

The Narrative of Death in Blanchot's Dying Experience

-- A Case Study of The Death Sentence

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Abstract

The notion of being-towards-death is rooted in the philosophical tradition stemming from Descartes' subjectivity of I think and I die. This concept compels individuals to recognize death as merely a possible aspect of the future. Rather than crushing us, it serves as the ultimate catalyst for igniting the passion for life. From this possibility of death, Blanchot explores another dimension—impossible death—and expresses it through the distinctive literary form of the *récit*. The dying experience depicted in *The Death Sentence* lies at the heart of Blanchot's view of death, pushing life to transcend the self-centered, infinitely recursive confines and thereby discovering a more open and authentic mode of existence.

Keywords

Impossible Death; MauriBlanchot; *récit*; *The Death Sentence*.

1. Introduction

From Socrates' calm acceptance of death, to Hegel's courageous transcendence of it through subjectivity; from Zhuangzi's serene detachment in the dream of a butterfly, to Buddhism's cyclical view of life and death—throughout history, death has been intimately linked to human existential questions and ultimate values, remaining a central topic in philosophical discourse. "Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?" Death and life seem like night and day—human beings forever speculate on the future and meaning of life in the looming fear of night. As one of the most significant literary and critical masters in post-war France, Blanchot's insights into literature, philosophy, and writing converge around the ontological concept of death, making it the most direct battleground for his critique of the tradition of subjectivity in philosophy.

In the context of Blanchot, research within Chinese academia has predominantly focused on his views on language, literature, the Other, and death, with his theoretical works *The Space of Literature* and *The Infinite Conversation* at the core of discussions. However, less attention has been paid to Blanchot's *récit*—a term he used to describe his fictional works. In this article, *récit* will be uniformly translated as narrative to distinguish it from traditional novelistic narration, with a more detailed explanation of this concept provided later. Additionally, because Blanchot did not write a specific treatise on the topic of death but instead intentionally wove the theme of death into all his works—particularly his *récits*, where it is depicted and explored with meticulous detail—it is necessary to systematically examine Blanchot's theory of death based on this foundation.

Blanchot's *The Death Sentence* and *The Instant of My Death* represent his first and last *récit* works, respectively. In these works, he crafts a death narrative that can be interrupted—a liminal experience of *dying*—which becomes the central framework for his exploration of the impossibility of death. This study will concentrate on the concept of *dying* as a means to delve

deeper into Blanchot's philosophy of death, offering a more comprehensive analysis and interpretation.

2. The Origin and Narrative of the Dying Experience

2.1. Tracing the Origins of Blanchot's View on Death

Blanchot never publicly discussed his own works, nor did he ever accept media interviews or allow himself to be photographed. For a writer who devoted his life to practicing the literary principle of anonymity, tracing his personal life might seem futile. Nevertheless, by identifying key moments in the evolution of Blanchot's views on death, we can establish a temporal and spatial framework for his theory of death, providing a foundation for studying his philosophical ideas.

In 1927, Blanchot's close friend Emmanuel Levinas introduced him to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. This introduction not only marked Blanchot's entry into the realm of philosophy but also initiated the enduring interweaving of his literary and philosophical thought. *The Instant of My Death*, a brief narrative and autobiographical piece published by Blanchot in 1994, recounts an experience from the final days of World War II, when the protagonist narrowly escapes execution by a German firing squad due to an unexpected turn of events. This encounter with survival transformed death into a central concept in Blanchot's thinking. From that point onward, he began to explore the question of whether death is truly possible, leading to the publication of a series of *récits*, including *The Death Sentence*, *Thomas the Obscure*, and *The Last Man*. These works revolve around the theme of death, seeking to wrest it from the control of the subject and plunge it into a series of purely passive *dying* experiences.

During World War II, Blanchot formed a deep friendship with Georges Bataille, and they found profound intellectual resonance on the issue of death. In 1943, Bataille introduced the concept of *inner experience*, arguing that true value does not stem from external, false authorities but “rather from a purposeless, pure experience focused solely on the internal state of the experiencing subject”. Unlike the anti-religious background of Bataille's *inner experience*, Blanchot's *extreme experience*—a term he introduced in 1969 in *The Infinite Conversation*—is both a reinterpretation and a renaming of Bataille's concept. On one hand, Blanchot views *extreme experience* as a concretized encounter with death, where death becomes an indefinitely prolonged state of *dying*; on the other hand, *extreme experience* refers to the dissolution of subjectivity and the abandonment of the self in the face of death. Thus, the development of Blanchot's thoughts on death is rooted not only in his personal experiences but also in the philosophical dialogue with Bataille, where these ideas were further deepened and expanded.

2.2. Blanchot's Concept of Dying

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger views death as the most authentic possibility for *Dasein*. The “not-yet” structure of death implies that the individual is always projecting itself into a future state of *being-towards-death*, proclaiming that everything is possible within the dread of impending death. The subject no longer passively accepts death but instead pulls it from the distant future into the very map of life. However, for the post-phenomenological master Emmanuel Levinas, “death is departure, a leaving, a form of negativity, with its destination remaining unknown”. While Heidegger understands death as a unique aspect of realizing the freedom of the subject, Levinas perceives death as the erasure and forgetting of self-existence, simultaneously signaling the intrusion and arrival of the Other. This shift leads the subject from a state of no responsibility to one of infinite responsibility towards the Other.

For Blanchot, however, whether death is seen as the infinite possibility of *Dasein* or as an objective event threatening the subject, both Heidegger and Levinas fail to escape the traditional logocentric binary thinking, thus falling short of grasping the true essence of death.

First, he argues that Heidegger's existential analysis of death is built on the assumption that death is always mine, yet the decision not to be is also a possibility. Therefore, focusing solely on the affirmative aspect of death leads to logical inconsistencies. Second, the death of the subject does not imply taking on infinite responsibility for the Other but rather points to the infinite distance and separation between I and the Other.

Blanchot repeatedly asks, "Can I die?"—not to question the inevitability of human mortality but to reflect on whether human agency can extend to and encompass death. The concept of *dying* emerges from this line of thought and is most meticulously depicted in his work *The Death Sentence*. He views death as an absolutely unknowable threshold, one that can only be approached indefinitely, revealing the truth that humans can never truly claim death as their own. The shadow of death looms over everyday life, yet it remains a moment that the subject can never reach, only transforming into an unending anxiety and a state of deferment.

2.3. Blanchot's Unique Narrative Space

Blanchot's works can be categorized into four types: political articles, literary criticism, novels, and a hybrid style that defies existing genre definitions. His novelistic writing can be further divided into two phases: the first focused on traditional novel creation, while the second shifted towards *récit* works. The French word *récit* is deliberately distinguished by Blanchot from traditional narration through a philosophical lens. In *The Book to Come*, Blanchot states, "*récit* is not a telling of an event, but the event itself; it is an approach to the event, a site—a place that, through its attraction, calls forth the event that is yet to arrive. Through this attraction, *récit* itself also holds the potential to be realized." What, then, is unique about the *récit*? By identifying the key characteristics of *récit*, we can find a way through Blanchot's often obscure writing.

The first characteristic of the *récit* is its disruption of traditional narrative structures. *Récit* dismantles the author-centric narrative framework, featuring few characters, who are often replaced by pronouns like "you" and "he" or by letters such as "J" and "N". Additionally, the actions of characters within the *récit* are often inexplicable and erratic. For instance, in *Thomas the Obscure*, the plot is essentially a series of imagined events within Thomas's mind, from the moment he gazes at the sea to his final plunge into it, creating a circular narrative structure. Thomas can move between different locations instantaneously, and the timeline is notably fragmented. Actions are frequently repeated endlessly or return to their starting point. In Blanchot's words, the *récit* transcends the conventional narrative path, compelling him to abandon the first-person perspective and the concept of continuous time, leading to the creation of a boundless narrative space reminiscent of a stream of consciousness.

The second key characteristic is the *récit's* orientation toward the future. Given the *récit's* disruption of space, time, and character behavior, it naturally points toward an unpredictable and inaccessible domain. Not only are characters' actions repetitive, but their motivations are also ambiguous and unclear. Readers cannot predict the subsequent plot based on the current narrative, nor can they fully grasp the characters' personalities and intentions. Even by the end of the story, the protagonist's identity and purpose remain unknown. It is as if Blanchot is simultaneously writing and erasing his words with a rubber. In Blanchot's *récit*, the story is a process of movement and change oriented toward the future; it does not aim to faithfully reproduce objective events but rather seeks to carve out a fissure within the continuity of time and discourse.

3. Experiencing Dying in the Death Narrative

3.1. An Endless Sentence of Death

The Death Sentence is Blanchot's first *récit*. Despite his deletion of most specific details, the thread of death remains clearly visible throughout its vague and cryptic narrative. The French title of the book is *L'arrêt de mort*. The word *arrêt* not only implies a sentence but also a pause or interruption. The translator of *The Death Sentence* notes in the preface, The original title encompasses two contradictory meanings: it refers both to a death sentence and to the interruption of death. Both the Chinese translation and the English title "Death Sentence" fail to convey the paradox contained in the original. Furthermore, the word *arrêt* not only hints at the outcome of the story in a conventional sense but also reflects Blanchot's deeper exploration of the concept of death: what does it mean to interrupt death? Conventionally, death is understood as the interruption of life. However, does Blanchot propose an alternative interpretation or conceptualization of death?

In *The Death Sentence*, the narrator records his final memories with his beloved J. After being diagnosed with an incurable illness, J repeatedly brushes against the edge of death, yet this unresolved death only intensifies her will to live. As an observer, "I" witness J's two deaths. The first occurs one night when J dies, only to be revived by my call at her bedside. However, soon after, the terror of death returns. This time, J herself clearly feels the approach of death, even calmly telling the nurse, Now, look closely at death. In the end, J begs me to administer an overdose of anesthesia to interrupt this endless *dying*. I become her accomplice in suicide, and thus, *dying* is interrupted for the second time.

The interruption of death implies that death can be separated from the person, becoming a state that can be re-entered at any time. In this sense, death is no longer the end of life but manifests as a perpetual state of *dying*. During J's first death sentence, she is abruptly pulled back from the brink by the narrator's call, yet she does not truly revive; instead, she plunges back into the extreme suffering of *dying*. The interruption of death turns it into a repetitive, unending event, where revival becomes an infinite torment and destruction for the one who is *dying*. J's second interruption does not grant her true death either, as her mode of existence is not "to live on but rather to die up". J has entered an eternal cycle of death sentences: if this interruption can continue indefinitely, can life ever truly be declared over?

For Blanchot, death is no longer a threshold that can be crossed but an unceasing spread. It ties me to the edge of a cliff, as I let time slip away, enduring wave after wave of assaults from *dying*. Encountering the impossibility of *dying* means that *dying* has stripped me of the ability to say "I". The subject relinquishes control over the self, existing in a state of infinite passivity. This force rejects the traditional concept of death, making it impossible for a person to bring their life to a conclusive end. On the contrary, I have lost my self, experiencing only the pain of someone *dying*, much like how both J and the narrator become mere spectators of this death scene.

3.2. Moments When Death Is Interrupted

Beyond the interruption of death, Blanchot's second distinct type of judgment scene also hints at the absolute otherness and impossibility of death. In 1994, Blanchot published his final work, *The Instant of My Death*, which is widely regarded by scholars as autobiographical. This piece, based on historical events from World War II, recounts the story of a young man who is about to be executed by a Nazi firing squad. However, at the last moment, an explosion announces the success of the French Resistance, and the young man is released by a Russian soldier, allowing him to escape. The young man later returns to Paris, and while the story seems to conclude, the narrator continues, "The instant of my death has been indefinitely deferred ever since."

For Blanchot, the onset of death can only arise from an external threat to the subject. For instance, in *The Death Sentence*, J is repeatedly confronted with the prophecy of death due to her terminal illness, and similarly, in this story, the Nazi lieutenant repeatedly commands the young man, “You are already dead”, “This is why you are here”. After settling his affairs and making all necessary preparations, he seems to have already died. Yet, this illusion of having died is abruptly halted—he does not succeed in *dying* a death. In this way, Blanchot expresses his skepticism about the notion of seeming to have already died. To others, the young man might be seen as either a god or a corpse; they attempt to imagine what a dead person would look like or derive all knowledge of death from his state. Similarly, the young man only needs to mimic the state of death. However, the truth is that the one who is dying has no knowledge of the death that threatens him, nor any real experience of it.

In the same way that Blanchot addresses the paradox of suicide, he highlights the impossibility of experiencing death: suicide implies that I kill myself. The suicidal I (je), as the agent of power, seems to successfully orchestrate its own death, but the objective self (moi) has already departed from life—this I can only passively await death in the moments before *dying*. Blanchot, by analyzing the logical fallacies within the act of suicide, points to the subject's oversight—he is trapped in an endless illusion of seemingly being able to conquer death. Thus, whether it is the young man about to be executed or the suicide attempting to end his own life, death always involves a rupture with the prior self or previous experiences. Death, as something ultimately inaccessible, has excluded me from the outset, making all my attempts to conquer or possess it infinitely deferred, forcing me into an unending experience of *dying*. There is no other way to reach the moment of death than to have already died. Blanchot thus outlines the impossibility of death, which becomes the core of the dissolution of subjectivity.

3.3. Breaking Away from Possible Death

In *The Death Sentence* and *The Instant of My Death*, Blanchot constructs a grotesque drama of *dying*. For J, her life is perpetually suspended in the struggle of *dying*, with death endlessly ongoing, never reaching its conclusion. For the young man, seeming to have already died means that although death is always within his sight, the encounter with it never truly materializes.

Both works represent Blanchot's deconstruction of traditional conceptions of death. Here, people hope to die “a personal death”. In the final moment, one still remains oneself, a unique, undivided individual until the very end, “This hard, central core resists being shattered. People long for death, but only on their own terms and in their own time.” In the moment of death, I can plan, control, and experience my death—I am never absent from my own death; I am the conductor and the participant in all of this. Death is merely one of the many elements I arrange, belonging to me, displaying absolute obedience to my will. But for Blanchot, this is nothing more than a foolish hope rooted in the individualism of the late nineteenth century. In their grasp of self-perception, people fear a mass-produced death, indistinguishable from that of others, and dread that their uniqueness will not be confirmed by death. They yearn for a death entirely conceived and constructed by the self. Furthermore, the subject's isolated fortress allows for no accidents; death cannot be delayed, advanced, or interrupted—everything must unfold according to my prior expectations. Here, the experience of death resembles the closing of a flower's petals, with the subject tightly enclosing themselves, happily slipping into an eternal sleep.

Based on the current analysis of Blanchot's *récits*, he raises three significant questions regarding the possibility of death. The first is, “Is death continuous?” If death is ultimately nothing more than the interruption of *dying*, then I will remain forever in the agony of *dying*. Time bends here, and the now can never transition into the future. The second question is, “Can I die?” This question directly challenges the notion of the subject's agency. At a certain point in death, my “core” has been entirely hollowed out—I cannot claim death as my own in the first

person. "I do not die; I am deprived of the right to die. In death, someone dies". So, Who is the one that dies? Here, Maurice Blanchot break entirely with the possible death and formally oppose the standard of subjective identity, ultimately opening up to the alien realm of the Other.

4. The Impossibility of Dying

4.1. A Labyrinth of Death in Inverse Proportion

Whether one is terminally ill or in robust health, the inevitability of death is indisputable—the only difference is that the former's timeline is accelerated. Thus, no matter how we discuss death, it always exists as a distant threat, a moment in the future. But can this future death be grasped and understood by the subject? What is the true relationship between death and the self?

Linear time is the temporal form of subjectivity; the rich meanings of the past can only be captured retrospectively, while the infinite possibilities of the future can only be predicted based on the present. In the case of suicide, the person attempting suicide feels an overwhelming threat from death and tries to sever the timeline to make the future clear, as if planting a "plantern"—a plant from the *Plants vs. Zombies* series that illuminates fog and reveals hidden zombies—between himself and death to dispel the fog, easing the anxiety and pain of impending death. "It brings death out of the shadows of the not-yet-arrived, rendering it shallow, insubstantial, and harmless.". The error of the suicide lies in perceiving death as a point on the linear timeline, a moment that can be arbitrarily replaced and adjusted. In reality, for the subject, death is not a straight line but rather an inverse function on a Cartesian plane.

If we play a linguistic game with the word future, its meaning is neither not yet arrived nor soon to arrive, but rather never arriving. In other words, for me in the present, death is always an impossible event—unless I am already dead, it will forever be beyond my reach. This echoes the Epicurean sentiment that the gods are not to be feared, death is not to be worried about. The negative structure of the term future signifies that it is a domain the subject cannot touch. Death represents the X-axis, while the Y-axis is the vitality of life; this death function perpetually approaches the X-axis but never intersects with it. As seen in the previously discussed narratives of death, death is portrayed as an event that can be infinitely interrupted. When the pain of *dying* exceeds the subject's capacity to endure, time seems to stretch, creating an infinite distance between the present moment and the next, submerging me in the abyss of the now, as if I were falling into a black hole, where everything is consumed and destroyed by the endlessness of death. In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot views the time of death as the "uninterrupted", an endless continuum that neither returns to the past nor progresses into the future. Thus, the future structure of death disrupts the framework of linear time, bending time into a moment that will never arrive.

4.2. The Dissipation and Collapse of Subjectivity

In this moment that will never arrive, the subject, as a nexus of all possibilities and powers, is utterly abandoned, seemingly suspended in a strange state between life and death. This death cannot be experienced, nor can it be grasped by consciousness or thought; the subject quietly disintegrates in the questioning of "Can I die?".

In the inverse proportional maze of death, death disrupts the linear time of the subject, forcing the subject into the struggle of *dying*. As I draw ever closer to death, my ability to say "no" to it gradually fades. I no longer attempt to assert my power over death through "suicide", nor do I issue commands to it. The one who commits suicide is, in fact, still motivated by considerations of life, pulling death from the future to exert control over it. The focus of the suicidal person remains on the present world, not on the true space of death. Therefore, in a certain sense, the desire of the suicidal person is actually to continue living.

But can I die? Can I freely, happily, and hopefully approach death? When I march towards death with existential resolve, is it not death that comes toward me? The threat of death is never merely physical torment but rather the destruction of the subject's agency. Blanchot recalls in *The Death Sentence*, "She began to emit a hoarse wheezing and displayed the pallor of a person at death's door. Her mouth was half-open—something she never did while sleeping—and emitted pained noises, giving the impression that this mouth was no longer hers but belonged to a stranger, a terminally ill and incurable person, even a dead one." In the final moment of death, J completely surrenders to death, acknowledging her own powerlessness. At this point, on the curve of death, within the eternal gap between the subject and death, the core of the subject is gradually worn away, entirely dominated by an unnamed and unknowable force.

4.3. Venturing into the space of the outside

Based on the previous discussion of the impossibility of death, if the subject has already dissolved in its infinite approach to death, then who is the one that dies? And where does this impossibility ultimately lead?

In the experience of *dying*, the subject no longer controls its own fate; all self-identity and consciousness are stripped away, and the subject is pushed towards a state of complete *anonymity*. The subject ceases to be the central I, transforming instead into an anonymous it, opening up to absolute otherness. When we speak of this is possible or my death is possible, the threat of force quietly arrives. Possible implies that the subject can exert its power within it, subsuming all externality and otherness into its entirety. "It unifies the manifold, equalizes differences, and brings the other back to the same." This process often involves the unknown surrendering to the known, allowing the unity and continuity of the world to be achieved through force. However, the impossibility of death offers us an escape from this space; the infinite distance between us and death provides a perfect escape route. The subject is hollowed out, leading to an entirely other experience, allowing thought to assert itself through a measure distinct from power.

Traditional philosophy of subjectivity always attempts to assimilate the other through cognition and control, a process that is inherently violent, erasing the other's heterogeneity and uniqueness. The encounter with the other should involve the subject abandoning its self-centeredness, entering a state of "non-self" that respects the other's alterity and strangeness. Therefore, the only way to escape the prison of the self is to restore the distance between the other and me, to restore the other's difference from me. Blanchot refers to the *time of the other* as a stranger, one that refuses to be understood and cannot serve as a means of salvation. As in *The Death Sentence*, where the narrator is effectively invited into J's experience of *dying* and personally interrupts it, the narrator does not become a savior but rather perpetuates the infinite maintenance of death. Similarly, in *Thomas the Obscure*, Blanchot describes this strange relationship, "The swimmer keeps an equal distance from him, constantly swimming out of his sight. He sees him, then does not see him, yet feels he follows his every move: not only does he always perceive him clearly, but he approaches him in a manner of complete intimacy, as if no other contact could surpass it."

Here, the traditional subject is transcended in its opposition to the other, and the foundation of violence and domination is thoroughly eradicated. The infinite distance between the self and the other provides the possibility for a more harmonious interpersonal relationship, replacing it with a non-violent interaction based on understanding and coexistence, a more open and dynamic relationship of existence. This opens up a new realm that transcends opposition and reshapes the human experience of existence.

5. Conclusion

Blanchot's view on death revolves around the central question, "Can I die?" He sees death as something that uproots the very essence of the subject and breaks the linear time that usually surrounds them, opening up a space that leads to a realm of otherness. In this space, death is not just the end of an individual, but also the breakdown of subjectivity and the intrusion of the Other. By analyzing Blanchot's work, we can see how he uses the "narrative" of death to show the endless interruption and the impossibility of death, revealing deep paradoxes and dilemmas in human existence.

Blanchot's thoughts on death go beyond just continuing the ideas of Heidegger and Levinas; they offer a thorough reflection and challenge to the philosophy of subjectivity. Through his description of the *dying* state, Blanchot presents an ongoing process of death that disrupts traditional understandings, showing the subject's helplessness and loss of identity in the face of death, along with a more complex and profound view of human existence. This discussion not only enriches the philosophical understanding of death but also provides new perspectives on the relationships between self and Other, subject and world.

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