Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 10 (59) No. 2 – 2017

Death reloaded: A rendition of intrinsic disposition in Matei Călinescu's *Un altfel de jurnal*

Anca PIRNOIU[1]

What is the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of death? Among the popular responses, based on common knowledge, it would be: 'the end,' closure, finality of both body and/or spirit (depending on beliefs). But could it be possible to regard death as a foundation for identity narrative? Can it represent a beginning? Can death define life, sustain it, and even prolong it? In the following essay, I attempt to identify circumstances in which life is an aftermath of death, not in physical assumption, but intrinsic evolution. I will be looking at Matei Călinescu's existential path as confessed in Un altfel de jurnal: Ieşirea din timp [Another type of journal: Stepping out of time] *and I will be focusing on the consequences and influence of death while justifying the self.*

Keywords: *life, death, existence, identity, phantomized being*

Where/when does death begin? What might trigger death to become a life-sustaining support? Starting from general assumptions, discussions involving death are almost always associated with an end, a closure. "Let us add that 'the ending of life' is itself potentially ambiguous" (Luper 2016). For those who believe in the notion of afterlife, death never occurs; the body disintegrates, but the spirit persists. Regardless of convictions, is it possible to pinpoint the beginning of death? Whether immediate (an unfortunate accident) or prolonged (a pesky disease), the general thought is that death is the cause of something palpable. It begins the instant we identify it and the factors that have concluded its reality. In a different interpretation, can the shattering of hopes, dreams, beliefs, and feelings also qualify as death? These notions are not in our immediate touch, though they pertain to the development and evolution of life. Why not fall into the embrace of death? While mostly constricted to physical accounts, death goes beyond the surface and metaphorically enters the intrinsic disposition of a human being, one that is prone to afflictions much as the external appearance. In the case of Romanian-American author Matei Călinescu, death is seen as dominating life, particularly in times of hardship, mostly because of contextual bereavement. Based on his last known journal from the published series, *Un altfel de jurnal*: *Ieşirea din timp* [*A different*

[1] University of Bucharest, ancapirnoiu@gmail.com

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)

type of journal: *Stepping out of time*], I will attempt to analyze the contributions of death, seen as a substitute for loss (losing grasp of) and incapacitation, to the life-changing episodes of Călinescu's existential trajectory by regarding death not as a barrier (a stop sign), but as a platform of initiation (a green light) and continuity.

For Matei Călinescu, the roller coaster of life has always maintained the element of suspense, the adrenaline of uncertainty and the uncontrollable unfolding of historical and personal events. These tribulations have taken hold of his existence and maneuvered its course, from being dropped at considerable speed and uplifted at half the intensity. The moments of descent represent the cornerstone of Călinescu's life narrative, for every ascending attempt begins from a designated finish line. In the conception of Jeremy Tambling, "energies once set in motion continue on the basis of death, not despite it" (2001, 145). I shall be arguing throughout the paper that the main defining contexts that have affected the author's being resemble acts of death, in their metaphorical understanding and representation. I will continue by focusing on how particular instances that erupt from the said contexts reveal themselves as consequences of death rather than life. And what better way to channel our attention on the chronological display of biographical dispositions than by launching a brief description provided by the author himself:

> Și nu încetează să mă uimească distanța dintre epocile pe care le-am trăit – infinitezimală în absolut, imensă în relativitatea existenței: sfârșitul anilor 1930, cu verile eterne la țară […], cel de-al Doilea Război Mondial și sfârșitul copilăriei, instaurarea brutală a comunismului în adolescență, stalinismul românesc […], experiența sărăciei, fricii și a mizeriei sociale, complexitățile ascunse ale lumii totalitare, exilul și ambiguitățile sale, pierderea și regăsirea limbii materne, America, România 'tranziției' și tentația de-o clipă de a trăi acolo, moartea lui M, mormântul familiei de la Turnu Severin, revizitat anual, cu cele trei plăci noi de marmoră albă: M.C., 1977-2003; M.C., adică eu, 1934-; A.C., adică Uca, 1941-… (45-46)[2]

At first glance, the path of Călinescu's life, as disseminated in his own words, is initiated by "the end" (*sfârșitul*). This closure prompts the beginning of a new

[2] [And it never ceases to amaze me, the distance between the eras I have lived in – small in absolute, huge in the relativity of existence: the end of the 1930's, with eternal summers in the countryside […], the Second World War and the end of childhood, the brutal installation of Communism in adolescence, the Romanian Stalinism […], the experience of poverty, fear and social evil, the hidden complexities of the totalitarian world, exile and its ambiguities, the lost and found maternal language, America, the Romania of 'transition' and the temptation, for just a second, to live there, the death of M, the family tomb from Turnu Severin, annually revisited, with three new white marble headstones: M.C., 1977-2003; M.C., meaning me, 1934-; A.C., meaning Uca, 1941-] (our translation)

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)

chapter, but omits the one before. Whether a mishap or a banal occurrence not worthy of mention, the decision to begin at the end of those "eternal summers in the countryside" might be attributed to the constrictions of memory. His early childhood has known but a few peaceful moments before being clouded by the outburst of World War II, a picture that offers an intriguing contrast between the expected colorful life views of a child and the constant grim threat of nonexistence. "Contemporary American psychological definitions of trauma borrow Freud's initial, economic conception of the phenomenon as being related to an exogenous matter, the result of an actual external shock to the psyche" (Walker 2003, 106). Death has taken control through its affective power of maneuvering the progression of life stages, showing one of its many faces at the very inception of consciousness. According to Joachim Oberst, taking on Heidegger's philosophy of death, "the naked reality of death's factical presence can be experienced neither directly nor objectively. One is confronted with such death abruptly. Such confrontation is so overwhelming that it bears life-shaping power" (2009, 19). As a result, Călinescu announces the "end of childhood," which can be attributed not only to a biological transition toward another juncture in human development, but also to one of the consequences of death, namely the awareness of feeble self-protection and the instilled co-ownership of existential agency.

External forces have continued to assume a crucial role in the condition of the author's life. His own recollections come full circle on death and its moldable figure, from the undesired, inflicting circumstances to individual collapse, both spiritual and physical, as we shall see further on. The leap into adolescence and young adulthood has sent Călinescu into a whirlpool of empirical dissociations (aspiration vs. imposition). "Communism," "Romanian Stalinism" has given way to a tirade of death-announcing implications, among which the author remembers "the experience of poverty, fear and social evil". "Poverty" (the death of wealth), "fear" (the death of confidence), and "social evil" (the death of social fulfillment), all have gained terrain in determining the dictated course of self-worth by obstructing the expression of free will. There is a sense of isolationism and exclusion, in which the author unwittingly partakes, that leads the way toward a loss of cultural, as well as individual defining. The political regime, having chained the body from attaining what it desires, has tried to trespass the premises of the intellect as well. The "hidden complexities of the totalitarian world" moved beyond external suffering and into intrinsic fragmentation:

> Poziția mea intelectuală personală devenea foarte fragilă: eu încercam să legitimez, după puterile mele modeste, valori occidentale într-o țară

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)

> comunistă, când acele valori (în acest caz libertatea de expresie) erau declarate, de către tineretul universitar occidental, ca fasciste. (204)[3]

Once again, death has unmasked itself to reveal the suppression of creative assertion by blocking one of the primary values of existence:

> Therefore, Hegel can describe this new relation as the life-and-death struggle for recognition. At this point, we should notice that the recognition that is strived for here can in no way concern mutual recognition. It still is about the pure self that in relation to nature wants to realize itself as pure self and, in this sense, wants to be 'recognized' as self. (Cobben 2012, 58)

Not only is Călinescu forbidden from speaking his mind, but he is also kept prisoner within his own being. Recognition relies on the appreciation of others, for one's own subjectivity may undermine the capabilities of being. Once the environment censors the articulation of self and drops the curtain on its performance, death claims the life of personal quintessence.

The outcomes of dictatorial leadership have lead the adult Călinescu to the marginal decision of climbing the tracks of his roller coaster journey in a place of fresh beginnings where the incipient being must educate itself in terms of language, culture, traditions, and opportunities. This cringeworthy revival from an imminent, terminal death is motivated by exile:

> Eu însumi am luat drumul exilului și pentru că eram supus periodic – deși cu amenințări doar implicite – cererii de a semna 'pactul', ceea ce ar fi fost pentru mine umilirea supremă. (176)[4]

By "signing 'the pact,'" Călinescu refers to the constant pressure from the Secret Police to give information on anyone who was of interest to the regime; by doing so, the dictatorship controlled any attempts of being dethroned. The end of Communism, this time also determined by the author himself through self-extraction, or self-exclusion, has dictated the restart of his entire system in the

[3] [My personal intellectual position was becoming very fragile: I was trying to legitimize, with modest powers, Western values in a Communist country, when those values (in this case freedom of expression) were being declared as fascists views by the Western university youth] (our translation)

[4] [I myself took the path of exile also because I was constantly under pressure – although with only implicit threats – to sign the 'pact', which for me would have been the ultimate humiliation] (our translation)

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)

United States of America. Not only have circumstances pressured the author into exile, but he has knowingly taken himself out of a context and placed into a new one. There have been several ruptures in connection to personal expectations up until the point of exile and there is little doubt as to the toll they have taken on Călinescu's identity. On new grounds, the "ambiguities" faced not only unearth the challenges of forth-coming impositions, but also deepen the acknowledgement of internal instability caused by past confrontations. "Time does not undo accomplishments. Death is not the end, but the inception of history" (Oberst 2009, 5). We can replace "accomplishments" with provocations for Călinescu's part, since the former have mostly been those of outside instruments. Nevertheless, the past cannot be undone, for death has occurred and with it another beginning is unveiled, even though the author's restart in America unfolds on quick sand:

> Am plecat din România şi pentru a ieşi din acest cerc vicios, dar, cum se vede, gândul la el m-a urmărit şi mă urmăreşte obsesiv. E groaznic: rădăcinile psihologice ale delaţiunii s-au prelungit, fără ştirea noastră, în fiecare dintre noi, chiar şi în cei mai intransigenţi adversari ai comunismului din exil sau din ţară. Pare a face parte din identitatea noastră culturală. (383)[5]

Being an exile enhances feelings of unbelonging, of no appurtenance, ultimately phantomizing the essence of being. The body carries the signs of alterity outwardly and inwardly, but when the spirit is scarred to unrecognizability, the surfaced body remains a lifeless carcass: "Eşti un biet suflet împovărat de un cadavru" (qtd. in Călinescu 2016, 58) [You are a poor soul impoverished by a corpse].

Losing grasp on "maternal language" adds to the implications of geographical removal; however, Călinescu maintains the practice of his journals as a reassuring lifeline:

> Faptul de a scrie în româneşte de departe, de foarte departe, din altă lume, dacă nu chiar din Lumea Cealaltă (mai e nevoie să spun că lumea în care trăiesc a fost foarte multă vreme, pentru românii din România, Lumea Cealaltă?), mi se pare în acelaşi timp extraordinar şi perfect normal. (112)[6]

[5] [I left Romania also to get out of this vicious circle, but, as you can see, the thought of it has followed me and obsessively continues to do so. It is awful: the psychological roots of reporting have extended, without our knowledge, to each of us, even the most intransigent adversaries of Communism, in exile or in the country] (our translation)

[6] [The act of writing in Romanian from afar, from another world, if not the Other World (is it necessary to say that the world I live in has been, for a long time, the Other World for the people in Romania?), seems to be extraordinary and perfectly normal]

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)

Reuniting with language, by means of writing, turns into a healing process, an exercise that comforts the spirit within the boundaries of its delineated solitary confinement:

> Să sper că măcar aceste pagini, întâmplătoare și dezordonate cum sunt ele până acum, se vor 'construi' până la urmă, vor căpăta o structură pe care acum n-o pot bănui, vor deveni 'salvarea' mea. Un lucru e cert: singur scrisul mă poate duce spre ea, spre orizontul ei, deocamdată acoperit de ceață. *Singur scrisul*. (102)[7]

In this instance, death has not completely intervened. "One is moving both away from and toward the source of being. Language is this ontological river of permanent homecoming. Speaking it allows one to come to terms with the meaning of being by coming home to the fountain of existence" (Oberst 2009, 4). The poignancy of language is rooted in the composition of the self, for it remains the pillar of one's own enunciation. It is a most crucial tool that also credits death, which gives it perspective and contour.

In relation to being in two spaces, and yet in none, death does augment the phantomized description of the self. "Since its emergence, existence continues to *come to terms* with the reality of itself. It comes to terms with the nothingness of death it sees itself faced with simply by virtue of its own being and the possibility of (its) non-being" (Oberst 2009, 14). Călinescu's spatial and cultural in-betweenness presents the reality of self, which is devoid of meaning. As much as it increases the doubt of one's own existence, exile also contests the connectivity of the body with others, better said the recognition of others with respect to one's livelihood (a recurring theme):

> Metafora cu Lumea Cealaltă rămâne valabilă, căci articolele și cărțile care-ți apar acolo vor fi percepute ca ale unui autor mort. Scrierile tale au acolo un statut de scrieri postume iar vocea ta, vag auzită (dacă e auzită), e o voce *d'outre-tombe*, de dincolo de mormânt. Vizitele tale anuale în țară, cu scopuri memoriale, sunt cumva ale unei fantome care-și face periodic apariția, o fantomă inofensivă, de care nu-i prea pasă nimănui. Mă întreb: dacă m-aș fi stabilit definitiv acolo, existența mea ar fi fost mai puțin fantomatică? (113)[8]

[7] [I hope that these pages, at random and mixed as they are now, will eventually 'built up', will gain a structure that I cannot imagine right this moment, and become my 'salvation.' One thing is certain: only writing can take me there, to its horizon, though foggy as it may be. *Only writing*]

[8] [The metaphor of the Other World remains standing, for the articles and books that will appear there will be perceived as those of a dead author. Your writings gain there the status of posthumous writings and your voice, vaguely heard (if at all) is a voice *d'outre-tombe*,

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)

A "Romania 'in transition'" presents itself as an opportunity for assuming a desired role, one that had been puppeteered, but having faced displacement before, the task of complete relocation leaves no energy for rebuilding a broken identity. As mentioned before, death makes way for a new start, but it rises on the rocky foundation of experience, one that has emptied the self of substance.

The passing of his son Matthew at the age of 26 has brought death in the form of spiritual abandonment and bodily devaluation. The act of physical death, even though not his own, but of someone dear, has consolidated the trauma provoked by all that has been reconfigured, distanced from Călinescu's reach. In Paul Cobben's view, "like love partners, friends in some sense 'share' their identity: if a friend dies, it is the partial death of oneself" (2012, 143). Building on this analysis, it can be said that in terms of blood ties, father-son relation in this situation, the repercussion has a similar intensity. M, as the author names him, had been living with autism, and the episodes of epilepsy that followed have been the cause of his demise. Death begins to take on its predetermined meanings, as the level of manifestation has changed. Although the self has reached another ending, another stop sign in its journey, it tries to alleviate the pressure of this new pain, this impasse, this profound loss, and revive the presence of what cannot fully be restored:

> Dar când și când, îl învie brusc în mine câte un obiect care se transformă, nu știu cum, în semn. Un semn de la el! Ieri a fost o foaie de hârtie. Am simțit nevoia să mă gândesc la el, să scriu despre el. (14)[9]

In the examples discussed so far, the instances of death have succeeded in almost nullifying self-consideration, but the disappearance of M provides impetus for continuation; the memory of M, his intangible survival, is dependent on Călinescu's own intrinsic continuation, much as the author's purpose for carrying on is relying on such fragments of remembrance (in a system of double reliance):

> E a patra aniversare postumă, mai misterioasă parcă decât cele precedente. Căci el continuă să trăiască pentru noi și memoria noastră refuză să-l înconjoare de aura celor dispăruți și să-i învăluiască imaginea în acea distanță interioară care pune semnul egalității între 'odată' și 'niciodată' și transformă

from beyond the grave. Your annual visits to the country, with memorial purpose, are those of a phantom that constantly appears, an innocent ghost that nobody cares about. I wonder: if I had decided to move back forever, would my existence have been less ghostly?]

[9] [From time to time, an object that transforms into a sign suddenly resurrects him. A sign from him! Yesterday it was a piece of paper. I felt the need to think of him, to write about him] (our translation)

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)

> într-un fel de basm melancolic ceea ce a fost. Continuă să trăiască într-un spațiu fără dimensiuni, dar nu mai puțin real în însăși irealitatea lui: intangibil, dar prezent. (22)[10]

Considering Vwadek Marciniak's insight, "death only magnifies the quality of living for those who still have motion" (2006, 373). Thus, Călinescu's life is fused by the death of Matthew, even if with the sole purpose of keeping M's memory and ghostly presence preserved.

Death does not offer much repose from its grasp, only to return under the diagnosis of cancer. As we have seen, it has never left Călinescu's side, and it has decided to directly imprint the flesh much as it has done the spirit. The trigger of one's own knowledge of near bodily death cripples the insecure future (73 years old when the author discovers his disease), recognizes the present and enhances the past. "Rolul de bolnav, dar și faptul însuși mă stimulează să citesc nu numai cărți și articole medicale, ci și lucrări despre filozofia morții" (146) [The role of a sick man, as well as the fact itself, stimulates me to read not only medical books and articles, but also papers on the philosophy of death]. Death assumes full potential in taking hold of the author's preoccupations by becoming the main attraction, on which Călinescu's attention is centered. Until this particular moment, death has been a silent, yet effective (major) component in assembling the course of actions that have tailored the author's life in patches. It has overthrown life by positioning itself as the lens through which possibilities may or may not forge. The spectrum of life is through death:

> Viitorul în sine e ireal, dar poți planta în el proiecte, așteptări, planuri care se vor realiza sau nu în drumul spre irealitatea imediată și apoi tot mai veche a trecutului personal, păstrat doar prin imagini și urme înscrise în memorie, mai clare sau mai șterse. (186-187)[11]

[10] [It's the fourth posthumous anniversary, more mysterious than the former ones. For he continues to live for us and our memory refuses to convey the aura of those departed on him and envelop his image in that internal distance that makes equal 'once' and 'never' and transforms what has been into a sort of melancholic fairytale. He continues to live in a space without dimensions, but no less real than his own unreality: intangible, but present] (our translation)

[11] [The future itself is not real, but you can plant within it projects, expectations, plans that might materialize, or not, along the road toward an immediate unreality, an older one of personal past, kept through images and tracks imprinted in memory, clearer or less so] (our translation)

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)

Călinescu's life has been projected through the kaleidoscope of death in all the instances put forth for analysis. However, room was still left for potential projects that had no time limit set for them, nor any barricades obstructing their advancement. At hearing the diagnosis, the sole occupation has turned into a day-by-day existence, thus the author being banished from fortifying the remains of his desires: "În genere, trăiesc după principiul (sănătos, în fond) *one day at a time*" (126) [By and large, I live by the principle (a healthy one) *one day at a time*]. As Oberst describes, "[…] death is an inerasable fact of life. In its *facticity* it is the most *universal* and *inclusive* of all life events. All face it; no one gets around it" (2009, 21).

After this specific death, there will be no beginning. The last end on the tracks has been reached and in this moment, being strives to self-indulge, by way of imagination, in affirming the value of its life:

> Îmbătrânind, ce altceva facem decât să ne deplasăm de-a-ndărătelea într-o singurătate din ce în ce mai mare, cu ochii ațintiți spre un trecut din ce în ce mai îndepărtat și mai cețos? Amintirile – incerte, iluzorii – sunt, când le arunci o privire mai atentă, scheletice: ca să pui carne pe ele, ca să le dai puțină viață – o viață oricum fantomatică – trebuie să le inventezi. Și trebuie să te prefaci că nu-ți sunt indiferente, că-ți pasă de ele, că din ele se alcătuiește – realcătuiește – eul tău adevărat, ființa ta profundă. (113-114)[12]

Consolidating existence as a final performance is as hazardous as it has been in all acts of life (or, rather death), because the pavement of being has been vandalized beyond repair. Life has depended on moments of death to carry it out to term and scribble the missing year on the "white marble:" "Se poate deci muri și în viață – într-o viață prelungită artificial, cu enorme riscuri și fără răsplată anticipată" (132) [So one can actually die during one's life – a life artificially extended, with enormous risks and no anticipated reward].

In conclusion, when thinking about death, there is more than meets the eye, literally speaking. Mostly connected to physical disappearance, many of its deep understandings and connotations pass under the radar of accountability, either out of fear or the intention of minimizing its dimension. Nonetheless, the presence of death can be discovered unwillingly in the undertaking of life, all the way to the smallest

[12] [Getting older, what else can we do than move toward a bigger loneliness, with our eyes fixed on a past more and more out of reach and blurry? Memories – uncertain, illusory – are, at close inspection, skeleton-like: to put meat on them, to give them a bit of life – a ghostly life – you must invent them. And you must pretend that you're not indifferent to them, that you care about them, that from them your true self, you profound being emerges] (our translation)

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)

of occurrences. As we have seen, Matei Călinescu's existence has been derailed by death without the power of fully controlling the effects. From the menace of the Second World War, the oppression of Communism to exile, the loss of his son and finally his own, Călinescu's identity has been shaped in the light of death, the mechanism through which existence has persisted, despite its fragmented construction.

References

Călinescu, Matei. 2016. *Un altfel de jurnal: Ieșirea din timp*. București: Humanitas.

Cobben, Paul. 2012. *The Paradigm of Recognition: Freedom as Overcoming the Fear of Death*. Volume 7. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Luper, Steven. 2016. "Death." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) https://plato.stanford.edu/ archives/ sum2016/entries/death/.

Marciniak, Vwadek P. 2006. *Towards a History of Consciousness: Space, Time, and Death*. New York: Peter Lang.

Oberst, Joachim L. 2009. *Heidegger on Language and Death*. London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Tambling, Jeremy. 2001. *Becoming Posthumous: Life and Death in Literary and Cultural Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Walker, Janet. 2003. "The traumatic paradox: autobiographical documentary and the psychology of memory." In *Contested Pasts: The politics of memory*, ed. by Katharine Hodgkin, and Susannah Radstone, 104-119. London and New York: Routledge.

BDD-A28077 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:10:08 UTC)