

M.

Anthony Banks

“Maurice Blanchot, writer, was born on September 27th, 1907. He died on February 20th, 2003, aged 96.”

As far as anyone could make out, these were the last written words of my old friend, erstwhile colleague and correspondent, M.. M. was one of the greatest obituarists of our time, an obsessive archivist whose twin passions for researching the facts relating to the lives of others on the one hand, and for writing their obituaries on the other, served only to fuel each other. Unlike the other great obituarists, M. did not fall into the genre by chance. He was not a staff writer assigned to obituaries as a test of his factual rigour, nor did he enter the realm of obituary towards the end of his career, a worn-out journalist put out to pasture. For M., the genre of obituary was not a means to an end, but provided the end in itself.

Although his obituaries did not gain a wide readership until the early 1960's, M. had commenced his relentless assault on the genre on February 21st, 1953, exactly 50 years to the day before his dead body was discovered slumped over his writing desk in an unusual condition. That first obituary was commissioned by M.'s good friend, the editor of a Leftist pamphlet that would appear intermittently around the University corridors during the mid-1950's, a young ideologue whose current task is this account of the facts regarding the life and death of M.. Its subject was a Bangladeshi language martyr named Abul Barhat. Barhat was studying for a Master's degree at the University of Dhaka; M., at that time also undertaking a Master's

degree, accepted the commission, driven perhaps by an empathy for his fellow student, for whom language had provided grave considerations. Although raw and in desperate need of sensitive editorial attention, the basic style of that first obituary was remarkable, and set the template for every single obituary that followed. And follow they did, at the prodigious rate of one a day, every single day for the rest of M.'s life. If one were to count the piece that concluded, "Maurice Blanchot, writer, was born on September 27th, 1907. He died on February 20th, 2003, aged 96," then M.'s oeuvre would amount to a staggering eighteen thousand, eight hundred and fifteen obituaries.

The style of M.'s obituaries, which I am not alone in considering "remarkable," was characterised by an uncanny empathy with the deceased. Sensing this quality in "Abul Barhat," I put it down to the similarities in the personal circumstances and intellectual concerns of obituarist and deceased. However, as time passed and obituary followed obituary, the sensation that it was not M., but the deceased themselves who were writing *their own* obituaries, became ever more pervasive. It is a well known fact that many people, especially those of a psychic disposition and those whose own ends were considered near, found M.'s obituaries almost unreadable, their solemn terseness unsettling to some and downright terrifying to others. Not for M. the humour of a Robert McG. Thomas or the wit of a Hugh Massingberd; his obituaries made no apologies for taking death quite seriously.

M. prided himself on being the sole practitioner of the obituary whose sole practice was the obituary. Upon completion of "Abul Barhat," M. took me to one side and confided to me, in hushed, conspiratorial tones, that he had found his genre, that he had figured out a way of writing that offered a sense of completion. Prior to "Abul Barhat," M. had been ashamed to think of himself as a writer, a *potential* writer, a *student of* creative writing. Anyone who entered his digs was confronted by the physical manifestation of this shame, reams and reams of paper littering the floor, stories that went nowhere. Walls covered in notes that formed a deranged archive of bibliographical and biographical references. M. had now found a genre in which he could write, his only genre. Time can testify to the fact that he made it his own.

Unable to attain a worthwhile position at any reputable academic institution, I fell into journalism, entering the rounds of provincial rags. Before long, minor editorial posts came my way, followed at length by more substantial appointments. All the while M. eked out what I supposed to be a meagre existence as a freelance obituarist. As his reputation grew, M.'s dispatches began to command respectable fees, but he never took up a

staff position. Even in the 1980's, with the positions engendered by the reappraisal of the obituary as a meaningful genre, M. remained resolutely independent. A complete recluse, M. shunned the limelight of literary celebrity that could have been his to take. Indeed, the extent of his perversity became the stuff of legend. While anthologies of other renowned obituarists began to appear in book form, many topping the bestsellers' list, M. refused to permit any such publication on his behalf. So it was that M.'s many devotees inaugurated a thriving trade in his antique cuttings, in which yellow scraps of paper from forty-year-old copies of *The Watford Observer* could fetch upwards of five thousand pounds. For the curious of lesser means, M. came to stand for microfiche.

After that secret meeting in which M. announced his generic intentions, I never again set eyes on the man. M. graduated *in absentia*, henceforth choosing to work in complete solitude at his private address. However, a correspondence of sorts did ensue. Only of sorts, in that the letters I received from M. saw him make good on his promise never to stray from the genre of obituary, as every single letter was an obituary of someone or other. These death letters, as I came to think of them, although concerned with persons from all walks of life, from the rich to the poor, from the notorious to the virtually anonymous, all had one thing in common; the fact that the name of dead appeared in every instance as a subtitle to that of its addressee. This fact disturbed me. The singular peculiarity of receiving an obituary as a letter never passed, the form of address possessed by every single one served as a reminder of my own death, the death for whom every other death is a precursor. The address not only to my name, but also to my abode, to my property, to my name as my property, to my death as my property, often sent me into the very depths of self-reflection. I cherished our correspondence.

To never receive another letter from my friend, that is the greatest loss. I always imagined that it would be M. who would be writing my obituary. This despite the fact that rumours were rife that M. had already been dead for many years, that the obituaries written under his name were in fact the work of ghost writers. These rumours reached an hysterical pitch upon the discovery of his body. The fact that this obituary arrives somewhat later than might have been anticipated, is due to my unwillingness to commit it to print until I had pieced together a satisfactory account of the precise details surrounding M.'s death, which at the time were subject to some debate.

This debate surrounded the unusual condition of M.'s body upon its discovery, and the forensic and other material evidence found at the scene. I will take these points one at a time. Firstly, the body. The toxicological reports of the autopsy concluded that the strange chemical constitution of the

body corresponded with that found in one type of corpse, and one type only, that of a lithopaedion. A lithopaedion (from the Greek *paido-lithus*, literally “child-of-stone”) is a foetus that has become dislodged from the cervix, before settling in the abdominal cavity, where the build-up of calcium causes it to become fossilised within the body of its mother. Only three instances of such lithopaedia have been reported, the earliest dating back to 1582. The autopsy concluded that for the body of an adult human to become calcified in such a manner, the human would have to have died many years beforehand, with estimates on this figure ranging from twenty to seventy-five. A careful and considered process would then have to be applied to the body over the entire duration of this conjectural period.

Now to the second point regarding local evidence. No sign could be found of any disturbance at the site of the body; neither forensic clue as to any other human presence, nor a trace of any of the materials that would have been required to affect such fossilisation. Furthermore, there was the ineluctable evidence of the obituaries, draft copies of which were filed chronologically, from the first, “Abul Barhat,” to the last, “Maurice Blanchot,” in each of which the handwriting was confirmed by experts to be that of M.. Simply put, an alive, non-fossilised M. had written an obituary that concluded with the words, “Maurice Blanchot, writer, was born on September 27th, 1907. He died on February 20th, 2003, aged 96.”

Interlocutors on the subject of M.’s death are inevitably divided into two camps. On the one hand there are those of a scientific disposition, who find themselves unable to refute the autopsy’s findings. On the whole they tend to believe in a conspiracy theory, involving a murderous newspaper editor and a team of ghost writers employed on his behalf, that is as convoluted and incredulous as only conspiracy theories can be. On the other there are those, largely enthusiasts of M.’s work, who put their faith in the forensic evidence that would appear to prove that M. was the sole author of his obituaries, his hideous physical transformation affected posthumously, miraculously. That M. had not been seen for around fifty years meant that it was impossible to ascertain the facts in this case. I, however, have come to a conclusion as to how M.’s demise came to pass, and this is why I now feel able to complete this undertaking.

In relation to the debate surrounding M.’s death, I could never fall into the scientific camp. No, I could never believe that the death letters that I received in M.’s name could have been written by anyone other than M. himself, such was the power with which they spoke to me, so clearly could I detect the mark of the man with whom I had been so close so long ago. Neither could I fall in with the legion of M.’s fans who believe that his strange transformation took place posthumously, the great obituarist’s

mythical entombment.

I believe that M. met with a terrible, drawn out end, but one in which he delighted, in which he took the greatest pleasure. Prior to his engagement with the genre of obituary, to the genre of obituary, M.'s life was devoid of meaning. To see him then was to see a hollow man, obsessed with literature but quite unable to bring it within his grasp. Writing "Abul Barhat," M. was affected by a change of the deepest order; I could not mistake this in our subsequent, final meeting. Such was M.'s commitment to the obituary that he would enter into his own death henceforth, the better to serve his genre, the better to enter into the deaths of his subjects. He was never seen again. Even if he had been seen, he could not have been recognised, for who could ever recognise death? Reading "Maurice Blanchot," I sensed no empathy with the writer who was born on September 27th, 1907, and who died on February 20th, 2003, aged 96. There was only a sense that a long and slow transformation had been completed.

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