

Writing the Disaster:

Testimony and *The Instant of My Death*

Jennifer Yusin

Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* is a philosophical inquiry into the Holocaust that seeks to understand the significance and meaning of the Holocaust independent from the empirical fact of its occurrence.

The holocaust, the absolute event of history – which is a date in history – that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up, where the gift, which knows nothing of forgiveness or of consent, shattered without giving place to anything that can be affirmed, that can be denied ... How can thought be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought? (*WD* 47)

Blanchot's claim that the "movement of Meaning was swallowed up" suggests, in its implicit relationship to the conceptual and philosophical status of the Holocaust, the absence of meaning. What Blanchot suggests, however, is not that meaning was first present and then erased throughout the course of the Holocaust, but rather that meaning was absent, in the first place, from the event of the Holocaust. Couched within Blanchot's assertion of the absence of meaning is his claim to the Holocaust as the event in which "the gift ... shattered without giving place to anything that can be af-

firmed, that can be denied,” as an event that did not “happen” in the manner of any other event. The conceptual and philosophical status of the Holocaust does not deny the empirical fact of its occurrence but rather exists in tension with its date in history. Out of this tension arises Blanchot’s thinking of the Holocaust as “the absolute event of history,” an event that is at once a historical reality as well as a violent historical rupture that challenges, in the first place, its status as an event. For what this tension between the philosophical and empirical status of the Holocaust gestures towards is the difficult question of the imperative to remember and to ascribe meaning to that which, properly speaking, cannot be known as an experienced presence, and therefore as memory. It is, as Blanchot claims, the question of how memory can safeguard both the empirical and philosophical status of the Holocaust when the Holocaust is marked by the violent absence of meaning “where all was lost, including guardian thought.” The problem of “guardian thought,” in this regard, becomes the problem of containing the story of the Holocaust as an I. That is, “guardian thought” seems to be contingent upon memory, and yet memory is contingent upon having first thought of the Holocaust in the present as a presence. Insofar as the Holocaust did not “happen” in the present, thought is always a memory; therefore, memory of the Holocaust is always a kind of impossibility, hinging on the very “guardian thought” that is absent in the first place. What Blanchot’s assertion of the primary loss of “guardian thought” opens up is the question of the I in relation to an experienced present, for what is lost is not only the possibility of memory but also the presence of the I during the event of the Holocaust.¹ This rupture between the I and experience emerges as the inherent failure of the I to tell about an event that it cannot tell. It becomes the central problem of Blanchot’s fictional text *The Instant of My Death*. For as much as *The Writing of the Disaster* opens the philosophical and conceptual space for questioning the relationship between the I, experience, and memory, it is *The Instant of My Death* that enacts and testifies to this problem of the I and, in so doing, becomes its own poetic writing of the disaster. Reading *The Instant of My Death* and *The Writing of the Disaster* together offers us a chance to investigate the intersection between fiction and philosophy that raises questions about the status of fiction and philosophy as modes of writing that inform each other in terms of the conceptual status of writing about the self.

First published in French in 1994, nearly fifty years after it was first written and fourteen years after the publication of *The Writing of the Disaster*, *The Instant of My Death* is often considered one of Blanchot’s more cryptic and complex fictional texts. The 2000 English translation of *The Instant of My Death*, published in a joint volume with Jacques Derrida’s 1998

essay *Demeure*, however, complicates its fictional status by raising the question of its autobiographical reference. Although much of the scholarship about *The Instant of My Death* considers the status of fiction in relation to structural and conceptual questions of narrative, it is Derrida's essay *Demeure* that considers the relationship between fiction, autobiography, and testimony.² Briefly mentioning a letter sent to him one year prior to the English publication of *The Instant of My Death*, Derrida cites the similarity between the central event of *The Instant of My Death* and Blanchot's personal experience.³ Although *Demeure* appears after *The Instant of My Death*, it nevertheless haunts and complicates Blanchot's text as an autobiographical referent that, as Derrida argues in *Demeure*, raises the question of the fictional status of testimony. In order to consider the relationship between fiction and testimony, we must first turn to the text of *The Instant of My Death*. Opening with a memory, *The Instant of My Death* is a first person narrative that attempts to tell about a brief encounter in front of what is initially assumed to be a German firing squad. Confronted by a lieutenant and his army, the narrator and his family are called from their Château and are ordered to stand in front of the firing squad. Agreeing to line up in front of the firing squad if the women from his family are spared, the narrator faces what is later revealed to be the Russian Vlassov army (*ID* 3). In a temporal rupture, the narrator suddenly discovers himself to be free from the aim of the firing squad and alive in Paris, questioning the status of his survival. This plot, however, unfolds from the narrator's opening claim to a memory: "I remember a man still young – prevented from dying by death itself" (*ID* 3). Immediately raising questions of autobiography, the first sentence complicates the narrative voice and the subject of the narrative by confusing the autobiographical promise inherent in the title's claim to "my death" and the subject for whom "my death" belongs. It is with this initial disruption to the question of who is telling the story of *The Instant of My Death* that the narrator locates the action of the text outside a Château in France at the end of the Second World War. What is striking about the action of the narrative is the absence of "my death." As the opening sentence suggests, and the text's plot confirms, the death announced within the title never empirically occurs. On an empirical level, therefore, the question of autobiography is also raised insofar as the very event which is at the center of the title and the narrative is absent. The young man of the opening narrator's memory, however, survives by "death itself," suggesting the presence of a death whose empirical absence calls into question its own status as a death. That the narrative of *The Instant of My Death* is written in the present tense, despite the logical impossibility of narrating from the position of an empirically present death, complicates, in a manner similar to Blan-

chot's questioning of "guardian thought," the problem of the I telling the story of a death which, properly speaking, the I cannot tell.

What the questioning of the status of the death in *The Instant of My Death* opens up is not simply the problem of the I in relation to experience as a conscious presence, but also the question of the status of a story that blurs the separation between autobiography and fiction. "To write one's autobiography," Blanchot asserts in *The Writing of the Disaster*, "in order either to confess or to engage in self-analysis, or in order to expose oneself, like a work of art, to the gaze of all, is perhaps to seek to survive, but through a perpetual suicide – a death which is total inasmuch as fragmentary" (WD 64). For Blanchot, a fragmentary and total death is a death that can never be experienced in the present; it is rather death which is inherent in the notion of survival. Recalling the narrator's claim to a memory of a young man whose survival is guaranteed by "death itself," the notion of survival, in this regard, is bound to what Blanchot calls "the inexperience of death" (WD 37). A paradox insofar as it assumes an encounter with a death that inevitably belongs to an inaccessible past, "the inexperience of death" gestures towards the conceptual status of death as that which signifies the inherent failure of the I to experience death in the present. Writing one's autobiography thus signifies the constant struggle to know, to own, and to possess death as a presence; for it is in writing one's autobiography, as Blanchot suggests, that the I attempts to tell the story of a death that it can never fully possess. In this regard, to write one's autobiography is to be bound to the inherent failure of the I's desire to contain a death that it cannot possess. It is therefore to be trapped within a perpetual suicide that affirms, at each turn, the paradox of "the inexperience of death" which gestures towards the impossibility of the I to know death as an I. The particular purchase of Blanchot's claim to the relationship between autobiography and death is to raise the question of the conceptual status of the I in relation to philosophy, writing, and fiction. To suggest the inherent failure of the I to tell its own complete story, which would indicate the story of the author's death, is to suggest, both on an empirical and conceptual level, the failure of autobiography to maintain its status as autobiography. It would seem, then, that any attempt at autobiography becomes fiction as the I announces, as Blanchot claims, its inherent failure and absence. For as much as empiricism puts into question the status of death, it is the refiguring of death within a conceptual and philosophical framework that puts the status of the I into question. The questions that Blanchot explicitly raises in *The Writing of the Disaster*, a seminal philosophical work, complicate the status of philosophy in relation to fiction and writing as a problem of language. The theoretical problem of the I's relationship to death, and therefore to

writing about the self, is a problem of language deeply embedded within the ambiguous space between fiction and philosophy.

What *The Instant of My Death* marks and testifies to is precisely this problem of language that is voiced in the philosophical inquiry of *The Writing of the Disaster*. In its opening call to a memory, the first sentence of *The Instant of My Death* raises, within fiction, the problem of the I and its relationship to autobiography and death. The title of *The Instant of My Death* promises to tell, in its first person assertion, the story of an autobiographical experience with death.⁴ The title, however, is followed by a strange claim to a memory: "I remember a young man – a man still young – prevented from dying by death itself" (ID 3). The first sentence immediately complicates the autobiographical status promised by the title by calling into question the I who is telling the story. Is the I who remembers the same I who promises to tell the story of "my death"? Does the "my death" announced in the title belong to the young man of the memory? If this is the case, it would seem fitting that the title read as *The Instant of His Death*. That it does not, however, gestures towards the inherent failure of the I to possess death and to therefore contain the story of "my death" as an I. Shifting from the opening memory to the scene of the young man standing in front of the firing squad, the narrative continues in the first person, suggesting that the I who narrates the primary action of the text is the voice of the young man from the opening narrator's memory. With two I's, distinguished from each other by memory and thus by time, voicing the narrative, the autobiographical status of the text is further put into question by the attempt to write about "the instant of my death." Recalling, however, that "my death," or any other death, is empirically absent from the text, both I's enact their inherent failure to narrate the actual instant of "the instant of my death" (ID 11). The narrative traverses through an account of the instant in which death is anticipated and the instant in which death becomes a missed experience, but never actually arrives at and conveys "the instant of my death." As a missed experience, the absent center around which the narrative revolves, "the instant of my death" enacts the inability of language to account for "the instant of my death" in the experienced present as a presence. Not only does the text of *The Instant of My Death*, in its promise to tell of "my death," and its subsequent failure of either I to do so, stage Blanchot's philosophical claim about the relationship between autobiography and death within fiction, but it also indicates that the problem within language is the impossibility of language to account for the instant of "the instant of my death."⁵ The question of the status of a death that is empirically absent in relation to the status of writing about the self becomes a question of how to speak about "my death." This question is, as Blanchot's

question about “guardian thought” suggests, about the problem of writing from the first person position as it is the disaster that ruptures the relationship between the I and experience.

Blanchot asserts that the I is constituted as an I by its incommensurable relationship to the other which “weighs upon me like an obsession with death” and makes me responsible to the other (*WD* 40-1). In keeping with Blanchot’s philosophy, the other is to be understood as something of a philosophical abstraction that cannot be converted into any kind of presence that would locate the other as a name, theme, or definition. Such a relationship with the other is marked by what Blanchot identifies, after Heidegger, as the “always already” because it is before the I is able to identify itself as an I that this relationship with the other “occurs” (*WD* 40). As it is before the I is able to assert itself, the relationship with the other does not “happen” in the manner of any other event, and thereby remains within a time that precedes even the past and is thus historically out of time. What is particularly important about this relationship with the other, at least with regard to Blanchot’s thinking of the Holocaust within *The Writing of the Disaster*, is that this relationship calls into question the conceptual status of the I in terms of a fractured temporality that remains outside of the realm of an experienced present. It is this temporality and the putting of the self radically into question that marks, for Blanchot, the disaster. In claiming the Holocaust to be “the absolute event of history” that irreparably fractured temporality and meaning, Blanchot figures the Holocaust as the disaster. What is at first a philosophical fragment about the Holocaust in Blanchot’s thinking of “guardian thought” becomes, as *The Writing of the Disaster* continues, about the disaster, an abstraction that resonates within the inadequacy of naming the Holocaust as the disaster. Indeed both the Holocaust and the disaster remain within the paradox of inexperience that resonates as an absent center unable to be accounted for within language. For what this movement between the Holocaust and the disaster enacts is the absence of the Holocaust as the disaster, and because it is not, properly speaking, present, naming becomes inadequate. The Holocaust cannot simply be a referent for the disaster, and similarly, the disaster cannot simply be a referent for the Holocaust when what is ultimately at stake is the totalizing absence of meaning and the I. Is the Holocaust the singular and only disaster, or is it one disaster of many that cannot be named? Does the disaster refer to the Holocaust or does the Holocaust refer to the disaster? These questions gesture towards the notion that only within language can the disaster be understood to exist outside of its limits. Only in writing can the I stage its inherent failure to contain the story of “my death,” of the disaster, and therefore occupy the creative space between fiction and phi-

osophy, and emerge as testimony. If writing arises, as Blanchot argues in *The Writing of the Disaster*, out of the relationship with the other and is always a kind of impossible gesture towards the disaster, in what way is *The Instant of My Death* its own writing of the disaster?

Writing from the position of the I about the disaster becomes an impossibility, for it is the disaster that strips the I of its first person position:

The disaster does not put me into question, but annuls the question, makes it disappear – as if along with the question, “I” too disappeared in the disaster which never appears. The fact of disappearing is, precisely, not a fact, not an event: it does not happen, not only because there is no “I” to undergo the experience, but because (and this is exactly what presupposition means), since the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it. (WD 28)

The paradox of the disaster is that despite its empirical absence, it nevertheless remains as a kind of absent presence indicated in the struggle of the I to regain its first person position after having survived the disaster that was never present in the first place. There remains, despite the annulment of the I, the desire to know, to shed light upon the absent meaning of the disaster and “the inexperience of death.” This desire, as Blanchot continues to assert, is staged in writing where the position of the I is put radically into question by the paradox of the notion of survival as bound to “the inexperience of death.” Writing, in this regard, does not situate death in the future, but rather acknowledges that it has already taken place without having been experienced. “The language of writing,” Blanchot claims, “in its repetitive difference, its patient effraction – opens or offers itself in the direction of the other” (WD 79). To write is to engage the I in a relationship that affirms it as limited and constituted by its relationship to the other. “The language of writing” becomes a performance of the inherent failure of the I to tell the story of the disaster in the present. Insofar as it affirms the I’s relationship to the other, writing stages the temporal fracture that characterizes the disaster as disaster. The I therefore becomes other to itself in writing and in so doing opens the literary space in which the I may bear witness to its own limitations. The particular importance of Blanchot’s notion of “the language of writing” is not exclusively to suggest that the I surrenders itself to an abstract notion of the other, but to also engage this relationship as an obligation that can only be voiced in the writing that gestures towards its own failure. This writing is, as I suggest in the manner of Derrida’s argument in *Demeure*, at once testimony and fiction.

In her critical encounter with Blanchot’s philosophical inquiry into

Auschwitz, Sarah Kofman questions how testimony and the story are able to coexist:

If no story is possible after Auschwitz, there remains, nonetheless, a duty to speak, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the very end they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal. To speak in order to witness. But how? How can testimony escape the idyllic law of the story? How can one speak the unimaginable?⁶

Whereas testimony refers to an event that is outside of the written text, the “idyllic law of the story” suggests that fiction exists on its own terms, referring to itself insofar as the context is its own story. As Derrida’s essay *Demeure* argues, testimony has inherent within it the autobiographical voice. Insofar as it is told from the first person position, testimony is privileged as that which tells the truth about an experience that happened only to the person delivering the testimony and cannot be replaced by another’s experience.⁷ With this in mind, it would seem that, by its very nature, testimony is never threatened by the “idyllic law of the story,” and is always distinguished from fiction by its inherent truth value. That, however, to question the possibility of testimony in relation to fiction suggests, Kofman continues, that the status of fiction has inherent within it an allegorical quality that allows it to coexist with the story. Herein lies the particular purchase of Kofman’s question: the question of speaking the unimaginable is the question of providing testimony for precisely that experience which can never be owned by the I who speaks, but is instead spoken in order to witness the very impossibility of providing testimony for the endless silence of those who want to “safeguard true speech against betrayal.” This implicates testimony as that which cannot “escape the idyllic law of the story,” and is rather made possible, in the first place, the very moment that testimony takes on a particular allegorical dimension. For what Kofman’s consideration of the duty to speak gestures towards is the inherent impossibility of testimony, and the inherent impossibility to contain and to tell of the “unimaginable” as an I. As the title and problematic opening line of *The Instant of My Death* enact, what begins as the promise to testify to “the instant of my death” reads as a story of a memory of a young man “prevented from dying by death itself.” What may begin as the promise of testimony emerges as an allegory, a story about the inherent failure of testimony.

In *Demeure*, Derrida asserts that “Literature serves as real testimony. ... It is a fiction of testimony more than a testimony in which the witness swears to tell the truth ... without the *possibility* of this fiction ... no truthful testimony would be possible.”⁸ It is fiction, as Derrida suggests, which

opens the possibility for “truthful” testimony. “Truthful” testimony is not one that claims itself to be truthful, but rather one that announces its own inability to tell the truth. Such testimony recognizes, within its own terms, the inability of the I to maintain its position as an I in the moment of, for example, “the instant of my death.” Testimony, therefore, can only be possible as what Derrida calls the “fiction of testimony,” as an allegory that tells the story of its own failure. As much as testimony may assume the autobiographical voice that writes about a singular experience, it is fiction that opens the creative space in which the I is able to write as an I. It does so, however, within the “idyllic law of the story,” that is, within the freedom of using fiction’s creative license to create the illusion of an I who is able to fully bear witness to what Blanchot calls “the disaster,” to what Kofman calls “the unimaginable,” and to the instant of “the instant of my death.” For fiction does not simply say, for example, “I cannot testify to the instant of my death that does not, properly speaking, belong to me,” but instead performs its own inherent failure. It is a failure, however, that is ultimately the most singular experience, as it is the failure itself that signifies the truly unique and irreplaceable position of “the instant of my death.” Unable to assert its own truth, testimony must turn to fiction in order to find its irreplaceable voice. “Real” testimony, as Derrida calls it, arises within literature, within the very space that allows the I to speak as an I and prevent “true speech” from the claim to truth, the very “betrayal” that underlines Kofman’s questions.

The inherent failure of testimony as that which cannot assert its own truth ultimately becomes the problem of the inability of language to account for the experience which testimony assumes to be addressing in the present. What the title of *The Instant of My Death* demonstrates is that the I cannot write about or from the actual instant of “the instant of my death” in the present tense. Rather, writing from the position of the I, and this is where Derrida’s work in *Demeure* is particularly poignant, necessarily assumes another tense in which “the instant of my death” is addressed as an anticipated future or a past, experienced event.⁹ The instant of “the instant of my death” cannot be accounted for within language, for any attempt to do so would necessarily assume the I to be dead and therefore without speech in the first place. Important in this assertion is that the problem with language is not exclusive to testimony and is one that fiction also confronts. The question then becomes as much about the failure of fiction to account for the instant as it is about the failure of testimony to account for the instant of “the instant of my death.” This is precisely the place in which Blanchot’s fictional text, in its relationship to *The Writing of the Disaster*, takes shape as its own poetic writing of the disaster. That is, *The Instant of My*

Death enacts, through fiction, the philosophical inquiry into the disaster and the problem of the I that is at the center of *The Writing of the Disaster*. As previously mentioned, the title of *The Instant of My Death* promises to testify to the experience of “my death,” or perhaps more appropriately, to the inexperience of “my death.” What occurs, however, in the five pages that constitute the text, is a fragmented narrative that never actually tells of the death promised by the title. On an empirical level, the fictional narrative fails to account for the death announced in the title. On an allegorical level, however, the narrative also fails, as I argue, to create the first person position from which the I may tell the story of “the instant of my death.” In complicating the narrative voice, the text’s opening sentence also calls into question the fictional status of the opening memory. Is the narrative telling the story of a memory of a young man or is it telling of the memory itself as a historical reality?

What is especially striking about the narrative of *The Instant of My Death* is its fractured telling that never clearly asserts the narrative voice in relation to the primary action of the text. As a result, two different narrative voices seem to drive the action of the text: the I who opens the text with a memory of a young man and the I of the young man, presumably telling the story which constitutes the memory of the first I. Although both narrative voices assert the first person position, they seem to be initially separated by temporality. The I who announces the memory speaks in the present tense about the past and the young man speaks in the present tense about the present. This temporal difference at first functions to distinguish the narrative voices from each other, but is quickly annulled by the attempt to narrate the instant of “the instant of my death.” In the description of the encounter between the young man and the firing squad outside the Château, the I who speaks is clearly the voice of the young man. As the narrative approaches the young man’s imminent death, however, the narrative voice shifts and marks a tension between the otherwise distinguished narrative voices:

I know – I do not know it – that the one at whom the Germans were already aiming, awaiting but the final order, experienced then a feeling of extraordinary lightness, a sort of beatitude (nothing happy, however) – sovereign elation? The encounter of death with death?
(ID 5)

The narrator’s waiver between “I know – I do not know it” can be read as either the voice of the young man or the voice of the opening narrator. Separated by a hyphen, by a linguistic mark of silence, the shift from “I know” to “I do not know it” suggests an ambiguity that enacts the very tension that

collapses the temporal difference between the narrative voices, and therefore the very thing that distinguishes the voices from each other. At once knowing and unknowing, the I who speaks can also be read as the simultaneous presence of both voices. The I who knows is the I of the young man, asserting the singularity of his confrontation with the firing squad. In the claim to not “know it,” the I of the opening narrator is voiced, affirming the position of the young man as singular and irreplaceable. The hyphen therefore becomes the linguistic mark that opens the narrative to the simultaneous presence of both voices without seeming to compromise their difference. This narrative tension occurs, however, in the very moment of an imminent death and as such, occurs in a moment that, in the manner of Blanchot’s philosophy in *The Writing of the Disaster*, refigures the I as an absence and fractures the relationship between the I and experience. In this textual moment, the narrative collapses into an anonymous “one,” conflating the young man and the opening narrator into the aim of the firing squad and rendering both first person positions as absent and voiceless. In turning to the nameless “one” as the subject at “whom the Germans were already aiming,” the story fails to maintain, even within fiction, the voice of either I in the very moment of the “encounter of death with death.” Although the death itself remains empirically absent, there exists the trace of it having already occurred in the narrator’s questioning of the “encounter of death with death.” For this questioning suggests the presence of death as an absence, having “happened” in the temporal manner of what Blanchot calls the disaster.

Haunted by this “encounter of death with death,” the narrative returns to the voice of the opening narrator and now positions the young man as having survived the death that did not happen as an assembled experience in the present. The young man becomes, in some sense, a survivor of the disaster, bound to the notion of death for the very constitution of his survival:

In his place I will not try to analyze. He was perhaps suddenly invincible. Dead – immortal. Perhaps ecstasy. Rather the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity, the happiness of not being immortal or eternal. Henceforth, he was bound to death by a surreptitious friendship. (*ID* 5)

Announcing the young man’s position as singular and irreplaceable, the opening narrator refuses to substitute the young man’s nuanced experience with a narrative. What seems, however, to be the very analysis which the opening narrator supposedly rejects emerges as a questioning of the young man’s survival within the notion of “the inexperience of death.” In a

narrative move that recalls Blanchot's assertion about the paradox of survival in writing one's autobiography, the opening narrator locates notions of death and immortality within a tension that testifies to the missed encounter with death. At once joining and separating the words "dead" and "immortal," the hyphen appears once again as a linguistic mark that interrupts the narrative and, in so doing, inscribes the young man's survival within an absent death whose presence can only be indicated as the disaster. For it is the very fact of not being immortal or eternal that affirms the young man's capacity for an "encounter of death with death" that then reaffirms his new-found position as a survivor of such an encounter. This fact of the young man's survival is, however, marked by "the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity," and therefore by a collectivity that seems to disrupt the singularity of such a position. Arising out of the singularity of "the inexperience of death," "the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity," does not rearticulate the young man's survival within a collective identity, but rather articulates the young man's survival within a collection of fragmented identities, similarly marked by the disaster. *The Instant of My Death* becomes, in this textual moment, as much about the disaster as that which is the philosophical abstraction of all such paradoxes that put "guardian thought" radically into question, as it is about the singularity of the story of "the instant of my death."

The effect of the disaster upon the young man's survival is not necessarily to question the empirical fact of having survived an imminent death, but rather to question the status of a survival defined by its dependence upon a death that did not empirically happen. Important in this distinction is not only the paradox of such a survival, but also the questioning of the relationship between this survival and identity. What does it mean to survive death by death itself? It is in the manner of this questioning that the narrative once again blurs the position of the I:

There remained, however, at the moment when the shooting was no longer but to come, the feeling of lightness that I would not know how to translate: freed from life? the infinite opening up? Neither happiness, nor unhappiness. Nor the absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know, I imagine that this unanalyzable feeling changed what there remained for him of existence. As if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him. "I am alive. No, you are dead." (*ID* 7-9)

Attempting to speak from the "moment when the shooting was no longer but to come," the I who narrates is presumably the voice of the young man. Unable to be translated, "the feeling of lightness" remains as the excess of

a past that cannot be fully accessed in the present. As such, it has become “the infinite opening up,” the unanswerable rupture between the I who stood as the “human target,” and the new life bodied forth out of a death that has already come to pass without having been experienced. The question then of what remains and of what it means to survive such a death arises out of the “unanalyzable feeling” that “changed what there remained for him of existence.” What is most striking, however, about this “unanalyzable feeling” is precisely its unanalyzable quality that marks the failure of the I to contain the moment in the present as either fiction or testimony. Recalling the opening narrator’s earlier assertion that “in his place I will not try to analyze,” the claim to “know” and to “imagine” an “unanalyzable feeling” as unanalyzable and to therefore possess it as such further identifies the I who speaks in this narrative moment as the young man. However, “this unanalyzable feeling,” the very feeling which reaffirms the irreplaceable position of the young man, becomes that which changes what “remained for him of existence.” The narrative shift to the anonymous third person as the person for whom existence now remains as an untranslatable fragment enacts the very annulment of I in the disaster. No longer recognizable to himself, the young man is unable to possess his newly acquired existence as an I; for it is an existence that is in constant motion with an internal death that is inescapably bound by its confrontation and collision with the death outside of him.

The I who survives remains entirely foreign to the I who stood before the firing squad. Able only to regain the position of the I in quotation marks, a linguistic move that suggests the creative license of speaking in the place of another, the I states: “I am alive. No, you are dead.” In what seems to be a question and response announced by different voices, the I who claims existence, presumably the young man, is also dead, forever bound to death for his survival. Reading as the voice of an anonymous other, the claim to “No, you are dead” inscribes both the paradox of survival as well as the failure of the I to contain the story of a survival that has been bodied forth out of the disaster. This story of survival is refigured in the final narrative fragment as the attempt to piece together fragments of a written text. As the narrative shifts from the third person to the first person voice, it becomes a haunting echo of the foreignness between the I who stood as the “human target” and the I who survives. It is, however, this final mention of a lost manuscript that marks the attempt to account for “the instant of my death” within the problem of “guardian thought,” that is, within the relationship between the I and memory. Ultimately failing to preserve “the instant of my death” within memory, and therefore within an experienced past, the final narrative fragment ends the text with the writing of “the instant of my

death" as an absence whose presence is inscribed in the very writing that fails to account for "the instant of my death":

Later, having returned to Paris, he met Malraux, who said that he had been taken prisoner (without being recognized) and that he had succeeded in escaping, losing a manuscript in the process. "It was only reflections of art, easy to reconstitute, whereas a manuscript would not be." With Paulhan, he made inquiries which could only remain in vain. ... What does it matter. All that remains is the feeling of lightness that is death itself, or to put it more precisely, the instant of my death henceforth always in abeyance. (*ID* 11)

Like the manuscript, the young man is unable to be fully reconstituted, to be translated into a new narrative that tells the story of young man who survived death by death itself. What remains is "the feeling of lightness," the absent meaning that, in its loud and untranslatable silence, etches the endless repetition of "the instant of my death" that can never be known and experienced in the present. "The instant of my death" emerges, in its absence, as the inescapable instant of the disaster. Out of this instant arises the I who is forever haunted by the continuous repetition of a death that remains suspended within a past never experienced in the present. The young man who returns to Paris has become other to the self that stood in the aim of the firing squad. *The Instant of My Death* becomes, then, in its inherent failure to testify to "the instant of my death" and to contain the story of "the instant of my death" from the position of the I, its own poetic writing of the disaster.

It is indeed the enigmatic language of a memory of a young man whose inherent failure to tell the story of "the instant of my death" from the position of the I that allows *The Instant of My Death* to emerge as testimony to a survival paradoxically bound to a death that remains as a kind of absent rupture. For it is in the fictional space of *The Instant of My Death* that testimony arises out of not only the inherent failure of testimony to assert its own truth, but also in the inherent failure of fiction to account for the I in the instant of "the instant of my death." It is in this failure that testimony finds its voice resonating within the relationship between the obligation to speak what Kofman calls the "unimaginable" and the problem of the I in "guardian thought." Haunted by the letter Derrida received from Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death* at once occupies and rejects its fictional, testimonial, and autobiographical status. What seems at first to be a testimony is revealed to be a fictional narrative that traverses around an absent event that bears a historical referent to Blanchot's own autobiographical experience. Ultimately, the text moves freely between each genre, using the fractured nar-

rative to enact the very problem of language and the inability of language to account for “the instant of my death,” rejecting, in the first place, its singular status as testimony, autobiography, or fiction. Indeed it is this movement that, in blurring the separation between fact and fiction, marks the text’s most poignant intersection with *The Writing of the Disaster*. *The Instant of My Death* not only announces the inherent failure of testimony, but also questions the status of writing about the self in relation to philosophy. *The Instant of My Death* becomes as much about the disaster as is *The Writing of the Disaster*, and as such, asserts, through fiction, the problem of the I in relation to the disaster. In a textual space that is not clearly fictional or philosophical, *The Instant of My Death* becomes a poetic writing of the disaster that testifies to the disaster as that which irreparably fractures the relationship between the I and experience. In this regard, *The Instant of My Death* also becomes a kind of allegory for the philosophical work of *The Writing of the Disaster*, questioning in its own terms how thought can “be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought?” For what *The Instant of My Death* enacts, without sacrificing its conceptual status, is the “unimaginable.” In its inherent failure to testify, *The Instant of My Death* becomes testimony to what Kofman writes as “the duty to speak, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the very end they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal. To speak in order to witness.”

Emory University
jyusin@emory.edu

NOTES

¹ For this paper, I use the term “the I” in the manner of Blanchot’s philosophical discourse in *The Writing of The Disaster* in order to invoke the relationship with the other. The term “the I” works to figure consciousness and identity in terms of its relationship to the other. Indeed alternative terms such as “the self,” “consciousness,” or “the subject” may in fact be more appropriate to the discussion of the relationship between experience and memory, and as such deserve careful consideration. In their inherent reference to identity, these alternative terms raise questions of the psychoanalytic relationship between consciousness, experience, and memory. It is important to recognize that, when speaking of events embedded within a historical reality, the psychoanalytic import of employing a term such as “the self” is to presuppose the presence of a formerly “whole” or constituted self that has been irreparably fractured by such an event. Because it is not my intent to explicitly address the psychoanalytic import in this paper, I have chosen to use “the I” in order to maintain consistency.

- ² See in particular the following articles: Welch D. Everman, "Maurice Blanchot, The Story, and The Vicious Circle," *New Orleans Review*, 2 (1998), pp. 35-40; John Gregg, "Blanchot's Suicidal Artist: Writing and the (Im)Possibility of Death," *Sub-Stance*, 55 (1988), pp. 47-58; Geoffrey H. Hartman, "The Fullness and Nothingness of Literature," *Yale French Studies*, 16 (1955), pp. 63-78; Steven Ungar, "Night Moves: Spatial Perception and the Place of Blanchot's Early Fiction," *Yale French Studies*, 57 (1979), pp. 124-35.
- ³ Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death / Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 51-4.
- ⁴ See Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 45. Here Derrida argues that speaking or writing the statement "the instant of my death" in the present is impossible as it necessarily implies that the I who speaks does so from the position of death. Implicit within "the instant of my death" is another tense that allows the statement to be spoken despite its inherent impossibility. That is, "the instant of my death" has inherent within it, as Derrida asserts, "every possible tense: *I am* dead, or *I will be* dead in an instant, or an instant ago *I was* going to be dead." To speak "the instant of my death" is to therefore speak *of* death as well as *from* death.
- ⁵ See Derrida, *Demeure*, pp. 33-4, 45. The possibility of the instant of "the instant of my death" exists, as Derrida argues, in relation to its own impossibility. The moment that one offers the instant as testimony, it is therefore bound to the possibility of being reproduced and repeated beyond the first claim to the instant. Testimony depends, in this regard, on the reproducibility of the instant, that I can speak the instant today and tomorrow in order to affirm a certain truth value. The moment that the instant is divided into repetition, it no longer exists as a singular instant. Yet, it is the very fact that I can reproduce the instant of my testimony that affirms the singular and irreplaceable nature of the instant and thus of my testimony in the first place.
- ⁶ Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeleine Dobie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 36.
- ⁷ See Derrida, *Demeure*, pp. 38-43.
- ⁸ Derrida, *Demeure*, pp. 71-2.
- ⁹ Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 45.