

ON DEATH IN LITERARY STUDIES.

CRISIS OF HUMANISM, A THEORETICAL OR A HUMAN ISSUE?

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Abstract

One of the most controversial and hotly debated concepts in contemporary literary theory is that of “crisis.” Philosophers and theorists speak about the “death of the author,” the “death of literature,” post-humanism and trans-humanism (which also imply, in a way, the “death of man”), and so on. However, these “alarmist” claims seem to point to internal changes and evolutions of paradigms and models rather than to the actual ends of domains and concepts. Moreover, they are also successful devices for drawing public attention and critical acclaim, for conferring prestige to their proponents. Engaging with Theodor Adorno’s dictum that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” my point is that the latest global calamities of the pandemic and of the war in Ukraine demand a more moral use of the term “death.” The metaphorical and abstract grand-narrative of the “end of man” fades away when we are confronted with the tragic and concrete realities of people suffering and dying in horrible conditions. Without ignoring the failures of anthropocentrism and the valid criticisms concerning the attitude and position of the human species within the planetary ecosystem, this paper engages with the possibility of ideologically-driven ethics giving way to a “humanism” *tout court* (not new-, not after-, not non-humanism), predicated on the imperative of caring about actual individuals in pain.

Keywords: Humanism, Posthumanism, Death of man, Death of the author, Death of literature.

Inter armas silent musae, as the adage goes. It might seem superfluous to speak about humanities and literary studies in a context dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion war in Ukraine. However, these apparently separate domains – theoretical research and daily life – might prove significant at a deeper level, which involves the very understanding of our humanity. So, I

would like to address one of the most controversial and hotly debated topics in contemporary literary theory: “death”, in order to question the moral validity of its indiscriminate use on a large scale. Indeed, in cultural studies and in literary theory, we are surrounded by “death”: “death of God”, “death of man,” “death of the author,” “death of literature”, “death of the language”¹, “death of the artist”² and so on. To be sure, this *thanatophilia* goes far beyond the humanities, in different domains, where we read about the end of history, the death of germ theory, the death of Big Bang theory, the death of archaeological theory, etc. I will pick up some of these topics as short case studies.

Death of Man

For several decades now, philosophers and theorists have been speaking about different “crises” and “ends”. The amplest of these “demises” is the “death of man” (as preached by anti-humanism and post-humanism). To start with, it should be noted that this topic derives, in its turn, from an even greater “catastrophe”, the “death of God”. After the “crisis of European thinking” (as Paul Hazard described it) at the end of the 17th century, European civilization saw Christian theocentrism being replaced by alternative forms of religiosity (deism, pantheism, dualism) or secular ideologies (secular philosophy, agnosticism, or atheism). During the 19th century, positivism, scientism, skepticism and nihilism led to the removal of the figure of God and any other divine being, as captured in Nietzsche’s famous formula, to the voiding of the transcendent and to the closing off of all metaphysics. For a while, Romantic and Postromantic mentality nurtured the hope that man could take over the place and the responsibilities of the absent God, that the “genius” could inherit the powers of a demiurge in acting like the creator of alternative worlds. Nevertheless, starting from Dostoyevsky’s dilemmas concerning the “Man-God,” phenomenology and existentialism explored man’s pretention of assuming the ontological quality of “being,” just to discover, as it happens with Paul Valéry or Jean-Paul Sartre, that humanity can only produce “nothingness,” that it does not possess an ontological

¹ Hans-Jürgen Sasse, *Language Death*, De Gruyter Mouton, 1992.

² William Deresiewicz, *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech*, 2020.

being. Sartre's pessimist conclusion was that the very source of nonbeing, the *néant*, was human consciousness, *l'être-pour-soi*³.

Further on, structuralism and poststructuralist philosophy shifted the discussion from ontology to linguistics and semiotics. Michel Foucault recommended that philosophers should delve into the "archeology" of concepts in order to expose their historical genesis, Jacques Derrida suggested the practice of deconstructing systems,⁴ and Jean-François Lyotard treated metaphysical and philosophical explanations of the world as *métarécits*, that is, as metanarratives or grand narratives.⁵ Based on the distinction between "words" and "things", Foucault argued that the "true self" is only a metaphysical concept, with no correspondent in the real existence, and that subjectivity is a continuous process depending on the milieu in which the individual lives and acts. Consequently, the theory of "man", that is "humanism", is only a recent historical ideological construct, forged at the beginning of the 19th century by the new positivist, scientific and atheistic mentality. Because of his critique of the foundation of human subjectivity, Foucault was deemed to have proclaimed the "death of Man", although what he had in mind was rather a deconstruction of the modern conception of humanism.⁶

Poststructuralist "anti-humanism" has been assumed by contemporary cultural studies and developed into theories such as post-humanism or trans-humanism. Rosi Braidotti, to quote one of the most authoritative voices in the field, claims that post-humanism goes beyond the controversy between humanism and anti-humanism, in order to offer new alternatives to the "anti-humanist disappearance of Man."⁷ Unlike Foucault, she uses not the modern 19th-century definition of humanism, but the classical, 18th-century definition, in which she conflates the Renaissance "Vitruvian Man" with the Enlightenment Man led by the "triumphant reason". This definition of humanism is predicated on an abstract, reductive and normative vision, describing human nature as idealistically embodied by a European white rational male, living in a secular democracy defined by a social contract. The

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1943; Idem, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris, Éditions Nagel, 1946.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967.

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, Editions du Minuit, 1979.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses - une archéologie des sciences humaines*, cap. IX and X, Paris, Gallimard, 1966; see also *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969.

⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Oxford UK and Boston, New York USA, Polity, 2013.

imposition of these Enlightenment characteristics as a norm brought about the devaluation of all differences and the relegation of Others into sexualized, racialized and naturalized categories (to which I would add a fourth category, of the “minority” Others, marginalized because of body disabilities, illnesses such as AIDS, or linguistic, cultural or religious differences). Feminist, postcolonial, environmentalist etc. critiques have unmasked and discredited these pretensions of Western imperialist and patriarchal anthropocentrism. This has determined post-human theorists to assert that we are witnessing the “historical decline of humanism” and the “crisis of humanism.”⁸ However, I would raise a question: Which humanism? Despite agreeing with the idea of archeological deconstruction of historically constituted concepts, Rosi Braidotti sticks to a historically limited concept of humanism, the Enlightenment one, and regards it as encompassing all the cultural history of European ideas. In fact, throughout the last three millennia, humanism has had various avatars, sometimes very different from one another: the ancient polytheistic myths about gods and men; the classical Greek-Roman *Kalos kai agathos* ideal; the Christian conception of a humanity created by God, and redeemed by Christ; the Renaissance produced not only Vitruvian secular humanism, but also a “Christian humanism” embraced by the clergy, at least until the Counter-Reformation, and a magical, alchemical, occult humanism based on a Neoplatonic conception; Enlightenment humanism; modern Promethean humanism, evoked by Foucault; even the Marxist ideology of the “new man”; to say nothing about countless theories about human nature advanced by individual philosophers. Comparing these acceptations, it becomes evident that they are quite dissimilar: ancient polytheisms, with the cult of great goddesses, are not at all reducible to patriarchal Judeo-Christian conception of women; Christian humanism, seeing the human being as a creature depending on its Creator, is far away from materialistic and atheistic 19th-century humanism; alchemists seeking divine powers through occult disciplines are significantly different from secular individuals, depending solely on their “triumphant reason.” To bring together all these models under the umbrella of a single concept, limited to a precise historical paradigm, is to force them into the bed of Procrustes, to reduce their differences to a unique meaning. Post-modern relativism would rather recommend respecting nuances and variations.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

So why practice such reductionisms? I heartily agree with all critiques targeted at the Enlightenment ideal of man. (Or maybe not with all. To give just an example: feminism rightly criticizes the reduction of the notion of man, as mankind, to that of the male part of the human race. Nevertheless, while this is true for languages such as English and French, it is misleading for other languages. For example, in Romanian, there is a specific term for humanity in general: *om*, from Lat. *homo*, *hominis*, and two distinct terms for the male / female genders: *bărbat* < Lat. *barbatus* / *femeie* < Lat. *familia*, *muiere* < Lat. *mulier*. Or, in Greek, the term *Anthropos* has two complementary terms for genders: *Andros* and *Gyneka*. To be sure, in Greek or in Romanian there are other uses of the grammatical category of gender which attest the social discrimination of biological genders. However, it is not only misleading, but, ironically, a form of cultural imperialism to give an English or French linguistic turn a universal value valid for different languages.)

But then why not make use of the post-structuralist lesson and simply deconstruct the historically limited Enlightenment conception of humanity, instead of smashing together all historical “humanisms” under a unique reductive label and relegate them all to the dustbin? The answer might not be so complicated: in our contemporary culture, creating new concepts and coining new terms can bring acclaim and recognition to their authors. In this specific case, the prestige device at work might be this: historical “humanisms” need to be reduced to a unique acceptance, Humanism, which can be then easily refuted in order to make room for a new, fashionable term: Post-Humanism. Less obsessed with terminological invention, previous thinkers did not seek new terms even when paradigms suffered radical turns. Suffice it to think of the replacement of ancient classical humanism by Christian humanism, of Christian humanism by secular humanism(s), etc.

So, to my mind, the “crisis” of Humanism is only the crisis of certain obsolete historical conceptions of humanism, which emerged during the Enlightenment or in modern times. The “death of man” is and should stay a lively metaphor for the replacement of a certain conception about humanity with a new one, which emerged from the evolutions and concerns of a new epoch. It is not a real “death,” i.e. destruction, disappearance, but a crisis of growth and change. I agree that changes should be made in the curricula of the humanities, in order to attune them to the developments of contemporary civilization. However, I cannot refrain from questioning the honesty of the claim that “humanism is dead” and seeing in it a strategy for replacing traditional with new disciplines, in the struggle for intellectual, financial and curricular power in the universities.

Death of the Author

After the “death of God”, and the “death of Man,” another “crisis” I would like to evoke is the “death of the author.”⁹ Again, structuralist and post-structuralist philosophies, starting from linguistics and semiotics, shifted the focus from reality to representation, from the biographical author to the inbuilt “paper” author. Roland Barthes, for example, says:

The Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own book: the book and the author take their places of their own accord on the same line, cast as a *before* and an *after*: the Author is supposed to feed the book — that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now¹⁰.

As I did above for the cultural “biography” of the concept of humanism, I will now undertake a brief survey of the main paradigms (in Thomas Kuhn’s terms) which describe the status of the author over the course of several millennia. It will allow us to distinguish between several conceptions about the nature and the position of the narrator in literature¹¹:

1. a supra-personal narrator, from Antiquity to Renaissance. As we know, the rhetorical convention used by story-tellers in mythological cultures, or by the prophets and fathers of the Judeo-Christian tradition, was that of the author inspired by a supernatural figure, such as Apollo, the Muses, angels,

⁹ See Roland Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, Tome 2, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1994; Michel Foucault, „What is an Author?“, in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, vol. 2, translated by Robert Hurley, New York, The New Press, 1998. I would also like to mention my PhD student Alexandru Ciorogar’s doctoral thesis “Ascension of the Author”, defended at Babes-Bolyai University in June 12, 2020, for a more detailed approach to the topic.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in Sean Burke (ed.), *Authorship: from Plato to the Postmodern. A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, 1995, p. 125-130.

¹¹ For a similar synopsis, see Mihaela Ursa, *Scrittopia, sau Ficționalizarea subiectului auctorial în discursul teoretic*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 2005, Partea I.

or God. According to this convention, the one who speaks through the mouth of Homer, Isaiah, Sibylla, Pseudo-Dionysus Areopagitus, etc. is of divine nature, while the human is the mere scribe of a message conveying the absolute truth;

2. a personal narrator. Starting from Renaissance and achieving its maximum heft in Romanticism, the replacement of Christian theocentrism with lay anthropocentrism led to a progressive endorsement by the author of the poetical message. Just like Romantic philosophy replaced divinity with the concept of an absolute ego, a demiurgical author who challenges God in creating alternative worlds, the individual author abandons his position of anonymity and becomes the creator of the literary work;

3. an impersonal author. After positivism, scientism, nihilism and atheism cancelled metaphysics, and the ontological basis of being was transferred from transcendence into the immanent world, literary Realism and subsequent currents inspired by it gave to the narrative voice the impersonality of the laws of nature, the objectivity of a neutral perspective outside human subjectivity;

4. a fragmented narrator. In modern times, starting from Baudelaire's *homo duplex* and Dostoevsky's polyphonic characters, literature began echoing the modernist sensation of chaotic diversification, multiplication, schizoidism and the fracturing of the traditional cohesion of the world, of the society and of humanity. The narrator assumed a dichotomic subjectivity, a multiple personality, and his work became fragmented, perspectival, relative, broken.

5. a deceased narrator. Within the crisis of anthropocentrism, structuralist and post-structuralist theory produced the "death certificate" of the author. Of course, we should see in Roland Barthes' proclamation of the "death of the author" a metaphor for a theoretical revolution, the change of the concept of authorship, the disinvestment of literary analysis from the external biography of the author and the validation of the implicit figure of the narrator created within the literary work.

Nevertheless, if we consider deconstruction to be a method of amplifying self-awareness, of exposure of misleading grand narratives, of theories with pretensions to final and complete explanations of the world, it would be interesting to see if deconstruction could not be deconstructed in its turn. Structuralist and post-structuralist critiques of the concept of biographical author were directed against the excess of power that Romantic and 19th-century aesthetics attributed to individual creators. The social and historical figure of the author was expelled outside literature and literary values. This was achieved by unmasking the strategies used by authors in order to achieve cultural consecration.

The point I would make is: Who has the authority to question the authority of the writer? The literary theorists? The literary critics? The funny thing is that Barthes, Foucault or Derrida (*les philosophes*, as they were revered at the time) attained a theoretical authority and the social status of cultural stars precisely through theories such the “death of man” and the “death of the author”.

Let us reread a paragraph from the second edition of *The History of Madness* (1972):

Je voudrais qu'un livre, au moins du côté de celui qui l'a écrit, ne soit rien d'autre que les phrases dont il est fait [...] Je voudrais que cet objet-événement, presque imperceptible parmi tant d'autres, se recopie, se fragmente, se répète, se simule, se dédouble, disparaisse finalement sans que celui à qui il est arrivé de le produire, puisse jamais revendiquer le droit d'en être le maître, d'imposer ce qu'il voulait dire, ni de dire ce qu'il devait être.¹²

At face value, this is a “profession of faith” in which the philosopher makes it clear that he will practise in his own work the idea of erasing the biographical author. But who or what is left to speak? It is the ghost of an impersonal author, haunting the text, with no connection to the life (i.e. subjectivity and individuality) of the historical author, an objective voice that no longer assumes the authority of a limited individual, but of the laws of nature themselves. In doing so, Foucault's work should stop being treated as the creation of a writer seen as a person, that is, limited and subjected to criticism. It should be regarded instead as the emanation of an impersonal truth. The apparent modesty of the gesture of the person Foucault withdrawing from his work is in fact a strategy of imposing the work itself as the expression of some super-personal irrefutable certainties (which reminds of the medieval practice of anonymity and transfer of the authorial function to the divinity).

So, while we are talking about strategies, and about concealed intentions covertly circulated by theories, we can inquire whether the topic of the “death of the author” is the expression of a complex of superiority of the theorists against the creators of literature. Romanticism worshipped the figure of the author, seen as a misunderstood genius, and left readership in a secondary position, be they literary theorists and critics, or ordinary readers. By contrast, Barthes's, Foucault's or Derrida's

¹² Michel Foucault. Seconde préface pour la réédition d'*Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972.

deconstructions seem to be aimed at a kind of fratricide: the critic is murdering the author, in order to reign as an absolute ruler over the work and to receive all admiration and acclaim within the “Republic of Letters”.

Death of Literature

From the “death of the author”, derives, logically, a third topic, “the death of literature¹³” (the disappearance of the creator leads to the disappearance of the creation). David Damrosch notes, fittingly, that the theme has become almost a “literary genre,” or rather a “literary criticism sub-genre,” which corresponds in literary studies to the pop culture vogue of zombies.¹⁴ Indeed, literature seems to have turned, especially in French criticism, into a walking corpse who strolls among us, bad-smelling and pestered by flies (well, Sartre’s flies, symbolizing guilt and remorse towards the corpse). So, who has killed, who has zombified literature? There’s no need for a criminal investigation in order to identify the philosophers and theorists responsible for this new demise. Let’s see a few samples. In his books *L’Adieu à la littérature : histoire d’une dévalorisation (XVIII^e-XX^e siècle)* (2005), and *La Haine de la littérature* (2015),¹⁵ William Marx asserts that literature has lost its social legitimacy because of the progressive autonomy assumed by modern aesthetics. Its haughtiness and even contempt of the social have caused an exhaustion of fiction itself and a growing disinterest of the common readers, who have bid a final “farewell to literature.” Similarly, Tzvetan Todorov evokes, in his volume *La littérature en péril* (2006), his conversion from his young structuralist allegiance to a mature love for literature.¹⁶ He considers that all emotional, intuitive, hidden life of literary experience has been destroyed by the necro-methodologies of the theorists, who have isolated fiction in abstract theoretical discourses. Antoine Compagnon also fights the “demon of theory” (in his *Le Démon de la théorie. Littérature et sens commun*, 1998¹⁷) which has taken into possession literary

¹³ Another doctoral thesis which scholarly engages this topic is Andreea Mirela Coroian’s “Literary studies under Dispute. Literature after The Death of Literature”, defended at Babes-Bolyai University in September 10, 2021.

¹⁴ David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures. Literary Studies in a Global Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2020, p. 4.

¹⁵ William Marx, *L’Adieu à la littérature : histoire d’une dévalorisation (XVIII^e-XX^e siècle)*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2005 ; see also *La Haine de la littérature*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2015.

¹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *La littérature en péril*, Paris, Flammarion, 2006.

¹⁷ Antoine Compagnon, *Le Démon de la théorie. Littérature et sens commun*, Paris, Seuil, 1998.

studies starting with structuralism and post-structuralism. He also makes a survey of the crisis of literature in the contemporary “epoch of suspicion,” which has engendered the loss of its social legitimacy, more precisely of its objective of contesting and fighting the inhuman ideologies of the century. Against this divorce from society, Compagnon recommends an “ethical turn” towards the retrieval of the moral and social function of literature.

The examples could be multiplied, but I think they are enough for showing that the discourses about the “death of literature” do not point to the concrete disappearance of literary works and of their readers (the contemporary flourishing industry of pop literature would prove just the opposite), but only to the change of common tastes, of literary practices and of promotion strategies. Each of the “crisis” seems to point rather to a specific conception of literature, and not to literature in general, in order to make room for new trends and authors. What is more, the “death” discourse is a fashionable strategy, which imposes the image of a mature responsible literary theorist who does not hesitate to expose the mortal maladies of his or her object of study. The “death of literature” is a success story! So, as in the case of the previous two lethal topics, I would say that “death” is an intentionally albeit irresponsibly inflated metaphor for mere changes in literary modes, practices and styles. The “crises of literature” are growth crises which announce changes of the general paradigm and of public taste, artificially presented as apocalyptic phenomena. Recent researchers, such as Paul Jay and, are already taking a more serene attitude, agreeing that the crises within these “culture wars” are rather a change of paradigm than real “casualties”¹⁸.

“Death of theory”

After the “death of literature” we could go on with the extinction of theory. Paul Feyerabend already cautioned that “Neither science nor rationality are universal measures of excellence. They are particular traditions, unaware of their historical background”¹⁹. That is, rationalism, and the scientific methods based exclusively on it, are not warrant of an objective, unquestionable truth, but are dependent on definite cultural paradigms. More precisely, they are the result of a choice Western civilization made during the Early modernity (Renaissance-Enlightenment period) in identifying

¹⁸ Paul Jay, *The “Crisis” of Humanities and the Future of Literary Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014. See also Sofia Ahlberg, *Teaching Literature in Times of Crisis*, Routledge, London & New York, 2021.

¹⁹ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, Revised edition, Verso, London & New York, 1988, p. 214.

criteria for investigation to the laws of the intellect. Later on, at the beginning of Modernity, Auguste Comte's positivism was the crucial moment when sciences were enslaved to the formal logics of rationalism. However, at a thorough scrutiny, Feyerabend demonstrates, all important innovations in sciences are rather the result of "anarchic" hypotheses, which go against the received, accepted theories and systems. This is why, he insists rather wittily, we should stand "against method" and say a "farewell to reason"²⁰.

In this vein, Terry Eagleton states, in his *After Theory*, that "The golden age of cultural theory has ended"²¹. The immediate references are, of course, at modern formalism, structuralism and post-structuralism, as in the analyses of Galin Tihanov about *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*²². Not only the theory is dead, but also the theorists (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida), *de facto* and metaphorically, as claimed in the volume [*Dead Theory. Derrida, Death, and the Afterlife of Theory*](#) edited by Jeffrey R. Di Leo in 2015²³. Along with literary theory, comparative literature is also in a terminal state. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states about her *Death of a Discipline* that the book should be read as "the last gasp of a dying discipline" and a call for "a new comparative literature"²⁴.

Of course, all these "deaths" are futile if we put them against the broader picture of a global extinction. As Claire Colebrook clarifies, in her *Death of the PostHuman. Essays on Extinction I*, There are three senses of extinction: the now widely discussed sixth great extinction event (which we have begun to imagine and witness, even if in anticipation); extinction by humans of other species (with the endangered species of the 'red list' evidencing our destructive power); and self-extinction, or the capacity for us to destroy what makes us human.²⁵

Is it possible to go still further? I would say Yes. The next logical step is for the killing mechanism to start consuming itself, heading to the death of the death theories. Already in the '90s Jeffrey Williams was intrigued and baffled by the "ominous rumors" of so many deceases, of deconstruction, of method, of

²⁰ Idem, *Farewell to Reason*, Verso, London & New York, 1987.

²¹ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, Penguin Books, 2003.

²² Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory. Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*, Stanford University Press, 2019.

²³ Jeffrey R. Di Leo (ed.), [*Dead Theory. Derrida, Death, and the Afterlife of Theory*](#), Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

²⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003.

²⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman. Essays on Extinction I*, Open Humanities Press, Michigan, 2014, p. 9.

theory²⁶. Two decades later, Chris Haddix concludes that “The death of theory, not unlike the end of history, has, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, been exposed as an embarrassingly premature announcement”²⁷. By now the “death theories” seem to implode, leaving us with corpses such as the “death of post-humanism”.

So, I wonder, is there somebody left alive?

Humanism

Now, remember Herman Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game* (German: *Das Glasperlenspiel*)? Are we not a caste of reclusive intellectuals cloistered in an academic Castalia and playing an abstract game with fashionable pearls called “death of the author”, “crisis of literature”, “death of theory”, post-humanism, transhumanism, etc.? Heeding Theodor Adorno’s “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (“Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch”), we could ask ourselves if our intellectual dealings are not futile in comparison with barbarian wars such the one perpetrated by Vladimir Putin in Ukraine? Maybe we should be more careful in indiscriminately and joyously using terms like death of man, crisis of humanism, anti-humanism, post-humanism, etc.

I want to be as clear as possible: my point is not to diminish or discard any of the just criticisms directed against classical Enlightenment humanism, modern Promethean humanism, or Marxist humanism, and to smuggle back into the cultural milieu, in an oblique way, any of these conceptions of humanity. I fully agree with the necessity of exposing and eliminating all forms of discrimination brought about by the ideal of a European rational white male. I endorse the analyses of feminist, postcolonial and ecocritical studies about the techniques of depreciation of the alterities, at work in the ideological representations of the sexualized, racialized, naturalized or marginalized others. I readily accept the idea that Eurocentrism and Anthropocentrism should get rid of the “centrist” positioning, that is, of the colonial, imperialist, consumerist pretention of the modern “Vitruvian man” of controlling humanity, natural life and planet Earth.

²⁶ Jeffrey Williams, “The Death of Deconstruction, the End of Theory, and Other Ominous Rumors”, in *Narrative*, Vol. 4, No. 1 Ohio State University Press, 1996, pp. 17-35.

²⁷ Chris Haddix, “PEN 2014: The Death and Life of Theory”, in *The Mantle Magazine*, <https://www.themantle.com/philosophy/pen-2014-death-and-life-theory>.

However, I am suspicious about the choice of words in combating specific forms of humanism. As I tried to argue, humanism should be comprehended as a mere domain (i.e. the conception about the human being), and not be identified with one of its historically-construed definitions. The “death of man”, of the author, of literature, of humanism, should be seen, I think (as many thinkers anyhow do), as a change of episteme, as the evolution of a conception, and not as its effective disappearance. Humanism is, in my view, a neutral concept encompassing all its historical avatars, the same, for example, as terms such as society, economy, cosmology, etc. We don’t need to claim the death of society when a major change occurs in a historical social organization; we don’t assert the death of the cosmos when physical discoveries radically modify our vision of the universe.

Why then discard a similar global concept, by stating its death, instead of asking for its redefinition? The problem raised by such a negative approach is that the metaphor of the “death of man” tends to become a catachresis, that is, to be taken literally. Michel Foucault himself, it seems, first used it fortuitously, as a simple metaphor, and it was only the huge public simplifying reception, especially of the French Marxists, who gave it a factual meaning. Although issued by the charitable intention of fighting the failures of classical or modern humanisms, terms like anti-humanism, post-humanism, after-humanism, non-humanism do a counter-service to this very purpose, by suggesting, for the readership at large, an inhuman turn. The terms anti-humanism or post-humanism are effectively oxymora, which, instead of introducing the sense of an inaugural beginning, create the oppressive impression of a catastrophic end. Post-humanism has generous biopolitical objectives, nevertheless uses a necropolitical name.

But should an infelicitous phrase really bother us? Unfortunately, yes, at least for two reasons. On the one hand, such attacks on the domains of literature and humanism from “inside” members, from the very theorists that should fortify the disciplines, give ammunition to “outside” detractors. They become arguments for neoliberal politicians and ideologues who manipulate them in order to declare the futility of the humanities. Symptomatic for this was the 2007 electoral discourse of Nicholas Sarkozy in France, in which he declared the inutility of classical studies and the necessity to redirect the state financing to technological disciplines which form performative workers for today’s successful industries. This proposal raised the vigorous reaction of several intellectuals such as François Rastier, Jean Marie-Schaffer or Yves Citton, who argued for the necessity of further cultivating the “pleasure for knowledge.” To be sure, such a controversy happens in democratic states,

so at least it allows a debate of ideas and opinions. But I confess it is appalling hearing president Putin speaking about “Cancel culture”.

On the other hand, claiming the crisis of humanism and the “death of man”, even with the best intention of imposing a new improved conception, might lead, in the mind of the public at large, not familiar with the subtle debates of the intellectuals, to a debilitation of the concept of humanity. Discouraging terms such as anti-humanism and post-humanism nurture, even involuntarily, the idea that the human being is despicable, and authorize or at least lessen the sentiment of responsibility and guilt towards the inhuman treatment of particular individuals. Read literally and not metaphorically, anti-humanism becomes a form of misanthropy, a modality of self-destruction of “what makes us human”. Blinded by abstract principles about the human race, we risk forgetting and disregarding actual individuals. This happens always when theory, even the best-intended, takes over the needs and desires of actual people for which it is envisioned. We already know, from Dostoyevsky and a very large corpus of utopian texts to different political experiments, that imposing utopias on groups and individuals is immoral, if not criminal. As the police officer in *Crime and Punishment* would put it, theoretical speculation gives permission for crime. President Putin’s concept of imperial “zones of influence”, so closely reminiscent of Hitler’s concept of “vital space”, is such a general principle which allows the murdering of people standing in its way. I really fear the prospect of President Putin engaging with the idea of “the death of man”. No ideology or “ideal” should give consent and authorization for afflicting and killing individuals.

This is why, in my opinion, we should retrieve the simple concept of humanism, beyond all its specific historical definitions and ideological constructs, and not combat it with negative terms such as anti-humanism. We should rather focus on the positive attitude, that is, to brace humanity’s responsibilities towards all its members and towards the natural planetary system. Instead of waging “cultural wars” about Humanism in the abstract, we should be more concerned about the rights of each individual, about people suffering wherever and whenever it happens. Ideologically-constructed ethics, as grand narratives about humanity, should give way to a “humanism” *tout court* (not new-, not after-, not non-humanism), beyond any political ideals and ideologies, predicated on the imperative of caring about actual individuals in pain.

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