

Nathalie's Rotunda:

Breaching the Threshold of Maurice Blanchot's *L'Arrêt de mort*

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I think of something very simple: the experience of weariness that constantly makes us feel a limited life; you take a few steps on the street, eight or nine, then you fall. The limit set by weariness limits life. The meaning of life is in turn limited by this limit: a limited meaning of limited life. But a reversal occurs that can be discovered in various ways ... the meaning of the limit, by affirming it, contradicts the limitation of meaning, or at least displaces it.

Maurice Blanchot (IC 379)

There is a brief passage that stands as preface to Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*, in which the author claims: "a book, even a fragmentary one, has a centre which attracts it. This centre is not fixed, but is displaced by the pressure of the book and circumstances of its composition. Yet it is also a fixed centre which, if it is genuine, displaces itself, while remaining the same and becoming always more central, more hidden, more uncertain, more imperious" (SL v). I will argue that this elusive, ever displaced centre can be considered a space not only in a conceptual sense, but in a properly architectural sense. This paper will contend that Blanchot's conceptual work on the space of literature lingers in an uncomfortable proximity to that space we conventionally name "architecture." What I will examine below is what Blanchot himself has identified as a "spa-

tial movement that is in relation with the becoming of writing" (*IC* 260), such that we forge a passage to and fro between at least two different registers of space.

It is generally accepted that Blanchot's conceptual assemblage concerning the space of literature is not straightforwardly engaged with extensive, quantifiable, or conventional space. Instead, the space of literature is an exemplary non-place, or what Michel Foucault has described as belonging to "placeless places."¹ Nothing really happens in the hallways, rooms, and stairwells that are detailed in Blanchot's *récits*, but I will suggest that these settings are crucial to the writer's sparse narratives and that they bear an intimate relationship with his philosophical work. I will suggest a two-fold sense of the concept of space in Blanchot's *oeuvre*, by way of a reading of *Death Sentence*. This *récit* not only details the breaching of one threshold after another, as Blanchot's characters venture through series of dimly lit rooms, but the astonishing appearance of a rotunda in the midst of one character, Nathalie's apartment. Like a mirage, this focal space of fascination, milieu of the impersonal, appears only to sink again into obscurity, exposing us for the smallest moment to the chiaroscuro of the limitless Outside.

Blanchot's space of literature is, on his own account, no space at all. It is more akin to the "intimacy shared by someone who writes [the work] and someone who reads [the work]" (*SL* 37), an intimacy that requires no real proximity. Or else it is the demand of a thought that comes from elsewhere, that impresses itself upon the writer, and places the writer at risk; "the risk to which the literary experience exposes us" (*SL* 44). The space of literature is an exemplary non-place or nowhere, out of time, out of place. Ann Smock, one of Blanchot's translators, explains that Blanchot's concept of space describes a dimensionless region toward which the reader and writer are drawn, that is, literature's "domain."² But to enter this domain we must traverse a threshold. The movement that propels us forward demands at least a single step [*pas*]. Both Blanchot and Jacques Derrida comment on the double sense of the French word, "pas," which can be used to both designate a step and to signify negation. The step across the threshold that is no step at all, is captured, as it were, in suspended animation, for just a brief instant before it becomes entirely dissipated.

We can locate the architecture of Blanchot's *récits* within this small interval, at the threshold. What's more, we find that this threshold not only pertains to the prosaic surface that demarcates a doorway, but that it is also presented through the threshold that is a pane of glass, a marginal motif that has a recurring place in *Death Sentence*, and which I will treat in passing below. Even the names cited in Blanchot's narrative are held, but

for their initials, in parenthetical brackets, which behave as a textual threshold that keeps the act of naming at bay. The question of the threshold, which will be considered crucial here, also pertains to the disciplinary divide between philosophy and literature. We are well aware that the distinction between fictional and philosophical writing becomes increasingly obscure in Blanchot's work. In the context of Blanchot's *oeuvre*, we discover series of thresholds, some material, even architectural in their expression, others that are more like incorporeal events. Between thoughts and things, sense and sensation, between disciplines, between the darkened rooms discovered in so many of Blanchot's *récits*, we apprehend something that is close to unbearable. We apprehend the dissolution of good and common sense, and bear witness to a fall into the realm of the impersonal, wherein the writer travels the passage from the first to the third person. This is what Blanchot has also named the Outside, or "the space opened up by the movement of writing" (SL 176). The force of the movement of writing potentially inspires an unending, interminable process. The clarity of the singular "I" is made obscure and Blanchot asks: "what would this experience of the obscure be, whereby the obscure would give itself in its obscurity?" (IC 44). The intimacy of the Outside, Blanchot suggests, clouds us in an obscurity that engenders vertigo, and yet it is this milieu that he asks us to go in search of.

Blanchot's *Death Sentence* is predominantly set in Parisian apartments or hotels, where we tend to discover ourselves in the interior, hidden from the innumerable activities and everyday banalities of the streets below. Paradoxically, Blanchot's interiors leave their inhabitants exposed. While being maintained by the material protection of an interior, they are exposed to the Outside, which cannot be considered a straightforward condition of exteriority. Instead, the Outside describes a relation that works between enclosure and exposure through the convoluted, even contortionist process of "enclosing oneself outside oneself," while remaining in the comfort of one's own home (SL 52).

Michel Foucault comments on the role of "houses, hallways, doors and rooms" in Blanchot's narratives, suggesting that they are "placeless places" composed of "beckoning thresholds, closed, forbidden spaces that are nevertheless exposed to the winds, hallways fanned by doors that open rooms for unbearable encounters."³ Though Blanchot's *récits* are by no means detective novels, they nonetheless display what Walter Benjamin calls "the horror of apartments" that is peculiar to that genre, where "the furniture is at the same time the site of deadly traps, and the suite of rooms prescribes the fleeing victim's path."⁴ And despite this, nothing can be said to really happen inside the series of rooms Blanchot presents, or else,

nothing is resolved with respect to the events we witness.

The narration of *Death Sentence* can be divided into two parts, much like two adjoining rooms. Within the second room there resides the promise of an explanation of the events that have occurred in the first. As it turns out, such an explanation is indefinitely deferred. The death sentence, (*l'arrêt de mort*), is a stay of execution, and the event of death will not be witnessed. It will remain outside the survey of the narration, or beyond the enclosure the described rooms offer. The event of death or the passage to the space of death, which seems to hold the narration in unresolved suspense, refuses to be directly broached. There is also a small back room that the narrative steps into at its closure, an antechamber of sorts that stands at a certain distance from the body of the text. The contents of this small room of conclusion are seemingly addressed to those who arrive late, after the event of writing, in order to survey the narrative. It reads as a warning of sorts. It says "do not trespass," for if the body of the text is breached then the late arrival, that is, the reader, will be made a victim of the text, and the writer will become the hunter who has captured his prey.⁵ In much the same way that the writer, Blanchot, or else his narrator (and this distinction too is uncertain) concludes by threatening the reader with the possibility of becoming entrapped, many of the rooms depicted within *Death Sentence* prove to be spaces of capture.

Throughout *Death Sentence* the narrator inhabits a number of nondescript hotel rooms. Though his "official address in Paris" (*DS* 17) is on the rue d'O., he does not maintain a residence in any single place and occasionally rents two or more apartments only to seek short term accommodation in yet another. The narrator explains: "the next day I took a room in another hotel, though I kept this one. I lived that way as long as I had the means to, sometimes in three or four different places" (*DS* 54). Furthermore, he describes the "need to make the place where one lives a place where nothing happens ... to make it a vacant place" (*DS* 38). In multiplying his places of address, the narrator multiplies the number of thresholds that he and his predominantly female companions must negotiate. There is a recurring event that marks a number of these rooms at their thresholds. They are breached by strangers who are unexpected and uninvited. Not only are the narrator's rooms violated in this way, but the narrator also surprises himself by trespassing into unfamiliar apartments, thereby placing himself in the role of uninvited stranger. Within the textual walls that contain the first part of *Death Sentence*, the event of a breached threshold inaugurates the intimate friendship that develops between the narrator and the dying woman, who is marked only with the initial, J.

Only informally acquainted, the narrator and J. are staying at the same

hotel. The narrator writes: "she was in a little room on the second floor and I was in a fairly large room on the third" (*DS* 7). One night J. senses the presence of the narrator venturing in and out of her room. She hears his departing footsteps and becomes convinced that he is dying. It is as though with his receding steps he passes away. Enthralled by this conviction, she enters his room through a door, which, according to the narrator, had been locked. Then, with what the narrator describes as a "noble impulse," she stretches herself out on the bed beside him (*DS* 7). Much like the relationship Blanchot imagines between the reader and the writer, it is their strangeness to each other, their unfamiliarity, that allows this immediate intimacy. With this encounter, which details the first breached boundary within the narrative of *Death Sentence*, the crossing, the passage across the threshold, is given as indissociable from a premonition of death. J.'s impulse is noble because it seems that she remains unperturbed in the face of death, and that she is prepared to take death on, and yet, at the very same moment, she herself becomes death, or the harbinger of death. She is a stranger, the archetypal figure of the other exemplified in the personification of death, and like death she has penetrated the space of the living.

Illegitimate entries, locked doors that open once they are pushed, intimate and violent entanglements between characters who are virtual strangers to one another, all these elements concatenate across Blanchot's *récit*. Although the event of penetration occurs only once in the first part of the narrative, in the second part the thresholds of rooms are repeatedly breached. Thus, in the first section of the *récit*, the scene is set for all the rooms that follow. They are places of waiting, in which the event of arrival can never be anticipated. As Derrida points out, this waiting, awaiting oneself, the other, awaiting each other, all such waiting, suffused with expectation, owns up to "a notable relation to death."⁶

Here is an expanded list of illegitimate entries, which multiply in quite rapid succession as the narration of the second part of the *récit* proceeds. The narrator enters his neighbour's room on the rue d'O. by accident. Although they had planned no rendezvous, she is sitting there in her dressing gown as though waiting for him. There is the suggestion of some intimacy shared between the neighbours, for C(olette) has had the opportunity of reading to the narrator aloud. But the narrator becomes quickly irritated by his neighbour, and it is evident that their intimacy is not sustained. On another occasion the narrator has only just arrived home when an unfamiliar woman enters his apartment. Having crossed the threshold she stops still struck by a combination of fear and fascination, and then, when she attempts to flee, the narrator violently captures her. This capture is conducted

in a fit of rage. The narrator depicts himself as becoming wild, even uncontrollable, but this overwrought encounter facilitates the inception of his intimate relations with N(athalie) (within whose apartment we will eventually discover the rotunda). On yet another occasion the narrator visits a former acquaintance who is about to be re-married, her name is S(imone) D. Forgetting the number of her apartment, he accidentally pushes against a door and by coincidence finds himself in the sought after room. He muses: "I too had opened a door, and was inexplicably entering a place where none expected me" (*DS* 44).

It is in relation to S(imone) that the narrator draws attention to yet another threshold, that of the pane of glass of a shop window. The narrator describes his pleasure in apprehending S(imone) behind a glazed threshold: "after I had been fortunate enough to see her once through a pane of glass, the only thing I wanted during the whole time I knew her, was to feel that 'great pleasure' again through her, and also to break the glass" (*DS* 44). Directly on seeing her behind the glass, Simone emerges and informs the narrator that her husband has died and that she never wants to hear his name again, thus, in the narrative, an erotic pleasure becomes associated with a death. The narrator explains that, whether reading a book, or sharing someone's company, "my very pleasure was behind a pane of glass and unavailable to me because of that, but also far away and in an eternal past" (*DS* 48). The threshold of the glass maintains a milieu of fascination, the obverse of which is the ordinary sway of simple actions, everyday people, and, as such, conventional space. One evening the narrator observes N(athalie) at the theatre with another man. She wanders "very near and infinitely separated from me, as if it were behind a window" (*DS* 60). She appears very beautiful, but they keep their distance. She regards the narrator with a gaze that arrives from behind her eyes, a gaze he describes as cold, friendly, and dead.

The act of venturing into the space of a stranger, including the space designated by their gaze, potentially facilitates not only a meeting with oneself become strange or a doubling of oneself, but also the possibility of sharing an immediate intimacy with a radically unfamiliar other. There is a sense in which the characters gathered in Blanchot's *Death Sentence* are awaiting each other at a distance, and that the space of waiting is negotiated in between them, at the threshold, so to speak.⁷ The passage to death is figured as an impasse, an aporia, suffered, as Derrida suggests, as a paralysing fascination.⁸ According to the narrator of *Death Sentence*, it is a thought that obliterates the recollection of yesterday and plans for tomorrow, but a thought of which the narrator can write: "I look at it. It lives with me. It is in my house. Sometimes it begins to eat; sometimes, though

rarely, it sleeps next to me" (*DS* 32). Given the intimate proximity described above, we can begin to understand the logic of the event that presents itself at the numerous thresholds featured in Blanchot's *Death Sentence*. Death is personified in the figure who breaches the threshold, and though the territory of death is maintained in its inaccessibility as though preserved behind a pane of glass, the space of dying continues to interrupt the text as its characters forge the passage into the realm of the impersonal.

In the timeless state of fascination, one character after another finds, or rather loses themselves and their capacity to utter the "I." And with each little death identity is momentarily neutralized. Blanchot writes: "Of whoever is fascinated it can be said he doesn't perceive any real object, any real figure, for what he sees does not belong to the world of reality, but to the indeterminate milieu of fascination" (*SL* 32). Blanchot's characters are frequently assailed by sensory, seemingly erotic disturbances, stricken with the syncopation of sudden attacks, and fits of shivering. For example, after making a gesture toward opening a closet in one of the narrator's rooms, J. suffers a "strange attack" that causes her to tremble incessantly (*SL* 132). The series of rooms depicted by Blanchot also accommodate locked drawers and closets that shelter nameless, sometimes horrifying things that cannot be grasped or put to use. What's more, the human body itself can be counted among these contained spaces. The space of fascination, the milieu of the outside is articulated by such spaces, and the spatial *punctum* of *Death Sentence* is to be discovered in N(athalie)'s apartment.

At a certain point in the very midst of N(athalie)'s attic apartment Blanchot's narrator imagines a large rotunda, that is, a structure with a round plan, that culminates above one's head in a dome. This is also a structure common to picturesque landscape gardens of the eighteenth century, where it would be discovered as a folly set in the midst of a leisurely and labyrinthine stroll, where it was to provoke surprise and delight. N(athalie)'s apartment is one of the more convoluted spaces described in Blanchot's *récit*, "an immense place, with an infinite number of rooms; except that they were not rooms but closets, nooks, bits of hallway" (*DS* 55). The narrator only ever visits one small room of the attic, which is simultaneously perceived as small and expansive. The rotunda is a preserve imagined in the midst of this space, yet the moment the narrator describes its form it becomes displaced. He tells us: "in my mind there is the image of a large rotunda, quite beautiful and well kept up, but perhaps in another building" (*DS* 55). This interior, made sacred through its sacrificial displacement, might be considered the preserve of death. It is an interior void that is both implacable and ungraspable, an inside that is at the same time an outside. Another variety of co-habitation is at issue here. The intimacy of the elusive

rotunda lends death an infinite preserve, at the same time as preserving the subject in proximity to death.

N(athalie)'s attic is an interior space transformed by way of fascination into the Outside and then, enfolded in this Outside, there shimmers like "a flash," for just a moment, a rotunda, that is, a perfectly composed interior. By the obscure clarity of this flash, day-to-day life is ruptured (*IC* 241). With Nathalie's rotunda, we bear witness to a limit that is affirmed in amidst the otherwise grim rooms Blanchot's narrator traverses. In attending to this rotund space we could call forth a phenomenology of roundness after Gaston Bachelard, who, by way of a series of literary citations maintains that "being is round."⁹ The truth of roundness, of the circle, is decidedly different for Blanchot who argues that phenomenology "maintains the primacy of the subject" (*IC* 251). Where Bachelard encourages us to collect ourselves in the immediacy of full roundness, in the intimacy of an inside, Blanchot instead imagines the circle of the rotunda without a subject, as belonging to the realm of the impersonal, or as the "reverberation of a space opening onto the outside" (*IC* 258). Rather than a phenomenological experience of being in its immediacy, for Blanchot "the centre of the circle [lies] outside the circle, behind it and infinitely far back; as though the outside were precisely this centre that could only be the absence of any centre" (*IC* 280). This is not a lofty space from which everything can be surveyed from the point of view of a subject. Instead, entering the realm of the impersonal we traverse the passage of a life, that is to say an indefinite life, any life whatever. And with Blanchot this passage always carries the whiff of death about it.

With respect to the thought from the Outside, there is a tangled thread of fascination that travels from Blanchot through Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, and not necessarily in that order. With his foldings of thought Deleuze reconfigures a relationship between the Outside and the inside of thought by considering the inside as a fold or operation of the Outside. He writes: "the outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside."¹⁰ The fabric of the Outside is thus folded in such a way that Deleuze can ask whether there is not, after all "*an inside that lies deeper than any external world?*"¹¹ Likewise, Blanchot affirms that a bad interiority is simply not interior enough, and asks: "mightn't there be a point where space is at once intimacy and exteriority, a space which outside, would in itself be spiritual intimacy? ... there we would be within ourselves outside in the intimacy and in the intimate vastness of that outside?" (*SL* 136). By acceding to such a space, which Foucault describes as a "dazzling interiority,"¹² we give ourselves over to

the infinite murmurings of a dissipated discourse, folded out of what Foucault simultaneously imagines as “the sparkle of the outside.”¹³

What I have ventured to suggest above is that Blanchot relies on the narration of voluminous, even quantifiable space in order to depict the scintillating, intervallic space of the Outside, the space of fascination, and the space of literature. Blanchot explicates in extended space the infolded implications of the Outside, and between these two registers the force of complication results in relations of strangeness and affective terrains. The rooms depicted in *Death Sentence* both are and are not fixed locatable places. Blanchot's logic of place, while maintaining, for the most part, fixed spatial coordinates, and even domestic details, reveals the transformative topology of a meandering conceptual passage that stretches and bends, and that frequently wreaks corporeal havoc upon its inhabitants. Intensity, Deleuze explains, envelops distances and is explicated in extensity, whereas extensity “develops, exteriorizes and homogenizes these very distances.”¹⁴ The narrator of *Death Sentence* traverses a multiplicity of homogenous interiors that are mercilessly exposed to the strangeness and heterogeneity of the Outside. That is to say, there persists the everyday imbrication of a multiplicity of deaths, which are excruciating at the same time as being tainted faintly with the erotic. These, finally, are maintained at the threshold of one overarching Death. A multiplicity of little deaths are implicated in Death proper, as Death itself is explicated in each little death. Blanchot's writings beget an infinite passage backwards and forwards between these registers, he conducts an interminable conversation that continues to complicate the relations borne by the subject, to her or himself, and to others. Finally, the joyful affirmation of life that Deleuze celebrates is unlikely to be found in the folds of Blanchot's darkened rooms. And so we might ask, what of an immanent life here, if life is to be forever maintained behind the perfect preserve of a pane of glass, or on one or the other side of a threshold? Where, finally, is what Deleuze describes as a “life within the folds,”¹⁵ folds that “one fills with oneself” in a transformation that converts the space of dying into a force of life?¹⁶

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NOTES

¹ Michel Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from the Outside”, in *Foucault Blanchot*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1990), p. 24.

- ² Ann Smock, "Translator's Introduction", in Blanchot, *SL* 10.
- ³ Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot", p. 24.
- ⁴ Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street," *Reflections*, trans. Edmond Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 64.
- ⁵ The figure of the hunter or a trap is deployed in both *Death Sentence* and *Awaiting Oblivion*. In these texts a stranger, generally a woman, is captured in the confines of a room. See *DS* 157-8 and *AwO* 62.
- ⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 65.
- ⁷ Derrida's three relations of waiting include: 1) Awaiting oneself in oneself. 2) In so directing one's waiting, even if it is directed ostensibly toward oneself, there persists the expectation in waiting of the arrival of some other, or some event, specifically, death. 3) Waiting for each other, or awaiting each other. This final relation of waiting awaits not only the other, but that which is absolutely other, that is, death. See Derrida, *Aporias*, pp. 65-6.
- ⁸ Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 12.
- ⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 234.
- ¹⁰ Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 96-7.
- ¹¹ Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 96. Italics in original.
- ¹² Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot", p. 16.
- ¹³ Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot", p. 18.
- ¹⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 230.
- ¹⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 123.
- ¹⁶ Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 123.