

## Editorial Foreword

### Danger and Hope in the “Eternullity”: Everyday Life after the Death of God<sup>\*</sup>

WANG Hai

In 1962, the French thinker and writer Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003) wrote an article entitled “L’Homme de la rue,” in which he referred to daily life as “the eternity that belongs to us.” To distinguish it from the eternity of God, he further explained that this eternity is actually the “eternullity” (éternullité) of which the forerunner of modernist poetry Jules Laforgue (1860-1887) speaks.<sup>①</sup> Laforgue coined the term to describe the heaven he imagined, combining the words “éternité” and “nullité.”<sup>②</sup>

When Blanchot uses “eternullity” to refer to everyday life, his irony was undoubtedly targeting the greatest fear modern people have of everyday life: that it is monotonous, endless, insignificant, futile, and lacks value and meaning. Everyday life is perhaps the most terrifying eternity, similar to the punishment Sisyphus suffered: and in fact even worse than Sisyphus’ predicament, because Camus’ Sisyphus can at least imagine that he is rebelling against the gods, and thus gain some meaning,<sup>③</sup> while after “the death of God” and “the flight of the gods,” modern people in everyday life lose even the consolation that they are at least capable of a gesture of resistance.

We will begin by facing this dilemma of “everyday life” and trace the history of

---

\* This article is sponsored by 2019 “Double First-Class” Construction Fund of Beijing Universities.

<sup>①</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 366.

<sup>②</sup> See Jules Laforgue, “Préludes autobiographiques,” *Les Complaintes* (Paris: Léon Vanier, libraire-éditeur, 1894), 7.

<sup>③</sup> “But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks... The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus is happy.” See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1975), 111.

discovery of “everyday life” from Lukács, to Heidegger and Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991), a dominant figure in the field of everyday life studies, and at the end return to Blanchot. Under the guidance of these thinkers, I hope to reveal the dangers and hopes hidden in the “eternullity” of everyday life after the death of God. In this brief “archaeological” trace, we will also find that regardless of the stance of these thinkers (atheism or theism), religious discourse and theological thought have never been absent from their work, and there has always been a generative and critical tension between the everyday and the sacred. Finally, I hope that this article can provide a general introduction to the historical context and theoretical foundations of the interdisciplinary research on “the everyday and the sacred” in this issue, to open up a broader space for thought on the topic.

### The Inauthenticity of Everyday Life

But what is everyday life? When we talk about it, what are we actually talking about? Before answering these questions, it may be necessary to ask how everyday life is found, or even “invented” and constructed in intellectual history. In other words, we must pay attention to the historicity of the concept of everyday life, that is to say, the concept as such, since even the varieties of feelings, ideas, and discussions concerning it today may not be those of ancient times. It is not that the ancients did not eat, chat, work or have fun ... nor is it that in ancient literature we cannot find a description of today’s so-called “everyday life,” but that people in the past did not feel it necessary to put these activities together and refer to them by a specific term, summarizing their commonalities and discussing them as an important issue.<sup>①</sup>

In terms of intellectual history, Lukács György (1885–1971), the Hungarian philosopher and Marxist, was probably the first to incorporate everyday life as an important category and theoretical keyword into the horizon of philosophical investigation.<sup>②</sup> In his article “The Metaphysics of Tragedy” published in 1910, Lukács

---

<sup>①</sup> See Henri Lefebvre, *La fin de L'histoire* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1970), 155. Cited in Stuart Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 117. Also see Rita Felski, “The Invention of Everyday Life,” in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 78.

<sup>②</sup> See Michel Trebitsch, “Preface,” in Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.I, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991), xvii; Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 31-32.

proposed that there are two kinds of human lives, and described them in poetic language.<sup>①</sup>

One kind is everyday life, which is empirical life, “the anarchy of light and dark.” In this life, “Nothing is ever completely fulfilled..., nothing ever quite ends; new, confusing voices always mingle with the chorus of those that have been heard before. Everything flows, everything merges into another thing, and the mixture is uncontrolled and impure; everything is destroyed and everything is smashed.” It looks ambiguous and uncertain, but like a pendulum swinging back and forth, it never really walks too far. People indulge themselves into everyday life because it resembles “a monotonous, reassuring lullaby.”<sup>②</sup> The logic of everyday life is that of “cheap security, of passive refusal before everything new, of dull repose in the lap of dry common sense.”<sup>③</sup>

The other kind of life is “unreal and impossible” compared with empirical everyday life, but it is “real life.” It is like “a lightning that illuminates the banal paths of empirical life; [It's] something disturbing, seductive, dangerous and surprising; [It's] the accident, the great moment, the miracle.” But this real life “cannot last because no one would be able to bear it, no one could live at such heights.” So one is afraid of the real life, “has to deny life in order to live,” and “fall back into numbness,” even if everyday life “is flat and sterile, an endless plain without any elevations.”<sup>④</sup>

Lukács points out sharply the paradox between the two lives. The first, everyday life, is real but not authentic; the second is authentic but lacks reality. However, he adds that the authentic life, the one that takes life as a miracle, is the only one that has reality before God, for “his glance robs every event of all that is temporal and local about it,” “before the face of God, value creates reality, and does not have to be dreamed and imagined as reality.”<sup>⑤</sup> In other words, for the early Lukács, the transcendental God, or at least a transcendental perspective, guarantees the authenticity of authentic life.

Lukács then used religious discourse to explain the relationship between the two lives. In his view, the two were alien from each other and between them there was no

---

<sup>①</sup> Georg Lukács, “The Metaphysics of Tragedy,” in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostok (Cambridge, Massachusetts: the MIT press, 1974), 152-174.

<sup>②</sup> Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, 152-153.

<sup>③</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>④</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>⑤</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-154.

direct passage other than miracles and revelations.<sup>①</sup> On the one hand, in everyday life there is that which can occasion revelations: “What is revealed is alien to that which has occasioned its revelation, higher and coming from a different world.” On the other hand, authentic life will serve as a revelation: “The miracle of life ... is merely what reveals souls.”<sup>②</sup>

The key to enlightenment is experiencing death, or more precisely, experiencing death as “the frontier between life and death.” This experience “is the awakening of the soul to consciousness or self-consciousness.” The attitude towards death in everyday life is fear. It regards death as “something frightening, threatening, meaningless, something that suddenly arrests the flow of life,” so “real ordinary life will reach the frontier.” The experience of death can be obtained through tragedy. Because the wisdom of tragedy is about “the wisdom of the frontiers,” and “death is also -- in a purely positive and life-affirming sense -- the immanent reality of tragedy.” For this reason, Lukács highly valued the aesthetic role of tragedy and considered tragedy able to awaken the soul.<sup>③</sup>

When Heidegger published *Being and Time* in 1927, he followed Lukács’s view that everyday life is an inauthentic way of existence, and the key to gaining real existence is to experience death, or in Heideggerian terms, “to anticipate one’s own death.” However, Heidegger gave a more positive and important intellectual status to everyday life from the perspective of ontology, and conducted a more rigorous and comprehensive analysis of everyday life than Lukács.

Heidegger’s emphasis on everyday life is reflected first in the probably most famous term he coined, “Dasein.” He used this term to refer to human existence. The word literally means being-there, but in colloquial German can also mean “everyday human existence.”<sup>④</sup> To use such an awkward word instead of “human being” is meant to emphasize that the existence of a human being is “there.” that is, concrete, and that “there” and “being” are integrated, or that the existence of a human being is inseparable from how she exists and the situation in which she exists. “there” refers to

---

<sup>①</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *Lukács and Heidegger: Towards a New Philosophy*, trans. William Boelhower (New York: Routledge, 2009), 47.

<sup>②</sup> Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, 155.

<sup>③</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-161.

<sup>④</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (London: The MIT Press, 1995), 13.



the world, “the concrete, literal, actual, daily world.”<sup>①</sup>

Heidegger emphasized that examining the everydayness (Alltäglichkeit) of Dasein is the key to analyzing its existence, for it is the primary and usual mode of Dasein,<sup>②</sup> and it is “the enveloping wholeness of the being.”<sup>③</sup> The western metaphysical tradition has always despised everyday life and never considered it meaningful at the level of ontology; that is, although daily life is related to everyone’s existence, and it is so intimate and familiar to us, it has always been an intimate stranger in intellectual history.<sup>④</sup> Heidegger pointed out that contempt for everyday life ever since Plato had led the metaphysical tradition to ignore the practicality of human existence, and established the theoretical thought of philosophers as the most authentic, highest mode of existence, before Descartes simplified the primary characteristic of human existence to the act of human consciousness, disincarnating the concreteness of human existence.<sup>⑤</sup>

By returning to everyday life, Heidegger breaks through the constraints of the Western philosophical tradition and reveals two fundamental characteristics of human existence—“being-in-the-world” and “being-with-others.” In other words, if we look at the reality of the everyday, we have to admit that no one can discard actual and specific everyday life, and that everyone always has something specific to concern (sorge) themselves with, and is always already involved in a web of things and people. This entanglement state of Dasein always precedes the isolated state of the cogito, that is, the subject’s separation from the object and others, and not the other way around. Simply put, the existence of each human being is actually an entanglement.<sup>⑥</sup>

Heidegger further refers to this entanglement as “verfallen” (fallen or falling). Although he has repeatedly claimed that this name does not connote any derogatory or negative value judgment,<sup>⑦</sup> we can still read in it his implicit critique of everyday life, or at least, his suspicion of and vigilance against the dangers of everyday life.

---

<sup>①</sup> George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 83.

<sup>②</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 15.

<sup>③</sup> George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, 85.

<sup>④</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 51.

<sup>⑤</sup> See Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time*, Division I, 3, 6; George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, 83.

<sup>⑥</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 170.

<sup>⑦</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-165.

He explains that each person's existence is unique and fundamentally "jemeinigkeit" (always-being-my-own-being), but in real life, we not always are aware of this. Our existence is not a fait accompli, but a potential to be realized, one must take responsibility for and decide one's own existence, that is, make it truly belong to one. In everyday life, we are deeply trapped in the world we care about and focus on being with others. As a result, one deviates from the initial self and for the most part, is "not oneself."<sup>①</sup> It is in this sense that Heidegger considers everyday existence inauthentic and calls it fallen.

If we are not ourselves in our daily lives, who are we? Heidegger analyzes "the subject" in its everyday life and points out that it constitutes/is characterized by a state of averageness, leveling down, and being irresponsible about its own existence. In everyday life, one often justifies oneself by saying "Everyone does this ...," "the Everyone" (das Man) is Dasein in its everyday life, anonymous and submissive to the mass. "everyone" makes judgments and decisions for me and removes the burden of existence from me. I gain a sense of ease, but at the cost of being "everyone" and losing myself. George Steiner (1929-2009) pointed out that the paradox of "das Man" is that it is both "everyone" and "they"<sup>②</sup> "Everyone is someone else, and no one is himself." As a result, no one is actually behind everyone.<sup>③</sup> The other side of "everyone" is "normal person" of average everydayness. This person is committed to maintaining a routine, regulating what is appropriate in word and deed, and guarding against all abnormalities and exceptions: "Every priority is noiselessly squashed ... everything primordial is flattened down, as something long since known. Every mystery loses its power."<sup>④</sup>

In everyday life, the mode of "being-in-the-world" is also in danger of falling. Heidegger believes that being-in-the-world is revealed in three ways: affectivity, understanding, and discourse.<sup>⑤</sup> However, everyday life turns discourse into idle talk, understanding into curiosity and ambiguity, and authentic affectivity into blind tranquilization.<sup>⑥</sup> Heidegger believes that discourse originally contains a primordial understanding of beings, but in everyday life, to adapt to being-with-others, discourse

<sup>①</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 40, 119, 164.

<sup>②</sup> George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, 92.

<sup>③</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 120.

<sup>④</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>⑤</sup> Ibid., 150. See John Haugeland, "Dasein's Disclosedness," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 28, Supplement (1989):63.

<sup>⑥</sup> William Blattner, *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2006), 131.

degenerates to idle talk with only average intelligibility, and in communication it loses its primordial relation with the being of what is talked about. In the end, idle talk is reduced to unfounded, empty words, conveying second-hand “understanding.” Curiosity’s desire is just to see, and is a superficial understanding; it keeps chasing novelty, never takes root or dwells anywhere: “curiosity is everywhere and nowhere.” Idle talk and curiosity create the illusion that everything has been understood, so that in the end, it is impossible to determine what you really understand and what you have not yet grasped, which is what Heidegger calls ambiguity. Under the misleading of curiosity and ambiguity, we in everyday life will think that “everything has been seen and understood,” everything is under the best arrangement, so that we are no longer anxious, we no longer make decisions on the basis of our own being and explore our own possibilities. In this way, Dasein falls deeper into blind tranquilization. <sup>①</sup>

How can we liberate ourselves from the falling of everyday life and the dictatorship of “the they” ?<sup>②</sup> Heidegger gives us the same prescription as Lukács: being towards death. He believes that if we face the anxiety caused by death and imagine the inevitable possibility of death in advance, we will gain a sense of individuality and wholeness of our being, which is the key to the transformation from inauthentic to authentic existence. The anticipation of death makes me realize that death is inescapable; after all I have to bear it alone, and my own existence belongs fundamentally to me, and I must win my existence. At the same time, this anticipation allows me stand in my death to review my whole life, i.e. to grasp as a whole my existence which is still unfinished and incomplete, so that I can make authentic decisions and undertake projects. <sup>③</sup>

Heidegger’s attitude towards everyday life is indeed critical, both in terms of terminology (falling, idle talk, ambiguity, etc.) and viewpoints (inauthentic existence). But why does he emphasize that falling need not imply a negative value judgment, and cannot be understood as “a bad and deplorable ontic quality which could be removed in the advanced stages of human culture,” and that authentic existence is not something which sits high above fallen everyday life? <sup>④</sup>

Steiner believes that in order to explain this seemingly contradictory position and to clarify the relationship between everyday life and authentic existence, it is “obvious

---

<sup>①</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 161-162, 166.

<sup>②</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>③</sup> See William Blattner, “Death”, in *Heidegger’s Being and Time: A Reader’s Guide*, 145-153.

<sup>④</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164-167.

and necessary” that we need to use the resources of theology, for beneath Heidegger’s discussion of falling there lies a theological dimension.<sup>①</sup> Some researchers believe that Heidegger himself is perhaps opposed to a theological interpretation.<sup>②</sup> In “Letter on Humanism,” however, he wrote that “this word [falling] does not mean the Fall of Man understood in a ‘moral-philosophy’ and at the same time secularized way,”<sup>③</sup> in other words, what he really opposes is understanding falling from a moral or right-and-wrong perspective.

Steiner points out that Heideggerian idea of falling could correspond to the doctrine of *felix culpa* in Christian theology. This doctrine holds that Adam’s fall was actually fortunate from a certain point of view, because without this event, humans would not be able to experience the joy of being redeemed, or witness God’s suffering on the cross to atone for humanity, and so on. The point is, “Redemption is thus not the mere restoration of prelapsarian innocence with no memory of sin or guilt; the record of human sin, is to be redeemed, not wiped out or changed.”<sup>④</sup> Just as Adam’s *felix culpa* is the precondition of Jesus’ ministry and the final resurrection of human beings, the falling of everyday life is also a necessary prerequisite for the pursuit of authentic existence. In Steiner’s words: “There must be inauthenticity and ‘theyness’, ‘talk’ and ‘Neugier’, so that Dasein, thus made aware of its loss of self, can strive to return to authentic being.”<sup>⑤</sup> In other words, there is a dynamic dialectical relationship between the falling of everyday life and authentic existence; falling does not originate from wrong choices or accidents, and is an inevitable part of existence. Perhaps it can be said that everyday life is to be overcome and surpassed, rather than completely abandoned: “authentic existence ... is existentially only a modified grasp of everydayness.”<sup>⑥</sup>

---

<sup>①</sup> George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, 99.

<sup>②</sup> Ibid.

<sup>③</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 235-236.

<sup>④</sup> See Victor Haines, “Felix Culpa,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 274-275.

<sup>⑤</sup> George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, 98.

<sup>⑥</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 167.

## Everyday Life as a Totality

The person who made everyday life a true hero of intellectual investigation was the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. In his three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life* (1946, 1961, 1981), everyday life is finally no longer the foil of authentic life, nor is it the groundwork or intermediary for the truth of existence. It is explored as itself, for it has been ignored for a very long time, as that which Hegel said we are familiar with but do not know.<sup>①</sup>

Like Heidegger, Lefebvre believes that everyday life is the starting point for all kinds of lives: “Man must be everyday, or he will not be at all.”<sup>②</sup> But the difference is that he does not think that this foundation is just to be overcome and redeemed. In fact, everyday life is neither authentic nor inauthentic. Because it precedes the distinction between the two, it is where these two differ and are in conflict, where “authenticity justifies itself and must show its credentials.”<sup>③</sup>

Lefebvre not only values but cherishes everyday life. Because, above all, from a sociological point of view, everyday life is a kind of “meeting place, bond, and common ground.” It is the meeting point of theory and practice, private and public life, the link between work, family and leisure activities. More precisely, it “is profoundly related to all activities and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts.”<sup>④</sup> Marx once said that humanity is the sum of all social relations,<sup>⑤</sup> and Lefebvre further states that the field in which all these relationships can be generated, developed, and expressed and realized, is everyday life.<sup>⑥</sup> In other words, without everyday life, human being and its life would remain fragmented and incomplete. Secondly, from the perspective of phenomenology, everyday life is the “residue” and the invisible “soil.” If everyday life is the ordinary, banal, trivial part of life, then

---

<sup>①</sup> Hegel once said, “The familiar is not necessarily the known.” Lefebvre liked this sentence very much. See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I, 15.

<sup>②</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I, 127.

<sup>③</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. II, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 2002), 24.

<sup>④</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I, 97.

<sup>⑤</sup> Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach: VI,” *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 14.

<sup>⑥</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I, 97.

we can determine it by means of abstraction, that is, by removing all “specialized, important, and advanced” human activities from life. This abstraction will make us realize that everyday life as a remnant, just like the invisible fertile soil under noticeable big trees and beautiful flowers, not only fills the vacuum between superior activities separated from each other, but also nurtures, nourishes and support these activities.<sup>①</sup> Finally, from a practical point of view, everyday life is “the supreme court,” another important metaphor of Lefebvre for everyday life. Whatever is produced and constructed by exceptional activities needs to obtain its reality in everyday life, and the validity of “feelings, ideas, lifestyles, and pleasures” can only be verified and confirmed in everyday life. It can even be said that “everyday life is the supreme court where wisdom, knowledge, and power are brought to judgment.”<sup>②</sup> Therefore, he believes that everyday life is the key to realize Marx’s ideal of “total man.”

If the previous thinkers criticized everyday life from the standpoint of “professional, advanced” human activities (such as philosophy, art, politics), then Lefebvre strove to make everyday life a critique, which in turn criticizes those “superior” activities and ideologies they produce.<sup>③</sup> However, the critique of everyday life also embraces the opposite: the criticism of the trivial by the exceptional. This means: examining the situation where everyday life is “colonized” by the economic and political-administrative systems, and where it is alienated by capitalism, to reveal its hidden potentialities of resistance, to create “an art of living,” to end the alienation with the revolution of everyday life, and then to make life a totality again.<sup>④</sup>

Yet what is everyday life? In his three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre returns to this basic question in various ways. He proposes that everyday life, characterized by everydayness, is a historical phenomenon, and a mode of life born with modernity.<sup>⑤</sup>

Does this mean that the ancients did not have everyday life? Let us examine its cultural expressions. If everyday life in the eyes of the moderns is that part of life

---

<sup>①</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I, 87, 97.

<sup>②</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. II, 45; *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I, 6.

<sup>③</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I, 87.

<sup>④</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I, 251, 199; “Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, trans. D. Reifman, eds. L. Grossberg and C. Nelson (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 80.

<sup>⑤</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 24-25.

which is “ordinary, practical, trivial, insignificant, regular, repetitive, uneventful, dated, undated, occupying but untellable,” then it was not until the 19th century that such a life form began to appear in a large number of important western literary works.<sup>①</sup> It can even be said that not until *Ulysses* (1918-20) by James Joyce (1882-1941), did the story that one lives an uneventful life or one is endlessly busy with trivial things become a serious subject matter for literary works, and the idea of everyday life clearly appears in literature.<sup>②</sup> When critics refer to the protagonists in these literary works as “anti-heroes,” they implicitly show their hesitation, or even resistance to the idea that everyday humans with their everyday lives can become heroes. We can provide another example for Lefebvre’s insight that the awareness of everyday life emerges in modernity. Perhaps no coincidence, this evidence comes from Joyce’s contemporary, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). In her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past” (1939), she confesses that she was frustrated by the fact that she could not successfully describe everyday life in her novels, especially the dominant “non-being” part of it, of which she found it very hard to retain a memory or even consciousness.<sup>③</sup> This lament at not being able to convey everyday life is rarely found in previous writers, at least never so directly and clearly.

Lefebvre combined dialectics and phenomenology to provide logical support for his observations. He points out that today the word “modern” represents novelty, something dazzling, bold, extraordinary, groundbreaking or fleeting, and can even mean art and aestheticism. These are exactly the opposite of everything embodied in everyday life,<sup>④</sup> to the extent that he can say, “the quotidian and the modern mark and mask, legitimate and counterbalance each other.” Quoting Hermann Broch, Lefebvre concludes that everyday life is actually the verso of modernity and the spirit of our times. In other words, the everyday and the modern are two sides of the same reality.<sup>⑤</sup> Perhaps it is precisely because modernity emphasizes keeping up with the present and innovating, that life is increasingly fragmented into two opposite parts, one, the styleless, unchanging everyday part, and the other, the ever-fashionable modern part, and that the division between the two is continuously solidified.

---

<sup>①</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in Modern World*, 2.

<sup>②</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>③</sup> Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” *Moments of Being*, 2nd. ed. (London: A Harvest/ HBJ book, 1985), 70.

<sup>④</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in Modern World*, 24.

<sup>⑤</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.



Lefebvre believed that in ancient society the prose side and the poetry side of life were still identical, and nothing was mediocre, that is, life itself had a style: “every detail bears the imprint of a style.”<sup>①</sup> Festival, meanwhile, closely connected with life, constituted an auto-critique of life itself, especially the critique of needs, constraints, norms, and authority within life. It was “the explosion of forces which had been slowly accumulated in and via everyday life itself,”<sup>②</sup> which constituted a Rabelian or Carnavalesque critique. As a result, the concept of “everydayness,” which today has a negative meaning, had not yet emerged, and was seen only with the advent of modernity and the birth of capitalism, when not only the products but also the homogeneous existence of the “mass” were reproduced on a large scale, and the style of life began to die; as Marx said: “The abstraction of private life was not created until modern times.”<sup>③</sup> The deepening of the division of labor and the high specialization of knowledge and skills have sundered the original complete life form into bits and pieces. Festival and leisure, which originally had an independent critical status, were also appropriated by the joint forces of consumerism and ideology. The rise of modern rationality began the depoeticization and demystification of life: “the mysterious, the sacred, and the diabolical, magic, ritual, the mystical ... were part of the real lives of human beings,”<sup>④</sup> but now have been downgraded to the bizarre or the weird in everyday life, “as a spice for banality, a cosmetic insignificance.” This is a “shoddy version of the mysterious from which the mystery has disappeared.”<sup>⑤</sup> As we all know, this is “the death of God” for Nietzsche, “the disenchantment of the world” for Weber, and “the flight of the gods” for Heidegger. Lefebvre inadvertently revealed the hidden connection between modern everyday life and “the death of God.”

Lefebvre admired Marx’s idea of changing the world, thinking that philosophy should be a way of life, or more accurately, a revolution of life. Thus, while constantly defining daily life, he tried his best to explore the sources of strength within everyday life. He pointed out that everyday life should be viewed as a level of social reality, not a thing with an “objective essence” or an activity with exact content. At this level, “nature and culture, the historical and the lived, the individual

<sup>①</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in Modern World*, 29.

<sup>②</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.I, 202.

<sup>③</sup> Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 90.

<sup>④</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.I, 117.

<sup>⑤</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

and the social, the real and the unreal” meet, interact and conflict with each other.<sup>①</sup> Everyone finds this level familiar but impossible to define accurately, because it exists right at the boundary areas, where the sector of life controlled by human knowledge and the sector that is uncontrolled, where empowerment and powerlessness converge and perpetually confront each other.<sup>②</sup> In other words, everyday life is both the basis for freedom in human life, and also highlights the limited status that life cannot discard. Therefore, everyday life is “a level in totality (un niveau dans la totalité), and on its own level, it is a totality (une totalité à son niveau).”<sup>③</sup>

This has resulted in the notoriously complex characteristics of everyday life. Lefebvre points out that modern people’s complaints against everyday life do make sense, but ignore the profound side of everyday life coexisting with the superficial one.<sup>④</sup> Everyday life is indeed a level which sustains our living and therefore is constrained by the need of living, but it is also here that the needs of the physiological and biological levels are transformed into personal and social desire, multi-faceted and complex. Desire as an important spiritual force that transforms human life into creative consciousness.<sup>⑤</sup> Everyday is indeed the routine, familiar, and even monotonous side of life, for it is contained, controlled, and even disciplined by various “forms,” including institutions, structures, language, culture and ideology. But at the same time, everyday life also has an unformed side, that is, the “content” that cannot be grasped, integrated, and exhausted by various forms. It keeps avoiding, obscuring, and even erasing forms. Modern bureaucracy is often frustrated by numerous exceptions and unforeseen contingencies of everyday life: “There is something tenaciously resistant within this organized or possibly overorganized sphere, which makes form adapt and modify. Form either fails or improves.”<sup>⑥</sup>

Everyday life does appear banal, tedious and lacking in creativity, but even those superior activities considered to be extremely creative (such as art, scientific research and invention, etc.) still contain the daily dimension, and while innovation or revolution is generated in the slow but unrelenting daily accumulation, and is

---

<sup>①</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.II, 47-48.

<sup>②</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>③</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne* II (Paris: L’Arche, 1961), 62.

<sup>④</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.II, 47,65.

<sup>⑤</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>⑥</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

finally verified in everyday life.<sup>①</sup> Everyday life does have the characteristics of being cyclic and repetitious, for it contains cyclic temporality, which is the imprint of natural rhythm (such as the cycle of day and night, the periodicity of life) on human life. And repetition comes from cumulative reproduction, which reproduces not only products but also the relationship between human beings.<sup>②</sup> On the one hand, everyday life achieves harmony with the cyclic time of nature, on the other, thanks to the accumulation of goods, it breaks the closed cycle, and brings out linear time. In the end, everyday life achieves a dialectical balance between cyclic time and linear time, the former natural, irrational, and concrete, the latter acquired, rational, progressive, abstract and anti-natural.<sup>③</sup>

Everyday life is usually trivial and private, and can seem meaningless and insignificant when facing the grand narrative of macro-history. This feature is brilliantly described by Lefebvre as “some immense anthill, swarming with obscure, blind, ambiguous, blind, anonymous beings and actions.”<sup>④</sup> But in fact, everyday life should be more accurately described as the place where the micro- and macro-levels of life meet and confront. Although at the micro-level, life’s meaning is unclear and its direction is vague, it is direct and specific, so it is the place where the question of authenticity has meaning. Although the macro-level has clear meaning and direction, it is indirect and abstract, so there is a danger of distortion and misleading. The macro does not decide the micro, it just contains, regulates, controls, and penetrates it. The macro accommodates and absorbs the micro through the actions of a few exceptional individuals, but its success is never complete and thorough. The vagueness and triviality of the micro are its resistance to subjection by the macro.<sup>⑤</sup>

### Everyday Life as the Limit-Experience

The second volume of Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life* resonated strongly with Blanchot, who wrote a review entitled ‘L’Homme de la rue’ and included it as an

---

① Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.II, 56, 240.

② Ibid., Vol.II, 317.

③ Ibid., 49.

④ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.I, 199.

⑤ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.II, 140-141.

important chapter in his theoretical work *The Infinite Conversation*.<sup>①</sup> The article was later widely quoted by scholars in the field of everyday life studies.<sup>②</sup> The article loyally interpreted Lefebvre’s thinking on everyday life, but also picked up and furthered the threads either appearing at the margins of Lefebvre’s text or left undeveloped, and in this deconstructionist way broke through the constraints of Lefebvre’s dialectic framework, revealing the potentially radical dimension of everyday life. In other words, using a strategy of deconstruction, Blanchot radicalized Lefebvre’s thinking on everyday life.

Blanchot’s interpretation never mentions Lefebvre’s keyword “totality,” because he eschewed thinking of everyday life as a totality. In Blanchot’s opinion, everyday life is an experience that cannot be completely totalized, that is, it is impossible for any totalizing concept or model, including dialectics, to completely contain and exhaust it. This view is actually a reasonable extension of Lefebvre’s point of view. Lefebvre’s first definition of everyday life was that it is a kind of “residue” after all specialized activities are removed,<sup>③</sup> and this residue is irreducible.<sup>④</sup> When Lefebvre proposed that it was impossible to fully grasp everyday life in any form, he ought to have included in this his own concept of totality and his dialectic model. The traces of “residue” can be found throughout Lefebvre’s text, sometimes interpreted as belonging to the side that is unformed, sometimes the uncontrolled sector, sometimes the dimension that refuses to be open to history. But in the end Lefebvre always incorporates this “residue” into the totality through dialectics. For example, he points out that people sometimes withdraw to their private everyday life as a passive act of resistance to the macro-history led by “event creators” such as political leaders, but he also believes that not only can no-one, in fact, escape history, culture, and knowledge,<sup>⑤</sup> but that we should also find a way to open everyday life to historical and political life.<sup>⑥</sup>

Blanchot insists that the “residuality”, “ambiguity”, or “escape” of everyday life is absolute: “The everyday life has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes.”<sup>⑦</sup>

---

<sup>①</sup> See Maurice Blanchot, “La Parole quotidienne,” 355-366.

<sup>②</sup> See Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1; Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>③</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne I* (Paris: L’Arche, 1958), 97.

<sup>④</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne II*, 62.

<sup>⑤</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.II, 94.

<sup>⑥</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>⑦</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, 357; *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 239.

He regards this feature of everyday life as the limit-experience. <sup>①</sup>

“Limit” here can firstly be understood as the boundary of the totality, and the limit-experience is a paradoxical experience concerning the totality. That is, when the totality has absorbed everything into its interior, we experience that there is still an absolute outside that cannot be absorbed by the totality; after everything has been acquired and recognized, we still experience there is “something” that has not been acquired and known, that is, “the inaccessible, the unknown.”<sup>②</sup> So for Lefebvre, the scene really worth looking forward to is the dialectical unification of everyday life with history under the holistic power of revolutionary events.<sup>③</sup> Blanchot, however, calmly points out that were such an event to open everyday life to history and make it participate in the truth, the unerasable exteriority and ambiguity of the everyday would only render everyday life a suspect who wanders beyond the totality. <sup>④</sup>

Secondly, the “limit” here implies that experience has reached its boundary, that is, limit-experience is no longer an experience in the usual sense, but an experience that cannot in fact be experienced, an experience that is impossible.<sup>⑤</sup> Blanchot points out that the ordinariness and familiarity of everyday life often makes us ignore it in reality, which creates a paradox: we are very familiar with it but at the same time we know it very little. We have never seen or experienced everyday life for the first time, and what we have is only the illusion that we have already seen it. In this sense it can be said that being unperceived is another essential feature of everyday life.

Blanchot believes our experience of everyday life may become apparent only in the feeling of boredom. Boredom is “the sudden, the insensible apprehension” of everyday life.<sup>⑥</sup> But boredom has an inherent contradiction. It is, on the one hand, a feeling that something is enough, or even more than enough; on the other hand, boredom also means “no longer,” to be no longer interested, to be no longer able to continue, so I have extricate myself from whatever. Blanchot points out that the moment we become aware of the existence of everyday life due to the feeling of boredom, we also stop immersing ourselves in everyday life. In other words, when we really feel the existence of everyday life, we can no longer experience it, and so it is a

<sup>①</sup> See Maurice Blanchot, “L’Expérience-limite,” in *L’Entretien infini*, 300-343.

<sup>②</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, 304-305.

<sup>③</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.II, 3.

<sup>④</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, 355-356.

<sup>⑤</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>⑥</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

non-experienced experience.

Thirdly, “the limit” also means that people radically question themselves, and the limit-experience refers to everything that people will encounter when this happens. This questioning is not simply skepticism, and will not end with some consolation or some truth, and will not be satisfied with some practical interests, the results of actions, or the certitudes brought to us by knowledge and belief. We can clearly see here lies Blanchot’s radicalization of Lefebvre’s thought. Lefebvre argued that everyday life has a side that deconstructs any form and resists the assimilating power of the macro, while Blanchot interprets this side as a movement of constant questioning, whose insignificance makes it unable to provide any comfort or satisfaction. But it cannot be understood as a power that can be grasped and used. On the contrary, it is a kind of interruption and abandonment of power.<sup>①</sup> Everyday life cannot be realized like an action, a project, or a goal, for it is always already there, but at the same time it is always to be actualized. It can perhaps be described as a kind of “stationary motion.”<sup>②</sup> Everyday life is indeed always at the risk of being totally closed into a system, and sometimes it is in fact entrusted to an absolute concept, such as “God, existence, Goodness, eternity, or unity,” from which the everyday is ruled to obtain its value and meaning, but everyday life as an *infinite* contestation always runs throughout history.<sup>③</sup> Blanchot emphasizes that although everyday life may always hold the possibility of bursting into history, it does not belong to history. Moreover, everyday life’s reluctance to join into history is not what needs to be changed, as Lefebvre suggested, but rather its unique value: “It frees all human possibilities from their meaning: from every knowledge, every speech, every silence, every end, and even this capacity for dying.”<sup>④</sup> According to Blanchot, this liberation can however be achieved in everyday life only unintentionally.

Lastly, the limit-experience is connected to the impossible, that is, enjoys a “relation without relation” to the impossible.<sup>⑤</sup> According to Blanchot, although Lefebvre revealed to us the uncontrolled and irrational side of everyday life, he still tended to see everyday life from the perspective of possibility, that is, by paying more attention to the part that can be understood, grasped, and dominated. But everyday life highlights another kind of experience of existence that is beyond our ability to live and

---

<sup>①</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, 302, 308.

<sup>②</sup> *Ibid.*, 359-60.

<sup>③</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>④</sup> *Ibid.*, 308; *The Infinite Conversation*, 207-208.

<sup>⑤</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, 309.

experience “but whose trial we cannot escape.”<sup>①</sup> Counter Lefebvre, for Blanchot, the impossible and the possible do not form a unity or totality through dialectics.<sup>②</sup>

## Conclusion

When we finally return to Blanchot, we find that he offers a paradoxical yet thought-provoking conclusion: the danger of everyday life is also at the same time its “weight and mysterious power.”<sup>③</sup>

Blanchot would say that the plight of everyday life is actually harder to endure than the punishment of Sisyphus, because everyday life has an endlessly corrosive power that erases a human being’s name and obscures his face. This kind of dissolving power is what makes Heideggerian heroes afraid of living everyday life. The subject will endure radical nothingness, but this does not mean that the “I” will necessarily become what Heidegger called “the they,” mindlessly following the masses. What Lefebvre called the “huge emptiness” of everyday life<sup>④</sup> or what Blanchot names “radical nothingness” will deconstruct heroic values, question all values and even the notion of values itself, constantly destroying the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic, and at the same time criticizing everyday life itself.

Blanchot says nothing about hope, but he does mention the word utopia, as Lefebvre did. Lefebvre’s utopia is the total revolutionary practice of ending alienation. It served as an ideal to stimulate people to action, to change the world, and to transform everyday life.<sup>⑤</sup> For Blanchot, however, the power of utopia comes through its being a paradox and a myth, and its inaccessibility. He believed that everyday life itself was a utopia, not because it was a beautiful ideal that summoned people to attain it, but because it was “the myth of an existence bereft of myth,” and even if we have already entered everyday life at the level of “reality”, it remains inaccessible in knowledge.<sup>⑥</sup> The different understanding of utopia between Lefebvre and Blanchot is directly related to how the two viewed the relation between modernity and the death

---

<sup>①</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, 308.

<sup>②</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>③</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>④</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol.II, 322.

<sup>⑤</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>⑥</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, 366.



of God. For Lefebvre, the death of God caused by modernity means that humanity can and should recreate itself through history, while from Blanchot’s point of view, we have to fully bear and respect the emptiness caused by the death of God, not strive to fill it with optimism and then forget it.

Lefebvre’s discussion of everyday life encourages people to intervene in and transform everyday life, while Blanchot’s interpretation is more an implicit praise of everyday life, whose emphasis is not on calling us to do something, but rather on encouraging us to embrace readily the trial of everyday life, keep it flowing endlessly, trust and respect its remaining mystery after it has been stripped of all the myths surrounding it, and after authority’s attempts to expropriate it have been thwarted. Both of these two thinkers’ profound insights can inspire us: as Blanchot said, “There must always be at least two languages or two requirements: one dialectical and the other not;”<sup>①</sup> so that we can “name the possible and respond to the impossible.”<sup>②</sup>

#### **Introduction to the Guest Editor**

WANG Hai, Associate Professor, School of Liberal Arts, Renming University of China.  
Email: hai.wang@ruc.edu.cn

---

<sup>①</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 38.

<sup>②</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, 69.

## 參考文獻 [Bibliography]

### 西文文獻 [Works in Western Languages]

- Blanchot, Maurice. *L'Écriture du désastre*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *L'Entretien infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969.
- Blattner, William. *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum, 2006.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990.
- Elden, Stuart. *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible*. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Felski, Rita. *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.
- Gardiner, Michael. *Critiques of Everyday Life*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Goldmann, Lucien. *Lukács and Heidegger: Towards a New Philosophy*. Translated by William Boelhower. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Haines, Victor. "Felix Culpa." In *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Edited by David Lyle Jeffrey, 274-275. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1992.
- Haugeland, John. "Dasein's Disclosedness." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 28, Supplement (1989): 51-73.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*. Translated by William Lovitt. Edited by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Laforgue, Jules. *Les Complaintes*. Paris: Léon Vanier, libraire-éditeur, 1894.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique de la vie quotidienne* II. Paris: L'Arche, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Critique of Everyday Life*. Vol. I. Translated by D. Reifman. Edited by L. Grossberg and C. Nelson. New York: Macmillan, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Critique of Everyday Life* Vol. II. Translated by John Moore. London: Verso, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Everyday Life in Modern World*. Translated by Sacha Rabinovitch. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx's Death." In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Translated by D. Reifman. Edited by L. Grossberg and C. Nelson, 75-88. Urbana: University of Illinois

- Press; New York: Macmillan, 1988.
- Lukács, Georg. *Soul and Form*. Translated by Anna Bostok. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974.
- Marx, Karl. *Early Writings*. London: Penguin Classics, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Selected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976.
- Moran, Dermot. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by François Raffoul and Eric S. Nelson. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Randall, Bryony. *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Sheringham, Michael. *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Steiner, George. *Martin Heidegger*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Treibitsch, Michel. “Preface.” In Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*. Vol.I. Translated by John Moore, ix-xxvii. London: Verso, 1991.

#### 中文文獻 [Works in Chinese]

- 加繆：《西西弗神話》，沈志明譯，《加繆全集·散文卷》（1），上海：上海譯文出版社，2010年。[Camus, Albert. “The Myth of Sisyphus.” In *The Collected Works of Albert Camus: Essays*. Vol. 1. Translated by SHEN Zhiming, 75-168. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2010.]