

The Narration of "Forgetting" in Blanchot's Fiction

Wenwen Liu^{1,*}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei 430063, China

*Corresponding author. Email: lww@whut.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

Blanchot's forgetting is not a purely mental illness in his writing, but a kind of emotional convergent, which pushes the human experience to a limit. This article mainly uses schizophrenic analysis to examine the narration of forgetting in Blanchot's fiction, and explores how the strong emotions and desire hid in forgetting help Blanchot build his literary space. This article points out that forgetting can serve as a positive power to break the linear history process in its immobility, so as to realize the rewriting of history. Besides, forgetting as a strong affect promotes the development of the story and makes the structure of the novel present a multi-dimensional narrative space. In forgetting, Blanchot suspends time in order to realize a paradoxical coexistence between the past and the present.

Keywords: Blanchot, forgetting, narration

I. INTRODUCTION

Forgetting is a theme that cannot be ignored in Blanchot's literary narration. In forgetting, he pushes human experience to a certain limit, so as to explore the characteristics of literature beyond time. The forgetting here is not a purely mental illness, but what Deleuze calls the emotional convergence point, which is a strong affect. Therefore, Blanchot writes "She forgot him in everything: slowly, passionately." (Blanchot, *Awaiting, Oblivion*, 32) Forgetting thus becomes a passionate emotional process. In literary and artistic creation, schizophrenic analysis of forgetting is of great significance, which is a path for the generation of thoughts, as well as the art of Dionysus. This process may open up emotional channels and let the imperceptible emerge, thus creating a space of becoming beyond time.

II. FORGETTING AND TRAUMA

Forgetting as a literary illness in Blanchot's works means writing trauma and pain. This strong emotion stems from the things that are too powerful and suffocating, which disturbs our sense of time and leads to forgetting. In other words, it is a kind of traumatic forgetting. According to Freud's understanding, this is an unconscious negligent behavior, a pathologically suppressed state, accompanied by a forcible repetition. In Blanchot's works, forgetting has a historical significance that cannot be ignored. Blanchot experienced the most turbulent and cruel years in history, witnessing the tragic fate of the Jews in the war, narrowly escaping under the guns of the Nazis himself, and involving in the rebellion in Paris. These historical traumatic experiences are represented in Blanchot's

narrative as a struggle between memory and forgetting. He regards *The Idyll* as "a story from before Auschwitz. No matter when it is written, every story from now on will be from before Auschwitz." (*The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, 495) He transforms his traumatic experiences into a kind of philosophical and literary writing, which echoes the destruction and despair in the history.

The protagonist Thomas in *Aminadab* got lost in a house. He was looking for a piece of news that he would never know. People in the house "wanted to annihilate everything, disperse everything, kill everything, and kill themselves too, so that as the house collapsed, they and their faults would be buried in the rubble. Such murderous rage, such destruction — memory alone cannot contain its traces." (*Aminadab*, 89) Forgetting in this house is a kind of historical shock, and the house is an indestructible existence in memory. The fact is Thomas was lost in time and history rather than in the house. The house symbolizes the history people trying to rebuild. People in the house tried to figure out their real mission by remodeling the house and drawing a map. However, their efforts were futile, and the house was still in lost and chaos. In the story *The Idyll*, Akim followed the map given by the bookseller to escape the city. When he was about to go out, the city changed, completely different from the memory, and more chaotic in the darkness. Blanchot's similar plots in *Aminadab* and *The Idyll* are not meant to represent the traumatic experience, nor to reproduce history, but to create a kind of break, writing memory from oblivion. Mehlman tried to find the "lost" texts of Blanchot, in order to prove that there is actually a continuity hidden under the crevice of the history. What is behind this continuity is a sense of powerlessness that cannot be forgotten due to the pain, because forgetting

indicates a kind of presence. For Blanchot, the purpose of writing oblivion is to reach an absolute forgetting, which is a long waiting process.

Forgetting allows the pain to transcend history and inhibits the possibility of recurring mechanisms. Blanchot says in *The Writing of the Disaster* that "the absolute event of history — that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up..." (*The Writing of The Disaster*, 47) In *Aminadab*, the waiters in the house were like ghosts with historical pain, existing in oblivion. No one saw them and nobody wanted to admit to be a waiter. "We quickly forget; how could we hold on to the memory of everything that happens to us? That would be insane." (*Aminadab*, 95) This sentence firstly emphasizes a kind of conscious forgetting. Forgetting is the eradication of pain and the forgiveness of crime. The waiters affirmed their forgetting, which is at the same time a kind of retrospect of memory. The past is shown in the forgetting as the absent presence. Logic and history are involved in the forgetting. The memory returns to the original point in a devastating way. Secondly, Blanchot uses the plural pronoun "we" here, which means that forgetting is not an individual behavior or a special state of mind, but a collective behavior, a common ritual expression. They said they couldn't remember what happened in the past. Their utterance of forgetting finally becomes a public performance. The erasure and forgetting they carried out in a way of emphasis actually opens up a space for the rewriting of history, blurring the boundary between memory and forgetting. Their forgetting of history is not simply amnesia, but a state of memory shock. They remembered or forgot from time to time, and had an uncertainty about the recurring scenes before their eyes. This blankness of consciousness has become a space for the preservation of truth. The boundary between writing and erasure, forgetting and memory has been blurred.

For Blanchot, forgetting is silence and refusal to speak. It is difficult to express traumatic experiences, while forgetting is the only feasible way to get close to this emotion and heal the pain. Forgetting thus is the process of exploring and mediating two different worlds: the once cruelly destroyed world and the present world. Blanchot does not return to the origin of things through memory, instead he takes a completely opposite path: forgetting. For Blanchot, forgetting is not an entire failure of memory, but a way of reconciling with historical trauma. Forgetting creates historical ruptures and gaps, which reveals a special state of existence. The disappearance and absence of memory prove the presence of the past. The meaning and essence of history and life are disclosed in the rupture of forgetting. Blanchot writes in the book, "Forgetting, the latent gift...we are, in the movement toward forgetting, in relation with the presence of the immobility of forgetting." (*Awaiting, Oblivion*, 45)

Then, forgetting refuses to reduce the historical memory into a pure memory, but approaches history in another way to understand the traumatic experience. When historical and personal trauma become a kind of emotional block, forgetting turns out to be a way to heal the pain, the escape from the memory, as well as a kind of self-salvation and relief.

III. FORGETTING AND TOPOLOGICAL NARRATION

Blanchot constructs a differentiated narrative through forgetting, moving towards the outside of literature. Forgetting is closely related to time and memory, but Blanchot's approach is to unexpectedly avoid time and erase the trace of time in his narrative. He makes the event break away from the truth that we are accustomed to, thus, forming the expression of a new narrative style.

"Forgetting" allows Blanchot's fiction to form a multi-memory structure in Riemann space. Forgetting, as a blank on the memory map, is a kind of fracture and a driving force for the development of narrative topology. The beginning of *Aminadab* tells that the protagonist Thomas entered a labyrinth-like house when a girl opposite the street casually summoned him. Everything in the house seemed to eliminate the traces of memory. The register book the gatekeeper carefully reviewed and the medical record on the patient's chest were actually blank. The young girl wiped the traces left by them while walking. When the gatekeeper appeared again, Thomas felt that he knew this person before, but forgot where he had met him. Blanchot presents the moments of events in an almost static way, slowly releasing them from the chain of time. Thomas was constantly lost in the house, always returning to the same point of departure, thus creating a blurry and loose narrative atmosphere. Forgetting becomes the driving force of narration, which keeps Thomas returning and going far away in forgetting, pushing the narrative forward and expanding the narrative space. This limited literary space has become rich and varied due to oblivion, thus creating a kind of topological narration. The unfolding plot of the narrative is deformed at all levels in forgetting, which is a Deleuzian Riemannian space juxtaposed but not directly related to each other. It presents an extreme uncertainty in the paradoxical logic and unity fracture in forgetting.

When the young woman said that there was a message for Thomas, he just followed the young woman to get it. The young woman said that she had an amazing memory and could write down all details without any omission even the things happened ten years ago, but when Thomas asked her what the so-called message was, she said that the whole thing had disappeared from her memory. Forgetting suspends the

"message" that Thomas was looking for. Does this message really exist? This uncertainty arouses the restlessness, anxiety and expectation in Thomas's heart, and the sense of incompleteness drives Thomas to keep on searching. Forgetting enables Thomas to follow the message at the beginning and then discard it in order to open a gap in the narrative so that the character can take other messages and go on with the next step. Forgetting uses the power of abandonment and absence to tempt Thomas to move forward towards an unknown and unfamiliar point, as if the message is the only thing that can be grasped against forgetting and nothingness. He was eager to get there, and this power pushed the narrative constantly moving forward.

The amnesia of the entire house made Thomas feel uncertain about his memory. He wasn't sure whether the person he had met actually appeared before. Thomas was struggling between memory and forgetting. He tried hard to remember the appearance of the maid, but it was not easy. After he fell over in the room, he was completely in a state of amnesia. Until Thomas completely forgot, the woman rushed to him, and "both of them were lost, wandering among loathsome punishments they could not quite reach..." (*Aminadab*, 165) At this point, forgetting pushes the narrative to a climax. Freud might agree that the drive of sexual desire brought Thomas back to this young woman again and again. This is a secret desire between him and this young woman, a battle between memory and forgetting. Thomas always thought that they had met each other before, but the young woman insisted that Thomas remembered the wrong person and his memory was not trustworthy. At this moment, forgetting produces a violent experience in the relationship between the characters, which creates a kind of dislocation. It is not that Thomas forgot this young woman after losing his memory, but this young woman forgot herself, so that the subject of forgetting becomes the object that was forgotten. During this process, their established relationship is untied, and a new structure is created because of forgetting. This young woman obviously becomes a kind of potential or pure memory, whose own richness and uncertainty makes herself an undefined existence. In the end, Thomas chose to follow her. Did this young woman recognize Thomas? Were Barbe and Lucie the same woman in the story? All these have become an unknown in forgetting, an infinite possibility of openness and freedom. Thomas' trajectory turns out to be a kind of contingency due to forgetting, which triggers new possibilities all the times. In this way, the common experience of forgetting is decomposed into an individual and unpredictable trail. This process shows us both Thomas' carelessness and concentration, his passion and exhaustion. Forgetting is where emotions converge. There is a kind of emotional intensity and convergent point in the void of forgetting, thus placing the novel into a kind of obscure status.

As one of Blanchot's early narrative works, *Aminadab* has relatively clear plot and characters, while his later piece *Awaiting, Oblivion* has no clear and recognizable time and plot, only filled with the chattering conversation between him and her in a room. The whole narrative seems rather loose, but it actually revolves around forgetting, entering their conversation at an interval, creating a continuous looping effect, constantly folded through forgetting. They were taken to each other by forgetting. They met each other, but their relationship always had a gap that could not be filled by memory. Blanchot writes "his relations with her, a perpetual lie." (*Awaiting, Oblivion*, 7) This gap is a potential becoming status. The secret between him and her is not hidden but not apparent either. "He had revealed in this forgetting, which seemed to him at the time very close to what she knew, closer perhaps than recollection, and it is through forgetting that he sought to gain possession of it." (*Awaiting, Oblivion*, 10) The relationship between them is not determined by memories or something already known. Forgetting activates the unknown: Is she standing by the door or sitting in an armchair? Why should they talk to each other? Is she the one who talked to him all night? Forgetting maintains her strangeness, unknowability, and absolute inability to possess him, making their relationship circuitous and pushing the narrative forward.

IV. FORGETTING AND BOUNDARY TRANSGRESSION

In Blanchot's narrative, forgetting is a profound daily existence, because "On the one hand, this ability-to-forget is a capacity: we are able to forget and, thanks to this, able to live, to act, to work, and to remember-to be present: we are thus able to speak usefully. On the other hand, forgetting gets away. It escapes." (*Infinite Conversation*, 195) Therefore, forgetting is a force of action and transcendence, which is positively revolutionary. It can break the boundaries of memory and is also Blanchot's metaphysical philosophical aesthetic practice.

In the fiction *Awaiting, Oblivion*, we cannot seize a clear time clue. He and she were waiting for forgetting in a simple hotel room. Forgetting is their ultimate goal. They wanted to forget each other, and meet again in forgetting. We cannot ask what happened? What's the ending? We expect something to happen, but Blanchot's narrative suspends our expectations infinitely. In his narrative, forgetting is a perceivable force that keeps them separating and meeting all the times. We can't expect anything to happen. He breaks the dimension of time and drives us into a fundamental forgetting. As Deleuze points out in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "Let us not dwell too much on the dimensions of time: the novella has little to do with a memory of the past or an act of

reflection; quite to the contrary, it plays upon a fundamental forgetting. It evolves in the element of 'what happened' because it places us in a relation with something unknowable and imperceptible (and not the other way around: it is not because it speaks of a past about which it can no longer provide us knowledge)." (Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 193) In the state of forgetting, the relationship between the subject and the self is broken. They continue to meet in a smooth space and forget each other constantly. When he was writing, she suddenly asked him "Who are you really? You cannot be you, but you are someone. Who?" He replied, "I chose to be that which finds me. I am indeed that you just said." (*Awaiting, Oblivion*, 29) Obviously, she suddenly forgot him, and he took the initiative to meet her in forgetting, and they approached each other through forgetting. The affect with intensity enables them to touch the existence of each other through the void of forgetting.

Forgetting cuts off the connection between the subject and the self, thereby dispelling the subject and allowing thoughts to move freely outside. In *Awaiting, Oblivion*, he actively forgot himself and eliminated his own existence, which is an impersonal and active forgetting process. At this moment, he opened to the outside in the forgetfulness to welcome the coming of complete heterogeneity. This dangerous movement puts him and her in a mysterious relationship. The encounter in forgetting also means separation. This is a relationship without relation. Forgetting is their ultimate goal. "Forgetting will separate us slowly, patiently, through an identically unknown movement, from whatever still remains in common between us." (*Awaiting, Oblivion*, 34) She met him just for losing him, greeting each other like strangers. "You found me again, perhaps, but without finding me." — "What do you mean?" — "I mean you do not know whom you found." He took this lightly, "Of course, but that adds to the beauty of the situation." (*Awaiting, Oblivion*, 55) They communicated in their shared secret and went towards each other. From the moment they met again, they had a knowing separation in the presence, and the distance caused by forgetting creates an absolute and abundant relationship. When Deleuze studied Nietzsche, he found that "it will be immediately obvious how there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no present, without forgetfulness." (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 113) They forgot each other just to make the things perfect. The perfection is not the harmony and mutual understanding between them but a complete strangeness and heterogeneity they opened to each other in forgetting. Because of it, their relationship has become extremely rich, thus shunning a monotonous daily mode and entering a state of infinite becoming, which is the source of happiness and hope. They met but separated from each other, a transcendence in paradox. Their call to active forgetting is actually to

face a difficult break and encounter between the past and the future, presence and absence, thinking and action. It calls for a future and the emergence of a community without any guarantee.

The One Who was Standing Apart From Me narrates the unperceivable relationship between "I" and "he" in my literary creation process. "I" could establish a certain connection with him only through forgetting. He is the conceptual character in the imagination, which is actually Blanchot's reflection on the process of literary creation. There is always anxiety in such forgetting, which is a splitting experience with great tension. "I think that at certain moments I'm afraid of forgetting him, losing him in forgetfulness and making forgetfulness the only abyss where he could be lost." (*The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, 328) Oblivion becomes a kind of chaotic disorder, revealing a depth that has never been reached. "My" fear was that I worried he would be difficult to emerge if he fell in the oblivion, and completely lose contact with "me". What hid in such oblivion is the pursuit, an energetic struggle for the emergence of a certain image. Such effort is not to separate from the outside world and maintain ratiom through forgetting. On the contrary, forgetting becomes an extremely dangerous action. "Through my meditation, a power is exercised that is already taking him to the frontiers of this world — is in some sense the root of the word 'forgetfulness,' the source of the disturbance I can't control." (*The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, 329) The edge of this world is the boundary between "me" and myself, the starting point towards the outside of literature, and the force behind forgetting injects him with the life and emotions which allows him to emerge from the chaos. Eventually, his existence becomes more conspicuous. He and "I" have established a deeper connection because of forgetting. Thus, forgetting becomes a kind of protection, because "I also knew this: unmasked, he could no longer be anything else — but me." (*The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, 318)

Forgetting breaks the boundaries of time, dissociating time from the chain of memory. The affect allows the past and the present to coexist and forms a connected emotional strength in it. In *Death Sentence*, Blanchot tells a peculiar scene in the subway station. The protagonist met an acquaintance in the subway, which made him think of his neighbor C (Colette), whom he saw almost every day. At that moment, he forgot her completely. In order to remember her, "I had to seek out someone I had only glimpsed ten years before." (*The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, 156) In forgetting, the past and the present are amazingly connected. This kind of forgetting is not the real forgetting. He did not notice her presence, even though she was there all evening. For Blanchot, memory has nothing to do with the daily representation, but a strong emotion attached to it. Only this pure emotion can

reappear in memory with the help of the power of forgetting. This is both a releasing and convergent force. This forgetting does not evoke a pure representation of the original reality, but a different repetition of the past under the influence of emotion. He saw C every day but couldn't remember her. She was refreshed in his memory only by the experience of their encounter ten years ago. At this moment, it is difficult for us to distinguish whether he remembered the person he had met at the subway station or his neighbor C. Although they are two completely different people, it is certain that forgetting makes him connect these two different women together, because they shared a certain emotional intensity. Just like the beginning of *When the Time Comes*, the protagonist could not recognize Judith the moment she opened the door. It evoked a distant memory in his heart, "I could look at her from the depths of my memory, I was uplifted, taken back to another life." (*The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, 204) Judith who was standing in front of him had nothing to do with his current visual cognition, but opened up to the protagonist in forgetting, evoking his distant memories. The forgetting at this moment is the ruptures and gaps of time, disrupting the existing cognitive model, giving the present a complete inclusive space, where the past and the present can merge. In this void, he was uplifted to a new life, which is the real memory emerging from forgetting. "Involuntary memory reveals the existence of a virtual memory that has no relation to the psychological representations of a past moment. It stands for a complete different world, an untouchable, unreachable, virginal memory." (De Bolle, *Deleuze and Psychoanalysis: Philosophical Essays on Deleuze's Debate with Psychoanalysis*, 141)

Blanchot wrote in *The Writing of The Disaster*, "We boldly separate forgetfulness from memory, still we seek only an effect of forgetfulness (an effect of which forgetfulness is not the cause) — a sort of hidden elaboration of the hidden which would keep separate from the manifest and which, identifying itself with this very separation (nonidentity) and maintaining itself as not-manifest, would nevertheless serve nothing but manifestation." (*The Writing of The Disaster*, 85) The setting in the narrative of *Awaiting, Oblivion* is a somewhat abnormally narrow and long room. It has been repeatedly replaced in memory and reappeared in narrative because of forgetting. The room is the same, but every time, the reappearance of the room is different from before. This difference is based on forgetting. This room in narrative is not a purely physical space and the repetition of the room is not Pythagoras's repetition of repetition. Instead, it is a repetition of difference, constantly updating the existing memories through forgetting. Each repetition is the transformation of memory about this room resulted by forgetting. It is the protagonist's re-understanding of the room and the relationship between him and her. As

Klossowski discussed in *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, forgetting is the way to overcome eternal return. (Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 56-59) This is not the forgetting of a specific thing, but the emotions related to it. Blanchot wants to present the obscure moment of this room. This kind of forgetting is very similar to Proust's involuntary memory. In fact, Proust's involuntary memory is closer to forgetting rather than recollection. Those reminiscences of the old days are not purely objective representation of the past, instead it is the deep subjective impression evoked in forgetting, which brings an emotional tremor to the protagonist. But Proust's writing about forgetting and memory follows a spider-web structure. He created different trigger points to connect with the memory, while Blanchot generates different feelings at the same point. The same person, place and image can produce multi-level feelings. Thus, in Blanchot's fiction, forgetting is the starting point of memory, and in this way he turns forgetting into a more profound everyday existence.

V. CONCLUSION

Blanchot's historical writing creates a gap by forgetting, allowing historical experience to remain in our cultural memory with the greatest tension in this gap. Blanchot tries to break the linear history process in the immobility of forgetting, so as to realize the rewriting of history. In Blanchot's writing, forgetting is not passive, but contains a positive force, which promotes the development of the story and makes the structure of the novel present a multi-dimensional narrative space. During this process, forgetting acts in a non-action manner and becomes almost static, or a kind of perceivable state, which helps liberate the mind from the memory enclosed in history. At the same time, Blanchot suspends time in order to realize a paradoxical coexistence between the past and the present. He does not want us to remember, but pushes us to the outside through forgetting and builds a secret connection between history and the present.

References

- [1] Maurice Blanchot, *Awaiting, Oblivion*, trans. John Gregg. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- [2] Aminadab, trans. Jeff Fort, Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.
- [3] *The Writing of The Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- [4] *Infinite Conversation*[M]. Trans. Susan Hanson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- [5] *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*[M]. Ed. George Quasha, trans. Lydia Davis Paul Auster and Robert Lambertson, New York: Station Hill Press, 1999.
- [6] De Bolle, Leen. ed. "Deleuze's Passive Syntheses of Time and the Dissolved Self" in *Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*:

Philosophical Essays on Deleuze's Debate with Psychoanalysis.
Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2010.

- [7] Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Felix, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- [8] *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, London & New York: Continuum, 2002.
- [9] Klossowski, Pierre. *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith, London: The Athlone Press, 1997.
- [10] Mehlman, Jeffrey. *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.