OF GOOD DYING, FUNERALS AND MOURNING: FUNERARY PRACTICES AND DISCOURSES IN EARLY 21ST CENTURY IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: Rites of passage are recurrent sites of investigation for cultural permanence and change. The purpose of my article is to investigate the conditions of possibility of "good death" in the current context of vanishing traditions, hybridization of cultural practices and marketization of discourse. Starting from personal stories – the recent death of my grandfather and of an uncle, I will undertake a brief ethnography of death and funeral practices in the early 21st century Romania, focusing on the drivers of change, on the economics of death, burial and memorials, and on the discourse of funeral service providers as the new champions and definers of "good death" and "good funerals".

Keywords: good death, funerary practices, funerary discourse, Romania, 21st century

Introduction

Over the past months, there have been two deaths in my family: my mother's brother's – a man of action, who had been the mayor of his village almost until the hour of his death, and my grandfather's , whom we remember as a hard-working and kind man that went through thick and thin throughout his life time. Both when I had to comfort my cousin over the loss of her father, and when I had to come to terms with the change in family circumstances brought by the death of my grandfather, I tried to think through my emotions and to understand – as an exercise in self-mastery and strength to go on – how we relate to death, how we can cope with loss and what we can do in the aftermath of such an event, so that the life of those who are left behind, and who cared immensely about the departed, can still be livable and meaningful. This article captures just a few of my musings and recollections…

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1. Death as a subject of current academic inquiry

Death has been gaining momentum as a subject of academic inquiry, in part due to current attempts to negate its universality and impending character. For centuries, the very condition of man's mortality, accepted as a given, has been the grounds on which morality has been based; with the current technologically mediated challenge of the fact of death, taken now as an assumption – as it is the case with the Russian media entrepreneur Dmitry Itskov's *Initiative 2045* (2045.com), we are in dire need of a new form of ethics and of the cultivation of virtues in new robotized environments. In such environment, to my mind, technology attempts to create a new form of living dead – robots or digital avatars that store human consciousness.

Immortality and life extensionism have been studied in the emergent academic field of posthumanism/transhumanism, with outstanding achievements such as Stephen Herbrechter's *Posthumanism. A Critical Analysis* (2013) or B. Gordijn and R. Chadwick's (eds.) *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity* (2008). On the other hand, death – as a social, economic and anthropological fact, has received increased critical attention after the turn of the millennium, in prestigious university centers: Christina M. Gillis, for instance, edited in 2001 a book born a series of conversations hosted by the Townsend Center for the Humanities called *Seeing the Difference. Conversations on Death and Dying*, covering topics on embalming, witnessing death, the photographic representation of dying persons and the American obsession with denying death. The University of Bath has even created a Center for Death and Society.

Adam Buben, in an article from 2015 (*Technology of the Dead; Objects of Loving Remembrance or Replaceable Resources?)* starts from the pertinent observation that contemporary society has proliferated its death-denying strategies, and he takes a critical view of the practice to mediate – through increasingly sophisticated technologies – the process of remembering the dead. He warns that "[a]s our recollection aids become more about replacement, we might be concerned about an increasing insensitivity toward the meaning of losing someone significant and the value of the simple recollection that maintains feelings of loss (Buben 2015: 21); in addition, through websites and Interactive Personality Constructs, this "trend of replacement in our current technological dealings with the dead … covers over and distracts, making it easy to lose sight of the fact that a unique and valuable person is now gone" (Buben 2015: 28).

It is not only technology that ignores the uniqueness and intrinsic value of a person, even when it has been reduced to a pack of bones; capitalistic material interests do the same. Heidi Grunebaum's "Unburying the Dead in the 'Mother City': Urban Typologies of Erasure" looks at how out of such interests, literally and symbolically marked graves of slaves, free blacks, free poor, or political prisoners were destroyed and the bones were relocated, for the sake of large construction projects in Cape Town. This article points to an increasingly recurrent phenomenon: the dead are on the move, just like the living. This idea is better captured and analysed in Lakhbir K. Jassal's "Necromobilities: The Multi-Sited Geographies of Death and Disposal in a Mobile World", which investigates necropower (what happens to the corpse, the dead body and bodily remains in societies where state power is exercised, not by way of violence or explicit violation, but through institutions and discourses of care) (Jassal 2015: 487) and the Death Care industry as an agent of the state, in the trans-national migration of corpses, ash or bodily remains. Lily Kong, on the other hand, in "No Place, New Places: Death and its Rituals in Urban Asia" looks at the changes in funerary practice induced by the lack of land for new cemeteries. This has led to incineration and the spreading of ash over the sea or in parks, or the inhumation of urns filled

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with ash in the forest, as well as to the performance of rituals connected to the commemoration of the dead over the internet, mainly out of economic reasons.

It is economics, also, that frames Christine Valentine and Kate Woodthrorpe's "From the Cradle to the Grave: Funeral Welfare from an International Perspective". The article compares funeral welfare provision in 12 capitalist democratic countries and sees funeral costs as a policy issue, finding that England lags behind in what it providess. Other articles investigate funerary practices from a historical perspective, looking at the material culture and burial specificities among less researched countries or groups of people, such as Hadas Hirsch's "The Discourse of Attire and Adornment of the Dead and Their Mourners in Muslim Medieval Legal Texts" (2012).

Thus, this brief overview of just a few articles on death, dying, funerals and necromobilities, proves that this subject can be approached from various perspectives; it can be very generous towards researchers, as this is a site of cultural change, of altering old traditions and instituting new ones, that has been impacted by globalization and by technologisation just like all areas of human life.

2. Death in traditional Romanian culture

Death is a natural occurrence; current attempts to achieve a technologically mediated immortality of consciousness, stored in computers and "embodied" in avatars seems, to me, the ultimate *hubris* of our times. Responses to death, on the other hand, are cultural. As Michael Witmore noticed, "In some sense, the difference between the human and the animal, for example, is the way in which humans can make an art of dying, whereas animals merely expire" (Gillis 2001: 60). Cultural responses to death largely depend on whether we believe that death is an ultimate end, or whether we accept that there is an afterlife and that it is possible to influence, from this side of the grave, the post-mortem trajectory of those who have passed away.

In the Romanian culture, such a belief exists, both in archaic myths of pre-Christian origin, and in Christian-based practices. Dacians – the former inhabitants of current territory of Romania, believed that they were immortal and that through death, they would join Zamolxis, their supreme God. Corpses were incinerated so that they would be purified, through fire, and inhumation was practiced only in the case of small children (who died too young to have been defiled by anything bad).

In subsequent folk representations, death is personified as an old, ugly and wicked woman who comes to "harvest" people with her sickle. Or, in *Youth without Age and Life without Death*, death – on the brink of dying itself, after waiting for so long for Prince Charming's return – kills by a simple touch of her hand.

Marcel Olinescu, in his book on Romanian mythology (*Mitologie românească*), provides a whole list of omens (cracking furniture inside the house, the crashing of a mirror or the cracking of an icon, the sound of an owl at night or the howling of dogs, etc.) and superstitions connected to death (slaughtering an animal on a Saturday, killing a frog, swimming in the place where two rivers meet, the chance encounter of two brides on their wedding day, etc.) (Olinescu 2008: 224-232). According to his account, death used to be visible (as it was the case, for instance, in Ion Creangă's story of Ivan Turbinca, who managed to outsmart death and tie it up in his military sack); God, however, made her invisible, because since people knew when they were going to die, they would lose all interest in life and stopped working (Olinescu 2008: 354).

Olinescu also provides an account of the stages of a traditional funeral. First, someone would close his or her eyes and say "May God forgive him". Then the corpse would be washed

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and dressed in the deceased' best clothes, putting the used soap, comb and needle inside his or her pillow, so that he or she could use them in the afterlife as well. Then the corpse was laid on a table, facing the door, his or her hands were crossed above his or her chest, and money was set in the middle of the wax cross that was placed in his crossed hands, tied to his small finger and / or inside his pockets, so as to pay for being taken across a river, into the afterlife, and to pay his or her way through the customs in the sky, on his or her way to heaven.

Notification of one's death was done by placing a fir-tree outside the house, by tolling the church bells and by loud lamentations. The corpse had to stay inside for two or three days, in the company of relatives and neighbours, including during the night. Preparations for the funeral included cooking large bread rolls, food, and adorning a tree with ribbons and fruit.

When the coffin was taken out of the house, it was banged gently against thresholds, as a sign of farewell from the house in which the dead person had lived. In the room in which a person died, for three days on, relatives set a mug of wine, one of water, a piece of bread and a lit candle. The wine and the bread were given to a man or a woman who attended the vigil, since it was believed that through that person, the dead himself or herself would quench his or her hunger and thirst.

Once the corpse was taken out of the house, it was set in front of the door and across it, his or her immediate family would give away his clothes and some of his or her cattle, for the forgiveness of his or her sins. Once the corpse left the house, water was sprinkled behind using the pot that was utilised when the corpse was washed, and then the pot was dropped forcefully inside the house so as to break and thus put an end to all misfortunes in that house. When the coffin existed the yard, a piece of white canvas was laid on the small bridge connecting the yard to the street, over which the coffin and the mortuary convoy would pass. This piece of white cloth was then given away to a poor person, together with a bagel and a lit candle, and it signified the bridge over which the soul would pass onto heaven.

When the corpse left the house, on the way to church and to the cemetery, as well as inside the cemetery, women would lament the death. Another customary practice was saying goodbye to the dead person through a final kiss, which could be done in the dead person's house, in the church or at the cemetery. There are quite a few folk traditions connected to the moment when the corpse is descended into the grave: taking all precious things off the body, untying all knots so that no one else from his or her household would follow suit, giving a black hen as alms, across the grave, so as to drive away all bad spirits (Olinescu 2008: 233-239).

The list of such practices goes on. The Church, however, does not endorse them. In practical guidelines for funerals and memorial services, many of the above mentioned practices are condemned as pagan superstitions: lamentations, the breaking of pots or the untying of knots, placing objects inside the coffin, putting money inside the wax candle or in the dead person's pocket, holding back the coffin when taking it out of the house, preventing cats from entering the room where the corpse was laid, lest it should turn into a ghost, accompanying the corpse on the way to the cemetery with a brass band or other performing musicians, giving a hen as alms over the grave, etc. (*** 73-90). Such books explain death as the separation of the human soul from the human body, the interruption of human life lest one should sin more, and the return to the clay from which man was fashioned in the likelihood and image of God (*** 3-6).

Sanctioned practices are "grijania" – preparation for death, which includes confession, communion, saying good bye to relatives, neighbours and friends, and peacefully accepting one's death as something natural, and as departure from this world, to present oneself in front of God, for the moral judgment of one's life (*** 8-19); the washing of the body, and its sprinkling

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with holy water, dressing it in new, clean clothes, putting a cross in the dead person's hand and an icon on his or her chest, the giving of alms and the performance of several religious services for the funeral and for memorial days, at pre-established intervals: three, nine, forty days, three, six month, one year after the funeral, and every year after that. These dates are connected, in Orthodox guidelines for funerals and memorial services, to Christian numerology: three, because of the Trinity, nine, because there are nine hosts of angels, forty, because Christ ascended to Heaven forty days after his resurrection. Folk beliefs, actually, have other explanations: it is believed that someone's soul rests around the house for three days; for the following days, until the ninth, it visits heaven, then, until day forty, it visits hell, and on the fortieth day, it is judged and his or her ultimate location – in heaven or in hell – is established upon having his or her life examined and weighed. These beliefs are actually inspired by Christian writings as well, such as the recorded visions of St. Macarios of Alexandria, of St. Theodora or of St. John the Evangelist.

Iconic representations of death show the soul exiting the body as a homunculus (the outer wall painting in Voronet monastery, featuring the Last Judgment and the ladder which the soul has to ascend before it reaches Heaven); in another canonical representation that pits the death of the believer against the death of a sinful man, in the former case, angels surround a peaceful-looking man, ready to take his soul to heaven, whereas in the latter case, devils hover around his death-bed, while his or her guardian angel is powerless.

3. "Good death" in the 21st century Romania

Nina Seremetakis' book on laments in Inner Mani makes a distinction between "good death" and "bad death," also termed "silent death" or "naked death": in her view, among the population where she conducted her ethnographic research, good death comes as the completion of the life cycle: in traditional societies, a woman, for instance, would die in the same room in which she was married and in which she gave birth, after uttering instructions as to who shall inherit her things and as to how she should be dressed when she is going to be laid down in her coffin. Good death is also an easy death that occurs smoothly, without pain. Bad death, on the other hand, is silent death – the death of someone who died alone, without family or friends, without anyone mourning him or her out loud. "The silent death is a public shame. Death must always have its accompaniment. The silent death is considered a naked death. Nakedness (*yimnio)* implies the isolate... Nakedness as contrasocial and as linked to solitary conditions implies the uncovered, the unsheltered, the outside, the abandoned, the unprotected" (Seremetakis 2004: 76).

Seen from this perspective, in the contemporary society, the "good death" in its traditional understanding as death inside the house, surrounded by friends and family, occurring after one has prepared his or her soul for the examination of his or her deeds and spiritual condition, and after saying goodbye to significant others, is hardly ever the norm. We no longer die naturally, of "good death" – the good death that is the natural closing of a life cycle; we die of a certain medical condition, which is recorded in documents, and death is certified by a doctor. We hardly ever die at home, but in a hospital or in a centre of palliative care; the corpse might stay in hospital for a few days, as it was the case with my uncle, who died on a Friday afternoon, and who could be taken home only on Monday morning; the washing of the body is done perfunctorily, by teams associated with companies that supply funerary services. Similarly, the extent to which traditions associated to death and funerary practices are observed depends on the financial means that the surviving family has available for this type of expenses.

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Even though "good death" as it was traditionally understood is a rare occurrence, in small communities or in monasteries, the dichotomy between "good death" and "bad death" has remained, and its terms have been redefined in our post-/trans-ist times. To a certain extent, I would argue, funerary service providers are not only the providers of material paraphernalia but they have also emerged as legitimate actors that sanction funerary practices, together with the church – itself a provider of funerary services.

From the perspective of funerary companies, "good death" is a consumption-based death and funeral, that includes the full package of services: embalming the corpse, dressing it in new clothes, (that can be provided by the company), placing it in a full-option coffin (expensive wood, golden nails and handles, lined with satin or some other expensive material), hosting the corpse inside a chapel or mortuary house associated with the funerary company, driving the coffin to the church or to the cemetery in a Mercedes car, having the coffin carried to the grave by professional undertakers, having all food provided by a catering company or by the catering division of a larger provider of funerary services, and having candles or food distributed among the attendees of the funeral by professional undertakers, as well. In this new context, the family of the deceased is supposed to do only the work of mourning and to pay for the services provided.

Not only in Romania, but probably everywhere in the capitalist world, death and funerals are a lucrative business, together with the provision of medical care for terminal patients, of life-extension medicine and devices, or the selling or leasing out of plots of land in cemeteries. It involves, for the remaining family, quite a few costs. Just like in the case of England, in Valentine and Woodthrorpe's article "From the Cradle to the Grave: Funeral Welfare from an International Perspective", in Romania, too, the amount of money provided by the State barely meets basic funeral costs. According to Law 340/2013, the sum is 2198 RON (approximately 500 euros). It is made available through the Pension House, upon completion of a file with documents and upon producing bills and receipts that can testify to the expenses that the family has made. But for "good death" – as providers of funeral services promote it – the amount is hardly enough, and the procedure to get it is quite bureaucratic.

4. The advertising discourse of the providers of funerary services

The professionalization of undertakers was under way in the inter-war period in Romania; its development was halted in the Communist area, and it has witnessed an impressive development over the past 25 years, with companies that provide full services, from washing the corpse, embalming and doing funerary cosmetics, to providing internal and international transportation services, doing repatriation, burying or incinerating corpses, and actually educating the population as to the advantages of incineration. The latter, even though it is not sanctioned by the Orthodox Church, is presented as an option and advertised as the expression of liberal choice (Condolio, http://www.pompe-funebre.ro/).

Condolio (based in Bucharest) promotes itself as a company that has a long experience in the field, employs experts, and is careful to details that the mourning family might forget; it boasts its various packages, that can cater to all budgets: Condolio Social (a fully equipped coffin, an inscribed wooden cross, and transportation); Condolio Economic (the same as in Condolio Social, plus the document that certifies death, and basic hygiene of the corpse); Condolio Medium (all of the above, plus other documents, embalming, the provision of handkerchiefs, candles and mourning ribbons), Condolio Premium (Condolio Medium plus

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koliva, bread rolls, towels, wine), Condolio Incineration – less expensive than Condolio Premium, etc.

Some companies have designed advertising slogans, even with humorous undertones: ”Un real sprijin într-un moment de grea încercare!” (”A real support at a moment of hard trial!, ”La capătul drumului (”At the End of the Road” company, Bârlad), ” Un sprijin de nădejde în clipe de grea încercare” (!A reliable support in moments of hard trial”, ”Daniel & Anca”, Iași), ”Noi vă ducem mortu’ cu tot confortu’” (“We carry your corpse in all comfort, of course”, ”Eternal Life” company in Braila). Other companies do not have a slogan, but their name implies one, such as The Way to Heaven – another funerary company in Braila.

5. Conclusion

Just like in the United States and in Western Europe, contemporary Romanian society tends to produce and promote an idealized death, that is painless, both for the person who dies and for the family left behind. Hospitals and palliative care units cater to the weaknesses of the (post)modern man, who can no longer stand to see someone dying, who would not ever recognize when death draws near. “Good death,” actually, is redefined by undertakers as “beautiful death” – that shows a cosmeticized face and an embalmed body, creating an aestheticized corpse whose sight and final storage in memory will not be frightening. Undertaker’s sites provide not only practical information about how to obtain necessary documents issued by civil authorities, about types of funerary packages, rituals and funerary monument options, but some of them also provide information about how to cope with the loss of a dear person. Thus, to a certain extent, they act as liaison agencies between citizens and the state, as service providers and profit makers, and as counselors, educating their customers who are increasingly cut off from traditions and trying to create cultural change, by pushing the agenda of cremation as an ecological alternative to burial and as a matter of liberal free-choice.

…… My grandfather died in a palliative care unit, because we felt that he was better looked after there, and that bringing him home – as some neighbours and relatives had suggested – would have shortened his life. For us, ”good death” was medically assisted death; for old neighbours and relatives, his ”good death” should have happened in the house that he had built with his own hands, in the room in which he had slept, for tens of years, in the proximity of people who loved him and whom he had helped throughout his lifetime…

When he was in the palliative care unit, I tried to stay with him as much as I could – even though this meant just a few hours a day, during the programme for visits. For twelve days, he had been unable to swallow or to speak. There was little I could do for him, except hold his hand, turn him in bed, or call the nurse when he was breathing too heavily. I am glad that I was there on the evening when he… left this world, and that an aunt had joined me, who is very knowledgeable about death, dying, and what the appropriate rituals are. She knew when the final moment was drawing near, and she told me to stay apart and to stop touching him, lest I might hold him back, or make him return from the journey that he had already set on. I stood behind him, breaking hospital rules by lighting a candle, looking, without seeing, and being present, as a witness, to a unique moment. He died as softly and discretely as he lived – just a little bit before the end of the visiting hours…

I dream of him, occasionally … The last time, just a few days ago. In this latest dream, somehow, we had unburied the coffin, and opened it. My grandfather was dressed in white, and he looked just as I remember him, from the hospital. He opened his eyes, and I felt sorry that

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maybe, we had hasted to bury him. My grandmother was there too – even though, she died long before him, when I was a student – and she started feeding him koliva. He looked healthy and happy – and he told me that ten days before, he had been accepted in heaven.

I took it as a sign… that his was, indeed, a ”good death” and that where he is now, his soul has found her peace…

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