

# Death in Literature



# Death in Literature

Edited by

Outi Hakola and Sari Kivistö

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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Edited by Outi Hakola and Sari Kivistö

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Death in Literature <i>Outi Hakola and Sari Kivistö</i> .....	vii
--	-----

## I Life Writing, Death and Immortality

We Tell Ourselves Stories <i>Antje Rávic Strubel</i> .....	3
Death, Temporality and Gender in Novels Based on Life Stories of Marilyn Monroe and Billy Tipton <i>Lotta Kähkönen</i> .....	15
Biofiction as ‘Thanatography’: Thomas De Quincey’s and Michel Schneider’s Narratives of Death(s) <i>Aude Haffen</i> .....	31
The Text as Cadaver <i>Katherine Doig</i> .....	47
The Pyramids of Poets or On Poetic (Im)mortality <i>Sari Kivistö</i> .....	63

## II Death and Narrative

Postmodern Ghosts and the Politics of Invisible Life <i>Tiina Käkälä-Puumala</i> .....	83
Hemingway’s Aged Characters as Symbols of Death <i>Deng Tianzhong</i> .....	103
“Damn death. Long live life!” Death in <i>Ulysses</i> <i>Andrew Goodspeed</i> .....	121
Love and Death in Ficino’s <i>De amore</i> <i>Risto Saarinen</i> .....	139

### III Spectacles of Death

Animated Skeletons and Open Coffins: Spectacles of Death in the British Gothic Novel <i>Margarita Georgieva</i> .....	153
“Every Disaster Made us Wish for More” Cinematic Deaths in Don DeLillo’s <i>White Noise</i> <i>Antti Sundberg</i> .....	169
The Paradoxical Figure of the Falling Man in Post-9/11 Literature <i>Aliette Ventéjoux</i> .....	181

### IV Suicide and Euthanasia in Literature

Self-killing As a Cure to Disease: Illness and Death in Roman Imperial Literature <i>Margherita Carucci</i> .....	199
Representing Life’s End in <i>Dancing with Mister D</i> : Literature and the Dutch Debate on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide <i>Wouter Schrover</i> .....	217
Not with a Bang, Neither with a Whimper: A Fictional Narrative about Death and Assisted Suicide <i>Gail Sidonie Sobat</i> .....	235

### V Death as Non-Closure

Death and Immortality in Fred Vargas’s Crime Fiction <i>Andrea Hynynen</i> .....	251
Death in Superhero Comic Books: How Not to End the Story <i>Jean-Pierre Thomas</i> .....	269
Contributors .....	287
Index .....	291

## INTRODUCTION: DEATH IN LITERATURE

OUTI HAKOLA AND SARI KIVISTÖ

We have no reliable information about death as an experience, and this emphasizes death's nature as a secret and mysterious event. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that while death is the most trustworthy experience in human life, death still remains inexplicable and unknown. People therefore need to encounter the death experience in other ways, such as by watching and following the death of others, as well as with the help of fiction, imagining how it will feel (Bauman 1992). The German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin was another scholar who claimed that what we seek in fiction is the knowledge of death that is denied to us in the real life (Brooks 1992, 22). If the purpose of philosophy is to prepare us for death or to be the practice of death, as Socrates put it in *Phaedo* 81a, then we might ask what is the relationship between death and literature? How can literature contribute to our existential concerns related to death as a characteristically private experience and a real loss in our lives? Can literature help us face or conceive this most definitive of all endings?

Literature can provide us with ways of approaching death and imagining it from different perspectives. Some literary genres (elegies, lamentations) are intentionally written as reactions to the loss of a loved object or a person, and literature can act as consolation to those who are suffering. Classical consolations, for example, offered solace in the face of death or exile, while in the first book of his consolatory *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero noted that death has even been praised and welcomed as it liberates us from the world of distress and from the numerous evils of humankind. Some literary deaths are more perplexing and less easily closed than others, and some literary heroes have left the life more painfully and dramatically than others. In comedy, violence may hurt but the victim always survives, whereas tragedy typically represents a meaningful and dramatic grand-scale death that prolongs the scene of dying, as is the case in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (cf. Kermode 2000, 82). The plot of classical tragedy is based

on suffering and the drama often ends in the premature death of the tragic hero combined with the development of some kind of self-recognition. In tragedy the meaningful existence of the hero is paradoxically created by his death.

Literature offers insights into death, dying and mortality in multiple ways. One could argue that death is very useful to literature. While providing fictional encounters with death to its readers, the stories also use death in their narrations to create emotional effects, plot twists, suspense and mysteries. But even more importantly, death and story telling seem to have a fundamental and existential connection. This is what the first essay in this volume by Antje Rávic Strubel suggests by focusing on the author's relationship with death. Life and death offer us the opportunity to tell stories, which, however, often contain an element of illusion precisely owing to their narrative character, which perhaps sometimes makes more sense than the banality of life and its ending does. Strubel considers storytelling an existential act crucially important to our lives; storytelling helps us to maintain a (deceptive) sense of order in our lives and momentarily keeps death at a distance, as though it did not exist at all.

The awareness of the finitude of life may thus lead us to ponder the human condition or to structure our lives in a meaningful way. The complexity of this effort is reflected in numerous contemporary novels, such as Haruki Murakami's best-selling *Norwegian Wood*, a novel often read as a sad but rather harmless love story which is, however, keenly occupied with the ubiquity of dying in the young characters' lives. The narration revolves around suicides and premature deaths, and death is depicted as a crucial part of human existence: "Death exists, not as the opposite but as a part of life" (trans. Jay Rubin). Importantly, Murakami's novel illustrates the fact that abrupt physical death is (nearly) always accompanied by a second, longer and even more painful form of death that takes place in the mind of the survivor who has lost his loved one. The process of forgetting becomes an equivalent to death while the memory of the past love gradually fades away in time and changes the mourning subject (on the second death, see Weinstein 2003, 309–318). Many literary representations focus on this second, psychological type of death, which also has its obvious religious undertones as a suffering and punishment following the first, physical death.

Literary descriptions of death are thus not merely preoccupied with the painful scene of dying or individual loss, but the concept of death can be understood more widely as a site of many projections and fantasies and as a metaphor of many social issues. Literature can also discuss death through



metaphors and characterizations. Karl S. Guthke, for example, argues that despite multiple alternatives, Western art and folklore have chosen to give a human form to the abstract concept of death, they personify death. Guthke also claims that through the personification of death (and its victims), death necessarily becomes gendered as a cultural product. And since death as a lover is a common, even a universal theme, death necessarily becomes eroticized in these products. Guthke maintains that in Western cultures, both genders have been available, but although male figures used to be more common, during the twentieth century in particular female death figures have become increasingly popular (Guthke 1999, 4–14, 173). This discussion continues in the section of major Western novelists in this book. Deng Tianzhong examines old male characters in Hemingway's books as personifications of death, whereas Risto Saarinen shows how the intimate relationship between love and death is one of the recurring themes in Marsilio Ficino's *De amore* and how, according to Ficino, the lover's soul when turned to the beloved is open to death as well.

At the metaphorical level, death can be used to mark issues that need to be alienated or in other words, abjected. Abjection is Julia Kristeva's concept and refers to something that has been part of a human being, but after separation from the subject it creates a threat to identity and needs to be cut loose. The experience of abjection is also linked to dead bodies and to death itself (Kristeva 1982, 1–12). The very connection with death can mark social issues as marginalized or invisible. Several vampire stories, for example, use the intimate and sexual relationship with death to mark active (female) sexuality as horrendous. In Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897), the vampire seduces Lucy and Mina. The men in the story need to hunt down both the Count and his transformed victims and kill them in order to tame any forms of sexuality that threaten the accepted social norms. By punishing female sexuality by death, the novel also marginalizes other types of sexuality than monogamous and heteronormative relationships.

Thus, in literature death exists at many levels: it is part of the narrations, imagery, metaphors and character traits; it reaches outside literature's own realm and discusses death-related social issues and emotions that are recognizable for the reader. Literature retains memories of past lives and gives them continuity. Literature itself can be considered a form of immortality, as novels, poems and short stories live through imitation and find new generations of readers centuries after their own time and the lives of the authors. This book aims to discuss these different dimensions and meanings of death in literature.

## Death in Narrative

In fictive stories, death is often recognized as having narrative power. Narratological theories construct events as building blocks of the plot, defined as changes of state, or transitions from one state to another (see, for example, Bal 1999, 5). Death, too, is a veritable change in state, a transformation from one kind of being to another kind of (non)being, and as with any narrative element, death happens in a certain place and at a certain time. Consequently, as a narrative event, death both affects characters and leads the story in some direction.

In film studies, Catharine Russell (1995, 2–4) recognizes the desire in Western fiction for meaningful death. Death can be used to advance the plot, but more often it is employed as closure to emphasize its meaning and importance. For example, in detective and crime novels, death usually opens the story and the story revolves around finding the murderer. Possible further deaths can be used to create new plot twists and increase the emotional anxiety of the story. However, in these stories, the death is still primarily related to the ending, the death of the murderer that settles anxieties and returns society to its usual equilibrium. Russell argues that desire for death as a formalized ending arises from the Bildungsroman tradition, where death brings an ending to different meanings and possible story lines. These traditions have made fictional death expected and hoped for because it settles narrative anxieties and provides closure. However, at the same time the tradition also culturally tames or explains away death (Russell 1995, 2–3).

However, using death to provide a narrative closure or even catharsis—an Aristotelian concept which explains how negative events and emotions can be used to serve ‘moral’ purposes by helping the reader to process negative issues and release emotional tension with a positive solution—is only one of the options available to literature. Death is often related to knowing in fiction from revelatory ancient tragedies to modern detective stories, where the reader learns more and more as the plot develops and discloses the crime. However, in many contemporary texts closure does not bring any kind of revelation or discovery. Many recent novels have been written in order to underline the uncomfortable fact that individual deaths, or for example the dreadful events of the Second World War, may not confer meaning on existence or make any sense at all. Although death offers an occasion for retrospection which can give meaningfulness to the lived past, as Walter Benjamin has argued, such a feeling of meaningfulness is not always achieved. Likewise, if earlier in narratology scholars usually

shared the view that the ending gives a sense to the beginning and the middle (Brooks 1992, 22), this is no longer the only option. Contemporary versions of death have preferred storylines, in which either the meaning of life is not revealed at the point of the death, or death and closure may not be related to each other at all, or death can actually work as a beginning or opening of a new story. Sometimes death merely shows us how things end, neither with a bang nor with a whimper, as Gail Sidonie Sobat puts it in her essay in this volume.

Various life stories and their telling of the moment of death are a good point to test and play with the construction of meaningfulness in narration. The examination of the past of deceased persons and narrating their moments of death can actually have creative and transformative significance by way of offering imaginable futures. In postmodern poetics in particular, death is no longer seen as an ultimate ending, but rather something that offers a potential for new narratives or new ontological or liminal levels. As Lotta Kähkönen argues in her article, which discusses novels as acts of remembering life stories, this possibility for new beginnings and approaches also entails alternative ways of thinking about such conventional dichotomies as subject and object. Likewise, although many (fictional) biographies tend to focus on life's end rather than its beginning, writing being closely connected with the death of the biographical subject, many contemporary biographical writings have also questioned the linear teleology of life stories. Aude Haffen observes how author biographies often play with such conventions of life writings. Haffen shows how the past author's supposedly sublime fame and noble death are contrasted with trivial, ironic and mundane details about his or her physical death that unsettle the conventions of life writing and also disturb the sense of closure. For later biographical authors, writing about past authors and narrating their deaths may also involve reflecting on the writers' own cannibalistic voyeurism and blur the boundaries between the selfhood of the deceased and that of their later narrator. Postmodern poetics have also tended to downplay the metaphorical dimensions of death and restore its materiality by drawing critical attention to the problematic relationship between language and the materiality of the dead body (cf. Perdigao 2010, 10 *et passim*).

Being aware of the conventional sense of an ending related to literary death scenes, some writers have experimented with this traditional topos and refused to close their stories in conventional ways. In classical detective fiction, for example, the dead body is often the point of departure for investigation and for telling the puzzling story, and usually when the

story ends the reason for the death is disclosed. Crime fiction is constantly preoccupied with death, but in this volume Andrea Hynynen shows how at least for one crime fiction writer, Fred Vargas, the plot evolves in more unexpected ways. Death and life are inseparably intertwined when the supernatural blurs the fundamental border between these two concepts. Fred Vargas has ended several of her crime stories with references to immortality, using fantastic plots which leave the ending more open than death as a strong closure might usually do. Jean-Pierre Thomas takes the discussion of immortality a step further by examining the deaths of seemingly supra-human superheroes, who characteristically do not die—or if they do, death may not offer any meaningful closure at all. Pondering on the idea (originally presented by Peter David) that in comic books death has no meaning, Thomas argues that it is tempting to suggest that the lethal experience does not exist in comics as it does in our world.

Thus, death can play an important part in both closed and open endings in narrations. This is why Russell introduces the term ‘narrative mortality.’ She uses it to describe death’s narrative and discursive role which, instead of trying to force the use of death in fiction into any clear formalist categories, would introduce issues of mortality as part of the stories as a whole, and thus give more room for “sociocultural heterogeneity” (Russell 1995, 2–3).

## Memory and Social Death

Death defines human lives on the basis that men are more or less conscious of their mortality. Some could argue that death robs life of meaning as everything comes to an end anyway. Others would claim that death gives meaning to life because it forces us to act on things now, not to wait for eternity. Among major Western novelists James Joyce expressed a positive and carnivalistic attitude to death in *Ulysses*, in which death has a life-affirming function. In his article for this volume, Andrew Goodspeed identifies Joyce’s acceptance of death as an integral fact of life and argues that it is the complementarity of death to life that leads Joyce to place so heavy an emphasis on death in a work that is so clearly in favour of life and humanity.

Griselda Pollock’s article on *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* has approached the same question of the meaning(less) of death from a slightly different perspective. She argues that even though Anne does not die during the diary, the story is filled with a sense of mortality due to her

known death at Belsen. In her diary, she is young and alive, forever frozen to a certain moment. Her seeming immortality at the story level merely shows the fragility of human life and makes her story a constant source of mourning and memorialization (Pollock 2007, 125–128, 135–140). At the more general level, Pollock's arguments bring forward a number of interesting notions. First of all, the mere consciousness of mortality can give any novel a sense of determinism. Secondly, literature has a power to freeze life to a certain moment, and this stillness can become a source of memorialization and through constant remembering writing can give the characters, their lives and stories a certain immortality.

The relationship between literature and immortality can be looked at from different perspectives and concerns social, cultural and historical continuity. Indeed, whereas human life in itself is limited, society outlives individual lives and introduces the necessary continuity. Bauman, for example, argues that society finds death abnormal and dangerous, because death is an end to existence. In order to overcome this disruption, modern society has marked death as a personal dilemma, whereas the past, future and collectivity of society represent immortality. Societies—and nation-states in particular—provide stability as a counter-force for death's destructiveness (Bauman 1992, 96–127, 197–199).

Owing to this social continuation, even an individual can seek immortality through remembrance, or among other things through literature. Bauman (1992, 58–60) argues that while an author accomplishes his or her place in history, this creates a form of personal immortality, even if it is meaningful only for as long as these texts are read and recognized. In other words, literary classics continue to make their authors alive and even immortal, and writing a novel can be seen as a way to reach for a cultural afterlife. Similarly, Stephen Cave, a British philosopher, claims that the desire for immortality motivates human achievements, such as literature and arts, or civilizations in general. Although the desire for cultural and symbolic immortality can be seen as a personal character trait and a desire of authors, it is also part of a larger cultural condition; after all, literary works continue to shape the culture long after their authors' deaths (Cave 2012, 2–6, 205–210).

The interconnections between literature and immortality are mentioned in several articles in this book. Focusing on the traditional topos of poetic immortality, Sari Kivistö argues that although since Horace many writers have challenged the finality of death and sought for eternal remembrance through their poetic monuments, this strive for immortality has also been criticized and even ridiculed in the early modern period as being

based on false assumptions of the human condition and entailing overly masculine or sublime poetics. Katherine Doig takes a slightly different stand on the analogy between narrative and life by showing how in certain contemporary epistolary novels—*Age of Iron*, *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *Gilead*—the text takes the body's place as the repository for the narrator's soul. Doig discusses structural equivalences between epistle and death, and shows how the text's gradual constitution mimics changes which occur at the moment of death. This literary phenomenon, where text is a tombstone, ash or a corpse, and where the experience of death is assimilated into the act of writing, opens wider philosophical perspectives.

A biologically dead person can thus have a strong symbolical influence in his/her society. But as a contrast to this type of social immortality, literature has also been occupied with serious social isolation and oblivion which achieves the dimensions of death. The concept of social death refers to the difficulties in defining the exact limits between life and death. People can be socially dead even before their biological death, if they have lost social relationships and cannot influence the wider society any more. Claudia Card (2003, 63), for example, defines social death as "loss of social vitality", "loss of identity" and loss of "meaning for one's existence." The concept has been used when dying people have lost their ability to interact with other people (Mulkay 1993), but also in cases of social history, such as slavery (Patterson 1982) or genocide (Card 2003). In this volume, Tiina Käkälä-Puumala argues that if someone is not remembered or noticed, mortality and death can intrude even before physical death, causing the person to retreat into the position of a ghost.

In sum, while different metaphors or characters are used to embody death in literature, death has also been used as a metaphor for different social issues and thus death imagery can contribute to serious social commentary.

## **Death in Society**

Another aspect of the representations of death is that although death has become more remote from people's everyday experience, images of death in the public media are rapidly proliferating. As Aristotle noted in his *Poetics*, people are fascinated with scenes of death and in fiction they are content to see things they would prefer to avoid in their own lives. The culture of spectacles was firmly rooted in the Roman Empire, which was preoccupied with gladiatorial combats and other 'pleasurable' visual

cruelties, with the gladiator's death being the entertaining climax of such events (Edwards 2007, 46). It has been said that of all experiences, death has the highest emotional potential and it also carries some aesthetic or entertaining allure. Death scenes often raise multiple and mixed emotional responses from curiosity to abjection. To give an example of stylized death from the past, Margarita Georgieva in this volume discusses how in late eighteenth-century gothic novels and romances the deaths of characters were staged with care and emotion and the gothic consisted in detailed displays of the dying and their corpses. The authors' obsession with death scenes transformed the imagery they used into exceedingly theatrical and exaggerated depictions of death and dying to please the reading audience.

Staging death as spectacle has become even more common in contemporary times, when death is constantly being represented in film and in the news media. One could argue that death has become a commonplace in our media culture, and Vivian Sobchack (2004, 231) has argued that especially violent or otherwise exceptional deaths have paradoxically become normal and naturalized in our time. This ubiquity of violent death has sometimes been considered to have led to the banality of death or to the denial of the reality of death, which when mediated via different images is difficult to encounter in reality. Therefore, some novels have discussed in a critical light people's thirst for witnessing death and the illusions of immortality paradoxically caused by such spectacles. Antti Sundberg discusses how in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985) television and radio programmes regularly show spectacles of death, which the novel's characters watch eagerly. By watching mass death as a spectacle, DeLillo's characters have a passing illusion that they can cope with their own mortality, but in the end while death is made a common event and a spectacle the characters are left with yet another way of denying their essentially mortal human nature. Aliette Ventéjoux continues this discussion of contemporary visualizations of death by focusing on one iconic image, which has also recurred in literature. This image is Richard Drew's photograph "Falling Man," which captured an image of a man falling from one of the twin towers on 11 September 2001. The image of the falling man reminds us of the importance of vision and visual representations in addressing the trauma and mourning linked with this terrorist attack. The event itself has been a major impulse for the significant increase of recent academic studies on the representations of death (cf. Perdigao 2010, 5).

Individual death is not simply a private experience; it affects us and resonates in the surrounding society in many ways. In addition to raising questions of the role of visual death in present-day society, literature can

participate in discussions of central social, political and ethical issues related to death. This discussion is particularly prominent in cases which involve complex ethical choices concerning, for example, the right of euthanasia or assisted suicides. In this collection, several articles offer insights into social and cultural approaches to death in society by examining texts that have actively participated in discussions about the good death. In unfolding this theme in the past, Margherita Carucci examines the theme of suicide in Roman Imperial literature. She notes that suicide as a personal response to unbearable pain was overall fully accepted by the ancient community and it was deemed a rational act of volition.

The Roman situation can be compared to more recent times, when the attitudes toward the practice of intentionally ending one's life to relieve suffering are more complex. Especially the case of euthanasia in literature has not yet been extensively studied, but this ethically sensible issue is becoming increasingly important in many cultures. Wouter Schrover shows in his article how euthanasia and assisted suicide have become a highly contested issue in contemporary Dutch literature, along with such death-related dimensions as the humane application of medicine and the conceptual differences between 'cure' and 'care.' Schrover also touches upon a crucial viewpoint by hinting that literary representations of dying can be important educational tools for medical professionals. Literature has been used in medical education to offer first-hand experience and personal histories for medical students to study. Literature offers emotional experiences that can be useful in developing a capacity for empathy, sympathy and other interpersonal emotions. It has been noted that the study of fiction provides access to the values and experiences of patients, their families and medical doctors, and reading fiction can help doctoral students reflect on their clinical practices, develop a better understanding of their patients' grievances and interact with empathic attention. According to Kathryn Montgomery Hunter and others (1995, 789), reading fiction can support moral reflection and enhance medical students' abilities to develop both their responses to patients' worries as well as narrative skills to be used in medical practice.

This discussion is related to the widely noticed medicalization and institutionalisation of death that removes this natural event from the normal course of life and resituates it out of sight within the walls of hospitals. As a result of hospice care, death and the dying are often removed or hidden from viewers, who seldom witness family members dying at home. Focusing on the Canadian context, Gail Sidonie Sobat argues that this is the case with young people in particular, who all too rarely have an opportunity



to familiarize themselves with premature or other forms of ‘normal’ death. In her own young adult novel *Not With a Bang* (2012) Sobat addresses this problem by showing how a young person encounters and understands death. By writing stories about death for young people Sobat suggests that it is possible to achieve “a return of significance” to death.

## About This Book

The current volume entitled *Death in Literature* examines the images and narratives of death, dying and mortality in literature and in the popular imagination. The central question of death entails a number of complex issues, which are debated under this broad theme. Approaches vary from discussing the narrative uses and functions of death to individual case studies in literature over a chronological span extending from antiquity to postmodern times. The articles examine death in different literary genres, from classical novels to comic books, and in different geographical and linguistic areas. The discussion also transcends the bounds of literature by studying themes relevant to the current politico-social discussions about such death-related issues as euthanasia and suicide. Thus, the collection offers a broad perspective on death’s role in literature as well as literature’s role in the social debates about death.

The book is divided into five sections. The first part concentrates on death as a point of departure for telling life stories in ways that entail an awareness of narrative conventions of writing about death; this section also critically scrutinizes literature’s ability to convey immortality. The second part discusses the issues of life and death in major Western authors from Ernest Hemingway to James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon. The third part focuses on cultural representations and spectacles of death from British gothic fiction to contemporary American novels. The fourth part is devoted to socio-political discussions of such topical issues as suicide and euthanasia in literature from ancient Rome to the Netherlands today. The fifth part concludes the book by suggesting new ways of closing a text, from supernatural endings to the trivial deaths of superheroes.

*Death in Literature* is based on a three-day international symposium held at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in December 2012. The symposium’s success revealed a gap in literary criticism that has not been widely addressed. The many indications of intense interest in the theme of death and dying in literature clearly show a need for this thematic discussion under which several different approaches to death in literature

are brought together through detailed textual analyses and more theoretical approaches. We have also offered here an opportunity for younger scholars and doctoral students to develop their views of the intriguing topic of death and dying. The editors thank all the contributors and referees of these articles for their considerable work. We also thank Mark Shackleton for proof reading the manuscript and Antti Sadinmaa for preparing the lay-out.

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# I

## LIFE WRITING, DEATH AND IMMORTALITY



# WE TELL OURSELVES STORIES

ANTJE RÁVIC STRUBEL<sup>1</sup>

Imagine a desk in Helsinki where I have been sitting since it started raining, and it has been raining for weeks. I switch on the lamp in the morning because the clouds outside my window are hanging so low, the lines in my book begin to blur in the shadowless-gray, dim light of my room. Damp, cold, drizzly weather; days darkening early, barren trees, the dark glow of wet birch trunks, muddy roads and frozen swamps—these are the elements of this landscape image in the season of dying, in the season that spawns the most deaths and suicides.

Notice that the backdrop to this talk about *death in literature* is a landscape shrouded in clouds, formed, paled and transformed by water. It must be Finnish humor to schedule a conference with a title like that, of all times, during the season authors of horror and detective stories privilege for dumping corpses into swamps. A humor which at first glance seems rather challenging, but at second reveals a strategy for survival. A person in the face of dying, who faces death, doesn't she have more out of life? It must be this kind of humor that spares Finland from being the country with the highest suicide rate. Statistics show that the majority of suicides occur in Australia, the land of eternal sunshine. So imagine me in the blurry morning at my dimly lit desk: laughing. After all, a person dying of laughter about a topic as deadly earnest as death, is never tired to death, rather she gets tired of death. Death likes to present itself as a comparative—as an intensification of life.

I'm supposed to talk to you about death in literature today, yet there are insurmountable difficulties inherent to the topic. Since the beginnings of what we call literature, death has proven to be its most successful producer. Whether death stems from reality and drives the text like a motor, or whether it appears in various guises in the text, it is always the empty space that literature needs in order to be written. It is that void which needs to be interpreted; the fundamental mystery of existence which underlies

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Zaia Alexander.

every literary text. It signifies a longing for meaning. The mystery of death expresses our yearning for life to have purpose, to follow a larger plan, subject to some cosmic law. Even love, the second major literary driving force, must defer to this longing; usually in the form of mourning over a loss, the loss of a lover. And if today cultural critics accused Western literature of having nothing left to say, it's because they assume it's no longer rooted in existential issues; and barely manages a couple of post-modern gimmicks in which death appears, at best, as a quote. But these eternal ups and downs in literary criticism are like a restless sea in which the next big wave washes the very opposite opinion ashore.

Literature is so intertwined with death that it is nearly impossible to chart the myriad ways writers have contemplated death over the past centuries, let alone tackle the countless modes they have devised for dying. Books are populated by masses of dead people. People with a death wish and people who dare to defy death deserve our attention. Some view death as a romantic metaphor while others think of it as a redemption fantasy, and there are contemporary characters who view death as a mere bureaucratic issue, symbolizing an overloaded health system. The narratives on death, the raging screeds against death, the language that talks death away—or by contrast—talks itself into it, needs to be taken into account as well. One would have to consider all the great fictional culprits such as: Doctor Glas, in the eponymously named novel by Hjalmar Söderberg, Raskolnikov in Fjodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and the serial killer in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, to name just a few arbitrary examples. One would have to take into consideration the countless victims, who either tried to defend themselves or simply acquiesced to it. Effi Briest, Anna Karenina and Werther, serve here as placeholders. And what about all the collateral deaths? The deaths of minor characters who authors banished from their texts—for dramatic purposes—only to make them reappear a few pages later? “Tonight I had to kill another three people,” the Russian writer, Victor Pelevin once said to me at the breakfast table in an artists' residence. He was so shaken that he resolved to find a way for them to come back to life in the next chapter.

In my novels, the dead stay dead. My characters always perish at the end. As if it would be kinder to let them die only when the book ends, because at that point their life is over anyway.

It wasn't too long ago that another critical death was proclaimed in literature: the death of the author. But you don't need to go as far as Foucault in search of the author who disappeared from the text. After all, I am standing quite vividly in front of you, and I can tell you that

while writing it's crucial to escape the vortex of literary discourses. The death of the author is a subject of literature precisely because writers often bear witness to their own death. There is no way around Heinrich Heine's sickbed documentation of his prolonged illness, his so-called "Matratzengruft." No way around Heinrich von Kleist, who had fatally shot himself at Lake Wannsee, or Paul Celan's suicide, no way around Marina Tsvetaeva who, shortly before she killed herself, wrote in her diary, "I've been trying on death for a year now," which probably can be said of the British playwright Sarah Kane, who in her final play went through all the motions of death, and then took her life before turning thirty. All of these authors were laboring at the outermost edge of language, and were plagued by feelings of inadequacy, guilt or desperation to the point of being unable to live on. And what about the murdered writers, such as: Daniil Kharmis, who was left to starve in his cell during the Stalin era, Gertrud Kolmar, who was gassed in Auschwitz; or those writers today who are being tortured to death from China to Egypt and everywhere in-between? And shouldn't those poets be mentioned who have been, or are being silenced now? Haven't they been—deprived of writing—murdered as authors? Forced into silence by dictators? Fallen silent for fear of political persecution or exile? Prohibited from writing or publishing by patriarchal, misogynistic systems? And only rarely, with luck, have they left evidence of their words behind; manuscripts found under beds or in desk drawers long after their authors have perished.

Nothing, in any case, is more intimidating than having to discuss a subject as vast and inexhaustible as the water in Finland, and if anything is left to be added, then only as an insignificant drop in the flood of texts that have shaped the literary landscape.

So let me talk about something personal, my first sense of awe; the moment, I realized that something which cannot be, could be.

"And that everybody is afraid of death, the very thing they find salvation in from this outrageous offense which is life", wrote Ingeborg Bachmann in her short story "The Thirtieth Year."

This sentence describes a dual movement: the escape from and rescue through death. Bachmann has articulated a paradoxical situation, one that everybody can relate to, sooner or later. Firstly, this "offense which is life" consists in the daily humiliations we are subjected to. It consists in people tormenting each other, in the brutality of both actively participating and passively looking away, this willful ignorance towards the inhumanity of your neighbor for the sake of preserving your peace of mind. More fundamentally, though, this offense consists in our being diminished



by the day, in the narrowing of the path ahead of us, in the reduction of opportunities, first by the year, then by the month, finally inching closer by the hour, the relentless attacks on the body painfully visible to all. Life becomes an offense through the catastrophe of having to die. A scandal, as the German essayist and literary critic Silvia Bovenschen put it. A scandal, as it was so famously called in the first fictional rage against death, written in the Middle Ages: Johannes Tepl's "Der Ackermann und der Tod."

The outrageous offense Bachmann speaks of consists in the fight for survival that makes our face look as though somebody had locked it behind steel doors hidden beneath the skin, and simultaneously by the fact that in this life, which we are fighting so hard to keep, we have been dying from the very start.

As a child, I was maybe four or five years old, I often tried to imagine being dead. I lay completely still in my bed, eyes wide open, staring into the dark room. I believed that the less I moved, the more I was dead. The night helped me. The darkness and my inertness merged into the dense black that I believed non-being consisted in. Neither the pain of having to part, nor the fear of the pain of dying played a role in those early years; when the reality of death was so distant; but rather the question of how something that had existed could suddenly cease to exist.

I stared into the dark room and couldn't conceive that beyond this darkness there was more darkness, an infinite darkness, an endless dark vastness that would exist in the space where I no longer was; yet at the same time it couldn't possibly be dark anymore because I would no longer be there to perceive it. It was like being sucked into a tube that grew wider as I got smaller, until the borders of it disappeared and expanded into infinity, and I tried desperately to recognize something in the dark, the outlines of my desk, the moonlight through the crack between the window and blinds.

Everything dissolved and it made me so dizzy that I forced myself to imagine the tube was a tree-lined country road, so typical of the landscape in Brandenburg where I grew up. I had to paint over the horror with a familiar image to catch my balance, to land safely in my body which was lying in a child's bed. I pictured death as a stroll along an endless summery road which soon led me to some practical considerations: Eventually my feet would start to hurt. Eventually I would have to eat. How would I find food? Brandenburg has a lot of fields, but few restaurants. And how would I pay? When you die, you probably don't think of bringing money with you. (At the time, I didn't know about the ancient Greek tradition of putting money in the coffin.) This problem distracted me so much that I forgot the horror.

When we grow older, such distractions become a habit. We are experts at distracting ourselves. We don't go crazy out of fear or go crazy because we have reached the limits of our imagination. Death reaches us only by proxy, through others; acquaintances die, friends, celebrities; it affects us, but we are not affected directly. It won't happen to us. Or at least not too soon. We make long-term plans. We "give our future a home," as an ad campaign for home savings accounts once proclaimed. Every threat, either by natural disasters or technical failures immediately gets pacified. We are watching out. We have everything under control. Those are the slogans.

As teenagers we flirt with death, the best jokes are about sex and death, and as we grow older, we learn to keep death at bay by eating properly, exercising, making sure our acid-alkaline is in balance. As believers, we deny it the final word. And if we start having doubts, we deprive death of its power by deciding to take matters into our own hands. *When the time comes*. Which actually means: if it really comes to that. In short, we act as though the only thing we can truly rely on to happen won't really happen to us. We tell ourselves stories.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Joan Didion wrote in one of her essays. She did not mean that we tell stories to entertain ourselves. Storytelling is not a pastime. Not embellishment. Telling is existential. We need these stories as fabulous, colorfully illustrated bits of oblivion, as a buffer against the gnawing knowledge of that black non-being. We need a backdrop. With my childish query about where I might find something to eat on this endless road, I had erected the first cardboard walls of my own backdrop.

Death is relegated to the outskirts by the act of telling. Or rather, what is referred to as death: emptiness, chaos, non-being. A non-being that is probably neither dense nor black because that, too, is a story. The act of telling brings order into the catastrophic chaos. Telling stories guides us away from death and more importantly: It guides us in general. It gives us direction and support. Even in those stories that talk about death, we find reassurance. This goes for every kind of narrative, whether they are intended as entertainment or political discourse, whether they take the form of weather report, philosophical essay or a novel. Fiction, however, has a special feature. It has a quality that makes its stories appear more suitable than others for keeping death at bay: it negotiates memory. It is the medium of memory and therefore, it possesses a keen sense of time—that henchman of death.

*Once upon a time*. Literature is rooted in this formulation. Dying and transience is its prerequisite. But unlike us, whose bodies are prone to reality

and therefore are frail and subject to time, time capitulates to fiction. Time becomes its agent. Fiction (and physics) can cancel out the beginning to end directionality of time. Here the timeline gets to run rampant. Even though reading a novel runs in one direction—usually from front to back—time in the novel can run backwards or in several directions. Past and future can be fused together in an everlasting present as seen in Gertrude Stein’s elliptical sentences. In fiction, one and the same person can be more than one age simultaneously. The literary “I” is not necessarily threatened with physical deterioration, even if that “I” possesses a body. Likewise, it is possible to extend life or shorten it, to arrive earlier than the hour of departure.

The literary “I” is not threatened by the one and final proof of reality: Matter, which draws us back into time and confronts us with the impending end, dissolves in language.

It is certainly no coincidence that Gertrude Stein preferred to use the technique of repetition. With it, she gestured to an essential truth; that literature is a *Wieder-Holen*, a bringing back. It brings back what is gone. It recuperates the past. What once was shall be again, in the act of telling. Of course, in a different version than it was before.

Personal memories about people and events also function as a way to *present* the past. The act of remembering past episodes from my life, however, does not exempt me from my own temporality. I set myself in relation to that which lies behind me only to be reminded of myself. Otherwise, there is no meaning to the random events. I see myself today in comparison to the person I was yesterday: at my high school graduation, publishing my first book, falling in love, on my first trip to Helsinki. Here, the passing of time is blatantly obvious, whether in conversations with others, in diaries, or with the help of photos which intensify the experience of transience by making physical changes visible.

Aesthetic distance allows events to be arranged in such a way that they extend beyond the personal and gain meaning for others. Aesthetic escalation or reduction makes them available to everybody. And so the lifespan of a person gets transformed into literary time.

When reading a novel, it isn’t necessary to bring our biographical selves into play. It does not matter how many centuries have elapsed, which body we inhabit or how often we have died; here transience leaves no trace, and the person who reads doesn’t need to know her age. A novel represents eternal life during the time it takes to read it. In the experience of language our own time dissolves.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why literature so often is connected with consolation, and not only to those who have experienced grief. The

experience of being able to withdraw from incomprehensible events, from everyday traps and, through the very act of reading, losing yourself in a dream-like euphoria that, despite all doubts, allows us the possibility of having more than one life—who does not know that feeling. Consolation cannot be found in textbooks. Nonfiction gives us information, but it does not provide us with comfort. As a child, I read in order to be consoled about my inability to imagine non-being in its infinitude. Through the act of reading, this experience became something universal. In books, all those doubting, sentient, questioning “I’s” had the same questions I had had, and some of them even had answers, and I understood all of them, I felt close to them all, I saw myself in all of them, I identified with them so intensely, it felt as if I had exchanged my life with theirs, or had become one with them, and maybe that was true, because I triumphantly believed I had experienced how that which cannot be, could be.

Today, since the ratio between the amount of life that lies ahead of me and that which lies behind me is slowly reversing and since the enchanting transformation of a literary figure has long since given way to a critical distance, my need for consolation has changed. It is less about the fear of getting lost in the timeless *before* and *after* (have I gotten used to it, has my sense of awe dulled?), but rather the inevitable passing of time scares me, this offense to all living beings that I mentioned earlier, this diminishing that we see every autumn, as I do this year in the darkening Finnish landscape, where the colors have lost their dazzle and grown profoundly melancholic.

Writers must be fearless. Anxiety and fear are the main obstacles in dealing with language, because you are forced to create something from nothing in a landscape where the criteria and conditions are created every time anew. For a writer fear can only be productive if it is transformed into a keen attentiveness and bold thinking. One author stands out for me as possessing this radical boldness: Joan Didion. Joan Didion, one of the greats of American literature, has been thinking her entire life about the phenomenon of transience, even if it was only in her last two late-works that she addressed the subject directly. Realizing that all effort is futile in the end she calls for an uncompromising, thoroughgoing clarity of thought. And hardly any other author writes as uncompromisingly as her.

Long before death had intruded into her life with a vengeance—first her husband died of a heart attack then just a year later her daughter died of a brain hemorrhage—Didion was asked by an interviewer what made her write. She answered: “You are obliged to do things which you think are futile. It’s like life.” Even her earliest essays are written from the

perspective of a person who views things from their end. In one of these essays, entitled "On Keeping a Notebook," Didion poses the question, why keep a notebook? To remember? Of course. That goes without saying. But to remember what? What should the erratic entries about events remind you of, if later you can't determine anymore whether they had happened or merely could have happened? According to Didion, people who keep notebooks are stricken with "a presentiment of loss." Their notes are a form of life insurance. They have meaning only insofar as they provide information about who the keeper of the notebook used to be. The notes are there to "remember what it was to be me." In this essay, we also learn that Didion was five years old when she received her first notebook and that this notebook began with an entry about a woman, "who believed herself to be freezing to death in the Arctic night, only to find, when day broke, that she had stumbled onto the Sahara Desert, where she would die of the heat before lunch."

"What it was to be her," when she was five meant to see no way out of the dilemma of mortality: neither in dreaming, nor when she was awake. At an age when an entire life lies ahead of you, seemingly limitless, all Didion could see was the single choice of either freezing to death or dying of thirst. Such a person isn't likely to have ever possessed this innocent view, this childlike, naïve way of seeing that would make it possible to believe our consoling stories. Consolation, one might assume, cannot be expected from this writer. And indeed, not everybody sees her astuteness as liberating. Her descriptions of the flower children in San Francisco, the film industry in Hollywood, of presidential elections, or her own youth in New York are sometimes considered ruthless and cold, because she depicts each individual's actions within the context of all action being futile. And in that she shows how forlorn we all are and how absurd.

Taking the void symbolized by death as her starting point, she closely scrutinizes the stories we tell ourselves to fill this void. She analyzes their errors in thought. In our attempt to rescue ourselves we deceive ourselves and others and these deceptions are made apparent through her disillusioned view. Beyond concealing the inadequacy of existence, her merciless gaze is directed at the false illusions, idealizations and ideologies, at hypocritical morality, the shallow excuses, political euphemisms, distortions by the media, and social appeasement which are supposed to ensure we find a good position in the struggle for survival. Didion demands that we become aware of the fact that what we believe is true, what we perceive as reality is simply a story, dependent upon our level of knowledge, upon the century we live in and the *zeitgeist*. Most striking is perhaps her essay,

“On Morality,” in which she comes to the conclusion that the only valid morality is having responsibility to those we love. This morality finds its most extreme expression in respect towards our dead loved ones. Death is a kind of guarantee for veracity, while any other form of morality dissolves into illusion under Didion’s dissecting gaze.

“I’m talking,” she writes, “about a morality so primitive that it scarcely deserves the name, a code that has as its point only survival, not the attainment of the ideal good.” And further: “it is difficult to believe, that ‘the good’ is a knowable quantity.” Everything can be subsumed under the name of the “good.” Too many criminals claim they were only following their own conscience, too many dictators have “done what they thought was right.” In the name of a higher goal, we elevate our lower motives. We do that because we have been desensitized to the fact that the life we are daily fighting for ultimately doesn’t belong to us:

Of course we would all like to ‘believe’ in something, like to assuage our private guilts in public causes, like to lose our tiresome selves, like, perhaps, to transform the white flag of defeat at home into the brave white banner of battle away from home. And of course it is all right to do that, that is how immemorably, things have gotten done. But I think it is all right only so long as we do not delude ourselves about what we are doing, and why.

According to Didion, these self-deceptions lie in the nature of language itself. Language is ruled by what it conceals. The content of a word depends on its use. Therefore, it isn’t only the linguistic content of an utterance that deserves our utmost attention, but also the linguistic form in which it is made. In her book *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion expresses it, thusly:

Even as a child, long before what I wrote began to be published, I developed a sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs, a technique for withholding whatever it was I thought or believed behind an increasingly impenetrable polish.

But language is all we have. And even Didion’s skepticism is always accompanied by the need to speak. When death took control of her life, speaking about it seemed to be her only salvation. It is a direct speech, a speech that is not imposed on (by) the fictional framework of a novel. When her husband dies she suffers a shock. It seems to burst any fictional frame, to reject all embellishment. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion’s prose is more austere than ever before. She retreats into an isolated, fragile “I.” She merges her own life with the narrator’s, leaving behind a book