DEATH IN WESTERN MEDIEVAL TRADITION

1. The fear of death

«Ἡγέρθη, οὐκ ἔστιν ὧδε».¹ This is the angel’s message to the Christians of all times and this message of the Resurrection, according to which death is beaten, came along with the spread of the Gospel in the West. But in the following centuries, the western medieval society will receive threatening and terrifying information about death and therefore death will dominate the mortals’ lives.

The western Christian revelatory literature, based on the recondite texts of the Peter’s Revelation (c. 135 -150 A.C) and to those of Paul’s (c. 250 A.C) until the major poetic composition of Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy at the 13th century, conceives the notion of death as an inevitable punishment of the original sin. The sinners are driven to Hell, which acquires a pedagogical character for the living, reminding them the avoidance of sin.

The medieval literature and the artistic iconography are greatly developed from the 12th to the 14th century and are fed by those frightening topics concerning death, which militated by the many hardships experienced by society, such as plague, famine, riots and wars.

We can say that the powerful symbols of the Middle Ages were two, death and devil. Death became the dominant symbol, because of its high rates of frequency in every family. The main cause of deaths were primarily the very poor hygienic conditions taking place and therefore epidemic diseases used to strike and torment

¹ Mk 16,6.
society, however many people were dying because of starvation as well. The Devil was used by the powerful church as a mean to intimidate people regardless of their social class. The low educational level of ordinary people and clergy greatly contributed to the creation and enforcement of an environment full of intimidation.

In the 15th and 16th century, the new culture of the Renaissance interprets death through the classical humanitarian ideals, trying to highlight the triumph of love and life over death.2

2. The good death

In the two homilies that compose the writing of Ambrose of Milan *De bono mortis*, which was written around 386 and has a high level of influences by *Phaedrus* of Plato, three types of death are recognized:

1) the death of sin
2) the mystical death
3) the physical death.

The first one, the death of sin,3 originates from a passage of Ezekiel's book, where the Lord speaks to the prophet and stresses

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3 AMBROSE OF MILAN, De bono mortis 3; 33, Sant’Ambrogio, Opere Esegetiche III, Isacco o l’anima - Il bene della morte, Introduzione, traduzione, note e indici di CL. MORESCHINI, [Tutte le Opere di Sant’Ambrogio], Biblioteca Ambrosiana - Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1982, 130; 176.
that all souls belong to Him, but whoever sins, will die.\textsuperscript{4} The saint considers this type of death as negative. In order to further explain this concept, Ambrose points out, by citing two psalms, the contrast between the death of the righteous, that is considered honest by the Lord, and the death of the sinner, that is vile.\textsuperscript{5}

Based upon the 6\textsuperscript{th} chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, the bishop of Milan talks about the mystical death. This is the death when someone dies as far as the sin is concerned and lives for God.\textsuperscript{6} This second type of death is absolutely good.

The latter type is the physical death, which is defined neither as good nor as bad, but lies in between. For the saints and sages, death is a commodity, since they depart from the corruptibility of the earthly world and they come to Christ. For most people though, death is considered as grief because of the fear of the end of life.

Taking cue from the \textit{Gospel of John},\textsuperscript{7} Ambrose notes that death is also known as "falling asleep", a sweet rest according to Psalm 3,6.\textsuperscript{8} However, death in the Scripture is a testimony of life. That is why the saint states he cannot praise a man if he has not yet reached the harbor of death.\textsuperscript{9} Death is also the completeness of pay and reward of departure.\textsuperscript{10} This leads to a positive evaluation of the event.

Ambrose considers death as a relief, because the man, who dies, is exempt from all of his burdens, all of his concerns and

\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ez} 18,4: «ὅτι πᾶσαι αἱ ψυχαὶ ἐμαί εἰσιν, ὃν τρόπον ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦ πατρός, οὐτὸς καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦ υἱοῦ, ἐμαί εἰσιν· ἡ ψυχὴ ἡ ἁμαρτάνουσα, αὕτη ἀποθανεῖται».
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ps} 115,6: «τίμιος ἐναντίον Κυρίου ὁ θάνατος τῶν ὅσίων αὐτοῦ» and \textit{Ps} 33,22: «θάνατος ἁμαρτωλῶν πονηρός, καὶ οἱ μισοῦντες τὸν δίκαιον πλημμελήσουσι».
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Rom} 6,10: «ὅ γὰρ ἀπέθανεν, τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ ἀπέθανεν ἐφάπαξ, δὲ δὲ ζῇ, ζῇ τῷ Θεῷ».
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Jn} 11,11: «ταῦτα εἶπε, καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο λέγει αὐτοῖς· Λάζαρος ὁ φίλος ἡμῶν κεκοίμηται· ἄλλα πορεύομαι ἵνα ἐξυπνήσω αὐτὸν».
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Ps} 3,6: «ἐγὼ ἐκοιμήθην καὶ ἤπνωσα· ἐξηγέρθην, ὅτι Κύριος ἀντιλήψεται μου».
\textsuperscript{9} \textsc{Ambrose of Milan, De bono mortis} 15; 31; 35, op.cit., 150; 174; 178.
\textsuperscript{10} \textsc{Ambrose of Milan, De bono mortis} 35, op.cit., 178.
injustices that inevitably the earthly life offers. As such a relief, death acquires a beneficial character.

Another reason for which Ambrose claims that death is a good event is the fact that the man does not feel anything after the end of his life. No pain. He adds, however, that even if something is comprehended, this would mean that life after death exists and life (without the body) is a commodity.\(^{11}\) This leads to the conclusion that death is not a bad event, since it leads to a true life, free from vices and sins.

In fact, while dying, we do not deteriorate our situation, but we improve it. We move away from the hostility of current affairs, because through death, sins end and with this, the fault also ends. Death is actually the end of sin, so that the offense does not become constant when lifetime increases.

Also, in order to show the virtue of the end of life, death is described as a transition (transitus) from an unfavorable situation to another more enhanced. This is related with the eminently "good transition" from the mortal status to that of immortality, from the disruption of peace in this life to a peaceful state. Death is like a discharge harbor, where one can find a secure peace against the raging waves of earthly life. With death the passions are buried for the benefit of the resurrection of virtues.

When the man dies, the soul flees to God and all the ephemera and negative of the world which are the passions, the violence, the agitation, are left on earth. While the soul leaves the body, it rises to the clear commodity, the eternal and immortal and will stay there as coming from there.\(^{12}\)

Ambrose argues that death should not scare us. Fear does not stem from death itself, but from the idea of death, the view that man has for it according to his feelings or his consciousness. Therefore he should not blame death for this fear, but he definitely needs to check the wound of his consciousness.\(^{13}\)

The bishop of Milan further explains that those who live with the idea that death is daunting, they actually believe that it is not

\(^{11}\) AMBROSE OF MILAN, *De bono mortis* 13, op.cit., 146.
\(^{12}\) A typical platonic view is reflected here.
\(^{13}\) AMBROSE OF MILAN, *De bono mortis* 31, op.cit., 174.
terrible to die, but to live with the fear of death. He encourages the believers not to feel any fear for physical death, because they will be rewarded for what they have suffered from the unjust people on earth, by taking the prize of life and living among the righteous and the Son of God.¹⁴

While the main concern of the church fathers, as pastors, was to convince the believers for a positive and evangelical treatment of death, in the monastic life death is endearing. The experience of mourning, the death of desires and generally of fleshly spirit from the monk is daily and in accordance with the Rule of St. Benedict, the monk must have daily in front of his eyes the death painted.¹⁵

From the Lives of many ascetic saints the information is extracted that their death is preannounced and happens when familiar faces are present, such as members of the fraternity. This on medieval models is a good, peaceful and christian death.

3. The depiction of death

While in Greco-Roman antiquity, the skeleton is represented only when the dead is disreputable, during the Middle Ages a movement gradually emerges that leads from the allegorical representation of death to the personification of the state of dying itself and, finally, to the personification of the dead and death. Already in the 12th century, the personification of death is something that has been already accepted comprehended by humans. Death is represented now as a corpse, without sex, in a way more and more realistic, while in the 13th century is depicted as reaper with his scythe. This image will await the Renaissance, in order to generalize.

Around 1230, at the metopes of the main entrances of the cathedrals of Amiens, Reims and Paris, death is represented as the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse. We even see him as a hunter

¹⁴ AMBROSE OF MILAN, De bono mortis 37, op.cit., 180.
with his net, his bow and arrows. During the 14th century, its representation as a musician with his violin or a bagpipe is spreading. Finally, it appears as burier, with his coffin and his shovel. The greatest artists of the time do not hesitate to portray the 'triumphant' death.\textsuperscript{16}

Moreover, since the 13th century, in the temples, the monasteries and the illustrated manuscripts, the peaceful Christian death of holy persons is also depicted, who has public character, since it happens in front of beloved persons who are present.

4. The art of death

In the Medieval period there was an entire artistic and literary genre with death as a subject, which, while in modern eyes seems macabre, in its time was serving some very meaningful spiritual needs. This included three main topics: the art of death (\textit{ars moriendi}), the dance of death (\textit{danse macabre}) and the memory of death (\textit{memento mori}).

The 'art of death' is inspired by the Christian faith that death is "the price of sin." From the 12th century already, Thibaut de Marly (1135-1190) describes in his poem "the lyrics of death" the nightmarish conditions of Hell and advises the man to keep a caution to the fleshly shell of the soul. More known are "the lyrics of death" of Hélinand de Froidmond (c.1150-1230), reminiscent of the inevitability of death, which we do not know either the day or the hour. Equality in front of death is symbolized by the similarity in the decomposition of every single mortal's corpses, as described in the poem of Gautier de Coincy (1177-1236) “on the misery of men and women and the imminent death.”

This time, in which societies were plagued by pestilence, wars, poor diet and unhealthy living conditions, the meaning of death was interwoven with the everyday life because of the high

\textsuperscript{16} A. TENENTI, \textit{La vita e la morte attraverso l'arte del XV secolo}, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane 1996.
mortality, while the average life expectancy in Medieval Europe was 25-30 years. The priests of the particular period could not literally commune all those people who were condemned to death, because they had to face already a big number of losses from their own group as well. Thus in 1415 in Germany, from the pen of an anonymous Dominican monk, the *Tractatus artis bene moriendi* (*Thesis of the art of good death*) was released, which functioned as a "virtual priest" for the people and in six chapters was explaining:

1. Death is not something that one should fear
2. How to overcome the five temptations of the moribund humans (lack of faith, despair, impatience, spiritual arrogance, greed)
3. Seven Questions for the moribund and comfort by the Bible
4. How to emulate the behavior of Christ
5. Guidelines for the moribund person’s family
6. Prayers for the dead.

The work was sold out and it was translated into all major European languages, whereas in 1450 become simpler, cropped and 11 engravings were added which, with legible allegorical symbolism, were depicting the same messages so that they are understood and memorized easily by the illiterate.\(^{17}\)

Death is represented in the ritual of the "dance of death", as well as in many songs, poems and images, as a dancer, which obliges people in any state and age, as reluctant as they are, to dance with him. Everyone is taking part in the dance in turn, according to the arranged social scale. Righteous and sinners, rich and poor, young and old.

The "macabre dance" began as a custom, probably French, and slowly was spread to Western Europe. Its exact beginning cannot be established with precision. However, we find references to it throughout the Middle Ages and its peak was in the 14\(^{\text{th}}\) and 15\(^{\text{th}}\) century.

The "dance of death" was originally a kind of theatrical play, which first appeared in the mid 14\(^{\text{th}}\) century. As cause of its

appearance were considered the epidemics, which were very frequent and destructive, such as the plague or, as the people used to call, the "black death". So death became a popular topic, which occupied the imagination of all people who lived at that time.

The reason for creating the dance was the fear of man in front of merciless death and shows his ability to express through dancing not only his joy but also his fears.

Important role in creating this kind of dance also played the deep human need to escape the oppression and restriction of expression imposed by the church. It is also considered as a form of religious and social satire and a normal reaction of the people against the religious fanaticism of the time and the incredible oppression of normal impulses of man from the church.

The ritual of the "dance of death" began with a sermon by a monk, who was referring to the inevitability of death. At the end of the sermon the messengers of death were presented, who were dressed in a well-fitting yellow linen suit, which was painted so as to look like a skeleton. In their face they were wearing the mask of death of the time. One of them was introduced to the person intended to be the victim, who was invited to accompany him beyond the grave. The first victim was usually the pope or the emperor. The invitation was not accepted and several reasons were given in order for the rejection to be accepted, but they were deemed insufficient and finally death was driving away his victim. A second messenger was taking from the hand a new victim, a prince or a cardinal, who was followed by others representing the various groups of society. The usual number of characters in the "dance of death" was twenty-four.\footnote{A. EVAGGELIDI, Χοροί του Μεσαίωνα και της Αναγέννησης, Athens 1991.}

When the plague spread in Europe in 1373, the "dance of death" was expanded everywhere and danced by men, women and children. The disease that decimated entire cities was called "black plague" and became the cause of creation of one more kind of mystical dance, apart from the "dance of death", which was called "carnival of despair." The believers, in the "carnival of despair," were beginning a cheerless litany, that were flagellating themselves
all the way, while another group of believers were accompanying them dancing and improvising. Thereby they believed that they expiated and simultaneously prevented evil.

In conclusion, it could be argued that the memory and the fear of death in the western Middle Ages were combined with elements conflicting and incompatible. To die sinful revealed surrendering of his soul to the Devil and to the eternal fire of Hell. The "memory of death" functioned essentially as a preparation of the believer to death and had become the main message of medieval theology. Death was invested with a terrifying scenario, which produced fear. The promising afterlife was not a source of comfort and hope, but rather of terrorism, which certainly abstained from the patristic view of both the West and the East. Typical is the vision of Saint John Chrysostom, who notes: "why we fear death? Because we have not been conquered by love of the heavenly kingdom, because we have not been inflamed by the desire of future goods. If this had happened, we would despise all goods on earth. Anyone afraid of Hell will never fear death."19