

Infinite conversation

Maurice Blanchot, 1907–2003

Maurice Blanchot considered writing unimportant. It is not important to write, he said. He was – but ‘What’s the word?’ Beckett would ask. ‘What’s the wrong word?’ He was an unimportant writer. Now he has made his exit. His books always did and still do leave us alone, with nothing to approve or disapprove, believe in or doubt, and in no position: no position to be there at all, where we find ourselves.

In *L’Éspace littéraire* (1955; trans. *The Space of Literature*, 1982) he called that ‘position’ – the indefensible one he has left us at – ‘the central point’. Writing exposes you to it, he said. Rather than reaching it you get left at it, left waiting because you missed your chance to wait. It is as if, with respect to the central point, you’d been in too much of a hurry and had covered the distance separating you from it too fast, and had thus got left there without the means to arrive.

The wanderers in Blanchot’s novels – in *Le Très-Haut*, for example (1948), and in his later *récits*, *L’Arrêt de mort* (1948), say, or *Au Moment voulu* (1951) – those wanderers who lack the strength to make it all the way to the end of their strength, know this unlikely exile. They get along all right, with the weakness they are not equal to, and this inequality casts a dubious light on everything.

Blanchot has left us along with them, just where we are, all the time, every day, with no way of getting there. The everyday, he says – the ‘unqualifiable everyday’ – is ‘the inaccessible to which we have always already had access’. Via some heedless move which has by no means made it reachable we’ve become stranded in it. It is uneventful. In newspapers even the absence of events becomes dramatic – a news item – but ‘in the everyday everything is everyday’. Passers-by pass by, showing nothing much, just the – what is the wrong word again? – the beauty. Showing just the ‘beauty’ of faces without distinction, the ‘truth’ of those destined to pass who, precisely, have no truth proper to them. The everyday is not in our homes, Blanchot says, or at the office or in libraries or museums. ‘If it is anywhere, it is in the street’ (*L’Entretien infini*, 1969; trans. *The Infinite Conversation*, 1993).

Blanchot was born in 1907, and was not always of the view that writing is unimportant. He wrote a great deal: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe once told me it was so easy for Blanchot to write that he couldn’t remember very well what he had written when. A casual comment, no doubt, which mixes, in my head, with this line from *L’Attente l’oubli* (1962): ‘Facile mais pas faisable’ (‘Easy but not feasible’) – and with ‘The Ease of Dying’, which is the title Blanchot gave an essay he wrote on Jean Paulhan, in 1969, just after Paulhan’s death.

Blanchot wrote a great deal: regular book reviews and critical essays over some forty years, collected in volumes such as *Faux Pas* (1943), *La Part du feu* (1949; trans. *The Work of Fire*, 1995), *Le Livre à venir* (1959; trans. *The Book to Come*, 2003), *L’Amitié* (1971). He wrote extended reflections on literature such as *The Space of Literature* and *The Infinite Conversation*, and these include stunning pages on the constellation of modern writers who mattered to him most – Mallarmé, Rilke, Kafka, Char. One hears his thought converse with Sartre’s in these volumes, with Hegel’s, Nietzsche’s, Heidegger’s, and with the thought of his friends Levinas and Bataille. He wrote fiction as well, as I’ve indicated: two novels in the 1950s, *Aminadab* and *Le Très-Haut*, and several *récits* in addition to

the two I've named already – from *Thomas l'obscur*, which appeared in 1941, to *La Folie du jour* (1973). Foucault wrote the best of all essays on him (*La Pensée du dehors*; *The Thought of the Outside*, Zone Books, 1990) – an even better text, I hazard to say, than Derrida's great collection in *Parages* (Galilée, 1986).

Blanchot said writing was unimportant in *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980; trans. *The Writing of the Disaster*, 1986), a scattering of fragments where the distinction between his fiction and his philosophical writing is barely relevant; it resembles *L'Attente l'oubli* in this respect, and *Le Pas au-delà* (1973; trans. *The Step Not Beyond*, 1992). 'Writing is evidently without importance', he said there. And: 'He writes – does he write?' He was not always of this view. During the 1930s he was a political journalist. And a pontificator.

Blanchot said that May '68 was an everyday affair. Perhaps his solidarity with students and workers in the streets of Paris stemmed from the kinship he had developed by then



with things of which one *needs* (as he puts it in *The Writing of the Disaster*) to say 'That was quite something! something quite important!' all the while ineptly trying to say something else altogether, more like 'Oh, it was nothing.' But during the 1930s his political texts, and the book reviews which he also provided to the right-wing press, scorn 'futile things, of which there are many'. Literature seems to have had terrific authority in his eyes in those days as an intransigent refusal of everything small-minded and routine and as a challenge, thus, to France, a nation mired in what he considered the petty forms of parliamentary politics.

He wrote for several right-wing papers during the 1930s, among them *Combat*, a journal which, as Leslie Hill puts it reluctantly but with his characteristic accuracy, 'did give a platform to anti-semitic views'. In a 1983 essay (reprinted in *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France*), Jeffrey Mehlman drew attention to Blanchot's early journalism. It was by no means unknown at the time, but thereafter became a major preoccupation for Blanchot's readers. Mehlman stressed the nationalism Blanchot

expressed in the 1930s, the contempt he poured on republican politics generally and on Léon Blum specifically, and his many calls for lawless violence. Ever since, students of Blanchot's work have been pondering the link in his writing, or the lack thereof, between radical politics – his voluble concern in the 1930s – and the literature with which he is principally associated. Literature became practically his exclusive commitment from 1940 until 1958. Then he again took a strong political stand, opposing de Gaulle's return to power on the shoulders of insurgent army officers.

His most serious readers have sought to understand the relation between his postwar leftism, which linked him to friends like Dionys Mascolo, and his earlier reactionary appeals for anarchy: between, say, his call for dissidents in 1937 ('Dissidents Wanted' was the title of a particularly vehement article in *Combat*), and his outspoken support for French deserters during the Algerian War.

No doubt the biggest question bears on the continuity between the prewar Blanchot, who wrote in the same periodicals as the likes of Brasillach, and the Blanchot of the 1960s, who published pages on Judaism and on the Holocaust, which led Sarah Kofman, for example, to write in homage to him a book she also dedicated to Robert Antelme, and to the memory of her father, Rabbi Bereck Kofman, murdered at Auschwitz.

As far as I have been able to understand, he himself never said anything forthright or clear about these divergences. I think Leslie Hill gives the best accounting at the beginning

of his *Blanchot, Extreme Contemporary* (Routledge, 1997). Michael Holland covers all Blanchot's political engagements through his choice and organization of the texts in the *Blanchot Reader* (Blackwell, 1995), and through his introduction to each of that volume's four sections. Christophe Bident's 1998 biography, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible* (Champ Vallon, 1997), is written in a spirit similar to Hill's and Holland's. These three books together are instructive.

For my own part, I dare say that though Blanchot's leftism is ten thousand times more sympathetic than his reactionary writing, neither is in my opinion especially profound. His position on the Algerian War is correct, by my lights, but it is just a position, whereas the overwhelming – the unimportant – thing in Blanchot is (for me): no position. By which of course I do not mean apathy, or the detachment of a mysteriously aloof, reclusive individual. On the contrary: if nothing follows politically from meditations like *The Infinite Conversation* in my view, or from a fiction such as *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* – if I'm not inclined to believe that Blanchot's sentences on the relation to the Other, say, lead to some just political stance and even less inclined to discover a profound ethics therein – still, his persistent return to political commitment throughout his life shows that the 'essential solitude' of which he speaks in *The Space of Literature* is not a Withdrawal from the World. It is not justifiable, however, in political terms or in any terms. This illegitimacy is what I mean by no position: Blanchot's books leave us someplace we are unqualified to be.

The first book he ever published about literature conveys his startled sense of having floated across a bottomless abyss. The book discusses Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*. It suggests that Paulhan ferries his reader over a black hole in that book – you only realize afterwards that what you have read implies you can't have made the trip. Blanchot published this small book on *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* in 1942, calling it *How Is Literature Possible?* So his half-century-long reflection on writing seems to have begun with a startled sense from Paulhan of literature's implausibility. And the sheer unlikeliness of literature persisted ever after at the centre of his thought. There is something improbable about it for Blanchot, but too light, too indefatigably light to be considered false. It is insignificant. And this is not because it misrepresents the real world but rather because it involves a peculiar sort of transport: a passage across an uncrossable divide which, having been crossed, remains as impassable as ever. It leaves you, in other words: it leaves you somewhere with a long way yet to go to get there, but no room to budge.

Blanchot, who left us, called that remaining way when no way is left the 'central point', as I've said, but really we see that that point is not a point so much as a separation. You could say that it is its own remove: its very own remoteness hollowed out within. Blanchot sometimes speaks of a place within a place. 'It is like an enclave', he writes, in *The Space of Literature*, 'a dark, airless preserve'.

It is a preserve for all that can't be done but is done – done without end or beginning – not because it can or should or must be, even if, indeed, it *must* ('You must speak', Blanchot writes), but rather by virtue of one's being in no position to do it. No position: that is the central point. There we are preserved from legitimacy and speak unjustifiably.

We speak there the way we wait, and there speech is spared significance just as waiting is when, having distractedly missed our chance to wait, we just have to wait. Lightened thus of meaning, speech is for Blanchot the very element of one's relation to others. 'Il faut parler', he has said. You must speak, preserving that relation and safeguarding it from power of any kind including the power to speak. You must speak, without being able to – 'sans pouvoir'. You must, but not you: your unworthiness. You must, but without even the strength of this *must* to go on. It doesn't qualify you. For only incompetence is ('What's the wrong word?' Beckett would ask) competent: competent to answer.

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