

Provocative and ironic, Costica Bradatan's endeavour is remarkably singular in the context of contemporary philosophical writings. The singularity plays out at all levels: the choice of the topic, the type of argumentation, the structure of the discourse, style and language.

In a context that does not privilege reflections on death as part of the human condition, unless to take position for or against its equivalence to murder (abortion, euthanasia, death penalty), Costica Bradatan places it at the center of philosophical speculation, and at the core of the philosopher's life. His *dramatic narrative of the philosopher's clash with death* (39) is two-layered: (1) when the philosopher is *not yet within death's shadow* and has a serene go at it as a topic, illustrated with Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* (1580), Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927), and Paul-Louis Landsberg's *Essai sur l'expérience de la mort* (1936); (2) when death moves from the *abstract and immaterial* to the philosopher's body and it is experienced as a consequence of one's thought, exemplified by Socrates, Hypathia, Thomas More, Giordano Bruno and Jan Patočka. These divisions of the discourse include a transversal meditation on the essence and role of philosophy.

The first step in approaching death is Montaigne's lesson, summarized as an attempt to domesticate it, *taking it by surprise, facing it head-on*, in a process that implies its personification: "If it [death] knocks on your door, do the unexpected: let it in. If it tries to scare you, don't run away, smile back, embrace it. Should it grin at you, show it boundless courtesy. Since death is not used to such fine manners, this will certainly put it off-balance" (43). After a survey of Heidegger's ideas on death in *Being and Time*, the author experiments reading *Being-toward-death* through Leo Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Illyich*, concluding that the writer is a better phenomenologist than the philosopher (pp.52-67). The cross-reading procedure continues with an analysis of Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* (1957) through Paul-Louis Landsberg's ideas on death in *Essai sur l'expérience de la mort* (pp. 76-84), as part of the larger discourse on the difference between facing death with faith or without, continued in the Chapter *Philosophy in the Flesh* with the case of Simone Weil. Introducing Landsberg to the reader, Bradatan offers a critique to Heidegger's ideas on death and operates a significant historical recovery, worth detailing. Ignored by academic philosophy today, Landsberg, a German Jew, was a student of Husserl and Heidegger and a disciple of Max Scheler, who ended his life in the Oranienburg concentration camp in 1944 (p. 67). Landsberg's essay considers death as *a biological fact, a social phenomenon, a highly personal experience* and finally an event that *brings us nearer to God*. Viewed as a response to Heidegger's philosophising, Landsberg's point is that the human person *is not, in its essence, an existence towards death* (p.70), but needs to attempt a spiritual appropriation of death, a transformative experience aimed at *dying into freedom* or as Bradatan reinterprets it: "The whole point is to see death not as an end, but a stage on our way to

self-realization” (71). Landsberg counteracts Heidegger both in the understanding of death and of metaphysics, hinting at the old distinction between *thanatos* and *eros*. Thus metaphysics “does not have its origin in the nothingness revealed by Angst, but in the being into which the philosophical Eros partakes by its very nature” (p. 71), and death assumes a new meaning in Christianity, which turns it into *a gateway to life eternal* (72). Landsberg’s attention to the Christian mystics’ way of dealing with death leads him to think that “the true love of death cannot be but a form of the love of God,” or as the author inspiredly concludes, *mystics don’t die, they just wake up.* (p.74)

The third chapter, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, is propaedeutic for the discussion of the martyr philosophers named above. Setting out from the postulate of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) that “the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment” (p. 86), the author explains that the philosophers who die for their ideas, in order to be successful “have to transcend their embodiment. Their bodies are now not something to live with, but something to overcome, re-signify and destroy in the process”(p. 87). Indeed the philosophers who embody their ideas and put their lives in danger for them, can make their thought efficient only by sacrificing their body, by accepting their biological death only to make their ideas live. As the second part of the book proves, each of the characters under focus could have negotiated their survival, but they refused to do so, preferring to give a dignified coherence to their lives.

Why do philosophers, whose lives are not commonly dangerous, come to the point of dying for their ideas? Here the author takes a philosophical, a sociological and an anthropological stance. The first answer would be that they practice the *parrêsía* (speaking out, telling the truth) Foucault addressed in his Berkeley lectures in 1983. However, contrary to Foucault, Costica Bradatan does not think that telling the truth is a form of power, but a way of alienating philosophers from society, of making them unpopular, strangers, perfectly liable to becoming sacrificial victims. Putting to good use R. Girard’s ideas in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *The Scapegoat* (1989), the book explains how these philosophers are sacrificed *in times of profound crisis* (p.187), due to their vulnerability and their stubbornness, “only when a certain connection can be established between the event of their annihilation and a renewed sense of social peace” (p.177). Acting as a vent for social anxiety, sacrificial victims re-establish group cohesion and hope. The consequence of such accepted murders is the sacralisation of the victim, so the philosopher’s death becomes a ritual of sacrifice with a foundational value. Applied to the philosophers under discussion it explains how and why they entered collective memory as myths, in spite of the fact that two of them, Socrates and Hypathia, have left no written works behind to prove their thought.

A central concept at stake in this book is performance. The martyr philosophers' life is a double performance: first, as enactment of their ideas, a rare conjunction of words and deeds, and second, through their death as a witnessed public event, a show. Their examples serve the discourse on death, as well as Bradatan's understanding of philosophy:

To philosophize, let me say again, is to act upon yourself, to embark on a journey of self-creation. The philosopher looks at the self as a project upon whose successful completion he or she will have been realized. What martyr-philosophers do is take this process of individuation to the limit. They practice self-fashioning in the most unlikely of places: on the verge of the abyss. And this is what renders their project unique. (p. 167)

In the footsteps of Pierre Hadot (20-26), the author contrasts understanding philosophy as a mere academic exercise, a job you leave at the office at the end of the day, to valuing it as an art of living and consequently an art of dying. Yet, if Hadot pointed to the classical antiquity to restore that sense of philosophy, Bradatan anchors his argumentation in early modernity, specifically in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's new anthropology put forward in the *Oratio* (1486). Assuming that the first human was not given a fixed nature, but was endowed with many possibilities that could be actuated according to his will, Giovanni Pico proposed the self as a work in progress, an enterprise of self-fashioning as S. Greenblatt would understand it in recent times. Philosophy as an art of self-fashioning gives meaning to one's life and implicitly to one's death. The latter ceases to be perceived as a scandal and an absurdity, being incorporated in the wholeness of one's being as valuable, precisely because it potentiates life understood as biological duration, as survival in the collective memory, or in another dimension for those who believe in immortality.

Costica Bradatan's method of argumentation deserves mention: he makes associations across cultures and disciplines putting in place a system of mirroring that is not common in philosophical discourses still indebted either to the analytical method or the hermeneutics of Heideggerian inspiration. For example he places in dialogue Montaigne's ideas on getting familiar with death, the Egyptian practice of bringing a mummified corpse in the middle of a banquet, mentioned by Montaigne himself in his *Essays*, and Edvard Munch's *Death and the Woman* (1894) and *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm* (1895). Yet the author does not stop in front of his astute mirroring devices, but goes through the looking-glass to the other side of each argument. For example, Socrates' celebrated statement that an unexamined life is not worth living, completes as *but the examined life can be unlivable*, with the discussion of *the high price that comes with such knowledge* (29). This way of looking at things pertains to the traditional literature of wisdom, where contraries are the

sides of the same coin, illuminating each other, the yin and yang that cannot be approached separately but only as the two halves of wholeness.

Another move worth mentioning is the re-alignment of philosophy with religion and literature, two old-time companions of the manifestations of the *logos*. Religion is invoked in addressing death, in considering the philosopher's decision to live his or her ideas as a *conversion* and in defining the philosopher's life sacrifice as *martyrdom*. Literature breathes through the organisation of the discourse and style. Divided into an Introduction, five Chapters and a Postscript the dissertation is structured midway between a novel and a drama. Each chapter is subdivided into smaller arguments, treated concisely under gripping titles like: *The business of dying*, *The art of hunger*, *Death hides between the lines*, *The "inconsolation" of philosophy*, *The fine art of gallows humor* and others. The discourse is punctuated by *Intermezzos*, where the author puts on various masks and invites the reader to play with concepts, undo and relativize them, a theatrical invention that complicates the perspective game, and adds irony and self-irony to a discipline famous for taking itself very seriously. Here is an example of Intermezzo, referred to Plato's *outstanding rendition of his master's ending*, subtitled *where Socrates is murdered by his disciple Plato*:

His craft is impeccable, his vision inspiring, the execution exquisite. Plato is almost too good at depicting Socrates' death. How could someone, who was supposed to be devastated by that very death, portray it so flawlessly? How can this be a mourner's work? Unless Plato executed Socrates' death so well because he had a hand in it. The sheer beauty of his portrait is indirect admission of guilt. Guilt made visible, guilt transfigured. Plato's deed is brilliant, an almost perfect crime. He certainly managed to get rid of the body. (p. 172)

A philosophy book on death is not expected to be entertaining, and yet this one is. Bradatan is a gifted narrator, who personifies his concepts and makes them reader-friendly, in a perfectly accessible style, which gives lightness to the heavy topic of death and murdering philosophers. A robust sense of humour pervades the discourse from the beginning to the Postscript tellingly entitled: *To die laughing*.

Every so often philosophy departs from its humanistic call to plunge into technicalities and abstractions, it becomes a strictly academic occupation, voiced in a parlance accessible only to an exiguous number of professionals, mere *virtuosismo*. Sealed with a laugh, *Dying for Ideas* makes an additional powerful statement about philosophy as *therapeia*, offering an antidote not just to death anxiety and but to its own alienation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Gabriela Dragnea Horvath, PhD, has published essays, book reviews, translations of poetry and short stories in magazines and anthologies in Italy, Romania, USA, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Switzerland. She also authored a monograph in Italian, *Shakespeare ermetismo, mistica, magia* (Rome, 2003); has co-authored a book of fiction in Romanian (*Preludi epici Epic Preludes*, Bucharest, 1990), has co-translated with Stuart Frieber and Adriana Varga the volume *Hands Behind My Back*, by Marin Sorescu (Oberlin Translation Series, 1991) prefaced by Seamus Heaney. In 2017 her study *Theatre, Magic and Philosophy: William Shakespeare, John Dee and the Italian legacy* was published by Routledge. She teaches for the Liberal Studies Program at NYU Florence.