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TOWARDS A POETICS OF DEATH

COMPARATIVE AND AESTHETICAL REFLECTIONS

Abstract: This article is proposed as a study on the issue of the relationship between the datum of death and the aesthetic context of the creation of a literary work, and therefore of authorial poetics. Starting with an in-depth study of the concept of literature and poetics 'of death', it will be intended to proceed with research on the related philosophical and critical issues, to provide an overview of the most important insights on the subject. Thanks to a comparative and transmedia approach, the discourse will be addressed to the theory of death in literature, considering in a broad sense the most significant contemporary critical proposals. Thus, literary and cinematographic case studies will be proposed, as part of a reflection on the issue from a theoretical point of view. The ontological implications relating to the creation of the work of art will also be considered, in order to deepen, with full awareness, the relationship between the poetics of death and works of a not only artistic and literary nature, but also the testimonial.

Key words: Death, poetics, literature, contemporary, aesthetics, comparative, theory.

1. Premise

This paper offers an insight on the issue of relationship between the datum of death and poetics in the context of the literary and non-literary works of art. The analysis will be articulated along two lines, and distinguished in two sections: in the first section, an in-depth study of an epistemological nature will be conducted, aimed at describing and analysing the main conceptual issues regarding the definition of 'literature of death'; in the second section, a critical reading will be conducted focusing on the ontological implications relating to the issue of the realisation of the aesthetic-literary work. A philosophical and comparative analysis methodology will be adopted, to approach the main theoretical problems presented

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by an issue unprovided of a relative literary theory. The relationship between the datum of death and the 'literary object' in the context of literary philosophical study, in fact, is today an unprecedented theme. The essay is therefore proposed as a starting point for a reflection on a broad theme and aims to provide a preliminary reading of some of the most relevant critical literary, anthropological, and aesthetic proposals on the issue.

2. Epistemological perspective

At the beginning of his essay *La littérature et la mort* (1995), Michael Picard deals with the issue of substance and matter of which literature is constituted in the representative and expressive relationship with the datum of death. Citing Xavier Bischat's famous concept of life as a «set of functions that resist death»,² Picard points out the consistency of literary expression as a stratification of the word and of emotionality on the one hand, and a figurative representation on the other. (1995: 9) The philosophical consideration of the work of art as an object that encloses, by its ontological attributes, a sedimentation of immaterial content in the material-form, is not new. Indeed, Theodor Adorno addresses the issue in his *Ästhetische Theorie*, defining the intrinsic existence of a link between the empirical form of the work of art and authorial intent.

If the material in the artwork is truly resistant to the artwork's otherwise pure identity, the inner process of identity in artworks is essentially that between the material and intention. Without intention, without the immanent form of the principle of identity, form would not exist anymore than it would without the mimetic impulse. The surplus of intentions reveals that the objectivity of artworks cannot be reduced simply to mimesis. (2002: 151)

The balance between these two dimensions generates the work of art as such. On the contrary, the absence of it would bring the artistic (and literary) object to a zero degree. By applying this dualistic vision to the 'literature of death' as a genre, Picard makes an argument that allows him to point out the insincerity – and therefore inapplicability to the theme of death – of the literary expressions 'unbalanced' by priori reasons. In other words, the insincerity of literary works limited by an orientation of the discourse on death, which is exhausted in its very premises aimed at resolving rather than deepening the non-material dimension of the term of death.

²Original: «ensemble des fonctions qui résistent à la mort».

[On a noté ce] qu'on désigne habituellement par les termes « littérature de piété », « littérature de préparation à la mort », « littérature de consolation », non seulement n'a le plus souvent rien de littéraire, du moins au sens moderne du mot, même pris en charge par la « littérature d'idées », mais ne traite en rien de la mort.³ (1995: 10)

Picard's reflection offers an important starting point in the approach to literary expressions in which the term of death is not only a theme and a subject, but an integral part of the compositional material. Those literary expressions, that is, in which death interacts as other-than-self, as alter, *in* the compositional act. Thus, adopting the Adornian concept of the work of art as an objective stratification of immaterial significance and empirical matter, and applying this principle to the specific issue of the literature of death, an essential prerequisite appears so that the literary product does not incur in an annihilation of its artistic dimension: that of the coexistence of the very datum of death in the aesthetic frame of the composition. Such theoretical issue is problematic for two different reasons. The first one regards the *contextualisation* of this phenomenon, namely the identification of those literary and artistic works in which death is indeed an element integrated dialectically into the aesthetic structure; the second reason, on the other hand, concerns the philosophical and cultural relativity of the very concept of death.

2.1. First reason

Regarding the first point, it is essential to structure the critical reading according to parameters that are not completely absorbed in the descriptive dimension of the first or second dimensions of existence of the work of art – that is, according to Adorno, those of sense («content») and empirical shaped matter («form»). In fact, if reference is made to the Picardian definition of «littérature de la mort» as literary work that goes beyond the closed forms in which the term of death is not integrated into the composition but is the subject of which it is written, a critical reading is required that contemplates both the dimensions⁴: as united in the literary work, but separated in the critic's analysis, therefore aimed at deepening the relationship between the two dimensions and not just at their description. This

³ «[It has been noted that] what is usually referred to by the terms «literature of piety», «literature of preparation for death», «literature of consolation», not only has most often nothing literary, at least in the modern sense of the word, even covered by the «literature of ideas», but does not deal with death at all». (My translation)

⁴ Reference is made here to the two dimensions of the work of art according to Adorno's theory.

critical parameter is described by Mario Fubini in *Critica e poesia*, an essay in which the «principle of inseparability» of the literary work is formulated as an aesthetic and critical ineradicable postulate:

Contenuto e forma, identici nella poesia che il poeta vien creando, e ricreando il lettore, si scindono necessariamente nell'atto del critico, il quale per rendersi conto di quella identità o della mancata identificazione, non può non opporre un contenuto a una forma, e per questa via raggiunge una critica certezza di quel che era per lui pure all'inizio del suo lavoro un'intuizione o, per usare il termine desanctisiano, un'impressione.⁵ (1973: 97-98)

In his reflection, Fubini cites René Wellek and Austin Warner's *Theory of Literature* in which, again, the separation between the two dimensions of form and content of the literary and artistic work is reported as an aim to which the critical analysis must aspire. (Id.) In carrying out an analysis focused on literary works that integrate the datum of death in such a way as to make it part of the compositional matter, and therefore focused on works properly defined as 'literature of death', it is necessary to adopt a critical perspective that is not completely absorbed in the dimension of formal or content components. As it is noted by Vito Bonito in *Il canto della crisalide. Poesia e orfanità*, this very theoretical issue regards contemporary literature in a broad sense: it is indeed *in* the organic statute of sense and empirical form of the work of art that it can be observed its potential 'belonging' to data such as that of death – or life.

La scrittura come la vita non è un processo di rivelazione, piuttosto un lento denudamento di quanto si è. Il punto di partenza della poesia non è il suo punto di partenza, ma quello che le resta. Il silenzio, la solitudine, permanenti, sono le forme sceniche in cui il mondo non sa stare, né resistere.⁶ (1999: 51)

The empirical world, as over-structured datum that is external to the literary work, does not exist – nor «resists» – *within* a literary work that constitutes an active relationship with the very datum of life, as well as with the very datum of death. The literary work which authentically meets the Picardian definition of

⁵ «Content and form, identical in the poem that the poet creates and the reader recreates, are necessarily divided in the act of the critic, who, in order to identify such identicality, or the absence of it, cannot avoid to oppose a content to a form, and in this way he reaches a critical certainty of what an intuition (or in De Sanctis words «an impression») was also for him at the beginning of his work». (My translation)

⁶ «Writing, as life itself, is not a process of revelation, rather a slow undernourishment of what one is. The starting point of poetry is not its starting point, but what remains to it. The permanent silence, the permanent solitude, are the scenic forms in which the world does not know how to stay, nor resist». (My translation)

«littérature de la mort», and which can be ascribed to his paradigm, therefore, is the one in which the extra-literary datum of death is integrated not as subject, but as composed matter. Bonito's reflection matches this theoretical perspective, and refers it back to the datum of life finding a confirmation in the hundred and ninth of Franz Kafka's *Zurau Aphorisms*:

There is no need for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked; it can't do otherwise; in raptures it will writhe before you.⁷ (Cisco 2013: 111)

The affirmative act which produces the poetic work – meant as *poiesis* of matter to which a form is given – is only possible in the paradoxical dynamics of a relationship of *detachment-from* and *reception-of* the «world», intended as external datum that reveals itself – it «writhes» – because gazed in its contingent authenticity. Life itself, thus, consists in poetic matter.

Contextualising this aesthetic principle in a broader sense, and therefore not exclusively poetic-literary, it is also possible to identify related cases in works made in different artistic languages. Contemporary cinematography offers interesting examples. About the present issue, cinematographic criticism has in fact already recorded several cases as emblematic. Directors such as Terrence Malick and Mike Leigh have carried out a systematic fathoming of the 'matter-life' in their work, creating an aesthetic that integrates the datum of life itself. The case of *The Tree of Life* (2011) by Malick is indeed significant: in the film, starting from the family-biographical narrative nucleus, the author reaches an expressive frame that embraces life itself. Starting from the narration of an everyday family life (characterised by an intimately emotional focus), Malick's gaze transcends the space and time of *living*, projecting itself towards *life*. A sequence set in prehistoric times appears: through the perspective of a predatory dinosaur, life and death are revealed in their empirical and material consistency, highlighted by the encounter with the other-than-self.

It is in the fundamental mystery of relationships that Malick finds a parallel between prehistoric evolutionary processes and the more finitely embodied gestures of the human characters in his film. [...] A carnivorous raptor spies a wounded herbivore who lies dying near the shore. Looking down at potential prey, the raptor places a claw on the face of the poor creature [...]. But the raptor eventually removes his foot, sparing his potential prey, and then leaves the herbivore for other sights and sounds. (Rybin 2012: 149)

⁷Quoted in Italian in Bonito, 1999: 51.

The act of the animal, devoid of any logical and rational consistency, is performed as a pure and simple manifestation of living. In an ontological frame of absolute immediacy, his action interacts directly with the herbivore's life – at the minimum level of breathing – and brings him into empirical and material contact with life's very essence. Empirically, the creature is not breathing due to the pressure of the other's foot. A similar aesthetic approach is adopted by Leigh, a British director whose cinematic poetics tends as well to a 'penetration' of the datum of life. Leigh's work explores a broad display of everyday life, in which the biographical and episodic dimensions of the time of living coincide. As Raymond Carney and Leonard Quart underlines in the essay *The films of Mike Leigh: embracing the world* (2000), Leigh's poetics appear to be oriented towards a direction that is not representative of life as a *tableau* or as a simple object of the gaze. On the contrary, in his cinematographic works life is 'presented', and is therefore present as an integral part of the film – as compositional matter.⁸

2.2. Second reason

As regards the second point, intercultural anthropological studies on death in the twentieth century offer an interesting overview of recurrent macro structures in different socio-cultural groups. In the essay *Death and Anthropology: an introduction*, Antonius C. G. M. Robben points out that from the beginning of the twentieth century – until its end⁹ – scholars such as Robert Herz have approached the issue of the social conceptualisation of death as an element that transcends the affective circle of the family, involving the social group to which the deceased belongs and implying moral obligations. (Robben 1991: 3) Herz's principle has been taken up and articulated a few years later by Arnold Van Gennep, who offered a further perspective by pointing out the death as 'completion' of a ritual social transition: «These transitions, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, are life crises that become the subject of elaborate elevation rituals as a person rises from one status

⁸ About *High Hopes* (1988): «Leigh's narrative is personalised – focusing attention not on institutions but individuals. It is particularised – understanding life not in terms of generalities and abstractions, but as a matter of one *particular* thing after another». (Carney, Quart, 2000: 202) A similar observation could be expressed regarding subsequent films such as *Another Year* (2010) and *Turner* (2014), in which the immediate presentation of the datum life problematises the boundaries of progressive temporality.

⁹ Fundamental studies such as *Living and Dying* by Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson, and *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* by Zygmunt Bauman, which are located in the field of study with the same epistemological perspective (Robben, 1991: 4-5), are published in 1974 and 1992 respectively.

to the next». (Id.) Although the field of study is wide, what we intend to underline at this point is that anthropologists, in the comparative approach to the social and cultural coordinates relating to the element of death, denote an implicit stratification of the phenomenon. That is to say: a series of different implications – from the empirical-collective one to the spiritual and immaterial one – are connected by the death of the individual, and therefore by the pure and simple occurrence of the end of life. In this regard, the ethnographer Johannes Fabian underlined a criticality in the studies on death which tend, in many cases, to ‘reduce’ and therefore to flatten the spiritual, cultural, and emotional transversality mentioned above:

Much like the concept of culture, approaches to death in anthropology have undergone a process of parochialisation. Parochialisation has had the effect of eliminating a transcendental and universal conception of the problem. “Death” (in the singular) has ceased to be a problem of anthropological inquiry; there are only deaths and forms of death related behaviour. (1972: 545).

The underlining of similar problems, such as Picard’s, appears contextualisable in a general attitude of criticism of the inadequacy of studies on death limited by a priori reasons. It is therefore the reductive nature of these approaches, inherited from some literary currents, which decrees their exclusion from what, according to Picard, can properly be defined as literature of death.¹⁰ It appears clear, therefore, the importance of the integration of the datum of death in the very aesthetic roots of the literary work. The authenticity of the literary work “of death” derives from this integration, according to Picard’s theory, and generates a bond that connects the term of death to that of pleasure in the poetic context. Such a bond, in more than a few cases, can be the subject of cultural rejections and, therefore, can reveal the inadequacy of a priori limited readings. The cultural taboos¹¹ that oppose the integration of the datum of pleasure and that of death are indeed many. Picard:

Il est devenu indispensable de s’interroger avec le plus de rigueur possible sur les relations entre volupté et mort, entre Eros et Thanatos. [...] L’attitude actuelle courante met à peu près sur le même plan la volupté et la mort en les considérant toutes les deux comme taboues. Mais il ne peut s’agir de « tabous » du même ordre : la mort n’est en aucun cas un objet comme un autre. (1995: 1434)

¹⁰ The annotation of this danger of insufficiency also appears in Fubini’s work, which underlines the « absurdity of every theory » which addresses the artistic-literary work by focusing unbalanced towards one of the two constitutive terms of absolute content and empirical form. (1973: 259)

¹¹ Reference is made here to the same taboos that polarise literary expressions to the point of annihilation – no longer “of death”, but “de piété”, “de préparation à la mort”, “de consolation”. (Picard, 1995: 10)

In defining a critical discourse that examines literary and poetic expressions authentically connected to death, thus, it is necessary to adopt epistemological parameters that allow to highlight not just the presence of the datum death as matter of the formal component or that of meaning, but to deepen the intrinsic reasons for the relationship between death and literary work. In the case of poetic expressions, between death and poetics.

2.3. Critical cases

An example of this critical conception can be found in Robert I. Savage's reading of Walther Rehm's *Orpheus. Die Dichter und die Toten* (1950) in his 2008 essay *Hölderlin After the Catastrophe: Heidegger, Adorno, Brecht*.¹² In approaching the study of Rehm's work, Savage analyses an ambiguity generated by its title ("*Orpheus: the Poet and the Dead*") in the scope of a study on the term of death as part of the compositional and critical process of the work of art. At the time of the publication of *Hölderlin After the Catastrophe*, the value of 'death-for-the-country', originally generated by Nazi propaganda, is still associated with Hölderlin's death.

The title leaves unclear whether the dead referred to are those commemorated by the Orphic poet and redeemed through his song, or the countless victims of Hitler's aggression, who remain trapped unsung, as it were, in the underworld. Rehm's fore word suggests that he is quite conscious of this ambiguity: "The book is dedicated to a dead man. [...] On 11 June 1945, Walter Nestle lost his life in the Swabian homeland". (Rehm, 1950: 11) Rehm also discloses that the bulk of his manuscript was composed before 1945, at a time, that is, when the war's escalating fatalities must have weighed heavily on his mind. Death thus constitutes the book's subject matter and its inescapable background, its theme and its inspiration, and in investigating the "cult of death" in Novalis, Hölderlin, and Rilke, Rehm's implicit task is to find meaning in the apparently meaningless "fate" of men like Nestle. (Savage 2008: 15)

Savage notes that the placement of the datum of death in Rehm's work¹³ does not aim at a simple critical relocation of death as a treated subject regarding the poetics of Novalis, Hölderlin, and Rilke. On the contrary, he stresses the centrality of death as an integral dimension of Rehm's work: it is in fact «subject matter»,

¹² Rehm's essay is also quoted by Wellek and Austin in *Theory of literature* in the *Literature and Ideas* chapter. (1956: 115)

¹³ Placement which is operated at the most immediate level of contact with the work – that of the title.

«inescapable background», «theme», and «inspiration». In other words, death is a datum with respect to which the work is integrally and aesthetically constituted in a dialectical sense. Another example of this critical approach, referred to a poetic literary subject, can be found in the essay *Death and the Native Strain in the American Poetry* by Harold Bloom.¹⁴ The issue of the relationship between the datum of death and contemporary American poetry finds in Bloom's reading an attempt to deepen not only the dimension of the datum presence as a subject, but its integration in the compositional-poetic process. Starting from a study of the different poetic ratios related to the theme death in the context of romantic literature,¹⁵ Bloom's essay deals with the poetics of Emily Dickinson by underlining a central fact of her elaboration of death in the compositional act. To Dickinson, according to Bloom, the conscious experience of death is consciousness per se. In her poetics, such focus on consciousness define death as a term/object that does not annihilate the Ego, but which is the very matter of consciousness: dying is «consciousness of consciousness». (1972: 454) Furthermore, already in Wellek's and Austin's *Theory of literature* a critical passage relating to Dickinson's work provided an indication of her conception of death in terms that are not objectified, but close to a dynamic conception and, therefore, on a compositional level, dialectical. (1956: 206)

To sum up, critical cases such as these indicate how the Picardian question of *littérature de la mort* concerns a theoretical scope which poses two epistemological assumption as sine qua non: the dialectical integration of the datum of death in the compositional act, intended as a poetic-formal action on a matter; the avoidance, in the creative paradigms, of limits imposed on the creative focus by a priori extra-literary restrictions.

3. Ontological implication

In *Living Thought*, the philosopher Roberto Esposito addresses an issue regarding to the poetics and the philosophical conception of Giacomo Leopardi. In identifying Leopardi's poetry as a point of saturation of the philosophical linguistic register of his time, Esposito stresses that «contrary to a mannered image flattened

¹⁴ The essay appears in the same issue of «Social Research» as Johannes Fabian's *How Others Die*. The issue of the magazine is dedicated in a broad sense to the theme of death and is titled *Death in American Experience*.

¹⁵ In the passage, Blooms delves into the difference between romantic poets like Emerson and Blake, who are «nearly at one in their realisation that death is not *materia poetica*» (1972: 451), and Wordsworth, who «fought the consciousness of death because he had begun by identifying the poetic spirit with the intimation of immortality» (ID.)

into a semantics of death, it must be said that the poet's gaze is focused from the beginning on the dimension of life as the natural form of existence [...]». (2012: 118) In *Zibaldone*, Leopardi considers in fact the term of death in a dialectic of contradiction with that of life: «If nature were dead, life would not be. To be dead: these are contradictory expressions. If nature tended to death in any way, if she provided for it in any way, she would do so against herself». (Leopardi in Esposito 2012: 118)¹⁶ The datum of death is excluded in an absolute sense from the empirical space of life. Esposito frames the issue within Leopardi's philosophical prospect, underlying its relevance to an all-encompassing tension of the poet towards the interconnection dynamic of the terms of pleasure and life. As part of this critical reflection, Esposito's reading of Leopardi's philosophical thought offers the opportunity to contextualise some contemporary artistic expressions that, from a theoretical and aesthetical point of view, tend to the contrary – namely, to the integration of the datum of death *into* the empirical experience of life.

An example of this perspective referring to the literary work is offered by Rossanda in a conversation about loss with the feminist psychoanalyst Manuela Fraire. Rossanda regards the term of loss¹⁷ as an integral part of the ontological modelling-process of the Ego: in her perspective, the progressive 'shaping' of the self takes place *in relation* to death.

Francamente io considero la perdita diversa dalle perdite. Intendo dire che gli oggetti amati – persone e cose – vanno perduti e la ferita è grandissima ma non coincide totalmente con la perdita – sostantivo singolare – che fa parte del processo di continua formazione dell'Io. [...] La verità è che mi ritrovo sia nel tuo modo «attivo» di andare incontro alle perdite, sia in quello che «ascolta» ciò che hanno da insegnarci. Ciò che apparenta ambedue i modi è l'esposizione alla relazione con l'altro, che mi sembra – dopo tutto – l'unica prospettiva nella quale la perdita non diviene pura disperazione.¹⁸ (2008: 42)

¹⁶ «Se la natura fosse morte, ella non sarebbe. Esser morte, son termini contraddittorii. S'ella tendesse in alcun modo alla morte, se in alcun modo la procurasse, ella tenderebbe e procurerebbe contro se stessa». (Leopardi, 2015: 1514)

¹⁷ The subsistence of a philosophical connection between the datum of loss to that of absence – and therefore to loss in the sense of loss of life – is explored by the two intellectuals in the general context of the conversation. (2008: 13-14; 19; 24-25)

¹⁸ «Frankly, I consider loss different from losses. I mean that loved objects – people and things – must be lost and even if the wound is enormous, it does not totally coincide with the loss – singular noun – which is part of the process of continuous modeling of the Ego. [...] The truth is that I find myself both in your «active» way of dealing with losses and in that which «listens» to what they teach us. What relates both ways is that they expose the relationship with the other, which seems to me – after all – the only perspective in which loss does not become pure desperation». (My translation)

The relationship with loss has an active role in the 'shaping' of the Ego – process which, according to Dickinson's poetics, as underlined by Austin and Wellek, leads to an awareness of itself. In this dynamic of relation to the datum of loss, the danger of Ego annihilation is avoided thanks to an ontological balance based on the very term of relationship. The same, in hindsight, of Malick's poetics, in which interpersonal contact is the projective fulcrum of categories such as humanity, violence and, to a large extent, death.¹⁹ Rossanda's paradigm outlines in fact an experiential stability in the relationship with death, that is, an ontological state of things that does not give in to despair - a condition that would mean the annihilation not only of life but of the work of art as such. The philosopher Giuseppe Di Giacomo writes of this concept in *Estetica e letteratura*, underlining the paradigmatic value of the works of Beckett and Kafka to understand the paradox of twentieth century literature in which, however,²⁰ despair does not lead to annihilation. (1999: 219) Di Giacomo's conception is close to Adorno's philosophical vision: that according to which the history of the twentieth century sets a limit beyond which the literary creative act cannot fail to relate to the collapse of the very categories of Western anthropological and artistic existence.²¹ On the basis of this principle, Leopardi's exclusion of the datum of death from life in the overall sense is understandable as it is devised in a time not yet 'devastated' by the collapse: a time in which the data of death and loss are irretrievably integrated into the sensitive experience and the creative act. The twentieth century thus marks the limit beyond which the integration of the data of death in artistic creation is not only necessary, but inevitable. Leopardi's point of view is therefore subverted, both on the level of the ontological implications of empirical existence, and on the aesthetic one of artistic and literary works. The identification of this duplicity of levels and therefore of the existence of an interconnection between manifestations of different kinds united by a constant integration of death datum, allows a double classification: on the one hand, the work in which the focus is testimonial, on the other, that in which centrality is given to that of poetics.

¹⁹ In this regard, I refer to Rybin's study on the relationship between Malick's poetics and Heidegger's philosophy (2012: 97-99).

²⁰ Term understood as deprivation of the possibility of overcoming and transcending death and loss.

²¹ In this regard, Adorno's reflection on post-Auschwitz literature is well-known: «Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today». (1983: 34)

3.1. Testimony and poetics

In the context of this critical reflection, aimed at deepening the issue of integration in the contemporary literary work of the datum of death, examining the testimonial meaning of literary works implies a broader question, namely that of transmissibility – or non-transmissibility – of the aesthetic dimension of contacts with the work itself. In the article *The acquaintance principle*, Malcom Budd stresses how aesthetic enjoyments derived from contact with the object is non-transmissible, unlike aesthetic judgments, transmissible «as are other kind of judgment». (2003: 392) The recognition and the attestation of testimonial character in a work under consideration is therefore an admissible operation from a logical-analytical point of view, and thus of judgment, but not from that of the 'person: work of art' relationship. Already in 1973, in the essay *Art and imagination*, the philosopher Roger Scruton argued the need to recall, in a critical context, that «the view is at best an hypothesis, which can only be made plausible by what we build on it». (1973: 44) Furthermore, in delving into Frank Sibley's aesthetic theories, Scruton points out that from the perspective of the philosopher,

aesthetic properties are not, strictly speaking, 'simple' properties, but what he calls 'emergent' properties: they always depend in some way on other properties, although the relation between them and these other properties is not a logical one. As examples of emergent properties we might consider aspects, and Gestalt configurations generally. (Id.)

Adopting this critical perspective and connecting it to Budd's proposition on the transmissibility of critical judgment in a logical sense only,²² the issue of testimony appears observable in terms of a formal configuration. In other words, in terms no different from the empirical structure of the work itself. A reference to this analytical-critical vision is already present in Adorno's aesthetic thought which, as is well known, indicates the work as «sedimented content». (2002: 144-145) Discussing the testimonial character of an object-aesthetic work to which the datum of death is related, is therefore a critical act referring to the formal dimension of the work itself, and not to its 'ulterior' dimension of emotional interiorisation, as pointed out by Budd. In deepening the cases relating to this testimonial-aesthetic *modus*, the critical gaze can thus access a synthetic analytical dimension, whose parameters allow the observation of the relationship with death as a dynamic integrated with testimony. In other words, it is possible to read the data of death as ontologically and aesthetically integrated with the testimony that considers it

²²Therefore, not in the sense of of the pleasure of aesthetic interiorisation

as a subject. As an example, consider the iconic letter that Gisèle Celan-Lestrange wrote to René Char in 1970, after the death of her husband.

«Cher René Char,

Vos deux lettres m'ont profondément touchée et je vous en remercie.

C'est dans la nuit du 19 au 20 avril — vous l'ai-je dit ? — que mon mari a choisi de mourir de la mort la plus solitaire, la plus anonyme, on ne l'a retrouvé que le 1^{er} mai, il a été enterré hier au cimetière de Thiais auprès de l'enfant que nous avions perdu, il y a dix-sept ans.

Tous ses amis sauront, j'en suis sûre, respecter son geste, son tragique destin d'homme, de poète, sa maladie aussi, sa lucidité et son délire : sa vie.

Merci de votre fidélité, de votre amitié

Gisèle Celan-L.»²³ (2015: 176)

Death is a past event, which precedes the compositional moment but remains present as an integrated element of the composition – that is, for the letter, the act of writing. In the same syntactic period Gisèle Celan-Lestrange admits the choice of the man, his disappearance resulting from the choice, and subsequent events (the discovery of the body and the burial): the states not of a dying life, but of the expression of the death datum coexist in the space of two lines. The critical issues raised by the edition of an epistolary are clearly differentiated by their aesthetic and formal nature from those of other types of publications.²⁴ The aesthetic convergence between the two works, both 'written',²⁵ is however observable starting from a commonality of a dynamic order; that is, as detailed in the first paragraph, from the dialectical integration of the data of death in the compositional act. The critical identification of a 'poetics of death' in both poetic and epistolary work is therefore possible thanks to the observation of the ontological interpenetration of the datum. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes of this interpenetrating character in the preface to the edition of the writings of the musician and composer Stefano Scodanibbio, *Non abbastanza per me*.

²³ «Dear René Char, / Your two letters have touched me deeply, and I thank you for that. / It was the night of April 19 to 20 – did I tell you already? – that my husband chose to die of the loneliest, the most anonymous death, he was not found until May 1st, he was buried yesterday in the cemetery of Thiais, next to the child we had lost seventeen years ago. / All his friends will, I am sure, respect his act, his tragic destiny as a man, as a poet, his sickness too, his lucidity and his delirium: his life. // Thank you for your loyalty, your friendship / Gisèle Celan-L.» (My Translation) The letter is dated May 13, just under a month after the poet's suicide.

²⁴ I refer to: Marti: 1961; Wårnhjelm: 1998.

²⁵ Reference is made here to the commonality between the work as a collection of letters and as a collection of poems.

Non, secondo un tenace equivoco romantico, l'opera che nasce immediatamente dalla vita, né, come nella teologia giovannea, la vita che scaturisce dalla parola. Non c'è verbo prima della vita, «in principio», né vita prima della parola: piuttosto esse nascono e camminano insieme, l'una per l'altra, quasi una presenza clandestina di cui non si può fare a meno [...]. Poetica non è mai una vita, per quanto avventurosa e svagata, né un'opera, per quanto singolare e inaudita. Poetica è solo l'ospitalità che si danno a vicenda, quel convivere come due amanti che hanno passato insieme tutte le loro giornate e non sanno dire perché.²⁶ (2019: 13)

The compositional dimension and that of the ontological datum are integrated *into* the work in a balance of interdependence. The poetic element of the work of art is annihilated if life does not constitute its foundation; vice versa, life alone is not sufficient for the development of the work which requires its integration into aesthetic – and therefore poetic – formality. In this sense, the work is «sedimented content» (Adorno, 2002: 144-145), that is, the empirical, and therefore formal, sediment of an immaterial datum. Death is therefore an integral part in the formal dimension of the testimonial work, which is composed *of it* on the compositional level – 'ulterior' if compared to that of the content of the testimony. The compositional-aesthetic principle of integration of the datum of death observed here does not change if the analysis is directed to works in which, instead of the testimonial, the dimension of poetics is preeminent. An emblematic example is the work of the poet and video artist Gianni Toti, active in Italy and Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. Contrary to the Leopardian paradigm of death as an irreconcilable datum with that of life - and therefore of the poetic work - in a broad sense, Toti reaches the concept of integration through the observation of an unsolvable ontological oxymoron. In other words, in his theoretical and poetic thought, coexistence with the datum of death is not only possible but essential and inevitable, considering the existence as a 'space' of paradox.

La morte è un paradosso, certamente, dei maggiori, quando noi ci siamo lei non c'è e viceversa, ma per Toti è un vero e proprio ossimoro, è l'"ossimorte" [...]. È ossimorica, la morte, perché sempre coimplicata con la vita, che non esisterebbe

²⁶ «It is not that the work is created directly from life (according to a tenacious romantic misunderstanding), nor, as in Johannine theology, life emerges from the word. There is no word before life, «in the beginning», nor life before the word: they are born and walk together, one for the other, almost a clandestine presence that one cannot do without [...]. 'Poetics' is never a life, however adventurous and abstracted, nor a work, however unique and unprecedented. 'Poetic' is only the hospitality that they give to each other, that coexistence, like two lovers who have spent all their days together and cannot say why». (My translation)

senza; ma proprio per questo la morte non è semplicemente negativa, e può risuonare il grido congiunto «evviammo emmuoiamo» (vedi *Il poesimista*). Invece di essere considerata come il punto di interruzione, la morte viene vista come un continuum e in questo modo negata a sua volta e rimessa in vita.²⁷ (Muzzioli, 2013: 17)

In Toti's poetics, death is therefore present as an ontologically introjected and aesthetically composed term in the creation of the work. An example of this concept is offered in the sixth stanza of *CID-CHÉ*, a poem from the collection *Penultime dall'aldiqua* (1969):

una morte da confezione come tutti
e ti starebbe male tra l'altro se ne accorgerebbero
che tu potresti avere una prodigiosa ultima
eternità l'ironico indugio prima di
inabissarti dentro gli occhi
la morte della ditta
la morte del partito che hai preso la morte
di famiglia la morte assegnata
da tanto tempo che dovresti
cortesemente rifiutarla e non puoi
una morte che ti va stretta o larga non ti prendono
neppure le misure una morte costa un anno e lunga
due minuti uno di andata e uno
di ritorno per dove si riparte nella stazione²⁸ (2013: 115)

The paradox of the coexistence of life and death is led to the paroxysm of a subsumption of the datum of death by the capitalist system. In the poem, death is a «per packaging object», nothing more than a supermarket item. Its atavistic and irremediable dimension is not denied – it is «long-time assigned»; «you should

²⁷ «Death is certainly a major paradox: when we are there she is not there and vice versa, but for Toti it is a real oxymoron, it is the 'ossimorte' [crisis between the words "oxymoron" and "death" in Italian] [...]. Death is oxymoronic because it is always co-implicated with life, which would not exist without it; but precisely for this reason death is not simply negative, and the joint cry «long live and die» (see *Il poesimista*) can resound. Instead of being regarded as the point of interruption, death is seen as a continuum and thus in turn denied and brought back to life». (My translation)

²⁸ «a per packaging death like everyone else / and besides it would suits you bad they would notice / that you might have a prodigious last / eternity the ironic hesitation before you / sink into your eyes / the death of the firm / the death of the party you pick the family / death the long-time assigned / death that you should / politely refuse and you can't / a death that fits you tight or large they doesn't even / take your measures a death costs a year and lasts / two minutes one way and one / back to where we leave again in the station». (My Translation)

/ politely refuse and you can't» – yet it is ascribed to the domain of the empirical as an object that can be measured and analysed, with which one can interact and relate. Toti's anti-capitalist perspective underlines how the very 'cost' of death can be quantified on a scale of values in contemporary society. Reaching a degree of saturation of the signifier, thus, his poetics shows how the integration of the datum of death in an equally ontological and aesthetic sense becomes the 'creative source' of the *poetics of death* in a broad sense.²⁹ A source which, as has been pointed out, is not linked to an exclusively aesthetic and formal dimension of the creative act, but also to an ontological one. According to Kafka's vision, as a proper reality that is revealed *in* empirical living, even before the creative act occurs.

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²⁹ The datum of death is also central to his video poetic and cinematographic work. In 2002 – the final period of his artistic career, in which he is active at the Center International de Création Vidéo in Montbéliard-Belfort – he dedicated to death his last short film *La morte del trionfo della fine* [which concludes the trilogy of the video poems *Tupac Amauta* (1997), e *Gramsciategui ou les poesimistes-deuxième CRI* (1999)]: «Starting with the cycle of frescoes preserved in the Camposanto Monumentale of Pisa, Toti creates a video-poem inspired by Buffalmacco (the painter) and his friend, Boccaccio. Macabre dances, grotesque parades, the figure of the "macabre" and cosmic thinker and poetic texts accompany this hymn to life, a sneer at the devil, a sarcastic invective against the "triumphs of death" of every era». (Montinari, 2007: 107)

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КА ПОЕТИЦИ СМРТИ *КОМПАРАТИВНА И ЕСТЕТСКА ПРОМИШЉАЊА*

Резиме

Овај чланак представља студију која се бави питањем односа између смрти као нечег датог, и естетског контекста стварања књижевног дјела, односно ауторове поетике. Започињући рад једном дубинском анализом књижевности и поетике смрти, аутор намјерава да настави истраживање тако што ће се бавити филозофским и критичким питањима која су повезана са наведеном тематиком те да пружи преглед најважнијих погледа на предмет истраживања. Захваљујући компаративном и трансмедиијалном приступу, текст се односи на теорију смрти у књижевности и, у ширем смислу, разматра најважније савремене критичке приједлоге.

Имајући то у виду, предлажу се студије случаја из области књижевности и кинематографије као дио погледа на предмет истраживања са теоријске тачке гледишта. Разматрају се и онтолошке импликације које се тичу настанка умјетничког дјела, у намјери да се продуби однос између поетике смрти и дјела која нису нужно умјетничке и књижевне природе, већ и вид свједочанства.

► *Кључне ријечи:* смрт, поетика, књижевност, савремено, естетика, компаративно, теорија.

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