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# ON THE RECONCILING FUNCTION OF ART О ПРИМИРЯЮЩЕЙ ФУНКЦИИ ИСКУССТВА

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Ecclesiastes 7

#### **Abstract:**

The paper is based on the book Death. From Dust to Destiny by Richard Brilliant that treats one of the most mysterious and philosophical aspects of our existence, or rather its termination, and the way to reconcile with it. After the first traumatizing losses in his life, the author begins to concentrate first on the funeral itself and the components of a formal ceremony in order to distance himself from the family tragedies, and later studying and analyzing "the survivors' behavior that followed, the perception of death and varied experiences of loss, which are subjected to ritual." The universality of death's occurrence in human existence, despite our reluctance to accept its apparent finality, demonstrates its central importance for human consciousness. That sensibility manifests itself in various cultural practices, responding to the fact of death and to the unknown consequences following the termination of life. And here we introduce one more important function of art, to which the author resorts - demonstration of life in all its manifestations and, by showing a wide spectrum of its recurrent possibilities, the way to reconcile us with its imperfections, losses and final termination. Reproductions of famous works of art (135 illustrations, 75 in colour) and pictures of sepulchral monuments accompany the author's meditations and reasonings about the final fate of man and its implications for the living. They are supported by quotations from religious books, works by philosophers and poets.

Keywords: art and its functions, death, loss, soul, self, reconciliation

#### 1) Introduction

Art is the expression, or application of human creative skill and imagination. As art has existed since prehistoric times and has been the earliest form of human self-expression, theories about its purpose and function are reflected in numerous works of philosophers and thinkers. Plato [23] viewed art as imitation, as a copy of a copy of a Form. Aristotle [1] defines art as representation, the realization of a true idea in a physical form. Kant [19, 20] treated art as disinterested judgment, Tolstoy [28] -- as communication of emotion. Nietzsche [22] described art as the highest form of self-expression. To name just a few of the most famous. The main purposes of art are religious, aesthetic, expressive and communicative.

### 2) Literature review

For thousands of years people have been practicing arts for self-expression, healing and communication. However, art therapy came into practice only in the XX century, when psychiatrists and therapists began to notice that people with mental illnesses frequently enunciated themselves through drawings and other artworks, and the positive effects of artistic expression on patients. Through drawing and painting, patients depicted feelings, fears, and anxieties which they could not verbalize. Their works of art provided doctors a deeper understanding of their mental states.

The use of art in therapy is based on various psychological theories and principles that help understand how and why art therapy works. Sigmund Freud [8, 9], the father of psychoanalysis, first developed the theory of the unconscious mind as a repository of memories, thoughts and feelings, which are beyond our conscious awareness, but nevertheless influence our behavior. According to Freud, we can access the unconscious mind through associations, dreams, and artistic expression. Creation of artworks can serve as a means of exploring and expressing the unconscious contents for therapeutic purposes. Carl Jung [16, 17, 18], who was Freud's student and later critic, discovered that all people share collective unconscious with common archetypes, which he defined as universal, archaic images and symbols. These archetypes are revealed in myths, dreams and works of art. Thus, art therapy, allows patients and physicians to explore these universal symbols and their connection with inner worlds of the patients [29].

In cognitive-behavioral therapy [2] negative patterns of thinking and behavior are identified and changed through art therapy, which helps patients to recognize and change destructive thoughts through the creative process. Other theorists [3, 11] highlight self-actualization as the highest goal of human development, achieved through creative expression. As the prosses of creation activates different parts of the brain, including those which are responsible for emotions, cognition, and motor functions, art therapy can help strengthen neural connections and improve overall mental health. Through the creative process, individuals can release repressed emotions, reduce stress, and improve their mental health. Overall, art therapy allows patients and physicians to explore and understand inner worlds in a way that is unique to each person.

Art therapy over time left the confines of psychiatric hospitals and rehabilitation centers. It is used in working with children and adolescents to help them cope with emotional and social challenges, and in supporting people in crisis situations, such as natural disasters, wars, or social unrest. Various uses of art therapy have been described by numerous psychiatrists, physicians and scholars [2, 12].

One of the key aspects of art therapy is the ability to enable individuals to express deeply rooted emotions, which they have difficulty to verbalize sometimes due to traumatic experiences. In other cases it may be due to social stigmas, or simply a lack of words. In these cases art provides an alternative way of expression through music, colors, shapes, and drawings. "Art therapy can help people express themselves more freely, improve their mental health, and interpersonal relationships by uses integrative techniques that activate the work of soul, body and mind in ways that verbal expression alone cannot [2]."

Alain de Botton, a contemporary British author and public speaker, has further elaborated on the role of art in human life. He identified the 7 functions of art as: to help us remember what matters, lend us hope, dignify sorrow, expand our horizons, help us to understand ourselves, rebalance us, and make us appreciate the familiar anew. In the book *Art as Therapy* [4], he argues that art is a tool that can variously help to inspire, console, redeem, guide, comfort, expand and reawaken us. Works of art function as implicit role-models that can invite us to become a bit more as they are – and therefore help us to become better versions of ourselves. He argues, that religions have always known this: in Buddhism, part of becoming a good follower of the Buddha involves regularly looking at a smiling statue or image of the face of the Buddha. The same might hold true for Christians, in relation to an image of the Virgin.

## 3) Materials and methods

Hence, art may be viewed as a two-edged tool, capable of healing and benefiting us both when we create art works, and when we interact with them. The example of the latter is the book Death. From Dust to Destiny by Richard Brilliant [5] in which the author treats one of the most mysterious and philosophical aspects of our existence, or rather its termination, and the way to reconcile with it. After the first traumatizing losses in his life – the death of a contemporary relative, a fifteen year old cousin, killed during military manoeuvres, and the death of a grandfather, the author of the book started to seek reconciliation with the phenomenon of death, try to get awareness of its place in human life, realization of its inevitability, as well as inevitability of losses during the course of one's life. In order to distance himself from family tragedies, he first began to concentrate on the funeral itself, and the components of a formal ceremony, and later studied and analyzed "the survivors' behavior that followed, the perception of death and varied experiences of loss, which are subjected to ritual [5, p. 7]." Meditation over the thought "how the dead could be peacefully or otherwise, once buried [5, p. 9]," which he could never figure out, resolved in the book about death and its effect on the living, which the author himself needed in order to come to terms with his life tragedies.



#### Arnold Bocklin, Island of the Dead.

Though a wise reminder "memento mori" is well known, what "mors" implies remains a mystery. Questions how a living being can become an "I" in existence, how, then, a physical death leads to a state of "not I" or "no longer I" and where "I" goes, become central of the author's quest. The nature of absence and its seeming finality reveal fundamental attitudes about the quality and character of being in this world and the mournful evanescence of a former living presence.

#### 4) Discussion

Brilliant studied grave inscriptions and sepulchral monuments, steles, sarcophagus of Egypt, Tunisia, Asia Minor, Israel, Europe, obituaries that track lives to comprehend "the relation that most deeply and universally determines the consciousness of our existence -- that

of life to death; for the limitation of our existence through death is always decisive for our understanding and our estimation of life [5, p. 33]." The purpose of all those monuments is to remind, and hence restore, a thought to life. Lest we forget..., as well as the necessity to focus the thoughts of a group upon some past person or event, thus affirming the unity of a group by common memories [5, p. 24].

The universality of death's occurrence in human existence, despite our reluctance to accept its apparent finality, indicates to its central importance for human consciousness. That sensibility manifests itself in various cultural practices, responding to the fact of death and to the unknown consequences following the termination of life.



From the Egyptian Book of the Dead

And the method to which the author resorts enables us to another identify important function of art - demonstration of life in all its manifestations and, by showing a wide spectrum of its recurrent possibilities, the way to reconcile us with its imperfections, losses and final termination. Reproductions of famous works of art (135 illustrations, 75 in colour) and sepulchral pictures of monuments accompany meditations author's and reasonings about the final fate of man and its implications for the

living.<sup>2</sup> They are supported by quotations from sacred books of all religions, works by philosophers and poets. As Brilliant writes in the *Introduction* [5, p. 12], "in these combinations of texts and visual images the nature of death and the memory of the once living are revealed."



Michelangelo, Pieta, La Madonna della Pieta

The author writes with deep sympathy and understanding about the premature deaths of children, symbolizing killing the future, otherwise embodied in these children, and accompanies his narrative with illustrations of famous works of art depicting grief and profound despair of the parents.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Most of the illustrations used in the present paper were selected by me, so as not to repeat the artwork used by Richard Brilliant, but to emphasize the method he used.



He shares deep sorrow of the elderly, which is hard to bear because there are so many in one's age group dying, "so many life stories coming to an and, such shrinkage in one's age category [5, p.72]".

Francisco Goya, Self-portrait with Dr. Arrieta, 1820,

He gives a retrospective view of historical deaths from Hector, the Trojan hero, to the crucifixion of Crist.



Priam Returning to his Family the Dead Body of Hector.



Bartolome Esteban Murillo, The Crucifixion.

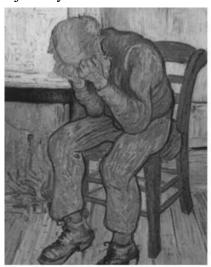


Marble statue of Gaul chieftain committing suicide alongside his wife.

The victims of Holocaust and massive slaughter in World Wars and other military actions, victims of genocide and political oppressions all pass before a sympathetic eye of the author as a single tragic moving picture of untimely, cruelly, needlessly terminated lives, leaving terrible scars on the survivors.

Another tragic termination of life is a suicide, when death is self-inflicted, self-imposed as an act of will, or as an expression of tired self-indulgence. Brilliant views it as a fundamental exercise of one's personal freedom to act on one's own behalf to end life in this world despite the adversarial claims of others, of society, the law and the formal

prohibitions against suicide established by religious belief about the sanctity of human life. Acceptance of the idea of one's own mortality is equally hard, no matter whether death is premature or comes too late after a long, suffering illness. "We ask not for whom the bell tolls so long as it is not for us; for us it comes too soon! We are rarely ready and are greedy for life, even if we have not used our time well [5, p. 97]." One way to be reconciled with our own death, as the author suggests, is to accept its certainty with equanimity, because we have no choice in the matter. As Simonides of Ceos (c.556-468 BC) wrote: "We are all debts owed to death." However presumptive that eventual arrival may be, even if faced philosophically as inevitable and with disciplined calm, it is fundamentally an interruptive termination of life for which the pretense of fearlessness in the face of death seems inadequate, because death begins a journey into the unknowable.



Though "death is universal and completely democratic; as it happens to us all [5, p. 50] it is so hard for the remaining to accept the loss of the beloved ones as well as to accept our uncertainty about what will happen after we perish. Recognition of someone's death requires getting awareness of the change in state from life to death and coming to terms with the moral trauma and the pain of wanting the once living to be as they were and the longing for physical and emotional relationships that can never continue.

# Sorrowing Old Man (At Elternity's Gate) by Vincent Van Gogh.

Nevertheless, as Jacque Derrida argues [7], because of the memory of the departed, the memory image undergoes an active interiorization. As a result, the departed never fully become absent, remaining so within the survivor, or incorporated into the other self, that the affective bonds of friendship never break. integrative force of affection and memory powerfully bind together the living and dead in an ongoing relationship. The suffering inflicted on somebody by the death of another



Death in the Sickroom by Edvard Munch.

who is or was close has fewer limits of time that might lessen the feeling of loss. These feelings are often difficult to express to oneself, as well as to others. The periodization of stages of mourning developed by some religions (the day, the week, the month, the year) lead eventually to the lessening of active grief and to the conflation of mourning and commemoration. Brilliant reproduces the ancient Roman grave inscription *non fui, fui, non sum, non curo* (I was not, I was, I am not, I don't care). In grave inscriptions there is "a conceived expectation that the living visitor and the dead can meet and establish more than a one-way exchange. The desire to speak with the dead, and for the dead to speak to the living, seems to respond to the felt desire to collapse time, to open the gates to the past, a past once shared [5, p. 48]."



However, reconciliation with the death of the beloved ones is never an easy task. The author recalls the myths in which heroes descended into the Underworld and came back. succeeded or returning their beloved ones from Hades. They reveal not only the profound resent of people to acknowledge the finality of death, but also an feeling intuitive of connection between the two worlds.

#### Marie H. Sirois, Orpheus and Eurydice.

Brilliant argues, that for Christians the resurrection of Christ was an event indicating to a possibility of post-mortem salvation after physical death. However, he acknowledges that this belief has persisted throughout the human history that with divine intervention there is always hope. He mentions stories about those on the verge of death, who were saved from that death by divine intervention, myths about returning from Underworld, which suggest access to and exit from the underworld, even if only temporary with the exception of those who were granted divinity. This inability to reconcile with death has provoked many attempts, scientific as well as otherwise, to bring the dead back to life.

And yet, death is a terminal event: "anticipated or not, happily expected or



deeply feared, the likely boundary between an altered state of being or no being at all, a point of departure when all future is past or when there is no subsequent future at all, when life's adventurous journey enters into a final unknown. The boundary between the "before" and the "after" seems to resemble a fateful hinge, connecting the "here" and the "there", existing as a momentary pause on the verge of death [5, p. 134." The author speaks about sepulchral symbolism that has often exploited the motif of the door, closed or left ajar, as a means of expressing an attitude about the relative finality of death, the tenacious grasp of Hades or the potential escape through divine intervention. He finds a support for his argument in Psalm 9:13 which suggests that deliverance from "the gates of death" rests in the Lord's hands.

O you who lift me up from the gates of death, that I may recount all your praises, that in the gates of the daughter of Zion I may rejoice in your salvation.

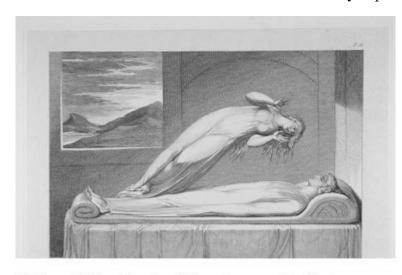
A reluctance to terminate what is known – life – and fear of the unknown – death – together with a failure to accept the reality of mortality as an intrinsic feature of the human condition, have contributed to an unrealistic attitude about the limitations of mortality, "as if life were a fictional novel to which further chapter may be added at will [5, p.162]."

Meditating over afterlife the author quotes David Hume [14, p.160]: When I shall be dead, the principles of which I am composed will still perform their part in the universe, and will be equally useful in the grand fabric, as when they composed this individual creature. The difference to the whole will be no greater than between my being in a chamber and in the open air. The one change is of importance to me than the other; but not more so to the universe.

The scientific concept of the conservation of matter is treated as plausible, according to which the molecular entities that first came together to compose a person as a living body, and led to the creation of the "I" that came to be, survive after death. Similarly, following one's physical death, those same elements would preserve in some amorphous form, possibly waiting for reintegration in another "I", not exactly the same as the original. Brilliant argues, that if this process does in fact occur, then the cycle of renewable being and its potentially everlasting character is very close to Buddhist belief in the cycle of reincarnation. If so, the state of "I" could never be more than a transitory phase in existence, because such a being, always becoming, would be perennial.

These questions are treated as relevant for the assessment of the human condition and development of self-knowledge, for they reflect common concerns: where have I come from? and where will I be going? But if so, he assumes that the journey of life seems to lack any adequate or ascertainable definition, even as a pilgrimage to some desirable end.

What remains after physical death of a body is the spirit of self that the author treats as elements, circulating in the cosmos, which were assembled at birth and lived until death. But what becomes with I? He cites Hermetica [10] that treats death not as the destruction of things that have been combined, but as the dissolution of their union. Hence, "death" is understood as a definitive event that marks the termination of life, just as "birth" marks its beginning. Between "birth" and "death" lies the continuum of life, bounded by one's material emergence from the cosmos to an inevitable, inchoate return. Hence, he makes a distinction between the "who" and the "what" that dies. In this case they represent interrelated but not identical



William Blake, The Soul Hovering over the Body.

entities. But how does "I" continue to live on the Earth? The author quotes one of the obituaries "A man is not dead while his name is still spoken [5, p. 98]." To keep the passed away always alive memories are important.

At the end of the book Brilliant raises the most undecided question: "After all, we die, and then?" We do not know whether death destroys us, or sets us free. As Seneca [27] argued in letter to Lucilius, "If we are released, the better part of us remains having lost its

border; if we are destructed, nothing remains and good and evil alike are removed."

This defense against the extinction of the other, and eventually of oneself, consciously, or not reveals faith that there is more to a human being than flesh and bone. It is "soul" or "spirit", the entity that lies within all of us and survives death. Though it has no definable physical substance and is not accessible to scientific proof, yet, belief in its existence has long been held as the essence of one's being. Nevertheless, Brilliant shares the skepticism of Pliny the Elder [24] who wrote:

All men are in the same state from their last day forward as they were before their first day, and neither body, nor mind has any more sensation after death than it had before birth. But wishful thinking prolongs itself into the future and falsely invents for itself a life that continues beyond death, sometimes by giving the soul immortality or a change of shape, sometimes by according feeling to those below, worshipping spirits and deifying one who has already ceased to be even a man (from "Natural History, VII, 188)

Meditation about what remains after death, other than "dry bones and fading reputations," brings the author to conclusion that it is memories and hope in the continuity of communal and natural life. "The continuation of the natural world for those who follow is an assumption that the environment will remain hospitable to their future existence in this world, if not in another. Memory of the deceased can extend an afterlife long after death, but only as a historical character alive in the past, existing through a subsequent intermediaries [5, pp. 185-190]."

The last part of the book is also a quiet conversation with other thinkers who have left us their vision of our fate after death. As Maximus of Tyre [21] argues, "if the soul is an entity of the same kind as the body, a mortal element that disintegrates and perishes and rots. ... If that is the soul's nature, then knowledge, recollection, and learning are all equally impossible for it; it could not more retain a piece of knowledge, than wax melting in the sun retains the imprint of a seal, if it is really only a physical entity."

Brilliant's argument is that the Afterlife, of course, is not so much an obvious untruth as a truthful untruth. It evokes our fear and longings. However, the afterlife of an individual person can be tied to the broader concept of a collective afterlife, as defined by the philosopher Samuel Scheffler [26]. The collective afterlife" posits the survival of the generations of human beings who follow, and on whose future existence of the present living depend [5, p. 191]."

The spirit of the mortals is strengthened by religion in assuring of miraculous process of resurrection of the dead, responding to the trumpet call of the heavenly angels. Brilliant quotes Ezekiel (37), who gives the word of the Lord addressed to Dry Bones: "Behold, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live." Sacred writings comforted humans by assuring that man, protected by the mantle of Divine Providence, is not limited by the material world [5, p. 182]. Men, in his turn, created beliefs and ceremonies to assure continuation of life after death by elaborating rituals to commemorate the dead.

At the end of the book Richard Brilliant quotes a hopeful, self-serving blessing from Jerusalem Talmud (XI, sec. 3, 13d, 1, 53) to be said on entering a cemetery:

... He who formed you in justice, sustained you in justice, and took you away in justice, will thereafter quicken you in justice. He who knows your number will remove the dust from your eyes. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who quickenest the dead.

#### 5) Conclusion

Though the book by Richard Brilliant *Death. From Dust to Destiny* is just a drop in the ocean of books by theologians and philosophers on the meaning of human life, its purpose and destination, the essence of "I" and "self" and relation between life and afterlife, it is unique in its attempt to demonstrate the purpose of humanitarian sciences – theology and philosophy, as well as literature and art to reconcile us, each in their own way, with adversities of life, its hardships, ups and downs and final extinction by showing us the recurrent character of all possible events. There is nothing new under the Sun. Though it does not make any individual tragedy or harsh condition any easier, it makes them somehow more bearable when one sees and reads about the same trials repeating with people of all standings throughout the human history, starting with mythological characters, serving archetypes for all life possibilities. Knowing that you are not the only one, or the first one, that many others have passed through the same losses and ordeals, makes one stronger and more resistible to the adversities of life. In this respect art and literature play a unique role by showing the idealized images of the sufferers and in this way elevating human sufferings above the level of just a physical pain, reflecting the turmoil of souls and at the same time giving consolation.

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