

Radnóti, Blanchot, and the (Un)writing of Disaster

Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [European Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna. "Radnóti, Blanchot, and the (Un)writing of Disaster." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.2 (2015): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2435>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 412 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 17 Issue 2 (June 2015) Article 2
Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei,
"Radnóti, Blanchot, and the (Un)writing of Disaster"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss2/2>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.2 (2015)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss2/>>

Abstract: In her article "Radnóti, Blanchot, and the (Un)writing of Disaster" Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei applies Maurice Blanchot's notion of disaster to the Holocaust poetry of Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944). Radnóti's work contemplates a catastrophic present and brings authorial experience and the writing self to the fore. Blanchot's thought may help us to understand Radnóti's poetry, yet paradoxically so, since the poems repel Blanchot's central formulations about the passivity and sacrifice of the author and, in his reflections on Kafka, about the uncertainty of death. Gosetti-Ferencei's study shows that despite divergences Blanchot's treatment of writing and authorship illuminates these themes in Radnóti's poems and that the latter also sheds new critical light on Blanchot's elusive understanding of disaster.

Jennifer Anna GOSETTI-FERENCEI

Radnóti, Blanchot, and the (Un)writing of Disaster

An application of Maurice Blanchot's notion of disaster to the Holocaust poetry of Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944), particularly the last sequence called *Postcards*, may suggest a paradox. Radnóti's poems were written from a more immediate crisis than even those of Paul Celan, literally on the brink of death. Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* comes to mind, even while Blanchot's "disaster" evades precise determination of historical events. While Celan's poetry evokes memorialization and loss, Radnóti's texts suggest a catastrophic present and brings authorial experience and the writing self to the fore. Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* offers theoretical assistance in approaching Radnóti's poetry, yet paradoxically so, since the poems repel Blanchot's central formulations about the passivity and sacrifice of the author and, in his reflections on Kafka, about the uncertainty of death. In the study at hand, I show that despite divergences, Blanchot's treatment of writing and authorship illuminates these themes in Radnóti's poems, while the latter also sheds new critical light on Blanchot's elusive understanding of disaster.

The notion of the "death of the author" may be understood in several senses. First, death refers to empirical fact and its hermeneutical implications—for instance, Franz Kafka is not present to verify or contest a contemporary interpretation of his fiction. Second, the poststructuralist thesis, as in Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author," posits the irrelevance of the author's intention in favor of the work itself as engaged by the reader. Kafka's own intentions, even if available, would manifest just one more text in a potentially immeasurable network of references out of which emerges active interpretation on the side of the reader. Third, Blanchot examines the experience of the self's effacement in language, a kind of self-neutralization through writing. Blanchot transforms, with implications for the literary author, Hegel's insight in *Phenomenology of Spirit* about expressed language already bearing with it an expiration of truth. If "this paper on which I am writing," once expressed, is rendered "untrue" by virtue of the universality of language and of the temporality of writing (Hegel qualifies "I am writing" with the phrase "—or rather have written—"), "I am" may be implicated in an analogous way. As Hegel puts it "language ... has the divine nature of reversing the meaning of what is said ... and thus not letting what is meant get into words at all" (66). While Hegel here refers to the individuality of things perceived which "cannot be reached" (66) by language in its universality, Blanchot highlights implications of the temporality of writing for the self: to write is already to undergo a linguistic experience of death since one is immediately surpassed by the work.

The self's effacement in language and the disaster of effacement—this third sense of the "death of the author"—are principal motives of Blanchot's account of literary writing and are ostensibly at odds with major claims within Radnóti's poetry. Whereas Radnóti's poetry is self-declared as a resistance to the poet's destruction, Blanchot's theory describes poetic or literary language not only as a medium in which the author is neutralized, but as the author's experience of neutralization. For Blanchot, a poem is a work from which the author is expelled, just as he is expelled from a grasp of his own death (since to die means "I" am no longer; it cannot be "mine"). Blanchot evokes the concentration camps as analogous to this kind of disaster of expulsion: they are situations of passivity wherein we find "anonymity, loss of self ... utter uprootedness, exile, the impossibility of presence, dispersion" (*The Writing* 34). Thus the empirical death of the author may converge with Blanchot's sense of authorial effacement to render yet a fourth sense: the writing of disaster as the poet's relation to his own death that impends exigently upon the "now" (Michael Holland argues that death in Blanchot's notion of writing concerns a unique presence or timelessness "haunted by a surplus of life" [50]). This relation is paradoxical and bidirectional: death is experienced through the author's linguistic de-literalization (expulsion from language), while death as the very content of the poem re-literalizes authorial singularity as one for whom death impends. If the autonomy of language repels the individuality and facticity of the self, the poetry I discuss could be seen as a neutralizing echo of this death in language by re-literalizing it, putting it "into words."

The notion of disaster, associated by Blanchot with the Holocaust and the concentration camps, pertains especially to Radnóti's last ten poems. These were written in a notebook in a camp in then Yugoslavia and the last five of these poems were written on the forced march to Abda, Hungary,

where in November 1944 Radnóti was killed at the edge of a mass grave. Radnóti's last poems, retrieved a year later from his coat pocket, have been defined by subsequent generations "as Holocaust literature" (Ozsváth 203). Yet the last four—picture postcards named ironically "Razglednicák" in Serbio-Croatian, with a Hungarian plural—can be approached in light of Radnóti's earlier anticipation of the coming disaster. In the context of the growing nationalism in Hungary after the World War I, where the first anti-Semitic laws of the twentieth century were passed, Radnóti's work concerns cultural and personal destruction in poetry of often exquisite, sometimes uncanny precision. Yet the problem of self emerges when Radnóti's poetic speaker claims repeatedly in "Second Eclogue" to write "so you'll know how I live" (*Foamy Sky* 107). Anticipating his third and final internment in a labor camp in April 1944, in "Neither Memory Nor Magic" Radnóti's speaker expresses hope that the poetry will defy the anonymity and ruin of this expulsion from his home where the author had been forbidden work and publication since 1939: "always the world rebuilds, though they forbid my song/ in the new wall's foundations my word will sing and be" (*Foamy Sky* 179). Radnóti holds to the mythic vision, traditional in classical Hungarian literature, of the prophetic and courageous poet whose song provokes the inevitable emergence of truth. Moreover, until the last two of the postcards, Radnóti's writing imagines an ethos of struggle toward preservation, which "demands to be considered as the poet's 'experience of truth,'" all cautions about holding poetry hostage to truth notwithstanding (Ozsváth 199).

Identification of poet and speaker is inevitable, given the autobiographical nature of the poetry written in the labor camps. In "Seventh Eclogue," perhaps Radnóti's most famous poem, his speaker invokes the reality of the labor camp at Heidenau in July 1944 with its degradation, physical pain, and hunger from which sleep can still liberate the prisoner: "only thus may the fantasy free itself:/ dream the redeemer dissolves the wreck of the body,/ and off they go homeward, the whole campful of prisoners" Writing in the dark, since "the guards took away everything," flashlight and book, his speaker tells, "I feel my way over the poem ... shorn of its crown of accents, even so do I live,/ blind, like and/an inchworm, spanning my hand on the paper" (*Foamy Sky* 188). The liberation of dreaming and writing is contrasted to the conditions of the body, bitten by rats, mice, fleas, and flies "...On boards among vermin I lie, a beast in a cage;/ while the flies' armies rest, the fleas renew the assault./ It's night. Confinement's another day shorter, my love;/ life, also, is less by a day. The camp is asleep./ The moonlight rekindles the landscape, retightens the wire;/ you can watch through the window the shadows of guards with guns, pacing, cast on the wall in the many voices of the night" (*Foamy Sky* 188). The speaker, who a few lines later addresses a "you," holds to that which in dreaming and poetry which he believes he still has left, yet by the poem's end it vanishes: "Alone, awake,/ I sit with the taste of a cigarette-end in my mouth/ instead of your kiss, and the melting dream doesn't come, for/ I neither can die nor live any more without you" (*Foamy Sky* 189). The poem "Letter to My Wife" of August-September 1944 repeats the coupling of poetic dream and illusion, this time not only precarious but vanishing fast ("skies once amazing blue with your eyes' glow/ are darkened now.") Here too dreaming is juxtaposed to the reality of the camps: "Tight with desire to blow,/ the bombs must fall. I live in spite of these,/ a prisoner"—a reality as brutally certain as "the sober 2 x 2" (*Foamy Sky* 193-95). The poetic self in Radnóti's poems could be described in terms of the structure of reality grounded positionally in the speaker's perspective, but it is also elaborated through the tension of image, rhyme, and rhythm. Rhythm is constructed, for example, by the percussive dactylic beat of the "Seventh Eclogue" and the iambic one of "Letter to My Wife," both of which have been restored in the translations into English by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner in *Foamy Sky: The Major Poems of Miklós Radnóti*. The description of a poetic self within the poem, invoking perceptions, feelings, self-reflections, and dreams in the face of an oppressive reality is supported linguistically in these ways.

Yet, theoretically speaking, the self may be elusive or hollow. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot argues that the writer "may believe that he affirms himself in this language, but what he affirms is altogether deprived of self (17). It is not simply the relative irrelevance of the author from the point of view of reading that Blanchot proposes. Rather, Blanchot attempts to describe the self's destruction as the work's very "unworking" (*désœuvrement*). When Blanchot claims that the writer is *désœuvré*, this indicates not only being, so to speak, "out of work" or left behind by the work as in current translation, but in a sense "unworked." For Blanchot the writer is always expelled by what in language precedes anything that could be said. Yet Blanchot's view of literature as radical effacement, sacrifice,

and neutralization of the writing self fits, at least at first glance, most uneasily into the context of Radnóti and Holocaust literature more broadly, just as it evokes ambivalence, if not outright protest, even from commentators invested in Blanchot's work. Joseph Suglia claims that in Blanchot's theory of literature the writer's "will to sovereignty is transformed unwittingly into an experience of extreme paralysis, powerlessness, and subjection" (241), Geoffrey H. Hartman claims that for Blanchot the writer experiences the work as "disengagement ... instead of a form of empowerment" and that Blanchot's thesis of exteriority "jeopardizes the coincidence of meaning and intention, or self-expression and validation" (51-59), and Geoffrey Ward highlights the problem suggesting that "To utter poetically and to disappear are linked in their profundity by a single movement which must jeopardize the customary self to make way for language" (678).

It is not incidental that the eclipse of the poetic self in Blanchot recalls Heidegger's theory of poetic language and his interpretation of poets like Hölderlin and Trakl, where the poetic self is rejected in favor of a subject-neutral reception of Being (see Gosetti-Ferencei, *Heidegger*; "The Poetics"; "The World"). The inheritance of Heidegger is undeniable in Blanchot's theory of language, even if Blanchot rejects the overemphasis on Being (*The Writing* 87-89), and criticizes the "dangerous leaning toward the sanctification of language" (*The Writing* 110). While Blanchot echoes Heidegger's call for an ontological clearing for language, he rejects the idea of a pure word that may institute a truth, political or otherwise. For Blanchot literature escapes "the totalising embrace of Heideggerian Being," just as it does the "totalising designs of philosophy" (Hill 87-89). So while Blanchot troubles the notion of a poetic self, Blanchot remains committed to understanding the position of the writer. His readings of Kafka, Rilke, Mallarmé, Char, and others attempt to imagine the intimacy between the writer and language, even if the writer's position becomes, paradoxically, a non-center, an unraveling periphery. Further, Blanchot's nearly obsessive worry about what Hartman calls the "spirit of language after the Holocaust" (50) influenced by Levinas, differentiates Blanchot from Heidegger. Yet Blanchot echoes Heidegger when claiming that the work of art "expresses nothing except the word being" (*The Space* 22). Both message and speaker are submerged in the theoretical sweep toward origin. Language becomes the "pure expression of the possibility of expression" (Suglia 239). This can be squared with Radnóti only if the authorial "I" is regarded as a "figure of the impossible" and if this impossibility is understood as intrinsically linked to possibility as poetical survival (Suglia 253). Radnóti's speaker, in a poem of 1937, implores: "Guard and protect me, salt and whitening pain/ you snow-white consciousness, abide with me:/ let not the brownly burning smoke of fear/ soil or besoot my word's white purity" (*Foamy Sky* 71). How else could survival be aimed for here except as dissolution of the self-same, destruction of *this* persecuted consciousness, into the safety of anonymity, of what Radnóti calls the "word's white purity" (*Foamy Sky* 71)? There seems to be described, in the struggle itself, a recession of Radnóti's own voice into the purity of expression that holds forth to survive the destruction of the empirical self, of the poet as writer. The poetic subject and its tie to essential language would be here held out as a rescue, poetic by sublimation, of the empirical author.

Common in Radnóti's and Kafka's work is a preoccupation with salvation and the paradoxical acknowledgment of its hopelessness: "At night. One writes less and less. Yet one writes; not knowing whether or not it is one's own death sentence that one etches on the paper" (Radnóti qtd. in Ozsváth 143). The death sentence and its implementation is thematized in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* and *The Judgment* and in Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death*). Perhaps not surprisingly, Blanchot analyses Kafka's diaries in detail, where Kafka repeatedly considered writing a "fight for survival" (*The Space* 63). When Kafka begins to feel that writing has exiled him from the world, "where he has to struggle not only for himself but for that other world, then writing will begin to appear to him merely as a means of struggle" (*The Space* 65). That this largely irrational struggle can still be expressed as tragic-comic indicates the scope of the cultural distance between Kafka of the 1910's and Radnóti of the 1930's (see Robertson for accounts of Kafka's relation to Judaism and anti-Semitism in Austria-Hungary). Both Jews in Central Europe, they write from diverging expectations for the present and future.

Deprivation of world is liberating for Kafka, providing the sense of an elsewhere. Erich Heller argued that this sense of being at home in another world was the condition for Kafka's imagination of extreme alienation (230). In his imagination of exile, according to Blanchot, Kafka "also knows staggering heights and a secret freedom" (*The Space* 70). Blanchot finds a connection between this aes-

thetic alternative and Kafka's expressions of desire, however ambivalent, to move to Palestine. Radnóti embraced neither the idea of exile nor a Jewish identity: as many Hungarian Jews, he felt Hungarian particularly with regard to language—he changed his surname in 1934 from Glatter to Radnóti, but was identified officially as a Jew in 1938—whereas Kafka criticized writers, himself included, who wrote in German. Radnóti converted to Catholicism, although he was not religious, and he longed to be recognized as a Hungarian poet. These writers also differ in their projection toward imagined readers: Kafka asked Max Brod to burn his writings, while Radnóti took great risk to entrust a copy of his verses to a fellow poet in the labor camp (where reading and writing were forbidden). Kafka fantasized about modes of disappearance. In contrast, Radnóti was terrorized by the real threat of his own and his work's disappearance without a trace. Radnóti's speaker asks fate imploringly whether at least "one or two poems shall remain?" (*Foamy Sky* 115). Despite these differences, Radnóti and Kafka offer remarkably similar descriptions of the helplessness and consolation of writing. Uncannily prescient, Kafka writes in 1922, as Blanchot cites him: "The consolation of writing, remarkable, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps salutary: it is to leap out of the ranks of murderers" (*The Space* 73). Kafka aims to create in fiction a space apart from a world he found oppressive. Ritchie Robertson describes Kafka's ethical task in part as a struggle against the world, reflecting Kafka's investment in a division between an indestructible realm or *das Unzerstörbare* and the worldly realm. That Kafka is also concerned with the inevitable division between the self-conscious, reflecting observer of reality and one who lives, as Flaubert put it, "dans le vrai," suggests at least the possibility of a life from which a higher reality does not remain remote (Robertson, *The Jewish* 142; *Kafka* 202). Stanley Corngold claims, in reference to Kafka's late aphorisms, that Kafka's "higher mimesis" is not of the world we know, but of "the rhythmic dawning and vanishing of a constellation of the mind" (140) and Adorno pointed out that "nearly any explicit reference to the historical" is avoided in Kafka. Any empirically realistic presentation of space and time is rejected in favour of "absolutely subjective space" said to exist only "in objectless interiority" (275). In this view, Kafka's spaces are not worldly spaces at all, but depictions of an alienated subjectivity where the subject, closed inside itself, seems to hold its breath, and thus Adorno sees Kafka's texts as documents of existential paralysis. Walter Sokel argues that Kafka "equates the call of literature with a hidden, powerful inner world that ... stands in complete opposition to ordinary life" (69). This other-worldliness is hinted at in Radnóti, too, even in the second of the *Postcards* written on the death march along which prisoners were executed. Radnóti contrasts the burning houses and farms, with their frightened peasants, with an image of disturbing beauty: "Here: a lake ruffled only by the step/ of a tiny shepherdess,/ where a white cloud is what the ruffled sheep/ drink in their lowliness" (*Foamy Sky* 210). At a time when Radnóti was facing execution, starving, and was covered with wounds, his poetry still rhymes, a striking fact given his familiarity with avant-garde forms more readily associated with disorder and chaos.

If the geometry of Kafka's spaces can be interpreted in terms of modern spiritual abandonment, Radnóti's precision in both rhyme and rhythm presents a more direct confrontation between moral disorder and an ideal clarity of mind. Radnóti employs hexameter rhythm in some of the last poems and makes thematic reference to measure and measuring and the metaphors of precision such as the evocation of the "2x2" of the multiplication table and its protecting sobriety. The painful irony here may lie in the very different kind of obsession with quantitative calculation in fascist modes of execution, a precision that, as Vasily Grossman put it, "rejected the concept of a separate individuality, the concept of "a man," and operates only with vast aggregates" (94). Radnóti evokes the precision of mathematics as a method of intellectual perseverance in the face of a morally disintegrating world. There is nothing Messianic about Radnóti's late writing. Kafka longs for a radical elsewhere, a symbolic desert, a wandering and a dispersion that might yield a new dimension of freedom. Distress is Kafka's element, but in Blanchot's interpretation "this distress is never without hope" (*The Space* 76). Blanchot links Kafka to a time of awaiting and to Hölderlin's notion of the abyss of the fled gods wherein the new gods must be awaited. In Radnóti there is no such anticipation of the future: there is only the still unextinguished hope that the work might survive him and that there might be a country, a reader who still responds to the rhythm of the hexameter (the meter of traditional Hungarian verse). In his 1939 poem, "At an Impatient Hour" Radnóti evokes the finality of oblivion: "know that there won't be even one cry ... the wind will scatter you" (*Clouded Sky* 5). If Kafka as a poet (and Blanchot calls him such), is expelled to the outside, for Radnóti "there exists not even one world" (*The Space*

83) from which to be expelled. That collapse of world is rendered in the images of Radnóti's last two postcards, which, along with other poems of the notebook were destined for the mass grave. In Radnóti's penultimate postcard, "life has been snuffed out" (*Foamy Sky* 212) in the image of the oxen drooling and men urinating blood. And the last postcard, situated in the mass grave where Radnóti would be buried within a fortnight, records the shooting in Radnóti's presence by an SS officer of the violinist Miklós Lorsi: in this poem the "I" or first person that appears and upon whose ear blood is drying is bereft of all interiority.

Kafka's despair concerns, as is evident in *The Trial*, one's being "condemned to defend oneself to the last" (Blanchot, *The Space* 76). Yet Kafka can still imagine a death with which one can be content. Echoing the events related in his story *The Instant of My Death*, Blanchot argues that "one must be capable of satisfaction in death" (*The Space* 90). This narrative recounts how Blanchot, during the occupation, was brought out by soldiers to be shot, but spared inexplicably at the last minute. However upsetting Blanchot's aborted execution (if we take his narrative, as Hent de Vries calls it, as an "entanglement" of fiction and biography), his account does not issue from the slow grind of persecution that haunts Radnóti's life and writing, but from the "useless ferocity" of an "already vanquished" enemy" (Blanchot, *The Instant* 30). What Blanchot describes in the experience of near-execution is diametrically opposed to Radnóti's experiences. Blanchot's impending death, the good fortune of almost being shot, is taken with calm nobility and bemusement, a tone different from the choking repulsion and fear of being hunted down. The impossibility of satisfaction in death parodied in Kafka's *Penal Colony* also recalls the distance between Kafka, who died from natural causes before the disaster of the Holocaust could claim him, and Radnóti, whose murder by fascists certainly precluded a death of his own. Blanchot points out that in writing about death Kafka "is not thinking of a realistic description of death scenes" (*The Space* 92). Yet the informed reader cannot but ascribe such to Radnóti's *Postcards*, whose poetic imagery is just as far as Kafka's from realism.

Considering this, the thematic triangularity of writing, authorial self, and death in Blanchot, Kafka, and Radnóti may be illuminating if it is assumed that up until almost the end, Radnóti writes in order to live, to escape the anonymity and passivity of a murderous death. In "Just Walk On, Condemned to Die" (1936), Radnóti's speaker urges himself, in contrast to the shriveling, "most hideous of worlds," to live on "as hard as the great wolf who goes/ wounded and bleeding through the snows" (*Foamy Sky* 50). This contrasts sharply to a central moment of *The Space of Literature* where Blanchot concludes his comments about death: "the writer, then, is one who writes in order to be able to die, and he is one whose power to write comes from an anticipated relation with death" (93). For Blanchot, it is toward the possibility of dying that the poet writes. Radnóti's poetry highlights an acute discord between theory and poetry, between the presumed intentionality of the author, and the ontological autonomy of his creation. The difference is not only aesthetic and moral, but concerns the temporality and teleology of literary language. Poetic language for Blanchot is always already an experience of death in leaving the author to the realm of total passivity as literary language must do once it is written. Yet an interpretation of Radnóti's poems, it seems, has to take into account the very motif of writing as a struggle toward the future, an attempt to create a living future through poetry in opposition to empirical circumstances even if the empirical author is excluded from the poem from the moment it is written. Blanchot suggests that the exclusion of the author is not only inevitable by virtue of the nature of language, and especially literary language which transforms fact into fiction or world into the nothingness of images, but that this exclusion is the very telos of writing. But this relies on an implicit authorial intentionality, just as much as does the hope that one might write in order not to die or in order to salvage something from the wreck of dying, to become one with history rather than to be obliterated by it. Blanchot privileges unapologetically ontological anonymity of the linguistic work over intentionality, even while thematizing this very privilege of the work as an existential experience for the author. The contrast with Radnóti's poetic statements is striking: Radnóti's speaker in "Foamy Sky" describes the anger of the sky, its poisonous bruise, a landscape poisoned by fascism, nature itself turning against him; and yet in the ultimate line he declares: "I roll myself a cigarette; slowly, carefully, I live" (*élek*, in Hungarian conjugation no personal pronoun is needed); while Ozsváth and Turner choose "living I," Stephen Polgar's translation is "I live" (*Clouded Sky* 17).

In Blanchot's work there are at least two senses to dying and death: the organic and factual event and the unreachable death that sustains in the very essence of language. Blanchot's interpretations of

literature, particularly in the case of Kafka, but also in his notion of writing as disaster, moves, often ambiguously, between these two senses. Yet it may be equally necessary to consider the meaning of living in Radnóti's poem, what the verb conjugated in the first person ("élek") in the poem ought to mean for his/her reader. In what sense, if any, does the speaker's use of the first person sustain some element of the author's memorialized presence? For Radnóti it seems that living and the life of the empirical author are sustained in being able to imagine a future, and thus a death not by murder, but of one's own. What Radnóti shares with Kafka is a common "determination to establish with death a relation of freedom" (Blanchot, *The Space* 95). In Radnóti's poems dread of death constantly threatens, but also spurs on living and living means the capacity for imagining a future, exercised and sustained in the writing of poetry. The life of the speaker is a performative memorialization not of Being, but of the author's becoming in poetic language. Yet Blanchot's repeated assertions concerning the uncertainty of death, as well as its distancing from violence and aggression, strains a Blanchotian encounter with Radnóti's writing and perhaps with any literature of the Holocaust. Blanchot admits that "at first glance, the preoccupation of the writer who writes in order to be able to die is an affront to common sense" (*The Space* 95), but it is scandalous if applied to Holocaust writing in its performance of self-preservation through language. This is all the more striking as Blanchot wrote for a right-wing publication in the 1930s and thereby contributed, as Hartman puts it, "to an atmosphere that made persecution normal" (47; see also Hill; Rapaport). Still further, Blanchot's claims that "no one is sure of dying" (*The Space* 94), that to confront death is to confront "the brittleness of the unsure" (95) constitute theoretical indulgence in the limits of phenomenology, since death can never be experienced, it is never phenomenal. Here Blanchot could be accused of leering into the void of a death beyond death, of fetishizing passivity and muteness, of a stylized obsession with absence.

Blanchot's thought can also be interpreted as a revaluation and reversing of the relative priority of phenomena and existence in Heidegger. Blanchot's emphasis on death's uncertainty gives an existential interpretation of the phenomenological impossibility of accounting for death. In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, death, although indeterminate, can be encountered existentially in a resolute *Augenblick* as the most extreme possibility of *Dasein's* being, as the certain but indeterminate possibility of its own impossibility—of nothing. In contrast, Blanchot insists on the limits of phenomenology (where Heidegger may be said to breach them), and addresses these limits themselves with an existential interpretation. Death itself never appears, since as Heidegger argues death is always in the future, and another's death is never my own and can never be experienced *as* death. Blanchot's view of death's uncertainty, despite its absolute inescapability, could nevertheless be said to express how it is possible that death, which is nothing, can be so damningly haunting, a "terrifying angel," as Radnóti described it in a poem of 1943; Polgar's translation as "terrifying" (*Clouded Sky* 64) (the Hungarian is *félelmetes*) recalls Rilke's angel in the *Duineser Elegien*, often rendered as terrifying: "jeder Engel ist schrecklich" (150).

The applicability of Blanchot's thinking to literary works of any (actual) disaster is further compromised by his celebration of writing as suicide and contempt for natural death outside the exercise of human choice. Art itself, and in particular poetical writing, is compared to suicide, which Blanchot admits is "shocking in a way" (*The Space* 105). For Blanchot both suicide and writing involve casting oneself irretrievably outside the sphere of what is accomplished. Blanchot's death of the author, then, signifies not merely the irrelevance of intentionality, but a dramatization of sacrifice. Yet while it would be difficult, and undesirable, to square Radnóti with this notion, his poetry nonetheless affirms Blanchot's aim to investigate "our desire to make death humane and proper" (*The Space* 100). Whereas for Blanchot natural death is contemptible, inhuman, unfree and therefore cowardly (*The Space* 97), otherwise "more insignificant and more uninteresting than the collapse of a little heap of sand" (*The Writing* 71), Radnóti's speaker dreads death by murder: neither self-administered nor natural. The murder of Federico García Lorca in Spain, which Radnóti's speaker laments, is taken as a forewarning of his own. Radnóti's speaker's dread is alien to the beatitude of Blanchot's own imaginings in the *The Instant of My Death*. For Radnóti, murder annihilates not only an empirical self, but also a sense of the world's moral order and any expectation of life's meaning. Blanchot's valorization of death "beyond the organic phenomenon" (*The Space* 125), as an existence of pure neutrality, seems indulgent to say the least.

Radnóti's postcards along with the poem "Forced March," were composed along Radnóti's death march from Bor, Yugoslavia, to Abda where he was murdered (*Foamy Sky* 210-213; 208-209). The first postcard, from August 1944, presents the speaker along a mountain road where the prisoners and their guards walked, jammed with fleeing peasants and their carts and animals: "Rolling from Bulgaria the brutal cannonade/ slams at the ranges, to hesitate and fade;/ men and beasts and carts and thought are jammed into one,/ neighing the road rears up, the maned sky will run" (*Foamy Sky* 210). Against this chaos of the first four lines, the image of a "you" as a mute angel overtakes the second four, an eternal "shin[ing] on beneath my consciousness" (*Foamy Sky* 210). Yet immediately this angel is transformed, without mediation, to a "beetle of burial in his hole in a dead tree" (*Foamy Sky* 210). The second of the postcards again juxtaposes the painful contrast of burning farms and fear with the pristine image of a tiny shepherdess and her sheep sipping white clouds of their reflection in the water. The third and fourth postcards may be read according to Blanchot's notion of fascination in the poetic image, albeit in stark negative. In fascination, a poetic image holds the speaker in a frozen power; there are no more statements of poetic yearning, no manifestoes of determination to outwit death. The third postcard, written in October 1944, achieves only four of the eight lines of its template. It is composed of a single image-complex, sealed by the rhyme of the last couplets, wherein each element points to the final line: oxen drooling blood; men urinating blood; the squad standing about in stinking knots; and death blowing overhead. The image-complex seems to paralyze the poetic voice, and in Blanchot's terminology, disaster and the expulsion of the writer seem to converge here. Blanchot writes that when language becomes image it "becomes a speaking depth" which is a silence, a silence that "has its source in the effacement toward which the writer is drawn" (*The Space* 27). The image seems no longer to refer to a coherent world. The fourth postcard, Radnóti's last poem written in a moment of rest on the back of the label from a can of a cod-liver oil and placed into the notebook, is the only one which evokes the first person, in translation appearing as the "I," a self-reflection doubled by the speaker's speaking to himself. It is not merely irony that this is the poem of the mass grave, where the speaker begins: "I fell beside him and his corpse turned over,/ tight already as a snapping string./ Shot in the neck. 'And that's how you'll end, too,' I whispered to myself; 'Lie still; no moving'" (*Foamy Sky* 212).

The mass grave, although long feared by Radnóti, was never evoked gratuitously as an image in his poems: the image-complex is not unified, but splintered between Radnóti or his speaker, alive, and the corpse which in the poem is killed twice—since "Der springt noch auf" as the guard says. In between the living body and the almost-corpse is an inversion of the Hungarian proverb that patience rewards: "Now patience flowers in death." A strained temporality is at work here: the death which is now (the shot corpse) and which is not yet (still not dead and to be shot again) is reflected in the strained coupling of "now" which is present, in contrast to past expectation, and "patience," which usually indicates a not-yet. The earth, in the form of the flower, has yielded finally to complicity with murder, and so in the last line earth is mixed with blood: "Blood mixed with mud is drying on my ear" (*Foamy Sky* 212). The image "needs the neutrality and fading of the world" (Blanchot, *The Space* 254): Blanchot's theory of the image as a kind of "corpse" can be made to confront the image of the corpse in Radnóti's poem. Echoing Sartre's view that images (by being nothing) annihilate what they represent, Blanchot refers to "the deep, sordid basis upon which it continues to affirm things in their disappearance" (*The Space* 268). The image has a "cadaverous strangeness ... the corpse is here, but here in its turn becomes a corpse" (*The Space* 268). Just as "the cadaver is its own image" (*The Space* 270), the image is the cadaver. With the image of the corpse, the postcards express the negative of the world that Heidegger claimed was opened up and set forth by the work of art. Here Blanchot's terminology assists in describing this poem-sequence: the postcard signifies the total outside, the expulsion of the human from meaning. With this image, death is not an idea. It illustrates that what Radnóti had feared is not the "nothing," but the meaningless remainder: that what is left means nothing, is simply there, oppressively absent of meaning (see Patterson 145).

In conclusion, while Blanchot's theory has its limits, the tension between his claims that the writer is always-already dead (117) and that "he who has been a contemporary of the camps is forever a survivor: death will not make him die" (143) is especially provocative in light of Holocaust poetry. The death of the author or the author as a figure of impossibility maintains profound resonances with Radnóti's poetic voice and circumstances. Yet Radnóti's poetry also enacts the impossible possibility of

writing disaster. If, as Blanchot writes, the disaster is "what remains to be said" (*The Writing* 33), such is the task and exigency of Radnóti's poetry.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka." *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977. Vol. 10.1, 254-283.
- Baer, Ulrich. *Remnants of Song*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. By Roland Barthes. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday P, 1988. 142-48.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Instant of My Death*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986.
- Corngold, Stanley. *Lambent Traces: Franz Kafka*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004.
- De Vries, Hent. "'Lapsus Absolu': Notes on Maurice Blanchot's 'The Instant of My Death'." *Yale French Studies* 93 (1998): 30-59.
- Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna. *Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the Subject of Poetic Language*. New York: Fordham UP, 2004.
- Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna. "The Poetics of Thinking: Heidegger and Hölderlin." *Literature and Philosophy: A Guide to the Contemporary Debates*. Ed. David Rudrum. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. 92-113.
- Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna. "The World and Image of Poetic Language: Heidegger and Blanchot." *Continental Philosophy Review* 45 (2012): 189-212.
- Grossman, Vasily. *Life and Fate*. Trans. Robert Chandler. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Hartman, Geoffrey H. "The Spirit of Language After the Holocaust." *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot*. Ed. Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2004. 46-65.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. 1927. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953.
- Heller, Erich. *The Disinherited Mind*. New York: Meridian Books, 1959.
- Hill, Leslie. *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Holland, Michael. "The Time of His Life." *Paragraph* 30.3 (2007): 46-66.
- Kafka, Franz. *Das Urteil und andere Erzählungen*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1952.
- Ozsváth, Zsuzsanna. *In the Footsteps of Orpheus: The Life and Times of Miklós Radnóti*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000.
- Patterson, David. *Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust Diary*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1999.
- Radnóti, Miklós. *Clouded Sky*. Trans. Stephen Polgar, Stephen Berg, and S.J. Marks. Riverdale-on-Hudson: The Sheep Meadow P, 1972.
- Radnóti, Miklós. *Foamy Sky: The Major Poems of Miklós Radnóti*. Trans. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner. Budapest: Corvina, 2002.
- Rapaport, Herman. *Is There Truth in Art?* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Selected Poetry*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Vintage, 1984.
- Robertson, Ritchie. *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1985.
- Robertson, Ritchie. *The Jewish Question in German Literature 1849-1939*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Sokel, Walter. *The Myth of Power and the Self: Essays on Franz Kafka*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2002.
- Suglia, Joseph. "On the Question of Authorship in Maurice Blanchot." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76.2 (2002): 237-53.
- Ward, Geoffrey. "Dying to Write: Maurice Blanchot and Tennyson's 'Tithonus'." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 672-87.
- Author's profile: Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei teaches philosophy at Fordham University. Her interests in scholarship include continental philosophy, aesthetics, and the philosophy of literature. In addition to numerous articles, Gosetti-Ferencei's book publications include *Exotic Spaces in German Modernism* (2011), *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* (2007), and *Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the Subject of Poetic Language* (2004). E-mail: <gosetti@fordham.edu>