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**“We shall die ... I shall die”:**

**Death and Alterity in Carlos Fuentes’s *The Death of Artemio Cruz***

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Carlos Fuentes’s *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (2009 [1962]) narrates the agony of the dying Artemio Cruz, a powerful newspaper magnate and veteran of the Mexican Revolution who is confined to bed after a gastric attack.<sup>1</sup> Aware of his impending death, he tries to make sense of his life by tracing back memories. The reader receives an overview of Cruz’s heroic campaigns during the Revolution after which he becomes a rich businessman. Nonetheless, his climb to wealth is marked by corruption and hypocritical exploitation of the Revolution’s egalitarian goals. In the process of looking back on his life, Cruz’s mind slowly degenerates until he eventually succumbs to death. The text is filled with flashbacks and moves back and forth between the present (Cruz on his death bed) and the past (Cruz’s memories). It is composed of multiple temporalities that overlap interchangeably thus forming a complex narrative structure.

Fuentes was part of the Latin-American Boom, a socio-literary movement in the 1960s and 1970s that represented the Spanish-American avant-garde (Dravasa ix). The Boom is associated with writers such as Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), Julio Cortázar (Argentina), and Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru) amongst others. Their works often engage with the violent history of the continent marked by civil wars, usurpation of power and dictatorships without losing sight of Latin-America’s cultural heritage (Williams ix). During his career, Fuentes

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<sup>1</sup> The Mexican Revolution was a major armed conflict that lasted roughly from 1910 to 1920. Its outbreak resulted from the failure of the 31-year-long regime of Porfirio Díaz to secure presidential succession which led to a power vacuum and a subsequent political crisis (Lomnitz 383).

meditated extensively on the question of what Latin-America exactly is: Indian? Spanish? Criollo? Eventually, Fuentes coined the term “Indo-Afro-Ibero-America” when studying the cultures of the Americas to refer to Latin-America (Williams xi).

Fuentes’s preoccupation with the continent’s history and, more specifically, Mexico’s history, is apparent in *The Death of Artemio Cruz*. Besides reconstructing Artemio Cruz’s life, the novel allegorizes Mexico’s social and political history of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This could explain why previous scholarship has mainly focused on the cultural heritage of the novel and analysed it, for the most part, within a specifically Mexican context. Joan L. Brown’s article “Constructing Our Pedagogical Canons” (2010) is exemplary of this since she describes *The Death of Artemio Cruz* as a “superb political novel” that informs the reader about politics, ethics and greed for power (545). Another example is Harold Bloom’s introduction to the novel (2006), in which he suggests that the novel only has social value because of the political and social critique it offers. He moreover criticises it for being “excessively derivative” (3) since, according to Bloom, Fuentes has modelled the character of Cruz after Octavio Paz’s portrayal of Mexican men as sons of the *Chingada*, i.e. the passive and victimized mother figure in “The Sons of la Malinche” (1991 [1950]), an essay in which Paz reflects on Mexican culture and identity.<sup>2</sup> This idea derives from the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, notorious for the violation of indigenous women by the Conquistadores, and, according to Bloom (3), is personified by Cruz and the way he regards the women in his life. Nonetheless, Bloom fails to recognize that the similarities between the character of Cruz and Paz’s representation of Mexican men could be interpreted as a form of critique on Mexican patriarchal society. Hence, these similarities should not diminish the novel’s value as Bloom suggests.

Just like Bloom, up until now, the academic discourse on Fuentes’s work has mainly focused on socio-political and cultural questions. Even though these questions are relevant and

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<sup>2</sup> In Mexico, the verb *chingar* means violating, ripping open, penetrating (“Chingar”).

necessary when discussing Fuentes in order to understand his importance for Mexican and Latin-American literature, I would like to suggest that there is another side to his work and, specifically, his novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, that has not yet been explored. Accordingly, this article offers another perspective on Fuentes's text. On the one hand, it explores how the novel reflects upon the question of identity and, more specifically, the difficulty of grasping one's identity or existence as a whole. On the other hand, it analyses how the novel poses the question of its own creational process and the nature of literature. As becomes clear in the analysis, the reflection on the text's creation is emphasized by the presence of the central dying figure, Artemio Cruz. By analysing these two aspects, this article exposes how the novel furthers discussions on the ontological status of literature as a phenomenon.

Following the above, I will argue that the novel is self-conscious in two different ways. On a first level, the term self-conscious should be understood in the sense of offering an explicit reflection on the creation of the self or identity. That is to say, the novel represents Cruz's (failed) attempt at creating a coherent identity or unified sense of the self through the narration of his life: in the process of dying, he is transformed into someone or something beyond his comprehension. Cruz is aware of this process and his failure at (re)constructing himself and explicitly reflects upon this throughout the novel. On a second level, following Patricia Waugh's terminology (2011), the term should be understood as "literary self-consciousness" or "self-conscious writing" which implies "a fiction that self-consciously reflects upon its own structure as language" (Waugh 14). Thus, I will argue that *The Death of Artemio Cruz* reflects upon and questions the nature of language and literature, that is, it draws the reader's attention to its own composition and construction through language. Consequently, it could be defined as a self-conscious novel. As I will demonstrate, the novel's literary self-consciousness is enhanced by the dying character of Cruz and his reflections on the creation or construction of his own identity and his failure to do so. Previous research has not yet elaborated on these

aspects sufficiently even though, as I will argue, this is necessary for a better understanding of the text that goes beyond a mere sociological or political analysis. As such, I hope to reveal a different direction of research for Fuentes's novel and possibly his work in general, namely, how it questions and challenges common conceptions of the ontological status of literature.

One thinker who has asked the question of 'what *is* literature?' with infinite patience, care and precision is French critic Maurice Blanchot and, subsequently, this question has come to preoccupy a whole generation of French philosophers, thinkers and social commentators (Smock 1). The list of writers who have responded to Blanchot's emphasis on the question of literature is impressive and includes names associated with the most provocative intellectual developments, the ramifications of which are still reverberating in literary theory: Jean-Paul Sartre, Georges Batailles, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous amongst others (Smock 1). As Leslie Hill notes, Blanchot's intervention is fundamental since what changes with Blanchot is not merely a localised sector of the literary critical or philosophical landscape, "but the manner in which the relationship between literature and philosophy, writing and thought is articulated" (2).

According to Hill, Blanchot renewed the critical debate concerning the ontological status of literature and art in general and, in doing so, he challenged and displaced many of the basic assumptions that continue to inhabit modern philosophy and literary theory (4). Blanchot questions the presuppositions inherent in scientific methodology by focusing the debate on the nature of literature and challenging classical ideas about mimesis, language, and identity. For example, he identifies two forms of approaches to language which I will both explain in depth throughout this article, namely, the communicative and literary model. The first focuses on the representational function of language and how a message is passed on from one mind to another while in the latter, the message is interrupted and meaning suspended. As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's recently published book *This Thing Called Literature: Reading, Thinking,*

*Writing* (2015) demonstrates, the question of the ontological status of literature is still an ongoing topic of discussion in literary studies. In this book, Bennett and Royle re-examine the previously mentioned question of ‘what is literature?’ and reveal the complexity of both literature and literary study itself.

To demonstrate the self-conscious character of Fuentes’s novel, this article relies on one of Blanchot’s most influential essays, “Literature and the Right to Death” (1995 [1949]), in which he argues that death, language and literature are intrinsically linked. Blanchot connects death to one’s impossibility of reaching a fixed identity as well as the reader’s failure to reach the ultimate meaning of a literary text. For Blanchot, death constitutes the distance or space between the self and identity or a meaningful comprehension of oneself. In an analogous way, it constitutes the distance between the reader and the text. In this sense, death becomes a liminal space of the in-between: it is that which separates the one from the other, yet at the same time creates the condition for the possibility of potential engagement. Space here should be understood in the abstract sense of the word as something fluid and unstable; it is a state of change and movement. Thus, for Blanchot, death is a fluctuating and, consequently, opaque space. I will explore death as this space in-between and how this is represented in Fuentes’s novel by considering Cruz’s attempt at recreating himself through the act of remembering and narrating his life at the moment of his death. In this process, he fails to arrive at a coherent, unified meaning with which he could make sense of his existence, leading him to despair and suffer a complete loss of identity which is why I am using Blanchot.

While some scholars have suggested a link between Blanchot and Fuentes’s novel such as Bernard Fouques in his article “Carlos Fuentes ou la traverse de l’écriture” (1989), Blanchot’s liminal perception of death has not yet been proposed as a possible reading strategy. Nonetheless, as I will argue, Blanchot’s thinking and, more specifically, his analysis of death and its link to language and literature, offers another perspective on Fuentes’s novel that

surpasses the representative socio-cultural and socio-political discourse. Thus, this article aims to demonstrate that *The Death of Artemio Cruz* should not necessarily be analysed within a specifically Mexican context since it addresses themes and questions that exceed the latter and, in doing so, challenges the present-day academic discourse surrounding Fuentes's oeuvre. Additionally, the article intends to highlight Blanchot's ongoing relevance for literary studies.

As Stephen Adam Schwartz notes, "though Blanchot's emulators are legion, his critics are scarce" (19).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, understanding and, consequently, applying his thinking is not an easy task since his texts are very theoretical and abstract. While it is clear at the level of reading, it is fundamentally opaque at the level of comprehension which is why finding an adequate approach for his work is difficult. As Simon Critchley declares: "when writing on Blanchot, I confess that I feel very much in the dark, fumbling here and there for a thread" (35). Gerald Bruns agrees and concludes that there is no "method of criticism that one could bring to bear upon these texts that would lay bare anything like an underlying logic" (xii). Consequently, one could question Blanchot's applicability to something concrete such as Fuentes's novel. Nonetheless, in this article I will attempt to demonstrate the opposite.

When writing on Blanchot, Bruns opts for a "philological" method that works from the bottom up: it entails the concentration on bits and pieces of texts and moving from one fragment to another as best one can (xii). I will apply Bruns' "philological method" and have a close look at Blanchot's essay and his analysis of death, language and the question of literature. In doing so, I will explore the two above-mentioned aspects of self-consciousness in *The Death of Artemio Cruz* and how these can be linked to the omnipresence of death in the novel by applying Blanchot's thinking. To start off, I will analyse the link between death and the problematizing of identity in the novel after which I will move on to its literary self-consciousness.

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<sup>3</sup> As Schwartz notes, there are no book-length studies that approach Blanchot's thinking from a skeptical perspective. In his article "Faux Pas: Maurice Blanchot on the Ontology of Literature" (1998), he attempts to fill this gap by offering a more critical reading. Nonetheless, the article contains many shortcomings and does not succeed in offering an accurate representation of Blanchot's thinking.

## A Fragmented Self

The novel starts *in medias res* in a hospital room where Artemio Cruz wakes up after he has been unconscious for an undefined period of time:

Now I am waking up [...] I tighten my face muscles, I open my right eye, and I see it reflected in the squares of glass sewn onto a woman's handbag. That's what I am. That's what I am. The old man whose features are fragmented by the uneven squares of glass. (Fuentes 3)

From the beginning of the novel, Cruz is represented as a splintered self: his image is fragmented by the squares of glass on the handbag of his daughter Teresa. While watching his fragmented reflection, he tries to put the pieces together: "I am that eye ... I am that nose ... I am those cheekbones" (Fuentes 3-4). In that sense, the squares of glass become a broken mirror because of which he does not recognise himself immediately. The act of contemplating himself in a mirror comes back several times throughout the text and always causes a tension between recognition and alienation: Cruz realizes he is watching himself yet, at the same time, he is unsure about the identity of the person in the reflection : "It was a face broken by asymmetrical pieces of glass [...] spread out on three encircling mirrors" (Fuentes 5). Additionally, he does not seem to be in control of himself: "I close my eyes again, and I ask, ask that my face and body be given back to me" (Fuentes 5). It is as if he is no longer in control of his body and, consequently, of who he is. Thus, one could argue that the image of the mirror and consequent alienation, foreshadow and are part of the process of Cruz's eventual loss of identity.

Subsequently, Cruz tries to recall what happened before he found himself in the hospital bed: "I think about what I did yesterday, I'll stop thinking about what's happening to me now" (Fuentes 6). From this moment on, he starts tracing back his memories as if through the act of remembering, he hopes to regain control. Thus, he tries to comprehend who he was in order to comprehend who he has become. Nonetheless, as soon as he attempts to remember the past, he is transformed into *another man* whom he refers to as his double or twin:



This morning. Artemio Cruz. Not sick, no. Not Artemio Cruz, no. Another man. In a mirror hanging across from the sick man's bed. The other man. Artemio Cruz. His twin. [...] His double. Yesterday Artemio Cruz, the one who only lived a few days before dying, yesterday Artemio Cruz ... *That's me ... and it's another man ...* Yesterday ... (Fuentes 7; my emphasis)

In this passage, Cruz repeats his own name several times which immediately causes the appearance of this *other man*. The *other man* could be interpreted as an estranged or alienated part of Cruz's self which enhances his split identity. That is to say, Cruz is watching himself as if he were someone else, namely, his twin or double. This could be linked to the motif of the doppelgänger which entails the split personality of the protagonist or a dissociated part of the self (Faurholt), represented in Fuentes's novel by the "other man". I will connect this to Blanchot's analysis of what he refers to as "the destructive power of language" (Blanchot 30) – an aspect that needs further elaboration.

Blanchot argues that language only communicates meaning by erasing or negating the particularity of the object we are referring to when speaking. He gives the example of speaking about one's cat: when I say 'cat' in order to refer to my cat, the word 'cat' will never capture my cat in all its singularity – e.g. white with black spots etcetera – and, consequently, the word could refer to any other cat in the world (Haase and Large 30). Hence, the word abstracts the singularity of the thing which ascribes a destructive power to language: "speech has a function that is not only representative but also destructive. It causes to vanish, it renders the object absent, it annihilates it" (Blanchot 30). Consequently, language causes a distance from the reality of things or, differently put, a distance between the word and the actual object, hence the word and the object are separated (Haase and Large 31). Blanchot refers to the annihilation of the object as its (symbolic) death: language creates a void, that is, the absence of the real thing (Gasché 328). Thus, death in this sense should not be understood as the end of a biological life but, rather, as an absence or void.

Nonetheless, when speaking about my cat, the person I am speaking with will understand that I am referring to *my cat* and not the cat of, for example, my neighbour. This is because the absence of the negated object is replaced by the presence of the concept: the idea of my cat remains, hence the interlocutor will understand that the conversation is about my cat and communication becomes possible (Haase and Large 31). Thus, the destruction or death of a singular being in the name creates an absence that gives the possibility for *something other* – the concept – to arise (Gasché 329).

A consequence of this is that, whenever we say our name, we negate ourselves. Hence, the power to speak is linked to one's absence of being: "I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge, I separate myself from myself" (Blanchot 324). Thus, when we speak, we are transformed into something else, namely, the mere idea of who we are. This process of negation is represented in the previously quoted passage of Fuentes's novel since, as soon as Cruz pronounces his own name, he is transformed into another man: "Artemio Cruz [...] The other man. Artemio Cruz" (Fuentes 7). Indeed, Cruz pronounces his name in his mind and not out loud, yet the idea of a negative dialectic through language remains the same. Thus, he negates himself: he is detached or separated from himself and transformed into something beyond his comprehension Blanchot refers to as *an Other*. In other words, an Other refers to the transformed self or object after saying a name or word.

It is important to note that, at this point in his theory, Blanchot is referring to ordinary, everyday language. Later on he makes the distinction with literary language in which, as he argues, a double negation occurs of both the object and the concept because of which meaning is endlessly deferred. Strictly speaking, Cruz's words take place within the realm of the novel, hence his language could be referred to as fictional or literary language. This distinction will be elaborated on further on in this article yet, for now, we can consider Cruz's words and

consequent negation of himself within the first part of Blanchot's theory that focuses on everyday language.

As the image of the mirror at the beginning of the novel already suggests, it seems as if Cruz is hovering above himself, separated from his body. This separation is made explicit later on in the text: "I'm apart ... I'm dying ... I'm parting ... no, an attack, an old man my age can have an attack ... *not death, not separation* ... I don't want to say it ..." (Fuentes 262; my emphasis). As suggested above, on his deathbed, Cruz is separated from his body which enables him to look at himself as if he were someone else. Subsequently, the process of detachment as described by Blanchot is embodied by Cruz's dying figure. As will become clear in the next section, this process of detachment or separation is moreover present on a structural level since there is an interplay between the experiencing self (Cruz in the present) and the narrating or remembered self (Cruz's memories in the past).

Thus, from the beginning of the novel, language is linked to death and alterity: Cruz is dying and tries to regain control yet from the moment he tries to put together the pieces of the splintered reflection and pronounces his name, he is transformed into an Other: he becomes a mere abstraction of who he is and once was. It is important to note that Cruz's lost control contradicts the representation of his character as a war hero and powerful magnate which suggests that in death, one is stripped of all power no matter one's situation in life. As such, the drawing of the reader's attention to the nature of language and consequent negation (or death) of the self, constitutes the first part of the creation of Cruz as a self-conscious character who is actively reflecting upon the construction of his identity. That is to say, as soon as he starts thinking in words by narrating, Cruz realizes he is losing control which is enhanced by the distorted mirror and appearance of *the other man*. In the next sections, I will further elaborate on this and clarify the connection with the representation of Cruz's death.

## Mirroring Structures

In order to understand the relation between the experiencing and remembered self, it is necessary to have a closer look at the structure of the novel. The structure is triadic: it contains twelve sections consisting of triplets in which the narrative alternates between a first-, second- and third-person narration that, as I will demonstrate, each constitute a different part of Cruz's split personality. Additionally, each triplet is written in a different tense. Consequently, the structure follows a triadic pattern in which different temporalities and narrative perspectives alternate. In her essay "Memory and Time in *The Death of Artemio Cruz*" (2006), Britt-Marie Schiller calls the structure of the novel rigid: "visible on the surface, like a literary exoskeleton, at times even like a straitjacket over the narrative" (82). In that way, the rigid triadic structure maintains the tension between order and chaos in Cruz's mind as well as the narrative structure of the novel. Thus, the structure consists of three narrators (I, you, he) and tenses (present, future, past) that form Cruz's complex self.

The first-person sections are written in the present and could be interpreted as Cruz's experiencing self. At the beginning, these sections are fairly long and coherent yet towards the end of the text, they grow shorter and more fragmented until the *I* of Cruz's voice disintegrates and sinks into chaos: "I don't know ... don't know ... if I am he ... if you were he ... if I am the three ... You ..." (Fuentes 306).

In the second-person sections, Cruz is addressed by his "double" or "the other man": "Cruz is addressed across that gap in consciousness that makes the self into a relation but not yet a self" (Schiller 83). Thus, the other self who turns to Cruz is "not yet a self" or, differently put, it is a *suspended* self. This suspended self or identity is created by presenting the past as an imagined future: "And you will want to imagine yourself. Like an empty, wrinkled wineskin [...] But you will insist on remembering what will happen yesterday" (Fuentes 9). Nonetheless, even though he tries to remember, the voice of his other self makes him aware of the fact that

there are “things you want to forget by remembering something else” and that “you will detest the I, the part of your you that calls it to your attention” (Fuentes 9; 29). Consequently, the process becomes an agony: it is a confrontation with the choices he has made in the past and, as becomes clear later on in the novel, the impossibility of making sense of his life as a whole. Since Cruz is addressed by his double, these sections could be interpreted as his mirrored self or as a transition between the experiencing (in the present) and remembering (in the past) self.

The third-person sections are narrated in the past by a seemingly omniscient narrator and reconstruct past events in Cruz’s life such as his whereabouts in the Revolution, the comings and goings of his business corporations, his love affairs etcetera. Hence, these sections constitute Cruz’s remembered self or his memory and give outside information about his life which balances the interior dialogues of the present suffering self and the mirrored self (Schiller 83). Nonetheless, even though it might seem that there is an omniscient narrator recounting Cruz’s life, towards the end of the novel it becomes clear that, just like the other two pronouns (I and you), these sections also constitute a part of Cruz’s split self. Additionally, it is important to note that the narrated events are not presented in chronological order: the reader merely receives snippets with which he or she can complete the puzzle of Cruz’s life-story. Thus, like his broken reflection, Cruz’s whole life is presented in a fragmented way.

All these different sections are interconnected. For example, the narrated events in the third-person sections explain or fill in associative fragments or lines of thought in the second-person sections. Therefore, the transition between the different sections is often a repetition or echoes that move thought in associative patterns. Fuentes himself has explained this as such: “It’s a question of a dialogue of mirrors between the three people, the three times that constitute the life of this hard and alienated character” (qtd. in Schiller 84). Thus, the image of the mirror at the beginning of the novel is also present on a structural level and connects the three sections and the three aspects of Cruz’s self, divided by the three pronouns (Schiller 84).

Throughout the text, Cruz's mind and language degenerate progressively. Cruz himself seems to be aware of this; his death is approaching and time is running out: "Ah. No. I still have so many things to do" (Fuentes 156). He possibly means that there are still so many things to remember: "There isn't much time left for remembering" (Fuentes 157). Nonetheless, as the text progresses, he starts having trouble with his memory: "I survived. Regina. What was your name? No. You, Regina. But what was your name, soldier without a name?" (Fuentes 196). Regina was the name of his first love and the unnamed soldier was under his command during the Revolution. Thus, it becomes harder to remember, harder to narrate and, eventually, harder to survive.

In the final first-person section, Cruz's mind deteriorates into complete chaos:

I don't know... I don't know... if I am he ... if you were he ... if I am the three ... You ... I carry you inside me and you are going to die with me [...] the three of us ... who spoke ... I ... will carry him inside and he will die with me ... alone [...] We shall die ... You ... are dying ... have died ... I shall die (Fuentes 306-307)

At the end of the novel, Cruz does not know if the three voices – I, you, he – were him, or if he was none of them. Although the last sentence of the novel might suggest a unification of the three aspects of Cruz's self, in the next section I will argue that he is more divided than ever before at the moment of his death.

Even though Schiller's article is useful for a better understanding of the novel's overall structure and interplay between the different aspects of Cruz's split self, it fails to offer a more elaborate explanation. In the next section, I will complement her analysis by linking Cruz's lost control over his identity, enhanced by the structure of the novel, to Blanchot's analysis of death as an infinite process of dying.

## The Impossibility of Possibility

In order to provide a possible interpretation of the degeneration of Cruz's mind and self, it is necessary to understand the distinction Blanchot makes between the "two sides of death" (320): death (*la mort*) and dying (*le mourir*). Firstly, there is *death* as in *being dead*. Being dead represents a positive side of death: it allows for the possibility of gaining knowledge about one's life or, as Blanchot describes it, in this side of death "being is revealed as absolute" (Blanchot 320). That is to say, it is only after death that it is possible to look back at one's life and consider it as a whole. It goes without saying that this knowledge is only available for those who survive us yet what is important here is that death implies the completion of a singular life and a possibility to reach authentic self-fulfilment or fixed identity (Haase and Large 45). German philosopher Martin Heidegger has referred to this as the *possibility of impossibility*, namely, the possibility that all our possibilities will come to an end and our life or existence can be perceived as something complete (Critchley 68).

Nonetheless, even though he recognizes this aspect of death, for Blanchot, death does not constitute the possibility to give meaning to one's life or existence. In order to explain this, Blanchot introduces another side of death he refers to as *dying*. Dying entails a passive act of infinite dying that never comes to an end; it is no longer something through which we can authentically grasp the significance of our life, rather, it is something that wears us down (Haase and Large 52). In Blanchot's fictional work, this *other death* is often represented as an elongated agony in the form of an illness that does not hold the promise of deliverance, namely, the promise of reaching self-fulfilment or the possibility to give meaning to one's life (Haase and Large 53).<sup>4</sup> Blanchot reverses Heidegger's statement and refers to this second side of death as the *impossibility of possibility*: the impossibility of reaching finitude or, differently put, the

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<sup>4</sup> Blanchot was not only an essayist, he also wrote several novels.

impossibility of death as something absolute. Death is no longer a possibility that can be mastered, it is being condemned to an existence without exit (Critchley 32).

Blanchot argues that “death as an event no longer has any importance” (Blanchot 320). Individual death no longer means anything: we can no longer say “I die” since our death disappears within the bigger whole where *everyone dies*. Consequently, dying becomes an experience of insufferable anonymity: ‘I’ never die, but ‘one’ dies and it is in this experience of ‘one’ dying that we lose ourselves. Instead of finding in death the ground of our individuality in which we cannot be replaced, ‘our death’ is no longer our own but exposes us to the dissipation of ourselves because we are lost in the experience of ‘one’ dying. This causes extreme anguish since, behind the hope that death would make our life meaningful, lies the horror of ‘one’ dying which makes our life disappear into insignificance and meaninglessness (Haase and Large 53). Consequently, the experience of dying is the experience of an absence of meaning in which the ‘I’ disappears in the passivity of dying. Thus, one is forever dying in the sense that we cannot master or control our own death, and it is in this experience that the self is transformed into an Other one can never fully grasp; it is an infinite state of change and movement. In that sense, dying becomes a liminal space of the in-between: it is that which separates the self from finitude or fixed identity (Haase and Large 53).

Fuentes’s novel could be interpreted as a literary representation of Blanchot’s second side of death. First of all, as in Blanchot’s fiction, Cruz’s death is represented as a long, agonizing illness; it is an elongated process that does not seem to come to an end. Secondly, Blanchot describes the experience of dying as the *impossibility of possibility*, namely, the impossibility of reaching authentic self-fulfilment. Cruz’s divided self is clear from the beginning: his reflection is scattered in the squares of glass and he refers to his image as “his twin” or “the other man” (Fuentes 7). This idea runs throughout the whole novel yet is expressed most clearly in the last line of the text: “We shall die ... You ... are dying ... have died ... I



shall die (Fuentes 307). In other words, at the novel's close, Cruz loses all sense of identity. Thus, for Cruz, death does not hold the possibility of reaching authentic self-fulfilment: as the text progresses and his death comes nearer, his mind and language become increasingly degenerated until he loses all possibility to arrive at a coherent and unified sense of the self.

According to Blanchot, dying is an experience that permeates one's life at any moment. Death is one's past, one's present and one's future and permeates one's entire existence without promise of deliverance. This moreover resonates with Blanchot's notion of the impossibility of death: we can assume that Cruz dies at the end of the novel, yet his last words suggest otherwise. Cruz dies, yet at the same time, his death still lies in the future, hence it never comes to an end: it is existence without exit. In addition to this, there is no final stop at the end of the last line which suggests that Cruz's death is a temporality of infinite delay and suspension. Thus, Blanchot's analysis of death offers new insights into Cruz's complete loss of identity and establishes the first aspect of the self-conscious character of the novel: it represents Cruz's failed attempt to (re)create or (re)construct himself through his memories. Cruz, in this way, could be described as a self-conscious character who is aware of his own (failed) construction.

In the subsequent section I will explore how this first aspect of self-consciousness leads to the other, namely, the literary self-consciousness of the text: the novel does not merely reflect upon Cruz's incapability to construct a (new) self in order to give sense to his life as a whole, but moreover reflects upon and questions its own creational process and structure as language.

### **Death and the Text**

In order to elucidate the literary self-consciousness of the novel, it is, first of all, necessary to understand what Blanchot means by the double absence of meaning in literary language and how this relates to death. As explained, language negates the actual, individual concrete thing for the sake of the idea or concept of the thing. In literature, however, "the absence of the object is experienced as an absence" (Haase and Large 33): literature does not only abstract the

singularity of the thing in the word, but also the concept to which the word refers. Rather than referring to an idea outside the text, the text displaces meaning and cannot be stabilized in a single interpretation. This is due to the fact that the literary text's universe is different from ours and the object in the text does not refer to an external reality; unlike ours, the work's own world is infinitely open and allusive.

Thus, in literature, the absence of the object is not replaced by the presence of the concept. This double negation of both the object and the concept makes it impossible to reach one, ultimate interpretation: the text is an open space in which meaning is suspended, hence multiple interpretations are possible. Thus, literary language entails a certain ambiguity and opacity since the text resists definite or fixed comprehension. As Blanchot states: "literature is language turning into ambiguity" (341). Hence, the central or ultimate meaning of the text withdraws time and again from the reader (Haase and Large 34). This should not be interpreted as a nihilistic emptiness at the heart of the text. The absence of meaning is not the result of a *lack* of meaning. Rather, as Blanchot argues, there is an *excess* of meaning: the fact that the work is characterized by an infinite chain of deferred meaning entails that there is, likewise, an infinite chain of alternative interpretations (Blanchot 341).<sup>5</sup> Blanchot links this deferral of meaning in literary language to death.

He describes death as the ultimate ambiguity: when death – like any other word – negates itself, we are only left with a void since, as discussed, death is a vacant space of absence (Blanchot 320). Thus, Blanchot argues that death concerns the very meaning of writing because it is in the experience of literature that the two sides of death become clear: death and dying. Just like we will never experience the fulfilment of our existence, "the author never experiences the fulfilment of a book well done and finished" (Haase and Large 52). The text becomes *something other* neither the author nor any other reader will ever fully comprehend. The author

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<sup>5</sup> This idea was further developed in philosophical movements such as deconstruction by Jacques Derrida who was influenced by thinkers such as Blanchot.

might present his or her book as something that appears to be a success – e.g. the novel becomes a bestseller – yet as soon as he or she starts writing, the text withdraws; the language becomes ambiguous through which the authorial voice disappears and becomes anonymous since, in the end, not even the author can provide a final interpretation of his or her own work (Haase and Large 66). Thus, the absence of an ultimate meaning at the heart of the text is analogous to the absence of authentic self-fulfilment in death.

According to Blanchot, death gives rise to the demand of writing since “it is in relation to death that we first of all experience a feeling of dread, which relates us to a nothingness at the heart of our experience” (Haase and Large 51). Consequently, the author starts to write with the desire to deliver the *definite book* that would bestow his or her immortality or status as an author and, consequently, the dread of death would be overcome (Haase and Large 51). Nevertheless, in the process of writing, the author loses his or her power over the text. The author becomes a reader of his or her own text that, even though he or she has written it, resists interpretation (Critchley 35). For example, as soon as Cruz becomes aware of his impending death, he feels an urge to remember and narrate his life in order to survive: “Survive through memory before it’s too late. Before chaos keeps you from remembering” (Fuentes 57). The chaos could refer to the degeneration of Cruz’s mind and language because of which he fails to make sense of his life-story and falls into despair and oblivion: “The oblivion of finding you...the oblivion...of all that existed...” (Fuentes 265).

Artemio Cruz is merely a fictional author and not the actual author of *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, Carlos Fuentes, yet what becomes clear in the text is the relation between narrating and dying. Narrating and writing are analogous: the author starts to write in order to bestow his or her immortality as Cruz attempts to (re)create himself through the narration of his life and, in extension, Mexico’s social and political history before the oblivion of death

overtakes him.<sup>6</sup> The urge to tell one's life before death might be a characteristic of all (fictional) autobiographies yet is expressed and reflected on explicitly in Fuentes's novel. Hence, Cruz's life-story could be interpreted as an answer to death in a futile attempt to survive.

Thus, Blanchot argues that the experience of literature is analogous to the experience of dying: in the same way that one's fixed identity is out of one's reach, the centre of the text withdraws from both the author and the reader through which they lose all mastery and control over the text. In other words, through the process of writing, the authorial figure of the author symbolically dies (Haase and Large 51).<sup>7</sup> Hence, Cruz could represent a metaphorical or fictional author who literally dies in the process of narrating which leads to a complete loss of control since he loses all grip on who he is and was: as soon as Cruz starts his life-story, he is transformed into "the other man. Artemio Cruz. His twin" (Fuentes 7). Therefore, literature – i.e. writing and reading – is complicit with the experience of dying since the literary author dies insofar as the language he or she uses makes the authorial voice disappear behind the ambiguous language of literature. The fragmentation of syntax throughout the novel and the deterioration of Cruz's language draw the attention to the nature of language and, more specifically, the ambiguous nature of and alterity inherent to literary language. In this manner, the novel is implicitly self-conscious since it highlights its own creational process through the death of the symbolic authorial figure of Artemio Cruz.

As mentioned before, death constitutes the distance between the self and fixed identity like it constitutes the space between the author/reader and the centre of the text; hence, death becomes a liminal space of the in-between. Thus, the two self-conscious aspects of the novel – the creation of the self and creation of the literary work – are connected through death and the

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<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this paper I will not elaborate on the historical aspects of the novel. For further reading, I can refer the reader to *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Carlos Fuentes' The Death of Artemio Cruz* which contains several articles on the subject.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of 'the death of the author' was coined by Roland Barthes in his essay "The Death of the Author" (2010 [1967]). Even though Barthes does not refer to Blanchot directly, Blanchot's influence is evident.

way it is represented in Fuentes's novel. Additionally, the dying character of Cruz enhances the literary self-consciousness of the novel: he realizes he loses power over his own life-story in the process of dying and narrating.

## **Conclusion**

*The Death of Artemio Cruz* represents the death of a powerful patriarch who is stripped of all authority and power on his death bed. Whilst some critics such as Bloom and Brown have argued that the sole value of Fuentes's novel lies in a social or political reading of the text, this article has attempted to offer another possible reading that highlights the self-conscious character of the text. On the one hand, *The Death of Artemio Cruz* questions the possibility of gaining knowledge about one's life or existence by presenting Cruz as a suspended self; his fragmented identity and voice completely dissolve into chaos and the complete oblivion of death. Thus, Cruz is aware of his failed attempt at reconstructing himself. On the other hand, the novel reflects upon its own creational process which is enhanced by Cruz's self-consciousness. According to Blanchot, death concerns the very meaning of writing since the nothingness – death – at the heart of our existence gives rise to the demand of writing. In that sense, Cruz's loss of control over his life and being through the process of dying is analogous to the author's loss of control over his or her own text through the process of writing: his impending death forces Cruz to narrate since he believes this is the only way to survive yet, at the end of the novel, he disappears into nothingness. Subsequently, in Fuentes's text, death does not only refer to the biological end of life. Rather, it is a space of absence and uncertainty which relates back to the absence of meaning at the heart of the literary text as well as one's impossibility to come to a unified meaning of the self. Additionally, this article has proven Blanchot's applicability since his liminal perception of death offers new insights to *The Death of Artemio Cruz* that turn it into more than a political novel: it addresses other profound issues

that go beyond the socio-political discourse. As such, the novel contributes to ongoing discussions on the ontological status of literature as a phenomenon.

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