

Life, in Theory

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Abstract

Life in Death: Narratives of decomposition in science and literature

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Narratives of life, and of its cessation, are generally grounded in the notion of the individual as a 'physiological island', a self-contained entity that is identified with the 'organism'. Under this notion, death of the organism is constructed as an abrupt transition between one state and another. The identification of this transition is dependent on biological definitions of 'life' as a property of matter, but is also dependent on the definition of the boundaries of the organism. The organism, identified as the group of structures encoded by human DNA, is, in both cellular and genetic terms, a minority player in the human superorganism. Only 10% of the cells and less than 1% of the genes in the human superorganism belong to the organism, the other cells and genes being mostly bacterial. This human system is moreover a habitat for bacteria, fungi, and, depending on the circumstances, various invertebrate parasites.

Death of the organism and death of the superorganism are therefore not synonymous; the human biomass, no longer functioning as a coherent system, functions instead as an organic substrate sustaining a diverse heterotrophic food web. This food web, subject to the Laws of Thermodynamics as is any food web, is a medium through which matter is recycled and energy dissipates. The entropy of the organism-turned-substrate now increases and its energy content decreases, whilst the superorganism persists. The atoms which, for a brief time, were part of the organism disperse over the environs and into other organisms, whilst the other organismal components of the superorganism colonise fresh territories.

This paper examines the above in scientific accounts of decomposition, while drawing attention to the various obstacles – ethical, pragmatic and others – hindering the study of this theme, particularly where human life and death are concerned. It reserves significant space for consideration of Jim Crace's novel, *Being Dead* (1999), which is arguably one of the most powerful depictions in literature of decomposition and of the paradoxes of death-in-life, life-in-death. Its conclusions focus on interdisciplinary reflection on the manner in which decomposition is represented in literature, science and culture, and on the reactions which discussion of the theme occasions.