



## Death and Authenticity Reflections on Heidegger, Rilke, Blanchot

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**Abstract:** This essay considers the relationship between death and authenticity, a concern in philosophy since Socrates' speech about his own death sentence in Plato's *Apology*. While death lies outside both ontology and phenomenology, a proper relationship to death has been central to existentialist thought. In Heidegger's philosophy, the notion of being-towards-death defines the singularity of existence, and death dramatically informs both Rilke's poetics and the literary theory of Blanchot. The essay shows how the relationship between death and authenticity in their works forms the horizon between the imaginable and the unimaginable, and forms a mode of thinking about the limits of thought and language.

**Keywords:** Death; writing; authenticity; authorship; Heidegger, Martin; Rilke, Rainer Maria; Blanchot, Maurice.

To what extent is death thinkable or imaginable, and what would entail an authentic relationship to death so thought or imagined? Certainly a central existential theme in respect to death is authenticity. This involves fear of death and the overcoming of such fear, philosophically pertinent since Socrates who, in Plato's *Apology*, suggests that a virtuous relationship to death means first of all to acknowledge our ignorance of it. In modern literature and philosophy, death emerges as a problem in that, while of utmost concern to us, it lies outside our experience and knowledge. Death is the event horizon of thought: there can be, properly speaking, no ontology of death, since it is nothing, and there can be no phenomenology of death, since it never appears. Yet death is the defining concept of Martin Heidegger's phenomenological ontology of the human being or *Dasein*, since the temporality of our existence, its finitude, structures our relation to Being as such. Similarly, death dramatically informs the poetics of transcendence in Rainer Maria Rilke, and Maurice

Blanchot's understanding of literature and language.

Death, as the absolute temporal limit, marks the human being in a uniquely defining way, and so death haunts the imagination and delimits the horizon of what is thinkable. While death is lamentable and sometimes tragic, it is implied, in Socrates' discussion, that the fear of death may occasion a kind of existential or ethical failure. What then would be authentic about an authentic relation to death? Is it more or less authentic to fear the unimaginable, or rather to imagine death—that is, to domesticate it within the actualizations of human imagining? To live in denial of death is to live within the confines of illusion, uninformed by the ecstatic temporality of human existence. Yet to imagine death would be to misunderstand its absolute alterity, the radical possibility of our own impossibility. Throughout works of Heidegger, Rilke, and Blanchot, explorations of fear and authenticity are relative to central assumptions about the imaginability—or unimaginability—of death. Insofar as death is accessible to thought and writing, it

comes to define the limits of both. A brief turn to Franz Kafka through Blanchot's interpretations will question to what extent human mortality, the embodied reality of our vulnerability to dying, is recognized in casting the problem of death in terms of authenticity.

### Death and Existential Authenticity

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger considers death in attempting to grasp the possibility of being-a-whole of Dasein, or the human being concerned about its being. If the human being is defined ontologically and existentially, as its "being there," how can this be apprehended across the whole range of Dasein's existence? This range would have to include not only the origin or nascency of existence (to which Heidegger gives little attention, as Hannah Arendt has charged, but for the notion of thrownness), but also its end. Death is the end of Dasein, yet with respect to any given individual existence, it is always outstanding, never-yet achieved, and the totality or wholeness of Dasein evades us or is marked by impossible closure: for when Dasein dies, or as Heidegger puts it reaches its most extreme possibility, Dasein is no longer there, is no longer, and thus is nothing. Along these lines one can even ask, as Blanchot does, whether one can die at all, since death obliterates the individual who could be the subject of that sentence.

Yet Heidegger describes death as "Dasein's ownmost possibility."<sup>1</sup> The death of others is, for Heidegger, no clue either to death as such, at least not in the existential sense of facing, and being marked by, the nothing it implicates. I can sacrifice myself to save someone, but I still cannot die his or her death, and he or she cannot die mine. Death, rather, individuates Dasein even more than Dasein's life does: I can share in others' opinions, participate in others' rituals, make the same choices, think thoughts already spelled out and utter sentiments, however inwardly felt, experienced by others and even universally expressed. But death is one's own, as finitude aligns a temporality—for it is my ultimate future, my end—that radically singularizes. Dasein's *Jemeinigkeit*, its mineness or ownmost singularity, is—as Derrida emphasizes in his interpretation—given by death:

The sameness of the self, what remains irreplaceable

in dying, only becomes what it is, in the sense of an identity as a relation of the self to the self, by means of this idea of mortality as irreplaceability.... The identity of oneself is given by death, by the being-towards-death that *promises* me to it.<sup>2</sup>

Dasein's own authentic being, then, is given by and through death. Yet Dasein's not-yet having reached this extreme, however impending, seems to leave Dasein as a whole out of reach, since death never "s" except in respect to that which obliterates its very being. Thus Blanchot's question whether one can die — *peux-je mourir?* — is about the *je*. If I am only in death, then I never am.

This radical singularization that death gives cannot be understood according to a biological account of death. Heidegger differentiates the existential analysis of death (concerning *Tod* and *sterben*, to die) from other designations, for instance the physiological perishing (*verenden*) which he employs to indicate the extinction of living beings. Demise (*Ableben*) is also set aside from death in the existential sense, as designating simply living out, as in using up, one's life, as in expiration. A psychological account of death, too, would not tell us anything about Dasein's death and its individualizing nature, for psychology describes living through the approach, tells about the experience of dying, rather than about dying itself. The existential analysis of death, Heidegger argues, cannot have anything to do with "an experience of...factual demising." Anthropology or ethnography will also not suffice to orient an investigation of death. In a rare reference to so-called primitive peoples, Heidegger suggests that their ways of comporting themselves towards death in magic and cult may tell us about their understanding of existence, but this does not get at the heart of it, for it "already requires an existential analytic and a corresponding conception of death" (*BT* 292). And any religious notion of life after death merely skips over the phenomenon in question by projecting life across the chiasm toward another life.

But is death, aside from biological perishing or inevitable temporal demise, a phenomenon at all? Death is merely a possibility, though a certain one, and is phenomenal only to the extent that a possibility is that horizon of expectation toward which we can be comported, or from which we can turn away. Death as possibility gives such horizon while never itself being given; it is mere possibility which Dasein can either, at

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York: Harper & Row 1962, p. 307. [Henceforth cited as *BT*]

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996, p. 45.

least existentially, evade, or take upon itself. So death is the condition of possibility for life lived existentially. In the "preliminary sketch of the existential-ontological structure of death," Heidegger describes death in an existential sense:

Death is a possibility-of-Being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case. With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. This is a possibility in which the issue is nothing less than Dasein's Being-in-the-world. Its death is the possibility of no-longer being-able-to-be-there. If Dasein stands before itself as this possibility, it has been *fully* assigned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. When it stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone. This ownmost non-relational possibility is at the same time the uttermost one. [BT 294]

Death is the uttermost possibility not only in being the last possibility, the end of the line, the final event, but by being that which Dasein can never, at any moment, outrun, or even reach, since when death occurs, Dasein is no more. For thought, death is inherently paradoxical; Death is the impossible possibility, and death is possibility in the form of impossibility:

As potentiality-for-Being, Dasein cannot outstrip the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped* [unüberholbare]. As such, death is something *distinctively* impending. [BT 294]

Even while death factually impends, ontologically it evades our grasp. Death not only evades Dasein, but Dasein evades, or is, in everyday life, ever distracted from its death. Everyday being-towards-the-end, Heidegger argues, has the character of evasion: one says, "not yet," and puts off death as a future present moment that can be projected and pushed beyond the imaginable horizon. In this way Dasein lives in existential flight. "Dasein is dying as long as it exists, but proximally and for the most part, it does by way of *falling*" or by *fleeing in the face of it*" (BT 295). Even in this case of distraction or flight, one cannot fear death, for fear indicates, in Heidegger's analysis, a determinate object. For "that in the face of which we fear," he writes, "is a detrimental entity within-the-world which comes from some definite region but is close by and is bringing itself close" (BT 230). What we feel regarding death is rather anxiety, for:

anxiety does not 'see' any definite 'here' or 'yonder'

from which it comes. That in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is nowhere....it is already 'there' and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one's breath, and yet it is nowhere. [BT 231]

One cannot fear or embrace death, unless the very possibility and extremity of death is diminished by some presenting symbolic reification, some actualizing domestication of impossibility within the possibility of the rendered imagination.

That is to say, one cannot fear death as one fears something (*etwas fürchten*) but one can experience dread or anxiety (*Angst*) regarding death's very indeterminacy, for death comes at us from out of nowhere; it is near but unlocalizable, it is nothing but nothingness itself. In anxiety I do not know when or how I will die, but I do know only that I will die. Death is not something that is to be put off as a future present; it is present as the most extreme and possibly last future; it can come like a thief in the night. One cannot fear it, but distracts oneself from it or faces it with the trembling of anxiety – and in this context Heidegger cites Søren Kierkegaard, whose *Fear and Trembling* was known to him as *Angst und Zittern*. Anxiety, in a call from nowhere that seems to be inescapable, catches up with Dasein, and shakes up Dasein with a call of conscience such that facing death, or facing mortality and the most extreme possibility, becomes possible.

To face death authentically is regarded by Heidegger as a kind of temporal projection as much as an existential attitude: anticipatory resoluteness is the kind of authentic relationship to death which does not evade death or put it off as a future present, but opens up Dasein to the projection of the radical and most extreme future possibility as determining the present itself. The future, not the present, becomes the primary dimension of time, determining the present and even the past as that which is recuperated in the projection toward the uttermost horizon. That horizon is the most extreme possibility; it is the possible as such and the possibility of Dasein's very singularity of being. In an authentic relation to death, Dasein must comport itself toward the possible in a kind of expectation, a kind of anticipation, which is:

the possibility of understanding one's ownmost and uttermost potentiality-for-Being – that is to say, the possibility of authentic existence. The ontological constitution of such existence must be made visible by setting forth the concrete structure of anticipation of death. [BT 307]

Yet in this expectation—and here is the point of intersection with Rilke's poetics—we must be wary of the "tendency to *annihilate the possibility* of the possible by making itself available to us" (BT 305) in some kind of anticipatory actualization. Socrates of course pointed out repeatedly that we do not know what death is, or even whether it is an evil to be avoided. Yet in his response to the death sentence handed down to him, he tries to think it through via images:

For the state of death is one of two things: either it is virtually nothingness, so that the dead has no consciousness of anything or it is, as people say, a change and migration of the soul from this to another place. And if it is unconsciousness, like a sleep in which the sleeper does not even dream, death would be a wonderful gain.<sup>3</sup>

Even this latter image resists imaging: death is nothing to be actualized, not even in the imagination, because it is, precisely, and gives, precisely, nothing. Beyond rejecting a brooding over death and thus weakening its character as possibility, Heidegger does not elaborate on this manner of making-available, but we may think of Heidegger's suggestion in the context of the imagination of death in Rilke's poetry. Rilke's various renderings of death set forth such anticipation in vivid figural images that alternatively personalize or personify death (in the novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*), and retrace the structure of human transcendence (in *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*) so as to include its beyond.

### Imag(in)ing Death

Rilke's writings engage death in every phase of his poetic development, and may be said to engender at least two modes of figuring a human relation to death. The first, especially prominent in Rilke's only novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (published in 1910),<sup>4</sup> concerns the idea of an authentic death and its personification or organic rendering, analogous to a para-life or a seed within life itself. The idea of a death of one's own is one of the major themes of Rilke's writings and attracts Blanchot's interpretive attention.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, "Apology," in *Loeb Classical Library Volume I: Euthyphro/Apology/Crito/Phaedo/Phaedrus*, trans. H. N. Fowler, London: William Heinemann/New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1919, p. 32 c-d.

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herder Norton, New York: W. W. Norton: 1949. [Henceforth cited as *MLB*]

Rilke articulates in *The Notebooks* an authentic or personal death, as Malte recalls that of his grandfather Chamberlain Brigge, in juxtaposition to the impersonal and particularly modern, mass-produced (*fabrikmäÙsig*) death epitomized by the Hôtel Dieu, with its 559 beds, across from Brigge's Paris lodgings (*MLB* 11). Malte's fear is not of death itself but of an inauthentic death, of an anonymous, especially institutional or technological death, precisely one that denies his *Jemeinigkeit*, a death that is not his own. Malte fears a death robbed not only of specificity, but also of humanity. In his journals Malte surmises that:

the wish to have a death of one's own is growing ever rarer. A while yet, and it will be just as rare as a life of one's own....One arrives, finds a life, ready made, one has only to put it on. One wants to leave or is compelled to: anyway, no effort: *Voilà votre mort, monsieur*....one dies the death that belongs to the disease one has...people die...from one of the deaths attached to the institution...banal, without any fuss. [*MLB* 17-8]

In contrast, an authentic death may be as robust and vociferous as a man's life. The death of Chamberlain Brigge is an authentic, expansive, personal and yet very public death that engages and disturbs the world around him. Malte describes a recollection of his grandfather's death, which took months and rattled the household, its servants, and indeed the whole community. Such a death:

was something more. It was a voice, that voice which seven weeks before no one had known yet: for it was not the voice of the chamberlain. It was not Christoph Detlev to whom this voice belonged, but Christoph Detlev's death....it was like a king who, afterward and forever, is called the Terrible. That was not the death of just any dropsical person; it was the wicked, princely death which the chamberlain had carried within him and nourished on himself his whole life long....He was dying his own hard death. [*MLB* 21- 3]

An authentic death arrives not only at life's end but, so to speak, persists throughout the trajectory of past, present, and future. In his description of the chamberlain's death, Rilke tends to personify death in order to render it intimate and singular; it is precisely not nothing but an achievement of individuality with the vigor of existential authenticity that surpasses that even of life. Death is not that which comes at the extremity and limit of possibility, but coexists alongside and within it. In this passage Malte uses both personification and organic terms, such that death can be imagined:

They have all had a death of their own. Those men who carried theirs inside their armor, within, like a prisoner; those women who grew very old and small, and then on a huge bed, as on a stage, before the whole family, the household and the dogs, passed away in discreet and seigniorial dignity. Even the children, and the very little ones at that, did not die just any child's death; they pulled themselves together and died that which they already were, and that which they would have become.

And what a melancholy beauty it gave to women when they were pregnant and stood there, in their big bodies, upon which their slender hands instinctively rested, were two fruits: a child and a death. Did not the dense, almost nourishing smile on their quite vacant faces come from their sometimes thinking that both were growing? [MLB 22]

Here death is poetically rendered as prisoner, ceremony, event, child, and as the temporal fruit, an entanglement of past and future, within that grows alongside life. Authenticity requires that death be achieved not as an endpoint, but as an origin and *telos* of life itself. Death is to be included in a sense of life, and so our sensibility of living must radically expand toward life's ostensible other.

While in the novel the inclusion of death is related to authentic individuality, Rilke achieves, in later writings, a poetical acceptance of death as transcending personal selfhood. This involves death's sublimation, in the *Duino Elegies*, with the view that death is life's other side, an aspect of its wholeness from which modern human consciousness generally turns away but to which poetical consciousness may yield access. For the later Rilke, for instance in *Sonnets to Orpheus* of 1922, death belongs to the wholeness of life as its other side, to be embraced rather than feared and despised. In the elegies (begun in 1912 and completed a decade later), the figures of fallen heroes and dead children are remembered in a poetic amplification of time (specifically an inclusion of past and future in the present) that renders their loss relative to poetic remembrance. Rilke attributes to death a purifying rather than debasing anonymity. This is an ideal which, as Blanchot writes, is "above the person: not the brutality of a fact or the randomness of chance."<sup>5</sup> And in the Orpheus sonnets, there is the extreme profundity of dying, where the "world, things and being [will be] ceaselessly transformed into innerness" or *Innerlichkeit*

(SL 157). Here even Blanchot charges Rilke with purifying death's brutality (SL 154).

While the elegies and sonnets have drawn much scholarly study, a little-discussed poem from the early *New Poems* (*Neue Gedichte*) hints at several aspects of death's possible figuration, to which Rilke will return throughout his poetical oeuvre. In *Todes-Erfahrung* ("Experience of Death") death's positive figuration or personification as found in the Malte novel can be traced to what will be in its later rendering in the sonnets and elegies life or nature's other side. In *Todes-Erfahrung* Rilke attempts to present death as a tragic figure, or rather the mask of such, and this is—despite the title—not to figure it positively, but to secure its imagination within the interstices of experience. The motifs of theatre in this poem—of masks and acting out roles, of stage and applause—evoke the philosophical concern for authenticity and inauthenticity; at the same time, the competing notion of reality (*Wirklichkeit*), and the metaphor of a real green, sunshine, and forest, as it were, behind the stage of life as it is ordinarily acted out, indicates the death that, as Rilke suggests, lives alongside or beneath the stratum of our ordinary experience. The poem both figures death as actor, and anticipates a notion of death that is the other side or more original background of life itself. Here is the poem (all translations have been altered by this author):<sup>6</sup>

#### Todes-Erfahrung

Wir wissen nichts von diesem Hingehn, das  
nicht mit uns teilt. Wir haben keinen Grund,  
Bewunderung und Liebe oder Haß  
dem Tod zu zeigen, den ein Maskenmund

tragischer Klage widerlich entstellt.

Noch ist die Welt voll Rollen, die wir  
spielen.

Solang wir sorgen, ob wir auch gefielen,  
spielt auch der Tod, obwohl er nicht  
gefällt.

Doch als du gingst, da brach in diese Bühne  
ein Streifen Wirklichkeit durch jenen  
Spalt  
durch den du hingingst: Grün wirklicher Grüne,  
wirklicher Sonnenschein, wirklicher Wald.

Wir spielen weiter. Bang und schwer Erlemtes  
hersagend und Gebärden dann und wann  
aufhebend; aber dein von uns entferntes,  
aus unserm Stück entrücktes Dasein  
kann

uns manchmal überkommen, wie ein  
Wissen  
von jener Wirklichkeit sich niedersenkend,  
so daß wir eine Weile hingerissen  
das Leben spielen, nicht an Beifall denkend.

#### Experience of Death

We know nothing of this going-hence  
that so excludes us. We have no grounds  
for showing Death wonderment and love  
or hate, since it wears that age-old mask

of tragedy that hopelessly contorts it.

The world is full of roles—which we  
still act.

As long as we keep worrying to please,  
Death also acts a part—though without  
pleasing.

But when you went, a streak of reality  
broke in upon the stage through that  
fissure  
where you left: green of real green,  
real sunshine, real forest.

We go on acting. Fearful and reciting  
things difficult to learn and now and then  
inventing gestures; but your existence,  
withdrawn from us and taken from our  
piece,

can sometimes come over us, like a  
knowledge  
of that reality settling in,  
so that for a while we act life  
transported, not thinking of applause.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, pp. 149. [Henceforth cited as SL]

<sup>6</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems*, Bilingual Edition, trans. Edward Snow, Boston: North Point Press 2001, pp. 94-5.

Rilke's speaker admits, from the outset, that death is beyond our knowledge, that it eludes us, and goes on to describe death as that which we fear and deny as we act on the artificial stage of life. Yet Rilke's figurations even here, of death as the real that may shine through from behind the façade of life acted, does not admit the radical alterity of death Heidegger grants it as impossibility of Dasein's possibility. In Rilke's last stanza, the speaker admits a precarious and transient knowledge of that more profound reality which may transport us *eine Weile*.

Such transport may be fortuitous in the case of human consciousness, but in Rilke's later poetry, particularly the elegies, death is thought through the angelic or orphic consciousness; such a being as an angel or mythic poet would be able to see, as it were, both sides of nature, or life and its invisible other side. The emblem of angelic transcendence in Rilke's later elegies has to do with the acceptance of death as such, and is also coupled with a sense of violence: the angel is terrifying, overwhelming, and the very plenitude of its being would crush the speaker were the call to be answered. In the Second Elegy the speaker repeats a sentiment announced in the first: *Jeder Engel ist schrecklich* ("Every angel is terrifying").<sup>7</sup> Yet the inverted transcendence from the angelic to the poetry of earth, presented in the final stanza of the Tenth Elegy, as a happiness that, like rain and like catkins hanging from the hazel trees, falls rather than ascends, requires not merely a descent of the poet's aims to the human world, but a horizontal dilation of the present that expands beyond the boundaries of finitude. This transcendence of temporal limits, this absorption of time into space, allows death to be accommodated as the other side of nature, as Rilke refers to it in the 1913 essay *Erlebnis*. Self-transcendence in human poetic feeling is aimed to realize an overabundant Dasein filled with past and future, including the radical future of death. An affirmation about what has been achieved can be seen in the Ninth Elegy:

Siehe, ich lebe. Woraus? Weder Kindheit noch Zukunft werden weniger....Überzähliges Dasein entspringt mir im Herzen. [DE 56]

See, I live. What from? Neither childhood nor future grows less....Excess of existence wells up in my heart.

The world or life inhabited by the speaker in *Todes-Erfahrung* has been expanded in its temporal depth,

so that past and future, including the past childhood and the future death, may be suspended within it. But this fullness of a present swollen with past and future eclipses the singularity and absoluteness of loss, even as the speaker of the *Duino Elegies* declares the singularity of what exists and what has existed: *Ein Mal/ jedes, nur ein Mal. Ein Mal und nicht mehr* (Just once/ each, only once. Only once and no more) (DE 52). Death is everywhere in the elegies; but if modern representational consciousness has forgotten and excluded death, Rilke supplants this with total remembrance: the transformation of transience into all-encompassing poetic space. The angel lives on to approach us from the terrifying other side, but then domesticates that for the human imagination. And so in 1922, in a Europe all-too shattered by death and destruction, Rilke eulogizes, along with the dead youth, the fallen hero. In the First Elegy:

es erhält sich der Held, selbst der Untergang war ihm  
Nur ein Vorwand, zu sein: seine letzte Geburt. [DE 6]

The hero sustains himself, even his destruction was to him  
Only a pretext for being: his latest birth.

In the Sixth Elegy Rilke's speaker continues the theme:

Wunderlich nah ist der Held doch den jugendlich Toten. Dauern Ficht ihn nicht an. Sein Aufgang ist Dasein. [DE 36]

The hero is strangely proximal to those died young. To abide Does not contain him. His ascent is existing.

The poetic consciousness inspired by these eulogies involves the risk of what Heidegger called death's actualization, its positive figuration so that its radical possibility—the possibility of the impossibility of existence—is reduced to that imagination of death with which we can live. In Rilke's elegies, the absorption of death, and in particular of the figure of dead heroes and children, into a poetic whole, may risk sublimation of loss rather than its radical confrontation. Poetic remembrance is more, rather than less, ontologically robust than the finite life. The angel-figure, far from transcending death, highlights how much Rilke's elegies, in absorbing the singularity and loss of elements of the past into a consciousness of saturated plenitude, have integrated death into an "immanent transcendence," or a "this-worldly" poetics.<sup>8</sup>

In these works by Rilke, we can discover the attempt to figure death within the poetic imagination. Death as seed, as growth, as a voice occupying and overwhelming humanly inhabited spaces; and then

<sup>7</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, Bilingual Edition, trans. Edward Snow, Boston: North Point Press 2001, p. 10. [Henceforth cited as DE]

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, "Immanent Transcendence in Rilke and Stevens," *The German Quarterly* 80/3 (Summer 2010), 275-96, here p. 275.

death as the relatively transcendent, that is, the not other worldly, but the other side of this world which can be accommodated by a poetically figured angelic consciousness—from a Heideggerian perspective, these assignations or metaphors, this imaging and imagining, may diminish the radical openness of death's possibility, its nothingness.

### Writing Death

Blanchot, for his part, interprets the theme of death in Rilke in Heideggerian terms, with the concern for the individual's distinction from everyday fallenness, into which one flees, taking refuge into commonality with everyone else or the "they." What horrifies Rilke, and perhaps Blanchot, is not the terribleness of death itself but its banality, not fear but the "terrible in the form of the absence of anguish, daily insignificance" (SL 123). To the contrary, Blanchot describes a kind of intimacy with death, a possibility of another experience of death than the distress of estrangement wrought by a "foreign" death that would be merely "borrowed, random" (SL 126). Of Rilke, Blanchot writes:

The anguish of anonymous death, the anguish of the "They die" and the hope for an "I die" in which individualism retrenches, tempts him [Rilke] at first to want to give *his* name and *his* countenance to the instant of dying: he does not want to die like a fly in the hum of mindlessness and nullity; he wants to possess his death and be named, be hailed by this unique death. From this perspective he suffers the obsession of the "I" that wants to die without ceasing to be "I".... This "I" wants to die concentrated in the very fact of dying, so that my death might be the moment of my greatest authenticity, the moment toward which "I" propel myself as if toward the possibility which is absolutely proper to me, which is proper only to me and which secures me in the steadfast solitude of this pure "I." [SL 128]

Yet aside from retaining the egological language of the first-person pronoun, already absent from Heidegger's terminology of Dasein, Blanchot's interpretation of death in Rilke differs from Heidegger's own understanding of death in two profound ways. Firstly, Blanchot does not reject (as will Heidegger in his interpretation of Rilke in the 1947 essay "What are Poets For?") the inwardness that still pertains to Rilke's understanding of human experience and consciousness. "To say that Rilke affirms the immanence of death in life is no doubt to speak correctly, but it is also to construe only one side of his thought. This immanence is not given; it is

to be achieved" (SL 127-8). Such achievement is to be a fashioning of our own nothingness: "My death must become always more inward," Blanchot writes (SL 126). While Heidegger resists the tendency to poeticize inner experience in favor of a more ecstatic and ontological structure of language, Rilke maintains the problem of consciousness in its open engagement with the world as his sphere of poetic investment. Blanchot accepts that Rilkean intimacy. Secondly, Blanchot's interpretation appears in a work, *The Space of Literature*, devoted to attempting to understand the relation between the impossibility of thinking death—what he calls "death's space" beyond the imagination—and the impossibility of the author's presence to himself in language. The intimacy or estrangement of a relation to death is analogous to that the poet has with language. In this way Blanchot approaches what Christina Howells, in her study of mortality and subjectivity, calls "the two meanings of the death of the subject."<sup>9</sup>

Blanchot's reflections on death inscribe the problem of the thinkability or imaginability of death upon the paradoxes of language, particularly literary language that, for Blanchot, is already the scene of authorial effacement. In this light, Rilke's attempt to figure death, like that of other modern writers such as Kafka, effects a scene of contending paradoxes, expressing one (the impossibility of writing) through the other (the impossibility of imagining death) and vice versa. What Blanchot attempts to conceptualize might be regarded figuratively as a palimpsestic void. Writing of death is always writing across a nothing, an impossibility; and this impossibility is reflected back into the paradox of literary language itself. Rendering this dual impossibility is the very task of poetry when it reflects, "beyond the organic phenomenon, upon death's being," as Blanchot puts it (SL 125). If this way of formulating death sounds like the kind of actualization Heidegger rejects—since death is precisely nothingness or the impossibility of being—Blanchot formulates it more precisely: Rilke's experience, for Blanchot, "opened onto that nocturnal region where death no longer appears as possibility proper, but as the empty depths of the impossible" (SL 132). This range of articulation from death's being to its profound impossibility occurs through Blanchot's transition from an interpretation of the Malte novel to Rilke's elegies and sonnets as discussed above.

<sup>9</sup> Christina Howells, *Mortal Subjects: Passions of the Soul in Late Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2011, p. 23. [Henceforth cited as MS]

This dual impossibility is reflected in the poetic experience of language. For the self's effacement in language, and the disaster of effacement is the ambiguous sense of the "death of the author" that thematically motivates Blanchot's account of literary writing. Blanchot's theory describes poetic or literary language not only as absolutely neutralized of the author but, more complexly, as the author's experience of neutralization. For Blanchot, a poem is a work from which the author is expelled, just as he is expelled from a grasp of his own death (since to die means I am no longer; it cannot be mine). Most radically, Blanchot explicitly evokes, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, the concentration camps as analogous to this kind of disaster of expulsion: they are situations of passivity wherein we find "anonymity, loss of self...utter uprootedness, exile, the impossibility of presence, dispersion."<sup>10</sup>

When the empirical death of the author is the content or theme of literary language, this only magnifies Blanchot's understanding of authorial effacement, allowing Blanchot to imagine the writing of disaster as expressing the poet's relation to his own death which impends exigently upon the now. Death is experienced through the author's linguistic de-literalization, while death as the very content of the literary work, whether the Malte novel or the poems, re-literalizes authorial singularity as one for whom death impends. If the peculiar autonomy of language repels the individuality and facticity of the self who writes — and thus in Blanchot's view enacts the death of the author — the content of the poetry about death could be seen as a neutralizing echo of this death in language by re-literalizing it, putting it into words.

This putting into words evokes the paradox of the work of art as a form born of nothing that in turn gives form to nothingness. Blanchot suggests such in the context of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, named after the mythical poet who both drew all living beings forth with his song and ventured to the underworld to retrieve his beloved from death, only to lose her again:

The poet's destiny is to expose himself to the force of the undetermined and to the pure violence of being from which nothing can be made, to endure this force courageously, but also to contain it by imposing upon it restraint and the perfection of a form. [SL 143]

The poem is, to quote from the sonnets, a breath around

nothing (*ein Hauch um Nichts*), a breath that could be the wind, or the sigh of a god. Yet Rilke's task, like that of Orpheus, is not to confront the nothing as absolute impossibility, but to rescue beings, in poetry, from the death that could only be a bad infinity. Thus Rilke's notion of *Weltinnenraum* or the world's inner space is interpreted by Blanchot as a salvation of things, in the invisibility of poetic consciousness, from the annihilation that would descend upon mere positive reality:

to save things, yes, to make them invisible, but in order that they be reborn in their invisibility. And so death, that readier death which is our destiny, again becomes the promise of survival, and already the moment is at hand when dying for Rilke will be to escape death — a strange volatilization of his experience. [SL 145-6]

In this way Rilke becomes complicit in a poetic denial of death by its very poeticization. If death is, as nothingness, not an entity, and so cannot be feared but only anguished over, Rilke's poetics translates the positivity of death that can be feared (and thus avoided, dismissed, or suffered haphazardly and inauthentically), into something which no longer belongs even to the anxiety about being and nothingness as such. Rather, death is taken up into the angelic poetry that contains transcendence within itself. As Blanchot puts it:

Just as each thing must become invisible, likewise what makes death a thing, the brute fact of death, must become invisible. Death enters into its own invisibility, passes from its opacity to its transparency, from its terrifying reality to its ravishing unreality. [SL 147]

Such ravishing unreality may be, even in the region of the imagination, inaccessible to those whose experience of and with death is less than the noble death for which Rilke's Malte hopes, and less than authentically resolute acceptance as Heidegger describes. The idea of a death sentence and its implementation or evasion emerges in Kafka's fiction and in Blanchot's prose. In light of his interpretations of Rilke and Kafka, and no doubt referring to the events related in his own autobiographical narrative, Blanchot argues that "one must be capable of satisfaction in death" (SL 91). This narrative is invoked by commentators as evidencing Blanchot's own familiarity with the approach of disaster, on the occasion when Blanchot, during the wartime occupation of France, was brought out by German soldiers to be shot, but spared inexplicably at the last minute. This aborted execution does not relay the experience of truly persecuted victims of that time. The priestly beatitude or even ecstasy (*un sorte*

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1986, p. 34.



*de béatitude...Peut-être l'extase*) Blanchot describes in his autobiographical character's experience of near-execution, is diametrically opposed to the worry of such poets as Miklós Radnóti or Federico García Lorca, whose persecution and murder were anything but noble and authentic. Blanchot's (or his character's) impending death is taken with calm nobility and even bemusement. The impossibility of such power of satisfaction in death, grotesquely parodied in Kafka's story *In der Strafkolonie* ("In the Penal Colony"), also recalls the distance between Kafka, who died from natural causes before the Holocaust could claim him, and those writers whose murders precluded authentic deaths of their own.

Blanchot argues, further, that despite the near ubiquity of death in Kafka's writing, the depictions of death are cruelly shallow. Indeed, a sordid or untimely death befalls Kafka's protagonists in "The Metamorphosis," "The Judgment," "In the Penal Colony," "A Hunger Artist," "Description of a Struggle," and *The Trial* among other works. Kafka's depictions of execution, wounds, starvation, and murder may be ironic, tragic-comical, pathetic, but never heroic or natural. Yet Blanchot's charge of shallowness may miss the brutality of the death of Joseph K. at the end of his trial, a violence that is eerily preordained. Blanchot also overlooks Kafka's hunter Gracchus who longs to die but cannot, where his living death is more a symbol of expulsion from the cycle of human life than its extinction. In any case, Blanchot points out that in writing about death Kafka "is not thinking of a realistic description of death scenes" (SL 92).

Yet the problem of death is in Kafka eerily connected to the problem of writing. In *Ein Traum*, which Kafka published as a separate story, Josef K. dreams of falling into a freshly-dug grave. He struggles to read what an artist is writing on the headstone, with an ordinary pencil. The name, Josef's own, appears in gold lettering. As Josef sinks into the ground that opens beneath him, he wakes up enraptured, *entzückt von diesem Anblick*.<sup>11</sup> In "The Judgment," Georg Bendeman sits at his writing desk, having just written a letter, as he gazes onto the river and the bridge from which he will, at the story's end, leap to his death. "In the Penal Colony" shows the condemned as meant to know the sentence literally inscribed into his flesh. In these stories, death is inevitably intertwined with the act of writing. From

Blanchot's point of view, this may illustrate how the death of the author in language comes to the fore as the experience of writing itself. Yet it may be that Blanchot, throughout his interpretation of Kafka, overlooks the relation between "the implications of human mortality for our understanding of the human subject" (MS 22), and the radical place of the body in Kafka's writings. The physical vulnerability to dying—highlighted in scenes of torture, injury, starvation, and drowning—haunts the subject in Kafka, and the subject of writing.

## Conclusion

Where Rilke most profoundly differs from Heidegger is the attempt to imagine and figure death, both as inauthentic and as authentic, and as the other side of life that, though transcendent to human experience, remains within the potentiality of poetical sublimation. Heidegger does not, as does Rilke, consider death itself as authentic or inauthentic; death cannot be an object of fear or derision, only of evasion or anticipation. For Heidegger rather it is the avoidance of death, and thus of our existential singularity, that is inauthentic, where as authenticity is the embrace of this singularity not as an expression of our selfhood, but of the very nothingness around which ecstatic openness is centered. Death is for Heidegger precisely the nothing that is our most extreme possibility. It cannot be imagined; to imagine it would be to render it present rather than ever-impending, known rather than inherently beyond our grasp. Heidegger's sense of death's transcendence is absolute, and it is this absolute transcendence that allows us to conceive of being as such as the transcendence, for it is through finitude, and thus the opening up of the ecstatic structure of temporality, that being there, our being at all, is possible. Rilke, on the other hand, imagines both a good death and an inauthentic death; an accepted and nurtured death and a dreaded, evaded, or simply suffered one. And in Rilke's more mature poetics, the transcendence that is death extends only to life's other side; or, it is the erasure on which our palimpsestic existence is traced. Blanchot offers, through his interpretations of Rilke and Kafka, a contemplation of nothingness as it haunts the experience of poetic and of literary language itself.

For Kafka, death is continually tied to the theme of writing. Even the brief consideration of Kafka at the end of this essay brings to light the problem of human body and its status in an authentic relationship to death. While Kafka does not aim for realistic death

<sup>11</sup> Franz Kafka, *Erzählungen*, ed. Max Brod, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1996, p. 138.

scenes, its threat is always impending not merely as an idea, a possibility, a temporal inevitability, but as a terminal imposition on a body. Where there is little or no acknowledgement of embodiment, there may be a tendency to relegate its role to an existential fascination, to a poetic project of recovery, or to a sublimated

alienation, a beatific passivity. The question remains, for Heidegger, Rilke, and Blanchot, to what extent our vulnerability as embodied beings, not merely death as the unthinkable, but mortality as the lived burden of being, informs the limits of thought and language.