

Aesthetic reconciliation with the self-evidence of death and its problem in Vladimir Jankélévitch

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Abstract---Philosophical discourse has often tended to regard death as an event occurring within the very unfolding of life, both being seen as a dual-pole necessity, each referring to the other. As Louis Lavelle states: “If death gives meaning to life, then life, in turn, gives us the capacity to experience it, or rather, grants us the experience of death.” Thus, the idea of life can only acquire its significance through the haunting presence of death that accompanies it. However, in the conception of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the experience of death cannot be lived, and it is therefore impossible to speak of any horizon beyond experience. This is precisely the issue raised by Vladimir Jankélévitch, who sought to elevate the idea of death understood as an evident event and a trivial ordinary fact to the level of a genuine philosophical problem. For thinking about death is not only the concern of philosophy but its unavoidable destiny. Did not Plato say that the true philosopher is one who is prepared to pursue death and who continually practices it in thought? Based on these approaches, we attempt, within the Jankélévitchian framework, to examine the question of thinking about death through the paradoxes of the known and the unknown: between what can be grasped with certainty and what resists description and articulation, between what is almost nothing in terms of knowledge and the “je ne sais quoi,” which constructs a meta-experiential, meta-logical, and meta-problematic vision. This ultimately opens onto an existential perspective grounded in the aesthetic dialectic of “life/death.”

Keywords---Jankélévitch, death, meta-experience, the other dimension, finitude.

Introduction

Attitudes toward death whose reality has been affirmed by religions, science, philosophy, literature, art, anthropology, and history converge on the idea that it is the necessary end of life. Indeed, awareness of

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death is itself awareness of life. Did Saint Augustine not say this? Is life not placed only under the shadow of the design of death? Did Abū al-‘Atāhiyya not consider birth to be death? Did Socrates not argue that death is one and that we must face it with courage? In this sense, death lies at the very core of human reality.

The human being, in its earliest definitions, is a rational being, but also a mortal being who is aware of its own death, which permeates all its qualities and states. Freud wrote, attempting so he claimed to correct a philosophical view, that “the starting point of all reflection is that intellectual mystery which appeared to primitive humans in the form of death, yet it is the state of conflict and the opposition between two attitudes toward it the one that recognizes it as the annihilation of life, and the other that denies it as such an end—that constitutes the origin of this reflection...”¹

For non-metaphysicians, death is regarded as an alternative to metaphysics. Schopenhauer, following Plato and Aristotle, showed that the capacity for wonder is what most distinctly characterizes the metaphysical mind. However, as Jankélévitch states, we are not required to experience an extraordinary adventure or an exceptional event in order to be philosophers; rather, we must learn to find wonder in the most trivial aspects of everyday existence, and in the naked essence of being in general.² In this privileged sense, philosophy speaks of death as its greatest mystery, its enduring concern, and its imperishable subject. How can death itself “die,” such that it becomes elegized and no longer spoken of? Death is alive, and life is dead this is perhaps the essence of the dialectical relation between presence and absence, between being and non-being, at the level of questioning truth itself.

Therefore, and in depth of inquiry into the research question: “How did Jankélévitch approach the phenomenon/reality of death between its problem and its self-evidence?”, we have attempted to unfold the problematic through the following steps:

Death: from the triviality of the event to the seriousness of its reality.

Death as belonging to another realm, or: in the impasse of finite thinking.

The consolations of love, or: in the ethical and aesthetic confrontation with death.

First: Death, from the triviality of the event to the seriousness of its truth

Philosophy is more than any other discipline preoccupied with the metaphysical questioning of “the thing,” with all the courage such questioning entails, and with all the metaphysical capacity for radical commitment that the “beyond” involves. Since we speak of death only within the framework of what is known as existence either as its negation or its absence, or as nothingness, as Vladimir Jankélévitch attempts to include it within the most general definitions we shall here invoke Heidegger’s concept of “the thing,” in a kind of essential approach. If we consider death as both the object and subject of thought and if we accept his statement that: “(...) there is something that can be called a thing in its broadest scope, insofar as it is an affair or a state.”³

Death, understood in this sense as an “affair” or a “state,” becomes the object of questioning both as a phenomenon and as a thing in itself, that is, from the standpoint of what applies to the thing in its dual qualities of manifestation and concealment. And although death is a phenomenon that can be perceived, it is in its essence, the “un-graspable” par excellence. And although it announces, presents, and reveals itself, “what reveals itself is at the same time appearance, insofar as it is a radiance announcing something that, within appearance itself, conceals itself.”⁴

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, trans. Samir Karam, Dar al-Tali’a, Beirut, 2nd ed., 1981, pp. 33 and 40.

² Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Death*, Flammarion, Paris, 1977, p. 455.

³ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning the Thing: On Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Principles*, trans. Ismail al-Masdaq, Arab Organization for Translation, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2012, p. 37.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Fathi al-Maskini, New Unified New Book House, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2012, pp. 88–91.

Thus, the question falls within the domain of traditional metaphysical inquiry whenever it concerns the essence and truth of death, just as is the case when speaking of God, freedom, or the soul, as well as love and music. These questions lie at the heart of a philosophy whose foundations, according to Jankélévitch, rest on mystery (*le mystère*), secrecy wonder, the unsayable (*l'indicible*), the ineffable (*l'ineffable*) and the "I-don't-know-what" (*le je ne sais quoi*). For metaphysics in this sense is not born of wonder alone the kind of wonder that places consciousness in a dilemma but rather of perplexity.⁵ And death is the perplexity of perplexities, the most secret obsession of obsessions, and the terrifying threshold before which the act of thinking collapses, if what lies beyond is nothing but absolute zero, a mere mode of absence as Jankélévitch says.

According to the Freudian perspective "death becomes a necessary consequence of life; every individual owes a debt to nature and must expect to pay the bill. In short, death is natural, undeniable, and unavoidable"⁶. It also becomes, according to many definitions agreed upon in dictionaries and lexicons, "the opposite of life" It is said that wine "died," meaning its fermentation has settled; water is said to "die" in a place when the earth absorbs it; the wind "dies" when it calms; a man "dies" when he submits to truth; and death is the disappearance of the strength of the living... The disappearance of vital force in the human being is a well-known fact, as Arnold Toynbee states in his book *Man and Death*: "Death, whatever its cause and circumstances, is an event in which the previously living body turns into a decomposing corpse, while the soul departs from its human counterpart". This is a view⁸ with which Vladimir Jankélévitch agrees when he says: "Death is a very small episode on the surface of eternal nature a trivial event in the vast cosmic life but wait! This incident is a profound mystery and a great tragedy"⁹.

This phenomenon can be approached, as a profound mystery and a great tragedy, when we recall the reflections of Ivan Ilyich and the questions of his anxious consciousness regarding the event threatening his life. The protagonist of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* says: "I was here and now I am going there? Where? When I am no more, what will there be? Nothing. Then where will I be when I no longer exist? Is this death?" The certainty of knowledge about death soothes the sting of truth and¹⁰ gives us, through the repetition of this natural fact, a kind of acceptance, satisfaction, and tranquility.

Since we were born, we are dying indeed we exist in order to die. In this sense, death is neither a strange accident nor a sudden fate that befalls life, but rather part of the essence of the very possibility of the living being.

Moreover, the divine affirmation—"Every soul shall taste death" (*Aal Imran*: 185) and "Wherever you may be, death will overtake you, even if you are in fortified towers" (*An-Nisa*: 78, does not simply grant us comfort through this evident truth as perishable beings or finite creatures. Rather, it places us, on one hand, in accordance with the Freudian view, before a burdensome preoccupation: "Our sensitivity is incapable of warding off the hand of death; our habit is to focus entirely on the accidental causes of death an accident, a symptom, a disease, an infection, aging. This tendency exposes our attempts to transform the meaning of death from necessity into accident"¹¹. On the other hand, it confronts us with the reality of our finitude, what Jankélévitch calls the triumph of death (*Le triomphe de la mort*), which inscribes itself into the ontological meaning that defines the being in its essence, for "the inability to avoid death reveals the finitude of the creature (*La finitude de la créature*) and exposes its fragility"¹².

⁵ Vladimir Jankélévitch, "Bad Conscience," in *Moral Philosophy*, ed. Françoise Schwab, Flammarion, France, 2018, p. 38.

⁶ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *First Philosophy*, previous source, p. 146.

⁷ Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, previous reference, p. 76.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op. cit., p. 434.

⁹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *The I-Don't-Know-What and the Almost-Nothing*, Vol. 1: *Manner and Occasion*, Éditions du Seuil, 1980, p. 57.

¹⁰ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Thinking About Death?*, Liana Levi Editions, Paris, 1994, p. 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹² Pierre Michel Klein, "The Metalogic of Death," in Françoise Schwab (ed.), *Presence of Vladimir Jankélévitch: Charm and Occasion*, Beauchesne, Paris, 2010, p. 96

In this context, Vladimir Jankélévitch considers death itself as a pure form of haecceity (Hecceité), related to the deceased person in their very singularity, as well as to death in its metaphysical essence. For although death is a defining characteristic of humanity in general a feature that carries the principle of necessity even for non-human beings haecceity, which refers to “thisness,” i.e., what makes this thing precisely what it is and nothing else, is the assemblage of residual properties that reveal the uniqueness of a being, insofar as it is a bearer of distinctive attributes that lie at the very core of its most specific existence. Hence, the truth of death and the truth of haecceity are contiguous, and both are, according to Jankélévitch, meta-empirical thresholds leading to “the unknowable.” From this perspective, his definition of the human being and thus the question “what/who is the human being essentially?” takes shape as an agent within countless definitions, which can become predicates when attributed to the subject through a relational link. Yet this subject is always other, always further away, and the essence of the subject which is the totality of these predicates and contains all modes of being is itself an enigma.”¹³

Therefore, Ivan Illich speaks of death as something that belongs to him alone, as an experience of the first-person consciousness and nothing more. Even if, within logical universality, he is a mortal being he still carries a singular essence identity and haecceity. The example he gives Caius cannot apply to him, because it refers to the principle of universality of an abstract being whose mortality extends to all humans that is as an abstract idea that applies analogically to every living human. The exception of singular identity here lies in the character’s awareness of his own difference. Thus: “(...) with all the joys and pleasures, and the sorrows of childhood, adolescence, and youth, what does Caius know about the smell of that leather ball that Vanya was so fond of? Did Caius kiss his mother’s hand in that way? Did he misbehave at school when the pie was bad? Did Caius fall in love in that way? Caius is in fact mortal, and it is right for him to die, but for me, Ivan Ilyich, and for little Vanya, with all my thoughts and emotions, it is something entirely different.”¹⁴

From the Latin term *Ecceitas*, which, according to its originator Duns Scotus, denotes the principle of individual singularity.¹⁵

Death is a particular event, and it cannot be apprehended within concern. The crowd does not produce a self-aware philosophy of death. It is within the discourse of the first-person “I” that this specificity is grounded in the experience of the pain of loss, between the fact that “they die” and the tragedy that “I die.” Heidegger says: “The deceased, who differs from the dead in that he has been taken away from those remaining alive, is an object of concern in the form of a funeral, burial, or grave rituals, and this once again because, in his mode of being, he is more than a mere ready-to-hand tool, something that can only be taken up within the world that surrounds us”¹⁶. This difference is sensed by the self-aware “I,” within the horizon of its relations with the Other. The poet who says, “The death of any human being diminishes me, because the expanse of humanity includes me,” thereby opens up death as loss, like the loss left by “the death of bed number 12”, for example, which remains, in this abstract sense, within medical records merely as a number added to the count of those who leave life. Yet Ghassan Kanafani’s vision of death here falls within a dual awareness of the phenomenon of death, shifting it from the status of a problem to that of a mystery: that is, from being a purely personal experience to being impersonal at the same time, an experience that can be observed from the outside as well as lived from within. This is what distinguishes consciousness in its engagement with death across the dimensions of universality and obviousness on the one hand, and the dimensions of particularity and secrecy on the other.

¹³ Arnold J. Toynbee and al., *Man and His Concerns with Death*, trans. Ezzat Shaalan, National Center for Translation, Egypt, 1st ed., 2011, p88

¹⁴ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Thinking About Death?*, op.cit, Paris, p.555

¹⁵ Jamil Saliba, *Philosophical Dictionary*, Lebanese Book House, Lebanon, Vol. 2, 1982, p. 519.

¹⁶

If we speak of the specific feeling of loss and its psychological effects, in a way that makes memory the memory of the person continuously present, imbued with nostalgia and fidelity, then consciousness becomes primarily an ethical consciousness, in addition to being a contemplative consciousness (une conscience contemplative). According to Jankélévitch, this consciousness is meant to contemplate things and even my own self as a thing among things; it is a consciousness that spreads its objects out on the luminous surface of knowledge. By contrast, ethical consciousness withdraws toward the person: it is akin to a secret and an enigma which, because of its depth, we ourselves hesitate to disclose within ourselves, and which remains, in general, unexplainable.¹⁷

It appears that death has two aspects: as a problem and as a mystery. This is what Jankélévitch argues in his dialogue “Reflections on Death.” It is well known that “death, for the physician, the demographer, and the biologist, is merely a set of phenomena to be explained and counted, without carrying within itself any mystery... One can say that thinking about death is both external and internal, and this is the condition of the human being within it. I call the obscure aspect of death its hidden side, its dark dimension and indeed it is Gabriel Marcel who distinguished between problem and mystery: the problem is placed before me, outside, a transparent object that shines with the clarity of self-evidence in broad daylight whereas I find myself within the mystery from the inside. Thus, death is at once problem and mystery, logical and enigmatic.”¹⁸ Moreover, the perception and awareness of the phenomenon of death, according to Jankélévitch, depend on the degree of its proximity or distance from us: whether it concerns my death, your death, or his death—that is, the death of the other, the distant one. Undoubtedly, thinking death through the pronouns of the first person (Je), the second person (Tu), and the third person (Il) establishes a form of classification related to the depth of experience, and opens onto both the extended and the limited within the horizons of time and space. Thus, “if there is some kind of continuity of death, the death of someone, or the death of a person, becomes a trivial and meaningless event within an indeterminate sequence. However, my own death (Ma propre mort) is nothing but the tragedy of the final moment; for me, it is the end of the world, of history, and of narrative.”¹⁹

From this point of view, and in this sense, the event in general and the event of death in particular, according to Jankélévitch takes on a metaphysical character within an ethical framework. This concerns the acting being who is destined for finitude, where becoming is purely temporal and subjects this agent to the principle of a first-and-last occurrence (la semelfactivité). Consequently, there is an event/action that is impossible to repeat, because it has reached its limit and come to an end with all the uniqueness and singularity that an event/action entails.

It is an event that cannot be repeated, yet at the same time its factual reality cannot be annulled: that it has been, that it is, and that it will have been. The eternity of what cannot be erased applies not only to death here, but also to the reality of what has been lived. These two movements within time l'irréversible (the irreversible) and l'irrévocable (the irrevocable) are in this context linked to the identity of the deceased which can neither be retrieved nor compensated, nor replaced, as well as to the event of death itself, which can neither be postponed, nor cancelled, nor annulled.

“Death, which is the future of all that comes into being, is bound to the becoming of time that does not turn back on itself; and this is the fundamental ordeal of existence, the source of all regrets, of the most beautiful songs, and of poetry that is deeply rooted in pain.”²⁰

¹⁷ Pierre Michel Klein, “The Metalogic of Death,” in Françoise Schwab (ed.), *Presence of Vladimir Jankélévitch: Charm and Occasion*, Beauchesne, Paris, 2010, p. 7.

¹⁸ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *The I-Don't-Know-What and the Almost-Nothing*, Vol. 1: *Manner and Occasion*, Éditions du Seuil, pp. 57–58.

¹⁹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *The I-Don't-Know-What and the Almost-Nothing*, Vol. 2: *Misunderstanding and Misrecognition*, Seuil, Paris, 1980, p. 67.

²⁰ “It is the irreversibility of becoming that is the fundamental pathos of existence, which is the source of regrets, of the most beautiful songs, of the most touching and most poignant poetry.” *Op.cit.*, p.11.

Second: Death from another perspective, or: in the impasse of finite thinking.

If thought is linked to existence as a relation of signification, and thus as a relation of conditionality, then the Cartesian statement “I think, therefore I am” offers a definition of this thinking being only within its ontological determination. Yet, in Heidegger’s terms, it is grounded in a being already oriented toward death and realized through it. Indeed, “the openness of Dasein is an openness to its own finitude; it is not the thinking ego that embodies its fundamental certainty, but rather the dying ego, *Sum Moribundus*, or the mortal one. The truth of ‘I am here,’ as Heidegger states in a lecture delivered in the summer of 1925, is tied to my existence as temporally determined and nothing more.”²¹

Since, in its oldest definitions, the human being is a rational creature who becomes aware of its existence through thinking, and subsequently becomes aware of its death through this same capacity for thought, the relation of signification and conditionality here takes on a negative form. It is based on the self-evident claim that thinking is linked to life, and that its opposite necessarily implies that I am no longer existing without, at the same time, negating the fact that I am a mortal being, and therefore a subject whose thought is already oriented toward death. This is precisely what Jankélévitch emphasizes: “Death is the end of thinking consciousness and by no means the collapse of thought-objects. This thought that thinks death, that becomes aware of death, that places itself beyond it and seeks to transcend it, itself comes to an end in death, in contradiction with its own task, because thinking is a temporal act historically bound to a living being.”²²

He further insists that thought is, in the very core of its essence, concerned with death, which it also encounters at the heart of its own being. Jankélévitch, while affirming the certainty of death through its lived anticipation, also acknowledges the reality of ignorance regarding its time and moment. This is what produces the anxiety of waiting and the anxiety of thinking. There is thus an uncertain hour, *Hora incerta*, despite the certain knowledge of our death, *Mors certa*: I know that I will die, but I do not know when (*Nescio-quando*), nor where (*Nescio-ubi*), nor even what lies beyond death. Its mystery resembles that of God: I know that He exists, but I do not know what He is. This incomplete knowledge we have of things is in fact a half-knowledge and a half-science, comparable to a half-consciousness an unhappy, deficient consciousness, because it can never be complete nor fully separated from its object.²³

The fact that (*Le fait que*) death is determined in terms of what is widely accepted and clearly known, without ambiguity or dispute, does not mean that the confidence granted to us by knowledge of the existence of a thing—its felt actuality (*Quoddité*) gives us access to its essence (*Quiddité*). In the words of Vladimir Jankélévitch, I know that death exists, but I do not know what its truth is beyond what is revealed by the corpse of someone. There is thus a difference between complete knowledge that “there is death” (*Il y a une mort*), and an incomplete knowledge that cannot approach it from the perspective of its metaphysical obscurity and its dimension of “non-knowledge.” Thinking about death here, and taking it seriously as Jankélévitch says is not only a reflection on its meaning, but also a dense passage from the conceptual to the actual: actuality understood as proximity, immanence, lived experience, and a passive anticipation marked by the anxiety of the instant.²⁴

When it comes to thinking about death within an experience that attempts to grasp it cognitively, and in light of the shift described by Jankélévitch, we may ask how the question of death can be approached without the objective becoming entangled with the subjective, since the researcher and the object of research are one and the same. Or, as Saint Augustine puts it, it becomes a psychological question. Or, as Marcel Conche says: “I think of myself as a mortal being, and I cannot think without being aware of

²¹ *ibid*, p. 60.

²² Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Thinking About Death?*, *op.cit.*, p 57

²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, translated by Jalal Badleh, Mabaaber Publishing and Distribution, Syria, 1st ed., 2014, p. 76.

²⁴ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Death*, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

this; yet I am not aware of it without thinking of myself as such. Thus, all thought develops on the basis of knowledge of death, and death becomes the horizon of thought.”²⁵

In other words, thought that thinks death descends from its conceptual abstraction to directly experience the phenomenon of death not in the manner of funeral attendants who maintain a pious distance from the deceased, but in the manner of those whose consciousness is overwhelmed by this instant, insofar as it constitutes the hinge of the body between presence and absence, between being and non-being, between something and nothingness. Here, “in death converge the egocentric exceptionality of perspective and the objective law of living nature: death justifies the tragedy of my singular hecceity, and at the same time the universal destiny of every being. Death is therefore philosophy itself, and at the point where tragedy meets destiny, metaphysics gives us awareness of our condition, which is at once less than tragedy and more than comedy: it is, quite simply, the serious.”²⁶

There is, then, a form of knowledge of death in its fatal/inevitable character. But can we speak beyond what is permitted by the presence of the cold body whose pulse has ceased and whose senses have gone out—whether it concerns the death of the Other or of the self, in a moment of solemn agony? No one has ever returned from death to report on its condition, and no one has ever described it while being in its horrors.

For this reason, Vladimir Jankélévitch believes that if death, according to Gabriel Marcel, is a mystery, this is not only because anyone attempting to think it is personally implicated in it and is thereby the first to be ignorant of it. It is also because, here, the necessary condition of all knowledge is not respected: namely, that one must not be an element of the problem under consideration.²⁷ The truth of death, then, is carried by the human being from the outside, insofar as one is able to think independently about one’s destiny as a living being, conscious of itself and of the world. Yet, because death belongs to another order, because it is an enigma and a miraculous disappearance of hecceity and personal identity, as Jankélévitch says, any science that seeks to place the beyond within the field of experience is a science that ventures hopelessly into meta-problems, meta-logic, and meta-empiricism... Death is synonymous with nothingness; it is a pure zero of being, in the language of the metaphysicians themselves. Experience, within the scope of scientific knowledge, contradicts the necessity of this principle. In this regard, Emmanuel Levinas says: “Experience always indicates knowledge, that is, light and initiative; it also indicates the return of the object to the subject. Yet death, as a mystery, differs from experience understood in this sense. Death announces an event over which the subject is not master.”²⁸

This is the source of anxiety, in its profound sense, arising from thinking about an unknown future. Anxiety is anxiety about something unknown that, in its absoluteness, becomes a threat, in Heidegger’s sense. This is precisely what Jankélévitch discusses: “The anxiety brought about by thinking about death, for example, does not concern the beyond (*L’au-delà*) as such; rather, it is an anxiety about something unrepresentable (*Irreprésentable*). It is not possible to speak of a passage from one form to another as if it were a transformation that could be grasped through experience. Death is a passage into the disappearance of form, which cannot be represented, and the arrival at something entirely different, or at nothingness or the void. The anxiety of death, as the author of *Thinking About Death* maintains, is an anxiety about something more metaphysical and radically different—so much so that even the words ‘difference’ or ‘something else’ may not be appropriate here, because ‘otherness’ still implies

²⁵ Pierre Michel Klein, “The Metaphysics of Death,” in Françoise Schwab (ed.), *Presence of Vladimir Jankélévitch: Charm and Occasion*, Beauchesne, Paris, 2010, p. 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁷ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Death*, op.cit, pp. 97–98.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Anthology*, trans. Mohammed Ben Saleh, Al-Jamal Publications, Beirut–Baghdad, 2nd ed., 2009, p. 23.

sameness, an other within the system of the Same (*Le même*). One can only say that the otherness of death is absolute, without landmarks or reference within the immanent realm (*L'en deçà*).²⁹

Jankélévitch's endeavor, within a philosophy that grounds itself in secrecy, wonder, and enigma, and in what is inexpressible, inexplicable, and indescribable, is systematically situated within a vision that establishes a logic of the absurd—or what he later called “metalogue” (*métalogique*). This will become, within the orbit of his thought, the form through which the ambiguous themes of a certain world—he calls it the “meta-empirical”—are understood: in love as in death, creation, and time. We can say that³⁰ death is known as a natural fact, and at the same time unknown as a supra-natural fact. This in-between position—“I know that,” but “I do not know what”—is what renders thinking almost nothing when it addresses the phenomenon of death, and at the same time everything in thought. This is what leads to the claim that “thinking about death turns back on itself, thinking life and becoming aware of its continuity up to the very moment in which thought at least thinks; and for this reason it is extremely difficult, indeed almost impossible, to speak of any harmony between the natural and the supra-natural within the limits of thought itself. Logically, there are two possible and mutually contradictory worlds, where the truth of one excludes the truth of the other. Thus, ‘I exist’ as an idea will collide with the very thinker who bears it within a natural existence, with non-existence, nothingness, or the void of ‘I am no longer’ (*Je ne suis plus*),³¹ or rather with the there of the absolutely other, meta-natural and supra-natural realm: how can thought think its own non-being when the thinker himself dies? Absolute truth rises above the very idea of death and even mocks it.”

Third: The Consolations of Love, or on the Ethical and Aesthetic Confrontation with Death

There exists a dialectical logic governing the relationship between life and death. In Jankélévitch's conception, life does not affirm itself as living except in confrontation with death, indeed in spite of it; nor does it affirm its finitude except under its shadow. There is thus a paradoxical relation between life and death, the latter functioning as its obstacle-organ (*l'organe obstacle*). Without death, life would not acquire its actual meaning. At times, death appears as an obstacle revealing the finitude of life in the living being; at other times, it appears as an organ or instrument—without which one would not even know that one is simply alive. Nietzsche speaks of this knowledge of life granted to us by the mere experience of illness: “I know life well, for I was very close to losing it.”³² What, then, if it were a real death and an irreparable loss of life as a whole?

However, the paradox of the will to live and the will to love, whenever we think about death, does not elevate us only on the ethical and aesthetic levels of our relationship to the Other. The loss, if understood as a diminution and contraction of the body of humanity, can only be consoled by an attempt to fill it as much as possible with love. Patrick Süskind says: “Love and imagination are the opposites of death; those who do not possess imagination do not create love. Between love and death there is the blindness of confusion between light and darkness, between emptiness and flourishing. Love is what leads the serpent of death into slumber; death lies sometimes in sleep, but it does not die. And how could death die?” Indeed, this very will, as a driving force, reveals in the most intense moments of need that it is itself the very “obstacle-organ.” Who, then, possesses the will to withdraw from the confrontation with their decisive moment of death by their own person and essence—so as to escape what Jankélévitch calls the radical and inevitable “extraction” of the being of the being?

It would be difficult to speak of death in isolation without linking it to life, for each opens onto the other. If death illuminates the meaning of life—as the French philosopher Louis Lavelle puts it—then life, in turn, gives us the capacity for experience, or rather, it grants us the experience of death. Death is

²⁹ Patrick Süskind, *On Life and Death*, trans. Nabil al-Haffar, Dar al-Mada, Beirut, 1st ed., 2017, p. 17.

³⁰ Louis Lavelle, *La conscience de soi*, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1933, p.156.

³¹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, “Adventure, Boredom, Seriousness,” in *Moral Philosophy*, ed. Françoise Schwab, Flammarion, 2018., pp.68–69.

³² Sigmund Freud, *Reflections on War and Death*, previously cited, p. 29.

not a strange or incidental event that life rejects; it lies at the very heart of its structure. Thus, with Abū al-‘Atāhiyya, we may say that birth is death, and whenever we are overwhelmed by the certainty that we are transient beings, and that from the moment we exist we are already dying, we move from initial knowledge as self-evidence to a kind of recognition or re-cognition (*une reconnaissance*), in the Platonic sense of *anamnesis*, which restores the power of memory.³³

Death, which is “a habit well mastered by people,” as Jorge Luis Borges puts it, does not teach us, through repetition, how to die, but rather how to live and how to cling to memories, which are at their core acts of re-cognition, in the manner of Marcel Proust’s return to time. For this reason, Jankélévitch speaks of regret only in order to give it an aesthetic dimension that softens the sting of truth—the truth of the death of youth, the death of the moment, the death of life itself. Regret, even though it belongs to the set of mental and emotional functions related to the past, is closely linked to nostalgia in its opposition to what may be called hope, expectation, or promise. In essence, regret is not fundamentally different from desire; indeed, it is driven by desire. It constantly turns toward the past, even if this turning is accompanied by pain and disappointment in what can no longer be recovered, in what is desired but cannot be attained.³⁴

From this perspective, we understand why Jankélévitch insists that regret is aesthetic (*Le regret est esthétique*), because it produces the joy of returning to a cherished past. In its longing for it, it creates imagined images of what we can no longer live again. More radically, regret becomes aesthetic when it leads to a form of re-presentation, which Gabriel Marcel considers the very spirit and foundation of art. For “aesthetic creation cannot be discussed apart from presence, understood as a pure presence, itself enveloped in mystery and ambiguity, since it is the source of all creation and all aesthetic value. Presence is not merely physical presence, it is also an echo of memory or more precisely, presence is fidelity (*une fidélité*), where fidelity is ontological in its origin, since we are not faithful to the presence of an ideal or an image that no longer exists in reality. Presence is deeper and goes beyond being merely an external object upon which subjectivity is projected. Presence is bound up with death and only takes on its meaning through it.”

From this point onward, it becomes possible to speak of aesthetic and artistic sublimation (*La sublimation esthétique et artistique*) of death, through a correspondence between two liminal realms (*entre deux intervalles*, if one may say so), or through an aesthetic reconciliation with death via commemorative inscription, as understood by Arnold Toynbee. In this way literature, art, and cinema become modes of circumventing death. If death is a way of absence, then art is a way of confronting and taming this absence. Hence, “we must seek in the world of the novel, in the world of literature in general, and in the world of theatre, a compensation for the impoverishment of life; and it is only there that we can enjoy the circumstance that enables us to train ourselves to death.”³⁵

If we follow the view of Jankélévitch, who holds that “creation is oriented in a direction opposite to death, that is, from non-being to being, it leaves behind a visible offspring, a work of art, in which the mystery appears capable of being slowly unravelled; thus the metaphysics of art seems easier than the metaphysics of death.” The statement of Saint Florent becomes profoundly true when he speaks about the piano to which he often entrusted his sadness and his pains: “It seemed to me that it answered me with the voice of my deceased old mother, and only from that day did I gradually begin to understand music, and I became a true artist.”³⁶

³³Vladimir Jankélévitch, *First Philosophy, Introduction to a Philosophy of the Almost*, previously; cited, p. 64.

³⁴Marcel Prévost, *The Blind Piano Tuner*, trans. Hassan Sadiq, Tlass for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, Syria, 1st ed., 1985, p. 56.

³⁵Gabriel Marcel, *Position and Concrete Approaches to Ontological Mystery*, Nauwelaerts, 1967, pp.77–79.

³⁶Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Thinking About Death?*, op.cit, p.69

Conclusion

Death is a pure zero and a mode of absence, in Vladimir Jankélévitch's words. It is not, as Rainer Maria Rilke says, something that people ordinarily manage to "practice" well, nor is it a truth that simply becomes established through repetition. Rather, it is a source of thinking-induced anxiety (and here existential philosophy does not have the monopoly on approaching what we are troubled by as a threat, in Martin Heidegger's terms; rather, it is the human being who is astonished by their existence, astonished by their death in a higher register).

It is one of the most exhausting subjects for the mind engaged in metaphysical inquiry, because for non-metaphysicians, death becomes a substitute for metaphysics. Hence, thinking the unthinkable (*penser l'impensable*) has been one of the tasks of philosophical reflection since its very beginning and remains so. To philosophize is to learn how to die, as Michel de Montaigne says. Indeed, this thought only acquires its legitimacy and grounding within the meanings of creatureliness and divine subsistence. As al-Hallaj states in his *Garden of Knowledge*: "Whoever is upheld by another is touched by necessity."

Death, which is the inevitability toward which every living being tends, reveals the finitude of being, for the departure of power from the living is the simplest definition of death upon which linguistic descriptions agree. In this sense, death is a standing at truth and reality within the limits of being's possibility. The "I" that thinks being is the same mortal "I" that only becomes aware of its existence within this horizon, for death is the horizon of thought, as Marcel Conche notes, and it is "the truth of truths," in Jankélévitch's own expression.

One who stands before this truth can only approach the meaning of negation (*le sens de la négation*) by returning it to its opposite, through the power granted by creation and artistic invention. Nothing is more capable than art of forging such a truth. We may say that art works toward the realization of essence and bears witness to its completion by transcending death through creation and invention, insofar as art possesses an affirmative power. Here, the possible meaning of death is achieved only by being returned to life.

Thus, the grandeur of grasping this truth that we are mortal beings and can do nothing in the face of our death creates, in turn, the grandeur of the fertile night of pain from which the arts rise and shine.

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