

Death in Blanchot

One way to approach the question of literature can be through the relation of literature and death. The relation of death to literature can be seen as a threshold, as a limit that is set up for the act of literature to begin or from where it departs its endeavour. A possible relation between death and literature can be drawn to give a consistency to literature, to what it is and how it is brought about through trying to grasp the relation that it entertains with death as the limit. Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning. Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness.¹ From this very sentence we can start to get the hints of the importance of death at Blanchot's work. It is through the matter of a certain kind of relationship to death that a meaning for the written word can be grasped. This initially pops up from the necessary bound literature has with language. Language is the component of literature that raises the question that haunts literature and makes it seek what it can't attain still within the materiality of language. Literary act consists of several different stages contradictory within and between themselves. These stages are writer, writing(the work) and the reader. It is through the relation of these elements that we can approach the question of literature, not through their successive exclusion of one another but through their relation between themselves and within each part with death that come to effect what literature is.

To begin, we should start by expanding further what can be taken in our case from the term death, and what connotation Blanchot gives to death in his own thinking. The essential one, seems to be what he calls 'the impossibility of dying', which is the conjoining term that allows us to explain further his line that he uses to define the elaboration of literature which is: 'life that endures

¹ Maurice Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death' in *The Work of Fire*, pg. 151-152

death and maintains itself in it'². Other than these two expressions that will be developed further on, death can also, function as 'putting to death', as negation within the parts (stages) of literature that allows it to develop.

Death- Impossibility of Dying

To begin with, death is a limit that exists for all of us. It has a value as the threshold every existent shares in common. The living is mortal. For Blanchot, there is a possibility of death, the living is mortal, but at the same time because at the moment of dying, it is impossible to testify to such an act, it also remains as an impossibility of experience, the presence in the moment of death is not attainable. One can bear witness to the death of others but to grasp that unknown, to understand that thing that everyone shares in common, to experience it on a one to one level is impossible. And because of this it can serve as a limit that needs to be approached but never attained. This necessarily opens the space of dying, which is the space that we share through that impossibility of experience, we can only work within that space of dying where we can try to understand or give meaning to the thing that the limit gives us within the endeavour that we have in that space.

We can come across this movement in Orpheus's attempt to reach Eurydice in night. 'Orpheus is capable of everything, except of looking this point in the face, except of looking at the center of night in the night. He can descend toward it; he can- and this is still stronger an ability- draw it to him and lead it with him upward, but only by *turning away*³ from it. This turning away is the only way it can be approached.'⁴ Orpheus can try to grasp the presence of death but can only do so by bringing it back to the daylight by carrying on this act in that movement towards death, not by reaching the end of its goal. It can only grasp something of the death through the necessary detour.

² *ibid*, pg.150

³ emphasis added

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, 'Orpheus's gaze', in *The Space of Literature*, pg. 171

‘However, Orpheus’ work does not consist of ensuring this point’s approach by descending into the depths. His work is to bring it back to the light of day and to give it form, shape and reality in the day.’⁵ Death as the limit, the night which can be worked by Orpheus or the writer, and brought back to the day by giving it a limited contour (form) through the act that has been carried on in the space of dying. The night contains the endless possibility and to be able to grasp something of that possibility, there needs to be a selection that appears in the work. It is not by reaching the ‘essence’ that the work is brought about but by the approach, by the movement towards the depth where work can be produced. The writer, by producing the work puts an end to endless possibilities and then gives life to the work that contains something of the night, death but not the death itself. This impossibility of dying, shares a necessary commonality with the detour of literature that arises necessarily out of its bond with language.

Language- ‘life endures death and maintains itself in it’⁶

For Blanchot, language is bound up with negation from the beginning. The word, through naming a thing, neglects the being of the thing it names. It withdraws the existence of the thing to have it in the materiality of language as the word. It affirms its existence in the materiality of the language through this necessary negation it applies. Death is the term that occupies a relation with the thing, the living and the word that takes the thing’s place, puts it to death. The word existing in the world of language entertains a relation with death as its beginning, as the act that allowed it to exist. The torment of literature is the paradox that lies in the middle of the literary act, for it to start it has to put things in their material state to death to have them in language, but it does not content itself with this, and through and within the language it still seeks the thing before it existed in language as a word. It seeks the thing that it cannot attain, like the death as the impossibility of dying, which is the death that you’re willing to understand or experience in its moment, is that very thing that

⁵ *ibid*, pg.171

⁶ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ in *The Work of Fire*, pg. 150

you cannot grasp, it is not attainable, thus literature in a similar fashion seeks the thing that it is not able to grasp but comes to being through this search. Looks for the before of the word but what it can find in its place is always what is brought up to daylight by the negation exercised for the word to exist. What literature finds as the before of language is still the word that exists in the language, it cannot reach the existence, even though one of its aims is to reach the thing as the thing, as it is. It can only use language that subjects it to this impossibility to continue its goal. Thus it departs for the thing it cannot grasp and turns around within language to reach its goal. While we can say that the act of literature is necessarily carried out in the space of dying, it also allows us to understand “the life that endures death and maintains itself in it.” This phrase implies the immanence of death in life, of the end that gives the beginning in the case of language, as it was through the end of being that the word was brought about, literature continues the act of creating the literary world within/through that death.

Writer- the act of writing

The necessary torment of literature (which is also the question of literature that arises in it and that which allows it) carries itself within the writer, it is through the incorporation of the means of literature which is to pursue, what can also be called the condition of language after the negation, ‘life which endures death and maintains itself in it’, that the writer finds the way out for its own paradox. As Blanchot suggests the writer only affirms itself with the work it carries, not the ‘writing’ as the end product but the process of writing, the labour it practices. To be able to begin this action it starts from where literature starts, from its own question. According to Blanchot, the writer starts with the ambiguity of not knowing what he/she is set out to create, but starts nevertheless to be able to grasp this ambiguity that also lies in the heart of literature. ‘Writing is only a worthless game if this game does not become an adventurous experience, in which the one who pursues it, involving himself in a path whose outcome escapes him, can learn what he does not know and

lose what prevents him from knowing.⁷ The work, the written piece entertains another relation as a material thing accessible to the reader, the writer needs to take into account the fact that she needs to sacrifice the ideal of the work, as the written thing is now open to the reader, whom will animate their own readings from the written thing apart from the references that the writer has in their mind. This sacrifice of ideal of the work (ideal here referring to the idea one has in mind) does not mean that the writer abandons their thoughts, it is through their thoughts that the text is written; but it implies the intersection of the parts of literature, the fact that the writer does not write for the other, does not try to enter another subject's world, it necessarily creates another world but acknowledges the fact that this new world that comes to being through literature, through language is shared. The reader is another part of literature that the other parts intersect with. Apart from the inhabitation of the torment and also the endeavour of literature by the writer, that allows it to share the same threshold which is death with the other parts of literature; Blanchot mentions the other relation with death in the following: "In order to write, he must destroy language in its present form and create it in another form, denying books as he forms a book out of what other books are not"⁸ the writer also perform the action of putting the previous works of literature to death with the work she produces, the work created involves the exclusion of other works by being a new work in itself. It also retains the possibility of other works as Felix Guattari quotes Henri Lier, in *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*; 'every signifying architectural work grasps itself as able to be different to what it is. An abode is never the abode but it refers to the abode; it is one of its possibilities, appearing as such.'⁹

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, 'Gazes from Beyond the Grave', in *The Work of Fire*, pg. 244

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death' in *The Work of Fire*, pg. 145.

⁹ Felix Guattari, 'Architectural Enunciation' in *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, pg. 214

Reader- The act of reading

'Reading simply "makes" the book, the work, become a work beyond the man who produced it, the experience that is expressed in it and even beyond all the artistic resources which tradition has made available. The singular property of reading demonstrates the singular sense of the verb "to make" in the expression "it makes the work become a work." The word make here does not designate a productive activity. Reading does not produce anything, does not add anything. It lets be what is.'¹⁰ Reader, by the singular act of reading reanimates the work. The reader is not only exclusively related to the finished work but is necessarily held in mind of the writer in the act of literature as we saw previously on the writer section. The reader brings to life the writing, through the singular act of reading that he/she performs alone, and animates it in his/her mind, retains an image from the text, enters the world that literature prepares for him/her.

We mentioned already torment of writer that intersects also with the torment of literature, as they share the beginning, or the departure from the torment through the endeavour they perform within their torment. 'One can even suppose that the particularly strange relations between artist and work, which make the work depend on him who is only possible within the work -- one can even suppose that such an anomaly stems from the experience which overpowers the form of time, but stems more profoundly still from the ambiguity of that experience, from its double aspect which Kafka expresses with too much simplicity in the sentences we ascribe to him: *Write to be able to die -- Die to be able to write*. These words close us into their circular demand; they oblige us to start from what we want to find, to seek nothing but the point of departure, and thus to make this point something we approach only by quitting it.'¹¹

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot, 'Reading', in *The Space of Literature*, pg. 193

¹¹ Maurice Blanchot, 'Death as Possibility', in *The Space of Literature*, pg. 92-93

The Departure- The end

'I ordered my horse to be brought from the stables. The servant did not understand my orders. So I went to the stables myself, saddled my horse, and mounted. In the distance I heard the sound of a trumpet, and I asked the servant what it meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped me and asked: "Where is the master going?" "I don't know" I said, "just out of here, just out of here. Out of here, nothing else, it's the only way I can reach my goal." "So you know your goal?" he asked. "Yes," I replied, "I've just told you. Out of here- that's my goal."¹² This short story of Kafka, resumes perfectly the driving force of the endeavour of literature, literature starts from its question that lies in the heart of it, it performs its actions in the space of impossibility. It understands its impasse as the way it can pursue to understand what it is, and that allows it to begin and re-begin, that which gives it the possibility of its endeavours.

¹² Franz Kafka, 'the Departure', in *The Complete Short Stories*, pg.449

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