

Death Representations in Literature

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Forms and Theories

Edited by

Adriana Teodorescu

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Is Literature a <i>Slap in The Face of Death</i> ?	1
<i>Adriana Teodorescu</i>	

Theories and Poetics of Death in Literature

The Paradox of Mortality: Death and Perpetual Denial.....	8
<i>Devaleena Kundu</i>	

Writing in the Shadow of Death: Proust, Barthes, Tuszyńska.....	24
<i>Agnieszka Kaczmarek</i>	

Bringing Death to Words when Poetizing	42
<i>Dorin Ștefănescu</i>	

Death Representation in Literature: Cultural Illusions and Theoretical Principles	54
<i>Adriana Teodorescu</i>	

From Early Modern Literature to Realism

Death Representation in French Early Modern Tragedies.....	76
<i>Johana Porcu-Adams</i>	

“This Salutary Remedy”: Female Suicide and the Novel as Pharmakon in Riccoboni’s <i>Histoire de M. le Marquis de Cressy</i> and Rousseau’s <i>La Nouvelle Héloïse</i>	97
<i>Ekaterina R. Alexandrova</i>	

Necro-Transcendence / Necro-Naturalism: Philosophy of Life in the Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson	117
<i>Ingrid Fernandez</i>	

Death and Democracy in American Realism.....	138
<i>Andrew Bibby</i>	

“The Little World of Poverty”: Dread and Death in the Victorian Workhouse.....	157
<i>Amber Cobb Vazquez</i>	

Modern Literature

Literary Representations of Death in Albert Camus’ Writing: Mortality as the Keystone of Existence	176
<i>Sofia Chatzipetrou</i>	

Beloved Presence, Painful Absence: Women Coming to Terms with Death in German First World War Novels	191
<i>Erika Quinn</i>	

Expressionist Death Images and the Feminine Other: Oskar Kokoschka’s <i>Mörder Hoffnung der Frauen</i> (1907) and Hugo Von Hofmannsthal’s <i>Elektra</i> (1903).....	207
<i>Rosa J.H. Berland</i>	

Postmodern and Popular Literature

Representations of Death and Topoi in Mishima Yukio’s <i>Yūkoku</i> (<i>Patriotism</i>)	228
<i>Thomas Garcin</i>	

Death in Jean Echenoz’s Novels.....	246
<i>Dominique Faria</i>	

The Perpetual Desire to Perish	262
<i>Hemlata Giri</i>	

The Benefits of Dying in the World of Superheroes	281
<i>Jean-Pierre Thomas</i>	

Once Upon a Time: Understanding Death During Childhood through Fairy Tales.....	301
<i>Cristina Douglas</i>	

Violent Death in <i>Paraloges</i> Songs: Aspects of Murderesses and Female Victims.....	323
<i>Maria Alvanou</i>	

Interferences and Comparatives Approaches

<i>Death is but The Next Great Adventure: Representations of Death and the Afterlife in Fantastic Literature for Children and Young Adults</i>	340
<i>Karin Kokorski</i>	
<i>Death as Symptom in Wagner's Parsifal</i>	359
<i>Aura Poenar</i>	
<i>The Many Faces of Death in Modest Mussorgsky's The Songs and Dances of Death</i>	374
<i>Anna G. Piotrowska</i>	
<i>Death and the Maiden in 20th Century Literature and Visual Arts</i>	389
<i>Silvia Marin-Barutcieff</i>	
<i>Pictures of Death Envisioned by Literary Memoirs</i>	410
<i>Florina Codreanu</i>	
<i>Contributors</i>	421
<i>Index</i>	428

IS LITERATURE A *SLAP IN THE FACE* *OF DEATH*?¹

ADRIANA TEODORESCU

If the academic field of *death studies* is a prosperous one, there still seems to be a lack of interest and a level of mistrust concerning the capacity of literature to provide socially relevant information about death and to help improve the anthropological understanding of how culture is shaped by the human condition of mortality. Furthermore, academically but also from a common sense perspective, the relationship between literature and death tends to be trivialized, in the sense that death representations are interpreted in an over-aestheticized manner. What derives from such an approach is:

- a) a propensity to consider death in literature to be significant only for literary studies (studies that focus only on death as a literary theme with no anchors in the social reality)
- b) the rise of certain persistent clichés such as the power of literature *per se* to annihilate death – the literature and the representation of death in literature as a *slap in the face of death*².

The volume aims at overcoming these stereotypes and at revealing the great potential of literary studies to provide fresh and accurate ways of interrogating death as a steady and unavoidable human reality and as an ever-continuing socio-cultural construction. In addition, the volume intends to fill the void created in the interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary field of *death studies* by the sharp decrease of publications on death

¹ This work was supported by the Romanian National Council for Scientific Research CNCS-UEFISCDI, under grant number [54/2011 – PNII TE].

² Drillon, Jacques. 2004. “L’œuvre est une non-mort à elle seule” [The Literary Work is Non-Death by Itself]. In *La mort et l’immortalité. Encyclopédie des savoirs et des croyances* [Death and Immortality. An Encyclopedia of Knowledge and Beliefs], edited by Frédéric Lenoir and Jean-Philippe De Tonnac, 967–979. Paris: Bayard.

representations in literature (the last major contribution was in 1993, focused rather on representation as a cultural process than on death³).

The general approach of the volume is interdisciplinary. The basic explanation for that is double. First of all, the volume wanted to avoid the risk of extreme “literaturization” of death (*id est* of making death a “text figure”) and subsequently the risk of editing a sort of literary critique book. Secondly, an interdisciplinary approach is almost inherent, due to the fact that death itself is a complex, “unsaturated” research object that requires multiple perspectives in order for one to grasp (never completely) its meanings.

The target audience of this volume encompasses not only the researchers interested in death studies, but also the ones with a literary interest and specialists in cultural studies, sociology, history, and anthropology.

The volume brings together researchers from various countries – the USA, the UK, France, Poland, New Zealand, Canada, India, Germany, Greece, and Romania –, with different academic backgrounds in fields as diverse as literature, art history, social studies, criminology, musicology, and cultural studies. It has five sections. Three sections diachronically indicate the important cultural and historical periods of time that shaped the attitudes towards death and dying in different, typical ways: From Early Modern Literature to Realism (five contributions), Modern Literature (three contributions), Postmodern and Popular Literature (six contributions). In addition, there are two more sections: a section dedicated to theoretical and meta-textual approaches of death in literature (four contributions) and a section that hosts the comparative analyses that cannot be limited to a certain period or interference analyses between literature and other fields such as music and visual arts (five contributions).

The book provides answers to questions such as the following:

What are the features of death representations (patterns, socio-literary functions) in certain literary genres?

To this question the following researchers provide enticing answers: Johana Porcu-Adams (who discusses the specificity of early modern French tragedies, imbued with violence), Maria Alvanou (who focuses on the images of women as victims or murderers in folkloric Greek songs called “Paraloges”), Karin Kokorski (who analyses writings pertaining to fantastic literature, such as the books from the *Harry Potter* series) or Jean-Pierre Thomas (interested in the psychological and social benefits of

³ Goodwin, Sarah Webster and Elizabeth Bronfen, eds. 1993. *Death and Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

the death of superheroes as illustrated in many famous Western comic books).

How is death represented in Asian literature? Is there anything specific (cultural patterns)?

Thomas Garcin offers an in-depth analysis of Mishima Yukio's work, stressing out his capacity of renewing and challenging the modern, classical and stereotypical Japanese representations of death.

Is it possible to speak of an homogeneous vision of death and dying in the case of some literary movements?

Both Amber Cobb Vazquez and Andrew Bibby investigate the manner in which death is constructed within literary realism, reflecting and also criticizing important political and economic aspects of the envisaged historical periods. Amber Cobb Vazquez is interested in British realism, while Andrew Bibby in American realism.

How do people (writers or not) perceive, imagine and describe their death through their personal diaries or how do they metabolize the death of the "significant others" through their writings?

At this difficult question some answers are offered by Florina Codreanu, who compares the diaries of Leon Tolstoy with the autobiographical writings of Ernesto Sabato, by Agnieszka Kaczmarek, who deals with the representations of grief and loss of the beloved ones in Roland Barthes, Marcel Proust and polish writer Agata Tuszynska or by Ingrid Fernandez who proposes the concept of necro-transcendence as fundamental for the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his psychological need of conserving the corpses of his "significant others".

To what extent does the literary representation of death refer to the extra-fictional, socio-historically constructed "Death"?

Death in the German First War novels is only apparently, as Erika Quinn points out, veiled in absence, consequence of the social demand of silent mourning imposed to widows. If it is sure that death in literature establishes connections with the related extra-fictional attitudes towards death, this is done in unexpected, sometimes paradoxical ways, as shown by Ekaterina R. Alexandrova, who explores the hidden meaning of death in two novels from French Eighty Century and Rosa J.H. Berland who looks into the Viennese expressionist death as it is reflected in the dramatic literature of Von Hofmannsthal and Kokoschka

Is it moral to represent death in children's literature or are there any aesthetic and moral constraints?

This is another difficult question that finds some appealing answers in the studies of Cristina Douglas and Karin Kokorski. For example, Cristina Douglas proposes a psychological and anthropological approach of the

Romanian popular fairy tales. A special attention is given to the contribution of death representations in strengthening the psycho-cultural connections between the children and the community to which they belong.

What are the differences and similarities between representing death in literature and death representations in other connected fields?

Silvia Marin Barutcieff examines the similarities between the postmodern literary representations of “Death and the Maiden” cultural motif, rooted in the Medieval “Dance of Death” and its representations in the contemporary visual arts. Aura Poenar is interested in the visual representation of death in Richard Wagner’s “Parsifal”, as it is staged by director F. Girard for the Metropolitan Opera in 2013. Anna G. Piotrowska highlights how the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky managed to transfer into musical language the poems written by Arseny Kutuzov.

Are metaphors and literary representations of death expressions of death denial or, on the contrary, a more insightful way of capturing the meaning of death?

Two of the studies that offer answers to this question are focused rather on theoretical aspects of what it means to represent death in literature. Devaleena Kundu seeks to see if the concept of “death denial” is valid in literature and how the concept of “paradox of mortality” is literary illustrated in comparison with its social configurations. Adriana Teodorescu places the representation of death in literature between the cultural illusion of taming and conquering death and the deconstruction of the theoretical principals that underpin these illusions. Dorin Ștefănescu on the other hand, provides a phenomenological answer, by analyzing the representations of death in the poems of the postmodern author, Mircea Ivănescu.

How do authors represent death in their work? Do they have the same vision on death and dying throughout?

To this question, the answers are to be found in the researches of Sofia Chatzipetrou, concerned with the representation of death in Albert Camus’ literary works, Hemlata Giri, who tries to explain why death plays such an important role in the literary writings of Michel Houellebecq, or Dominique Faria, whose analysis on contemporary French writer Jean Echenoz reveals the existence of three stages in representing death dependent on the author’s psychological evolution.

Literature and death representation in literature might not always be *slaps in the face of death*; at least not in a victorious, shallow sense. There are good literary works and bad literary works; not all of them conquer an artistic immortality. Memorable characters from very well known literary writings that are susceptible of being labeled as authentic characters or framed into what could be called the literary paradigm of “slapping death”, like Romeo and Juliette (Shakespeare), Ivan Ilych (Tolstoy), Emma Bovary (Flaubert) or Meursault (Camus), they all die. They are the ones who are slapped by death. We must never take for granted the idea – popular among some scholars and even more among segments of pop culture influenced by death studies – according to which the authenticity of the being, encountered or regained in the acceptance of one’s own death/mortal nature (of the characters, of the reader through characters) leads automatically to the defeat of death. Furthermore, extending this ontological and literary perspective on death to a social one, the opposite of “death denial” does not necessarily render humanity happier and it is not such an obvious solution for coping with Other’s death.

Nevertheless, being able to observe the ways in which Death is represented involves awareness and knowledge in relation to the complex and multilayered reality of death, thus empowerment, no matter how partial and limited. From this perspective, studying the representations of death in literature, their aesthetical and their social, anthropological, philosophical, psychological and historical implications, may function as a temporary, cultural – and, why not, scholarly – *slap in the face of death*; a slap that at the same time rebounds in the face of life. Our life. So that we can wake up.

I want to thank the people without whom this volume would not have been possible: my husband, Lucian Teodorescu, who helped me, as always, with his excellent advice and with his special ability of “taming” any Word document; my friend and colleague Marius Rotar, from “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, Romania, who encouraged me to go further with this project; Andreea Blaga, from Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania and “Jean Moulin Lyon 3” University of Lyon, France, for her precious help in the evaluation process, and, last but not least, Melania Duma and Greg Douglas, for their accurate and very intelligent proofreading.

**THEORIES AND POETICS OF DEATH
IN LITERATURE**

THE PARADOX OF MORTALITY: DEATH AND PERPETUAL DENIAL

DEVALEENA KUNDU

"We shall die... You... are dying... have died... I shall die."
—Carlos Fuentes, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*

Abstract: *Literary discourses often seek to explore the emotional motley experienced by individuals while encountering death and dying. Representations by literary artists offer a virtual space wherein readers partake of the conclusive episode in a character's lived experience. However, does a reader in the process imagine and accept his/her own cessation? Or does it always have to be an "other" being at whose death we are present as voyeurs? Freud in his 1918 work "Reflections on War and Death" observed: "We cannot, indeed, imagine our own death; whenever we try to do so we find that we survive ourselves as spectators." While we recognize death as the annihilation of others, we take the possibility of our own demise as somehow being unnatural. We engage in a death denial syndrome which for instance becomes the basis of the story by Leo Tolstoy titled "The Death of Ivan Ilych". This paper is a study of the literary representations of an intrinsic human tendency leaning towards denial whose basis might be social rather than purely an instinctual inclination. How do literary works perceive the truth of transience? Do these representations serve as a complementary projection of reality and reveal the socio-cultural repercussions of anthropological claims to immortality? Can literature aid in overcoming the existential dread associated with the notions of death and dying? By evoking both the aesthetic and the pathological notions of death as represented in certain select literary works, this paper looks at the paradox of mortality and the role of literature in creating a forensic field that seeks to understand and acknowledge death as the unavoidable, all pervasive entity. The paper challenges the clichéd envisioning of death as the grim reaper and replaces it with a perception of death as the rounding off of an eventful life. The argument will be substantiated by references made in particular to Karel Čapek's play *The Makropulos Affair* (1922), José Saramago's*

novel Death at Intervals (2008), and Carlos Fuentes's novel The Death of Artemio Cruz (1962), all directed at understanding the literature on death as means to interpret what it is to be mortal.

Keywords: *mortality paradox, death denial, social death, existential dread, immortality*

Revisiting the history of denial

Exchanging finitude for eternal life has been a dominant leitmotif in the literature of death. Tales of attempted immortality populate histories of ancient civilizations, particularly the Chinese and the Egyptian. Consumed by the dread of death – post-Freudian psychoanalysts traced the origins of this fear back to the narcissus compulsion¹ – Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, sent expeditions across the eastern seas in search of the fabled potion of life. It is indeed ironic that his untimely death was the result of the frequent consumption of supposed life-extending concoctions.² Recently unearthed artifacts of his tomb suggest that its creation was equally a part of his larger plan of outliving death. Constructed in the manner of an underground palace, the tomb was “an ostentatious display of funereal megalomania”³ (Portal 2007, 162). Perhaps the emperor was

¹ The problem of narcissism has attracted immense clinical research in recent times. While Freud's 1914 essay, “On Narcissism: An introduction” sets the fundamental theories of narcissism – Freud discusses the issue from a libidinal context and connects it to the “purpose of self-preservation” (his use of the term “megalomania” is also significant); it was the work of the post-Freudian analysts that developed and examined it as a personality style and disorder. Otto F. Kernberg notes that patients with overt symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder hold on to their “grandiose self” (Kernberg borrowed the term from Kohut), “grandiose fantasies” and “exhibitionistic demands” (Kernberg 1975). Kernberg further observes: “Such ‘self-idealization’ usually implies magical fantasies of omnipotence, the conviction that he, the patient, will eventually receive all the gratification that he is entitled to, and that he cannot be touched by frustrations, illness, death”. In other words, the patients exhibit an intense denial of the reality of “frail, limited and transitory nature of human life” (Kernberg 1975, 311). Since the recorded behaviour of the Chinese Emperor also manifests some of these narcissistic traits, we could conclude that he suffered from this disorder. For further reference see: (Kohut 1966, Green 2001).

² The potions apparently contained toxic elements such as mercury, arsenic and lead, frequent consumptions of which not only cause biological deformities but at times prove fatal. The emperor's physicians had mistaken them to be the ingredients of immortality-inducing drugs.

³ The tomb contained extensive bronze carvings, including life-like statues of the army, to replicate Qin's entire empire. It also had illustrations of the cosmos,

trying to ensure his rule even in the afterlife. This preoccupation with post-death sustenance gets reflected also via the customary Egyptian practice of mummification. Mummies were a mode of memorial carry over and therefore had a value at par with other artistic representations of the dead. They were believed to preserve the hope of resuscitation and assure an overall continuity in the afterlife. Yet, having domesticated the verity of death, the Egyptians continued to be visibly unsettled by it.

Studies of Egyptian mortuary lingo validate their sepulchral anxiety. Dr. Ogden Goelet writes:

the very name given to the funerary workshops [in Egypt was]... – *Per-Ankh*, “The House of Life”. The idea behind such euphemisms involved more than not speaking ill of the dead... To mention death would be to confirm death’s power over the departed (Goelet 1998, 150)

One essential objective of the death narratives then is to act as subliminal ways of naturalizing the fear of death and dying. Such chronicles often portray the human understanding of death not merely as gateway to the inescapable unknown, but also as a channel for psychological reconciliation with human physical frailties. The myth of Gilgamesh gives an elementary insight into the matrix of emotional tussles which supplement death in the ancient world: as the hero grieves over the death of his friend Enkidu, he is forced to confront his own fears of annihilation. He realizes that mortality is the ethos of being human: “I am going to die! am I not like Enkidu?! / Deep sadness penetrates my core, / I fear death” (Kovacs 1989, 32). His fear ensues from perceiving death as the invisible, invincible force “that snaps off mankind” (Kovacs 1989, 42). The inaccessibility and nullity of transience is what makes death an object to be feared.

Death is conceived as an enemy or an “evil” that calls for repression, and literature is littered with such unfounded renditions. Plato’s recounting of Socrates’ defense in his *Apology* challenges this archetypal cognitive fallacy:

this fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being the appearance of knowing the unknown; since no one knows whether death, which they in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil,

presumably, to affirm the emperor’s universal status. Besides, it was believed that mercuric reproductions of the major streams (including the Yellow river and the Yangtze) were mechanically fashioned to flow into a vast quicksilver sea. Scientific surveys revealing abnormal concentration of mercury in the central part of the tomb have further substantiated this belief.

may not be the greatest good. Is there not here conceit of knowledge, which is a disgraceful sort of ignorance? (Plato n.d.)

As human intelligibility cannot penetrate the post-death territory, there exists a factual vacuum that does not allow death to be weighed on moral scales. Hence, perturbations rooted in such dismal want of holistic knowledge can only be partially justified. In the defense therefore, Socrates proposes alternative views of death, as “a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or... a change and migration of the soul from this world to another”, neither of which would rationalize the fear. However, it must be noted that the ethical grounds of Socrates’ questionings of this fear stemmed from his belief in the afterlife and the eternity of the soul,⁴ a stance that till date remains highly contested.

Decoding the paradox

It was much later that Freud, in negotiating with the problem of death denial, attested that the human inability to conceive of a state of non-being is what catalyzes the fear of death.⁵ His proposition developed the Cartesian postulation “cogito ergo sum” into an understanding of death as a form of reduced spectatorship. Freud (1915) observed:

⁴ Socrates’ theory of the immortality of the soul is most prominently exemplified in Plato’s *Phaedo* (known to ancient readers as “On the Soul”). For Socrates, death meant that “the soul [could exist] in herself, and [was] released from the body and the body was released from the soul.” He also believed that “the living [sprang] from the dead, and that the souls of the dead [were] in existence” in the “other world”. A similar line of thought had existed even amongst the Pre-Socratic philosophers – Pythagoras, in particular, had proposed the theory of metempsychosis – and Socrates could perhaps be drawing upon the existing philosophical tradition. Also see Plato’s *Phaedrus* and Book X of *Republic*.

⁵ Incidents of self-destruction such as suicides would, however, be an exception. In such cases the individual could perhaps be viewing the act of self-inflicted cessation as the ultimate mode of taking control over his/her life. While the existentialists perceived suicide as a choice forged by the absurdity and meaninglessness of human life, the psychoanalysts surveyed it as the product of the tensions between the instincts. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920), Freud makes a sharp distinction between the ‘ego-instincts’ and the sexual instincts on the grounds that “the former exercise pressure towards death and the latter towards a prolongation of life”. According to Freud (1923), the death instinct performed the task of leading “organic life back into the inanimate state”. Post-Freudian analysts have also associated suicidal tendencies to narcissistic personality disorder. Also see: (Frankl 1992)

It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators.⁶

Imagining an annihilated self would only affirm that the individual is still present as an observing and thinking being. Thus, human thought processes act as psychological barriers to experiencing death truly. As terminal experience, death remains a phenomenon that cannot be shared. A holistic knowledge of it can only be achieved by the dying, if at all. The survivors are but onlookers with only relative access to the actuality of the event. This gap between the Actual World of the survivors and the Possible World of the dead leads to the creation of a symbolic order that would moderately allow the living to overcome the existential dread of dying.

In Stephen Cave's words, this creates a "mortality paradox", an intrinsic behavioral anomaly that propels us to invent techniques of postponing death while also adopting manners to manage those deaths that we do encounter. In exploring the pre-historical quarters of this ancient impulse, in his work *Immortality* (2012) Cave offers four narratives to resolve the paradox – "Staying Alive", "Resurrection", "Soul", and "Legacy". Of these, the "Resurrection" and the "Soul" narratives presuppose death as journey into the other world. Foregrounded in the cyclical notion of time⁷, "Resurrection"

⁶ Freud echoes the words that were accredited to Goethe by Johann Peter Eckermann – "It is quite impossible for a thinking being to imagine nonbeing, a cessation of thought and life. In this sense, everyone carries the proof of his own immortality within himself." It should also be noted that to Freud (1926) the fear of death was a derivative of "the fear of castration". He also maintained: "Our habit is to lay stress on the fortuitous causation of the death – accident, disease, infection, advanced age; in this way we betray an effort to reduce death from a necessity to a chance event" (Freud 1915). While he connected the notion of death denial to the early experiences of death incurred by the *Primaeval man*, Freud also claimed that in war-ravaged times, "death will no longer be denied" because in those situations death ceases to be a chance event. While his contention is true to an extent, the conventional attitude of denial is not completely effaced.

⁷ The cyclicity of time is a major predicate of the Buddhist philosophy which professes that the human form is "the evolving principle, the principle of continuity whose normal goal is Enlightenment". The Tibetan Book of the Dead or the Bardo Thödol "purports to treat rationally of the whole cycle of *sangsāric* (i.e., phenomenal) existence intervening between death and birth; – the ancient doctrine of karma, or consequence... and of rebirth being accepted as the most essential laws of nature affecting human life" (Evans-Wentz 1960, 2). The biblical typology, on the other hand, predominantly upholds the linearity of time beginning with the act of creation and ending with the Day of Judgment. Matthew 13: 49 records:

professes immortality through the eventual rebirth of the departed⁸. A contemporary secular analogue promotes cryopreservation as the humanly attainable resurrection-oriented approach, thus scientifically actualizing a religious theme. Contrary to the secular argument, the “Soul” narrative effectively depicts the soul as the Hermes figure commuting between the worlds of the living and the dead and claims immortality for the soul which is presumed to be the only non-destructible constituent of the biological frame. Nevertheless, non-believers of eschatology strongly question the feasibility of these narratives, in effect delegating additional pursuers to the remaining two of them.

Both “Legacy” and “Staying Alive” are undoubtedly the more favored panaceas because they proffer the hope of a definite, materialized existence. Although “Legacy” involves “indirect ways of extending ourselves into the future” (Cave 2012), it is, however, the currently most viable alternative. It induces a reduced yet continued survival, ideally in the form of one’s progeny or as mnemonic permanence in the social logistics that biology denies. A recent headway made by Richard Dawkins in the chromosomal quarters has further vouched for this narrative. Dawkins’s theory of the “selfish gene” – wherein he studies anatomies as “survival machines” disseminating genes – substantiates the “Legacy” argument of progenies being carriers of the “immortality of genetic

“This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous”. Also see Matthew 25: 31-33, Daniel 7: 9-10, Acts 17: 31 for further references. However, there are local instances of cyclicity inscribed as in the passages from Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 and Ecclesiastes 3: 15. While the Hindu notion of time is also held to be chiefly cyclical (depending on the theories of kalpas, manvantaras and yugas) there exist certain discrepancies within it.

⁸ Although the term “departed” is an oftused euphemism for the dead its root word “depart” does not convey a similar meaning. The entry in the Concise Oxford English Dictionary records that “depart” was borrowed into the Middle English from the Old French “departir” which was again a derivative of the Latin “dispartire” meaning ‘to divide’. However, its English usage quite interestingly carries the sense: “[to] leave, especially to start a journey” or to “deviate from”. Thus, the use of “departed” as a substitute for the “dead” suggests that the dead were or rather are believed to be undertaking a journey into another world. Such lexical uses (a few other examples would be “gone”, “pass away”, and “pass on”) attest to the role of language in creating and maintaining cultural belief systems of afterlife and symbolic immortality. Death related euphemisms, thus, reflect the conscious efforts of the living to deny the reality of death. Conversely it could also be a measure to linguistically liquefy the fear of death. In either case it does maintain that death continues to be a taboo for civilized conversations. See the section on “Language” under the “Attitudes towards Death: A Climate of Change” in DeSpelder and Strickland, *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying*.

information” (Dawkins 2006, vii). On the contrary, “Staying Alive” believes that “a civilization is a collection of life-extension technologies”, and everyday physical existence stretched to an infinite scale of time would refute the all-pervasive clutch of death. It assesses death not as an end but as a baffling problem that needs to be decoded. In other words, it implores scientific advancements towards achieving an interminable lifespan, and striving to deny death in its most elemental configuration.

However, Cave consciously refrains from delving into the trope of liberal arts as providing a metaphorical insight into the anthropology of death-consciousness. For instance, as a subset of the arts, prose can be revisited as embodying the mortality paradox. The structuring of a prose piece demands that the author begins by fabricating an illusion of unceasing action. Yet the author is consistently engaged in moving the plot forward towards a calculated resolution. The semblance of continuity is maintained throughout the progression of the plot, to be broken only in the concluding section. This narratological dilemma intensifies when the text also thematizes the denial of death. The definable textual parameter literally fails to convey the *infinitude* contained in death denial. The text functions under the pale shadow of death, and evokes the essence of immortality only in its restricted structural capacity. The materiality of textuality intrinsically parallels the corporeal predicament.⁹ Whereas, on the one hand the structural closure operates as hindrance to thematic expansion, its absence on the other weaves precarious delineations. This brings me to the next section – a literary appraisal of the repercussions of postponed cessation.

⁹ It could also be argued that literature, as a medium of creativity, bestows a kind of “symbolic immortality”. The theory of “symbolic immortality” was developed by Robert Jay Lifton as a metaphorical self-preservatory mechanism in the face of the inevitability of biological death. Broadly speaking, then, all art is an immortality conferring mechanism. However, it cannot be denied that the materiality of art is itself a token to its resurrectionary force. It is death dealing and yet immortality bestowing. Art embodies both the stasis of dying and the dynamic force of living in equal measure. It, therefore, grants a frozen continuity as illustrated by Keats in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave / Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare; / Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve; / She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss / Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”

Death denial: a dystopic affair

Literary tradition is inscribed with exemplars that act as constant reminders to the inevitability of transience, and lay bare the ravages of death denial. By aestheticizing the pathological implications, literature builds its own forensic field. In fact, it endorses a binary approach and seeks to represent immortality both in accompaniment with, and as devoid of, eternal youth. While Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" recounts Winzy's mourning over his perennial youth and life, the Greek myth of the Cumaean Sibyl¹⁰ tells of her gradual deterioration to a degree where she becomes an object of petty amusement. In either case though, immortality is identified as "psychosocial deformity". Similar representations also seem to advocate that singular instances of immortality are counter forces to the communal drive of death denial, and are therefore "regarded with horror and detestation" (Shelley [1833] 2012). Instead, if it were to be a common ordeal, as envisaged by José Saramago in his *Death at Intervals*, it would transform the entire milieu into a shared "hell" (Saramago 2008, 25). Immortality, then, has to be understood from a dialectic plane – charted by the individual as well as the collective entity. Lately composed generic texts like Karel Čapek's *The Makropulos Affair* (1922) and Saramago's *Death at Intervals* (2008) are experimental ventures aiming to furnish the combined semantics of the desire for immortality.

These texts, which were published in the early decades of the twentieth and the twenty first centuries respectively, re-established death denial as timeless fascination, and immortality as pertinent desire. Thematically pivoting on the significance of cessation, *The Makropulos Affair* is a fantasy play exposing the imperfections of unaccompanied deathlessness. Its protagonist, Elina Makropulos, is the experimental victim of her father, who is a physician. Having to live for over three hundred years, she chooses to spend her days incognito. Her assumed appellations always bear the same initials, "E M", perhaps as an identity-reminder amidst her temporal shifts. Caught up in the vicious circle of static youth, she repeatedly exhausts every available distraction at her disposal, thus

¹⁰ Another Greek mythological parallel is the tale of Tithonus. When Eos asked Zeus to confer immortality on her Trojan lover Tithonus, she forgot to ask for immortality accompanied with eternal youth. As a result, Tithonus lived eternally with never-ending decrepitude. The "Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite" narrates how Eos's ultimately "put him in a chamber and closed the shining doors. / [With Tithonios's] voice flow[ing] unquenchingly [from within]". A later version of the myth appears in Tennyson's poem "Tithonus" where Tithonus contemplates on death and immortality

marking her life with tiring monotony. Besides, her “mortal immortal” (Shelley [1833] 2012) disposition restrains her social and behavioural indulgences. Her apprehensions about the disclosure of truth make her a self-directed recluse. For Elina, virtual deathlessness is not merely a state of being but also a determiner of her surface interactions. As her character increasingly grows nonchalant towards the sensations of the human spirit, she reflects on the perpetual tedium her life had come to be. She says, in the end, “[s]inging’s the same as silence. Everything’s the same” (Čapek 1999, 255) and hence death seems to her a rather welcome episode rather than the prolongation of an unfortunate terrestrial abyss.

Bernard Williams ([1973] 1999) in his arguments against immortality asserts such a state would not only be meaningless but “where conceivable at all, [be] intolerable”. While eternity may arrive with the hope that all “categorical desires” of humankind may now be fulfilled, once that peak of satiation is reached, it would in due course be coloured with indifference and “frozen boredom” (Williams [1973] 1999). For Čapek death offers an escape route from that weary stupor, and he concludes the play with characters coming to terms with their temporality. Unlike Shelley’s Winzy – who is abandoned to “the weight of never ending time... the tedious passage of the still-succeeding hours!” (Shelley [1833] 2012) – Elina has the choice of putting an end to her misery. Her death and the subsequent destruction of the secrets to the elixir constitute the playwright’s artistic censure of the drive towards death denial. Elina is the microcosmic personification of the technologically stimulated modern society which strives after the protraction of longevity. The play is satiric of not only such endeavours but also of their monochromatic outcomes. Its dialogic exchanges interpret the rationale of immortality within the parameters of socially sanctioned mannerisms.

Čapek, however, does not delve into the politico-economic facets of death denial, which is the motif that interests Saramago in *Death at Intervals*. Saramago’s novel explores the relation between death and the collective from a utilitarian perspective. With the conscious disappearance of Death, immortality becomes a lived experience in his hypothetical country. This sets in motion a chain of irregularities. Freed from biological death, the inhabitants are soon met with the crisis of social death culminating in a demo-dystopia:

the rhomboid of the ages [was] swiftly turned on its head, with a gigantic, ever-growing mass of old people at the top, swallowing up like a python the new generations (Saramago 2008, 21)

As they struggle with the contextual fallouts of deathlessness, they discern their inveterate dependency on death. The hard-hit death industry¹¹ – the author recreates this currently thriving enterprise to suit the purposes of his narrative – stands witness to that. For a host of sectors (such as funeral homes, old-age care institutions, insurance companies and the media) death is a money-minting commodity. Its absence therefore entails a major economic loss, as confirmed through the novel. Proportionally, it also precipitates a hitherto unforeseen spatial and resource crunch. Instead of ushering in a “new paradise”, immortality coupled with a duly escalating population graph triggers an “unparalleled state of unrest”.

In such a world, the word “dead” ceases to suggest the end of life. Rather, it is intended to signify a societal paralysis. “Banal”, an oft-used qualifier of the sentient lifestyle could well be transferred onto a deathless world whose natives would be habitually preoccupied in caring for “fatal and inescapable old age... since their days will have no end” (Saramago 2008, 20). Saramago tends to slightly medicalize the issue. He treats deathlessness as a festering wound which gradually incapacitates the normal functioning of the entire social anatomy. In this context, I refer back to Bernard Williams’s aforementioned hypothesis. To Williams as well as the body of scholars who have traced his line of argument, either in acceptance or disagreement, immortality is more of a singular rather than a communal possibility.¹² While they do employ universal human attributes

¹¹ The death industry consists of two sectors – the ‘death-care industry’, companies and organizations that provide services directly related to death such as funerals, cremation, burial, and memorials and the ‘associate sector’ that includes all those enterprises that are dependent on the host such as insurance companies, law firms, medical units and even religious institutions – which put together create what the urban world views as the “well managed” death.

¹² Presumably, because in contending for or against Williams’ seminal essay, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”, Elina Makropulos formed the central case-study to the researchers (Timothy Chappell, Hunter Steele, J. Jeremy Wisniewski, John Martin Fischer, Aaron Smuts, Donald W. Bruckner), they failed to inquire into the collective dimensions of the issue under consideration. For instance, Chappell’s essay “Infinity Goes Up on Trial: Must Immortality be Meaningless?” (2007) is an argument against “Williams’ key notion of ‘repetition’ [being] crucially indeterminate, and his account of boredom crucially underdeveloped”. See also: Steele, Hunter. “Could Body-Bound Immortality be Liveable?” (1976); Fischer, John Martin. “Why Immortality is Not So Bad?” ([1994] 2009); Wisniewski, J. Jeremy. “Is the Immortal Life Worth Living?” (2005); Smuts, Aaron. “Wings of Desire: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality” (2008); Bruckner, Donald W. “Against the Tedium of Immortality” (2012). Each of these papers, in responding to the premise put forth by Williams, analyses immortality as a condition affecting the individual. The fact that in

for their logical groundwork, their discussions are nonetheless directed towards a body-centric appreciation of immortality.¹³ Williams, for example, prioritizes individual “categorical desires” over and above that of the social. When he contends that Elina’s semi-isolated bearing “would disappear if her condition were generalised”, his focus is primarily on individuals of that potential superset and how each one of them would be subjected to a “Elina-like” staticity in life. In debating over the meaningfulness of eternal life, Williams principally overlooks the larger socio-cultural corollaries which Saramago anticipates in *Death at Intervals*.

The novel is the artist’s impression of a plausible reality. As more and more people enter the zone of “suspended life” the apparently immortal world metamorphoses into a world of the living dead. Here, unlike in the epics, “katabasis” is not followed by “anabasis”, and thus, the population is left trapped in a newfound “hell”. Saramago’s prognosis strips immortality off its utopian gloss, leaving bare the inherent asymmetries. Herein lays the parity between him and Čapek: both prefer to address death denial periphrastically, by harping on its impact rather than on its trail. They recognize the non-superimposability of the conjectured and the de facto reverberations of death denial. They predicate the chirality from two very distinct dimensions. Čapek delivers it using the repetitive mode, and Saramago via the sustained accumulative method. They unveil immortality as a one-sided, three-dimensional continuum (geometrically speaking, a variant of the umbilic torus¹⁴), that encapsulates the

affecting all individuals it would also be a collective phenomenon generating other socio-economic complications remains largely ignored. Mikel Burley’s essay, “Immortality and Meaning: Reflections on the Makropulos Debate” (2009) is perhaps the only article that makes reference to the backlashes of immortality from the collective outlook. As he reviews an extract from Jonathan Glover’s “Causing Death and Saving Lives”, Burley comments on the demographic implications of immortality; he writes, “it is unclear how a Malthusian nightmare could be avoided” – but he leaves it at that without delving any deeper.

¹³ In focusing on the individual rather than the collective, the arguments of the above scholars tend to be body-centric. Their rationales include references to human (individual) memory (Bruckner 2012), categorical desires and boredom (Bruckner 2012; Wisniewski 2005), the meaningfulness of immortal life for an individual (Williams 1973; Chappell 2007), the fixity of individual character (Williams 1973 and Fischer [1994] 2009), “body-bound immortality” (BBI) and “body-independent immortality” (BII) (Steele 1976).

¹⁴ I compare immortality with the concept of the umbilic torus from a purely structural standpoint. The comparison stems from the symbolic sculptures of John Robinson that were conceived as tectonic permutations of the mobius strip and the

dilemmatic “mortal immortal” status: “desirous of death, yet never dying” (Shelley [1833] 2012). Thus, in debunking immortality, they project death as the complementary imperative of life.

Reconciling with death

Such evocations stimulate our awareness and receptivity towards death and dying:

to give death the place in reality and in our thoughts which is its due, and to give a little more prominence to the unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed (Freud 1915)

The literature of death and dying, thereby, ensures that death ceases to be a “closed” reality. In this respect, I view it as antithetical to the dominant repertoire of civilized conversations that censor death references. However, Elisabeth Bronfen in the Preface to *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* claims,

[t]he aesthetic representation of death lets us repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because here death occurs *at* someone else’s body and *as* an image (Bronfen 1996)

I believe, Bronfen’s contention (which definitely parallels the Freudian outlook towards fiction)¹⁵ completely ignores the volume of literature that deals with death denial and its ramifications, for such an oeuvre not only unveils the civilized human’s inclinations towards circumventing death, but also manifests those tendencies as Faustian bargains. Representations of death denial in literature serve as discursive vehicles steered towards bringing about a conceptual synthesis with death.

umbilic bracelet. I refer in particular to Robinson’s “Eternity” which structurally conveys the essence of immortality, eternity and afterlife as discussed in this paper. It needs to be mentioned that Robinson’s representation of immortality is, however, quite different because he conceived it within the familial framework. His “Immortality” therefore represents a continued journey of and through generations.

¹⁵ Freud in his “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915) expressed: “we should seek in the world of fiction, in literature and in the theatre compensation for what has been lost in life... There alone too the condition can be fulfilled which makes it possible for us to reconcile ourselves with death: namely, that behind all the vicissitudes of life we should still be able to preserve a life intact.”

Besides, in reading any literary narrative on death, the readers vicariously partake of their own demise, although only momentarily. While according to Bronfen (1996, 44) “every representation of dying... implies the safe position of the spectator”¹⁶ which is doubtless true, I hold that it only serves to heighten our proximity to death. Through multifarious depictions, narratives (fictional and non-fictional) prevent us from reducing death “from a necessity to a chance event” (Freud 1915). When a reader indulges in a text like Carlos Fuentes’s *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), and participates in the protagonist’s physical and emotional wanderings, he or she reflexively probes into his or her own faculties. Thus, when Artemio, lying on his deathbed, reflects:

[y]ou will die with your dense lines worn out, but all you have to do is die for all trace of your destiny to disappear from your hands after a few hours (Fuentes 2005, 47-48)

The reader immediately connects to Artemio’s musings because they would have had some derivative awareness of death in their own lived experience. Artemio’s deathbed reveries therefore comprise the author’s invitation to his readers to “experience death by proxy” (Bronfen 1996), and thereby come to terms with the certainty of one’s own obliteration to come.

As Artemio prepares for a drawn-out death, the readers too are mentally readied to acknowledge death as the unavoidable, ultimate entity. The closing line of the novel articulates that psychological coalesce: “We shall die... You... are dying... have died... I shall die” (Fuentes 2005, 268). In binding the character and the readers with the same fate of death, Fuentes subtly blurs the boundaries between the literary and the real worlds. In his portrayal of death, Fuentes is rather intriguing because he rejects its clichéd envisioning as the grim reaper and supplants it with the perception of death as the rounding off to an eventful life. *The Death of Artemio Cruz* belongs to that genre of literature which operates as a preparatory and consolatory base in conceding to the inescapability of death. By fostering a cathartic release in its readers, it assuages their mortal fear. Gregory Zilboorg held that such cathartic releases implicated an “egocentric self-delight” (Zilboorg 1943, 468) that accentuated one’s belief in immortality, and thereby, diminishes the fear of death. However,

¹⁶ Bronfen borrows Freud’s thoughts (1915): “In the realm of fiction we find the plurality of lives which we need. We die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him, and are ready to die again just as safely with another hero.”

I feel, by placing death within the lexical, emotional, and intellectual corpus of the reader, these literary representations not only puncture any existing illusion of immortality but also reform the prevalent attitude of death denial.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I propose that the topos of death and its denial moves in a two-way channel – it explores the emotional motley of the dying or death-denying characters while it also manipulates the readers' responses to death and its postponement. Thus, in its thematic and structural capacity, it plays the role of an interpretative guide to “[d]eath! [the] mysterious, ill-visaged friend of weak humanity” (Shelley [1833] 2012). Representations of death, especially its denial uphold that in running away from death, we are actually moving toward it, and in our efforts to deny death the upper hand, we in fact are putting ourselves in the role of a modern Sisyphus: “[t]he struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill [our] heart[s]” (Camus [1942] 1991).

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