to the French sociologist, the base of the incredible development of practices and procedures of donating organs or assisted reproduction.

³ Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Cap. 4: *Modernity or Deconstructing Mortality*. Chiefly 137.

⁴ Iaromira Popovici, "Moartea și societatea de consum" ("Death in The Consumer Society"), *Idei în Dialog* (*Ideas in Dialogue*), Nr. 6 (45) / June (2008).

continues to be) the development of evolutionary research. Man is similar to nature, according to this vision, immortal in a virtual manner. Nature's transformations from one species to the other have brought man in the position of knowing death. In other words, according to Darwinist thinkers and researchers, death is a fact acquired through evolution; man knows it because it is on the highest step of cellular specialization. August Weismann considers that primary, mono-cellular organisms do not die because there is no body¹ – which is refuted by science, and the American anatomist, C.S. Minot, believed that beings come closer to death when they drift away from simple cellular development, death is a necessity in order to give other beings a chance to exist and contribute to species development.² Death is, in such a perspective, produced by nature and also an accidental fact for its validity, while, it is fundamental for the human being only in the sense in which death represents a separation from inferior species, while at the same time a reverence made to the species and its capacity of revival and evolution.

These elements, from maternal to demiurgic valences of nature and certain trains of thought which evacuate death from nature are some of the elements which favour the appearance of immortality through nature. We shall now proceed to shed light on critical aspects of this symbolic construct.

The Deconstruction of Symbolic Immortality through Nature

In one of his books, Norbert Elias³ admits that the bond between man and nature is understandable, because there is a constant infusion of maternal significances about the human individual towards it – a way to say that the individual *builds* nature. However, nature should not be forced to make sense and certainly not a superior, transcendent sense, because there is no intentionality which characterizes it because it does not know purpose and cannot act to be useful to man. In fact, says Elias, to relate oneself to nature is *stupid*.⁴

Elias is not the only one to criticize the transcendent nobility of nature. The Marquis de Sade, even though Schoppenhauerian and Freudian *avant la lettre*, talking about the coincidence of the principle of life and death and about their simultaneous hosting and administration of the human being,⁵ the Marquis is a bitter and very able critic of man's attachment towards nature and the emotional attachment and values associated with it. His criticism, would risk to be drowned in his general theme,

¹ Jean Claude Ameisen, "La mort au coeur du vivant," *Revue française de psychosomatique*, 32 (2007/2): 11-44. Stuart Holroyd, *Mystère de la vie et de la mort* (Paris: Hachette, 1989). André Klarsfeld, Frédéric Revah, *Biologie de la mort* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1999). Cf.: Mircea Florian, *Experiența ca principiu de reconstrucție filozofică (Experience as a Principle of Philosophical Reconstruction)* (Bucharest: Editura 100+1 GRAMAR, 2002 [1935]), 262–273.

² Speaking of which, the lucidity of the Romanian philosopher, Mircea Florian, is impressive when analysing this major tendency to treat death as an added category – a tendency which cohabitates with its opposite, as we shall see later – without benefitting from the results of the latest research in the field of biology, he states his scepticism towards the fact that death comes from life.

³ Norbert Elias, *La solitude des mourants suivi de Vieillir et mourir, quelques problèmes sociologiques* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Editeur, 1998).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 106–108.

⁵ Marquis de Sade, *Juliette ou les prospérités du vice* (Paris: Gallimard, tome II, 1995), 847-877.

sexuality, becoming less visible for the ones who are interested in the matter of death and nature and on the other hand, to be stuck in a certain time, without many links to the present. That is why it is useful to understand Sade through current interpretations, reported to the contemporary aspects of immortality through nature, belonging to Patrick Dupouey,¹ who, in his commentaries, puts this problem in a wider philosophical and cultural context. The illuminist replacement of God with nature, as pointed out by Dupouey, is not without consequences on a logical and rational plain, a plain which has been praised during that period. If nature contains death and death represents a natural necessity, then we can only say it is right or at least be more reserved in condemning the Marquis de Sade who, starting from such an assumption, concludes that killing has a certain moral legitimacy. This necessity of death for nature contributes to the modelling of Sade's conception regarding death in its classical Epicurian form, a strictly disjunctive relation between the human subjects and his death, because nature shapes death to be a *figurative existence without reality*.² Then, if nature becomes a *supreme norm and an ultimate fundament of values*,³ according to Illuminist vision, Sade is right to beat the thinkers of the Century of Lights at their own game: let's listen to nature, if we have to, but it is possible that it will not bring value or imply some ethical fact. Dupouey sees how for Sade, nature is headed towards Nietzschean indifference and considers it an opportune time to highlight a current contradiction: "But, if nature is indifferent, our fault consists of introducing differences, to prefer creation over destruction protection rather than aggression. And punishing those to stray from a norm that we think is natural, when it is actually a convention."⁴ Sade's teachings for our times are appreciated by Patrick Dupouey: "Sade teaches that neither life, nor death exist in real principles, forces that would act in the universe (...) Sade heals us from that falsely «ecological» naivete, according to which the integrity of nature, its fundamental balance would be compromised by man's destructive actions. Life and nature have seen worse! The collision with the asteroid that probably started the great extinction of the Cretaceous period, when the dinosaurs disappeared, activated a discharge of energy millions of times greater than the power of any nuclear arsenal (...) Even the disappearance of man, an interesting epiphenomenon of evolution, would not affect – either positively or negatively – nature or life".⁵ Dupouey finds in Sade a vigorous way to shake the symbolic transcendence of nature, but does not shy away from revealing sophisms dealing with nature and civilisation, which Sade sometimes slides on.⁶ It is about declaring invalidity of the relation between man and nature on an ethical and subordinate level: there is no law that can enfeeble man, says Sade. Later on it is given new value when it is talked about laws created by human beings in order to encourage population and destruction and which are created to contradict with the laws of nature. Basically, through this statement, man either distances himself from nature and attains a certain level of superiority or remains integrated with it and it becomes clear how nature

¹ Patrick Dupouey, ed. *La mort. Textes choisis et présentés* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 49-51.

² Sade: *Juliette ou les prospérités du vice*.

³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴ Dupouey, ed. *La mort*, 49. (our translation)

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49–50. (our translation)

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

is capable of having a purpose. The contradiction, although not a very harsh one, exists anyway. “We cannot, at the same time, disqualify nature as a legitimate instance for evaluating human actions and condemn it for some of its human actions, the ones which institute social norms, then judge and condemn in the name of these norms.”¹

Patrick Dupouey’s conclusion regarding nature and immortality through nature comes from two directions, one of criticism through Sade and the other one of Sade’s criticism. One of the problems is the contagiousness between nature and culture, a problem already mentioned above: “we absolve certain human actions by absorbing them in the natural order and condemn others, excluding them from the same order, after having declared they are part of it.”² Immortality through nature is deconstructed through channels which we can easily observe as being environmental, but it is rebuilt, in the direction of immortality – neo-Spinozian³ to a certain extent, through or towards man. Dupouey contests nature’s superiority and sentimental investment in it – on a large scale during the current era. Good and evil do not come from nature; they come from actions of the human individual and his peers. Even when nature is targeted, it only manages to be an environment meant for transition, and the repercussions are suffered by man: “It is for man and not for nature that man must avoid sowing death in nature.”⁴ Nature’s transcendence is apparent; the only thing that it hides is your fellow man, the other.

A special part of deconstruction of the idea of immortality, not necessarily through nature, but in general, comes from philosophy overall. You could say that philosophy is consubstantial with death, if we think of the famous Ciceronian words, which were used by Montaigne: to philosophize means learning to die.⁵ There are remarkable discoveries regarding death. Scheler considered that fear of death is innate.⁶ Heidegger shed light on the ontological level of death (*being-toward-death*).⁷ Landsberg⁸ and Levinas⁹ have highlighted the way in which another’s death becomes a fundamental part of the human being. Simmel¹⁰ has talked about death as a creator of

¹ Ibid. (our translation)

² Ibid. (our translation)

³ Spinoza defined the free man as the one who thinks of nothing less than death (Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics - Part IV*). He believed in the soul’s immortality which can be sensed even during life, because it has nothing to do with the temporal coordinates of the world. Nature replaces God, but does not keep good and bad as absolute forms either for beings, or morals, because they are characteristics of the adequacy of the action to the purpose. That is why Dupouey talks about the Spinozian eternity like this: “it is not another world, it is another way of existing in this world, and freeing oneself (which is never completely possible) from contingencies of the self”. Dupouey, *La mort*, 180. (our translation)

⁴ Ibid., 51. (our translation)

⁵ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 10. <http://artfl.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.0:2:20.montaigne>, accessed on 11.05.2011. Cf.: Françoise Dastur, *La mort. Essai sur la finitude* (Paris: Hatier, 1994).

⁶ Max Scheler, *Mort et survie* (Paris: Aubier, 1952).

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Ființă și timp (Being and Time) (Sein und Zeit, 1927)*, translation from German by Gabriel Liiceanu and Cătălin Cioabă (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006).

⁸ Paul-Luis Landsberg, *Essai sur l’expérience de la mort* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1951).

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *La Mort et le temps* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 1992).

¹⁰ Simmel, *La tragédie de la culture*.

culture and civilisations which offer death a meaning, Jankélévitch has described death as an organ-obstacle of life,¹ devoid of meaning and provoking purpose at the same time. Existentialists, whether Christian (Jaspers, Kierkegaard, Marcel, Pascal) or Atheists (Sartre, Camus) show a preoccupation with death which was unprecedented in the history of philosophy. However, the theme of immortality appears, in the history of philosophy, inferior from a semantic point of view opposed to death. First of all because, in general it has not been perceived as an ontological emanation of mortality, but rather, thanks to Platonic philosophy, as a form of reality within another temporal plain, to which a being only has access after death, through the soul. Pascal considers the soul's immortality as something that is so important that you cannot have a neutral stance towards it.² Hume, on the other hand, believes in the immortality of the soul, but states that because we are not interested in existence before birth, we should not be interested in existence after death either. Secondly, beyond the degree of reality given to immortality, philosophers have been interested in the temporal problem of eternity, as a proximate term for immortality (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche), which leads to the perception that immortality is partial, impersonal, non-religious, cultural (Spinoza, Feuerbach). Thirdly, after the European trend of Existentialism which exalts the relationship between death and authenticity, the interest for immortality fades even more.

Recently, Derrida, whom we mentioned earlier, has recognized that immortality is an ontological structure generated by death, an asymmetrical and paradoxical structure, because even though it is aimed against death, it never manages to cancel it. His analysis remains, in essence, an analysis of death and it is slightly contemptuous regarding immortality and it lacks curiosity for what it could mean in current society. Shortly, one way or the other, philosophy has always had a certain degree of scepticism towards immortality. István Király, for example, even though he recognizes the trans-historical character of immortality, considers the content of immortality to be tied to life more than to death³ and he asks himself if immortality has to deal with an inability to *become mortal*.⁴ The Heideggerian influence is obvious here. The question remains relevant especially if we think that, beyond the compensation that immortality constructs hold, whether is about immortality through nature, immortality through offspring or art, these constructs can become true structures of manipulation for the individual by society. Moreover, when the connections with death are eliminated, immortality gains the potential for auto-manipulation. Thus, instead of giving meaning to death, immortality breaks away from death and puts in brackets what is linked to human beings: mortality.

An interesting approach to immortality through nature, which sheds light on its status as a socio-cultural and symbolic construct, can be made through death but also through a relation to a socio-cultural imaginary of what happens with the body after death, what in literature is called means of disposing of the body. More precisely, we are talking about two privileged types, present in Western society, namely burial and

¹ Jankélévitch, *La mort* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), 97.

² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992[1670]).

³ Istvan Kiraly V., *Moartea și experiența muririi. Introspecție metafizică și filosofico-aplicativă* (*Death. Metaphysical and Applied Philosophical Perspectives*) (Cluj-Napoca: Casa cărții de știință, 2002), 75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

cremation. Basically, both use elements from nature, the first one uses earth, while the other one uses fire, and both up to a certain point, require human intervention: placement into the fire, placement into the earth. However, cremation has been associated, in specialized literature, as well as by laymen,¹ with a high degree of human intervention in nature, with a violation of nature's laws and one of its major correlatives – normality. Beyond religious norms, which can be noticed especially in countries with an Orthodox majority, such as Romania,² cremation seems to generally be something that deals with the imaginary, an imaginary which is strictly tied to the body and nature, perhaps even more than religion. Thus, for example, Marie-Frédérique Bacqué, in an article from 2007,³ talks about the fact that people and researchers are still developing a certain resistance towards cremation, a type of resistance which is mental and cultural at the same time, which could come from the neglecting of certain symbolic aspects, the relation modern humans have with cremation, aspects which are not perfectly identifiable in man's relationship with the social reality of cremation. In Romania, Ștefan Borbély considers that one of the real-symbolic components of cremation, namely ash, has suffered a process of symbolic degradation, in the sense of retention, from the ambivalence of the imaginary, only of elements with negative connotations.⁴ But if cremation is associated with a less fixed imaginary, geared more towards customs, by tradition, does not mean that burial does not have symbolic norms, on the contrary, symbols belonging to nature and the body are stronger in this case.

Basically, beginning with the idea of this imaginary match between ways to dispose of the body, a deeper study can show that, from a symbolic point of view, we are dealing with four types of nature and only two types of immortality through nature. From the point of view of cremationists, nature, the space, in a larger sense must be left to the living, unpolluted by death. Earth means putrefaction, and those who gravitate towards cremation do not want to leave their bodies to the will of a nature that takes entropy beyond death. On the other hand, there is also that type of nature, a superior pole, one that must be looked for. Abstract nature is what cleanses the spirit through flame and the body through ash. It is a nature that has to do more with the individual than a collective, a nature in which there is a posthumous, essential existence. From the point of view of those who oppose cremation, nature is perceived more concretely and less personally, burial is a placement next to loved ones, ancestors, where you can also position immortality through nature. The earth is maternal, as you can see countless

¹ Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Le cadavre. De la biologie à l'anthropologie* (Paris: Complexe, 1980); Jean-Didier Urbain, *La cendre et la trace. La vogue de la cremation*, Lenoir and de Tonnac, eds. *La mort et l'immortalité. Encyclopédie des savoirs et de croyances*, 1207-1221.

² Marius Rotar talks about the situation of cremation in Romania, a profound issue we shall not discuss right now, in his 2011 book: Marius Rotar, *Eternitate prin cenușă. O istorie a crematoriilor și incinerărilor umane în România secolelor XIX-XXI (Eternity Through Ash. A History of Crematoriums and Human Cremation in 19th-20th Century Romania)* (Iași: Institutul European, 2011).

³ M-F Bacqué, "Pourquoi la crémation résiste sur le plan psychologique en France," *Etudes sur la mort*, 2 (2007): 47-54.

⁴ Ștefan Borbély, *Cenușa – eseu de mitopoetică (The Ashes – An Essay on Mythopoetics)*, in *Homo brucans și alte eseuri (Homo Brucans and Other Essays)* (Bucharest: Contemporanul, 2011), 184-196.

times,¹ and fire is harsh because, among other things, it also represents an ancient taboo. That is why, for them, the nature of persons who choose cremation is torn from – mother – nature through the air, this time also entropic – through time, the temporal laws of post-mortem transformation are destroyed. All aspects show that nature is far from being an undisputed and united fact of reality, so that the idea of continuity through nature makes its cultural construct and imaginary compensation mechanisms visible.

Another Construction of Immortality through Nature. The Meaningful Death

An alternative form of immortality through nature is the mythologization of the meaning of death. In this situation, nature is not transcendent to man anymore, it is at most a thanatologic transcendence, but where death has the role of an organising element of life and an elaborator of meaning: without death nature would not be possible, man himself would not be possible. The individual is subsumed to the species, which as a superior share in constructing a sense of the world. At the same time, the mythologization of the meaning of death can be seen as the most radical type of criticism of the concept of immortality through nature. This construct's sources – not immortality, but one that gathers all the contained meaning, in other conditions, by immortality through nature – meet in the Illuminist vision on nature: what becomes a replacement of the demiurgic principle, inspired by Freud: death is immanent, not opposed to living beings. Up to a certain point, the emphasis of a meaning of death translates into a certain dose of acceptance, an opening towards the cohabitation with the thought of death, beyond which there is a risk of a fierce denial of death, more ferocious than the one denounced by Philippe Ariès or Ernest Becker, the idea of a sense of death deviating towards the idea of a simplification of the meaning of death, a fact that Patrick Baudry explains in a penetrating manner referring to the refusal of death.²

The idea that death has meaning, that it is an implacable necessity of nature and its species appears in multiple areas of the human discourse. In literature – in writings such as Jose Saramago's *Death with Interruptions*,³ Simone de Beauvoir's *Tous les hommes sont mortels*⁴ or even *Vincent the Immortal*⁵ by Bogdan Suceavă or *The Great Portrait* written by Dino Buzzati⁶ – there is a dark portrayal of immortality in order to attain catharsis and a semantic toning of death, like the reality that is subjected to it.⁷

¹ Bachelard, *Pământul și reveriile odihnei* (*Earth and Reveries*).

² Baudry, *Devant le cadavre*, 19-29. Baudry, *La place des morts. Enjeux et rites*.

³ José Saramago, *Intermitențele morții* (*Death with Interruptions*), translation from Portuguese by Georgiana Bărbulescu (Iași: Polirom, 2007).

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *Toți oamenii sunt muritori* (*Tous les hommes sont mortels*) (*All Men are Mortal*), translation by Florica-Eugenia Condurachi (Bucharest: Editura Univers, 2008 [1946]).

⁵ Bogdan Suceavă, *Vincent nemuritorul* (*Vincent the Immortal*) (Bucharest: Curtea-Veche, 2008).

⁶ Dino Buzzati, *Marele portret* (*The Great Portrait*), translation and afterword by Cornel Mihai Ionescu (Iași: Polirom, 2003 [1960]).

⁷ Most times the immortality painted onto literary works suffers – and we do not want to suggest that it would affect their literary value – from artificiality and a tendentious character. Certain aspects are considered viable in the world imagined under the sign of immortality, the only parameter which is modified is the fact that death does not take place anymore. Everything else is like a puzzle with a missing piece, without reconfiguring something else in its place but to send nonsense from that missing piece. For example in *Death with Interruptions* there is no death, but

Augustin Dercrois ties this *cursing of immortality*, specific to literature, to another immortality myth, the myth of self-perpetuation through art¹. In theoretical discourse, even in the one that focuses on death, the myth of death's meaning is frequently encountered. We have previously named two examples: Robert Kastenbaum and Jean Ziegler. We can put Umberto Eco next to them, who in his contribution for *Encyclopédie des savoirs et des croyances*,² after naming the disadvantages of death, is disgusted by the image of an immortality that would prevent him from having children, an intellectual environment meant to cultivate creativity and the immortality which would basically be a crowded room, in which nobody could fit anymore, in which the pleasure of reading would lose meaning and parents and children would compete for space, etc.³

In scientific and pseudo-scientific discourse, the symbolic construction of necessary death has known high levels of recognition due to recent cellular biology research. This is a continuation of Darwinism which already made Mircea Florian state that: “the pronounced preference for the thesis: death is destined to life; death is not an accident of life, it is a vital necessity, a stage of life,”⁴ but also bring other ingredients in the construction of a meaningful model of death.⁵ The discovery of self-destruction or programmed cellular suicide, a phenomenon which, most probably, dates back to the first stages of evolution, has determined to creation of a vision, more acute, of the usefulness of death for life. The term apoptosis is the one which is used most often in order to describe programmed self-destruction, because it means *falling upward*, and it was used in ancient Greece to refer to leaves falling on flower petals during Autumn – suggesting the transformations the cell suffers when it activates self-destruction –, but also the term that refers to any type of cellular death. Jean-Claude Ameisen states that using the word in perfect synonymy with programmed cellular death has resulted in confusion between “molecular executors responsible for death and elements which can simply be involved in transformations which accompany self-destruction without causing it.”⁶ Simpler, apoptosis is a cellular death that works as a regulatory mechanism

disease and physical degradation still exist. In *All Men are Immortal*, death disappears, but temporality persists, and even more so becomes traumatic.

¹ Dercrois, *Immortalité*, 558.

² Umberto Eco, *Sur les inconvénients et les avantages de la mort*, in Lenoir andde Tonnac, eds., *La mort et l'immortalité*, 1666.

³ Notice the similarities with the literary imaginary of immortality, mentioned above.

⁴ Florian, *Experiența ca principiu de reconstrucție filozofică*, 268.

⁵ Significant to the scientific discourse participating in the construction, from modern positions, of a myth regarding the meaning of death would be W. Donner Denckla's work, “A time to die,” *Life Sciences*, Volume 16, Issue 1, January, (1975): 31-34. He proposes a theory of death and states that the life span of mammals is managed by an internal biological clock which acts on the endocrine glands by determining them to act destructively on the immune and circulatory systems. He launches the idea that the body can control its destruction.

⁶ Ameisen, *La mort au coeur du vivant*, 31. According to Ameisen, recent research from 1995 manages to highlight through experimental facts that in the presence of imminent danger eukaryotic unicellular organisms have the capacity to self-destruct. Thus, Weisman's argument that death is an acquisition of evolution, of cellular complexity is contradicted and it is demonstrated that death is always present in life. Moreover, the myth of a golden age comes crashing down after this discovery.

and manifests itself through cellular self-destruction, for multi-cellular organisms, its role is to stop the proliferation of their cells, it is not equivalent to programmed cellular death in general.¹ It was discovered – re-discovered actually, according to Ameisen's explanations by Glucksmann, in 1950, and the name apoptosis has been registered around 1970.² In 1990 it was discovered that the ability to self-destruct is present in all cells throughout their existence.³ Apoptosis does not create lesions in the cells which it convinces to commit suicide, something similar to an implosion takes place, the entire process is similar to scissors (the role of some proteins) cutting the cell into small pieces. While it dies, it emits a signal that determines neighbouring cells to *cover up its death*.⁴ Apoptosis has a fundamental role during the embryonic and foetal development, in structuring the central nervous system and the immune system, disturbances in the process and its pathology allows the majority of cancer types and auto-immune diseases but also nervous or immune system degeneration.⁵ Ameisen talks about a new dimension of significance for the notion of death – “Aged images of death, like a scythe, coming from outside to destroy what was imposed on a cellular level, at least, a new image, belonging to a sculptor, in the heart of the living, at work in the emergence of the form and its complexity”⁶ – and the changes taking place on the level of the bio-social imaginary: “We are cellular societies in which each component lives in delay, and in which neither can survive on its own.”⁷

Deconstructing the Meaning of Death

Jean Claude Ameisen is not only the one who notices the mutation of death in the imaginary, through the contamination with the scientific model of programmed death, but is also the one who notices the critique of radicalising this internalisation of death, whose consequence is the conception of the meaning of death. The danger pointed out by the researcher is the application of an erroneous discourse, with ethical connotations, biological processes which include cellular death and, the other way round, biologizing the discourse⁸ targeting life in general. Cellular suicide cannot be categorized as being

¹ Hafida Djemni, *Mort cellulaire programmée*, ed. di Folco, *Dictionnaire de la mort*, 707-710. Programmed cellular death has two types: apoptosis and necrosis.

² John F. Kerr, et al., “Apoptosis: a Basic Biological Phenomenon with Wide-Ranging Implications in Tissue Kinetics,” *British Journal of Cancer* 26 (1976): 239–257.

³ Ameisen, *La mort au coeur du vivant*, 32.

⁴ Jean Claude Ameisen, “La sculpture du vivant. Propos recueillis par Olivier Postel-Vinay,” *La Recherche*, n. 338, January (2001).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 709.

⁶ Ameisen, *La mort au coeur du vivant*, 17–18. In order to offer some examples, cellular death is what separates the fingers of birds living on the ground, while it leaves the skin between the fingers of birds living in an aquatic environment intact. The human embryo has, in its first stages, a sort of caricature for both genital organs, male and female, while later on, depending on the genetic gender, the sketches of the surplus gender die. The same thing happens in human embryos to the tail which attests the evolution of species.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸ The danger is greater because there was a social form of biologization during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when there were attempts to apply the Darwinist idea of natural selection on a social and political level See: Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello, *Istoria*

altruistic – favouring other cells or cellular groups, just like the absence of self-destruction cannot be egoistic. The reduction of one level of reality to another, collapsing their diversity into a pseudo-moralistic paste involves a deformation of reality, whose main characteristic is plurality, variety. Ameisen explains this fact as follows: “Etymologically exact (suicide means to kill yourself) the concept of «cellular suicide» is ambiguous, especially through its anthropomorphic implications. It suggests the notion of a decision, of a form of free will, favouring the confusion between the act of killing yourself, which is done effectively, the cell uses the executors it possesses, and the ways in which this act is activated, which depend on its environment”¹ and, so that it is even clearer: “Thus, when Socrates drinks hemlock, he kills himself, but he is not the one who decides to die, the Athenian collective is.”² Cellular suicide is not the equivalent of human suicide and only covers a small part of the vast and difficult concept of suicide. Similarly, programmed cell death is also not synonymous to human death and is never the *death we die of per se*. Also regarding the confusion between discourses between the mortality of biology and the biologization of morals, Ameisen rejects the use of an ethicist vocabulary in describing biological phenomena – a vocabulary which we can consider a sign of social pressures and norms that are connected to symbolic death through children: “Do the mother-cells sacrifice themselves in an «altruistic» fashion, for the benefit of survival for the daughter-cells? Or are the daughter-cells the ones which, in a selfish manner, force the mother-cells to keep the molecules which lead to their end? This question, the way it is asked, makes no sense, and we must avoid becoming victims of the temptation to use anthropomorphic terms and concepts, or concepts which can be used to describe conscious animals, such as «altruism» or «egoism» from which the notions of project and intentionality emerge.”³ Ameisen’s initiative – to determine the limits between necessity and constraint, between action and a programme of action – , but especially an initiative to separate levels of reality, to eliminate the metaphors from a level of biology which is similar to the one undertaken by Susan Sontag in *Illness as a Metaphor*,⁴ where it is shown that scientific, pseudo-scientific and popular myths have contributed, influencing the other ones, to over-interpretations of certain diseases such as cancer, tuberculosis and AIDS. The mechanism behind this *drowning in meaning*, as they are called by Sontag, is simple: because neither the individuals affected by them, nor the specialists which should treat them can find their cause, certain theories are elaborated – which are actually myths, in order to mask the lack of meaning which is in fact the true problem with these diseases. And because necessity is a facet of meaning, even though it is not meaning itself, Ameisen continues the deconstruction of the myth regarding the necessity of death: “The fact that earth has been spinning around the sun for a long time does not determine

corpului. Vol III: Mutațiile privirii. Secolul XX (History of the Body) (L’histoire du corps [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2006]), translation from French by Simona Manolache, Mihaela Arnat, Muguraș Constantinescu, Giuliano Sfichi (Bucharest: Editura Art, 2009).

¹ Ameisen, *La mort au coeur du vivant*, 29. (our translation)

² Ibid., 30. (our translation)

³ Ibid., 40. (our translation)

⁴ Susan Sontag, *Boala ca metaforă. SIDA și metaforele ei (Illness as a Metaphor. AIDS and Its Metaphors)* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1995 [1978, 1988]).

us to imagine that Earth expresses a «need» or an «interest» to spin, or that it is its «purpose» or that this trajectory is an evolutionary «success» for our planet or for the sun. Why must we be convinced that the voyage of bacteria – to which we do not attribute any consciousness or intentions – towards a more favourable environment shows the «interest», the «need» it has in order to avoid its demise?”¹

Klarsfeld and Revah go along the same direction of subtracting the myth out of the biological necessity of death. As Patrick Dupouey points out in his analysis of the book written by the two researchers, *Biologie de la mort*,² it is not an easy task, because the variants of the myth of death are numerous, starting with the divine sanction of Genesis and continuing with rationalistic and biological theories of constant and immanent aging.³ “How many advantages death has!”⁴, says Patrick Dupouey ironically, and how important among them are avoiding overpopulation and obstacles in the way of evolution. Klarsfeld and Revah are not intimidated by these malicious stereotypes, and dismantle them meticulously, starting with the general premise according to which: “the existence of aging and natural death does not take place because of a certain advantage it gives to individuals or species. With the risk of putting this in a simplistic form, natural death has no value in itself: its existence comes from the biological uselessness of repair systems which prevent aging.”⁵ In fact, the researchers say, even potentially immortal organisms can be victims of death from external causes.

Far from contesting evolutionist ideas, the authors want to get rid of labels with social and ethical messages: the moral explanation cannot be moulded onto the biological description. Put this way, the problem truly does seem easy to understand, nature can show us what we are, but not what we can or want or should be. Regardless if we accept death as a base element of nature in the shape of an accident, or in the shape of immanence, nature’s pedagogy is null and should, according to the authors, be treated as such.

Likewise, drawing the conclusion of a necessity of death starting with the laws of thermodynamics which apply to inanimate objects is an exaggeration, and, again, a simplification. Human bodies are not subject to the laws of entropy, not in the classical sense at least, because they are open systems which are not defined by balance. Not even the Century of Light, which, being rational by definition, should have given meaning to death, a hidden usefulness, is not free from Klarsfeld and Revah’s criticism. Basically, what unites old and new theories about the biological necessity of death is, in a critical perspective, *the utilitarian obstacle*,⁶ as it is called by the two authors. “In order to

¹ Ameisen, *La mort au coeur du vivant*, 41. (our translation)

² André Klarsfeld, Frédéric Revah, *Biologie de la mort*.

³ Patrick Dupouey, ed., *La mort*, 61–63.

⁴ Ibid., 62.

⁵ Klarsfeld, Revah, *Biologie de la mort*, 240–253.

⁶ The Romanian philosopher, Mircea Florian notices starting with 1935 that a myth regarding the necessity of death is farther from a serene acceptance of death than could be interpreted, and closer to hiding an attempt to tame death, through unassuming semantics, a utility which would integrate it in the logic of life. Apparently paradoxical, in this situation “man follows the same goal: shrinking the value of death up to the denial of its existence and he is pushed by the same natural resort: not the fear of oblivion, but the fear of life coming to an end”. (Florian, *Experiența ca principiu de reconstrucție filozofică*, (*Experience as a Means of Philosophical Reconstruction*) 270.)

accept the existence of forces that are hostile towards us, attributing a utility, a higher value to them weighs more than the risk of studying them objectively.”¹

Conclusions

The way these two authors end the discussion regarding the necessity of death coincides in large part with the way in which, we would like to end this paper. If the two researchers express their suspicion and reluctance regarding the moralizing recovery of biological data for death and nature – because, after all the analyses, it becomes obvious that biology “rejects the category of a natural death, a utility which allows for virtues to be found and would thus offer a consolation”² – they do not deny that the meaning of death, in a *human* sense, truly exists, but finding it could be more probable in other areas of reality and with the help of other fields than biology, fields such as philosophy and theology.

We have tried to show how the resort of this important type of symbolic immortality, as products/strategies of the relationship between man and death, are, at a personal level, but maybe more collectively, inserted in and determined by the general mechanism of human culture and civilisation, both understood in their diversity and variations, temporal and spatial, regarding their configuration and the way they function. Death is difficult, torn between the generality of its shapes and, on the other hand, the incommunicable particularity of its content. That is why its meaning coagulates itself between the two poles, and implicitly, immortality as a result of death’s cultural denial, in its quality as a structure of symbolic resistance suffers the same shortcomings of helplessness to create the saving average between generality and particularity. The situation with the competing myth, the necessity of death for human life and the world, is almost the same – but, as we were able to observe, that is only the way things look on the surface. Thus, it is important to take into consideration the conventionality – submerged, that inconspicuously separates and also confuses, without perfectly homogenizing, death from its images, and more importantly from its imaginary. But the risk that an immortality construct has when it comes to earning oppressive valences should not be disregarded. In fewer words, like Klarsfeld and Revah, who deconstruct the myth of death’s necessity, but recognize the resistance of a meaning of death which needs to be discovered on a more intimate level, we did not want to deny the necessity of a meaning belonging to death, we wanted to attract attention towards the idea that it might only partially be located, and eventually distorted, in the myth pertaining to the necessity of death, the way we wanted to negate the benefits of symbolic immortality constructs, especially immortality through nature, and also signal the fact that their precariousness exists. Myths, the symbols to which death urges offer value to what Louis-Vincent Thomas stated: the power of death resides, mainly, on the level of the imaginary.³ In which discourses from various fields merge, whether they are artistic or scientific and which also produce dynamics and re-configurations of the imaginary of death.⁴ The imaginary – and this is generally valid,

¹ Klarsfeld and Revah, *Biologie de la mort*. (our translation)

² Ibid. (our translation)

³ Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Mort et pouvoir* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1999), 47.

⁴ Cf.: Jacques Pierre, “Le statut de l’imaginaire: Approche sémiotique”, in *Religiologiques: Le statut de l’imaginaire dans l’oeuvre de Gilbert Durand* (sous la direction de Jacques Pierre), 1, printemps, (1990).

not only regarding the imaginary of death – accompanies, pre-forms, pre-conditions any research, just so that it then will be the terminated one, the one on which the research exerts its influence.¹ Moreover, the imaginary, as shown by Gilbert Durand in his famous book, is a continuous attempt to avoid meeting the unavoidable reality of death, a defensive reaction, an active counter-representation of death. Thus, we cannot have complete trust either in the imaginary or in reality. Suspicions and a critical spirit remain, basically, the only ways in which we can come closer, without taming and compensating, to the theme of death and human mortality.

¹ Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Dunod, 2006 [1960]).