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"Lapsus Absolu": Notes on Maurice Blanchot's _The Instant of My Death_

Dying means: you are dead already, in an immemorial past, of a death which was not yours, which you have thus neither known nor lived, but under the threat of which you believe you are called upon to live; you await it henceforth in the future, constructing a future to make it possible at last—possible as something that will take place and will belong to the realm of experience.

—Maurice Blanchot, _The Writing of the Disaster_

It has always been risky to speak of the conceptual underpinnings of a corpus of texts—Blanchot's "oeuvre"—in which critical commentaries have not only accompanied and commented upon the fictional writings (the novels and récits) from early on, but in which these seemingly separate kinds of writing have increasingly interpenetrated each other to the point of becoming virtually indistinguishable from each other. Indeed, the greatest challenge of Blanchot's writing, for any philosophical interpretation, as much as for any other reading, might be posed by the more recent fragmentary meditations and récits in which the common distinctions between the genres of fictional narration, literary criticism, the philosophical aphorism, as well as of autobiography seem to have been all but erased. One of the most puzzling examples of this recent writing is Blanchot's _L'instant de ma mort_ (The Instant of My Death), published in 1994, and which is the main focus of this essay. It is in this recent text that one finds the elements of literature, philosophy, historical engagement, testimony, and, it seems, autobiography; the interplay, or rather entanglement, of these elements calls for a reading that is at once philosophically astute and sensitive to the text's apparent fictionality. This fictional status first appears in the curious role of the voice of the narrator and, as always, in the relationship between the "je" and the "il," in which one takes the role of the other, and indeed substitutes for the other. _L'instant de ma mort_ provides us with a meditation on the meaning of death, of its impossibility and of its necessity, its irreplaceability and its apparent universality. It does so in a short narration which, for all its singularity or idiosyncracy—suggested already by its very title—entails an oblique interrogation of the philosophies of death, from Plato [whose _dictum_ "For of death, no one has knowledge"] Blanchot had already quoted in the opening sentence of _Le dernier à parler_, the text devoted to Paul Celan] through Hegel and Heidegger, and others as well.

One of the contemporary authors on whom Maurice Blanchot has had a decisive and lasting influence and in whom he has arguably found in turn his most patient and formidable interpreter is Jacques Derrida. The work of Derrida provides us with an important key to the reading of the suggestive text of _L'instant de ma mort_, which, for all its brevity, conjures up not only an immense tradition of thought and an engagement with the forces of history, but also the depths of an inwardness that seems "indestructible" or at least marked by a sublime indifference, and that neither historiography nor autobiography can capture.

Derrida is one of the contemporary French thinkers who, together with Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Nancy, has paid homage and devoted extensive attention to the inexhaustible richness of Blanchot's oeuvre and, more particularly, to intricacies and indeterminacies of its literary, fictional or narrative, and critical challenge of the concept and the practice of genre. In addition, it could be argued that, like no other reader, Derrida has, from the outset of his career, insisted on the philosophical pertinence of Blanchot's writing to any responsible discussion of the relationship between literature and critical thought (not to be confused with the Heideggerian _Denken_ and _Dichten_2), and to any discussion of literature and critical thought in relation to the elusive notion that will interest us here. This notion forms the extreme limit—the end or, rather, the very beginning—of all narration, of discourse, and, if this could be said, of experience in general. In Blanchot's writings, as has often been noted, this peculiar notion is given different names, and the same name may evoke radically different associations, descriptions, analyses, and conjure up

1. Maurice Blanchot, _L'instant de ma mort_ (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994). Translations from this work are my own.

other names. But all of them, in some way or another, revolve around the nondialectical negativity of death or, more precisely, around the singular mode of our relation—dying (le mourir)—to this death, which never gives or presents itself to us, here and now, in any experience, or as such. It is in addressing this absolute singularity, whose very idiom even absolves itself from language—without, therefore, becoming unsayable or idiomsyncratic—that Blanchot, throughout his long career as a writer, has touched upon the central myths and theogonies of the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition as well as upon some of its most irreducible philosophemes. It is first of all in speaking of death—and in the wake of the death that, he argues, characterizes and enables all writing, especially the writing called literary whose privileged instance is the récit—that Blanchot enters into a philosophical dialogue with Hegel and Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida. Their work, I would argue, forms the philosophical backdrop against which to place the Blanchotian leitmotif that I will attempt to discuss here by drawing on merely one decisive insight of the recently published L’instant de ma mort.

Derrida has devoted several major analyses to Blanchot’s novels and récits. The most explicit and elaborate of these readings have been collected in Parages. This volume is in the first place dedicated to the intractable forms taken by such fictional writings as Thomas l’obscur, L’arrêt de mort, and La folie du jour. But other references to the more essayistic and theoretically or philosophically oriented texts of Blanchot abound, from Derrida’s earliest up to his most recent writings. The list of allusions to the name and the work of Blanchot ranges from L’écriture et la différence to Spectres de Marx, Politiques de l’amitié and Aporias. All of these writings, it could be argued, pursue the response to Blanchot collected in Parages. These extend Derrida’s reading well beyond the récits and address the whole spectrum of Blanchot’s other texts, from L’entretien infini (notably the essay “La pensée et l’exigence de discontinuité”), La part du feu (in particular the chapter “La littérature et le droit à la mort”), and L’amitié (especially the parts entitled “Les trois paroles de Marx” and “La facilité de mourir”), to name only the most significant examples. The latest of these readings is “DEMEURE: fiction et témoignage,” published most recently in Passions de la littérature.


Taken together, these analyses necessitate an interrogation of an intellectual filiation that no one could pretend to be able to reconstitute fully, here or elsewhere. Paradoxically, the first task of any such inquiry should consist in examining the difficulty, indeed the very impossibility, of determining a rigorous concept of influence, of intellectual inheritance, of translation, and even of interpretation. Such an examination might well establish that the complex, yet far from random processes that govern the relationships between authors and texts do not permit us to establish a simple, let alone unilinear, mode through which ideas are transmitted. For if there is any dialogue between them, it is characterized by transference and belatedness, among other things. This is the very structure of the leitmotif that interests me here: death, the impossible being toward the impossibility that is death.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Derrida’s Parages begins with a preliminary consideration of precisely this interpretive and analytical problem as it is encountered by any genuine reading of Blanchot’s work. This difficulty pertains to his fiction—novels and récits—as well as to the critical and philosophically oriented work that has accompanied these literary writings from the very outset of Blanchot’s career. They entail the suggestive effect of a writing praxis that resists the categories commonly attributed to the world of letters. Nonetheless, Derrida argues, they testify to a formalizable logics of singularity, of the singular, a logics that is at once exact and elusive, paradoxical and aporetic. And, it is precisely in their tendency toward a relentless formalism and impersonalism, Derrida goes on to suggest, that Blanchot’s writings acquire their surprising and often unsettling intensity.

This is nowhere clearer than in their fictional evocation and in their critical analysis of the notion, the figureless figure, and the impossible experience of so-called death. The most recent and most telling example of this preoccupation with death and everything for which it stands can be found in L’instant de ma mort. This text contains a host of indirect or oblique “references” to the modern philosophical traditions, references of the kind mentioned above. But it is also marked by what Derrida, in his most recent discussions of death or the being-towards-death, has come to term the “culture” and the “politics of death.” In this, I would claim, it departs from the long tradition of meditations on death, of the memento mori. Neither a reconciliation with nor an appropriation of death is attempted in Derrida here.
Given the limited space available in this context, I take my point of departure from a compressed citation that Derrida takes from Blanchot’s L’écriture du désastre and that can be found in one of the final notes to Aporias:5

Dying means: you are dead already, in an immemorial past, of a death which was not yours. . . . This uncertain death, always anterior—this vestige of a past that has never been present—is never individual. . . . Impossible necessary death . . . one lives and speaks only by killing the infans in oneself [in others also].6

Derrida’s elliptical commentary in this particular context is revealing and will guide this discussion of L’instant de ma mort:

Here as elsewhere one can recognize the reference to Heidegger, notably to the thinking of death as the “possibility of impossibility” [the well-known formulation from Sein und Zeit that Blanchot addresses in the same context, in a discussion of the specific case of the death called suicide]. . . . The apparent neutralization of this reference [neither an approximation nor a critique] deserves a patient and original treatment that we cannot undertake here. [Aporias, 87 n. 18]

Yet with reference to the earlier reading of L’arrêt de mort in “Survivre,” the main text of Aporias echoes this by recalling the leitmotif that interests us here and that, as Derrida reminds us, we find most


6. Cf. Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster, trans. Ann Smock [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986], 65, 66, 67. The figure of the infans is borrowed from Serge Leclaire. Blanchot explains: “One lives and speaks only by killing the infans in oneself [in others also]; but what is the infans? Obviously that in us which has not yet begun to speak and never will speak; but, more importantly, the marvelous [terrifying] child which we have been in the dreams and the desires of those who were present at our birth [our parents, society in general]” (67). I will not analyze this motif here, but only note that it allows one to engage with at least three related discussions: first, the one that Blanchot has in this very context with psychoanalysis, second, and more obliquely, with Heidegger, more precisely with the latter’s privileging of being-toward-death over and against a being-toward-birth that seems to be marked by an almost similar structure, by an analogous possibility of impossibility; and, third, more indirectly, with the very figure of the sacrifice of the child that haunts Derrida’s interpretation of the sacrifice of Isaac, of Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling, and, more generally, of the giving oneself (and others) death, in Donner la mort. In addition to “Pas” and Apories. I consider this text to be of crucial importance for any attempt—however provisional, as it is undertaken here—to unravel the enigmatic texture of L’instant de ma mort.

clearly expressed in L’attente l’oubli, Le pas au-delà and, again, in L’écriture du désastre:

When Blanchot constantly repeats—and it is a long complaint and not a triumph of life—the impossible dying, the impossibility, alas, of dying, he says at once the same thing and something completely different from Heidegger. It is just a question of knowing in which sense [in the sense of direction and trajectory] one reads the expression of the possibility of impossibility. [Aporias, 77, my emphasis]

Death, the impossible experience and endless agony of death, forms the subject of many of Blanchot’s novels and critical essays. Thomas l’obscur, L’arrêt de mort, and Le dernier homme, no less than the studies on Mallarmé and Rilke collected in L’espace littéraire, abound in analyses of the modification of time and space in light of the relation toward a death that seems unable to arrive—or to be experienced—as such.7 Speaking of the arrêt de death, Blanchot evokes this paradoxical, indeed aporetic, structure by suggesting that one’s being sentenced to death does not exclude but, on the contrary, presupposes the suspension of its actual arrival. More precisely still, death does not stop to arrive. Yet a death that at every instant goes on to arrive never arrives as such. Put otherwise, its arrival as such retains an element or structure of ineffaceable delay or postponement. Its distance is a measure of its imminence, it retreats the more one comes near to it.

What to think, then, against the backdrop of this well-known schema, of the title and the content of Blanchot’s récit entitled L’instant de ma mort? Does this title seem to contradict all the central features that had dominated the earlier writings? Does it not bid farewell to the endless analysis of an indefinite, it not necessarily infinite, suspension of death, an analysis that would seem to undermine the very evocation, in the title and the text that interest us here, of an apparent punctuality of the notion rather than the concept of the “in-

7. Many excellent analyses have been devoted to the relationship between literature, philosophy, writing, and death. See, for example, Anne-Lise Schulte Nordholt, Maurice Blanchot. L’écriture comme expérience du dehors [Geneva: Droz, 1995], chapters 2 and 10; John Gregg, Maurice Blanchot and the Transgression of Literature [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994]; chapter 3; Evelyne Londyn, Maurice Blanchot. Romancier [Paris: Editions A. G. Nizet, 1976], chapter 1; Françoise Collin, “Arrêts de morts,” Magazine littéraire 197, special issue on “La littérature et la mort” [July/August 1983]: 34–38, and Collin, Maurice Blanchot et la question de l’écriture [Paris: Gallimard, 1971], notably 120 ff. and 190 ff., to name only a few examples. None of these authors, however, was able to address L’instant de ma mort.
stant” and *a fortiori* of the concept or, again, the notion of “death” and “dying” in the sense Blanchot has given to these apparently all too familiar words? Can there be an “instant” of death, especially of *my* death, of which I can be the witness or to which I myself can testify, in the present, here and now, or after the fact? Can this “instant” be anything else but always—and always already, from birth and earlier on—in coming, at least *for me*: an “instant forever pending,” that is to say, “en instance”? Moreover, does the phrase *ma mort* not undercut the very impersonality of the experience of death, which nonetheless continues to subtract itself from any relation between a preestablished or fixed subject that could be said to “be” and its supposed destination, termination, and nonbeing? In other words: how does the text of *L’instant de ma mort* situate itself with respect to the Heideggerian description of death in terms of anticipation or *Vorlauf*? to be distinguished from the expectation of a determinable event, an anticipation, moreover, characterized by an indelible mineness or *Jemeinigkeit*, rather than by *le neutre*.

The structure of the relation to death or, as Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, to our being-towards-death, is one of waiting, awaiting, expectation, and anticipation alone. Or so it seems. For some essential conceptual differentiations have to be made here. They all revolve around the understanding of the most paradoxical or even aporetic features of the “waiting” that all thinking and all experience tend to suppress and forget. It is precisely to these features that Blanchot already points in his contribution to the *Festschrift* for Heidegger’s seventieth birthday, published in 1959, in a short text entitled “L’attente” and later included in his *L’attente l’oubli*. And *L’instant de ma mort*, whose *récit* we are about to read, follows a similar path—similar also to the ones taken by *L’arrêt de mort* and *L’écriture du désastre*—in that it sets out our common interpretation of time, of human temporality, both in its vulgar [objective, historical] sense and, I would add, in its supposedly originary, ontological sense (as defined by Heidegger in the Second Division of *Being and Time*). Some indications may suffice to make this clear.

If the voice of the narrator recalls that the young man who undergoes the near-execution is “still young,” then the subsequent interrupted experience and the haunting character of this event or non-event is a process of sudden aging or *vieillissement*, to use the phrase to which Levinas has given new philosophical significance. This apparent detail is not without relevance for the general argument here. Whereas *Being and Time* invokes the saying that as soon as man is born he is old enough to die—“Sobald ein Mensch zum Leben kommt, sogleich ist er alt genug zu sterben”10—Blanchot’s *récit*, by contrast, strikes an almost Levinasian tone by implying that man is—like the unlucky sons of the farmers—either *too young* (that is to say, *not old enough*) or, conversely, *already too old* to die. One never dies on time. While one dies at some time or another, one never dies in a timely way or, indeed, in time. More generally speaking, the text of *L’instant de ma mort* can be read as an exploration of the untemporality, or atemporality, or countemporality, of the instant, that is to say, of the instant of death or, as we shall soon see, of the very *instance* and instantiation of this instant. For while it is clear that the text seems to be centered around a few incisive historical dates [1807 and 1944], and in fact displays an almost comic excess of chronological detail—e.g., in its portrayal of the family of the young man: “the aunt [94 years old], his much younger mother”—the scene that is evoked or remembered is also one of detemporalization. Thus, the still young man is said to age or grow old overnight. By contrast, the Germans who make up the firing squad at the very moment when the forces of the *maquis* intervene are depicted as frozen, immobilized, when the *arrêt de mort*—the undeclared death sentence—comes to a halt (arrêt). What is arrested is time alone.11 In addition, there is a general insecurity on the part of the voice of the narrator (or ascribed to the main protagonist of the narration) with respect to the time that has elapsed between the different actions and situations that punctuate the story. As a consequence, the *récit* seems to provide us with what are finally conflicting indices concerning the time taken up by the course of the events that are related. Let me give yet another revealing example. It is in the woods that the voice of the narrator says:

Suddenly [tout à coup], and after *how much time* [après combien de temps] he found a sense of the real. Everywhere, there was fire, a sequence [une suite] of continuous [continuel] fire, all the farms were burning. A little later [Un peu plus tard] he learned that three young

8. See also Derrida, “DEMEURE,” 34.
9. See also Derrida, “DEMEURE,” 38.

men, sons of farmers, who had been strangers to the struggle, and whose wrong was only their youth, had been slain.

Even the swollen horses, on the road, in the fields, testified to the fact that a war had raged for some time [avait duré]. In fact, how much time had elapsed [combien de temps s'était-il écoulé]? [L'instant de ma mort, 13, my emphasis]

Even while the face-to-face with death inspires a sudden, unanticipated sentiment of “lightness” and “extasis,” this mood is less an appropriation of the young man’s being-there than a freedom from being. More significantly, it is presented as the momentary—or, rather, less than momentary and immediate because intemporal and non-dialectizable—flight from the very weight that life, the war, and the responsibility for others (in the first place for the family in the castle and for friends in the resistance) impose. Thus, the “instant” of evasion is not only followed by the “instant” of the return to the world of affairs, the two instants are, in a sense, one and the same. As in the Platonic parable of the cave that is related in the Republic—the philosophical counterpart, if one can say so, of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, analyzed in L’espace littéraire—the care for the soul, of that soul, that is, in its very preoccupation with death, is in essence an uplifting yet binding movement of ascent—and a return to light and life—followed by the equally binding movement of the soul in its descent back into the dark. The young man steps forward out of the castle, faces his death, only to disappear in the woods. What thus comes to interrupt the everydayness of his experience does not spare him from rediscovering this everydayness in an even more disconcerting manner than ever before. Yet, the return of what the words of the narrator describe as le sens du réel is not so much the real in an empirical, ontic, or historical sense, let alone the real of which much is made by Lacanian psychoanalysis. It is a heightened and irrefutable sense of responsibility, of a responsibility even or especially for those who are not one’s direct concern, one’s relatives or neighbors, but whose sociopolitical status is unmistakable. The three young men from the country who die instead are those whose only “wrong” [tort] had been their age and, it would seem, their class. The “torture of injustice” that the one who lives on suffers, from this moment on, is grounded in the mere fact of his living on alone, which, it should be added, is also the condition of his testimony and of testimony in general ["DEMEURE," 33–34]. De facto and de iure his life takes the place of theirs. That also is the mistake made by justice, “the error of injustice” [L’instant de ma mort, 7], of which the narrator is immediately reminded (even though this error is mentioned only after the dying [mourir] of the still young man which has been prevented by death itself [la mort même], that is to say, by the “sentiment of lightness” but also—perhaps [peut-être]—by death of the others). No ecstasy of death and, at the same time, more of this ecstasy—Plus d’extase—both characterize the existence and the conscience of the one who had been given death, were it not for the intervention of others, and who gives death to others, in turn. Young men take the place, in this narration, of the feminine figures whose agonies and corpses populate Blanchot’s novels and récits. Here, in L’instant de ma mort, the women are spared and move silently back into the house, “a long and slow cortège, silent, as if everything had already been accomplished” [L’instant de ma mort, 10].

In all this the opposition between the castle, a designated place of exception and social distinction, or between what is called the castle [le Château, disait-on], and what surrounds it is crucial. It reinscribes the seemingly abstract, existential, and ontological problem of death and finitude into what Derrida will come to call the culture and the politics of death.12 Without ever raising the issue directly, the récit makes one wonder whether the young farmers have sensed the same lightness when confronted with their death or whether even this very sentiment that is supposed to signal a step beyond being and not-being, beyond life and death, is not itself already tainted or prejudged by social privilege. Il faut bien mourir. Derrida writes in Aporias, a formulation

12. Two further observations should be made here. First, it is no accident that it is precisely in Blanchot’s reading of Franz Kafka that the relationship between writing and death is analyzed. And the direct or oblique reference to the latter’s second major novel, The Castle, is never absent here. In the second place, it is tempting and, I would add, imperative also to treat Derrida’s well-known reading of Kafka’s “Vor dem Gesetz” ["Before the Law"], in "Préjugé—devant la loi," as a reading avant la lettre—more precisely, after Parages but well before Aporias and “DEMEURE”—of L’instant de ma mort. Conversely, Blanchot’s récit can be considered as an instantiation or re-instantiation of the formal schemata, if one may say so, that Derrida’s reading puts in place. "Préjugé," at least as much as L’instant de ma mort, is a thorough, some would say fatal, rearticulation of the existential analytic of the being-toward-death in light of a relentless exposure of its inherent aporias. Interestingly, the evocation of an endless deferral of waiting, as in the case of the man from the country in Kafka’s parable, and of instant en instance, forever pending, comes down to the same: in both places it indicates the relation-without-relation to death. Perversely, they each say the same thing as Heidegger and something completely different.
that brings into play all the ambiguity of the necessity of dying [one has to die anyway, one way or the other] and the need or desire of dying well expressed by so many discourses de bene moriendi. Il faut bien mourir, but, we might add, not everybody dies as well. The death, then, whose instant is related in this L’instant de ma mort, is perhaps not just any other death, it is hardly the death of everyone. It is a guilty death, albeit not as a general rule or universal quality, but in the singularity of my death. Blanchot touches here upon the logic of substitution that is developed in the later writings of Levinas, which center around the enigmatic phrase that speaks of ma substitution, in the middle chapter of Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence.13

In saying this, however, we have reached the point where a Levinasian récit—or, for that matter, a Levinasian reading of Blanchot’s récit—must presumably also come to a halt since there is nothing more to say.14 Such a reading could not but affirm the most cynical note on which Blanchot’s text seems to conclude—“That was it, war: life for some, death for others, the cruelty of assassination” (L’instant de ma mort, 16). What is more, it could not but locate whatever remains other in the other (autrui) and the Other [the trace of “God” left in the face of this other] alone. For the narrator of L’instant de ma mort, by contrast, something else remains as well. It is here that, in spite of its essential untranslatability, the “infinite” seems to open itself in the first place (or for the first time). What remains is an interiorization and introjected “death” in relation to which—or, paradoxically, in comparison to whose immeasurability—the first death, no less than the ones to come, loses much, perhaps all, of its ontological privilege:

Neither happiness, nor unhappiness. Neither the absence of fear and perhaps already the step [not beyond] le pas au-delà. I know, I imagine that this unanalyzable sentiment changed what remained to him of existence. As if the death outside him could not but clash with [or find itself limited by] the death inside him. “You live. No, you are dead.”15


Contrasting the death inside and the one outside, overcoming or counterbalancing the latter with the help of the former, and this to the point of erasing—giving death to—their very distinction, all this comes down to the repetition of a classical topos. It is the topos of the memento mori that informs a whole tradition from at least Plato through Christianity up to Heidegger. This, it would seem, is the only thing that remains and the sole thing that counts:

What remains is solely the sentiment of lightness which is death itself or, to put it more precisely, the instant of my death which is from now on always pending [en instance]. [L’instant de ma mort, 20]

It should be noted that the voice of the narrator does not project this mode of relating to death—or as dead—onto an ontological and originary modality of being there or existence. Not only is the mode in question one that never comes into its own and, as a consequence, remains forever in suspension, imminent or, more precisely, en instance. The new mode of relating to death is also opened up by an event that, for all its historical specificity, apparently never took place as such or whose actual violence was first of all or in fact inflicted upon others. Moreover, everything here is a matter of memory, of the power of recollection. It is no accident that the sole capitalized words—“I REMEMBER” (JE ME SOUVIENS) [L’instant de ma mort, 7]—mark the very beginning of the récit, which struggles throughout with the distinction between the “essential” and the “empirical” [L’instant de ma mort, 15]—a distinction that, as the text ironically states, was still possible for a Hegel—only to resign by stating that, in the end, subtleties of this kind matter little: “Qu’importe.” What remains is what remains alone—trauma, if one wishes, but the concept as well as its psychoanalytic reverberations are conspicuously absent here, as if they were still too comforting, too serious, too schematic also, for the understanding [without understanding] of what is at issue in the “sentiment of lightness,” that is to say, of that which alone remains, as it were, as our [mine, his] sole habitat [seul demeure]. And yet, it is in spite of [or thanks to] its very elusiveness that what remains “is” from now on also something “indestructible”.

Man is indestructible and . . . can none the less be destroyed. This happens in affliction [malheur]. In affliction we approach the limit
where, deprived of the power to say “I,” deprived also of the world, we
would be nothing other than this Other [Autre] that we are not.16

We can now understand—again, without fully understanding, for
an aporia, especially this aporia, the sans issue of death, marks pre-
cisely the limit (in Levinas’s words, the sans réponse) of all understand-
ing—why Derrida’s assertion that Blanchot “says at once the same
thing and something very different from Heidegger,” gives an exact
description of the difficulty of situating Blanchot vis-à-vis Heidegger,
in particular where the question of death is concerned. Derrida writes,
we recall:

When Blanchot constantly repeats ... the impossible dying, the impos-
sibility, alas, of dying, he says at once the same thing and something
completely different from Heidegger. [Aporias, 77, my emphasis]

As a matter of fact, the passage goes further by adding a minor qualifi-
cation that makes all the difference in the world. Or so it seems.
Derrida continues:

It is just a question of knowing in which sense (in the sense of direction
and trajectory) one reads the expression of the possibility of impos-
sibility. [Aporias, 77]

If one reads the expression in the sole way Heidegger would have ap-
proved of, namely as the formal indication of Dasein's innermost and
utmost possibility, as the possibility that alone allows Dasein to appro-
priate itself—all by itself and first of all for this very self that it poten-
tially is—then Blanchot says indeed “something completely different
from Heidegger.” The death of which our text speaks is, in spite of its
title, irreducible to the structure of mineness and appropriation articu-
lated in Being and Time. This is an almost ironic response to Derrida’s
intriguing assertion, noted above, that il faut bien mourir, one must die
all right, and which suggests that, while everybody must die, not every-
one dies as well as everyone else.

If, on the contrary, the relation to death is the relation to a possi-
bility that is experienced as impossibility, that is to say, not experi-
cenced at all (or properly speaking, if death marks the limit of both the
actual and of the possible or of possibilization as long as it is thought as
an actual or actualization to be (or to come), and if death is thus itself or
as such never faced, directly or indirectly, frontally or obliquely, liter-
ally or figuratively, by myself or in others, if this is what one can make
Heidegger say by reading him against the grain, perversely, apoph-
tically—then Blanchot does indeed say “the same thing” as Heideg-
ner. On this reading, the proper death is at the same time the least
proper, the least appropriable, and the one that is already invaded—
and, indeed, haunted—by the actual or possible death of others (in-
cluding the other that the “I” is to itself.

The instant of death, thus encountered, however, is also and at once
an instant death, the death of death, death to death, death without
death, a being always already one step beyond death, a “being,” if one
can still say so, that is otherwise than the being-towards-death and
other than the being toward the death that is mine. Perhaps this is
precisely what the final words of L’instant de ma mort seek to convey
or evoke: the instant as instance, the instance qua instance, names the
structure and the aporia of what does not let itself be appropriated, of
what does not properly belong to anyone, of what is proper to no one,
and therefore, in a sense, the property of no one, of nobody, personne.
Death, then, the relation to death, to a death that has not yet taken
place or that has taken place in others or in myself as the other alone,
could be said to “be” the very “event” of singularity. But this
singularization, which is a singularization of the self in the very deter-
mination of its mineness, is one that, in turn, singles nothing out.
Nothing, or, rather, almost nothing is singled out. Neither Dasein in
its resoluteness, as Heidegger would have it, nor the self made respon-
sible to the point of alienation and being hostage of and for the other, as
Levinas suggests, exhausts the meaning or, rather, the meaningless-
ness of this nothing or almost nothing that the récit singles out as the
realm in which everything else may appear or not, disappear or not.

This indécision, it seems, plays itself out between the very title of the
narration, L’instant de ma mort, which would seem to affirm the
structure of mineness—ma mort, confirming both the structure of
femeinigkeit, according to Heidegger, and that of ma substitution,
according to Levinas—and the text “itself.” For in this last, the familiar
transition from the “I” to the “he” is respected whenever the subject of
the imminent death is at issue. The voice of the narrator substitutes
the voice of the soon-to-be-dead and hesitates to speak in his place:

sation, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 130.
happy, by the way)—sovereign drunkenness? The encounter with death and of death [La rencontre de la mort et de la mort]? [L’instant de ma mort, 10]

The indecision or twilight of Being and beings, of selves and others—an indecision that is signaled even by the ambiguity of the different possible intonations of the le sais-je (suggesting “do I know?” or “do I know!” and the affirmative “do I know!” or “who else would know besides or better than myself?” respectively)—is inaugurated by that most enigmatic of Blanchotian phrases, namely that of the pas au-de-là. This “step (not) beyond” evokes not only the not yet dead, the living, the no longer simply living, the living on, the haunt, etc. It describes the very mode [not modality] of the instant qua instance in which an “I” is and is not death, ontologically, existentially, and semantically speaking.

In his place, I will not attempt to analyze this sentiment of lightness. He was perhaps suddenly invincible. Dead—immortal. Perhaps ecstasy. Much rather the sentiment of compassion for suffering humanity, the happiness of being neither immortal nor eternal. From now on, he was linked to death, by a surreptitious friendship. [L’instant de ma mort, 11]

Death and dying are, from here on, the “silent companion” of all speech and of all agency: the instance of an “originary affirmation” as much as of a passion, more passive than any passivity. It is precisely because of this ontological and linguistic indeterminacy that only one last option remains—or, in fact, is necessary: that of testimony or attestation. This might well be what it means to respond to an impossibility (“répondre à l’impossible” is the expression adopted in L’entretien infini). It has been noted that this responsibility vis-à-vis the impossible is also an impossible, paradoxical, and aporetic, responsibility, one that is possible to the extent that it is impossible and vice versa. In this it resembles the very structure of death, of being toward the anteriority, the immemorial pastness, rather than some imminent yet indistinct futurity called death. In the terminology of The Writing of the Disaster:

Impossible necessary death: why do these words—and the experience to which they refer [the inexperience]—escape comprehension? . . .

Thought cannot welcome that which it bears within itself and which sustains it, except by forgetting. [67]

To use a Kantian formulation: what is comprehensible is this incomprehensibility alone, not what it stands for, the incomprehensible “itself.” This singular “fact,” not of reason but of an existence without or beyond existence in the very ontological determination that is typified and revolutionized by the Heideggerian existential analytic of Being and Time: it is this bare fact and nothing else that will remain what Blanchot calls “indestructible.” Yet this “indestructible” is neither a new existential mode nor an always already there. It only comes into being—without, however, ever attaining this being as such—on the basis of an event that it outlives. Its survie, its being more and other than life [that is to say, more and other than mere life] is founded by an act of testimony, by an attestation, whose ontological status is uncertain, warranted by this testimony alone.

The word “indestructible” doesn’t appear in the text. However, this word may well serve our purpose to clarify what is at stake in L’instant de ma mort and enable us to establish a certain continuity between this quasi-autobiographical fiction and some of the so-called critical writings that have preceded it, that silently comment on it, that have made it possible, and that, in turn, are made possible or at least more intelligible by it. I am referring here to the remarkable first section from the chapter of L’entretien infini entitled “L’indestructible,” whose two parts are titled “être jui” (“Being Jewish”) and “l’espèce humaine” (“Humankind”), and published for the first time in 1962 in the Nouvelle revue française. Like “L’attente,” this text opens with yet another fragmentary phenomenology of waiting and of the intricate relationship between attentiveness and malheur (“affliction,” as it is translated, but surely also unhappy consciousness in the very Hegelian sense of this expression that is put to work by the Phenomenology of Spirit).

* * * *

Let me return to the letter of the text of L’instant de ma mort. It should be noted that the death of which this récit speaks is neither a so-called natural death nor, for that matter, a suicide [so often discussed in Blanchot’s other writings] but, on the contrary, a death that announces itself and, more precisely, threatens in the name of a specific culture and politics of death. The pending death, whose instant will forever transfigure the existence of the main protagonist of the narration, is not just any death. It is an execution, a failed, delayed and, finally, a delegated execution. And while the reference to the [unpronounced
and, perhaps, unpronounceable] verdict, to the death sentence, has always been a connotation of Blanchot's repeated use of the phrase *arrêt de mort*, its explicit articulation here in terms of war crimes is remarkable in itself. That the instant of death of which the *récit* speaks takes place [without taking place] in the context of the Nazis' war against France and the Allies, that this war, in its turn, conjures up the Napoleonic wars that would leave their mark on Hegel's philosophy of history—all this is central to the understanding of this text. And yet, while these references should be taken for what they are, as indices of an irreducible historico-political and, perhaps, biographical specificity or singularity, they do also have a broader relevance. It is almost as if the state of exception that typified the war here becomes the very measure and the central ontological feature of everydayness, of our always already being condemned to death itself. This generalization, or even universalization—the transformation of the *arrêt de mort* into an existential structure—could thus be said to qualify and transform the Heideggerian analytic of death (of my being-towards-death) by inscribing an almost Levinasian moment in it. Yet, I note that Blanchot says, *mutatis mutandis*, “at once the same thing and something completely different” from Levinas, just as he says “at once the same thing and something completely different” from Heidegger, from Freud, and, perhaps, from Derrida. Indeed, with respect to each of these authors, Blanchot’s own “position”—if we can speak of a position—no longer deserves the name of either “appropriation” or “critique.” For, as in the case of his translation of certain motifs taken from the traditions of Judaism, a certain cautionous should govern any reading at this point. And let us not forget: what is addressed throughout *L’instant de ma mort* is precisely the difficulty for the narrator to translate (tra-duce) the “sentiment of lightness,” ascribed to the main protagonist when faced with his imminent execution (or fusillade) (*L’instant de ma mort*, 16).

Now, does not this generalization, aside from respecting the historical specificity that it commemorates, also result in an irresponsible trivialization, that is to say, in the betrayal of the very singularity to which it seems to attest? No simple answer—other than “Yes and no”—is to the point here. Without a minimum of translation [and thus betrayal], historical singularity would be condemned to death and no longer speak to us, haunt us. Yet were a translation without remainder

20. Blanchot, *Le pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, [1973], 85; *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. and with an introduction by Lycette Nelson [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992], 60: “absolute slip.” I prefer to retain the French (and Latin) *lapsus* since it allows one to insert Blanchot’s text in the series of commentaries on originary guilt, from the Biblical myth, through Nietzsche’s genealogy, up to Heidegger’s formally indicative use of this phrase in *Being and Time*, to say nothing here of Freud and Levinas. Blanchot’s account of the fall (and the *Verfallen*) is different from each one of them. Or, more precisely, he says “at once the same thing and something completely different” from them.
21. It should be noted that this is also a central concern of the postface, entitled “Après coup” ["After the Fact"] that Blanchot added to [and superimposed on] the two
That the death of which L’instant de ma mort speaks is interrupted by chance,²² that it does not take place as such, by no means lessens its subsequent, momentary, and belated effect. As with trauma, we are indeed dealing here with an experience that is an experience without experience, that does not take place in the present, in some past present, or at which we are present, but that is always coming and therefore not coming at all or as such, and remains toujours en instance. And in the latter, the sentiments of elation and lightness are necessarily juxtaposed with an instantaneous return to the real and to an unbearable weight of guilt.

If the instant of which and from which L’instant de ma mort speaks is one that “is” always in coming, always to be instantiated and always its very own stand-in, then we are dealing with paradoxical and aporetic “logics” of the instant (of the “at the same time,” “at once,” and “each time again,” “always yet to come” or à venir) in which a tantalizing tautology and a restless radical heterology coincide or become virtually indistinguishable. The very singularity of “my death,” of an event that never comes into its own, that does not enter into an experience here and now—and that is therefore not “mine” in any rigorous sense—but continues to gaze at me at every instant, this singular singularity is one that never gives itself as such or once and for all but only as infinitely repeatable. Death is a shadow of itself. And this holds true as long as I continue to live, as long as I am bound to die, that is to say, always [or as long as the enunciation “I” in the first person singular or as long as its gestural equivalents continue to make any sense at all]. The instant of my death, more precisely, the instant qua instance, in its very difference from itself, expresses the alpha and omega of experience.²³ It says nothing and all. It describes the nothing of death as all there is or, conversely, rethinks everything that is in the light of this nothing.

Rather than being a hic et nunc that is determinable in time and space, the instant of which Blanchot speaks resembles the “no-time-lapse”²⁴ that Derrida, in The Gift of Death, attributes to the instant of the Abrahamic resignation to sacrifice or to give death to the infant that is his son. The instant of Abraham’s decision, Derrida recalls with reference to Kierkegaard, is “madness”:

“The paradox cannot be grasped in time and through mediation, that is to say in language and through reason. Like the gift and “the gift of death” it remains irreducible to presence and to presentation, it demands a temporality of the instant without ever constituting a present. If it can be said, it belongs to an atemporal temporality, to a duration that cannot be grasped: something one can neither stabilize, establish, grasp, apprehend, or comprehend. . . . [I]n the act of giving death, sacrifice suspends the work of negation and work itself, perhaps even the work of mourning. [The Gift of Death, 65]”

L’instant de ma mort addresses death in its relation, not only to the multifaceted and paradoxical temporality of the instant whose instantaneous character is that of a haunting instance, but first of all in so far as all of these are intrinsically linked with the question of justice or, rather, injustice. Even where “my” death is concerned, death is in the first place the death of the other, of others in this case of the peasants who are forced to take the place of the young man from the castle according to a logic that seems obvious to the German officer and the Russian soldiers alike and that determines the dialectical logic of history—as thought by Hegel, as enacted by Napoleon—itself).

Could this last aspect or concern be taken as an oblique indication of the often debated Levinasian turn to the format of dialogue or polylogue with the Other and the fragmentation of writing that can be discerned in Blanchot’s oeuvre from the publication of L’entretien in-

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²² See Derrida, Parages, 176–77. Somewhat earlier in this text, Derrida discerns a “temptation” of Blanchot’s writing in its tendency to develop a “logic” that permits one to say all and to do so out of the most singular and “calamitous” details (“tentation du côté de Blanchot: à partir de l’arrêt de mort, point de départ à la fois aléatoire et nécessaire, reconnaître une ‘logique’ qui permette de tout dire, dans l’arrêt de mort et ailleurs, jusqu’à l’élément le plus petit, le grain de sable, la lettre, le blanc, etc.” [166–67].

In the same vein, Blanchot’s preoccupation with the instant is hardly the return to the Greek nun that, as Derrida demonstrates in “Ousia et gramma,” is already infinitely more complex than the simple now to which Heidegger would seem to reduce it at times. The final words of L’instant de ma mort thus seem to invoke an instant that is neither a hic et nunc nor a thisness or haecceitas, but a singularity that singularizes beyond the individuum, beyond the “one” or the “I,” in other words, an instance that remains always on the verge of its own instantiation, that is “toujours en instance,” that is, strictly speaking, not, and therefore remains “indestructible.” We would be dealing here with a “subject-position” that can best be described in terms of “an instance [without stance, a “without” without negativity],” to cite a formulation used by Derrida in an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, entitled “Il faut bien manger.” The instance thus marks the resistance against time and temporality in its vulgar and authentic, improper and proper or kaiological sense—a thinking that characterizes so many of Blanchot’s other writings as well.

Not at a “triumph of life,” then, but rather an incisive articulation of the perturbation of the most unquestioned of all “border lines,” namely, that between life and death. This conclusion could already have been drawn on the basis of Derrida’s “Survive—Journal de bord,” the horizontally divided text that comments on two of Blanchot’s récits that are most relevant to any discussion of L’instant de ma mort, to wit: La folie du jour and, of course, L’arrêt de mort. The point of reference, if one may say so, in Derrida’s reading is Shelley’s The Triumph of Life, but much more is at stake than a loosely or merely associative commentary on this poem in the light of Blanchot’s texts. Derrida analyzes all the complexities involved in the phrase arrêt de mort, whose meaning is not exhausted by the ambiguity between the “halt” and “the stopping” of death, on the one hand, and the “death sentence,” on the other, but whose semantic effects urge upon us a careful reading of all the different modalities or, rather, traits of the “living on,” the survivre or survivre. Thus, Derrida writes,

29. The nun. Derrida argues in “Ousia et gramma” [in Marges de la philosophie (Paris: Minuit, 1972)], is commonly translated as “instant.” Yet, in Greek it takes the function of our word now [maintenant]. See Parages, 197.


27. Levinas, it seems, does not—or cannot—claim that substitution takes place, here and now or in some past present. The intrigue of responsibility is more complex than that and, in its very absoluteness, expressible by a hypothetical clause alone: if there will have been responsibility, it will have had the structure of substitution. But no one could say, speaking for others, let alone speaking for himself, that responsibility is to be seen in this particular instance. To say this is precisely what would be irresponsible.
Living on can mean a reprieve or an afterlife, “life after life” or life after death, more life or more than life, and better, the state of suspension in which it’s over—and over again, and you’ll never have done with that suspension itself.  

According to this reading, Blanchot thus comes close to what Roland Barthes, as Derrida reminds us in the concluding pages of “Les morts de Roland Barthes,” had indicated when he spoke of the “impossible enunciation” of the sentence that states one’s own death. Derrida cites an essay from 1973, titled “Analyse textuelle d’un conte d’Edgar Poe,” in which Barthes says of Valdemar’s famous phrase:

It is in fact a banality to enunciate the phrase “I am dead!” ... The reversal of the metaphor in a literal meaning, precisely for this very metaphor, is impossible: the enunciation “I am dead,” according to its literal meaning, is foreclosed. ... We are dealing therefore, if one wishes, with a scandal of language. ... We are dealing here with a performative, but one, to be sure, that neither Austin nor Benveniste had foreseen in their analyses. ... [The uncard phrase “I am dead” is hardly an unbelievable statement but much more radically the impossible enunciation.  

We would be dealing here, then, with an “absolute performative” or “perverformative,” to cite Derrida’s La carte postale, whose contextual requirements are never fulfilled. Dying is an impossibility for my being-there and the phrases “I am dead” or “I am dying at this very moment” make no sense at all. This is not to say that I live forever or that even beyond this present life I am supposedly immortal. The reason is simply that the name death indicates the very moment where an I can no longer take the word and speak for itself.  

This explains why Blanchot’s texts, in speaking of death, are marked by the transition from the first- to the third-person singular, substituting the “il” for the “ie.” It is as if—contrary to what Heidegger thinks—the event of death can only be grasped by analyzing the death of the other or, more precisely, by appropriating my own death as the death of an other; that is to say, by not appropriating it at all.

33. See Schulte Nordholt, Maurice Blanchot, 273.
interminable, recommencing below whatever negation of it may be undertaken. . . .

To Blanchot, death is not the pathos of ultimate human possibility, the possibility of the impossibility, but the ceaseless repetition of what cannot be grasped, before which the “I” loses its isopse. The impossibility of possibility. The literary work brings us closer to death, because death is that endless rustle of being that the work causes to murmur. . . . Death is not the end, it is the never-ending ending. As in certain of Edgar Allan Poe’s tales, in which the threat gets closer and closer and the helpless gaze measures that ever still distant approach [toujours encore distante].

Blanchot thus determines writing as a quasi-mad structure, in the general economy of being by which being is no longer an economy, as it no longer possesses when approached through writing any abode—no longer has any interiority. It is literary space, that is to say, absolute exteriority—exteriority of the absolute exile.\textsuperscript{35}

At times Levinas suggests that this death is more distant, farther out than any God ever was or will be. But it is also suggested that the otherness of death is otherwise than Being. Even if it seems to share with this Being an absolute neutrality\textsuperscript{36} (a dark light instead of the fluorescent luminosity of the clearing), it resembles at least the formal structure of that other otherwise-than-being-and-not-being that Levinas calls the Infinite or Illéité and that he introduces as the counterpart of the mere murmur of the so-called il y a.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{L’instant de ma mort} allows us to consider other encounters and confrontations as well. The most important of these is a certain resemblance to and departure from the traditions of mysticism and negative theology. To speak of an instant without instant, to address a death that is mine without therefore being appropriable in any rigorous sense of these words—all this is reminiscent of the discourses on death and God that characterize the tradition of apophatic, mystic speech. It may suffice here to recall that the logics of the sans, the without—mostly in the form of “X sans X,” “X without X”—resembles the very structure and abstractions of the \textit{via negativa}. As is well known, the formulae in question are used by Blanchot to circumvent the formal-logical and dialectical determinations and deployments of the concept of the negative. The Blanchotian rearticulation of this “negative without negative” should be distinguished from Heidegger’s rethinking of the “not,” the “not yet,” as well as of the \textit{Nicht}, against the backdrop of a more fundamental reconsideration of the “nothingness” that the latter terms the \textit{Nichts}. But Blanchot too recalls a certain experience of “night” and “dark light.” And while these central motifs pay tribute to the \textit{expérience intérieure} of Georges Bataille, with whose writings Blanchot was intimately familiar, they conjure up other references as well.

Thus, it could be claimed that \textit{L’instant de ma mort} occupies—envelops or opens up—the literary and, perhaps, no longer simply literary space that is inhabited by the writings containing Blanchot’s most explicit reflections on the Jewish tradition. Again, one is first of all reminded of “L’indestructible,” the section in \textit{L’entretien infini}—to which I alluded earlier—that considers the question “what remains?” in a way that anticipates the “instance” or the perennial re-instantiation of the “instant” of which \textit{L’instant de ma mort} speaks. Yet the way in which this motif is thus articulated against the backdrop of tradition also reveals some remarkable differences between this rearticulation and other attempts at establishing the logics of the instant or, rather, of instantiation. At times it would seem that, whereas for Blanchot (as well as for Heidegger) an ultimate possibility is given in and beyond the impossible experience of death, Levinas—and in his wake Derrida—goes one step further in rethinking the relation without relation between self and other. They do so by deconstructing even the nonempistemic certainty of whatever it is that remains. What remains, if anything, even less than a possibility, a potentiality or force of being or of being-there, less than a sentiment, less than a lightness, appears [as] “the indestructible.”

Finally, a certain continuity, or at least contiguity, could be established between this reading of \textit{L’instant de ma mort} in the light of “L’indestructible,” on the one hand, and Blanchot’s meditation on the giving of the Torah, in “Grâce [soit rendue] à Jacques Derrida.” In this contribution to the special issue of the \textit{Revue philosophique} devoted to Derrida’s oeuvre,\textsuperscript{38} Blanchot responds not so much to the former’s


\textsuperscript{36} See Levinas, \textit{Sur Maurice Blanchot} (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), 49.


\textsuperscript{38} Blanchot, “Grâce [soit rendue] à Jacques Derrida,” \textit{Revue philosophique} 2
incressant reflection on his own work, but to that which, in Derrida no less than in his own writing, with ever more persistence escapes and resists the parameters and, perhaps, the very element of Heideggerian thought. It is not an interpretation of Derrida that is attempted here—"how pretentious," Blanchot writes—but an invocation of a singular structure of singularity whose ethico-political or, rather, religious overtones demand a redescription of the “not yet” that governs Heidegger’s fundamental ontology or existential analysis of death. Not unlike the substitution of the toward-death with the à dieu encountered in Levinas and in Derrida, this rearticulation consists in a reinscription of the figure of death—indeed of its very instant—into the traditional scene whose singular and historically overdetermined nature is hardly fortuitous: the writing of the Tablets and the relationship between Moses and Aaron. At the surface this relationship would seem simply to illustrate the well-known theses that Derrida has advanced since the publication of De la grammaletologie and La dissémination, notably in “La pharmacie de Platon.” However, much more is at stake here.

What is interesting about this reading is that it establishes a formal analogy between the doubling of death and the doubling of the Torah, between the impossible phrase of the absolute performative of finitude—“I am dead”—and the absolute performative “I am who I am,” which the Biblical text reserves for God, for JHWH, alone. This is another way of saying that the structure of the instance of death, an instance that cannot be experienced or enunciated as such, extends itself well beyond the realm of human beings and finite history and into the auto-affirmation of God Himself. And this, in its turn, is another way of saying that human finitude was premised all along on the singular nature of what [or Who] has been deemed infinite, unpronounceable, secret, sacred, and, to that extent, precisely, indestructible. Speaking of the “indeterminacy of death,” in Aporias, Derrida suggests as much:

Fundamentally, one knows perhaps neither the meaning nor the referent of this word. It is well known that if there is one word that remains absolutely unassignable or unassigning with respect to its concept and to its thingness, it is the word “death.” Less than any noun, save “God”—and for good reasons, since their association here is probably not fortuitous—is it possible to attribute to the noun “death,” and above all to the expression “my death,” a concept or a reality that would constitute the object of an indisputably determining experience. [Aporias, 22]

For Blanchot, as for Levinas and Derrida, the towards-God, the à dieu, comes down to a towards-death, an adieu. This not only presupposes a kenosis of and vis-à-vis God [a motif Blanchot introduces at a crucial moment of this text], it also shows itself in the following meditation on Moses’s death:

It is sometimes said, in analyses of Deuteronomy, that Moses was incapable of telling the story of his own death, writing it [critical scepticism]. Why not? He knows [with knowledge that is never elucidated] that he dies through “God,” “on God’s mouth,” thereby carrying out a last, final commandment in which there is all the sweetness of the end—but an end that is hidden from view. The death that is necessarily in life (since Adam) “here does not take place in life” [Derrida]. And God, playing the part of the gravedigger [Levinas], in a proximity that promises no afterlife, buries him in a valley in the land of Moab, in an [atopical] place without place. “No man knows of his sepulchre unto this day,” which is what allows those who believe in superstitions to doubt his death, just as the death of Jesus will later be doubted too. He is dead, but “his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.” He has a successor, Joshua, but he also has none (no direct heir, he himself refused this kind of transmission). And there has not yet arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses. “Not yet.” The disappearance is without any promise of return. But the disappearance of the “author” gives even greater necessity to teaching, writing [the price prior to all text] and speech, to the speech, to the speech within writing, the speech that does not vivify writing which otherwise would be dead, but on the contrary impels us to go towards others, caring for the distant and the near, without it yet being given to us to know that, before all else, this is the only path towards the Infinite. [“Thanks [Be Given] . . . ,” 173]

In L’écriture du désastre, the most desertified of his writings, Blanchot suggests as much, once more referring explicitly to the work of Levinas, according to whom the other [Autrui] speaks to us from a dimension of height:

The death of the Other: a double death, for the Other is death already, and weighs upon me like an obsession with death. [The Writing of the Disaster, 19]
In a sense, then, the story of Moses's death—unlike the account of his nebulous Egyptian origin at which Blanchot hints without mentioning Freud's Moses and Monotheism directly—is read as the prefiguration of every death to come, of the structure of impossible anticipation that characterizes the to-come of each single death, of the other, and of myself as other (to myself), and thus as "the only path towards the Infinite." What Derrida, in The Gift of Death, says of Abraham, of the sacrifice of Abraham, of the moment of "Abrahamic renunciation," thus holds true for Moses as well. The adieu is the very form and content of the à dieu, and vice versa.

The sentiment that accompanies the face to face with death—and subsequently with the mortality of others—is, therefore, not only that of a freedom from or with respect to life, but, if anything, also that of "the infinite which opens itself" (l'infini qui s'ouvre) [L'instant de ma mort, 16]. Is it both or, on the contrary, neither of these two? L'instant de ma mort leaves the question unanswered. What remains is merely the neopistemtic certainty that there is neither "happiness" nor "unhappiness," nor, for that matter, an "absence of fear" here, but at best a "step"—and whether this step is actually (or potentially) a "step beyond" or "no step" at all [L'instant de ma mort, 16–17], must remain forever uncertain. What is certain is this very uncertainty, the condition of all speech, of all writing, of every act, whether commemorative or not, fictive or not, and, indeed, of every passion. The passage from L'écriture du désastre used as epigraph for this essay, and in which Blanchot challenges the common understanding of death in terms of an imminent threat and futurity—as a possibility, that is, that could or should be appropriated and mastered—thus continues:

To write is no longer to situate death in the future—the death which is always already past, to write is to accept that one has to die without making death present and without making oneself present to it. To write is to know that death has taken place even though it has not been experienced, and to recognize it in the forgetfulness that it leaves in the traces which, effacing themselves, call upon one to exclude oneself from the cosmic order and to abide where the disaster makes the real impossible and desire undesirable.39

Death and God, the "death of God," its instant or, more precisely, its being forever en instance, falling short of itself; both of these notions could be seen as the figures for an "absolute lapsus" that forms the matrix and the disaster [the birth and the infanticide] of all other instances where singularity translates itself into a generality beyond recognition. An "absolute fall," a "no-time-lapse," from which no return—no relief, no retrieval also—will ever be possible. What remains can hardly be remembered. Or, if it remembers at all, it remembers by forgetting and forgets by remembering, articulating itself all over again. Indestructible, it is at the same time [i.e., at no time] inappropirable. Improper death.

Death, then, the instant of my death, toujours en instance, is not an event that takes place only once and that is therefore unrepeatable and unique. Nor is it some indeterminate futurity or even futurity par excellence. It is first of all the "echo" resounding or the shadow cast in every word, in each gesture: "the figure of absence which haunts every figure" (Collin, 34). What is more, it is the figure of every relation to death, to the death of others, and to the instant of my death as radically other, that is to say, as dead, at the very limit of experience, of discourse, and of narration, including that of L'instant de ma mort itself.

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