

Narrating the Death

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I could open my review with a short praise on the literary quality of Davide Sisto's book for its rare elegance and then I could concentrate my attention on the success of his work relating to contents, trying to outline as much as possible the structure of this dense essay about death but this strategy would be reducing, fragmentary and not that precise. Both the elements, the literary style and the contents, are just the two faces of the same prism. The "narrative" style adopted by the author is precisely the only way to put into practice the message that it wants to transmit to the reader: the chosen literary style is indeed an act of devotion to reflections transmitted by its. Sisto seems to say, even in the title of the book, that the unique possible structure of a speech about death has a narrative nature. This narration is, of course, a philosophical narration but just because philosophy acts as a glue between many other types of narration, many inter-disciplinary references. So it is not a coincidence that the book starts with a cinematographic quote which will be used during the whole treatise as a *leitmotiv* or that at the beginning of each chapter the author wrote a quote taken from the history of rock of the last twenty years – a subject of which Sisto demonstrates to know the most sophisticated and precise aspects, including in this way his extra-academic experience as a music writer. Moreover, the prism I wrote about before shows a third face which is not less important than the others, I mean the pedagogic-educational aspect. I guess that Sisto does not want only to elaborate a good theoretical essay about the chosen theme, I mean the end of the life.

Starting from a genuine philosophical speech about the death, Sisto also wants to offer "the theme from which philosophy tries to take again the cultural lead of the western society" (17). Sisto's aim – especially shown in an introductory paragraph titled *Lontano dallo stordimento. La coscienza*

della morte – is not to define the death as whatever concept, even because this would be “a concept empty in itself, like ‘the walnut skin’, because without any corresponding intuition” (35). His aim is to educate on the reflection about death, on the becoming conscious of our limit, of our ontological status as a “reed”, as Pascal wrote.

Therefore, the speech around death can be elaborated in two very different ways, thus to which the two parts of the work are dedicated. At first exactly the narrative procedure, used by the author, “concentrated on the agreement of knowledges in view of a ‘visceral’ interpretation” (21), fitting a Schellingian, symbolical conception of the death. On the other side a second type of comprehension of the death which “aims at the knowledge of phenomena and events which proceeds through the orderly strategy of the opposition and of the sectioning” (21) from which a mechanistic vision of the nature and the typical post-human idea of immortality are inferred. In the first case (the *cosmopolitan philosophy*) the *narration* flows from the consciousness about the opacity of the death’s image and from the consideration that even if humans know and have consciousness about their death as the reality which interests them at most, nevertheless they do not know its essence. For this reason that narration just tries to conduct a meditation starting from that reality without taking the risk of a (fallacious) scientific report. In the second case (the *meta-level philosophy*), at contrary, the analysis tries to give a rationalistic explication, to elaborate defining theories of the concept of death. Well, I find that the cinematographic quote used as a springboard of the entire treatise, I mean the 2003 drama film directed by Iñárritu *21 Grams*, is in fact very perceptive. Protagonist Paul Rivers’ vicissitudes themselves are actually emblematic for what concerns the double perspective facing the death individuated by Sisto. During the first part of the movie Paul seems to be in line with the meta-level philosophy perspective as demonstrated by his attempt of life extension through a very delicate heart transplant to avoid his sad destiny. On the other hand, in the second part, the protagonist refuses medical care proposed by his doctor since the first appearance of reject symptoms of his new heart by his body. During that phase Rivers becomes conscious about the inevitability of the death, and this consciousness becomes explicit in the final monologue, when he compares the vagueness of the death to a stack of five nickels, to a hummingbird or to a chocolate bar.

Cosmopolitan philosophy, then. A “philosophy which feels at home everywhere”, as written by Sisto: in a movie, in a rock song, in an artwork, in poetry, in literature generally. This kind of philosophy can adopt a hermeneutic view facing the death’s ontological opacity, I mean a view really more successful than scientific descriptions. “Through descriptions and

dialogues between the characters, representing the range of the writer's personality or fantasy aspects, a certain phenomenon – the death, in this case – is plumbed from many points of view, which can in this way reveal more aspects of that phenomenon instead of the scientific survey and its formal strictness" (43). So, regaining Gabriel Marcel's famous dichotomy, the cosmopolitan philosophy is that approach which honestly addresses itself to the death like to a *mystery* which cannot find – by definition – a solution, and not like to a *problem* where the subject and the object are extern each other, producing in this way an analytical approach addressed to a solution which – it is important to repeat it again – is not possible when we are dealing with the death. There is not separation between us and our death, therefore it is not possible to give a definition or a conceptual explanation about it forgetting completely the participation of the I who live it and experiment it. Like when we describe a city – Sisto writes alluding to Giuseppe Longo – we cannot exclude smells, noises and colors we perceive, when we try to describe the death we cannot forget the typical vagueness that phenomena have when we are totally absorbed in them. This kind of phenomena must be felt more than thought. Well, Sisto regains exactly in this perspective the German Romanticism's teaching, especially Schelling's one, maybe his favorite author. The thanatological conception elaborated in that cultural environment, a conception based on the importance of the symbol and through it, has been able to "catch an interpretation of the relationship between visible and invisible and a *spiritual* conception of the nature which confirm the anti-dicothomical character of the cosmopolitan philosophy as a narration addressed to the polygamy of knowledges" (53), against the modern Cartesian tradition. So Sisto ventures into a long, complex and incisive analysis of the German term *Sinnbild* starting from its scission in its two structural elements, I mean sense and image, Spirit and Nature, to observe that the romantic idea of the death as a palingenetic event (so an event able to re-establish the correct relationship between the sense/Spirit and the image/Nature) was able to conduct to the liberation of the spirituality contained in the Nature itself. And about this Nature Romanticism gave a completely particular vision, "totally removed from a comprehension which outlines it as a mere matter or as a mechanicistic instrument in the hands of a human-subject provided with consciousness" (77) and "deeply woven with the spiritual weave" (77). This romantic narration of the symbolical death was then the mirror of the human condition in its more dramatic but real aspect, I mean a condition always hanging in the balance between the sense and the non-sense and describable – as I wrote before – just through a never ending mix of the philosophical-rational reflection and the narration.

Now, this Schellingian configuration has been passed, since Hegel and during the contemporary age, in view of a dualistic Cartesian structure of the choice and of the separation, giving a rational and logical-formal interpretation of the reality. The meta-level philosophy, to which the second part of the book is dedicated, exactly born from this inclination to the separation and the contradiction as the only ways about the interpretation of reality, the link between the man and the world, the life and the death. The death has been pushed in that way out of the life, and all in all this has complicated more and more the comprehension of the relationship between life and death. As the author says, this is also demonstrated by the contemporary difficulty in defying what the natural death is, where this difficulty is emphasized by the results of the secularization and by the biomedical progresses, as if the death was a cultural and historical construct more than an existential and biological fact. For these reasons, we can see how much this essay is important for what concerns the recent debates around the bioethics field, especially because the reflections about what the natural death is, also conducted, in the contemporary age, to the definition of the “juridical death”, which radicalized the soul/body Cartesian dualism in the body/brain one. The death – as underlined in the fourth paragraph of this second chapter – has been, in the contemporary age, literally “removed” and not just “domesticated”, as already written by Philippe Ariès. The estrangement of the thought about the death from the contemporary humans’ consciousness has been possible, and it also was considered necessary, in a society like ours, thanks to the deep techno-scientific transformations in which that society has its roots; those transformations, in fact, have de-symbolized and de-mythologized both life and death: “[...] the elimination of any symbolic or mythic character from the woven life and death processes – Sisto writes – goes at the same speed with their radical medicalization and professionalization” (138). Thanks to that medicalization, the death stopped to be an upsetting event for people lives and it stopped to weigh that deeply, for example, on the dead one’s relatives and friends because that process also conducted towards one more solipsistic condition of dying. Today men often die, in fact, alone in hospitals, very far away from the social environment where they always have lived, and this underlines still more the separation already very deep between life and death, or, in this case, between the alive ones, who can still take outside the death, and the dying one, which has already the death inside. Sisto lets us highlight that it is not for hazard that any medical science handbook contains information about how the problem of death must be considered or managed: the medical science’s objective is to save and prolong lives and not to give answers about their end. Therefore, Sisto seems to

declare – recuperating a very incisive image contained in Günther Anders' *Outdatedness of Human Beings* – that the medical science can, if at all, give us the illusion of being something like peaches in syrup, reproducible in series forever and never expired. For all these reasons, the contemporary impossibility of defying what the natural death is, is just the result of this ascent of the “technological” and the parallel descent of the “natural” and so of the bodily as well, where this is considered the real responsible of the humans' lacking immortality.

In conclusion, the philosophical path drawn by Sisto tries to show that at the end death is such of a watershed between two big perspectives: on one side, the one which derives from the Romanticism, sustained by who feels his death, who includes the death in his life, and on the other side the one sustained by who totally excludes that thought pushing it out from his life. The narratologic perspective and the scientific one, and an unsurmountable limit between them. In this way he remembers us that the first type man is the only one who can reconnect the Nature and the Spirit, the image and the sign, introducing the exteriority of the death-event in his life, and so he is the only one who can recognize and accept his genuine and limited identity, recognizing himself as “human, all too human” and rejecting the promethean presumptions, which are the bastion of the post-humanism.

REFERENCES

Sisto, Davide. 2013. *Narrare la morte. Dal romanticismo al post-umano*. Pisa: ETS.