

“TO DIE CONTENT”: DEATH AND WRITING IN CHU TIEN-HSIN’S *MAN OF LA MANCHA*

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I discuss how *Man of La Mancha*, a story written by the Taiwanese novelist, Chu Tien-Hsin, resonates with the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot’s analysis of Franz Kafka’s reflections on death and writing. In his reading of Kafka’s writings, Blanchot notices the close and dynamic relationship between writing and death in his *The Space of Literature*. His primary argument is that writers are drawn to death in the same manner as they are drawn to the origin of creativity. I argue that a similar theme is also observable in Chu’s novella *Man of La Mancha*, which tells the story of a young freelance writer who obsessively prepares for his inevitable yet unpredictable death after experiencing a sudden illness. I use *Man of La Mancha* as a springboard to explore and contest Blanchot’s theory on death and writing. After giving brief overviews of Chu’s death narrative and Blanchot’s theory, I focus on *Man of La Mancha* in terms of Blanchot’s definition of *récit* (i.e. “a narrative of narrative”), and examine her story as a literary representation of the unique space containing both writing and death. I believe that a simultaneous reading of Chu and Blanchot’s discussion on death and writing will illuminate how writers situate themselves in the space of literature in which the best writing is possible.

KEY WORDS: death, writing, Blanchot, Chu Tien-Hsin, Man of La Mancha

Introduction

Authors often refer to their writing projects as “their children”, but they could also easily approach them as ways to deal with death. In this paper I will discuss the representation of death as the origin of literary creativity in a work by the Taiwanese writer Chu Tien-Hsin—a short story entitled *Man of La Mancha* (1994). After suffering from an attack of arrhythmia while writing in a café, the story’s first-person narrator, a male in his thirties, realizes that regardless of how young and healthy he is now, death can visit him anywhere and at any time. From that point forward, death occupies his consciousness and dictates his behavior. He acknowledges that the last thing he wants is to meet death unprepared, and therefore embarks on an intensive search for a proper response to his inevitable death—that is, for a way to die

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content. In this text, Chu does not present death as an object to contemplate and decipher, but more as an invisible character whose impending encounter must be meticulously prepared for. In her story she shows how death serves as a multi-level motivation in the creative process.

This close and complicated relationship between writing and death also caught the eye of French philosopher Maurice Blanchot, who dedicated an entire section to the topic in his *The Space of Literature*. In his reading of Franz Kafka's writings, Blanchot believes that writers are drawn to death in the same manner as they are drawn to the origin of creativity. In this paper, I will use "Man of La Mancha" as a springboard to discuss Blanchot's theory on death and writing. After giving brief overviews of Chu's death narrative and Blanchot's theory, I will analyze *Man of La Mancha* in terms of Blanchot's definition of *récit* (i.e. "a narrative of narrative"), and explore on how this story functions as a literary representation of the unique space containing both writing and death.

Death and Writing in Chu's Works

Death has been a recurring motif in Chu's writings. In one of her earlier works "Chronicle of a Death Foretold" (1992), she writes about a group of people she calls "old souls" because they abide with death day in and day out. Chu suggests that they are not easy to identify in terms of their occupations because they are not performing high-risk jobs as pilots, criminals, or police officers. Neither are they doctors, funeral directors, or other workers that regularly deal with death in any sense. Further, they are not chronically ill patients. As Chu explains and defines, "Old souls are rarely scared of death, and they do not want longer lives. What bothers or worries them is that they have no clues about when or how death will come (this time). For them, death is so unpredictable, so inevitable" (my own translation) (Chu 2002: 122). In other words, it is the attitude that these "old souls" have toward death that distinguishes them from other individuals. They know their lives are never separated from death—that is, they are living "in death", they are living at a time of dying. Their greatest fear is to fail to die a proper death at the right time. They worry that "many people die too late, while some die too early" (Chu 2002:126).

As the story unfolds, we witness how the narrator in *Man of La Mancha* turns himself into an old soul. He is first introduced to the reader as a typical young man in his thirties who tends to prioritize his work over his health. He is completely absorbed in his task of moment, working several hours straight on a piece of writing in a café in order to meet a short deadline. When he eventually finishes his project, he suddenly feels very ill probably because of the lack of sleep and caffeine overdose. He then has to struggle extremely hard to avoid fainting as he makes his way to a nearby

medical clinic. He admits that he actually could faint at any moment, but he is worried that if he passes out alone on the street, he might be pathetically treated like the dying character he once saw in a film or soap opera. He starts to obsess about what could happen if he gives in to his illness at that moment. Passers-by may “instinctively” mistake him as “a beggar, a vagrant, a mental patient, or maybe someone suffering from the effects of the plague, cholera, or epilepsy.” Then he imagines an elderly man among the strangers, one “who’d seen more of the world would come up to check and then, judging from my more or less respectable attire, take me off the list of the aforementioned suspects and decide to save me” (Chu 2007:29-30). In this fantasy scene, the young man must answer a series of questions posed by the passers-by who join his elderly rescuer; “Looking into my wide-open but enlarged irises, they’d shout, “Who are you? Who should we call? What’s the number?” (Chu 2007: 30)

The scenario, though it merely takes place in the narrator’s imagination, shows that regardless of the stability and complexity of one’s identities, in life-and-death crises we are immediately tied to worldly concerns and can only be reduced to or identified with “numbers” (such as telephone, ID, and health insurance numbers). The narrator, who is simply caught off-guard by this interrogation, starts to ask himself these questions: “Who am I? Who should I call? What numbers?” (Chu 2007: 30)

In the narrator’s imagination, because he fails to offer those numbers or answers immediately, the crowd fails to learn his identity. They then have no choice but to search for his belongings in his bag and his pockets in order to “decipher” his identity:

And, under watchful eyes, so as to avoid suspicion, he’d open my bag. Let’s see, plenty of money—coins and bills—some ATM receipts, one or two unused lengths of dental floss, a claim ticket for film developing and a coupon for a free enlargement from the same photo studio; here, here’s a business card... given to me yesterday by a friend, for a super-cheap London B&B (16 pounds a night), at 45 Lupton Street, phone and fax (071) 4854075. Even though it would have an address and a phone number, it would of course provide no clue to my identity. So Grandpa would have to check my pockets; in one he’d find a small packet of facial tissues, in the other, after ordering the onlookers to help turn me over, a small stack of napkins with the name of the Japanese coffee shop I’d just visited printed in the corner. Different from the plain, unprinted McDonald’s napkins in their pockets. Then someone would take out that short, insignificant essay and start to read, but be unable to retrieve, from my insignificant pen name, any information to decipher my identity. (Chu 2007: 30-31)

To the narrator’s frustration, he finds that his belongings and his essay with his pen name are all insignificant and meaningless. Those things which he carries around simply fail to give clues to those passers-by as to the narra-

tor's identity. Without the ability to express himself, he anxiously finds himself, under the circumstances, become a nobody.

The narrator continues with his fantasy, which turns nightmarish in his anonymity: "That's what scared me most. Just like that, I could become a nameless vegetable lying in a hospital for who knows how long; of course, even more likely, I'd become an anonymous corpse picked up on a sidewalk and lie for years in cold storage in the city morgue" (Chu 2007:31). Terrified by this thought, he wonders: "Could all this really result from an absence of identifiable items? From that moment on, from that very moment on, I began to think about making preparation for my own death—or should I say, it occurred to me that I ought to prepare for unpredictable circumstances surrounding my death?" (Chu 2007: 31)

From that day forward he becomes meticulous, almost to the point of paranoia, about what he carries in his pockets and shoulder bag, what he wears, and where he goes, should he die in an accident. For instance, he begins to insist on taking the exact same routes to his regular destinations every day so as to avoid suspicion of having gone to an "embarrassing" place such as a red-light district in case he dies near such a location. He acts according to his belief that when he dies, the only objects that can speak to the world are one's clothes and items found in one's bag or pockets. He shares with readers an anecdote he read in the autobiography of the Spanish film director, Luis Buñuel, who had similar concerns:

I recall that he said he stopped going on long trips after turning sixty because he was afraid of dying in a foreign land, afraid of the movielike scene of opened suitcases and documents strewn all over the ground, ambulance sirens and flashing police lights, hotel owners, local policemen, small-town reporters, gawkers, total chaos, awkward and embarrassing. Most important, he was probably afraid that, lacking the ability to defend himself, he'd be identified and labeled, whether or not he'd led a life that was serious, complex, and worthy. (Chu 2007: 32)

The narrator expresses envy for people like Buñuel, who has the luxury to "have enough time to decide what to burn and destroy and what to leave behind—the diaries, correspondence, photographs, and curious objects from idiosyncratic collecting habits they've treasured and kept throughout their lives" (Chu 2007: 33).

Realizing that his death could come at any moment, unannounced and unexpected, and that he will have no opportunity to defend himself after he takes his last breath, the narrator begins to gather items that he believes will provide instant but accurate clues to his identity and life. Based on this epiphany, he fastidiously attends to his wallet, his clothes, and daily routes and routines. His goals are apparently to die well-prepared, to die a proper death, and to die content.

Blanchot’s Death and Writing

In *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot is inspired by an intriguing passage in Franz Kafka’s diary to rethink the relationship between death and writing:

On the way home, I said to Max that on my deathbed, provided the suffering is not too great, I will be very content. I forgot to add, and later I omitted this on purpose, that the best of what I have written is based upon this capacity to die content. All the good passages, the strongly convincing ones, are about someone who is dying and who finds it very hard and sees in it an injustice. (Blanchot 1989: 90)

It is notable that many passages in Kafka’s work support his own assertion that his capacity to die content is fundamental to his power to write. In *The Trial*, *The Metamorphosis*, and *The Verdict*, for example, he avoids giving realistic descriptions of his heroes’ deaths in favour of showing how his characters “carry out their actions in death’s space” (Blanchot 1989: 92). While his characters do not always experience actual death, they appear to continuously live their lives in death’s shadow. According to Blanchot, Kafka believed that good writing requires a profound relationship with death, and that a writer must constantly live within “the indefinite time of ‘dying’” (Blanchot 1989:92). In light of Kafka’s observations, Blanchot argues that in order to write well, a writer must establish a relationship with death that is marked by freedom and equality.

Blanchot offers the following explanation of Kafka’s mysterious idea that the ability to die content is required to empower one’s writing:

You cannot write unless you remain your own master before death; you must have established with death a relation of sovereign equals... Why death? Because death is the extreme. He who includes death among all that is in his control controls himself extremely. He is linked to the hold of his capability; he is power through and through. Art is mastery of the supreme moment, supreme mastery. (Blanchot 1989: 91)

According to Blanchot, all writers must directly address death without being overwhelmed, defeated, or even simply intimidated by it. As part of the task of coming to good terms with death, they must establish a relationship of freedom and equality with it. In short, they must be capable of dying well in order to write well.

For Blanchot, actually no meanings or words are possible without death. In his essay “Literature and the Right to Death”, he asserts that death is essential to sustaining language. He gives the example of how language might be used to metaphorically take a woman’s life:

... when I say, “The woman”, real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction... My language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is. (Blanchot 1995:323)

In other words, Blanchot argues that the simple act of naming is capable of alienating a woman from her mortal life so that she becomes an “idea”. As part of the process of signification, this negation can take place only because the woman is destined to die. For Blanchot, the space of literature is where deaths to come are always felt and exposed:

[W]hen I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address... Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning. Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness. (Blanchot 1995: 323-24)

Blanchot’s conclusion is that since death and words go hand in hand, death is essential to the emergence of meaning, language, and writing.

Man of La Mancha as a Récit

An analysis of Chu’s *Man of La Mancha* as a “narrative of the narrative” finds support in Blanchot’s meditations on the space of writing. The structure of Chu’s story fits well with Blanchot’s definition of a *récit*: the act of telling a story within the space where events occur rather than relying on the coherent narration of events. In the first chapter of *The Book to Come*, Blanchot uses the story of Ulysses and the lure of the Sirens to differentiate between a novel and a *récit*. Treachery underlies the decision by Ulysses to be tightly bound to the mast of his ship and to plug his seamen’s ears with wax. In this way he can enjoy the enchanting sounds of the Sirens without having to face the potentially fatal consequences. Blanchot points out that the Sirens’ song represents a means of navigation—in his own words, the mysterious and irresistible song “was a distance, and it revealed the possibility of traveling this distance, of making the song into the movement toward the song, and of making this movement the expression of the greatest desire” (Blanchot 2003:4). He further argues that an obscure struggle exists “between any narrative and the encounter with the Sirens... a struggle in which Ulysses’ prudence... was always used and perfected” (Blanchot 2003:

5). The story emerges precisely from the struggle between one’s desire for the Sirens’ song (death) and one’s instinct for survival (life). The meaning of survival here is therefore two-fold: one refers to the lives of Ulysses and his crew, and the other to the survival of the story—Ulysses must endure in order to take part in the later episodes of Homer’s epic.

Blanchot goes on to describe how a *récit* differs from a novel in its response to the Sirens’ lure: “The narrative [*récit*] begins where the novel does not go but still leads us by its refusals and its rich negligence. The narrative is heroically the narrative of one single episode, that of Ulysses’ meeting and the insufficient and magnetic song of the Sirens” (Blanchot 2003: 6). Whereas a novel might turn away from the destructive lure (in order to make the story flow, a *récit* would be more likely to linger and expose itself to whatever comes its way. And whereas a novel would be more likely to take a detour in order to describe consecutive events, a *récit* would stay with the song and deal with its destructive beauty. While a novel provides detailed descriptions of situations, a *récit* goes beyond simple storytelling. As Blanchot explains: “[A *récit*] narrative is not the relating of an event but this event itself, the approach to this event, the place where it is called on to unfold, an event still to come, by the magnetic power of which the narrative itself can hope to come true” (Blanchot 2003:6). Rather than simply describing events, a *récit* tries to restage the act of storytelling itself—in other words, to present a “narrative of the narrative”. To clarify the term, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines *récit* as a genre having “a high degree of compression and concentration and the narrative is related from one point of view... It has a single theme and very few characters, apart from the central character on whom attention is focused almost exclusively. Events and actions should speak for themselves and the reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions... Whereas in a novel events tend to unfold in a chronological sequence and are described as they occur, the events in a *récit* are depicted by an oblique, reflective and associative method” (Cuddon and Preston 1991:734). In other words, there is not much going on in terms of plot or action in a *récit*. According to Blanchot, everything that the French writer Jean Paulhan ever wrote was a *récit*. André Gide is another example of a *récit* writer. Blanchot’s own *Thomas the Obscure* is also a good example of this unique genre.

Significantly, a *récit* is also unique in terms of time. As Leslie Hill observes, a novel belongs to the everyday, while a *récit* “exist[s] only in relation to another time, a time outside of time and at a distance from time, a time that is the time of the *récit* itself” (Hill 1997:143). Kafka’s works, empowered as they were by his relationships with both death and the *récit*, also tend to describe different experiences of time.

It is not hard to note that Chu's *Man of La Mancha* has many qualities of a *récit*. The story starts with the narrator briefly describing how he almost faints on the street. It is an episode that inspires him to start preparing for—and to become totally consumed by—his impending death. The narrator has a different sense of time after the event, with each moment somehow linked to his inevitable demise. The bulk of the story consists of his various musings on philosophical issues tied to his identity, his relationship with death, and his potential for dying with a feeling of contentment. Thoughts drawn from various sources—a recently read novel, the biography of a Spanish film director, personal memories, anecdotes told by his friends and former teacher—all serve to motivate and inspire him to rethink his relationship with death. Except for the opening incident, the story is essentially plotless. The narrator occasionally addresses readers as “you”, as if he were having a casual conversation with a friend. While the story occasionally borders on the discursive, *Man of La Mancha* can be viewed in terms of movement toward a point that is both foreign and dangerous to the central character, yet it is the unknown destination that makes the narrator's writing possible.

The Space of Writing and Death

Accepting *Man of La Mancha* as an example of “narrative of narrative” supports an examination of the story in terms of Blanchot's theory. In many ways the story is about writing. In the beginning, the narrator says he is working on “a short essay of absolutely no importance” (Chu 2007: 26). He goes by his pen name, and he has no office, staff ID card, work permit, or business cards (Chu 2007: 34). Arguably, the story is a record of his meditations on death and an account of his efforts to fulfill his independent vision and to gain a more profound understanding of his own writing.

One of the narrator's primary concerns is one's inability to die at the right time, and Blanchot expresses the same concern in *The Space of Literature*: “Death's rightful quality is impropriety, inaccuracy—the fact that it comes either too soon or too late, prematurely and as if after the fact, never coming until after its arrival” (Blanchot 1989:117). The narrator strives to greet death well-prepared, but he is also cautious about the associated risks and dangers. His response to his sudden illness represents an attempt to establish a relationship with death by preparing for it in advance, and by refusing to take a passive or helpless position toward death. In doing so, he feels that he can do more than just “prepare”—he can reshape his identity, and even create a false one: “I should also fabricate or arrange things in such a way that people would think what I wanted them to think about me. A minor ruse might be to obtain some receipts for charitable donations or copy down some occasional, personal notes that are more or less readable and

might even be self-published by the surviving family” (Chu 2007: 33-34). His concerns are not limited to avoiding obscurity in death, but producing something positive, active, and creative: “So you need to understand that the advance preparations I’m talking about go far beyond passive procedures to prevent becoming a nameless vegetable or an anonymous corpse; in fact, they have developed into an exquisite, highly proactive state” (Chu 2007: 34). At this point, his preparation echoes Blanchot’s assertion that “art demands that one play with death” (Chu 2007:92). The narrator turns his crisis to an opportunity by transforming his severe anxiety into energy to create his identity.

It is precisely because he can play with the idea of death at ease that he finds himself in a more comfortable position as a writer. The narrator’s thoughts evolve from a passive state of preparation for death to one of creation within a negative context. In the earlier state, he is in a more subordinate position—he has no idea when and where he will die, in order to do himself justice, he has to prepare for it. While later, death becomes a positive force which makes the act of creating possible. Thanks to the fact that he is going to die, a space emerges for the narrator to create and explore his identity.

As the story unfolds, the narrator’s exploration of his own identity for the sake of preparing for his death parallels his own doubts and reflections on his own writings. This is evidenced by the fact the narrator feels frustrated when he imagines that his pen name and his writings do not help a bit to provide others his identity. It is also significant that the narrator keeps emphasizing that both his pen name (his identity as a writer) and his writing (which ironically almost costs his life) are of no importance. He also comes to realize that his project is not simply about making preparation for his own death; rather, he is more concerned and worried about the underlying circumstances of uncertainty, so he “ought to prepare for unpredictable, unpreventable circumstances” surrounding his death (Chu 2007: 31). The narrator feels a great sense of anxiety toward his own writing and his marginal space as a writer in the society.

Thus, *Man of La Mancha* can be read as an allegory of writing in the sense that the narrator’s actions and opinions on expressing himself, communicating who he is to others, and representing his life when he is voiceless in death share many similarities with the act of writing. He wants to leave behind traces of his life that people can “read” so as to understand him afterwards. His choices on what to take or leave behind as he walks in death’s shadow serve as an allegory of the writing process. Like dying individuals, writers feel an urgent need to define themselves through their writing, but once their writing is finished, they cannot have a say as to how their words are read and interpreted. Writers create spaces where they are free

to decide what to place at the front of the stage and what to keep hidden. However, neither writers nor corpses have any control over how they are read or identified afterwards. In other words, the anxiety the narrator feels is two-fold: he is making preparation for his death as well as making preparation for the inevitable death of his writing. The narrator-writer is looking for a way to die content, literally and symbolically, so that he can come to terms with the unpredictable, unpreventable circumstances in which the best writing is possible.

Conclusions

Man of La Mancha was published in the collection entitled *The Old Capital*, along with other stories such as *Death in Venice*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and *The Old Capital*. Apparently these titles are borrowed from famous literary works or films. As a writer familiar with western films and literature, Chu exhibits intertextuality in all of these stories. For example, at the beginning of *Death in Venice*, she clearly states that there will be “no Thomas Mann, no Visconti, not even a formal link to the real Venice” (Chu 2007:1). The styles and themes found in her stories are irrelevant to those found in the original works whose titles she uses. In this sense, she “empties” the titles—that is, the signifier—and replaces them with the newly signified.

As most readers know, *Man of La Mancha* is the title of a musical written by Dale Wasserman, adapted from his 1959 non-musical teleplay *I, Don Quixote*, and inspired by Cervantes' masterpiece *Don Quixote*. Wasserman's *Man of La Mancha* is a play within a play, with Cervantes telling the story to his fellow prison inmates as he awaits a hearing during the Spanish Inquisition. Since the term “Man of La Mancha” is already a palimpsest referring to several possible works, Chu's use of the title can be viewed as a case of putting new wine into an old bottle.

Since Chu never directly mentions the original book or Wasserman's play, readers are likely to wonder about Chu's decision. However, *Don Quixote* is not completely absent from Chu's story. While we are told that the narrator is working on a short essay of “absolutely no importance” when he is confronted with his sudden illness, his efforts to deal with his insight about the certainty of his own death is a theme that Cervantes was very familiar with. In accepting the inevitability of death, the narrator acknowledges the foolishness of fighting against it, and confronts it to improve his chances of dying content. This is a battle in which the enemy is invisible, yet he never gives up his writing, even though he knows he is unlikely to achieve what he wants. Accordingly, readers may find it fitting for the narrator to refer to *Man of La Mancha* at the end of the story:

After all, death only visits us once in our lifetime, so we should make advance preparations for its arrival.

Hundreds of years ago, the Man of La Mancha
howled at the sky—
A windblown quest
Seeking love in steel and rocks
Using manners with savages
And me, afraid that the handwriting would be eaten away by mites and no longer legible, I wrote this down. (Chu 2007:38)

In this manner the narrator appears to echo the French writer André Gide’s comment that his most important reason for writing is “to shelter something from death” (in Blanchot 1989: 94), as if one can outlive death by entrusting oneself to the survival of what is written. However, the narrator in Chu’s *Man of La Mancha* might find convincing Kafka’s statement as summarized by Blanchot: “*Write to be able to die—Die to be able to write*” (Blanchot 1989: 94, italics in the original). Blanchot argues that both Kafka and Gide strove to make a contented death possible, but in very different ways. Kafka wrote in order to grasp death, while the artist Gide created in order to “hold it at a distance”. One way or another, Kafka, Gide, and Chu’s narrator are all determined to establish positive relationships with death by grasping the last breaths of youth, life, and memory. In death, Chu’s narrator finds the possibility of poetic creativity, a space in which to share a productive and profound relationship with death. He eventually gains new perspectives on both his death and his writing, which can no longer be described as “of absolutely no importance”.

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