ABSTRACT. Death Representation in Literature. Cultural Illusions and Theoretical Principles. Our study focuses on exploring the main aspects of death representation in literature as a simultaneous socio-cultural and aesthetic process, and on highlighting the existing close relationship between, on the one hand, the cultural illusion of transcedency or relativity of power and reality of death and, on the other hand, the major theoretical principles under which literature is or has been viewed. Based on current literature theorists, we define literary representation as an average between mimesis and semiosis and we examine the impact of this fact on death as object of representation. We discuss about language as a primary literary instrument as being remoteness from death, as well as a thanatic form par excellence. We also analyze critically several theories and perspectives of literary representation in general, theories and perspectives built on the literature-death binomial, pointing out that, generally speaking, there are two significant orientations of interpretation – of excessive vitality and death surplusage, detecting the cultural illusions they extend. The last chapter takes into account death status and functions in literature, aiming, among other things, to reveal some prejudices and stereotypes concerning the two orientations.

Keywords: death, literature, cultural illusion, representation, mimesis, semiosis, language.

REZUMAT. Reprezentarea morții în literatură. Iluzii culturale și principii teoretice. Studiul nostru își propune să examineze aspectele principale ale reprezentării morții în literatură, ca proces simultan socio-cultural și estetic și să sublinieze existența unei relații strânsă între, pe de o parte, iluzia culturală a transcenderii ori relativizării puterii și realității morții și, de cealaltă parte, principiile teoretice majore sub care literatura este sau a fost privată. Pe urmele unor teoreticieni actuali ai literaturii, definim reprezentarea literară ca o medie între mimesis și semiosis și cercetăm ce impact are acest lucru asupra morții ca obiect de reprezentat. Discutăm despre limbaj, în calitatea sa de instrument literar primar, ca fiind atât o îndepărtare de moarte, cât și o formă thanatică prin excelență. De asemenea, analizăm critici unele perspective și teorii ale reprezentării literare în general, perspective și teorii construite pe binomul literatură-moarte, arătând că, în general, este vorba despre două direcții semnificative de interpretare, cea a vitalității excesive și cea a surplusului de moarte, și surprinzând iluziile culturale care le subîntind. Ultimul capitol de dinaintea concluziilor are în vedere

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statutul și funcțiile morții în literatură, urmărind, între altele, să lămurească anumite prejudecăți și stereotipuri cu privire la acestea.

**Cuvinte cheie:** moarte, literatură, iluzie culturală, reprezentare, mimesis, semiosis, limbaj.

1. **Introduction.**
**Issues of death representation in literature**

Death representation in literature uses the same issues regarding literary representation in general, to which we add those due to the nature of death as object of research and problematic representation, impossible to catch in a unique formula, characterized by a structural inconsistency and opaqueness.

Briefly speaking, there are two major cultural apprehensions on representation. Starting with Plato representation has been assimilated preponderantly with *mimesis* that is imitation. To all intents and purposes, the represented object or phenomenon was inferior to the represented reality – be it the case of an artistic or literary work, a background, any object or, speaking in Plato’s sense, the being itself. A principle of a strong reality is asserted both incorruptible in the sense of the representation, and folded. Art (thus literature also) was gradually overestimated after being freed from Plato’s critique of the copy, after acquiring meaning and respect, an overestimation of realism through the judgement – from a semantical and value perspective – of the artistic work based on the degree of rendering and encompassing reality. The structuralist as well as the French post-structuralist movement focused from *mimesis* to *semiosis*, from representation as imitation to representation as self-representation. There is an extreme discontinuity inserted here, which is welcome at first, but which then tends to grow exaggerated. In a strong structuralist comprehension, representation doesn’t preserve the object through which it has been generated, betraying it. Theorists like Antoine Compagnon or Umberto Eco succeed in putting an end to all nimieties and conceit of the first interpretation of representation, as well as to those of the second manner of interpretation, showing that representation - both on the artistic tangible level, and on the imaginary level – isn’t a truthful copy of reality, developing

3 See also: Roland Barthes, „L’Effet de réel”, in *Communications*, n° 11, 1968. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Curs de lingvistică generală*, translation by Irina Izverna, Iași, Polirom, 2007 [*Cours de linguistique générale*, 1914].
distinct features and characteristics, being instead at once capable of bringing the possibility of its cognition. Thus, representation does not mean the complete equivalence of what is represented (the element to represent) with the environment/element that represents, but neither is it total disruption, which is a valid aspect at the process level and at the result or product level.

Further on, we will investigate several theoretical principles of death representation in literature with a view to discovering, while analyzing their thanatic dimensions, how these principles are bound to the cultural illusion of defeating death through a total representation of the mirror type (emphasizing mimesis as a coordinate of representation) or, on the contrary, through an incomplete death representation, which ends up in literature, torn from the reality of death, otherwise difficult to grasp (emphasizing semiosis as a coordinate of representation). Besides, we seek to reveal the functions of the literary representation related to death if we deal with an acceptance of death or, on the contrary, with defiance of death.

2. Language and death. Between the linguistic being of death and the thanatic being of language

Language contains, in nuce, all the problems of representation and those of the death-culture relations. Language and its prime unity, word, are the most elementary forms of world representation. As Eco puts it, in a pragmatic understanding, on several occasions, there is a permanent operation of growth and transformation of significances within a word, not only on a temporal axis, but also on a synchronical axis. Language is also the main means through which culture has been established, and which has ensured its dynamics. Nevertheless, language does not occupy the entire space in culture, but it instils in all its areas, being, in its implicit state, always present and relating with other symbolic systems. The above mentioned Antoine Compagnon states that: every sign, every language is fatally transparency and obstacle. That is why, especially in the context of representation in literature, it is worth exploring the core that conditions it, and upon which literature has exerted and traced its own influences and conditions: language.

The relationship between language and death seems appropriate for a study starting from death towards language – observing those features of death, which participate in language structuring and functioning, but, symmetrically, from language towards death – in the sense of capturing a linguistic nature of death.

Immolating the nuances, there are two major perspectives on language. Either we choose to consider that language – in its potential form, not enabled properly, but also under its manifested forms of speaking and writing – reveals a principle of death, extracting the object from the environmental reality, depriving it from its substantiability. Or, on the contrary, we incline towards the other party, and

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6 Antoine Compagnon, op. cit., p. 43.
consider language a force opposed to death, which, through its linguistic baptism over the world, gets rid of its specific degradation and has the chance of another body. The disjunctive approach of the language-death relation is not yet necessary and it should be overcome. There is a demonstration offered by Françoise Dastur in a chapter entitled *Death, word, laughter* from his 1994 work. Language “manifests in the most radical way our finiteness. If, in the manner Hegel recognized it, language is in itself a power of death – as imposing a name to things means bringing them from nothingness to their real existence – this fact means – as Blanchot says, commenting on Hegel – that «when I talk, death is talking through me» and that death is what, at the same time, disconnects me from being and binds me with it”\(^8\). But, the same language represents, through Dastur, a *technique* of facing the limit of our existence and of our world, existence that is based on *abyss*. Moreover, language is the the most powerful means in fighting death, a fight that occurs through *utterance*.\(^9\) We are to be convinced further that language is both a source of death, a receptacle of death, and a force that is opposed to it permanently.

The linguist Michel Arrivé\(^{10}\) describes the language-death relation from three perspectives. The first one is that of the grammatical system of a language (of the French language mostly, but the notes are valid for most of the languages). Here, death is not present, except for the word *feu* – the archaized adjective that means *deceased*. Otherwise, the grammatical system does not contain categories that would separate what lives from what is dead, neither the spirited from the uninspired – although it seems that, at the origin, the distinction between neuter, masculine, and feminine was a mark of this separation – as it contains categories for marking the difference between singular and plural, or between feminine and masculine. The author’s conclusion is that, on the grammatical level, we are *immortal*.\(^{11}\) On the lexical level we encounter a different situation. Languages “have an extremely large inventory of words to designate death and especially the act of dying”.\(^{12}\) A French dictionary may provide up to 38 substitutes for the verb *to die*, among which to disappear, to decease, to stop or even 103 in a dictionary that takes into account euphemisms or slang expressions, while for *to live* there are much less – 14 in the same dictionary that returns 38 synonyms. It seems that the vocabulary of death is characterized by a tendency for proliferation, which is explained by Arrivé through a taboo regarding the name of death and through the grammatical deficiency of the language related to death, although it is possible that this is not only a consequence of a cultural denying of death. Actually, the

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12 Ibidem.
grammatical aspect of death is due to a deeper layer – the subconscious of the language. Arrivé combines the Freudian theory of immortality that defines the unconscious (death being in Freud’s conception a too abstract concept with a contents that is denial itself\textsuperscript{13} for it to be able to find its correspondent in the unconscious), which demonstrates the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and shows that the language essence is negativity and difference,\textsuperscript{14} thus ending the analysis dedicated to the death-language relationship, underlining the thanatic principle and origin of language: “If death is the one that constitutes the origin of negation, then it is necessarily at the origin of language.”\textsuperscript{15}

Michel Picard does not aim to grasp an intrinsic death principle of language, the way Dastur approaches this matter, and he doesn’t consider, in a Freudian interpretative line, as is the case of Arrivé himself, that death is too abstract a concept for it to void, linguistically, the contents till it reaches its pure negativity. Placed at the intersection between psychism and the social, between the imaginary and the symbolic, between my death and the other’s death, death is in language neither a theme, nor a concept, nor a diagram, but simply a structure, or a form, a relation characterized by excellence of tension.\textsuperscript{16} It is not the abstract character of death that which determines, in Picard’s opinion, the emptying of contents of the word death, and the dissolution of the referent, but, on the contrary, the richness and complexity of the reality of death, which cannot organize itself in a concrete referential formula. Another cause is the continuous defeat of the death-related thinking.

But Picard’s position is very interesting and worth keeping in mind, as he places the problem of death within language somewhere at mid distance between the two directions analyzed previously. Starting from describing the word or words denoting death in terms of having as contents a vacant structure that functions, seemingly, as a jocker, Picard wonders whether the power of metaphorisation of this jocker is infinite and, moreover, arbitrary. And the answer he gives is that the figures death refers to in general, not only in literature, are reduced to a small number which may be articulated into a logical system, and which has closer connections with literature than we may be tempted to imagine.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, death, at least when it doesn’t abuse its substitution qualities as a jocker, doesn’t embody a hermetic semiosis,\textsuperscript{18} but neither does it embody a void concept, functioning idly,

\textsuperscript{14} Ferdinand de Saussure, op. cit., p. 70.
\textsuperscript{15} Michel Arrivé, op. cit., p. 614.
\textsuperscript{16} Michel Picard, La littérature et la mort, Paris, PUF, 1995 p. 35.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibidem, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{18} Cf.: Umberto Eco, Op.cit., pp. 348-361. The concept of illimited semiosis is borrowed by Eco from Charles Sanders Peirce and developed, from a semiotic code into a textual code, while the concept of hermetic semiosis appears as a placement, in the representation mechanism, of the hermetism principles, semiosis being an interpretative practice of text and world. The hermetic semiosis may give birth to.
as it retains its own limited semantic area. Nevertheless, death has a high degree of dispersion through the existence of one of its most powerful attitudinal correlatives, the fear of death – regarded by Picard with reserve (as he is not a very flexible follower of the modern tabooization of death)19 –, which triggers in language a phenomenon of migration of the image of death in areas of language which, theoretically, do not imply it.20 A phenomenon that does not bother Picard as it doesn’t imply more than the author assumes: “preponderantly a cultural phenomenon, death is, in fact, before anything else, a linguistic being.”

Picard’s perspective seems to us a little too optimistic and indebted to a cultural illusion of transcending death through literature. First of all, due to the fact that the semantic stability of death in literature and in culture as well, generally speaking, doesn’t confine to the stability of the word, but it takes into account an entire linguistic context of relating the word death with other words, and this is not only in the phrases that partially borrow some images of death, but actually in contexts that take into account death or related phenomena as dying, mourning, agony. Another reason why we deem Picard’s optics as too optimistic is related to the manner in which he treats death in literature, which conceals, in essence, an encapsulation of the hermetic semiosis principle in the principle of the literary representation of death.

3. Thanatic articulations and vitalistic articulations of literature. Between murder and the slap in the face of death

Before we start exploring the ways in which death is represented in literature, as well as the motivations and logic of functioning of death representation as a process, we will concentrate on the thanatic articulations of literature, as we did in the case of the representation and language, and we will attempt to draw a map of the literary realm in order to make them visible.

Undoubtedly, the first region in literature where we can identify a principle of death is that of language, thus the magma itself, the mere literary substance. What has been said about language reaches literature itself as, on the one hand it is valid for its contents (literature being, in fact, a language), and on the other hand it retains the same possibility of strongly polarized interpretation, as in the case of language. From a certain point of view, literature, and its mere existence, is an

hermetic deviation. And this would be explained in the following manner: not only a text, a reality is interpreted abusively, but that text, respectively that reality, risks being disintegrated under the action of over-interpretation. Otherwise, massive over-interpretation has, as a result, the anihilation of the object that had generated it, a detachment from it and passing into irrelevance of the possible information connected with it. There are big chances that the ludic and creativity would manifest freely within this leeway, but not so big as to maintaining a correct representation of the object or of the initial text, giving birth to a series of incontinent representations and portraying a sort of impulse of representation.

20Michel Picard, op. cit., p. 33. One of the examples offered by Picard is “petite mort”.
21Ibidem, p. 35 (our translation).
evasion from the natural temporality of the world, and an abeyance of both the creator, during his moments of writing, and the reader, during his moments of reading, out of reality itself. As Albert Camus puts it, there is a time of living and a time of confessing, and there is, of course, a time of writing, but it is the most unnatural of all, an un-immediate time that betrays the other two.22 Besides, literary worlds, once created, are something else than the real ones, and if we may talk about their ontology, this is, obviously, a fictional one23, which means, if not death itself, at least a periphery of the living. They are not ontologically autonomous, being (in line with the reading theories of the last decades)24 incapable to exist without the reader’s real physical sustentation. On the other hand, due to the selection and isolation activity of some events from the real world or from the author’s interiour forum, and through the (conscious or not) processing for incorporating it in the literary work, death is brought to the foreground, as it happens also if we embrace Freud’s position on the artistic work as sublimation, mentioning though that sublimation may not necessarily refer to the sexual pulsation, also including the death pulsation.25 In fact, almost the same aspect must have been pointed out by Jean Duvignaud, when he observes that to write means to detach traumatically, through betrayal, from the violence of nature and, implicitly, of death, but it also means to render this violence, as writing involves itself a destroying act specific to the entire culture.26

On the other hand, things are not easier for the author either, as he experiences his death through self-fictionalization27 (when he intends to mirror himself in what he writes), and, generally speaking, the death he experiences is even more consistent, through its absorption in the literary work28 - a death, that in a post-structuralist view, acquires a sacrificial dimension, as the author must die on behalf of the reader29. Ruth Menahem expresses this reality of the author’s death in the harsher terms of murder: “Every creation is a murder; it signals its creator’s death.”30 In his book dedicated to Blanchot’s work, Jean-Philippe Miraux states on

22Albert Camus, Fața și reversul, Nunta, Mitul lui Sisif, Omul revoltat, Vara, translation from French by Irina Mavrodin, Mihaela Simion, Modest Morariu, București, Rao, 2001 [Noces, 1939].
24See also: Wolfgang Iser, Actul lecturii. O teorie a efectului estetic, translation from German by Romanița Constantinescu, Pitești, Editura Paralela 45, 2006 [Der Akt des Lesens, 1976].
25See also: J. Havelka, “Death and Creativity”; in Morgan, Mary Ann; Morgan, John D. (eds.), Thanatology: A liberal Arts Approach, London, Ontario, King’s College, 1988, pp. 155-162. In J. Havelka’s opinion, the unconscious manifests in the artistic work, influencing directly the artist’s creativity. The unconscious, headquarters of death anxiety and pulse of non-being, is through art, integrated in a symbolic order of the one that receives art to be faded away and overcome in his negativity. Death is somehow remote.
the account of the non-symmetrical relationship between the writer and his work that: “The author signs his work, but the work doesn’t designate him.”

And, since we’ve mentioned Maurice Blanchot, it is worth presenting his theory on literature and language. In his 1949 work the French writer adopts a Hegelian perspective on language and literature, highlighting the fact that, through its entering the word, the real world undergoes a process of disparity and displacement that implies an experience of nothingness, of death. Blanchot explains this fact through the linguistic dimension of the abstract, which de-realizes initially the real presence that it takes over, but for the human being, in general, and especially for the writer it represents the exertion of power over the world, a domination of a reality that is no longer that reality. Blanchot gives a simple example: the word *cat* accumulates the non-existence of a living cat with its linguistic existence. The negative power of literature consists in the transformation of the world and has as a consequence the dissolution of representation and the emergence of presence. Literature, through the death it is responsible of, no longer represents the world which triggered it, to which it preexisted, and presents itself as a reality of a different kind: if in the extraliterary space the word gives meaning to the object, in literature the meaning functions as an object, achieving textual materiality. But isn’t this consequence in itself a mark of the literature negativity (which is indebted to the language negativity, wrapped in the act of designation), but an expression of its positivity. Thus, in Blanchot’s theory, death is a functional principle of literature, with undoubtable benefits, ensuring the validity of the signification process and literary existence. We can even dare to say that for Blanchot death is a phenomenon belonging more to the text than to the subject, which is always frustrated by death: “As long as I live, I am a mortal being, but, when I die, I cease to be a being, I cease also to be mortal, I am no longer capable of dying, and the death that lies ahead horrifies me, as I see it the way it is: ceasing to be death, it is the impossibility of dying.”

A consistent position concerning the thanatic force of literature we encounter in Diana Fuss’ article, published in 2003. The work focuses especially on the corpse representation in literature, more exactly in poetry, defining the concept of *corpse poem* as a poem written in the first person, on behalf of the deceased, but also contains general appreciations regarding the connection of death to literature. *Corpse poem* is a lyric subspecies of the 19th century, becoming recently a comic or theologic formula, which transforms in the 20th century into a

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33 *Ibidem*, p. 38.
34 *Ibidem*, pp. 327-328.
species that follows the utterance of certain critical attitudes towards the political movements, towards the historical context or the literary genre itself. This species is characterized by Fuss as a mixture between a poetic art (as writers can violate the frontier of death in order to do something that no man is allowed – to speak as dead, from the grave) and an *ars moriendi*, prompting the oxymoronic formula: *Ars essendi morti*. Among those who used this literary species Fuss enumerates Emily Dickenson, Thomas Hardy, Randall Jarell and Richard Wright. The author notices two major aspects of this species, casting lights that may seem contradictory at the first sight, extrapolating over literature in its relation to death. First of all, she identifies cultural and social functions in the poems analyzed, and among the most important is the subtle implicit critique of the way the 20th century society related to a corpse, driving it away from the representation sphere and from the public discourse. The critique undertaken by the *corpse poem* materializes, on the level of form, through the compensating presence of the body that, as in Dickenson’s poem, becomes weak, defenceless, haunted, and not the other way round. We must note, thus, that the relationship between literature and reality doesn’t have to have as a consequence a miniature, mimetic representation of the latter. The literature-reality rapport may be direct or in inverse proportion, and, as the rules of literary representation are less easy to decode, what matters is that this relation exists. Although, this capacity of literature to place itself in a ratio, which includes a disruption from reality, is also a proof of a relative autonomy of literature towards reality, of an existence of a certain literary specificity, partly adjusted by a principle of death. Fuss states this herself, referring to the *corpse poem*: “the poem may absorb the deceased, because literature, as an environment, has already incorporated death.”

Yet, from a different angle, we discover the living pole of literature. Writing literature may be the equivalent, after all, with a protection against death, as writing doesn’t involve dying and persevering in this activity may create an impression of remoteness and even disappearance of death. Douglas Davies conceives literature in terms of *words against death*, and according to more recent literary theories, the author doesn’t find his end in his work, the latter constituting only its beginning under the shape of what is not purely conscious intentionality. For example, Compagnon believes that, no matter how inexhaustible and qualitatively superior a literary work would be, it cannot discount the original meaning, which had functioned as a stimulus for this. In fact, the author’s presence in his own text functions as an interception of the interpretational bleeding, that is, pushing it a little, of death, of sacrificing the legitimate significances in favour of those degenerated, néoplasique.

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41 See also: Umberto Eco, *op. cit.*, p. 350.
The only way of understanding and encountering once again the lost time
is, as Proust proves it, by writing. And we can imagine the effort: searching for the
lost time means seven volumes.42 An effort that ends though43 by finding that time
again. And the paradox is impressive. What Marcel had lost (finally nothing else
but himself, among the fragments) has been found by Proust, the author, who gave
up on himself, socially speaking, in order to save Marcel. This is a mutually
accepted compromise, and both of them are simultaneously dead and alive. And
this paradox is sensed in the appreciations, slightly contradictory, on the literary
work, which meet in the last volume. Although he sees literary work, in the long
run, as a large cemetery with graves from which nothing can be read anymore, the
author speaks and traces the rules of writing demeanour regarding his own work in
the following way: any hour lost on behalf of literature and writing, as in the case
of a small talk with an acquaintance is immolating a reality for something that doesn’t
exist.44 We may understand from these words that the true life of a writer is when he
creates, and that his work itself is the real world, not its pre-existent context. But Proust
doesn’t praise literature in general, as not of any type of literature has the capacity of
sifting the essential, the specific of one existence from the stereotypical and its
irrelevance. The descriptive literature, which attempts to duplicate the entire fabric of
lines and surfaces is considered by Proust as the most remote from reality and this is
due to the fact that it abolishes the possibility of experiencing for the profound ego
throughout the past and the present – an ego that may be author’s and the reader’s, too.

In his work, J. Havelka investigates the manner of intersection between death
and literature as functioning principles.45 Moreover, literature is placed under the more
comprehensive sign of creativity. This is characterized, from a structural point of view,
through a refusal of death, refusal that must be separated from any form of pathology,46
basically, a denial specific to culture itself. Concerning this aspect, Havelka
distinguishes between creativity and the natural strategies of defence of the individual
and society, strategies that imply a bigger effort and a great amount of energy. We
conclude thus that the literary and artistic work are born aiming towards immortality
and, paradoxically, they have, at once, the advantage of prompting a meeting with
death, which ends not through retention, but through overcoming, as, when the artist
creates, he is oriented towards a semantically consistent world, inside which death is
just a reality among others, and the temporality is different from the real one.47 In
Havelka’s opinion, the world is for the artist a way of a creative updating of the self,

42 Marcel Proust, À la recherche du temps perdu, 1913-1927.
43 Marcel Proust, Timpul regăsit, translation from French by Radu Cioculescu, București, Editura
Minerva, 1976 [Le temps retrouvé, 1927].
44 Ibidem.
45 J. Havelka, op. cit.
46 See also: Louis-Vincent Thomas, “La mort au XXe siècle”, in Serge Bureau (ed.), Aujourd’hui, la mort,
47 J. Havelka, op. cit., pp. 155-156.
although it isn’t characterized by safety, being not the prerogative of the weak ones, but implying, on the contrary, a lot of courage. The explanation regarding the actual contents of this courage remains unclear. If creativity doesn’t have some nuances and it is just a monolithic force, an expanded reality, and therefore with no abrupt encounter with death and no direct relationship with the creator’s intellectual or spiritual identity, but with obvious benefits for the personality of the creator, who frees himself of anguish, what is the reason for which assuming this creativity supposes courage? It is true that, as Havelka observes, the risk of failure is there but the courage would mean that these risks should be realized at the fullest. Then, it is interesting though to investigate how this theory of expanded reality would cope with the literature or art that represents death. A convincing conclusion would be that what is represented is not death, as a literaturization or artisticization of death had occurred, an estrangement from the real object ‘death’, and yet, the question still remains – in what way is affected the expanded reality? Is it limited? Is it encouraged? We tend to believe that, most likely, everything depends on the type of literature and representation, and that there’s no general rule concerning this aspect. Returning to the issue of creativity, we could say that its definition as expanded reality, as well as its ontological attributes of altering the creator’s being and reality through the artistic work resembles the hermeneutical definition given by Gadamer to the artistic work as enhancing the being and the way Eco interprets it, referring mostly to the reader, as the capacity of the literary work to compensate for our metaphysical scarcity.

A similar perspective, but stressing the traits of the literary and artistic work more than the conditions and energies it generates, is to be found with Jacques Drillon. He regards the literary work as an exception from death which adjusts the human world, an absolutely defiant exception, being a slap in the face of death. Drillon attempts to explain this thing and to get rid of potential stereotypical approaches, which would have as an inconvenient taking the immortality of the literary work for granted. What represents the basis of the immortality of the literary work is the consubstantial limitless. The dynamics of the work gets so close to one of a human life that it borrows from it character of being: “Masterpiece is a being. If I say «Rimbaud», who is designated? Little Arthur, breastfed by his mother, the young genial poet, or the love merchant? Do I

51 Umberto Eco, Șase plimbări prin pădurea narrativă, translation by Ștefania Mincu, Constanța, Pontica, 1997.
54 Ibidem.
speak of the same man, compared to his sister’s talking about him? «Rimbaud» doesn’t exist only in a movement of being. (See Bergson, Proust). Masterpiece never ends, just as the being never ends.”

Nevertheless, death isn’t entirely made impossible by and for the masterpiece, says Drillon himself, as “it may die, just like the human, but it is never completed.” The difference resides in the fact that, without being finite, which is specific to the human condition, the death of the artistic work is relatively benign: it starts, it exists and, at a certain point, it may also end.

On the whole, our conclusion is similar to our statement on the account of language. In other words, literature is a surplus of life, just as it is a surplus of death, and existence in excess, contained by literature, evolves simultaneously with death which runs through literature. Probably one of the most inspired metaphors may be that of the face and of the reverse, employed by Camus in order to designate the relationship between life and death, between the joy of living and the terror of knowing that everything that happens during lifetime is dying. In this way, over the thanatic map of literature superposes the map of life, while the perspective of literature and art (understood not just as death, but as murder) are associated with that makes from literature and art a potential access to immortality, contributing, in its turn, to feeding the mythology of immortality through the artistic work. All essential points in literature have double valencies: the author, the reader, the act of writing, the reading, the literary work itself. Culture, in its different moments, various literary artistic and philosophical movements, through their poetics and methodologies developed for exploring and explaining the reality, all these may emphasize, more or less, any one of the two directions. Literature re-states, at a smaller scale, the cultural problematic of death.

4. The status and functions of death in literature

Historian Michel Vovelle considers literature to be one of the most privileged means of death representation, and maybe mostly in the novelistic area. Which is only normal, he states, as death is the essential condition of any human adventure, a condition that literature attempts to respond to, in its own way. But which, in fact, is this specific way of literature, as we are about to demonstrate in this section. Just as Paterson reveals, we may also state, at first, that death representation in literature is different from the telecasted death. Analysing death in literature isn’t just about examining (and it doesn’t even necessarily imply this

56 Ibidem (our translation).
57 Albert Camus, op. cit.
aspect) the manner in which the writer relates to the death depicted in his work, the degree of nearness through the theme of death of the reader to the text, aspects considered very important by Paterson. But, as he further specifies, it is also significant the literary direction according to which the representation of death is shaped. Paterson doesn’t insist that much on this particular aspect, offering as an example of investigation methods such leads as: ways in which the emotional and psychic trauma of death and dying are graphically concentrated, the existence or inexistence of signs of a symbolism of immortality, minimizing or overbidding the presence of death in the masterpiece, aspects that don’t say much about the representation of death in literature.

First of all, there are types and types, categorically speaking, of literature, which contain a predefined set of world relating and implicitly, death relating modalities. For example, death in the police novels contributes to action deployment, being, generally, reduced from the point of view of its signifieds, and standardised. The situation is similar in the case of adventure novels for young people, or not necessarily, while at the other end stand tragedy and elegy. Another factor which should make us aware of the fact that, when we approach the problem of death representation in literature, generally speaking we can do that only if we admit a considerable approximation is the qualitative difference of literature. When we say literature we make, in most of the cases, an inherent axiologic judgement and we consider literature as an art species with value per se. An exercise that could reveal the fact that we deal with massive abstractization would be to imagine that when we say (using more precious formulas) that literary death is a slap in the face of death, that literature means words against death, or even that death, in its linguistic quality, is a tension, an obstacle in the way of its narrative, we refer to the most prosaic death of an adventure novel – e.g. the murder of the musketeer X in d’Artagnan’s troup, etc. The effect of such an exercise is humourous and it may help us to conclude the following. Firstly, not any literary work is a slap in the face of death, as there is good and bad literature, and secondly, not any death representation, even if belonging to the best literary work, is mandatorily extremely relevant to knowing death, as, beyond principles, death representation means representations of death. Thus, we should avoid the idea that risks taking the form of a prejudice, according to which the simple death representation in literature would inherently involve the courage of confronting death.

Now that we’ve taken all the necessary precautions and we’ve paid the necessary attention to the particular and the relative, we return to our discussion on death representation in literature in general, as there are, obviously, widely valid features of this process through which death enters literature. What is so remarkable in literary art is that it manages to unite the human particular, even the most atypical, with the human general, the aesthetic, which is a category that rejects the brute reality (and it may exempt from ethical and ontological) with the real. We notice thus that there is a functioning affinity between death and literature, death
being itself, like literature, the incredible average between the typical and the particular, between the perfect exteriority and total interiority.

It’s time we returned to Michel Picard and to the fact that we have called his attitude regarding the semiotic stability of death as being too optimistic. As we have pointed out above, Picard isn’t afraid of the fact that death, as a linguistic structure, could know the semantic metastasis that isn’t extraneous to literary representations, and he considers that there is a limited number of figures to which literary death could point. We will see how this optimism lacks any foundation two times – firstly, because, in his desire to separate the literature from the sciences of reality, Picard throws it in the arms of psychonalysis, which raises some questions on the literarity of death which Picard discusses, and secondly, because, despite the limitation of significances that death would acquire in literature, the French author incorporates, through his explanations, the hermetic semiosis principle in the functioning principle of literature.

Actually, in his book, after the first part, which is preponderantly theoretical, he attempts to demonstrate that there is a limited number of significances of death from a perspective that seems to combine Freudian and literary theories. His demarche, following which death at the first person, in Jankélévitch’s formula, proves to have a stable connection with the death of the Father, while the death of the other is a replica, from the imaginary area, to the death of the Mother, and, as a consequence, the same demarche concluding that fear of castration precedes fear of death becomes suspicious. And this is not because such an approach wouldn’t be justified, or because it wouldn’t bring enough information for the first theoretical pages on death representation in literature, but because it betrays the author’s desideratum to grasp what is specific to death in literature, without subduing it to reality or to other thinking systems and world interpretation systems. Picard states that there are (and we cannot avoid noticing that, in many aspects, he is thoughtful enough in intercepting problems neglected for a long time by researchers of death and literature) three major evils that influence literature: the hegemony of literary history, the referential illusion and the methodological empiricism. The referential illusion is among the most contested issues by Picard as it is also the source of the methodological empiricism because of the lack of knowledge for the area and the object of research. By referential illusion the author understands the classification of the literary texts as forms of reality (here are to be included ideologies and thinking systems), lacking specificity and investigating according to this assumption. This is Picard’s reproach to the historians. It would be fair enough if things would stay here, but, for example, he

63 Ibidem, p. 71.
64 Ibidem, pp. 3-4.
65 Ibidem, pp. 13-14, p. 18.
reproaches Montaigne his conception of death, indebted to his thought system.\textsuperscript{66} And, after all, the psychoanalytical concepts which the author uses in order to delineate the main death significances in literature are indebted to a certain system of thought, to a set of references that originate outside literature itself. The psychoanalytical vocabulary is obvious also in describing the process where death enters literature: figuration, displacement and condensation.\textsuperscript{67}

It is also paradoxical that, on the one hand, Michel Picard focuses on the evanescent aspect of death: “«Death» in general doesn’t exist, therefore, when we talk about it, we talk almost always about something else,”\textsuperscript{68} but on the other hand, he insists frequently on the consubstantial connection, which is exceptional in its strictest sense, between literature and death.\textsuperscript{69} The resulting confusions are not few. If death doesn’t exist and any expression denies it and displaces it, then literature does the same, too, a fact that abolishes the principle of restricted significances, stated above by Picard, and demonstrates that the author considers, at least to a certain extent, that the action of hermetic semiosis in literary death representation is inherent. Again, if there is a difference between death in literature and the real death, the one searched vainly by the historians in literary texts, as even Picard seems to believe, then there’s no point in talking about similarity, and under no circumstances such a categorical and dramatical similarity, as the author understands it, between literature and death as an effective reality. We might talk about similarity between literature and literary death, a fact that would be bizarre enough, taking into account that literature ensures and imposes upon death a certain face, as Picard pleads. We are tempted into thinking that at the basis of these incomplete logic statements is the author’s desire of cleansing literature of the mimetical approaches of literary theories and of the common sense, approaches that could become even more unpleasant when death is in question, as well as perspectives of death researchers, most of them historians, anthropologists or sociologists, who neglect the specificity of literature. Death in literature, says Picard, “can be anything but verbal,”\textsuperscript{70} “always metaphorical.”\textsuperscript{71} But new traps lie ahead once again, as, what does actually mean only verbal? Is it outside reality or just having a supplementary feature – verbal, metaphorical – capable of manifesting also in the disruption towards reality?

Death in literature, and this aspect is obvious with Michel Picard, too, doesn’t lend itself to one referential interpretation, but also to an aestheticized interpretation through the literary theories that, based much on the linguistic nature of literature, emphasize the differences – structural, functional, of reception – that intercede between literature and the real world, those theories that coagulate around the semiotic nucleus of literature, abandoning that of mimesis. From such a perspective, as literature has so

\textsuperscript{66} Ibidem, pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibidem, pp. 151-172.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibidem, p. 187 (our translation).
\textsuperscript{69} Ibidem, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibidem, p. 39 (our translation).
\textsuperscript{71} Ibidem, p. 41.
little in common with the reality (that constitutes only a static framework) and whose influence, if it exists, is covered by the literality of the text, death can be no more than a matter of aesthetic effect. At the same time, yet, we don’t want to create the impression that we would deny such a process of aesthetization and its relative legitimacy. This process does exist and it is traceable in the hermetic semiosis and even in the unlimited semiosis as a processes specific to the language as well as a potential danger to the literary and artistic representation. Literature has this fascinating power of transforming the world, of intervening on it, and of re-creating it. But this doesn’t necessarily imply that its connection with literature dissolves. We’ve already seen while discussing Diana Fuss’ conception on death in literature that the relation between reality and fiction may be indirect, reversed, compensative on behalf of literature, distorted, without becoming irrelevant, and semantically void. Despite the fact that reality is residual in relation to literature, but also literature in relation to death, death in literature may provide information concerning the reality, the attitudes of the individual and of society towards death, concerning the writer’s perspective, a direction or literary species regarding death in the same way, as, for example, the funeral social practices reveal their connection with the imaginary or with the religious literature. It is not the literature – reality, death literature – reality of death relations that should be questioned, but the methods of analyzing them. It is certain that including notions about death in reality will not ruin anything, when studying death in a literary text, and this thing is even more difficult, as this is a topic around which great precautions are taken, with the possibility of reaching ignorance or, on the contrary, to the total disappearance of precautions, clearing the way for cliches and preconceptions. But when the human attitude towards death and its representation is analyzed, we should take into account the specific means of death representations in literature, as literature fills its own space within the vast scope of reality. That is why literature, in a general way, and literary representation of death have not only an aesthetic function (for knowledge, or cathartic), but also an ontological and super-aesthetic function, which is greatly highlighted by the Romanian poet Horea Badescu: “I’ve brought into this world so many things/ and I didn’t know/ that death itself may be born/ through words” or by Albert Camus: “As a creator I gave life to death itself. This is all that I had to do before dying.”

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72 Sandra-Marie Glatigny notices that the solution for the significances bleeding, for which we could blame death in literature, is myth usage, whose structure has a curdling role and allows a layered understanding of the world. (“Littérature et mythe”, in Philippe di Folco (ed.), op. cit., pp. 635-637).
73 This is the function that many have in mind when they consider that simple representation of death has been already a courage in facing death.
5. Conclusions. Death, literature – a (too) complex relationship

The literary representation of death is not situated exclusively on the side of the mimesis, just as it cannot be subdued only to the representation understood as semiosis. In other words, both ideas that literature neutralizes the knowledge of death, projecting the reader in an environment of immortality as a result of activating the anti-thanatical forces of language (as a means of building literature or due to other mechanisms of literature that develop a disrupting relation with the reality) and the fact that death may be perfectly illustrated by literature, becoming a direct source, beyond any literarity are false for anthropologists or historians of death if they are analyzed to their full extent. Behind each of them we find theoretical principles, doubled by the cultural illusion of controlling death, either through circumscription or framing, or through transcending or relativization. The cultural illusions (as an anthropological fact and result of the confrontation between man and death) generated by the idea of literary representation of death are inevitable and might even become dangerous. For instance, when they become stereotypes, as in the case of the slap in the face of death, which we have discussed above. As a consequence they must be inferred in the logic and structure of certain theoretical functioning principles of literature in general and of literary representation of death in particular, being supervised without contesting their legitimacy. The relation between literature and death exists, it is permanent and complex but, isolated of any literary and/or theoretical context, as death representation in literature doesn’t translate the courage of facing death, as well as it doesn’t show indifference towards death. That would be much too easy.

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