



The posthumous condition of gossip: Death and its reputational benediction

Mihai Stelian Rusu¹

Abstract

Gossiping is ubiquitous in social life. In every imaginable corner of society, people from all walks of life are gossiping their living acquaintances. But what happens when the “third party,” i.e., the subject of gossip, is absent par excellence, not only temporarily and spatially, but definitively? Do people continue to gossip their dead acquaintances? What is the fate of gossip after its target dies? These are the questions this paper sets out to address. In doing so, it develops a non-reductionist sequential model of death as a social process in which biological death is only the starting point of the bio-social phenomenon of dying. Building on some classic anthropological theories and concepts taken from Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, the paper examines the post-mortem status of gossip in terms of the unfolding sequence of the funeral ritual in a particular Romanian cultural context. It argues that during the liminal phase covering the deathwatch and the burial, a transient “gossiplless communitas” emerges around the dead one governed by the taboo against gossiping. If the dead is afterward spared from post-mortem gossip, this is due mainly to the impracticality of gossip. The paper ends by arguing that death, despite the emotional distress caused to the surviving family, brings about a reputational bless for the deceased. It does so since, under the normative jurisdiction of the saying “De mortuis nihil nisi bonum” (Of the dead, nothing unless good), the memory of the deceased is being posthumously dignified.

Keywords

Anthropology of gossip, death and dying, death studies, funeral rites of passage, memorial afterlife, reputation management

¹ Department of Sociology, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania, mihai.rusu@ulbsibiu.ro

Gossips we live by: The ubiquity of gossiping in everyday social life

A stream of intriguing studies coming from all across social sciences has flashed out the ubiquitous nature of gossip in human affairs (Dunbar, 1996; McAndrew, 2008; Feinberg et al, 2012). Hardly can one think of a social situation foreign to gossip, which seems to creep into every conceivable nook of human society. Everyday life is surely fraught with gossip, bursting with discussions centered on various absent parties. Gossip flourishes not only in friendly environments such as the family, kinship, work groups and friendships but thrives in the most hostile and austere of milieus humans had ever established. Such were the desert wilderness of the anachorites of the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., whose highly abstract and atomistic “society” was nonetheless pervaded by gossip carried around by visitors, which turned out to be instrumental in ranking the hermits in terms of their ascetic prestige (Gleason, 1998). Here as elsewhere, in the bleakness of the desert as in the buzzing hive of social life, gossiping the “absent other” functioned as an efficient device of reputation management and prestige stratification.

Gossip also broke into what was arguably the most ambitious human attempt to create a gossipless society, the Cluniac monastic experiment. Founded in 910 in Burgundy, the abbey of Cluny had developed an “ascetic program of angelic mimesis,” singular in the entire Christian monastic tradition (Bruce, 2009, p. 12). The brethren of Cluny distinguished itself in the monastic landscape of Western Christendom through the unprecedented degree to which its monks were at pains to imitate the life of the angels. To this purpose, “the monks of Cluny articulated a new ideology of Christian asceticism that married the glorification of silence to the ideal of an angelic life realized in mortal bodies” (p. 3). A crucial part of this ascetic ideology was the invention of a “silent language” consisting of 118 signs, specifically designed to keep communication to a minimum and to root out the possibility of gossip. However, despite the radical measures took to suppress humans from gossiping, by depriving them of the very linguistic tools of verbal communication, this program of oral asceticism utterly failed. Sermons preached in the abbey, that have been written down and thus survived to our day, reveal that monks continued to gossip *through* the silence language designed specifically to prevent gossip. Dispossessed of their words, Cluniacs were using the sign language and their hands “to tell vain and curious things to their fellows.” Even when explicitly forbidden to communicate through manual signs, disobedient monks were able to find ingenious ways to continue gossiping their fellow brethren. In a sermon, the abbot scolds those monks who, “no longer daring to employ any other means [oral utterances and manual signs], they would converse together with their toes, thus communicating to their brothers the battles of kings and the deeds of warriors and almost all the news and tidings of this world” (p. 168).

What these extreme examples ranging from the wilderness of the desert to the austerity of the monastery show is that sociality, in every conceivable form and shape, is prone to the allure of gossiping. A modicum of sociality, however minimal, is sufficient for gossip to sprout out. It can safely be assumed that a form of gossip will take root everywhere two parties enjoy a moment of intimacy against an absent third. Defining

gossip can be a real challenge since the term passes in many different guises both in the literature as well as in the popular understanding of it. Its meaning ranges from the loosest of definitions – such as any kind of idle talk, negative, neutral, or positive, on a third person, present or absent, dead or alive – to the most restrict, where gossip is thought of comprising only negative evaluative discussion on a living absent other. I will not be satisfied, as judge Potter Stewart was in the case of pornography, which he famously defined in the lack of a better definition as “I know it when I see it,” in defining gossip by assuring the readers that “I know it when I hear it.” For the purpose of this study, I shall take the conventional stance and define the gossip act as the social practice comprising a negative moral evaluation *in absentia* of a third party (Rusu, 2015, p. 307).

The role of the “absent other” suits everybody, as no one is spared from becoming the target of gossiping. But just as true is the general principle that no one is spared from death. If it makes sense to talk of a *thanatic democracy* guaranteed by the ultimate equality in death of the “proud and humble, rich and poor, good and bad” (Aiken, 2001, p. 168), it is also legitimate to talk of a democratic regime of gossiping, in which everyone, irrespective of his or her wealth, status, gender, age, etc. is prone to become the target of gossip. However, this democratic principle of death and gossip needs to be significantly nuanced. Scholars working in death studies and the sociology of death and dying have questioned the idea of a democracy of death by revealing a “social stratification of death” that persists beyond the last breath has been squeezed out of the lungs and life has all but left the breathless body. “We are stratified in death as we are in life,” point out sociologists (Kearl, 1989, p. 52), revealing the structural inequality of life prolonging into the realm of death. Through their patterns of location and segregation within the necropolis space, the depth to which corpses are buried and the material memorialization through which the dead are posthumously remembered, cemeteries immortalize social inequalities that structure the parallel, living society. Not only that “some deaths are better than others,” as Michael C. Kearl (1989, p. 120) has poignantly put it, but even more dramatically, *some deaths come earlier than others*. Life expectancy and mortality are greatly influenced by socioeconomic status, making death as unequal as life itself. In the face of this compelling evidence, the thesis of the fundamental democracy of death can survive refutation only if revised into an ultimate and absolute statement. Indeed, ultimately, everyone is equal in the face of the inevitability of death. However, in all other matters, paraphrasing George Orwell’s “unequal equality” thesis, some are more equal in death than others.

A similar argument can be made regarding gossip. Theoretically, everyone is a potential target of being talked behind his or her back. Empirically, however, research examining the patterns of gossip has revealed that gossip is factored by social status in two different ways. First, in line with the premises of “social competence theory” (Rose-Krasnor, 1997), people occupying the higher statuses outperform their low-status peers in terms of their communication skills. As a powerful communication skill with major functions in reputation management and prestige ranking, gossip is thus better put to work by those who are positioned in the higher echelons of social stratification. People excelling in gossip competence manage not only to secure their privileged positions, but

also to use gossip to climb through the social ranks (McDonald et al, 2007, p. 396). On the other hand, in line with “social comparison theory” (Suls and Martin, 2002; Wert and Salovey, 2004), people tend to resort to upward comparisons, which means that they will be inclined to gossip more their high-status peers and to be rather uninterested in the affairs of their low-status fellows (McAndrew et al, 2007, p. 1574). The reason for this upward gossip is as straightforward as it is self-interested: since gossip is a soft skill with powerful effects in the management of reputation (it can be a destructive weapon of moral assassination), people are interested in using it against their rivals and superiors in order to promote their own social uprising on the back of others.

A plethora of studies has revealed that gossip follows people like a backbiting shadow in their passing through life. But what happens after people die away? What is the fate of post-mortem gossip? What happens to gossip after its target departs this life? Do dead people remain at the receiving end of the moral judgment passed upon them by their surviving fellowmen? Or does death bury in the grave of forgetfulness and forgiveness the faults and foibles of the deceased along with her cold body? These are the questions this study strives to answer by inquiring into the relationship between death and gossip. To this purpose, this study advances a *sequential model of death as a social process* in whose frame I plan on unraveling the intricate link between dying and gossiping.

Siding with the processual turn which refuses to reduce death to the moment of biological demise (Hertz, 1960 [1907]; Martínez, 2013; Swazey, 2013), this paper advances an anthropological understanding of dying as a social processuality. Hence, to the static view of death, as it is understood in the *stricto sensu* biological perspective, this study favors a more overarching vision which looks at death as a social process set in motion by the biological event of death. Such a trans-biological understanding of dying implies a processual model consisting in the sequence of four main events:

1. The biological event of death;
2. The social event of the deathwatch;
3. The social event of the burial;
4. The serial social events of the memorial service.

According to the Orthodox liturgical canons, which influenced popular memorial practices of remembering the dead in Romania – where this study is geographically and culturally grounded (central region of Transylvania) – the last memorial service is held until seven years have passed from the death of the commemorated one (Braniște, 2005, p. 402). Given these ecclesiastic guidelines, usually respected by the faithfuls, the processual model of dying set forward in this study will adopt these temporal milestones symbolizing the beginning and the end of dying understood in social rather than strictly biological terms.

The paper does not purposely strive to *épater le bon sens*, to shock the common sense of ordinary people’s understanding of death. However, by reconceiving death into dying – which implies a rethinking of it from a biological event to a social process – this study advances an approach that questions the taken-for-grantedness of the medical paradigm of death. According to this, death is a medical event that can be objectively

determined by various technological devices such as an electrocardiogram or an electroencephalogram. Refusing an understanding underpinned by a biological reductionism of death to an objectively determinable moment, this paper embraces an approach which looks at dying as a social processuality. Within the frames of such a non-reductionist approach, biological death is conceived of as only a sequence that sets in motion the process of dying, a process which is deeply embedded into an intricate cultural matrix.²

From a methodological point of view, the study consists in a series of personal reflections upon funeral practices grounded on intermittent participant observations and interactions with bereaved families conducted over the past three years in the central region of Transylvania, in both urban and rural areas, across confessional borders. Every now and then, news of some death occurred in my extended family and network of acquaintances reached me, offering me the chance to both fulfill my social obligations and to pursue my morbid research interests. Taking part in the funeral rites allowed me, first, to pay my condolences to the family who suffered the loss, but also enabled me to explore the relationship between death, post-mortem reputation, and social gossip. A note on the methodological challenge of conducting such a research is in place here. Not as a methodological alibi, but rather to point out the intractable difficulty of engaging from an emic perspective phenomena as delicate and sensitive as death, funeral, and the defunct's reputation. Grieving families and friends can hardly be approached by an outsider interested in fumbling through the deceased's past and her survivors' memories of her. It was these considerations that led me to stick within my own social network of kinship and acquaintances, extended to include funerals of public figures where my presence was not about to raise any suspicious eyebrows. News of a death in my extended social network was both a cause of personal grief and a research opportunity to engage in participant observation to deathwatches, funeral rites and memorial services in which I could conduct informal interviews with the bereaved family members, acquaintances of the deceased, and other community members taking part in the events.

Gossips we die by: Post-mortem gossip and the process of social death

Despite its centennial age, the notion of “rite of passage” coined by Arnold van Gennep (1960) more than a century ago, in 1909, retains its heuristic value undiminished by the passing of time. This paper will employ van Gennep's tripartite scheme of the ritual process for the purpose of unraveling the relationship between the social process of dying and the status of post-mortem gossip. All the more so since death, unlike other life's crises giving rise to rites of passage, such as puberty, pregnancy, marriage, professional initiation, etc., is a *rite de passage* of cosmic scale, as its subject passes not only between worldly statuses but embarks in the supreme crossing from the world of the living to the world of the dead. The ceremonial sequence of the funerary rites organizes, on the one hand, the deceased journey from the world of the living to the

² This study deliberately leaves aside the case of “social death” (e.g., slavery, stigma, exclusion etc.), where biological death is absent, as living people are considered to be socially dead (Králová, 2015).

afterworld of the dead, structuring at the same time, on the other hand, the social process of mourning for his or her survivors.

Van Gennep's bold anthropological claim was that underpinning all rites of passage lies a fixed ritual structure. He insisted that this invariable structure could be discerned underneath every ritual process accompanying the transitions from a state to another, lurking beneath the surface variations of these ceremonies. Rites of passage are a special category of "ceremonial sequences" organizing the passing of an individual from one state to another (physical, as it is the case with journeys, social, when it implies a change of status, or cosmic, when the individual passes from a world – of living – to another – of the dead). The fixed structure of the ceremonial sequences followed by any rite of passage involves the succession of three distinct phases, each of them draped in its own specific rites. *The phase of separation* involves ritually codified symbolic activities meant to signal the detachment of the subject from her fellows and/or from her status. Set apart from the community and dispossessed of her status, the rite's subject is thrown in the *liminal phase* of seclusion, where she is kept in a state of segregation. Here, in the interstices of social structure, trapped in the limbo of statuslessness separating the distance between two conventional positions in the organization of social relationships, the passenger-individual becomes a "liminal entity" with ambiguous characteristics and shady features (Turner, 1991, p. 95). Thrown between social or even cosmic worlds, the rite's subject undergoes a process of deindividuation: her nominal identity is withdrawn as she loses her name in exchange for anonymity. The same fate is shared by her status-identity as she is deprived of the position she occupies in the social structure. Dispossessed of her social name, identity, and status – often enough even undressed of her clothes carrying distinctions in terms of rank – the liminal individual is introduced into a community of equals, an equalitarian community of the statuslessness. Liminality is the proper condition for enacting some rituals aiming at degrading the self and the social condition of the person passing through this threshold-zone. Pedagogy follows destruction, as the function of these degrading rituals is two-fold: first, to destroy the state the individual is departing from (childhood, virginity, etc.), and secondly, to teach her the lesson of humbleness. Liminal rites are thus meant to fulfill prophylactic functions against arrogance and abuses of power that will come with the elevated status. The dispossessed subject will re-enter her rights, benefiting now from enriched powers, with the *phase of reaggregation* when the liminal subject is once again reincorporated into the communal body where she will be assigned a superior position within the social structure. Each one of these movements in the social space – separation, liminal segregation, reincorporation – is accompanied by specific rites deemed to symbolically mark the shifts in status, as well as to facilitate the displacements of the subject in the status-order of society.

Funerary rites enacted in the Romanian cultural space are certainly no exception in this regard. Despite the bewildering diversity of ritual practices specific to various regions influenced by their own historical legacies, their sequential structure nevertheless seem to conform to a universal pattern as postulated in van Gennep's triptych scheme of the ritual process. For the remainder of this paper, I will employ van Gennep's understanding

of the ritual process as analytical scaffolding for constructing a processual model of dying along whose lines the status of posthumous gossip could be discerned. A synoptic preview of the argument is provided in the table below, where the status of gossip is thought of in relation to the ritual phase and the event sequence of the process of dying.

Table 1. The model of dying as social process

Ritual phase	Event sequence	Social modality	Status of gossip
Phase of separation (preliminal)	Somatic anticipations of death	“Gossiping community” centered upon the moribund	Uproar, a flush of whispers, a murmur of rumors and gossips, prognostics regarding the chance of survival, explicative speculations concerning the cause of death.
	The biological event of death	“Gossiping community” centered upon the deceased	
Phase of segregation (liminal)	The social event of deathwatch	“Gossiless <i>communitas</i> ”	The taboo against gossiping is instituted, backbiting the dead is strictly prohibited.
	The social event of burial		The taboo against gossiping the deceased reaches its prohibitive climax with the burial.
Phase of reaggregation (postliminal)	The social serial events of memorial services	“Gossiping community” decentered from the deceased	Gradually, as time goes by, although memorial services occasion the remembering of the deceased, gossiping the dead becomes out-of-date and lacks any practical reason.

Source: author’s own elaboration using the typical schema of the rite of passage (van Gennep, 1960)

Biological death and the social life of gossip

When it does not come unexpected, as the result of some sudden accident, death is adumbrated by various somatic symptoms, which ordinary people have learned over their life course to construe as prologs of the nearing end. They have become easier to identify as such with the advent of clinical medicine and biomedical sciences. In any case, the *phase of separation* from van Gennep’s three-stage scheme starts even before biological death has occurred, once the first manifestations of the *somatic anticipations of death* become visible. These must be carefully distinguished from the ordinary symptomatology signaling the presence of some non-lethal medical conditions. Falling ill with a deadly disease or due to old age constitutes a strong thanatic symptom which triggers a ritual sequence starting with separation rites. That the separation is instituted even before the fatidic moment of actual death is highlighted by the physical-spatial isolation of the moribund, secluded on the death bed, be it either in the familiar milieu of the household or in the sanitized space of the hospital. In the Romanian peasant imaginary, death is conceived of as a dangerous source of contagion, enough reason for it to justify measures of socio-symbolic quarantining the moribund.

At the same time as the moribund body is set apart from the social body, death is hidden behind the veils of a euphemistic rhetoric. Afraid to call it by name, death is rendered less threatening by disguising it as “falling asleep,” “being called to Christ,” “passing on,” “fading away,” etc. Modern Western civilization has excelled if not in becoming a death-denying culture, at least in hiding it from public view. The advent of modernity slowly but irreversibly pushed death, once a familiar presence, to the backstage of social life. The ever-increasing medicalization of death brought about the hiding of the final act from public sight behind the medical curtain, where it was to occur under the clinical gaze of medical professionals. Constantin Bărbulescu (2015) has shown the full extent of the state-run process unfolded in Romania between 1860 and 1910 pursuing the sanitization of rural life. Medicalization of death was an intrinsic part of a larger modernization program implemented in the Romanian society designed to hygienize social life and thus to fortify the national body. This biopolitical project brought about a dramatic clash of mental civilizations, as the peasant archaic mindset was reluctant to give way to the offensive unleashed by the medical colonization of rural life. Notwithstanding this opposition, as the modernization process was slowly penetrating the rural outskirts of the body social, empirical healers were challenged and supplanted by professional doctors in curing diseases and prolonging life. The process of modernization was never complete, as empiric healers, although have lost their position in the face of professional doctors, nevertheless survived the medical offensive. To this day, they continue in trading their craft in the shadow of the medical system, in rural and urban areas alike of contemporary Romania. However, as this medicalization process continued its advance, death itself was eventually brought under the medical magisterium (see also Palaga, 2016).

Physically and spatially separate from the rest of society, waiting for her end on the death bed, the moribund is then separated from the community through ritual means. As Adina Rădulescu (2008, pp. 103–106) has shown in her monography on *Rites of Protection in Romanian Funerary Customs*, in a first phase, when there still is hope for recovering, the person in danger of dying is subjected to “practices and rituals of *pulling out of death*.” This is especially true in peasant communities, where an archaic mentality based on magical thinking still persists. In these communities that were relatively spared from the influence of the theories developed by modern medicine, diseases are seen as having supernatural and/or moral origins. Diseases are thought of being caused either by the poisonous actions of some mythological beings or as having spiritual roots and springing from the sins of the moribund. The flickering of the hope of salvation drives people to resort, alongside conventional medication, to a series of incantations (*descântece*) cast on the death bed. They are all meant to neutralize the poisonous action of the mythological forces thought of being the source of the moribund’s illness and to bring her back to life from the grip of death. When the ritual attempts to pull her out of death fail, and the moribund slips into death, the closest ones have no other means at their disposal other than to console themselves in the face of helplessness. What they can do is to alleviate her end through “practices and rituals of *relieving death*,” through

religious means of redemption, such as confession, communion, and the Holy Unction officiated by a priest at the moribund's bedside.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a vast program of ethnographic research was initiated as part of a state-sponsored endeavor to use folklore as an argument in the process of nationhood building (Karnooouh, 2001). Impelled by the nationalistic urgency to prove the identity of customs of all Romanians, ethnographers have cut wide swaths through the countryside, driven by their mission to collect the beliefs, rituals, mores, and folkways from what they conceived of as the most untainted by the ravages of modernity, i.e., the peasant. Funerary customs were a focal point in this ethnographic program, as they were deemed to express the peculiar Romanian attitude towards death (as revealed in the much celebrated *Miorița*, a pastoral ballad where death is rendered metaphorically as a wedding). Among the ethnographers who had forayed into the countryside and depicted the ways of dealing with death, Teodor T. Burada (2006) [1882] explored the *Funeral Customs of Romanian People*. Simeon Florea Marian (1995) [1892] wrote an ethnographic trilogy of the social life cycle, following the life course of Romanians from the cradle, through marriage, to the grave. In the last of these volumes, focused upon *The Funeral among the Romanians*, he described the community's efforts of handling those facing the prospect of death as undergoing a series of stages. When the first signs of death become visible, the family resorts to a *natural therapy* involving the indigenous ethnomedicinal knowledge and ethnopharmaceutical remedies available in the local community. Potions and salves, such as garlic-infused oils, are administered to the ailing person. Then as now, only seldom do rural people call the doctor and her specialized knowledge, preferring to heal the sick with their own, home-made, remedies. If these means fail, the family resorts to *magical therapy* attempting to break the spell cast upon the unfortunate one, using various incantations (*descântece* and *desfăcături*). The last resort, in the face of the failure of this magical means of redressing the curse at the root of the disease, is the local priest. Only at times of despondency does the family members rush to bring the priest for performing the *spiritual therapeutics for the afterlife*. It is through confession and the final administration of the Eucharist that the moribund is spiritually prepared for stepping into the afterlife (Marian, 1995, pp. 15–19).

The separation, first adumbrated in somatic signs of death, is fully instituted as soon as the *biological event of death* finally occurs. Around the precise definition of death – be it legal, medical, or biological – the controversy had proliferated such as to baffle any hope of ever reaching a working consensus. Seen from the perspective of this definitional controversy, death seems to be kept alive by the never-ending disputes fought between philosophers, biologist, jurists and others at its bedside. The polemic is between the advocates of “the whole-brain approach” and those supporting “the higher-brain approach.” The former insist that death implies the irreversible termination of the functioning of the entire brain, including the “lower brain,” i.e., the brainstem, which is responsible for controlling spontaneous respiration. The latter, in contrast, argues that the cessation of the higher functions of the brain, controlling consciousness, is enough for death to be pronounced (DeGrazia, 2011). While the former see the permanent vegetative state (PVS) as a form of life because the lower brain is still functioning, the

latter regard the organism in PVS as a consciously dead body still breathing, but essentially dead. It is not my task here to adjudicate between these camps. From a practical point of view, death understood as a biological ending does not prompt individuals to engage either in philosophical reflection on what is the nature of death, or in technical debates on when is one entitled to pronounce death as having occurred. Confronted by the biological reality of death, presenting itself as a breathless body of a close one, ordinary people cope with their existential terror in the face of the precariousness of life by engaging in logistical preparations for the funeral.

Gossip studies have shown that any collection of people who get to more or less know each other tends to become a “gossiping community,” where members exchange newsworthy information about their fellows in the black market of social relationships, i.e., behind their backs. It is worth highlighting that gossip, just as rumor, have an itch for news and that both spring from a fundamental set of informational and epistemic needs. Engaging in gossip and spreading rumors, people strive to satisfy more than some mere frivolous, but otherwise entirely natural, curiosities regarding the public and private businesses of others. They also struggle to fulfill some basic cognitive necessities of knowing, interpreting, and understanding their most proximate social reality. If we accept that gossip and rumor are also epistemic means of knowing the social world, it follows that the news over someone falling ill or dead will unleash an intense informational exchange within the social network focused on finding out more on the moribund or on the reasons that led to death.

An outpour of murmurs, whispers, rumors, and gossips carry the news from one lip to another, as the community enquires about the state of the individual and struggles to find a satisfying explanation of the event. Prognostics are cast upon the moribund regarding her chances of making it through. The biographic past of the deceased is searched through along with her medical record remembered in the social memory in a collective endeavor to find out elements that can help people in making sense of the death. When it is not a self-evident outcome of a long disease, every death is a troubling puzzle that impels people to cope with it emotionally, but also to come to terms with it cognitively, by devising a plausible explanation as a basis for their understanding. Gossip creeps in amidst these explicative speculations over the cause of the disease or of death, as it is carried around by the belief in the spiritual causes of illness, a belief deeply rooted in the Romanian popular mindset historically molded by the Orthodox tradition. The moral substratum of medical conditions is revealed in sayings such as “his sins have caught up him” (Psalm, 40: 12), which further invites people to explore the defects, vices, and faults responsible for his or her illness and death. We are thus dealing with a mortuary gossip disguised in spiritual explanations of illness, rooted into a *mentalité collective* shaped by the Christian understanding of some medical conditions as diseases of the soul.³

³The relationship between sin and illness would deserve a more thorough discussion than the argument made in this paper allows. The Christian theology of illness is rather ambivalent towards a causal connection between sins and bodily diseases. While Jean Claude Larchet (2002, p. 36) points out that “several passages

The formation of this mortuary gossip can be accounted for by the interaction between three elements. The process of mortuary gossip formation is set in motion by *the death news* (the informational component of the three-folded model) which usually passes the notice among the acquaintances by word of mouth. Spreading the word within the social network, the death news fulfills a communicative function, that of notifying the decease within the community. It is important to note down that the death news has a strictly factual value, informing people of a tragic event occurred in the social community. The second, interpretive, element in the model consists in *the cognitive effort* on the part of the defunct's acquaintances to make sense of the death. People cannot receive the death news simply as a factual piece of information without struggling to reach an understanding of it. In their strive to achieve an understanding, they put together pieces of information and interpret the death of their close one in the light of the knowledge they possess regarding her vices, lifestyle, and medical record. That is to say, they frame the death news into the biographical context of the deceased, in a hermeneutical attempt to confer meaning to the factual event of dying. The third is the background element consisting in the *cultural mindset* in which the death news is interpreted. In the Romanian society, this mindset is grounded in a *paradigm of medical theology* blending rudiments of medical knowledge and vulgatic scraps of religious interpretation, in whose light bodily diseases have spiritual causes and moral roots. The outcome of this process of making sense of someone's death is the emergence of unintended gossip deriving from a factual piece of information used to explain an extraordinary event within a particular cultural milieu.

In brief, the entire process is set in motion by the conveying of a factual notification (the death news) which prompts individuals to engage in a cognitive effort of making sense of the death on the basis of what they know about the deceased. And since medical history offers the best source of clues, the close ones will tend to account for the defunct's death in terms of his medical anamnesis. Yet all this causal analysis is passed through the filter of the popular mindset shaped by the Christian belief system in which somatic affections are conceived of as being somehow caused by the spiritual diseases ultimately determined by people's sins. We thus have a *double hermeneutics* people perform in making sense the death notice of someone they know. This corresponds to a *double framing* of the death news, as people first contextualize the decease within a biographical framework, in their attempt to explain the event based on the defunct's lifestyle and medical record. Biographical framing is followed by a second, cultural framing, as people draw on the paradigm of medical theology to make sense of diseases and death in terms of sins and foibles of the dead. In this way, without deliberately pursuing to engage in gossip behavior, people nonetheless are driven towards gossip by

of Scripture demonstrate that there exists no *a priori* link between a person's illness or infirmity and any specific sin or sins which that person or his or her immediate ancestors might have committed," other scriptural passages suggest the opposite (James, 5:15; Luke, 5:18–26). Jesus himself, after healing a sick, told him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John, 5:14), hinting towards a moral underpinning of bodily conditions.

their cognitive interest in making sense of the death, which drifts them to mingle factual information, explicative speculation, and spiritual interpretations of the disease.

Fictional intermezzo: Mortuary gossip at work

Perhaps a concrete example could pump some blood into this rather abstract theoretical model of the informational genesis of gossip within the communicational circuit initiated by the death notice. What follows in the next paragraphs is a literaturized depiction based on a real case, occurred in the author's apartment block. Names were changed and the dialogues are fictive, but the narrated succession of events follows the typical course of action in such a situation.

Meet Mr. Pavel from the third floor, retired due to illness in his early sixties. The news of his death spreads rapidly through the inhabitants of the apartment block 57 located on the Union street in the largest working-class neighborhood of a typically provincial Romanian town. Most of the residents of this Communist block house, who used to work at the industrial plant that gradually disabled and eventually dismantled after the Revolution of 1989, are elderly persons retired due to illness. Members of this geriatric community spend most of their sunny days sitting and talking on the two benches situated on both sides of the block's entry. They form a genuine block watch as well as a welcoming committee, briefing their neighbors returning from work on the latest news. In the meantime, the defunct's family is scattered all across the town, busying themselves with solving pressing matters. The visibly bereaved wife, wearing the black garments she hastily bought from one of the neighborhood's second-hand shops, is already on her way to the church for settling the liturgical details of the funeral. The service is almost over. A couple of more minutes and the priest can be approached. She already paid the bell toll fee to the verger who also sells candles and icons with Arsenie Boca prominently displayed on the church's stand. The ever-whispering old ladies who form the hard core of the parish's flock have already found out what's going on. The word of news spreads rapidly through the church nave from the narthex to the high altar, competing for people's attention with the Word of God coming to them from the very opposite direction. They will further spread the news to their neighbors and families on their way back home. Ioana, the daughter, carries about the death certificate, which the funeral home needs in order to prepare the file with all the papers required for receiving the death benefit provided by the state. The chapel where the dead body will be kept until the funeral is taken care of by the defunct's brothers. They will bring the wine, bread alms (*coliva*), sponge cake (*cozonac*), and all that is needed for deathwatch and the funeral. Thank God the family owns a burial site. Otherwise, they would have had to dig deep in the family budget to buy one, in a real estate market where a square meter in a graveyard is more expensive than a square meter of an apartment building. With the grave diggers, they stroke a bargain over the payment. Besides the money, they asked for two bottles of wine. Usually, they drink the wine while digging the grave, a reason strong enough to stubbornly resist the offer of receiving the bottles only after they finished the job. Have it their way, only to dig it straight and deep enough to receive the casket, but

also taking care not to disturb its current inhabitants, the deceased's parents buried there. They will take care of paying the priest after the funeral. Back to the block, the daughter came back with the mortuary ribbon that she now ties it above the block entrance, with the helpful assistance of the elderly neighbors. Now it's official. Who hasn't already find out by word of mouth, can now see the visual notification. "Pavel Morar has fallen asleep in Christ at the age of 62. Let him rest in peace! The family weeps and howls over the dead. May God forgive him!" says the ribbon.

The neighbors who due to attentional blindness may have missed the black ribbon above the entrance receive the news from the apartment block administrator (*șeful de scară*). Door by door, residents are asked to make a small gesture of solidarity with the bereaved family. The whip-round will be used to pay for the burial feast (*praznic*). Several doors, behind which clogged footsteps could be heard as well as the sound of the TV-set progressively lowered down until it was all mute, remain closed despite persistent knocking. The burnt light bulbs from the second floor determine the residents of this story to invite the administrator in. Visibly embarrassed by the obscure situation, he solemnly promises to solve the problem. Otherwise, the dialogue and the whip-round occur as the two parties stand divided by the doorstep. It must be a bureaucratic habitus that the apartment block administrator draws a list of contributors he will hand over to the bereaved family. Here as everywhere, the rule of reciprocity is sacred, and its rigorous observance requires a sui-generis archive. The list will be deposited in the drawer from the living room, where the family also keeps the notebook of records with the sums of money offered as gifts at the weddings they have participated in the last years. They still have to give back the counter-gifts after Ioana's wedding ten years ago. That the young couple divorced after two years of happy marriage does not change the rules of the social game. Now that Pavel has gone to the eternal rest, Ioana will have to take over the debt. Together with her mother, she will now have to wear black garments for at least a year, otherwise people will grumble that they do not care for their lost one. At least during this time, she can excuse herself from the duty to reciprocate, since the mourning prevents her from taking part in any wedding.

In the apartment from above, the neighbors with whom the family had a lot of troubles regarding repeated flooding have started chatting at the dinner table. "No wonder he finally dropped off. Two years ago the poor guy cheated death by the skin of the teeth when he was hospitalized for two weeks for alcohol rehabilitation. This time, cirrhosis brought him down. Pity for him, don't you think? Otherwise, he was a nice guy, a good craftsman." "Well, didn't he bring from the factory, until the work accident forced him into retirement and alcoholism, those metal frameworks used by almost all neighbors to enclose their own balconies? He was a good man, indeed. May God forgive all of his sins!" In the apartment next door, the young couple who moved in last year was treating the news rather as a *fait diverse*. Besides the physical proximity and the communal walls, which brought them hard times during winter since the Morar family was tightening the purse strings when it came to heating the apartment, the young couple shared almost nothing in common with their elderly neighbors. They barely know their neighbors. Only scarcely do they greet their fellow residents when they happen to meet them in the dim-

lit corridors of the block. They are enraged by the always at duty “welcoming committee” standing in front of the block entrance, following their every move, recording every input and output from the block. If they had known of this sedentary social custom of their future neighbors, they would have thought twice before moving in. With Mr. Pavel, they have rarely come across, only when their paths happened to intersect on the block’s corridors. Only once did he knock on their door, asking them to loan him fifty lei. He told them that it is an emergency and that he was caught penniless, but he seemed rather hectic and quite red in his cheeks. The young lady who happened to be the one to open the door excused herself by telling him that they keep all the money in the bank account and they only withdraw from the ATM machine when they need to. The news got to their ears, passed on by a garrulous neighbor, that Mr. Pavel was taken down by cirrhosis. “It makes sense,” concluded the young couple, dropping the subject dead.

It is not difficult to imagine that similar discussions were occurring, simultaneously, behind closed doors, while the open space of the stair landing or the block entrance were areas of talkative exchanges between the neighbors. This intense circulation of the news caused by the falling ill or the death of an acquaintance will persist until the news is hot enough and people have yet to appease their epistemic curiosity. The making of this “gossiping community” focused upon the moribund/deceased will soon be confronted by the taboo against gossip that will suspend, provisionally, their activity, only to be resumed, although sporadically and quite anemically, after the funeral.

Deathwatch and the gossipless communitas

The point has been made earlier that when they find themselves in front of a *fait accompli*, ordinary people do not let themselves be drawn into philosophical debates on death, its nature, and the technical means of establishing it. Instead, they react in the face of death through clinging to a “set of rules and recipes which have stood the test so far and are expected to stand it in the future” (Schütz, 1962, p. 19). People manage extraordinarily events disturbing their everyday life by resorting to a stock of “cookbook knowledge” including taken-for-granted beliefs, patterns of action, and ritual means meant to restore the everydayness of ordinary life. Death, to be sure, is the ultimate test people face, stressing to the limit their capacity of mastering what Alfred Schütz has called “the fundamental anxiety.” The dreadful terror of death brought to the surface of individual and social consciousness every time a member of the community passes away is tamed through a series of pre-, per-, and post-funerary practices and rituals.

The first of these pre-funerary rituals is *the social event of deathwatch*, the second event in the sequential model of death following the biological demise. In our contemporary, medicalized, modern societies, death is certified by a medico-legal apparatus endowed with juridical authority. Before the institutional articulation of the medical profession, which in Romania came into being between 1860 and the fin de siècle, deathwatch was the funeral institution meant to confirm the reality of death. The three days of keeping the body before the burial were instituted so as to give the chance to a comatose person or someone in clinical death to recover. Burying alive a breathing

man could thus be avoided. With the legal medicalization of death, deathwatch lost its pragmatic function. As the revolution of modernity led to the professionalization of medicine, the medical profession gained a legal monopoly over certifying death. This development forced deathwatch to assume other, more symbolic, functions. As it happened with so many other phenomena, Christianity managed to impose itself on the popular stock of spiritual beliefs but only by paying the price of incorporating in its own system of beliefs and practices many of the pagan customs. Deathwatch illustrates abundantly clear this double incorporation, as it could serve as a paradigmatic exemplar.

The origins of deathwatch as a funerary institution are lost in pre-Christian times when death gave rise to sumptuous funerary feasts brimming with ludic activity (e.g. dancing, playing games and making farces during the deathwatch, many of them having a parodic or downright obscene nature). In some cases, the mortuary jocularity was accompanied by Dionysian lavishness consisting in bacchanal parties bathed in frivolity and alcohol. Many of these elements have survived in some areas of rural Romania, which co-existed for a long time in parallel with the official model of Christian deathwatch, with its ritual sobriety and austere piety towards the deceased. Recent ethnographic research conducted in the Romanian rural world has revealed that the pagan model of deathwatch is increasingly less practiced (Ghinoiu, 1999). Everywhere ethnographers have looked, they found the domination of the canonic model of Christian deathwatch. In the Romanian Orthodox tradition, deathwatch is a “passing-over together” (*împreună-petrecere*). What this means is that the deceased’s relatives and acquaintances spend the nights before funeral together with the defunct, in a milieu of prayers and mourning. The Christian purpose of deathwatch, superposed on top of a pre-Christian funerary institution, is ambivalent to downright problematic. Religious literature, the liturgical as well as the popular one, is rather hesitant in explicating the purpose of deathwatch. It wavers between pragmatic considerations (the three days offering a respite in order to prepare the funeral) and spiritual arguments (the prayers made during the deathwatch are helpful in forgiving the deceased’s sins). If the ludic aspects were gradually suppressed and eventually abolished by the Church’s colonizing action, other mythical pagan elements have nevertheless survived the ecclesiastical offensive. The very linguistics of the term reveals that the original purpose of the deathwatch was to watch over the dead. In the popular imaginary, haunted by mythological creatures, watching for the dead in the nights before the burial was meant to prevent some living being (bird, dog, cat, etc.) to cross over or under the dead, which would have transformed her into a poltergeist (*strigoi*) (Ghinoiu, 1999, p. 242).

Beyond its popular meanings and Christian purposes, from an anthropological point of view, deathwatch lies at the very core of the *liminal phase* of the funeral rite. Within the funeral ritualistic system set in motion by the biological event of death, deathwatch symbolizes the highest point of liminality, in which the deceased is suspended in the interstitial space lying between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. As soon as the soul has departed the body, the deceased is trapped in-between these two worlds. On the one hand, her cold body is still caught in the world of the living she just departed from. On the other hand, she is about to join the world of the dead,

passing bodily through the gate of the tomb, and spiritually, through the customs of heaven. Three days after her death, the deceased will be hanged up in-between the earthly world of the living, to which she still bodily belongs, and the afterworld of the dead, towards she is prepared to depart. Deathwatch thus occurs in the antechamber of the afterworld, in that transitional no man's land of the "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1967, p. 97). The liminality phase that reaches its tensional apex in the deathwatch is the time for performing some rites of passage deemed to prepare the body of the defunct ahead of the burial. As soon as the moribund has taken her last breath, the body of the deceased undergoes a *necrocorporal orthopedics* which starts with closing the eyes of the dead, binding the jaws so as to prevent the stiffening of her face with the mouth wide open and finalizing with folding the arms in a cross over the chest (Burada, 2006, p. 14; Marian, 1995, p. 32). Among the liminal rites bearing preparative purposes are washing the body with water, splashing it with holy water (*agheasmă mică*), dressing the deceased in clean clothes, lighting up a candle, together with the customary prayers and readings from the holy books. It is quite evident how physical purity is blended within the sequence of liminal rites with symbolic purity for an integral purification of the defunct ahead of her final judgment. Bodily hygiene intertwines with spiritual cleanliness not only to purify the dead before her appearance before God hereafter but also for preparing the corpse for the this-worldly gaze of her fellow men and women who will not refrain from passing judgment upon the family based on the cleanliness of the dead.

Deathwatch is also the social occasion announcing the prohibition of post-mortem gossiping. This interdiction is definitively sanctioned by the solemn act of the burial, which constitutes the third sequence in our processual model of death. It is widely acknowledged that the social institution of the burial does not exist strictly for satisfying some hygienic necessities (e.g. burying or cremating the corpse as a means of preventing the spread of infections caused by the decomposition of the body). From an anthropological perspective, more importantly are its functional extensions, thoroughly social in nature (e.g. conferring socio-emotional support to the grieving family affected by their loss). In similar fashion, deathwatch is both a watching over the body of the deceased and a social watching over the others, i.e., a *gossip watch*. Deathwatch also entails a surveillance over gossiping, a watch over the defunct's reputation. Creating a socio-temporal duration of maximal liminal tension, deathwatch suspends all idle talk and tittle-tattle (particularly inhibiting any blather concerning the deceased) as a means of instituting a sober community of silence in the face of death. The biological event of death together with deathwatch as a social event and funerary institution manage to create a temporary gossipless *communitas* of the living gathered around the deceased. During the days ahead of the funeral, dominated by mourning, silence, and piety in the face of death, the family and the closest ones become a "liminal community" operating in an exceptional regime of social functioning. Alongside mourning with its precise set of prescriptions and prohibitions, the liminal community of deathwatch is governed by the all-powerful taboo against gossiping.

The notion of *communitas*, understood as a special community emerging in moments of social liminality, was coined by anthropologist Victor Turner (1967), who has

deepened the insights into the nature of the ritual process made by Arnold van Gennep (1960). In one of the most celebrated books of early anthropology, van Gennep has famously argued that every human society organizes its social life in terms of some rites of passage. Despite the exuberant variety of these rites among the world's different cultures, they all share a structural resemblance given by the same threefold sequence. All rites of passage include a phase of separation (preliminal) in which the participant is removed from the social body. It is then followed by a transitional phase of liminality during which the participant is kept in the limbo of social marginality. In the third and final sequence, the participant is reincorporated into society which now recognizes his or her new status. Further elaborating van Gennep's tripartite structure of the rites of passage, Turner has highlighted the role of liminal rites enacted to emphasize the segregation phase in the process of social change. He pointed out that during the second phase, societies morph into liminal communities that the British anthropologist had named *communitas*. Following van Gennep, Turner sees social life, of individuals' and groups' alike, as a continual passage of some symbolic thresholds marked through ritual ceremonies. Turner conceives of social life as undergoing what he calls the "dialectic of the developmental cycle." This cycle patterning social life implies a recursive process through which the community experiences the ever-repeating alternance between "structure" and "*communitas*," mediated by the state of societal liminality (Turner, 1991, p. 97). Propelled by the events that set in motion the rites of passages, social life is driven to oscillate between two models of society: a) the first is that of a society as a structured, differentiated, and hierarchized system of statuses. I will refer to this form of social organization, which Turner has simply called "structure," by the notion of "structured community"; b) the second societal model, born out of the transformation of conventional society during the period of liminality, is that of an unstructured, egalitarian, and homogenous community, in which individuals are released from their statuses in order to emerge into an ephemeral community of equals. This is the model of the *communitas*, a transient communion, which I will refer to by the term of "liminal community."

The inherent transitoriness of these liminal communities, whose lifespan is limited to the periods of segregation within the rites of passage, led Turner (1991) to work out a typology of *communitas* in terms of the dialectic between "structure" and "liminality" (pp. 131–140). He distinguished between three types of *communitas*: a) *existential liminal communities* that take shape spontaneously in the cracks and clefts of social order, at its fringes, or even in direct opposition to it. Drawing on the subtitle of Turner's 1969 book, *The Ritual Process*, which reads as *Structure and Anti-structure*, I will refer to these existential *communitas* as "anti-structural communities" (although Turner himself never uses the term besides the subtitle of his book). The most eloquent example of this type of liminal social formations is provided by the hippy communities of the 1960s, which have themselves articulated into powerful counter-cultures living outside conventional society and its normative system; b) *normative liminal communities*, which, in their quest to triumph over the ephemerality of the liminal state, develop over time a durable system of norms together with a social structure defined by its own pattern of statuses. But this

survival comes at a high price. Liminal communities that undergo this process of normativization eventually come to transform the genuine communion of equals into a stratified community as rigidly structured as the mainstream society against which it defines itself. A poignant case in point is provided by the monastic orders. Despite their thrust to cut themselves off from the wider society in order to constitute equalitarian communities, they soon come to codify social relationships into strict rules that led to a formalization of monastic life. The Rule of Saint Benedict (*Regula Benedicti*), which soon after it was written has been established as the constitution of Western monasticism, perfectly exemplifies this institutionalization process transforming liminal communities; c) lastly, Turner distinguishes *ideological liminal communities* to which various utopian societal projects strive to establish. Examples of this type of liminal formations include the utopian Socialist communities such as Robert Owen's New Lanark, Charles Fourier's *phalanstère*, or the American communes of the 19th century studied by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1972) in her book, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*.

The liminal funerary community emerging between the deathwatch and the burial does not fit unambiguously in either of the threefold typology worked out by Turner. It is not an existential or spontaneous *communitas*, since its emergence is ritualistically programmed whenever a death occurs. Besides lacking a genuine spontaneity, it also lacks any anti-structural nature. The funerary community is by no means anti-structural, but rather represents a form of *intra-structural liminality*, as it is designed to emerge *within* the existing social structure at the time of someone's death. Neither it is normative in the sense given to these liminal communities by Turner, i.e., structuralized liminal communities developed as a societal alternative to the mainstream conventional society from which they have cut themselves off (e.g. monastic orders). However, funerary communities are normative, in the trivial, not the Turnerian, sense that they are subjected to a normative code regulating behavior during the period of liminality (i.e. mourning). By no means could funerary communities be considered an ideological *communitas*, yearning towards a utopian social order. Instead, funerary communities form *intra-structural liminal communities*, characterized by a series of features that particularize them from other types of *communitas*.

They are, first and foremost, characterized by ephemerality, since they pursue neither to cut themselves off the world (as normative *communitas* do) nor to make permanent the state of liminality (as ideological *communitas* strive). Intra-structural *communitas* are governed by the socio-moral code of mourning, where the prohibition against gossiping the deceased ranks among the most compelling interdictions. In terms of Turner's dialectic of the development cycle, the liminal funerary community of deathwatch and burial, although powerfully regulated both socially and morally by the normative code of mourning, has to be radically distinguished from the "structured society," i.e., the mainstream conventional society within which it emerges. The funerary *communitas* remains a transient communion, a socio-affective union of equals facing death together. This societal ephemerality is also the source of the transient nature of the *gossipleness* imposed by the code of mourning. A conventional society, i.e., a "structured

community” in the terminology of this paper, is inconceivable without gossip, which has a ubiquitous nature and pervades everywhere. Paraphrasing Turner yet again, who describes the liminal entity (i.e., the participant to a rite of passage) as passing through a “limbo of statuslessness” (Turner, 1991, p. 97), I will refer to the liminal funerary community coming together during the deathwatch and the burial of the deceased as passing through a *limbo of gossiplessness*.

The funeral rite implies two major social parties. First, there is the individual object – *the deceased* –, who is the liminal entity that has to pass through the limbo of statuslessness in order to cross from the worldly realm of the living to the afterworld of the dead. Second, there is the collective subject – *the passing-over community* (comunitatea petrecătoare) –, which itself has to pass through the limbo of gossiplessness. The unburied dead watched over during the vigil is an utmost example of a “liminal *persona*,” caught in the interstices lying between the two worlds. Around the dead body a “threshold community” comes to life, a *gossipless communitas* pulled out of its daily rhythms. As soon as the community will come out of this liminal state, as soon as it will return to its structured pattern, the prohibition against gossiping will be partially relaxed. The taboo against gossiping the defunct will be replaced by the principle “Of the dead, nothing unless good.” However, even after this mellowing down of the prohibition to gossip the dead would have occurred, the deceased will continue to be spared from post-mortem gossiping. With few exceptions, the dead will be left to rest in peace.

Post-funeral remembrance and dignified reputations

Seen as a sequence in the social process of death, deathwatch presents itself as the funerary prolog of the burial. Deathwatch is followed by the second sequence in our processual model, i.e., *the social event of the burial*. In the Romanian religious-scape shaped by Eastern Christianity, burial is scheduled to take place three days after the moment of death. The funeral service, culminating with the powerful prayer of absolution (*molitva de dezlegare*), symbolizes the end of the liminal state and the incorporation of the deceased into the world of the dead. Physically, this occurs by burying the coffin and sealing the tomb. Socially, the burial feast consisting of a meal offered immediately after the burial (*praznic*) prolongs the normative jurisdiction of gossiplessness concerning the defunct, whose posthumous reputation it continues to protect. The living society of the deceased’s survivors cannot yet return to the business as usual of everyday life. The burial feast will offer the funerary community the chance to gossip, if not the deceased, then of other participants to the funeral cortege, either present (e.g. family members or friends for how they managed the funeral, how they dressed and behaved during the funeral) or not (e.g. people who had the social and/or moral obligation to attend the funeral but failed to come).

The social process of death does not come to an end once the coffin is nailed down and buried six feet under. Funeral is followed by the last reiterative sequence of our processual model of death, i.e., *the serial events of the memorial service* (parastas). Scheduled to be held at 3, 9, and 40 days after death, and then at 3, 6, 9 months, and a

year. It is then held each year on the day of the death until the seventh year (Branîște, 2005, p. 402). Memorial services could be organized by the family even after the passage of the seven-year time frame, but this exceeds the Church's canonical norm which is set at seven years after the death. Moreover, in the Orthodox tradition, Saturday is the day dedicated to the commemoration of dead persons. However, within these weekly services for the dead, the Church prays for what could be called as the generic "deceased other," and not for any specific person. The liturgical purpose of these memorial services is to pray for the repose of the departed, to comfort the living, and to remind people of their own mortality. They are also ritual devices of reiterative commemoration that keep alive the memory of the defunct. But the memorial service occasions more than the obvious commemoration of the deceased, "their eternal remembrance" (*veșnică pomenire*), to quote the Orthodox divine liturgy, paradoxically limited to seven years. It also occasions the management of the deceased's reputation through the reconstruction of her memory.

The religious memorial service is ritualistically stylized and liturgically formalized to such a degree that it will only serve to commemorate the remembered one in a highly abstract way. The memorial service is liturgically structured to accomplish only a *nominal commemoration* of the deceased, since only her name is mentioned during the service, without remembering any other aspects of her life. A summary of the deceased's life is done at the funeral service when the biography of the deceased is incorporated into the sermon preached by the priest. Memorial services do not include such a recapitulation. However, the burial feast that gathers together the family and the poor of the village or of the neighborhood creates the perfect social context for evoking the memory of the commemorated one. Within these evocations of the deceased in informal discussions, a subtle management of her reputation takes place. Remembered are only the positive aspects of her life while the negative sides are discreetly passed under silence. Whereas the luminous memory of the departed is brought under the memorial spotlight as they are serially commemorated, the darker corners of her life are left in the shadow. That is to say, the Baudelairian efflorescence of evil – *La sottise, l'erreur, le péché, la lésine* (Folly and error, stinginess and sin) – is buried along with the coffin in the graveyard of social oblivion (Baudelaire, 1998, pp. 4, 5) [1857]. Memorial services could thus be conceived of as the social media of memory where, within the milieu of the family, her remembrance is rendered reputable. Her entire biography, with goods and bads, is passed through the circuit of a reputational recycler, out of which only the positive sides will come out. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* – the Latin version of the venerable memorial precept proclaimed by the sage Chilon of Sparta in the Axial Age of humankind continues to underlie the evocative positivation of the dead (Laertius, 1959, I, §70, p. 71).

From a structural point of view, the memorial service brings about a tensional social situation. There are at least two dimensions on which this tensional state manifests itself. First, the commemorative situation created by the memorial service is defined on the one hand by the moral imperative of remembrance, and on the other hand by the just as imperative norm of purging from social memory the negative aspects of the one who is remembered. Second, we have on the one side the powerful human proclivity to gossip

everywhere there is a social gathering, and on the other side the situational prohibition against gossiping. The tension building up to the breaking point into the social situation created by the memorial service is made even more salient by the fact that the memorial service is *the ideal occasion to gossip*: it implies the coming together of acquaintances within a social gathering organized for the very purpose of remembering a third party who is absent *par excellence*. However, the prohibitive imperative against gossiping the dead is still in place, neutralizing the structural factors that make the memorial service an ideal occasion for gossip.

How can we make sense of the fact that memorial services continue to be social events hostile to gossiping the dead, despite their structural proclivity towards promoting such a behavior? Before answering this question, two theoretical premises supporting my argument will have to be spelled out. The basic premise upon which the argument rests consists in postulating the essentially social nature of gossip acts. Drawing on this postulate, the thesis that *gossip is socially occasioned* can be now advanced. People do not gossip their fellows in solitude. Only by stretching the imagination to its outer limits one could imagine soliloquies of gossip. But even such an exercise runs the risk of distorting not only the semantics of language but also the very intrinsic social nature of the gossip acts. Beyond the moral imperative against gossiping governing the dramatic context of the memorial service, the main reason people do not engage in evil-speaking the deceased is rather the *impracticality* of gossip. Moral norms against gossiping, as shown abundantly clear by the ever-present chattering over their fellows in all the ins and outs of daily life, are by no means effective means of controlling people's prosaic passions. Although the memorial service is surely an extraordinarily social event, drawn out of the humdrum and clatter of everyday life and regulated by the most austere norms concerning peoples' appearance and behavior, we should nonetheless resist overstating its power to determine human actions. People excel at formally obeying normative order (e.g. wearing black garments by which they conform to the mourning dress code, displaying a liturgical piety throughout the religious service, etc.) at the same time in which they find subversive means of escaping control through all kind of informal actions (e.g. gossiping the deceased during the funeral within an informal discussion). Another reason lies in that memorial services are by their very nature serial events enacted according to a precise timetable that stretches for seven years from the death of the deceased. This makes them to gradually move away on the temporal axis from the moment of death, which soon becomes a historical event. But even if the prohibition against gossiping, which reaches fever pitch during the burial, loses progressively its moral grip as times goes by, memorial services continue to remain social event repugnant to gossip. The reason why gossip eventually stops following the dead, although it is constantly facilitated by what appears to be ideal occasions of gossip organized in memorial services, consists in the impracticality of posthumous gossip. Despite the dreadful presence of death is not so intense during memorial services as was during deathwatch and the burial (where its presence is downright physical, embodied in the cold corpse of the deceased), gossiping the defunct simply lacks any practical reason. Why should the living judge the dead for their earthly sins? What would they gain by

gossiping their fellow man or woman passed to eternity? People's social curiosity, together with their moral sensibilities, is directed towards the present, as they are drawn to the contemporary world of the living. It is in the present that their pragmatic interests lie, enough reason for their gossip to follow the line of the present and to consider the deeds of the past, however intriguing they have been, as unworthy of their gossip.

Conclusions: The reputational benefits of death

This study had set out to discern the intricate relationship between death and gossip, by trying to make sense of what happens with one's reputation after she passes away. It tried to address the question in what sense does gossip or the lack of it shape the posthumous remembrance of the deceased in the social memory. Refusing the reductionist conception of viewing death as the biological ending of vital processes, the study advanced a processual model of dying, which extends well beyond the last breath of air has been drawn to include the social dimensions of the deceased memory. Katherine Verdery (1999) has masterfully pointed out "the political lives of dead bodies" in the case of heroes, revolutionaries, artists, and other famous individuals whose bodily remains have been exhumed and reburied. The present study has focused, instead, on ordinary people and their *memorial afterlife*, aiming to reveal not the political, but the social afterlives of dead persons.

A proviso should be mentioned at this point for specifying a limitation of this study. The paper examined the memorial afterlife of ordinary people, leaving aside the fate of the rich and famous, whose posthumous reputation may follow a different path. Regarding the latter, an intriguing approach has been put forward by Ștefania Matei and Marian Preda (2016), who have examined the social construction of the "posthumous social status" in the Christian-Orthodox tradition. However, by focusing their analytical scope on saints who have achieved symbolic immortality through a series of "three systems of antehumous influence" (i.e., the system of institutional authority, the system of acknowledgement, and the system of extended agency), their argument leaves out the posthumous fate of ordinary people.

The argument defended in this paper takes a rather different path with regards to that of Matei and Preda (2016). Instead of focusing on antehumous systems of influence, my argument insists upon the posthumous media as the key factor granting celebrities their memorial afterlife. I argue that the difference between the symbolically mortals (ordinary people) and the symbolically immortals (the rich and famous) is made by the means through which the posthumous reputation is shaped. In the case of famous people (politicians, artists, sportsmen, scientists, and other celebrities), their post-mortem memory is an essentially *mediated* memory. It is shaped via media means, starting with the obituary and continuing with memorial articles or tribute acts (in the case of artists) for as long as there is a public interest in them.

In her study of *The Obituary as Collective Memory*, Bridget Fowler (2007) has distinguished between five "genres of the obituary" (pp. 17–22). Besides the conventional and formulaic "positive obituary" written as an accolade to someone's life, Fowler

mentions a still positive, although “untraditional obituary,” which departs from the standard portrayal of someone’s life and career as an ascent upwards. Moreover, the rich and famous are not spared from negative obituaries, ranging from critical evaluation, through tragic considerations, to ironic satire. Due to a very imbalanced class and prestige differential, lower class ordinary people usually pass away quietly, with no obituary written to announce wider society of their demise. This silent death also means that ordinary people are spared from the critical, tragic, or ironic genres of the obituary with which some of their famous peers could be posthumously scolded in the media. In contrast to the rich and famous and their genres of the obituary, the posthumous reputation of ordinary people is shaped mainly via oral means, by words of mouth through which their remembrance is kept alive within the oral memory of the deceased’s family members and acquaintances.

With this proviso in mind, it was the main argument of the paper that the posthumous reputation of the defunct is articulated along a sequence of funeral events that follow her death, during which the taboo against gossiping the dead governs the retro-construction of a dignified memory. It is during the period stretching between the deathwatch and the burial that an ephemeral “gossipless *communitas*” emerges on the fringes of social liminality. In the aftermath of the burial, during the postliminal period, society returns to its business as usual, including a return to gossip as a pervasive behavior of everyday life. However, the serial events of the memorial services held to commemorate the departed up to seven years from her death keep her remembrance alive in the family and community’s memory. Despite the fact that these events could be conceived of as ideal occasions for gossiping the dead (since the dead is the perfect absent “third party” of a gossip act), her memory will nevertheless be spared from gossip.

It goes without saying that losing a close family member or beloved friend could be an overwhelming experience, seriously testing the grieving ones’ capacity of resilience. People of the present, as compellingly revealed by Philippe Ariès (1974, 1982) in his masterpiece examinations of the shifting attitudes toward death, have lost their familiarity their ancestors enjoyed with dying. Hardly could (post)modern people tear themselves out of the emotional cocoon of experiencing the death of another as an existential curse cast upon their lives. However, shifting the analytical angle from the subjectivity brimming with grief of those affected by someone’s death towards the defunct’s posthumous reputation, a hitherto unsuspected facet of the phenomenon becomes fully visible. Death brings an unexpected benefaction to the defunct’s reputation. It absolves the dead of the worldly sins she committed before her fellow men and women, whose judgment passes from the mouth of the people to the divine jurisdiction of the final judge.

In his ethnography of the funeral among the Romanians published at the dawn of modernity, Simeon Florea Marian (1995) [1892] has captured the social interactions taking place at the dead (wo)man’s bedside. “If it happens to be several people gathered in the house, they relate a thing or two about the deceased’s life: what kind of [wo]man has [s]he been, how has [s]he lived, and what good has [s]he done during his [her] life” (p.

99). It is within these cursory recapitulations of the defunct's life that a first courthouse – “the worldly tribunal” – judges the deceased. But it is an indulgent courthouse this popular tribunal. “If [s]he was a [wo]man of God, good, gentle, and soft-hearted, nobody speaks evil of [her] him. And if [s]he was a bad [wo]man [*un om ca neoamenii*] or quite an evildoer, then people pity [her] him rather than blame or curse [her] him” (Marian, 1995, p. 99). The judicial metaphor of the worldly tribunal employed by Marian to frame the informal exchanges at the deceased's bedside in a judgmental language is clearly far-fetched. Working through the metaphor, I would contend it is rather an *amnesty granting tribunal*, forgiving her misdoings and remembering only the bright side of her life.

With death, a jurisdictional transfer occurs regarding the agents endowed with legitimate power of judgment, from the earthly mouth of the people to the heavenly divine justice. Once death had occurred, the living will leave the dead “at the mercy of God” (*în mila Domnului*). As this jurisdictional shift is set in motion by the biological event of death, people recuse themselves *sua sponte* from passing moral judgments any longer upon their deceased fellow man or woman. All too impressed by the mystery of death, terrified by its power over life, or paralyzed in their devout fearfulness expressed in the face of funerary rites, people give up their social right to gossip. In the face of death – and only to it – people are willing to renounce their judgmental prerogatives in favor of the divine legislator. “Of the dead, nothing unless good” – this is the fundamental principle formally instituted during the deathwatch as a law governing the references made towards the dead. The precept keeps its validity long after the funeral, resisting despite the ideal occasions of gossip created by memorial services held by the deceased's family up to seven years following her death. The hustle and bustle of social life, in which gossip occupies a prominent place, spares the dead from its posthumous backbiting. This is due not only to Chilon of Sparta's precept of talking good of the dead, which favors the creation of a reputable reputation to the deceased through her selective remembering, as to the practical inactuality of posthumous gossip.

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Mihai Stelian Rusu is a sociologist working at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania. He is the author of a book, *Memoria națională românească. Facerea și prefacerile discursive ale trecutului național* [Romanian National Memory: The Discursive Making and Remakings of the National Past] (Iași: Institutul European, 2015), which examines that politics of memory throughout Romanian modern history. His research interests vary wildly, ranging from collective memory and fascist studies to the sociology of love and the anthropology of celebration. His latest publications include “Transitional Politics of Memory: Political Strategies of Managing the Past in Post-Communist Romania,” *Europe-Asia Studies* (forthcoming in 2017), “Theorising Love in Sociological Thought: Classical Contributions to a Sociology of Love,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* (2017), “Domesticating Viragos: The Politics of Womanhood in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” *Fascism. Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* (2016), “The Sacralization of Martyric Death in Romanian Legionary Movement: Self-sacrificial Patriotism, Vicarious Atonement, and Thanatic Nationalism,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* (2016).