LITERATURE AND REFUSAL: MAURICE BLANCHOT'S IMPOSSIBLE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

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By

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Abstract

It is my contention that Maurice Blanchot's political ontology of the artwork (*l'oeuvre*) calls for a new politics, but not a politics founded on work, power, or any previously conceived partisan agenda. I begin with Blanchot's starting point of the question of how literature is possible because he holds this to be a question that cannot be answered. I then establish Blanchot's unique ontological depiction of the artwork as useless and impossible through the philosophical foundations of Aristotle, Hegel, and Heidegger on potentiality (*dunamis*), work (*Arbeit*), and technology (*Technik*) respectively. Since Blanchot considers his artwork to be evidence of an essentially political refusal, I consider Blanchot under the guise of political ontology. By narrating the roles of impossibility, refusal, the absence of work (*désoeuvrement*), and death in Blanchot's theory of art as literature, I show how we can derive a new politics from the artwork.

Epigraph

A philosopher who would write as a poet would be aiming for his own destruction. And even so, he could not reach it.

Poetry is a question for philosophy which claims to provide it with an answer, and thus to comprehend it (know it).

Philosophy, which puts everything into questions, is tripped up by poetry, which is the question that eludes it.

—Maurice Blanchot

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> *If we have art—which is exile from truth, which is the risk of an inoffensive game, which affirms man's belonging to the limitless outside where intimacy is unknown, where he is banished from his capability and from all forms of possibility—how does this come about?*[1]

At least two things can be said concerning the beginning or origin of art. First, there is the birth of something called 'art'—realized in multiple differing ways—and it stands in relation to an artist. Secondly, there is the opportunity to reflect upon what 'art' is and what, if anything, the artist does. While generally speaking artists are more closely related to the former, literary critics, for example, belong to the latter. Of the numerous and varying twentieth century literary critics, Maurice Blanchot is one particularly preoccupied with pursuing the question opened up by the birth of art: 'what is art and what can be said about it?'[2] For him, this question is essentially one of both ontological and political import. However, Blanchot is not alone in his emphasis. His writings on literature appear amidst two other politically charged artistic trends that are more commonly recognized. On the one hand there is Surrealism, which takes the form of art as activism and rebellion against reason, and on the other there is Jean-Paul Sartre and

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[1] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982): 240. Hereafter cited as *The Space of Literature*.

[2] Blanchot treats art and literature synonymously and so shall I herein. However, it is reasonable to assert that aspects of this paper might be difficult to immediately reconcile with painting or music, for example. There is something special about literature, something that differentiates it from other arts (e.g. language), and I am in agreement with Blanchot on this particular emphasis.

committed or *engaged literature*. In the shadows of these two popular movements, Blanchot is located as a marginal figure.

The surreal now occupies a hackneyed corner of the Western vernacular and the movement itself no longer holds the fervor it once had. Spawned out of its predecessor Dadaism, Surrealism embraced non-rationality as the essential artistic exigency.[3] In order to accomplish rebellion through art, the essential task of Surrealism was the dissolution of any difference between life and art through the emergence of surreality. "Surreality is a kind of internal or universal reality, whereas objective reality is composed of phenomena which are visible to all and chaotic and trivial. Both extremes of reality are equally nonrational."[4] Thus the goal of Surrealism is to gain access to another level of reality, and, by doing so, the artist rebels against reason's dominance through nonrational modes of expression.

The Surrealist induced dream-like unconscious states to promote creativity. This artistic experience for Surrealism is a specific technique that aims at "no barriers between the artist's self and what he produces."[5] Surrealism prioritizes the artist as the determinant of art and the artwork. Despite its attempt to revolutionize aesthetics, Surrealism reductively places too much power for artistic creation in the hands of an artist attempting to discover something revelatory about humankind's condition.[6] This is something Blanchot cannot allow, and is why "Surrealistic writing and painting were to

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[3] Nahma Sandrow, *Surrealism: Theater, Arts, Ideas* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972): 15. Hereafter cited as *Surrealism: Theater, Arts, Ideas*.
[4] *Surrealism: Theater, Arts, Ideas*, 20.
[5] *Surrealism: Theater, Arts, Ideas*, 48.
[6] Maurice Blanchot, "Reflections on Surrealism," In *The Work of Fire*, 85-97, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995): 92. Hereafter cited as *Reflections on Surrealism*.

remain experiences and not works of art."[7] Blanchot primarily diverges from Surrealism on the notion that art cannot be reduced to an experience or to an artist.

Sartre, who was a contemporary of Blanchot, founded a theory of politicized literature that shares the Surrealist's emphasis on the artist as the most important subject. Sartre's approach to literature emphasizes political commitment on behalf of the author. He constructs his theory in opposition to the idea of 'art for art's sake' (e.g. Surrealism) and favors 'art for *our* sake,' meaning art for humanity, whose fundamental condition is the imperative of a radical freedom. In his historical approach, Sartre also makes a distinction between poetry and prose (something Blanchot does not formally do) because the aim of literature is to express meaning and not to merely represent it by poetic metaphor.[8] In *engaged literature*, the writer makes language an instrument in order to participate in the dialectic (of the artwork) with the reader, which, in two ways, completely differentiates Sartre's approach from Blanchot's: Blanchot does not describe art as dialectical or language as the instrument of the writer. By contrast, for Sartre, "the end of language is to communicate."[9]

Sartre's writer is intent on changing the world because to be a writer means to be directed toward action through disclosure. He states, "the prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure… The 'committed' writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change

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[7] Lars Iyer, *Blanchot's Vigilance: Literature, Phenomenology, and the Ethical* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 50. Hereafter cited as *Blanchot's Vigilance*.
[8] Jean-Paul Sartre, *'What is Literature?' And Other Essays*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988): 30-31. Hereafter cited as *What is Literature*.
[9] *What is Literature*, 36.

and that one can reveal only by planning to change."[10] The fact that Sartre makes his theory of literature one of intentional aims, decisive action into the world, and the fact that language is the subordinated tool of the writer, thus makes Sartre's *engaged literature* perhaps the polar opposite of Blanchot's view.

Blanchot primarily presents his treatment of art and the artwork in two sources: the collection of essays published as *The Space of Literature* (*L'Espace Littéraire*, 1955) and the essay written in response to Sartre entitled *Literature and the Right to Death* (*Littérature et le droit à la mort*, 1949). In fundamental distinction to Sartre and Surrealism, Blanchot affirms that art does not offer itself as a revelation of some poetic essence of nature by mystic communion or Surrealitic automated experience. Blanchot writes: "an artist could never ascend from the use he makes of an object in the world to a picture in which this object has become art."[11] Blanchot is critical of conceptions of art that reduce it to a useful mechanism, as in the case of Sartrean committed literature, or to some sort of mystical cultivation, as in the Surrealist practice of dream-induced writing. For Blanchot, both of these views distract from the fundamental issue of art and the artwork: what is literature?

For Blanchot, literature is a matter of questioning, not commitment. Literature poses an open question that is neither answered, nor a political solution bowing to some partisan end:

> His attempt to provide a definition for literature is motivated by what he sees as the challenge to the legitimacy of art that the world of work and

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[10] *What is Literature*, 37.
[11] *The Space of Literature*, 47.

> technology embodies… Literature is threatened, in Blanchot's view, not by the fact that a positive definition has yet to be formulated for it, but by the situation that he feels is implied by this lack… In a world dominated by science and work, in which, increasingly, only what is useful has a right to exist, literature is in danger, it would seem, of disappearing altogether.[12]

As a question, literature exists as a power of contestation. As contestation, it essentially refuses the grounds for particular choice and resists being made servile for particular (political) ends. For Blanchot, this power of refusal affirms the most fundamental essence of the political and "clarifying what is peculiar and singular in this refusal is one of the theoretical tasks of the new political thinking."[13]

In *The Concept of the Political* (1927), Carl Schmitt writes: "the political has its own criteria which express themselves in a characteristic way. The political must therefore rest on its own ultimate distinctions, to which all action with a specifically political meaning can be traced."[14] In Blanchot, the irreducibility of the political takes the form of a refusal or contestation. Refusal is an immemorially constituted political power because, as Blanchot writes, "when we refuse, we refuse with a movement free from contempt and exaltation, one that is as far as possible anonymous, for the power of refusal is accomplished neither by us nor in our name, but from a very poor beginning that belongs first of all to those who cannot speak."[15] This contestatory approach to the political finds its exigent expression in the artwork. "The poetic work, the artistic work, if

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[12] Stephen Adam Schwartz, "Faux Pas: "Maurice Blanchot on the Ontology of Literature," *SubStance* 27, no.1 (1998): 37. Hereafter cited as *The Ontology of Literature*.
[13] Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings, 1953-93*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010): 89. Hereafter cited as *Political Writings*.
[14] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 26.
[15] *Political Writings*, 7.

it speaks to us of something, speaks to us of that which is removed from all value or repels all evaluation, articulates the demand of beginning (again), which is lost and muddled as soon as it is satisfied in value."[16]

Art is art because it both returns and responds to the question at its fundament, "the point which cannot be reached, yet the only one which is worth reaching."[17] The question is not a challenge because challenges are met and overcome; challenges are problems solved by working. While the question of art is not a challenge to its legitimacy either, Blanchot views the posing of the question itself as sufficient. Literary legitimacy, thus, does not lie in its ability to satisfy criteria, but rather in the surrendering required by the artist. Instead of the artistic attempt to subordinate or appropriate art as a reflective activity, the artist can do no more than surrender to a vacuum of inaction opened up by the artwork. According to a Blanchotian notion of art, the artist is always doomed to failure because failure denotes a state wherein it is impossible to act. While an artistic experience determined by personal possibility cannot qualify as true art—because it is practiced capacity—artistic surrendering is unrealizable and unsurpassable. This enigmatic representation of Blanchot's conceptualization of literature is an endeavor to 'protect' literature, to permit it its uncompromised non-dependence.

In order to follow the trace of the political in literature, I will follow Blanchot's method, heeding the question of art as unresolved. Literature is a question and it is a question for itself: "literature is perhaps essentially (I am not saying uniquely or

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[16] *Political Writings*, 6.
[17] *The Space of Literature*, 54.

manifestly) a power of contestation: contestation of the established power, contestation of what is (and of the fact of being), contestation of language and of the forms of literary language, finally contestation of itself as power."[18] Since literature presents itself as a forever-being-put-into-question questioning itself, the artwork escapes our mastery and shatters our horizon of expectations in a way that is disastrously catastrophic. In the foreword to a recently published collection of Blanchot's political writings, Kevin Hart writes that Blanchot is attracted to literature in part because of its power of contestation since it points to the shared source of politics and art as something like 'communism beyond communism,' or as I conceive of it: something *catastrophically* new.[19]

The Writing of the Disaster (*L'Ecriture du Désastre*, 1980) is Blanchot's book that specifically takes up literature and/as catastrophe, but I believe the catastrophic nature of literature is evident in much earlier works, like *The Space of Literature*.[20] While the question of art is not a challenge to be met and overcome, neither is catastrophe to be confused with crisis, which is a kind of challenge. In *Impossible Exchange* (1999), Jean Baudrillard defines catastrophe as "the irruption of something which no longer functions according to the rules, or functions by rules we do not know, and perhaps never will.

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[18] Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997): 67. Hereafter cited as *Friendship*.

[19] Kevin Hart, "The Friendship of the No," In *Maurice Blanchot: Political Writings, 1953-1993*, xi-xxix (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010): xxii. Although Blanchot is primarily associated with the political left, during the 1930s he published in right wing journals and has since been labeled an anarchist, fascist, and anti-Semite. However, I am in agreement with Hart's assessment in "The Friendship of the No" that these labels are inaccurate characterizations of Blanchot's political inclinations.

[20] Due to the reoccurring nature of 'catastrophe' in the postmodern canon, I will prefer it to Blanchot's term 'disaster' herein. My choice on this matter is neither an inconsistent nor misplaced relation of synonyms with respect to Blanchot's writings.

Nothing is simply contradictory or irrational in this state; everything is paradoxical."[21] Baudrillard's definition is helpful in two ways. First, both catastrophe and literature offer themselves as unknowable and unforeseeable or unintentional, which implicates both of them as impossible. Secondly, the notion of paradoxical impossibility, as opposed to contradictory impossibility, is also significant for Blanchot's conceptualization of literature because Blanchot characterizes the artwork as impossible in the sense of a practical impossibility. Contradictory impossibility is more conceptually strict than paradoxical impossibility, which is much less demanding. This is evident in passages from *The Writing of the Disaster*, where he writes: "the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact."[22]

Catastrophe possesses an inherent political connotation, a dimension often associated with political instability. Although Baudrillard emphasizes the societal progression from crisis into what is now a state of catastrophe (according to him, we are no longer facing a crisis, but rather catastrophe), the relation of catastrophe to crisis and the latent, yet manifest, struggle of contradictions (there are foreseeable resolutions to a crisis, but not to a catastrophe) can be further carried over to the writing experience.[23] Next to refusal, the catastrophe constitutes the single most significant notion for understanding the politics of literature.

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[21] Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2001): 18. Hereafter cited as *Impossible Exchange*.
[22] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 1. Hereafter cited as *The Writing of the Disaster*.
[23] *Impossible Exchange*, 18.

So as to retain the significance and idiosyncratic nature of the artwork in Blanchot's view, I will retain the original French designation of *l'oeuvre* for the artwork. For Blanchot the artwork is not to be thought of in terms of work, as in a labor. *L'oeuvre* is meant to connote how "the work says nothing, communicates no message exterior to itself. But it nevertheless *is*."[24]

The formulation of *l'oeuvre* and its impossible and political dimension requires the consideration of Blanchot's canonical philosophical predecessors. In the ensuing chapter, I will elucidate *l'oeuvre* in terms of Aristotle, G. W. F. Hegel, and Martin Heidegger, all of whom are latent influences on Blanchot's artistic consideration of the political. Then, in what will follow, I will explore the importance of death for literature's ontological formulation in the artwork, the relations of reading literature with respect to the formation of community, and the catastrophic nature of literature itself.

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[24] *The Ontology of Literature*, 22.

CHAPTER TWO

BLANCHOT'S ARTWORK

> *I feel questioned by the torment of an enigma whose first effect is to make me feel—confusedly, clearly—that there is no 'defining' when it comes to poetry, that, exhausting any definition, it sends me (not in my mind alone but in my life-writing-mind) toward a definitive crisis, because of the indefinite, which it endlessly provokes.*[25]

Implicitly and explicitly, Blanchot draws upon three philosophers in continuous and repeated ways in his work. I will proceed chronologically and in a manner most aptly considered narrative. The first historical matter is Aristotelian potentiality (*dunamis*), a part of the purposeful process of actuality (*energeia*). The second is Hegel's master-slave (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*) dialectic, essential for the explication of work (*Arbeit*) and death. Work, as will be shown, is antithetical to art, but death is likely art's most essential aspect (I have devoted the entirety of the next chapter to its place in Blanchot's political aesthetics). The third consideration is Heidegger on technology (*Technik*) and art. For Heidegger, art and technology share a common foundation elucidated through the etymology of the Greek word *techne*. *Techne* denotes both the skills and activities of the artist and the craftsman, but is considered by Heidegger as a way of knowing and not of making (*Machen* or productivity). Although Blanchot and Heidegger share a common emphasis on poetry, Blanchot differs from Heidegger on the relation of art to possibility.

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[25] *Political Writings*, 153.

2.1. (Im)Potentiality

> *It must be understood that possibility is not the sole dimension of our existence.*[26]

In his considerations of first philosophy, Aristotle emphasizes the significance of the relation between what is actual and what is potential; "it is, of course, a quite different question when something is, and when it is not yet, potential."[27] In order for something to be actual—for an act to be realized—it must have first been potential as the capacity to do something, existing as not-yet-having-obtained. He writes, "the possession of a potentiality just is the possession of a potentiality to act."[28] Potentiality refers to something distinct from possibility.

Actuality logically precedes potentiality. Aristotle states that "actuality is prior to potentiality" on metaphysical grounds according to substance, not temporality.[29] Aristotle elaborates that "the account of the actuality is prior to that of the potentiality and that the knowledge of the former is prior to that of the latter."[30] In other words, there is potentiality only if there is actuality because actuality is the purpose for which the potentiality can be said to exist; possibility does not imply a purpose in the way potentiality does. Actuality denotes the eradication of potentiality because if something *is*, then it is no longer *not yet*. By way of process, a subject I will return to, a potentiality

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[26] Maurice Blanchot, "Affirmation and Passion of Negative Thought," In *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, 41-58, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, trans. Susan Hanson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998): 46. Hereafter cited as *Affirmation and Passion of Negative Thought*.
[27] Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Books, 1998): 126. Hereafter cited as *The Metaphysics*.
[28] *The Metaphysics*, 264.
[29] *The Metaphysics*, 272.
[30] *The Metaphysics*, 273.

is exhausted by its actuality because actuality is the end or reason for which a process is undergone. Thus, "actuality has priority not only over potentiality but over every principle of process."[31]

A potentiality holds, furthermore, despite a thing's possibility for obtaining. In other words, an impossibility, if conceived as a practical impossibility and not a logical one, can have potential. The connection between practical impossibility and potentiality is evidenced in the twofold nature of potentiality, wherein potentiality is always also and already impotentiality:

> What Aristotle undertakes to consider in Book Theta of the *Metaphysics* is, in other words, not potentiality as a merely logical possibility but rather the effective modes of potentiality's existence. This is why, if potentiality is to have its own consistency and not always disappear immediately into actuality, it is necessary that potentiality be able *not* to pass over into actuality, that potentiality constitutively be the *potentiality not to* (do or be), or, as Aristotle says, that potentiality be also im-potentiality.[32]

An actuality *is* as no longer *not yet* and whatever has the potential of being also has the potential of not being.

We can discern how potentiality can be used to grant existence to something elusive, like *l'oeuvre*: "it is a potentiality that is not simply the potential to do this or that thing but potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality."[33]

According to Aristotle, potentiality concerns matters of process where a process is conceived of as a potentiality being exhausted into actuality; "the fact is that the actuality

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[31] *The Metaphysics*, 277.
[32] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998): 45. Hereafter cited as *Homo Sacer*.
[33] Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality," In *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, 177-184, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999): 179-180. Hereafter cited as *On Potentiality*.

of an object is its *obtaining*."[34] The example Aristotle provides is the relation of a statue to the wood from which it could be carved. The statue exists as potentiality in the wood, but whether or not it obtains depends on whether or not the statue is carved (i.e. actualized) by the artist. In other words, since an exhausted potentiality is an actuality, an actuality *is* as no longer *not yet*. The statue exists potentially in the wood as not yet, and in particular: as not *necessarily* yet. For the statue to obtain, its actuality must be realized because "every output of a production *progresses* towards a principle, towards an end… The end *is the actuality*."[35] Therefore, in terms of a process of actualization, something that remains solely potentially extant does not exist in terms of some desired end; it exists only as not yet and it need not necessarily obtain. This provides the ground for the way in which we can conceive of a practical impossibility with respect to some kind of process.

In Giorgio Agamben's view, commensurate with Blanchot's writings, "potentiality has never ceased to function in the life and history of humanity, most notably in that part of humanity that has grown and developed its potency to the point of imposing its power over the whole planet."[36] Agamben's insistence on the contemporary saliency of potentiality resonates with Blanchot's treatment of the question of art as open. Since art is, in Blanchot's view, the ever-elusive aspect of human life, we can see why potentiality matters to him. Basically, potentiality allows us to conceive of Blanchot's peculiar artwork, *l'oeuvre*, as not ever having to necessarily obtain or not ever having necessarily obtained; it is essentially subordinate to no-thing.

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[34] *The Metaphysics*, 267.
[35] *The Metaphysics*, 274.
[36] *On Potentiality*, 177.

L'oeuvre is not the outcome of a process in the sense of a labor of means to ends. This is evident in the original French text of *The Space of Literature* wherein Blanchot uses *le travail* distinctly from *l'oeuvre*. *Le travail* denotes work or labor in terms of power, possibility, and the ability to personally appropriate and transform something in the world. Ann Smock, in her translator's introduction to Blanchot's *Space*, comments that "the difference, in other words, between *l'oeuvre* and *le travail* is that while *le travail* is diametrically opposed to inaction and passivity, *l'oeuvre* requires them."[37] If indeed *l'oeuvre* is to be understood in terms of having potentiality, meaning that it can be or not be, then it cannot be comprehended as a work in terms of *le travail*. What matters is that art is difficult, stubborn, that it can *not be* as impotential. Therefore, *l'oeuvre* is impossible as a practical (and not a logical) impossibility. If it is not work that matters, then what can we say of the artistic process in the case of Blanchot? The answer is found in worklessness or inoperativeness, that is, the absence of work: *désoeuvrement*.

Désoeuvrement is essential to the writing process because "to write is to produce absence of the work (worklessness)."[38] Art is conceived of by Blanchot as an unsettled question and hence "the work by itself can discover only the absence of art."[39] The absence of art means art as impotential, as *not yet*, and it is in this sense that art is impossible. *L'oeuvre* is intentionally unrealizeable "and because of this, when the work takes itself to be the task of grasping art in its essence, the impossible is its task, and the

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[37] Ann Smock, "Translator's Introduction," In *The Space of Literature*, 1-15 (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982): 13.
[38] Maurice Blanchot, "The Absence of the Book," In *The Gaze of Orpheus and other literary essays*, 145-160, ed. P. Adams Sitney, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981): 147. Hereafter cited as *The Absence of the Book*.
[39] *The Space of Literature*, 234.

work is only realized as an infinite searching."[40] What is fundamental for Blanchot's notion of art is that *L'oeuvre* and *désoeuvrement* are synonymous and this is commensurate with the consequence of art as the impossibly impotential.

As something impotential or impossible, *l'oeuvre* is passive, not active, and therefore nondialectical. "The potential welcomes non-Being, and this welcoming of non-Being *is* potentiality, fundamental passivity. It is passive potentiality, but not a passive potentiality that undergoes something other than itself; rather, it undergoes and suffers its own non-Being."[41] Passivity means a withdrawal instead of an imposition. This essential withdrawal—the withdrawal from/of experience, production, power, possibility, and so on—is a passive movement, not an active one. While a dialectic is dynamically active, a passive movement is nondialectically latent and unequivocally paradoxical.

The nondialectical status of art is a way in which Blanchot differentiates his aesthetics from Sartre's; in Sartre's view, as I have stated, both reader and writer enter into a dialectic. As a paradoxical passivity, *l'oeuvre* cannot be reduced to an artist's intentions, means, or desired ends. For Blanchot, "the work cannot be planned, but only carried out" and therefore to be a writer, 'to write,' means to have already been writing.[42] By situating Blanchot with respect to Hegel's infamous master-slave dialectic from *Phenomenology of Sprit* (1807), the way in which art is nondialectical and *l'oeuvre* is impossible should become translucent, but not overly determined.

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[40] *The Space of Literature*, 234.
[41] *On Potentiality*, 182.
[42] Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," In *the Gaze of Orpheus and other literary essays*, 21-62, ed. P. Adams Sitney, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981): 24. Hereafter cited as *Literature and the Right to Death*.

2.2. Work and Passivity

Through the lectures delivered by Alexandre Kojève in the 1930s, thinkers like Blanchot, Sartre, and Georges Bataille received a particular reading or interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Kojève conceived of the master-slave dialectic as being the most significant aspect of Hegel's treatise. Hegel's *Phenomenology* is an account of the dialectical evolution of self-consciousness, where "self-consciousness is Desire."[43] Self-consciousness is desire, a consciousness capable of contrasting itself with something external. However, the external object in question cannot be any external object whatsoever because "*self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*."[44] Thus, self-consciousness needs, desires, and demands another self-consciousness, or, in other words: "desire seeks itself in the other: man desires recognition from man."[45] In this way, the encounter between self-consciousnesses is an intrinsically social phenomenon because "the condition of self-consciousness is the existence of other self-consciousnesses."[46]

Hegel posits that self-consciousness desires recognition. "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists

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[43] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 109. Hereafter cited as *Phenomenology of Spirit*.
[44] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 110.
[45] Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974): 160. Hereafter cited as *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Although I am relying upon Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Hyppolite's commentary is a seminal supplement to Kojève's. Kojève and Hyppolite are the two foremost French Hegelian commentators and are essential for making sense of Blanchot's relationship to Hegelianism, as well as Hegel's presence to French thought in general.
[46] *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 163.

only in being acknowledged."[47] In the meeting of two consciousnesses, each desiring recognition from the other, a struggle ensues for at least two reasons. First, in the initial encounter the ability to satisfy one's desire(s) is compromised because in the other one confronts "something that has an independent existence of its own, which, therefore, it cannot utilize for its own purposes."[48] Second, in the initial encounter between consciousnesses there is no exposure of what Hegel calls "pure being-for-self" or self-consciousness. In order for this self-consciousness to be presented in its 'pure' form, it must show how it is not attached to material, necessary life:

> The presentation of itself, however, as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as the pure negation of its objective mode, or in showing that it is not attached to any specific *existence*, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life.[49]

The attachment to the body is expressed by our desire for preservation, which relates us to animals; since the reality of the master-slave dialectic pertains to human reality, "Human Desire, therefore, must win out over this desire for preservation."[50] This encounter depicts what is essential to human reality and marks the way in which the human reality begins with the struggle for recognition. This beginning must involve the wager of death through the risking of one's life because man "is capable of risking his life and thereby freeing himself from the only slavery possible, enslavement to life."[51]

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[47] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111.
[48] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 112.
[49] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 113.
[50] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1969): 7. Hereafter cited as *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.
[51] *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 170.

The willingness to risk the living body by wagering death in the face of the other instigates "this trial by death."[52] Death must be risked because "if life is the natural position of consciousness, then death is merely its natural negation."[53] Furthermore, death provides the gateway to winning freedom, since "it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won."[54] Freedom is essential because the encounter with the other, foreign consciousness threatens my ability for self-assertion and inner pre-eminence; that is, for pure being-for-self.

By asserting the need for self-consciousness to engage in combat, Hegel makes violence a vital component of his philosophy. This has the consequence of violence being an essential facet of human life. However, "in order that the human reality come into being as 'recognized' reality, both adversaries must remain alive after the fight."[55] The actual, realized death of the other is not preferable because then the victor would have no source for recognition, which was precisely what initiated the combat in the first place. "Death is the *natural* negation of consciousness, negation without independence, which thus remains without the required significance of recognition."[56] Consequently, both consciousnesses must survive. The victor must spare the life of the other. What results is that one emerges the victor as the independent master and the other emerges subordinate and dependent as the slave.

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[52] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 114.
[53] *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 170.
[54] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 114.
[55] *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 8.
[56] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 114.

By his position as master, the master is free from necessity, since, unlike the slave, he was not willing to submit to the desire for preservation.[57] Furthermore, because the slave is there in service of the master, the master is no longer required to submit to providing for his bodily life's necessary needs. "Servile labor is the lot of the slave, who in that way arranges the world so that the master can negate it purely and simply, that is, enjoy it. The master consumes the essence of the world; the slave elaborates it."[58] But although the master is put in the superior social position by proving victorious in the struggle, he has not achieved recognition. The slave is just a thing in the eyes of the master and recognition requires an independent consciousness, which the slave is not. "The slave is for him an animal or a thing. He is, therefore, 'recognized' by a thing. Thus, finally, his Desire is directed toward a thing, and not—as it seemed at first—toward a (human) Desire."[59] By holding the slave in subjection, the master is lifted from the burdens of having to labor out of necessity, but at the price of the insufficient recognition from a 'thing.' The slave, on the other hand, is bound to necessity by his place in the social hierarchy; the slave is the one who must work.

Because he is master, the master does not need to work and can therefore remain idle, merely enjoying, consuming the things prepared for him. The master "takes to himself only the dependent aspect of the thing and has the pure enjoyment of it. The

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[57] "This slave is the defeated adversary, who has not gone all the way in risking his life, who has not adopted the principle of the Masters: to conquer or to die. He has accepted life granted him by another. Hence, he depends on that other. He has preferred slavery to death, and that is why, by remaining alive, he lives as a slave." *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 16.
[58] *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 174.
[59] *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 19.

aspect of its independence he leaves to the bondsman, who works on it."[60] The slave's independence over things through work becomes the turning point in what has so far been a one-sided dichotomy. "By working, the Slave becomes master of Nature," and, "in transforming the given World by his work," the slave "transcends the given and what is given by that given in himself; hence, he goes beyond himself, and also goes beyond the Master who is tied to the given which, not working, he leaves intact."[61] While the fear of death initially relegated the slave to his position subordinate to the master, the capacity to work—meaning to transform, shape, and fashion nature or material objects—has given the slave a power much greater than that exercised indolently by the master. This is why "the *truth* of autonomous Consciousness is *slavish Consciousness*."[62]

True achievement in the dialectic of master and slave belongs to the slave who holds the power of work. According to Hegel, "work forms and shapes the thing" and through labor, the worker recognizes himself in his efforts independently.[63]

> The negative relation to the object becomes its *form* and something *permanent*, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence… For, in fashioning the thing, the bondsman's own negativity, his being-for-self, becomes an object for him only through his setting at nought the existing *shape* confronting him… In fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to *him*, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right.[64]

Therefore, what matters in the master-slave dialectic is how work allows the slave to achieve the recognition originally desired. This is accomplished through the slave's work,

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[60] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 116.
[61] *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 23.
[62] *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 20.
[63] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 118.
[64] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 118.

wherein he comes to identify himself in things, meaning the products of his labor. It is precisely on the frontier of Hegel's prioritization of work that I wish to situate *désoeuvrement* as the absence of work because *désoeuvrement* is essentially *l'oeuvre*.

It is helpful to begin with the absence of work as antithetical to work, which produces products. "The product of work is the worker's production. It is the realization of his project, of his idea; hence, it is he that is realized in and by this product."[65] According to Hegel, work is activity wherein the worker comes to recognize himself in the products of his laboring and this is the truth of the slave in the master slave dialectic: "it is by work, and only by work, that man *realizes* himself *objectively* as man."[66] Through the transformation of material things, a fundamental and objective revelation transpires which provides the grounds for the constitution of the essential human reality. Thus the truth of work is negation. "Man is negating *Action*, which transforms given Being and, by transforming it, transforms itself."[67] This negating action is the activity of work. In Hegel's view expounded in the *Phenomenology*, negation transforms the given or material things through labor, as in the activity of the slave. Yet, if the artwork is the product of the artist, then by what process do the two coalesce in the production of art? Once again, as it was with impotentiality, passivity is at the heart of the matter.

While work in the Hegelian sense means action—that is, a transformative, intentional action carried out into objective realization by a consciousness—*l'oeuvre* as *désoeuvrement* means passivity (i.e. action's antithetical opposite). While work is the

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[65] *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 25.
[66] *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 25.
[67] *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 38.

actualization of an idea, passivity is the inaction of impotentiality. To see how Blanchot's artwork is not a product of (an artist's) working, it is necessary to establish how it is that *l'oeuvre* relates to the non-actual in the actual.

For Blanchot art "indicates what one might understand as the play of the non-actual within the actual, the reserve that does not reveal itself."[68] Here, non-actuality denotes the impotentiality of the absence of work inherent in *l'oeuvre*, but I do not wish to construct an especially antagonistic binary between work and *l'oeuvre* or *désoeuvrement*. *L'oeuvre* as worklessness denotes a lack, but not in the sense of a desire or deficiency, which is why *désoeuvrement* is not nothingness. Work constructs, determines, and overcomes; it satisfies. Wherever work self-determines its absence, it aims to fill that gap by introducing work. However, the non-actual within the actual—*désoeuvrement* (or *l'oeuvre*) demands a kind of undetermined openness, that is, the openness of impotentiality. Therefore, *l'oeuvre* is a lack in terms of work's absence as pure passivity.[69]

As the passively non-actual, *l'oeuvre* is the absence of work and designates the space of something that cannot be integrated into a consciousness aiming to be active. *Désoeuvrement* in no way produces *l'oeuvre,* for Blanchot seems quite explicit in divorcing art from production, that is, from the products produced through work. *L'oeuvre* is not the result of an artist's intentionality and the artwork is not a product of teleological activity.

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[68] Lars Iyer, *Blanchot's Communism: Art, Philosophy and the Political* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004): 147. Hereafter cited as *Blanchot's Communism.*

[69] Under no circumstances can *l'oeuvre* be a perceived deficiency or a desire requiring satisfaction. If it were, then this would no longer be Blanchot's artwork.

The Hegelian dialectic is driven by contradiction, not paradox:

> For the emergence of contradiction is the motive force, as it were, of the dialectical movement. The conflict of opposed concepts and the resolution of the conflict in a synthesis which itself gives rise to another contradiction is the feature which drives the mind restlessly onwards towards an ideal term, an all-embracing synthesis, the complete system of truth.[70]

In contrast, *l'oeuvre* is nondialectically undetermined. It is an open 'answer' to the question of art. "It is to surrender to the indistinct and the undetermined, to the emptiness anterior to events, where the end has all the heaviness of starting over… What is first is not beginning but beginning over, and being is precisely the *impossibility* of being for the first time."[71] Here, where art reigns, writing means to be forsaken of possibility and to passively undergo a workless impossibility: the paradox.

L'oeuvre cannot be made concrete in the form of a manifested realization. *L'oeuvre* is aimless, unproductive, passive, and inactive. None of these features provides assistance in formalizing some determinate answer to the question of art. Yet, this problematic is precisely why the question of art cannot be settled. If we really must settle the question, then we must simply allow it to subsist as unsettled and leave it there, undetermined. Work settles and solves things by overcoming them; destruction, assimilation, and transformation are constitutive of the Hegelian notion of work enacted by negation.[72] By not settling the question of art and determining its supposed answer, we allow a space for that which we cannot subsume because it always eludes us.

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[70] Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, vol. VII: Modern Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1994): 176.
[71] *The Space of Literature*, 242-243.
[72] *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 38-39.

For Hegel, language is at the heart of the origin of the human reality because human reality is founded on the capacity to bring forth one's self-consciousness into language by pronouncing 'I.'[73] In order to name something, the thing must be negated, meaning destroyed or transformed in its present given state into something new within which one recognizes one's own activity.

According to Blanchot, literature presents us with something essential, but something essentially ambiguous and indeterminate. "Surrealists understand, moreover, that language is not an inert thing: it has a life of its own, and a latent power that escapes us."[74] If there is indeed something elusive in writing—literary language—then this is precisely that play of the non-actual within the actual. Following the Surrealist who heeds him or herself before the power of language, Blanchot writes: "let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question," and, "this question is addressed to language."[75] In other words, there must indeed be something ontologically revelatory attributable to literature in terms of *l'oeuvre*.

Blanchot describes literature in terms of a paradoxical movement in order to emphasize how *l'oeuvre* can never be intentional and to protect art from technological artifice.[76] Although determined use perseveres to cover the vast domain of all things,

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[73] "Man is Self-Consciousness. He is conscious of himself, conscious of his human reality and dignity; and it is in this that he is essentially different from animals, which do not go beyond the level of simple sentiment of self. Man becomes conscious of himself at the moment when—for the 'first' time—he says 'I.' To understand man by understanding his 'origin' is, therefore, to understand the origin of the I revealed by speech." *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 3.

[74] *Reflections on Surrealism*, 88.

[75] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 21.

[76] For Blanchot, technology is tied to humankind's desire for universal knowledge, where technology contributes to making things instantaneously at our disposal, meaning making things useful for furthering human activity.

"there belongs to man, such as he is, such as he will be, an essential lack from which this right to put himself in question, and always in question, comes."[77] There will always be this workless lack and it is in the artwork that we encounter this insufficiency in abundance. Therefore, what is primordial for labor cannot be the same as what is primordial for art. In this way, senselessness is prioritized before sense, meaninglessness before meaning, and uselessness before use. To demonstrate the way in which *l'oeuvre* is useless and how it refuses to be overtaken (by technology), a discussion of Heidegger's influence on Blanchot is necessary. This influence will be developed in the following chapter on death.

2.3. Use and Uselessness

Work is always useful. Work describes the process of means and ends wherein some particular means aims toward generating a desired result or end. Work does not concern itself with useless activity because waywardness is not productive. While material things can evidence their obvious and inherent usefulness, most often things need to be *made* useful. In other words, something is rendered useful by a process of making. "A being that falls under usefulness is always the product of a process of making. It is made as a piece of equipment for something… This name [equipment] designates what is produced expressly for employment and use."[78] This process of making (manufacturing) is distinctive of what Heidegger considers modern technology.

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[77] *Affirmation and the Passion of Negative Thought*, 44-45.
[78] Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 17-76, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971): 28. Hereafter cited as *The Origin of the Work of Art*.

In *The Question Concerning Technology* (1953), Heidegger describes two commonplace definitions of technology and states that the two together constitute one sufficient explanation to the question: what is technology? "One says: Technology is a means to an end. The other says: Technology is human activity. The two definitions of technology belong together. For to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity."[79]

Blanchot describes technology as "the penury of being become the power of man, the decisive sign of Western culture."[80] If art is autonomous and protected from useful determinations, then it—now more than ever—cannot be allowed to fall under the category of technology or work. If art is to be separate from the category of technology, then we should not conceive of it in terms of human activity or instrumentation. What is essential at the moment is to distinguish the book (*le livre*) from *l'oeuvre* and also the book from a tool for achieving literature. According to Blanchot, the book precedes *l'oeuvre* and never the reverse; there is first the book as materiality, meaning printed words on paper. If *l'oeuvre* preceded the book, then *l'oeuvre* would have to exist beforehand as an ideal belonging to a consciousness; *l'oeuvre* would be reduced to a human idea.[81] Heidegger is essential for understanding how it is that *l'oeuvre* cannot be rendered useful.

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[79] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, In *Basic Writings*, 308-341, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Inc., 1993): 312. Hereafter cited as *The Question Concerning Technology*.
[80] *Friendship*, 43.
[81] *The Absence of the Book*, 146-147.

In his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935-1936), Heidegger poses his own version of the question of art: "how is it that art exists at all?"[82] Blanchot's answer would likely be something like the following: does art, or something called art, properly exist? Or, we can refer to a statement given by Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*: if there is something called art, if art exists at all, then whether or not we ever have it cannot be determined; "to the question there can be no response."[83] Herein lies a point of difference between Heidegger's and Blanchot's treatment of art's question. While in the case of Blanchot we have a fairly ambiguous conception of the artwork (whose essence I am attempting to narrate), Heidegger is much more affirmative, writing: "art is truth setting-itself to work."[84] For Heidegger, art is the revealing or happening of truth, which is thus made present and apprehended by a kind of knowing; this knowing is *techne*. *Techne* is featured both in *The Origin of the Work of Art* and *The Question Concerning Technology*. I will begin with his analysis from the latter essay.

In order to grasp what makes technology something technological, Heidegger takes up the etymological significance of *techne* with respect to the more familiar term 'technology.' However, his interest is primarily in the essence of technology, which he affirms to be nothing technological. Heidegger's discussion shifts the emphasis from technology as a useful, purpose driven activity to that strange realm of art, where use no longer holds its effective sway. He writes:

> The word stems from the Greek. *Technikon* means that which belongs to *techne*. We must observe two things with respect to the meaning of this

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[82] *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 55.
[83] *The Space of Literature*, 247.
[84] *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 38.

> word. One is that *techne* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts… The other thing that we should observe with regard to *techne* is even more important. From earliest times until Plato the word *techne* is linked with the word *episteme*. Both words are terms for knowing.[85]

The etymological significance of *techne* reveals an interconnectedness between technology and art, which are two seemingly disparate areas. Yet, *techne* does not denote our modern sense of technology as an instrumentalized actualization of human activity; *techne*, according to its Greek origins, is not the making we call working. "For *techne* signifies neither craft nor art, and not at all the technical in our present-day sense; it never means a kind of practical performance… *techne* never signifies the action of making."[86] The originality of *techne* refers to the craft of the artist, who is a creator in a mode we must think differently from that of the maker.

The artist as creator practices a kind of craft, but "the Greeks, who knew quite a bit about works of art, use the same word *techne* for craft and art and call the craftsman and the artist by the same name: *technites*."[87] But while the worker-maker makes things by virtue of his or her very activity and comes to see the products as the fruits of their labor, the artist-creator is engaged in a different project with respect to work, in Heidegger's view. "In the work, createdness is expressly created into the created being, so that it stands out from it, from the being thus brought forth, in an expressly particular way," but Heidegger goes on to state that "the emergence of createdness from the work

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[85] *The Question Concerning Technology*, 318.
[86] *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 57.
[87] *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 57.

does not mean that the work is to give the impression of having been made by a great artist."[88] Therefore, the artwork must be autonomously self-assertive in its affirmation.

Blanchot will in many ways articulate a similar position on art to that of Heidegger. For instance, they both share the emphasis on art as poetry, but in particular, aspects of *The Space of Literature* appear as a re-presentation of Heidegger's efforts in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. However, Blanchot does make a clear break with Heidegger on the notion of death and I will elaborate on this difference in the chapter immediately to follow. In a sense, Blanchot takes a step further into the unknown (or the useless or the impossible) of the artwork than Heidegger and he thoroughly differentiates himself by this effort.

The artwork is not an object of which we can make use; it refuses useful appropriation through an autonomous affirmation of uselessness, of *désoeuvrement*. If work is always useful, then art is always useless. "Art, useless to the world where only effectiveness counts, is also useless to itself."[89] Because art is useless it is also the space of *désoeuvrement* and by refusing to be useful, art asserts its autonomy from the artist. "This demand, that art be ineffective, is by no means a vain flight which there would be no need to take seriously. Nothing is more important than this absolute autonomy which is refusal."[90] For Blanchot, the implication of an artistic autonomy of refusal reaches its fullest condensation in death. "Every work, and each moment of the work, puts everything into question all over again; and thus he who must live only for the work has

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[88] *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 62-63.
[89] *The Space of Literature*, 215.
[90] *The Space of Literature*, 215.

no way to live. Whatever he does, the work withdraws him from what he does and from what he can do."[91]

In my next chapter, I will emphasize the place of death in Blanchot's conceptualization of literature. While negation is destructive and dependent on death (as in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic), death as the destruction or end of a thing is not the only way in which to conceive of death. Work is possible, but *l'oeuvre*, like the *other* death, is impossible; there is death as the unavoidable limit of life, but there is also an *other* death or "the death without death," that cannot be appropriated by consciousness.[92] For Blanchot, the most literarily relevant impossibility is this *other* death.

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[91] *The Space of Literature*, 87.
[92] Andrzej Warminski, "Dreadful Reading: Blanchot on Hegel," *Yale French Studies*, no. 69 (1985): 274.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE AND DEATH

In art's milieu there is a pact contracted with death.[93]

3.1. Encountering Death in Literature

In *Literature and the Right to Death*, Blanchot writes that the essence of literature is silence and nothingness, but not nothingness in the sense of Hegelian desire.[94] According to Geoffrey Hartman, Blanchot's importance as a literary theorist, his literary criticism, and his comments on literature in general are based upon the essential nothingness of literature itself, a nothingness that coexists with fullness.[95] A coextensive relation between fullness and nothingness means that in *l'oeuvre* an encounter with nothingness in all its fullness occurs. There is no doubt of the paradoxical crux of this characterization and it has implications.

The essential nothingness of literature implies the emergence of a new and strange (imaginary or fictive) world by the denial and ignorance of all that is familiar. In other words, the world of *l'oeuvre* is one that refuses what is familiar to us as everyday and commonplace. Fullness is attributed to accessing something completely new. However, the fullness of this literary nothingness is also silence. For instance, a speaker who is connected with a subjective personality in the form of an 'I' has possibilities and these

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[93] *The Space of Literature*, 243.
[94] *Literature and Right to Death*, 29.
[95] Geoffrey Hartman, "The Fulness and Nothingness of Literature," *Yale French Studies* 16 (1995): 70. Hereafter cited as *The Fulness and Nothingness of Literature*.

possibilities can be brought into action in the world, as I have shown in the previous chapter. But what happens when there is no one, meaning no 'I,' speaking? What kind of place is it that demands the inability to act because there is no foundation within and upon which to act? These are the kinds of concerns Blanchot conceives of as essential to literature, where silence correlates with the death of the author, an impersonal speaker, and the peculiar pull the space of literature has on its audience. Nothingness represents the kind of worldlessness that is necessary in order for literature to offer itself up without possibility and deliver the imaginary world of the *récit* [narrative or tale].[96]

In the essay "What is an author?" Michel Foucault denotes the death of the author as being a major theme in contemporary writing. The disappearance of the subject is a trend linked specifically with death. In literature, "the work of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing."[97] But why does literature require a death on the part of the author? "The poet must renounce all mediate possessions and is thus yielded up to a *désoeuvrement* so total, that it deserves the name of death."[98] What I have previously claimed as 'the death of the author' is the imposition thrust upon the artist by *l'oeuvre*'s necessary impersonality, an impersonality fundamental for the autonomous self-assertion of Blanchotian art. In the writer's surrender to the impossibility at the core of the

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[96] In French, *récit* can be translated as tale or narrative. Blanchot treats *récit* as distinct from the novel, *le roman*. His fiction, like *Thomas the Obscure*, is considered a *récit*.
[97] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" In *The Foucault Reader*, 101-120, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Josué V. Harari (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984): 102-103. Hereafter cited as *What is an Author*.
[98] *The Fulness and Nothingness of Literature*, 72.

workless *oeuvre*, the writer undergoes a kind of death, but this death must be thought of in terms of its literary impossibility, rather than its human possibility, as I will show.

Silence is also a condition of impersonality and is one way to conceive of a literary death because the author is neither encountered in the text nor in a close and careful reading of *l'oeuvre*. Silence is often misrecognized as authorial tone, but even though Blanchot says that it typically marks the trace of a great writer, silence's tonality does not belong to the author; it is not the product of an author's work, but perhaps the suffering he or she undergoes in the writing experience itself:

> The writer belongs to a language which no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no center, and which reveals nothing. He may believe that he affirms himself in this language, but what he affirms is altogether deprived of self… If to write is to surrender to the interminable, the writer who consents to sustain writing's essence loses the power to say 'I.'[99]

An essential silence means that language eludes the author's capacity to seize and appropriate literary speech as a meaningful power (e.g. communication). Language, or literary speech, is not within the author's capacity for intentional action because it is not revelatory of self-consciousness. Silence's speech, which is the speech of no one speaking, is a condition thrust upon the writer through the struggle with writing itself. This struggle is the writer's wrestling with impersonality in the form of a literary death, wherein the writer is dismissed from *l'oeuvre*. *L'oeuvre* cannot cling to the author anymore than the writer can desperately hold on to it; they are not appendages of one another, but rather *l'oeuvre* is independent and self-subsistent so as to maintain its ambiguous relation to the real world of things and activities; here, it has the relation of

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[99] *The Space of Literature*, 26-27.

non-relation. In addition, while silence means that the author is not the speaker in literature, neither is there the potential for any other attributable speaker either: "language no longer has anything to do with the subject: it is an object that leads us and can lose us."[100] As the condition of the writing experience, silence is essential for understanding the relationship between writing and death.[101]

The self-subsistence and impersonal ontological status of *l'oeuvre* requires that literary speech speak nothing but being: *it is*.[102] *L'oeuvre* is therefore a kind of immanent object inasmuch as it neither depends upon nor references nor represents the world and its objects. An author's hidden meaning is never determinable nor decipherable because the literary work never says more, never expresses anything more, than being's solitude or art's self-affirmation (both of which refuse our grasping).[103] *L'oeuvre* does not even divulge a sense of completeness and this inability to resolve the status of art is fascinating, like wrestling with the interminable.[104] Rather than 'the possible' being the object of fascination, Blanchot describes the object of fascination as impossible because possibility retains an inference toward realizable finality that *l'oeuvre* cannot allow. Fascination is significant for art in general—art has always fascinated us—but it is paramount for understanding literature as Blanchot conceives it, since fascination means "the shattering possession by something that has slid outside of all meaning and all

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[100] *Reflections on Surrealism*, 89.
[101] "This relationship between writing and death is also manifested in the effacement of the writing subject's individual characteristics. Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality." *What is an Author*, 102.
[102] Maurice Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude," In *The Gaze of Orpheus and other literary* essays, ed. P. Adams Sitney, 63-77, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981): 64. Hereafter cited as *The Essential Solitude*.
[103] *The Space of Literature*, 22.
[104] *The Essential Solitude*, 75.

truth."[105] If indeed literature is catastrophic, then fascination is the experience of catastrophe in the form of an utter theft of meaning where fascination's object is irresolvable, that is, refused to us.

As silence is *l'oeuvre*'s impersonal tonality—the divulgence of nothing but immanent being—nothingness is its gift in the form of literature's incomprehensibility. While silence is indeed essential for understanding the essence of literature, nothingness is the more significant of the two.[106] The gift of nothingness is a way to approach the question of art:

> It [*l'oeuvre*] is not explanation, and it is not pure comprehension, because the inexplicable emerges in it. And it expresses without expressing, it offers its language to what is murmured in the absence of speech. So literature seems to be allied with the strangeness of that existence which being has rejected and which does not fit into any category.[107]

We are fascinated by what we do not recognize and what we do not know, but Blanchot takes this involved perplexity further by affirming that our fascination with the unknown and unfamiliar in literature is due to the emergence of the impossibly unknowable in literature itself. In other words, we are fascinated by the absence of an answer to the question of literature.

For Blanchot, fascination is the experience of meaning's invalidation and it is closely connected to the artistic experience of both reading and writing. Writing entails the surrender to the impersonality of silence, but also the surrender to impossibility's affirmation. Where only being speaks there can be no past, present, future, or being-

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[105] *Friendship*, 37.
[106] *The Ontology of Literature*, 33.
[107] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 58.

toward the future, since literature does not allow for memory or projection in the way that consciousness does. The impossibility for any temporal instantiation means the writer's commitment to what Blanchot calls a 'no-present,' which is the presence of absence *absencing* itself.[108] The presence of absence signals the confrontation with impersonality, wordlessness, impossibility, and so on, but what is most significant is the provocative pull that these indeterminacies have upon the artistic audience. This attraction is attributed to Blanchot's explanation of reading in the literary mode and how it is that readers only wish to read whatever is characterized by strangeness instead of familiarity.[109] Readers only want to read what they have not read, the unfamiliar (this point will be developed in chapter four).

In order for fascination to manifest itself, literature must demonstrate a removal from the world and thus be made devoid of sense, meaning, or clearly (pre)determined signification. Blanchot affirms, hence, that the writer inhabits language, rather than him or her making use of it as an instrument or means to an end, that is, a tool. The habitation of language by the writer is fundamental to the non-impingement into art's space. "Signification," as Blanchot understands it, "presupposes the possible absence of a referent and the absence of the speaker who might initially claim this language as their own," and this concerns literature explicitly in two ways.[110] First, literary language is impersonal, and second, literary words do not correspond with objects or things in a

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[108] *The Space of literature*, 30.
[109] *The Space of Literature*, 194-195.
[110] Christopher Fynsk, "Crossing the threshold: On 'Literature and the right to death," In *Maurice Blanchot: the demand of writing*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill, 70-90 (London: Routledge, 1996): 73. Hereafter cited as *Crossing the Threshold*.

familiar manner. The object of fascination is impossible and literary language does not conform to a correspondence between meaning and the world.

Nothingness is also implicated in another kind of strangeness, which is the alterity of the artwork itself, a kind of otherness that requires a total negation or cancelling out of the familiar world, of all that is given to consciousness. Blanchot writes, "poetry has nothing to do with the world in which we live, which is, at least in appearance, a world of things completely made. Thence the primacy of the imaginary, the call for the marvelous, the invocation of the surreal."[111]

Fascination contributes to the peculiarity of a literary work by refusing the everyday; this contributes to its worldlessness. Worldlessness is the refusal of what is familiar to us in the sense of the everyday; it is removal and distancing from the real world of action into an imaginary world:

> What fascinates us, takes away our power to give it a meaning, abandons its 'perceptible' nature, abandons the world, withdraws to the near side of the world and attracts us there, no longer reveals itself to us and yet asserts itself in a presence alien to the present in time and to presence in space. The split, which had been the possibility of seeing, solidifies, right inside the gaze, into impossibility.[112]

Fascination signals the point of transformation where a gaze that was once considered in terms of possibility transitions to impossibility. Fascination robs and remits only unreflectivity in the form of incomprehensibility.

Blanchot says that a writer must enter into an affirmation of solitude's realm: the *it is* of *l'oeuvre*. "To write," he says:

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[111] *Reflections on Surrealism*, 92.
[112] *The Essential Solitude*, 75.

> Is to enter into the affirmation of the solitude in which fascination threatens. It is to surrender to the risk of time's absence, where eternal starting over reigns. It is to pass from the first to the third person, so that what happens to me happens to no one, is anonymous insofar as it concerns me, repeats itself in an infinite dispersal. To write is to let fascination rule language. It is to stay in touch, through language, in language, with the absolute milieu where the thing becomes image again, where the image, instead of alluding to some particular feature, becomes an allusion to the featureless, and instead of a form drawn upon absence, becomes the formless presence of this absence, the opaque, empty opening onto that which is *when there is no more world, when there is no world yet* [emphasis added].[113]

Blanchot offers poetry as an example of this ambiguous literary design. The poem and its fascinating sway are defined by the fact that the poem's signification is dependent on misunderstanding, rather than understanding.[114]

Examples of poetry's elusive nature are never far from Blanchot's thought. Bataille's *The Impossible* (1962), which originally held the title *The Hatred of Poetry*,[115] evokes the impossibility at the heart of literature. In order for the imaginary world of literature to flourish, the real world of power and possibility must be dismissed in what both Blanchot and Bataille consider to be a total negation or global death. In other words, for the realization of *l'oeuvre*, something catastrophic must occur beyond the merely individual death of the author, which is generally a kind of solitary dismissal.

In order for the writer to allow fascination to manifest through language and for an audience of readers to encounter fascination's realm of sense deprivation, an imaginary world must be born. The imaginary is not the commonplaceness of banal life.

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[113] *The Space of Literature*, 33.
[114] *The Space of Literature*, 263; *Literature and the Right to Death*, 30.
[115] Georges Bataille, *The Impossible*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991): 10. Hereafter cited as *The Impossible*.

Literature necessitates a denial of the everyday and it is accomplished by what Blanchot calls a *global negation*: a negation that is total in every sense of the word.[116] This comprehensive destruction casts off the world from the materiality of the book and establishes a relation with it that can only be understood as distance itself, which permits the alterity of the work to become manifest.[117] As a global annihilation, literature is deceptive because everything contained in it is simultaneously denied by it and its contents cannot be concretely grasped either; "literature, by its very activity, denies the substance of what it represents. This is its law and its truth."[118] Generally speaking, the world must undergo a kind of death in a manner similar and connected to that of the author, but on a grander scale. According to *l'oeuvre*, the world of determinate action and possibility becomes distanced absolutely and the author is absorbed into the impersonality of silence.

But what is this total denial—the *global negation*—that Blanchot ascribes to the activity of writing and which illegitimates its content(s)? "[The writer's] negation is *global*... This is why negation negates nothing, in the end, why the work in which it is realized is not a truly negative, destructive act of transformation, but rather the realization of the inability to negate anything, the refusal to take part in the world."[119] Writing cannot negate anything in the Hegelian sense because its total distancing from the world of the everyday means nothing is given and therefore nothing can be negated or even constructed into a stable image. In the literary world of essential nothingness there is

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[116] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 35.
[117] *The Essential Solitude* 75-76.
[118] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 30.
[119] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 35.

nothing to negate because there are no objects to be grasped and overcome. In fact, what matters is not that there is no real world, or even that there is this peculiar other world of the literary work, but that there is no world *yet* because art does not offer itself to us as stable or capable of being anticipated.

The worldless alterity that literature occupies relates to death inasmuch as both death and the world of literature are inactive and ineffectual. In *l'oeuvre*, the possibility for action exists no more. The possibility of an event requires an instantiation in time and wholly determinate objective qualities, but literature is experienced as possibility's deficiency. Literature lacks possibility and fundamentally "literature does not act."[120] Here, I believe, is another instance of the incommensurability of Sartre's commitment to literature and Blanchot's refusal of it. In order to evidence the ineffectuality of an inactive conceptualization of *l'oeuvre*, it will be necessary to reconsider Hegel's theory of dialectical negation.

Life is a process of becoming and it retains the possibility of acting in terms of the possibility of death. This process of becoming is indeed a struggle, but "if you struggle you are still alive; and everything that brings the goal closer also makes the goal inaccessible."[121] The timeless moment of death exhausts death as mankind's possibility and in it we lose the world and the capacity to act therein. Essentially, consciousness does not overcome the moment of death and that is why it marks the indeterminable transformation from the world of possibility to utter impossibility. As operative in the

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[120] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 58.
[121] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 56.

world, nature, and literature, becoming is inoperative in the event of death itself. The only knowledge we have of death, according to Blanchot, comes from the process of our lives: "man only knows death because he is man, and he is only man because he is death in the process of becoming."[122] Blanchot's notion of death seems predicated on the basis of an implied atheism, but while he is committed to the reality of a biological death, death has an other and it figures prominently in his writings on literature. Death remains an ever-elusive aim for Blanchot because it forever evades being sought out and captured by consciousness. The main reason for Blanchot's treating of death in this way is his affirmation of the nondialectical status of art.

Dread determines the hierarchy in Hegel's master-slave struggle. However, as it concerns Blanchot, "dread has nothing to reveal and is itself indifferent to its own revelation."[123] The fear of death is not an imposition that allows the dialectic of self-consciousness to continue on its teleological path. Dread is the nothingness of the death of the author:

> It is towards this nothingness that all literary powers flow back, as towards the spring that must exhaust them, and this nothingness absorbs them not in an effort to be expressed by them, but rather to consume them with neither aim nor result. This is a singular phenomenon. The writer is called upon by his dread to perform a genuine sacrifice of himself.[124]

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[122] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 55.
[123] Maurice Blanchot, "From Dread to Language," In *The Gaze of Orpheus and other literary essays*, 3-20, ed. P. Adams Sitney, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981): 14. Hereafter cited as *From Dread to Language*.
[124] *From Dread to Language*, 7.

3.2. The Impossibility of Possibility

In death the possibility which is death dies too.[125]

The writer writes in order to die since, for Blanchot, death is essential to *l'oeuvre*:

> The 'omission of self,' 'death of the individual,' which is linked to the poetic rite, thus makes poetry into an actual sacrifice, but not in view of vague magic exaltations—for an almost technical reason: because the one who speaks poetically exposes himself to the kind of death necessarily at work in actual speech.[126]

The death at work in speech names things in their absence. It means naming on the basis of the thing-named's death.

There is the death that is the horizon of human life, Hegel's and Heidegger's death as a possibility.[127] Blanchot's literary death is the one essential to literature. This other death is the death eludes understanding because it is ungraspable, inconceivable:

> There is one death which circulates in the language of possibility, of liberty, which has for its furthest horizon the freedom to die and the capacity to take mortal risks; and there is its double, which is ungraspable. It is what I cannot grasp, what is not linked to *me* by any relation of any sort. It is that which never comes and toward which I do not direct myself.[128]

The other death—the double of death, the death belonging to a subjectless subject—is the one essential to literature. While Heidegger, as I will show, conceives of death in terms of a personal possibility, according to Blanchot's analysis Heidegger leaves this double of death unaccounted for. Additionally, as the destructive work of negation in Hegel pertains to the power of possibility, literary impossibility demands a new consideration of

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[125] *The Space of Literature*, 261.
[126] Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003): 229. Hereafter cited as *The Book to Come*..
[127] *The Space of Literature*, 96.
[128] *The Space of Literature*, 104.

death (and art). The other side of death belongs to the workless impersonality of literature or "the one that we prefer not to think about precisely because it is unthinkable."[129]

In Section Two of Division One of *Being and Time*, Heidegger explores Dasein's relation with death as an existential possibility. Dasein—being-there, being-in-the-world, being for whom being is an issue—is the kind of being concerned with its own existence in terms of its potential non-existence.[130] As Heidegger writes, "death signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being in which the very Being of one's own Dasein is an issue."[131] The possibility of death as something impending and unavoidable is a possibility without a fixed determination. It is possible because it is possible at any instant.[132]

According to Heidegger, death is the most significant of all the possibilities of Dasein's existence.[133] "*Death*," he states, "*is something that stands before us—something impending*."[134] Therefore, this being that is characterized by being-toward something—being-towards-death—is faced with the reality of their most personal condition; as Dermot Moran states, "death can only be authentically experienced by us if we become totally secure with our first-person experience of dying—our genuine anticipation of death. We cannot experience other people's deaths in the same authentic manner."[135]

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[129] John Gregg, "Blanchot's Suicidal Artist: Writing and the (Im)Possibility of Death," *SubStance* 17, no.1 (1988): 47. Hereafter cited as *Blanchot's Suicidal Artist*.
[130] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962): 67. Hereafter cited as *Being and Time*.
[131] *Being and Time*, 284.
[132] *Being and Time*, 302.
[133] *Being and Time*, 299.
[134] *Being and Time*, 294.
[135] Dermot Moran, "Heidegger's *Being and Time*," In *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 222-245 (New York: Routledge, 2000): 240. Hereafter cited as *Introduction to Phenomenology*.

Here death is described as a personal possibility, a personally appropriated possibility, and one that is essentially and authentically mine.

The Being of Dasein is "Being-towards-death."[136] Consequently, authentic being-toward-death implies owning the most significant possibility of human existence.[137] Death not be considered as an event, but an experience; it is "a way to be" as "Being-towards-the-end."[138] As Dasein's uttermost possibility, "death is in every case mine."[139] It is a personalized possibility, which through authentic comportment toward it as the uttermost possibility becomes mine, my death. Heidegger asserts: "*no one can take the Other's dying away from him*," he means that no one can personally appropriate the death of an other as his or her own.[140] One cannot die in the place of another, but is always maintained in relation with death by Dasein's stance toward his or her own personal end, a death that is distinctly intimate and on my horizon.

In summary, authentic being-toward-death is endeavoring to achieve ownership over one's death in terms of its anticipation. Blanchot will not follow in this line of thought because for him death represents an indeterminacy that utterly eludes authentic comportment toward it.[141]

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[136] *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 240.
[137] *Being and Time*, 307.
[138] *Being and Time*, 289.
[139] *Being and Time*, 284.
[140] *Being and Time*, 284.
[141] Commentators agree that Blanchot, like Levinas, exploits a space largely ignored by Heidegger. However, this is a contentious claim. Proponents of Heidegger disagree and view Heidegger in a much more radical light, thus problematizing any substantial differences between Blanchot and Heidegger. I do not intend to try to resolve this ongoing debate here.

Blanchot is not interested in Heideggerian Dasein *per se*, but rather writing and literature; while Dasein's own being is a question, writing is a question for writers.[142] The being-there of Dasein contrasts with "writing [as] withdrawal: the writer is no longer 'in the world,' but is withdrawn from it and from himself as correlative with it."[143] The space of literature is not the space of the real world; it is indifferent to it and no one is ever positively 'there' in its vacuum:

> To read the word death *without* negation is to withdraw from it the cutting edge of decision and the power to negate; it is to cut oneself off from possibility and the true, but also from death as true event. It is to surrender to the indistinct and the undetermined, to the emptiness anterior to events, where the end has all the heaviness of starting over. This experience is the experience of art.[144]

Since literature is dependent on impersonality (the form of no one in particular), Heidegger's terminology of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' is not fitting. "If there is," says Blanchot, "among all words, one that is inauthentic, then surely it is the word 'authentic.'"[145] Although both Heidegger and Blanchot seem to agree on the significance of an experience of death instead of an event of death, they clearly diverge on the (im)personality of the experience. However, the most significant departure from Heidegger's analysis of death as a phenomenon of Dasein—"the possibility of impossibility"—is the affirmation of death as the impossibility of possibility.[146]

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[142] Donald G. Marshall, "The Necessity of Writing Death and Imagination in Maurice Blanchot's *L'Espace Littéraire*," *boundary 2* 14, no. ½ (Autumn, 1985 – Winter, 1986): 227. Hereafter cited as *The Necessity of Writing Death and Imagination*.
[143] *The Necessity of Writing Death and Imagination*, 228.
[144] *The Space of Literature*, 242.
[145] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 60.
[146] *Being and Time*, 307.

Blanchot is clear in his differentiation from Heidegger on the certitude of death. He advises that we "do not count on death—on your own or on universal death—to found anything whatsoever, even the reality of this death. For it is so uncertain and so unreal that it always fades away ahead of time, and with it whatever declares it."[147] Art's uncertainty—an uncertainty it shares with death—is what makes art demand the reversal of the possibility of impossibility to the impossibility of possibility. Death as an impossibility is a condition of our mortality, not the source of our uttermost possibility. Impossibility is not a conscious moment, an activity undergone, but the revocation of any possibility for effective activity. Art, like death, means the impossibility of possibility because literature dispossesses us and does not belong or adhere to the world; *l'oeuvre* and death are not useful instruments, but mark "the realization of the inability to negate anything."[148]

Although Blanchot figures literary death indeterminately, it nevertheless is revelatory of something relevant to the human (political) condition.[149] However, the fact that he views literature and *l'oeuvre* as revelatory at all is peculiarly ambiguous because "literature seems to be allied with the strangeness of that existence which being has rejected and which does not fit into any category."[150] If the artist does not surrender over to it, then *l'oeuvre* will never affirm itself:

> If we have art—which is exile from truth, which is the risk of an inoffensive game, which affirms man's belonging to the limitless outside where intimacy is unknown, where he is banished from his capability and

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[147] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 90.
[148] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 35.
[149] *The Necessity of Writing Death and Imagination*, 226, 231.
[150] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 58.

> from all forms of possibility—how does this come about? How, if he is altogether possibility, can man allow himself anything resembling art?[151]

If art were classified as just another mundanely possible thing—or in the case of Heidegger, as the most significant human possibility—then *l'oeuvre* would be reduced to another of mankind's technical powers. But since art is so closely implicated with death, it cannot be integrated into the network of means and power distribution because it is essentially ungraspable and unthinkable. Thus the question of art stays open. One does not bring about the realization of literature's space anymore than one can instigate a mystical experience; such experiences are characterized by their inability to be legitimately pursued. Just as Blanchot says we are never conscious of death, neither can the artist achieve *l'oeuvre* by way of conscious intentionality. This has the implication of art never being at the artist's disposal; rather, it is something one must be receptive to in the form of vigilance.[152]

According to Blanchot, possibility and knowledge are too closely associated. Technology and its new modes of communication have made it be that the totality of art can be brought forth at the command of an individual (e.g. online encyclopedias). Blanchot was already keen to this issue when *Friendship* (*L'Amitié*, 1957) was published, wherein he refers to technology's ability to 'generously' offer information instantaneously upon command as the establishment of an 'imaginary museum.'[153] Technology directs us toward that which is possible in terms of knowledge, but *l'oeuvre*

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[151] *The Space of Literature*, 240.
[152] *Blanchot's Suicidal Artist*, 48-49.
[153] *Friendship*, 41.

and its (self) affirmation confronts us with the impossible, which must be something either more primordial than knowledge or its dissolution.

The capacity for literature to be self-determining and paradoxical is something considered by the poetry in *The Impossible*. It speaks:

> *As I stared into the void before me, a touch—immediately violent, excessive—joined me to that void. I saw that emptiness and saw nothing—but it, the emptiness, embraced me. My body was contracted. It shrank as if it had meant to reduce itself to the size of a point. A lasting fulguration extended from that inner point to the void. I grimaced and I laughed, with my lips parted, my teeth bared.*[154]

How does one join with the void? Rather, how does the void reach out and *touch* you? The answer is the experience of art and the experience of art as impossibility and language, where "language can neither free itself from things nor become a thing; it is drawn simultaneously in two opposing directions."[155] It is not a human capacity, power, possibility, or object of personally appropriated knowledge. Therefore, neither death nor art can be humanized in this way.[156] The writer submits to language, which is never usefully subordinated to him or her.

Literature and literary death are not pure abstractions. Certainly there is some material given (e.g. the book) from which art can then manifest and self-determine. If "literature seems to be allied with the strangeness of that existence which being has

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[154] *The Impossible*, 143. Both Bataille and Blanchot make extensive use of italics in their writings. For this and other subsequent citations, I have retained the author's original use of italics.
[155] *Banchot's Vigilance*, 149.
[156] Blanchot considers Heidegger's being-toward-death to be a humanization of death. The same holds for religious notions of immortality. Blanchot asserts that immortality is another name for death as the impossibility of dying. Art is not a kind of immortality of presence, nor the realization of eternity. *Literature and the Right to Death*, 55.

rejected and which does not fit into any category," then what is the book?[157] For Blanchot it is a kind of corpse, which is another way he conceives of the encounter with the death that cannot be thought, that is, the *other*, literary death.

Evidenced in Heidegger's attention to death in *Being and Time* is a kind of death that is not mine. This is the death of the other, which for Heidegger is: "Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more."[158] Such a being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more would perhaps be a corpse, for example, but Heidegger treats the corpse as an object for knowledge to overcome. He writes, "even the corpse which is present-at-hand is still a possible object for the student of pathological anatomy, whose understanding tends to be oriented to the idea of life."[159] For Blanchot, the corpse delivers a materially pronounced death, a kind of existence detached from being like the reality of words and an imaginary story. Dasein is irrelevant when one finds oneself encountering something that refutes the capacity to be interiorized—the encounter which refuses me—and this is the encounter with the image. As I will show, Blanchot's cadaver is highly significant for outlining the role of the image and the word in literature, and it highlights the importance of death for his conceptualization of art.

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[157] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 58.
[158] *Being and Time*, 281.
[159] *Being and Time*, 282.

3.3. Literature and the Cadaverous Resemblance

Literature is language turning into ambiguity.[160]

If a poem can be said to have a meaning, then the poem's meaning is its very way of existing.[161] The meaning of the poem is not meaning in the sense of Heidegger's happening of truth, but is undetermined. While generally there is first the object and then the image, which is a kind of idealization of the object, poetic language does not mean an idealized object.[162] Blanchot affirms that there are at least two ways in which to conceive of the image. In the first place there is the image as I have just stated: first the object, then its idealization by the object's negation. However, for artistic imagery and the language of poetry, Blanchot describes the image as "the thing as distance," rather than being apprehended at a distance, and "present in its absence, graspable because ungraspable, appearing as disappeared."[163] The image as the voided presence of pure absence is that which *l'oeuvre* evokes and the home it makes for itself in language.

Literary language does not grant that which it names an ideal existence or life in the mind, but rather it names an existence (a thing) without being; "it points to an existence that precedes the ideal existence of language, reaffirming itself as the reserve with which language cannot have done."[164] Blanchot affirms 'existence' as representative of the material word on the page and the book. The ink and paper have existence, but behind the word is nothing; it resembles nothing. This resembling-nothing relates to

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[160] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 59.
[161] *The Ontology of Literature*, 22.
[162] *The Space of Literature*, 255.
[163] *The Space of Literature*, 256.
[164] *Blanchot's Vigilance*, 130.

l'oeuvre's meaningless thrust, a kind of existence without being, an ungraspable impossibility. The encounter with the book is akin to the encounter with the corpse because mortal remains are an encounter with existence without being.

The type of imagery Blanchot describes as belonging to literary language is defined by resemblance. For Blanchot, resemblance is an immanent way of meaning. "A being who suddenly begins to 'resemble'," Blanchot writes:

> Moves away from real life, passes into another world, enters into the inaccessible proximity of the image, is present nonetheless, with a presence that is not his own or that of another… Whom does the resembler resemble? Neither this one nor that one; he resembles no one or an ungraspable Someone.[165]

Since Blanchot sees a correlation between an encounter with the deceased and literary language, his notion of imagery is aptly named cadaverous imagery, which is the apparatus of existence without being.

The effect of death on the living body makes the mortal remains; "death transforms the body into something which, like an image, is only a resemblance."[166] This corpse does not establish a relation among meanings; rather the corpse's meaning is "meaning whose potential infinity is immediately present in its very void."[167] The corpse is not a relation between the former host and the body—a relation which has now become meaningless—because the person (the former host) is totally absent. This is why the corpse 'resembles,' rather than 'reflects.' "Resemblance is not a means of imitating life

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[165] *Friendship*, 145.
[166] *The Necessity of Writing Death and Imagination*, 228.
[167] *The Necessity of Writing Death and Imagination*, 228.

but of making it inaccessible, of establishing it in a double [the corpse] that is permanent and escapes from life. Living figures, men, are without resemblance."[168]

Corpses and their relation to imagery insist on the meaninglessness that Blanchot attributes to literature's detachment of images from objects in the world. "Not only is the *image* of an object not the *sense* of this object, and not only is it of no avail in understanding the object, it tends to withdraw the object from understanding by maintaining it in the immobility of a resemblance which has nothing to resemble."[169] Blanchot conceives of something that has nothing to resemble as emanating strangeness. This strangeness is the status of the corpse presenting a simultaneous union of presence and absence. The deceased is gone—absent—but yet *this* body of *theirs* is indeed given. Blanchot writes, "the deceased, it is said, is no longer of this world; he has left it behind. But behind there is, precisely, this cadaver, which is not of the world either, even though it is here."[170] The corpse is the presence of an ungraspable nothingness because I can no longer tell to whom this corpse relates. The corpse surely cannot be the former host, who has died and is no longer present in terms of a material body. Through this unity of presence and absence in the mortal remains, I confront worldlessness in something material that holds no relation with the world as I have known it.

In a manner befitting the confrontation with a corpse, literature is itself the manifestation of strangeness. The kind of language encountered must be displacing and similar to nothing in order to be utterly unfamiliar. The image and the corpse are both

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[168] *Friendship*, 32.
[169] *The Space of Literature*, 260.
[170] *The Space of Literature*, 257.

very strange, presenting this existence without being as unknown and unknowable. It is thus through the cadaverous image that *l'oeuvre*'s worldlessness seizes us. "Death suspends the relation to place," and, "the cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere."[171] Therefore, the corpse, like *l'oeuvre*, removes us from the world wherein action is possible and delivers us to an unknowable unknown: the void of literature's space. For example, the book[172] precedes *l'oeuvre* and the living person precedes the corpse, but through death—a death understood as the impossibility of possibility or *other* death—the book transforms into *l'oeuvre* and the corpse respectively. Literary death and its cadaverous resemblance is figured as "the death that is the non-dialectical *other* of living existence."[173] The corpse refuses itself to being grasped; its affirmation is a refusal of appropriation. This *other* manifestation, which is devoid of form, emphasizes the importance of death in the literary experience, where death is spoken by literary speech.

Literary speech makes use of a kind of methodological nothingness by requiring the writer to pronounce death through writing. The pronouncement is the absence of what is named, its nothingness, its death. Although language does not kill (as in a homicide for example), it announces the occurrence of a 'real' death.[174] As Blanchot explains:

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[171] *The Space of Literature*, 256.
[172] Since it is the material word of the book which then later through a reading becomes that totalizing negation of an imaginary story, the reader is delivered over to that dead state of the dead present wherein impossibility is a frozen possibility, an impotentiality, and the utter maxim of literary death. Regardless, the written word's materiality is a stabilizing factor sharing in the real world's objectivity. It is what allows for reading's possibility and its promise of fascination. This will not become clear until chapter four, where I will address the significance and importance of reading literature in detail.
[173] *Crossing the Threshold*, 74.
[174] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 47.

> When I say, 'This woman,' real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence.[175]

This is the destructive capacity inherent in language that announces death as a function of communication and without which Blanchot says communication would not even function on the level of the everyday. However, literary speech is not merely idealized abstraction, negation, and a real death; it goes further than naming in terms of ordinary communication. "The literary *parole* [speech] annihilates the object that it names and represents its absence in the form of an idea," where absence itself is the idea.[176] Basically, language, including literary language, announces death without murder. A presence exposed to nothingness by a word marks death's violent and destructive literary campaign.

For Blanchot, however, it is not sufficient that the announcement of death in language be solely proclaimed, but more-so that the woman—'this woman'—actually possess the possibility for a real death because "if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is."[177] The capacity for real death in language constitutes the implicit linguistic model underlying Blanchot's general comments on literature. Language might not murder, but it calls upon the fundamental

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[175] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 42.
[176] *Blanchot's Suicidal Artist*, 53.
[177] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 43.

feature of its referent: the capacity to die or be killed. It is this underlying importance of death that refers to the life of speech, but in literature absence cannot be 'killed,' so literary speech is negation with nothing more to negate.

L'oeuvre is littered with linguistic corpses, all of which signify nothing but this formless presence of absence and the essential silence and nothingness of literature. Literary speech speaks death. Language's expression of death as the hope of language—"*the life that endures death and maintains itself in it*"—means that language is in proximity to the impossibility of dying and illuminating existence without being.[178] Therefore, death can be defined as "existence without being, existence which remains below existence, like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning or end—death as the impossibility of dying."[179] This death in the literary or *other* sense exemplifies what the literary word accomplishes: naming death as existence deprived of being.

Death maintains a strong association with Blanchot's depiction of the literary experience, which I have presented here on the basis of impossibility. This is not to say that Blanchot is ignorant of the political importance of a notion of death. In *The Space of Literature*, he writes, "what man risks when he belongs to the work and when the work is the search for art is, then, the most extreme thing he could risk: not just his life, not only the world where he dwells, but his essence, his right to truth, and, even more, his right to death."[180] It is on the basis of this risk that a good deal of Blanchot's attention in the essay *Literature and the Right to Death* is focused. Literature delivers impossibility,

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[178] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 54.
[179] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 47.
[180] *The Space of Literature*, 238.

other death, and the refusal or abandonment of the world. However, "literature may well have succeeded in abandoning a signified meaning, but it cannot avoid signifying this abandonment," and to account for this evidence Blanchot relates literature to revolution.[181] It is how revolution and literature are related that establishes a direct connection between literature and politics because revolution is always political.[182]

3.4. Literature and Revolution

Literature must be free.[183]

Blanchot conceives of literature as essentially linked to revolution because revolution involves the meaning of everything in its totality.[184] He considers the significance of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror specifically because "the French Revolution has a clearer meaning than any other revolution."[185] The Reign of Terror refers to a period in the French Revolution where subversive 'enemies' were sought out and dealt with violently. The Reign of Terror also included an attempt at routing out minor languages in favor of national unity and dechristianization as well.[186] In my development of the linkage between literature and revolution, I will show how the historical significance of the French Revolution is paramount for the affirmations Blanchot makes about this relationship, which he develops in *Literature and the Right to*

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[181] *Crossing the Threshold*, 77.
[182] Up until this junction, death has been the literary factor maintaining an indirect political relation between literature and politics.
[183] *Reflections on Surrealism*, 97.
[184] *Crossing the Threshold*, 80.
[185] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 39.
[186] Peter McPhee, *Living the French Revolution, 1789-99* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): 132, 145.

Death. Although revolution may be generally linked with revolutionary action, it is an action of a different sort and unproductive in kind. As I will show, revolutionary action is like the impossibility of literature and the commonalities between the two include interruptive questioning, death, and freedom.

In order for *l'oeuvre*'s essence to manifest itself and for it to be readable—as the offering of an other world, alien and utterly strange—it must deny the world of existence by way of the *global negation* so as to create the fictitious and imaginary one; writing is *withdrawal* from the world. If literature serves political ends, not only is it no longer literature in the Blanchotian sense, but it is also inherently denying the political intent supposedly written into it (delegitimatizing itself); "the function that he assigns to literature is therefore, profoundly anticultural."[187] Basically literature makes political action, and all action for that matter, ineffectual because literature is itself inactively impersonal; the only relation literature and politics share is, seemingly, indirect.

Blanchot says that literature is ineffectual and that it does not act; hence its impossibility. Accordingly, it cannot be a political instrument; literature cannot be confused or misrecognized as a political pamphlet or a work of intentional partisan rhetoric. If literature is never a political tool, then serving a party's agenda—like Sartrean *engaged literature*, for example—can have no political significance at all because literature inherently denies everything it contains and makes it inoperatively illegitimate. "People who are in favor of action reject literature, which does not act, and those in

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[187] *Blanchot's Suicidal Artist*, 48.

search of passion become writers so as not to act."[188] But then how is revolution related to literature? The answer provided concerns the essence of literature itself: literature becoming a question for literature.

Questioning casts aside certitude and opens up a space for the new and undetermined. The space of questioning, like the space of literature, is one of unbounded denial, denial of the current milieu. The movement of questioning is interruptive and dispossessing. Literature interrupts the everyday commonality and banality of work and labor in the world for something new; it puts everything into question. As an interruption, literature is marked by unforeseeable and undetermined consequences because there is no clear goal on the horizon.

Revolution also operates according to the movement of questioning as essentially interruptive. Blanchot defines revolution as the moment or event where everything remains to be done. "At this moment," where revolution means freedom in an absolute sense, "freedom aspires to be realized in the *immediate* form of *everything* is possible, everything can be done."[189] Writers are drawn to such a moment because in order for writing to be successful, meaning for *l'oeuvre* to overtake and overcome the book, a strange and imaginary world must be accessed by the *global negation* attributed to writing itself and the necessity of its creativity or worldlessness. It is only in an imaginary world that everything remains to be done because such a world represents absolute freedom. "Revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in

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[188] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 33.
[189] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 38.

literature: the passage from nothing to everything, the affirmation of the absolute as event and of every event as absolute."[190] In revolutionary moments, which put everything into question, everything familiar—once put into question—becomes the void of nothingness—the space of literature—wherein the only realizable goal is freedom.

Through freedom everything prior to the revolution reduces to rubble: "people cease to be individuals working at specific tasks, acting here and only now: each person is universal freedom, and universal freedom knows nothing about elsewhere or tomorrow, or work or a work accomplished."[191] The revolution does away with the current cultural milieu and in it "death as an event no longer has any importance;" a death lacking importance is an impersonal death.[192] As Blanchot explains, "in order to write, he [the writer] must destroy language in its present form and create it in another form."[193] The writer must commit the *global negation* and pronounce death—the existence without being—in literary speech; he or she must engage in revolution's literary contemplation:

> Literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution, and if it has been called the Reign of Terror, this is because its ideal is indeed that moment in history, that moment when 'life endures death and maintains itself in it' in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech. This is the 'question' that seeks to pose itself in literature, the 'question' that is its essence.[194]

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[190] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 38.
[191] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 38.
[192] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 39.
[193] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 34.
[194] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 41.

Blanchot describes Robespierre as desiring death.[195] For Robespierre, death no longer constitutes a meaningful or important event.

The writer is drawn to revolution by what it represents. "The writer sees himself in the Revolution. It attracts him because it is the time during which literature becomes history," and therefore death as an event no longer has any importance.[196] Due in part to the meaningless immanence of poetic words, writing and revolution withdraw toward that limit of impossibility; like death and poetic words, revolution contemplates unavailable possibilities. "*Poetry*," according to Bataille's *The Impossible*, "*is not a knowledge of oneself, and even less the experience of a remote possible (of that which, before, was not) but rather the simple evocation through words of inaccessible possibilities.*"[197] This 'simple evocation' is the freedom of revolution, which is manifested by death during the Reign of Terror, wherein no one possesses their right to life any longer.

According to Blanchot, "every citizen has a right to death, so to speak: death is not a sentence passed on him, it is his most essential right; he is not suppressed as a guilty person—he needs death so that he can proclaim himself a citizen and it is in the disappearance of death that freedom causes him to be born."[198] The disappearance of death—disappearance in terms of death as a meaningful event, an event of any importance—means a death that is no longer understood in terms of dying, negation, or

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[195] Blanchot writes: "The Terrorists are those who desire absolute freedom and are fully conscious that this constitutes a desire for their own deaths, they are conscious of the freedom they affirm, as they are conscious of their death which they realize, and consequently they behave during their lifetimes not like people living among other living people, but like beings deprived of being, like universal thoughts, pure abstractions beyond history, judging and deciding in the name of all of history." *Literature and the Right to Death*, 39.

[196] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 40.

[197] *The Impossible*, 162.

[198] *Literature and the right to Death*, 39.

work. The disappearance of death in both revolution and literature implies absolute freedom, a freedom attributed to the birth of the Reign of Terror, revolution in general, and literature.[199]

Blanchot describes the freedom of literature and revolution as absolute. This revolutionary freedom, like the freedom of *l'oeuvre*, lacks expectations. But the writer is not without a sense of responsibility; "to write freely is also to take responsibility for what freedom is not; it is to brace oneself against the conditions of society, to flash against the darkness of our present condition—to flash, and, in this flashing, to expose the cracks and the interstices, the great contradictions in the present state of society."[200] Freedom means exposure and a lack of commitment to the current societal norm; "freedom is nothing if it is not the freedom to live at the edge of limits where all comprehension breaks down."[201] This push toward unboundedness or catastrophe to inhabit the edge of the ultimate limit (i.e. death) is like the habitation of a black hole's event horizon: impossible.

Slogans of the French Revolution included "liberty, equality, fraternity, or death," but Blanchot immediately reduces this particular slogan to freedom or death, which thus makes the relatedness of revolution to literature more evident.[202] The conjunction of liberty, equality, and fraternity could be interpreted as the reduction of particular persons

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[199] *Literature and the right to Death*, 38.
[200] *Blanchot's Vigilance,* 72
[201] *The Impossible*, 40.
[202] Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006): 87.

en masse to an impersonal community.[203] A notion of community, for which Blanchot has a unique conceptualization, is importantly linked to the reading of literature, where the existence of *l'oeuvre* is derived from the community of readers.

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[203] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 38.

CHAPTER FOUR

READING AND COMMUNITY

> *The work demands much more: that one not worry about it, that one not seek it out as a goal, that one have with it the most profound relationship of carelessness and neglect.*[204]

By exploring the significance of reading literature we can better situate the importance of *désoeuvrement* for political relations in Blanchot's writings. It is not enough that the book is written; it must disappear for *l'oeuvre* to appear as this disappearance. The narrative must be allowed to affirm itself and this is accomplished through reading, but not just any reading. Hence, Blanchot makes a clear distinction between reading literature (or fiction) and reading nonfiction. Reading is never merely reading 'in general.'

4.1. Reading

> *Reading aside, the question of reading is only more essential.*[205]

Blanchot conceives of the writing experience as a kind of suffering and the endurance of impossibility; having written and thus become 'artist' is a special accomplishment.[206] Reading is important because "the fact is that other people do not

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[204] *The Book to Come*, 30.
[205] *The Book to Come*, 242.
[206] Suffering is like the impossibility for any possibility or action because, for Blanchot, suffering is linked to thinking and thought's impossibility. "Suffering and thinking are secretly linked, for if suffering, when it becomes extreme, is such that it destroys the capacity to suffer, always destroying ahead of itself, in time, the time when suffering could be grasped against and ended, it is perhaps the same with thought. Strange

want to hear their own voices."[207] People read because there is something offered as unforeseeable, unfamiliar; by reading the narrative is passively granted its opportunity for accomplishment or self-unfolding.

Assuming that he is addressing a fully literate audience (since his medium is writing itself), Blanchot describes reading as the most basic creative capacity of all the arts (aural and ocular inclusive). "Reading requires no gifts at all and shows this appeal to a natural distinction for what it is."[208] No opportunity is given by literature for either the writer or the reader to ever be in a position of power; both are un-gifted or giftless. This type of giftless (or perhaps talentless) reading is not just any reading experience in general, but is specific to literature.

Blanchot considers the seeing of a painting and the hearing of a piece of music to require a gift or key. These gifts are actually abilities restricted to closed spaces, like galleries or concert halls; they also imply talent.[209] The problem literature poses for a comparison with other arts lies in *l'oeuvre*'s essence, which completely convolutes, reverses, and problematizes such a comparison via its unity of contradictory movements. At the center of literature is not just the contradictory movement of visibility and invisibility, meaning the play of written words and imagery, but also absence and absence as presence (e.g. the corpse that is present, but delivers the absence of the person as its

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connections. Might it be that extreme thought and extreme suffering open onto the same horizon?" *The Book to Come*, 40.

[207] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 27.

[208] *The Space of Literature*, 191.

[209] *The Space of Literature*, 192.

presence), dissolution and illumination.[210] These literary revelations do not allow for a 'talented' approach toward them because a talent cannot be an aptitude for a contradictory movement; a talent is possible and *l'oeuvre* is not.

In order for Blanchot to develop a notion of reading that is appropriate for the status of literature and the conditions of *l'oeuvre*, reading must heed to the openness of literature's question. According to this impotentiality, reading is passivity in the form of unconcern.[211] Reading cannot converse with *l'oeuvre*, it cannot ask questions of it, and it must allow *l'oeuvre* the freedom to *be* and nothing more (i.e. no personal impositions beyond passive unconcern). Therefore, reading is essential for *l'oeuvre*'s communication, where communication is not conversation or information, but *l'oeuvre* "communicating itself in the *becoming* that is unique to it."[212]

Blanchot differentiates between two kinds of reading with the intent of showing how only a particular mode of reading is suitable for *l'oeuvre*'s unfolding.[213] While on the side of pure art there is fiction and reading in the literary mode, on the other, there is nonfiction and reading in the nonliterary mode. Nonfiction is never to be confused with *l'oeuvre* because it employs language differently, meaning it adheres to and makes use of networks of signification. "Only the nonliterary book is presented as a tightly woven net of determined significations, a set of real affirmations. Before being read by anyone, the

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[210] *The Book to Come*, 56.
[211] Reading's passivity in the form of unconcern means the uninterruptive allowance of the narrative's unfolding, instead of determining its outcome ahead of itself. Impatient reading will try to overcome the narrative, but the essence of *l'oeuvre* is to elude such a misguided appropriation by way of its constitutive dissimulation.
[212] *The Book to Come*, 242.
[213] Literary reading is associated with fiction or poetry exclusively; nonliterary reading is not.

nonliterary book has already been read by all, and it is this prior reading that guarantees it a solid existence."[214] Due to the nonliterary book's concretized signification and the knowledge it contains—a knowledge that is objective, factual, and familiar or worldly—everyone has already read nonliterary books. These books are written with understanding and comprehension as the intentional aim of the entire textual experience, author and reader included. The epistemological status of the variety of facts offered by reading a nonliterary work is such that the affirmations always correspond with the real plane and often require little imagination on the behalf of the reader. All that the nonliterary book communicates preceded the production of the book; its truth is still that of the world, not its dissolution. However, Blanchot is adamant that literary truth is non-truth.[215]

Nonfiction delivers itself as a kind of guarantee through its corresponding system of truth. Reading nonliterary books is a conversation with various affirmations about the real world, where the reader's reflection upon these affirmations imposes itself and fixes the reader in the world. Like work, nonfiction actively participates with the world and through this correspondence, nonliterary reading establishes a guarantee of the world and its existence; there is no threat of the imaginary. However, "the book which has its origin in art has no guarantee in the world, and when it is read, it has never been read before. It does not come into its presence as a work except in the space opened up by this unique

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[214] *The Space of Literature*, 194.

[215] "The essence of literature is precisely to escape any essential determination, any assertion that stabilizes it or even realizes it: it is never already there, it always has to be rediscovered or reinvented. It is not even certain that the word *literature* or the word *art* corresponds to anything real, anything possible or anything important." *The Book to Come*, 201.

reading, each time the first and each time only."[216] Literary reading, which is always a first reading, will manifest *l'oeuvre* as strange and unfamiliar. Literary reading denies the restraints of the familiar in favor of "a movement which is free insofar as it does not submit to, does not brace itself upon anything already present."[217]

4.2. Literary Reading

Write to say nothing.[218]

According to Blanchot, literary reading is never interpretation, comprehension, or even conversation with a text. Reading literature is always reading for the first time, which means that ignorance or forgetfulness is favorable because ignorance is the condition of a first encounter. In distinction to reading nonfiction, which calls upon the reader's familiarity with the real world of facts—meaning that the book is a vehicle of knowledge and that the reader is a being-in-the-world—reading literature requires that the world be abandoned, dismissed.[219] Blanchot affirms that this kind of reading cannot even belong to the same plane as understanding[220] because while comprehension favors memory and understanding, literary reading necessitates ignorance and forgetfulness.[221]

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[216] *The Space of Literature*, 194.
[217] *The Space of Literature*, 194.
[218] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 32.
[219] *The Absence of the Book*, 146.
[220] While Blanchot refuses to allow art to belong to the real, neither will he make it a wholly ideal manifestation. Imagination refutes the existence of *l'oeuvre* as totally real and the peculiarity of the reader's role in reading literature is what makes art not totally ideal either. Blanchot does not offer dichotomous binaries, but rather irreducible duplicities, which are nondialectical, interminable, and deceptive.
[221] *The Space of Literature*, 196.

This illiteracy of the real, in turn, allows art to be described by Blanchot as indeterminate and unbound:

> The reader has no use for a work written for him, what he wants is precisely an alien work in which he can discover something unknown, a different reality, a separate mind capable of transforming him and which he can transform into himself. An author who is writing specifically for a public is not really writing: it is the public that is writing, and for this reason the public can no longer be a reader; reading only appears to exist, actually it is nothing. This is why works created to be read are meaningless: no one reads them.[222]

L'oeuvre offers itself as unknown and never predetermined, that is its essence. Authors writing with a particular public in mind, like Sartre for example, are not delivering what the reader desires in reading: a real book and an imaginary story.[223] These are the criteria for a fascinated encounter with *l'oeuvre*, where fascination is passion for the realm of literature in the form of passive consent.[224] Reading in the literary mode is itself a kind of adherence to artistic unboundedness, manifested by the imaginary's evocation and the space of literature's opening. "Something is there which the book presents in presenting itself and which reading animates, which reading reestablishes—through its animation—in the life of a presence."[225] This 'animation,' the space of literature, is, for Blanchot, a no-place, devoid of time, fixed reality, or being-in-the-world—an outside[226]—and so reading must affirm this placeless place wherein death as impossibility is encountered.

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[222] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 27.
[223] "It is easy to understand why men who have committed themselves to a party, who have made a decision, distrust writers who share their views; because these writers have also committed themselves to literature, and in the final analysis literature, by its every activity, denies the substance of what it represents." *Literature and the Right to Death*, 30.
[224] *Crossing the Threshold*, 83-84.
[225] *The Absence of the Book*, 146.
[226] "The magnetic force of a presence always there, not close, not distant, not familiar, not strange, deprived of center, a sort of space that assimilates everything and keeps nothing." *The Book to Come*, 247.

Literature is not deliberate obfuscation, but imaginary; it is fiction.[227] The imaginary is the condition for the improbable or unthinkable, which allows literary reading to unfold a space of nothing, devoid of meaningful content. *L'oeuvre* implies the absence of the book; it requires it. However, the book is not obsolete. "The book constitutes the condition for every possibility of reading."[228] So, the book must precede *l'oeuvre*, but there is only the achievement of pure art where the book has withdrawn. This absence is a withdrawal from the worldly plane of comprehension or reflection and the familiarity of real factual knowledge. Since *l'oeuvre* never precedes the book, the book cannot be said to contain *l'oeuvre*, but "rather it is outside the book, though it is enclosed in it, not so much its exterior as a reference to an outside that does not concern the book."[229] This space, which is a kind of 'outside,' is the space of literature.

Since we cannot know determinately what art is, writer and reader remain ignorant and forgetful:

> And just as to be an 'artist' is not to know that art already exists, that there is already a world, so reading, seeing, hearing the work of art demands more ignorance than knowledge. It requires a knowledge endowed with an immense ignorance and a gift which is not given ahead of time, which has each time to be received and acquired in forgetfulness of it, and also lost.[230]

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[227] "This is not to say that the poetic work seeks out obscurity in order to disconcert everyday comprehension. We are simply situating, between the book which is there and the work which is never there in advance—between the book which is the hidden work and the work which can only be affirmed in the palpable thickness of this manifest concealment—a violent rupture: the passage, that is, from the world where everything has more or less meaning, where there is obscurity and clarity, into a space where, properly speaking, nothing has meaning yet, toward which nevertheless everything which does have meaning returns as toward its origin." *The Space of Literature*, 195-196.
[228] *The Absence of the Book*, 146.
[229] *The Absence of the Book*, 147.
[230] *The Space of Literature*, 192.

Blanchot describes reading's essential forgetfulness in two ways. First, a reader must be ignorant of art's existence. Second, forgetfulness means forgetting the world of the real exists, a worldly amnesia that allows for the eruption of art in the strange void space wherein it self-subsists. "Each encounter with the work *is* new in the sense that it brings about a singular opening of an inexhaustible reserve," meaning the workless reserve of the imaginary (I will return to this point in a later section).[231] Forgetfulness and ignorance may be conceived in terms of wayward desire; "I think the writer desires nothing," writes Blanchot.[232] The reader's desire must also be nothing if nothing is the imaginary alien world of the artwork. Forgetfulness is the gift of impossibility. Impossibility belongs to *l'oeuvre* and the reader must concede to literature's impossibility, to its 'impossible project.'[233]

Reading is freedom; the "freedom that welcomes, consents, says yes, can only say yes, and in the space opened by this yes, lets the work's overwhelming decisiveness affirm itself, lets be its affirmation that it is—and nothing more."[234] Freedom in the form of a yes—reading in the literary mode—is also freedom in the sense of impotentiality, openness. This space is not aimed at, nor seized; it is what remains from a profound unconcern and laborless ignorance conditioned by the alien world of the story.

Reading involves a unique encounter. Its passive yes of unconcern occurs in conjunction with *l'oeuvre*'s refusal of cultural determinations. Literature belongs to no

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[231] *Blanchot's Communism*, 65.
[232] *The Book to Come*, 247.
[233] Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Maurice Blanchot: Philosopher-Novelist," *Chicago Review* 15, no. 2 (Autumn, 1961): 11. Hereafter cited as *Philosopher-Novelist*.
[234] *The Space of Literature*, 194.

age exclusively, it is timeless. "Our impression that works are ageless expresses, by forgetting it, what makes the work always accede to presence for the first time in its reading—its unique reading, each time the first and each time only."[235] Here the ignorant first-reading of literature is the confirmation of *l'oeuvre*'s unbounded and unrestricted essence, one that is affirmed by the unconcern of reading's freedom. The essential freedom of reading in the form of a 'yes,' means the affirmation of an unforeseeable, inevitable, and unique revelation.[236]

Blanchot plays with this threatening communication of *l'oeuvre* in his book *Thomas the Obscure* (*Thomas L'Obscure*, 1941), which is considered a *récit* [tale or narrative].[237] Geoffrey Hartman describes this book's subject as being art and consciousness; "Thomas is fighting, like the writer, with consciousness itself."[238] In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot indicates that the reader is also implicated in a struggle:

> Even if it demands of the reader that he enter a zone where he can scarcely breathe and where the ground slips out from under his feet—and even if, leaving aside these stormy approaches, reading still seems to be participation in that open violence, the work—nonetheless, in itself it is tranquil and silent presence, the calm center of measureless excess, the silent yes at the eye of every storm.[239]

This zone of excess is the unbounded and indeterminate space of art, a space of nothingness without content. To read is to be fascinated by an immobilizing fixation on art's void, meaning the space of literature.

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[235] *The Space of Literature*, 202.
[236] *The Space of Literature*, 196-197.
[237] "The récit is a confessional narrative, a kind of dramatic monologue in prose." *Philosopher-Novelist*, 7.
[238] *Philosopher-Novelist*, 3.
[239] *The Space of Literature*, 196.

The reader's state of non-imposition or unconcern is similar to a position of waiting to be devoured as described in the fourth chapter of *Thomas the Obscure*, where we find Thomas reading:

> He was reading. He was reading with unsurpassable meticulousness and attention. In relation to every symbol, he was in the position of the male praying mantis about to be devoured by the female. They looked at each other. The words, coming forth from the book which was taking on the power of life and death, exercised a gentle and peaceful attraction over the glance which played over them.[240]

This glance is the forgetfulness that overcomes and overtakes the reader, who is always anonymous.[241] Just as the female praying mantis devours the male after an intimate encounter, so does the book in a certain sense devour the reader's personality or worldly comportment. Literature is always impersonal, devoid of personality. As Blanchot's narrator describes, "it was a story emptied of events, emptied to the point that every memory and all perspective were eliminated, and nevertheless drawing from this absence its inflexible direction which seemed to carry everything away in the irresistible movement toward an imminent catastrophe," meaning to the point where conventional thoughts and personality no longer apply.[242] This is the threat posed to the reader, who freely and willingly accepts it.

Thomas continues to be gripped by reading's hold:

> He was locked in combat with something inaccessible, foreign, something of which he could say: That doesn't exist…and which nevertheless filled him with terror as he sensed it wandering about in the region of his

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[240] Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, trans. Robert Lamberton (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988): 25. Hereafter cited as *Thomas the Obscure*.
[241] *The Space of Literature*, 193.
[242] *Thomas the Obscure*, 50-51.

> solitude… It was a modulation of that which did not exist, a different mode of being absent, another void in which he was coming to life.[243]

Reading is non-productive freedom. It makes the book disappear and thus gives life to the void: "reading simply 'makes' the book, the work, become a work beyond the man who produced it, the experience that is expressed in it and even beyond all the artistic resources which tradition has made available… It is freedom."[244] Reading, through its consensual unconcern, allows the book to become a work of art. Neither the language deployed by *l'oeuvre* nor the reading itself subordinates art from its protected immanent existence; literary language is its own and "whoever asserts literature in itself asserts nothing."[245]

Freedom, the consenting yes to the power of *l'oeuvre*, relates a unique power to impossibility. This relation has three modes: the reader makes the book into an artwork beyond the author, beyond experience or work, and beyond any artistic resources.[246] The significance of these three criteria for *l'oeuvre*'s existence is that they permit literature to remain unsubordinated to human productivity.

Artistic freedom is movement: "it is free movement, if it is not subject to anything, if it does not depend on anything already present."[247] Movement, as it appears in Blanchot's writings, designates something that eludes conceptual understanding; it is

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[243] *Thomas the Obscure*, 27.
[244] *The Space of Literature*, 194.
[245] *The Book to Come*, 201.
[246] Reading's freedom and *l'oeuvre*'s impossibility coalesce to 'make' the book into *l'oeuvre* beyond objectivity, subjectivity, and any dialectic of meaningful action.
[247] Maurice Blanchot, "Reading," from *The Gaze of Orpheus and other literary essays*, 91-98, ed. P. Adams Sitney, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981): 95.

"a common name for what most deeply resists systematic, scientific explication."[248] Literature is never static; "the work of art is never connected to repose, it has nothing to do with the tranquil certitude which makes masterpieces familiar; it does not take shelter in museums."[249] The idea of the impossibility of rest is paramount for understanding movement's essence because it is what finally does away with the subject-object distinction. "'Subjects' and 'objects' take up positions in the world—they are posed and therefore capable of repose" and so if reading does not conform to reality's fixity, then it can have no such binary distinction.[250]

4.3. Dreaming and Reading

> *The dream is perhaps close to literature, at least to its enigmas, its glamour, and its illusions.*[251]

What are we to make of all the singular experience of reading posed by Blanchot's account of reading literature, especially since it is so important for his notion of 'the absence of the book'? Where is the political in all of this? Before I can answer the latter question, I must address the first. My efforts at explaining Blanchot's account of reading lead me to formulate the following working definition of reading: it is a free and unconcerned movement wherein *l'oeuvre* comes to subsist, like life given to the void, by way of the unreality of the imaginary, fascination, and an anonymous reader. Described in this way, I think it is appropriate to view Blanchot's depiction of reading as a kind of

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[248] Herschel Farbman, "Blanchot on Dreams and Writing," *SubStance* 34, no. 2 (2005): 125. Hereafter cited as *Blanchot on Dreams and Writing*.
[249] *The Space of Literature*, 204.
[250] *Blanchot on Dreams and Writing*, 131.
[251] *Friendship*, 142.

dreaming, since dreaming is itself another way of conceiving of his nondialectical movement. Reading's and dreaming's movement is the movement of freedom at play in impotentiality. Although Blanchot is interested in something rather remote from Sartrean committed literature, I have chosen Sartre's account of dreaming from *The Imaginary* (1940) as a companion study to elucidate the way in which reading and dreaming can be viewed as synonymous experiences.[252] I will develop this position in the following with the intent of showing how dreaming and reading emphasize *désoeuvrement*, which is the heart of Blanchot's notion of community and wherein the political relation with reading resides.

There is nothing magical about literature. In order to gain access to literature's realization we do not need to be tuned-in to special mystic powers. Although reading could be confused with a mystical encounter wherein an otherly realm (the outside) is manifested giving the reader some privileged access to it, this is simply not Blanchot's view. The encounter with the outside is not a divine revelation, but something much more simple and mundane. Reading, if it is like anything, is like dreaming because both are ineffectual, unreflective, and narrative based. The dream and *l'oeuvre* are similar in that "it [either the dream or *l'oeuvre*] is always lacking in relation to the conditions of actual existence: being, but impossible."[253]

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[252] "Sartre saw perfectly that if literature seems to open up to man a way out and help the accomplishment of his mastery, when everything has gone well, literature suddenly discovers the absence of outcome that is unique to it, or else it discovers the absolute failure of this success and itself dissolves in the insignificance of an academic career." *The Book to Come*, 214-215.

[253] *The Book to Come*, 230.

For Sartre, dreams belong to the realm of the imaginary. Dreams employ imagination, which, to use his terminology, is an unreflective or imaging consciousness. As unreflective consciousness, dreams are incommensurable with the consciousness of understanding and comprehension. Understanding, which implies going beyond oneself, belongs to reflective consciousness.[254] Therefore, unreflective consciousness—the imagination—is closed to the utterance *I am dreaming*. *I am dreaming* is an assertion belonging to consciousness in a reflective mode.

In *The Imaginary*, Sartre states that "every dream image appears with its own world."[255] Dream images are not related to each other or to other images, such as those given by perception; they are not the same as mental images. The type of imagery involved in dreaming is uniquely imaginary in kind. Therefore, everything must be transformed into the imaginary, which is not real, but irreal.

The dream form is irreal: "the dream is a privileged experience that can help us to conceive what a consciousness would be like that had lost its 'being-in-the-world' and had, at the same time, been deprived of the category of the real."[256] The irreal is lacking in both temporal and spatial determinations. It thus belongs to an imaginary world, a world wholly different from the perceptual world of wakefulness. The imaginary world requires impersonality (effacement of the dreamer); as Sartre states, "the imaginary world is entirely isolated, I can enter it only by irrealizing myself."[257] Therefore, when one

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[254] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1968): 18.
[255] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: a Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2004): 166. Hereafter cited as *The Imaginary*.
[256] *The Imaginary*, 175.
[257] *The Imaginary*, 132.

passes from the wakeful state to the dream world, everything is transformed into the imaginary, and the vantage point of the dream is the denial of the object world—a nihilation—from a particular point of view, meaning that of the dreamer: "suddenly introduce a real person into the dream and the dream completely falls apart."[258]

Who dreams the dream then? The dream transforms all into the imaginary. Hence consciousness' deprivation of being-in-the-world. Temenuga Trifonova states that, for Sartre, dreams are impersonal consciousnesses: "dreams and hallucinations nihilate the subject-object distinction, replacing it with an impersonal spontaneity or an impersonal consciousness."[259] Furthermore, Sartre's impersonal dreamer, whose consciousness is in an unreflective mode, is consistent with his early work in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1937), wherein he asserts, "there is no *I* on the unreflected level."[260] Unreflective consciousness is the level of impersonal life.

Sartre's phenomenological psychology of the imagination from *The Imaginary* helps establish the relatedness of two basic imaginative events: reading and dreaming. Neither the dream nor reading is an apprehension of reality; "it is above all a *story* and we take the kind of passionate interest in it that the naïve reader takes when reading a novel."[261] I am mindful of the following fragment on dreaming as a preliminary foundation for developing a theory of reading as a kind of dreaming:

> Where I am dreaming, something wakes, a vigilance which is the unexpectedness of the dream and where in fact there keeps watch, in a

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[258] *The Imaginary*, 170.
[259] Temenuga Trifonova, *The Image in French Philosophy* (New York: Rodopi, 2007): 100.
[260] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hall and Wang, 1960): 48.
[261] *The Imaginary*, 175.

> present without duration, a presence without subject, the un-presence to which no being ever accedes and whose grammatical formulation would be a third person.[262]

While I cannot grasp or establish myself in the dream, this is exactly why sleep is of importance: "in sleep, the sleeper collects him or herself, for the sake of the enterprises of the day into a single position, a resting place in which he or she is a grounded and grounding subject, at home in the world."[263]

Sleep is on the plane of personal potential and characterizes a way in which we are capable of fixing our place in the world.[264] Dreaming is not a point of stoppage (i.e. rest), but a relentless movement of instability preventing complete rest. "The dream is an allusion to a refusal to sleep within sleep—an allusion to the impossibility of sleeping which sleep becomes in the dream."[265] The dream is a refusal of personality; "he who dreams sleeps, but already he who dreams is he who sleeps no longer. He is not another, some other person, but the premonition of the other, of that which cannot say 'I' any more, which recognizes itself neither in itself nor in others."[266]

In accordance with his operating law of the imagination—that *there is no imaginary world*—Sartre's irreal dream world is a kind of 'world' that has no reality.[267] In order to distinguish between the variety of meanings signified by 'world,' I propose to describe the story—whose unfolding constitutes the world of reading and dreaming—as a

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[262] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 59.
[263] Herschel Farbman, "Dream and Writing in Blanchot," In *The Other Night: Dreaming, Writing, and Restlessness in Twentieth-Century Literature*, 45-68 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008): 59. Hereafter cited as *The Other Night*.
[264] *The Space of Literature*, 265-266.
[265] *The Space of Literature*, 185.
[266] *The Space of Literature*, 267.
[267] *The Imaginary*, 167.

scene.[268] In order to avoid applying determinacy to happenings that both Blanchot and Sartre explicitly note for their indeterminacy, 'scene' seems more appropriate than 'world.' Also, a scene does not need an actual moment in time. The idea of the scene still allows for a discussion, while simultaneously describing the vantage point of the dreamer and reader as uninvolved and inactive. The reader and dreamer are therefore something like an impersonal audience member, for example, and the emphasis should be on their impersonality and their community.

According to Herschel Farbman, "dreams are, in Blanchot's account, images of the absence of the subject of the experience of dreaming."[269] Or as Foucault puts it: "a language without an assignable subject… a personal pronoun without a person."[270] Neither reading nor dreaming involves a conversation constituted by an interior language because the dream, the story, or "the narrative… unfolds a placeless place that is outside all speech and writing."[271] While being engaged in reading means being outside of any possibility for action, Blanchot's ignorant reader is like Sartre's dreamer; he does not utter *I am reading*. "The fact that we are in the position of strangers in the dream, this is what first makes it strange; and we are strangers because the I of the dreamer does not have the meaning of a real I."[272] Since forgetfulness—forgetfulness implicates literary reading as always a first reading—is required of the reader, the same can be said of

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[268] "*A Scene?—This term is ill-chosen, for what it supposedly names is unrepresentable, and escapes fiction as well; yet 'scene' is pertinent in that it allows one at least not to speak as if of an event taking place at a moment in time.*" *The Writing of the Disaster*, 114.
[269] *Blanchot on Dreams and Writing*, 133.
[270] Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from the Outside," In *Foucault/Blanchot*, 7-60, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987): 48. Hereafter cited as *The Thought from the Outside*.
[271] *The Thought from the Outside*, 52.
[272] *Friendship*, 144.

Blanchot's dreamer, meaning that dreams come to us as forgetfulness. Forgetfulness takes its home in the imaginary world of the scene. But if a dream and a first reading simply *happen*, then what kind of happenings are these? The answer, I believe, can be found in movement.

On reading, imagery, and the notion of an imaginary world, Sartre writes against any idea of interruption:

> Images appear with the stops and failures of reading. The rest of the time, when the reader is engrossed, there is no mental image… A multitude of images is the characteristic of an inattentive and frequently interrupted reading… Actually, in reading as in the theater, we are in the presence of a world and we attribute to that world just as much existence as we do to that of the theater; that is to say, a complete existence of the irreal.[273]

The scene: just as dreaming is the impossibility of sleep or repose, reading is an incessant movement. Therefore, the reader-dreamer is destitute according to the movement of *désoeuvrement*.

Désoeuvrement is the absence of work, inoperativeness, and the literary artwork itself.[274] *Désoeuvrement* is manifested when we read a book, that is, when the book disappears and the narrative unfolds like a dream. *Désoeuvrement* is a "non-working reserve that cannot be overcome by work."[275] As it cannot be overcome, it remains, but not stagnantly or unimportantly. *Désoeuvrement* confronts us with its exigency and demands a response. Instead of responding by way of a capacity to overcome and attempt

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[273] *The Imaginary*, 63.
[274] Eleanor Kaufman, *The Delirium of Praise: Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 2001): 8. Hereafter cited as *The Delirium of Praise*.
[275] *Blanchot's Communism*, 2.

to treat *désoeuvrement* as an object of knowledge, 'the exigency of worklessness' establishes of an impossible, impersonal, and unknowable relation:

> Non-knowledge offers itself as the fundamental exigency to which one must respond; no longer this non-knowledge that is still only a mode of comprehension (knowledge put in brackets by knowledge itself), but the mode of relating or of holding oneself in a relation (be it by way of existence) where relation is 'impossible.'[276]

4.4. The Community of Readers

> *Even before I begin to read, I am already part of the community that encloses all the books like angels with intertwined wings.*[277]

A reader never entirely exhausts the book because the book in its material reality is the object that creates community. "It [the book] is there as a web of stable meanings, as the assertiveness which it owes to a preestablished language, and as the enclosure, too, formed around it by the community of all readers, among whom I, who have not read it, already have a place."[278] The preestablished language evidenced by the book implies a community, a community that is based upon the framework of predetermined signification. However, the book that has not been read—the literary book of fiction—is exactly what the reader wants to read, since it offers the unknown; "the reader has no use for a work written for him."[279] Readers are communally implicated in not having read, but instilled with the potential to do so. The community of readers is the community of potential readers and for this reason the community is always impotential. The reader is always anonymous, *l'oeuvre* dismisses its author, and the community of readers is also

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[276] *Affirmation and Passion of Negative Thought*, 47.
[277] *Blanchot's Communism*, 65.
[278] *The Space of Literature*, 195.
[279] *Literature and the Right to Death*, 27.

necessarily impersonal. Blanchot describes reading as allowing the book to be written *again*, but this time it is 'written' (perhaps in the sense of 'being undergone') without the suffering, anguish, and weight of the writing experience itself.[280] If the reader is responsible for the gift of *l'oeuvre*'s existence and is thus implicated into a community of impersonal readers, then the existence of *l'oeuvre* itself should be understood in terms of community.

4.5. The Blanchotian Community

> *Communism is this... the incommensurable communication where everything that is public—and then everything is public—ties us to the other (others) through what is closest to us.*[281]

Blanchot's community of readers is indirectly political; it poses a question to politics without offering a supplementary theory. Community functions like the question of art, meaning it puts itself into question and exposes itself to indeterminacy, which favors *désoeuvrement* as essential. I say that community, here, is indirectly political because its relationship with politics has to do with unpredictability and indeterminacy. Blanchot's impotential community is absolutely distinct from familiar forms of the political, like totalitarianism or anarchism. "The affirmation of Blanchotian communism is not simply an anarchistic declaration of war against existing political systems, but a way of holding open a space for a future that is not the dead repetition of the past."[282] Thus, Blanchot's notion of community is essentially anti-institutional. Literary

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[280] *The Space of Literature*, 193.
[281] *Friendship*, 149.
[282] *Blanchot's Communism*, xi.

communism, the reading community, or community in general, mean the refusal of both institution and convention.[283] Furthermore:

> The community is always and already de-instituted or, better, *destituted*. The work of art gives itself to be experienced such that the horizon of any community of respondents, even the world of a Heideggerian historical people, trembles as it attests to a division beyond what Heidegger calls strife in the experience of work.[284]

Literary community is paradoxical by way of the *désoeuvrement* that opens a space for the community of dispersed readers who are related only by that which they have not read. Readers who grant literature existence form an impossible impersonal community.

Just as art can never be the aim of an artist, and death (the *other* impossibility) cannot be the aim of someone attempting suicide, a community cannot ever be the object of a group's will coalescing.[285] That which is so heavily dependent on nothingness can *never* be made into a deliberately willed action. Blanchotian community "is a form of community that leaves few concrete traces but whose fleeting depth is nonetheless conveyed."[286] It is conveyed through Blanchot's formulation of friendship because friendship favors the unrestrictedness of impersonality. "Such a recasting of friendship as something at once singular, plural, personal, and impersonal extends the concept of friendship to generally uncharted realms."[287] Friendship, like community, is paradoxical. While friendship is commonly held to be a relation among at least two individual

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[283] *Blanchot's Communism*, 111.
[284] *Blanchot's Communism*, 66.
[285] "The error of suicide is to think death is an event which occurs in the normal course of time; it is the impatient attempt to die at a particular moment, determining the uncertain futurity of death's approach." *Blanchot's Vigilance*, 20.
[286] *The Delirium of Praise*, 35.
[287] *The Delirium of Praise*, 45.

persons, Blanchot's friendship is the impersonal plurality of literary community; it cannot be reduced to personality, individuality, or the singularity of the communal pair or multiple. This irreducibility inherent in community finds its clearest political example in the events of May 1968.

4.6. Community and 1968

> *Insomniac vigilance is Blanchot's central concern from at least* The Space of Literature *to the last of his writings. By 1968, the concern was widely shared. Utterly restless vigilance (as opposed to the repose of knowledge found in 'totalizing' systematic thinking) became the only acceptable ethical position for the generation of Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault in its struggle to wake from a thousand metaphysical slumbers.*[288]

For literature to be literature it must be open toward the community of readers. Perhaps it calls for a new politics. This new politics of Blanchotian community must be anti-totalitarian. Totalitarian political systems are formed by and are dependent upon work. Having witnessed the actuality of totalitarianism in German occupied France, Blanchot emphasizes a need to avoid the politics of power and work. Blanchotian community, which is never the product of work, makes community something like the artwork inasmuch as neither community nor literature are achieved through labor, meaning they are not manufactured. If we follow the paradoxical example of *l'oeuvre*, then we avoid the nasty situation of a totalitarian politics.[289]

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[288] *The Other Night*, 51.

[289] Instead of favoring art, Bataille's writings from the 1930s emphasize the erotic as a refusal of fascism and communism, both of which he deemed to be equally unsatisfactory political 'options.'

If we turn our attention to the formation of groups in explicitly (i.e. stereotypical) political situations, such as the student protests in France in 1968 for example, what becomes evident is that a political community need not be united under the rhetoric of a partisan agenda, a rallying speech, or a series of common and definable goals. Rather than these being the possible basis for the group, in 1968 we encounter a group founded on *désoeuvrement* (which is *impossible*). "The participants during May 1968 were not protesting about anything in particular. It was not a question of a political project, only a general dissatisfaction with a world that does not permit the extraordinary criss-crossing of relations at play amongst the participants."[290] Where the participants could not be defined personally or by what they explicitly shared, Blanchot believed nothing but a malaise can be explicated from these events and that this is what constitutes the radical possibility of an impersonal community (of which the events of 1968 serve as a contemporary and paradigmatic case).

Blanchot briefly addresses the events of 1968 in an essay on Foucault written in the spirit of friendship shortly after Foucault's death. Entitled *Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him* (*Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*, 1986), the essay begins:

> A few personal words. Let me say first of all that I had no personal relationship with Michel Foucault. I never met him, except one time, in the courtyard of the Sorbonne, during the events of May '68, perhaps in June or July (but I was later told he wasn't there), when I addressed a few words to him, he himself unaware of who was speaking to him… (Whatever the detractors of May might say, it was a splendid moment, when anyone could speak to anyone else, anonymously, impersonally, welcomed with no other justification than that of being another person.) It's true that during those extraordinary events I often asked: but why isn't

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[290] *Blanchot's Communism*, 148.

> Foucault here? Thus granting him his power of attraction and underscoring the empty place he should have been occupying. But I received replies that didn't satisfy me: "he's somewhat reserved," or "he's abroad."[291]

The silence and impersonality of literature are not only important for community, but for friendship as well; "silence, like impersonality, is a defining rather than an incidental feature of friendship."[292] Instead of gathering around that which is shared and familiar, friendship should respect and greet the unknown, the exigency of *désoeuvrement*.

Impersonality is perhaps the most fundamental feature of community and friendship. Impersonality is the essence of community and friendship, so it cannot be conceived of as a negative characteristic.[293] Impersonality is at the heart of Blanchot's depiction of May 1968, where anything was possible due to the anonymity of others. In fact, Blanchot's lifestyle is a testament to the significance of this impersonality, where he figures more like a ghost in the modern technological artifice of photographs and information that is always available on the internet. "As someone who refuses all public engagements, photographs, and personal contact in the literary world, and has done so now for several decades, Blanchot is one of those rare figures about whom very few personal attributes are known."[294] However, he provides somewhat of an explanation for this lifestyle in *The Book To Come* (*Le Livre à Venir*, 1959), saying, "in the public, the friend has no place."[295]

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[291] Maurice Blanchot, "Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him," In *Foucault/Blanchot*, 61-109, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Zone Books, 1987): 63.
[292] *The Delirium of Praise*, 50.
[293] *The Delirium of Praise*, 48.
[294] *The Delirium of Praise*, 47.
[295] *The Book to Come*, 246.

CHAPTER FIVE

LITERATURE AND POLITICS

This is what is strange: passivity is never passive enough...
Perhaps only because passivity evades all formulations.[296]

Death and community are equally important for understanding Blanchot's treatment of literature and for deriving a generalized approach to politics from his writings. To simplify: death is the refusal of life and community is the refusal of personality. Since "rebellion only reintroduces war, which is to say the struggle for mastery and domination," a politics of passivity will demonstrate a radical openness to an undetermined future, instead of the perpetuation of mistakes, familiarity, theory, and violence.[297] A politics defined communally (i.e. impersonally) and founded on the *other* death—the impossibility of possibility—is the form of Blanchot's literary work, especially in *The Writing of the Disaster*; "if the work announces a kind of politics, it is beyond both the radicality of the engaged artist and the conservatism of culture."[298] As it is a new politics that concerns me herein, a politics where refusal is synonymous with passivity, Agamben will prove helpful in identifying the political and ontological significance of Blanchot's notion of literature because Agamben's development of the state of exception and the notion of bare life are closely related to the literary witnessing of catastrophe.

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[296] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 16.
[297] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 138.
[298] *Blanchot's Communism*, 46.

Generally speaking, Agamben's *Homo Sacer* concerns the relation of politics and life on the working assumption that "in Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men."[299] The relationship between life and politics is to be understood as *biopolitical* on the basis of the state of exception, which denotes the inclusion of whatever is excluded as forming the foundation of political inclusivity.[300] Agamben's immediate concern is that we recognize that "there is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion."[301] This notion of bare life, which I hold to be significant in approaching a Blanchotian politics of literature, means the fundamental status, capacity, or relation of being able to be killed without it counting as homicide, according to human law, or sacrifice, according to a divine law.[302]

Bare life is a life at its point-zero, reduced, stripped of recourse to Law. This stark abstraction of life is evident in literature, especially when considering the aforementioned discussion of death and literary language from chapter three, and specifically Blanchot's example of 'this woman.' Were it not for the (or her) elemental capacity to die, the death announced when Blanchot says 'this woman' would not have its dual significance: naming toward presence, but offering only absence, as death. "Language is thus constantly referring back to its origin in the essential bond between the existent being and

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[299] *Homo Sacer*, 7.
[300] *Homo Sacer*, 18.
[301] *Homo Sacer*, 8.
[302] Unless otherwise indicated, I will use 'Law' in place of 'human and divine law.'

the possibility of death that offers this being to language."[303] Part of the importance of 'this woman's' death—her bare life—is political in what Agamben calls the originary political relation: "the originary exception in which human life is included in the political order in being exposed to an unconditional capacity to be killed."[304] Language is the capacity to kill (i.e. negate) upon which the human self-conscious reality is founded; it insists on the significance of the political as immemorially primordial. Manifested by the accounts of both Agamben and Blanchot, the kind of life that anyone can kill is represented in language as "an object of violence that exceeds the sphere both of law and of sacrifice."[305]

The violence that anyone can perform on the *homo sacer*—the life of bare life—is possible due to the fact that this person no longer falls under the category of Law; they are excluded and set outside. "This violence—the unsanctionable kill that, in his [*homo sacer*] case, anyone may commit—is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege."[306] The violence of language inherent in its capacity to announce the 'real death,' whether in literary or everyday speech, is not accountable to Law because "it is not only that language signifies in the possible absence of its speaker and its referent; it is that a 'real death' has occurred," and this 'real death' concerns what Agamben refers to as bare life.[307]

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[303] *Crossing the Threshold*, 73.
[304] *Homo Sacer*, 85.
[305] *Homo Sacer*, 86.
[306] *Homo Sacer*, 82.
[307] *Crossing the Threshold*, 73.

Impersonality—the notion that is so significant in terms of the death of the author—also points to the political import of literature. Authors who undergo a necessary death, a descent into impersonality, are also exposed to the originary political exception and thus they constitute an important aspect of the political dimension of literature. The author undergoes his or her own sacrifice, but this authorial sacrifice is not to be understood as a sacrifice in terms of a productive expenditure:

> It is toward this *nothing* that all literary powers ascend, as if toward the spring that must dry them up; and it absorbs them less to try to be expressed through them than by a pointless and ineffectual consumption. This is a singular phenomenon. The writer is summoned by his anguish to an actual sacrifice of himself. He must expend and consume the forces that make him a writer. And this expenditure must be real… The art he uses is an art in which perfect success and complete failure must appear at once, the fullness of means and their irremediable degeneration, the reality and the nothingness of results.[308]

There is no doubt that this authorial sacrifice, which is sacrifice in the sense of the absence of sacrifice or 'the unsacrificeable,' demonstrates the political import of literary sacrifice, where that which is unsacrificeable is suspended, excluded. The reason the death of the author cannot be a productive expenditure is due to the activity of writing itself, which in literature is never more than the deployment of *désoeuvrement*, a useless movement. Therefore it is more appropriate to describe literary sacrifice in terms of the unsacrificeable. Jean-Luc Nancy also suggests that the political significance of literature is related to sacrifice: "a link between sacrifice and art, and no doubt literature in particular, unarguably runs throughout—or doubles—the Western process of the

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[308] Maurice Blanchot, *Faux Pas*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001): 5.

spiritualization of sacrifice."[309] Literary sacrifice is sacrifice's suspension, preventing it from being overcome dialectically so as to make sacrifice *be* impotentially.

The space of literature resembles the space of the concentration camps. "The camps represent an absence of sacrifice. They bring into play an unexpected tension between sacrifice and the absence of sacrifice."[310] Both literature and the camps are capable of demonstrating sacrifice's suspension in a place devoid of Law, where extinction and inexistence threaten. In literature and the death camps we are confronting a space that is unsacrificeable. What we are dealing with is the utter destitution of identity: "the very nature of Blanchot's thought is to unravel the entangling bonds of identity."[311]

The Nazi death camps constitute a topic taken up by Agamben in a latter portion of *Homo Sacer* and also by Blanchot indirectly in *The Writing of the Disaster*. According to Agamben, the attempted extermination of the Jews represents "a flagrant case of a *homo sacer*," and the killing in the camps only affirms the capacity to be killed; hence, it concerns the fundamental political relation of bare life.[312] For Blanchot, the camps point to the space of suspension, where passivity is a nondialectical and literary revelation:

> Passivity. We can evoke situations of passivity: affliction; the final crushing force of the totalitarian State, with its camps; the servitude of the slave bereft of a master, fallen beneath need; or dying, as forgetfulness of death. In all these cases we recognize, even though it be with a falsifying, approximating knowledge, common traits: anonymity, loss of self; loss of

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[309] Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," in *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks, trans. Richard Stamp and Simon Sparks, 51-77 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003): 65. Hereafter cited as *The Unsacrificeable*.
[310] *The Unsacrificeable*, 69.
[311] Garth Gillan, "Levinas on Blanchot: Commentary," *SubStance* 5, no. 14 (1976): 51.
[312] *Homo Sacer*, 114.

> all sovereignty but also of all subordination; utter uprootedness, exile, the impossibility of presence, dispersion (separation).[313]

Situations of passivity, like those demonstrated by the space of the concentration camp, evidence bare life, and the catastrophe that confronts us in Blanchot's theory of literature. This catastrophe should be treated as a paradox.

For Blanchot, literature is ineffectual: it is a labor of dispossession that makes nothing.[314] All it does is transform or metamorphose into the imaginary, and this utter lack of work means that literature's space—*l'oeuvre*'s being—is that of an inoperative worklessness, *désoeuvrement*, or impotentiality. As Agamben writes, "the only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted."[315] Since literature lacks possibility itself, it must be freedom: unadulterated and absolute passivity, an inexhaustible potentiality. Blanchot's own description of literature, which depicts it as incessant and interminable, thus demands a politics of passivity instead of a politics of activity.[316]

Agamben describes refusal as the rejection of sovereignty. He writes, "the strongest objection against the principle of sovereignty is contained in Melville's Bartleby, the scrivener who, with his 'I would prefer not to,' resists every possibility of deciding between potentiality and the potentiality not to."[317] The resistance of Bartleby's indecision provides an example linking impotentiality and passivity (here it is Bartleby's inactivity) with refusal, that is, with Blanchot's essence of the political. Indecision is at

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[313] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 17-18.
[314] *The Necessity of Writing Death and Imagination*, 233.
[315] *Homo Sacer*, 62.
[316] *The Space of Literature*, 26-28.
[317] *Homo Sacer*, 48.

the core of passivity because it is antithetical to determination.[318] In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot also considers the political import of Melville's Bartleby:

> "I would prefer not to" expresses: an abstention which has never had to be decided upon, which precedes all decisions and which is not so much a denial as, more than that, an abdication… "I would prefer not to" belongs to the infiniteness of patience; no dialectical intervention can take hold of such passivity.[319]

Because refusal is indecision as impotentiality, it precedes determination. Therefore, the essence of the political for Blanchot is this pre-decision capacity for passive indecision, a state of impotential passivity resistant to dialectical appropriation. Passivity must be measureless since it is nondialectically pre-political (i.e. pre-decision). To qualify this characterization, Blanchot stresses the connection between situations of passivity and situations of disaster and it is the disaster in which I will now concentrate.

For Blanchot, when the *global negation* proper to *l'oeuvre* implicates everything and everyone, it is on the basis of this primordial capacity to be killed: the exception of bare life. Death is a political concept according to bare life by definition and thus language is inherently political. However, it is not merely that language implies the political, but that this political relation be passive rather than active. Consequently, literature must evidence a politics of passivity, a politics of catastrophe, or, as Blanchot would (perhaps) have it: a politics of disaster; "it is what escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes."[320]

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[318] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 17.
[319] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 17.
[320] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 7.

A politics of passivity is first and foremost a politics in complete distinction to the politics of action and decision. It is a politics that predicts, foreshadows, and determines nothing, but sustains itself as a radical openness to new possibility through its impotentiality. This is why it is a politics of catastrophic vigilance. However, this vigilance is not to be viewed as or inferred to be negative or anarchistic. Rather, it is the willingness to be vigilant toward the impotential for a radical calling-into-question, for a catastrophe. This is why Blanchot would prefer a politics of passivity, especially in terms of the essence of literature and the literary experience; it is indecision, unimpositional:

> Passivity neither consents nor refuses: neither yes nor no, without preference, it alone suits the limitless of the neutral, the unmastered patience which endures time without resisting. The passive condition is no condition: it is an unconditional which no protection shelters, which no destruction touches, which is as remote from submission as it is bereft of initiative; with it, nothing begins.[321]

The politics of catastrophe is ineffectual, like literature, and therefore shares its essence of the impossibility at the heart of *l'oeuvre*. Here, there is only the impending, but it forever eludes determination, and is therefore that which Blanchot calls the disaster, or as discussed in chapter three, the *other* death (both of which are nondialectical).

The catastrophe is never something we are or can become contemporary with; it cannot be sought out and achieved. This is the same issue confronted by the artist regarding their intentionality and the capacity for their personality to subvert *l'oeuvre*:

> The disaster is separate; that which is most separate. When disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive of it in the order of living time, belongs to the disaster, the disaster has always withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no

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[321] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 29-30.

> future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment.[322]

The impossibility of this politics, the essence of literature, of catastrophe, can *only* be treated as a paradox: "not to answer is the rule—or not to receive any answer. This does not suffice to stop questions. But when the answer is the absence of any answer, then the question in turn becomes the absence of any question (the mortified question)."[323] The radicalized questioning at play here, meaning in both politics and literature, is a capacity to refuse; it is like the silence that always eludes determination, but is nevertheless *there*.

What we fundamentally encounter in literature is not a politics determined by power, but by power's absence. Power is defined as (or by) work, production, and, especially in the present-day by technology or machines. "Power in the broadest sense—capacity, ability—is like the power of the group leader: always related to domination. *Macht* [doing, as in power or strength] is the means, the machine, the functioning of the possible."[324] What I have called the politics of activity is essentially synonymous with the politics of power; both are driven by decision, initiative, and the desire for (self) reproduction.[325]

The politics of literature is a politics adhering to the always-impending exigency of disaster or catastrophe in terms of a diligent vigilance. As the only means of comportment, "the disaster alone holds mastery at a distance," but not in the sense of

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[322] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 1-2.
[323] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 31.
[324] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 8.
[325] "Mechanical production is essentially capable of reproduction: this is the meaning of the machine." *Friendship*, 43.

seizing-the-day or becoming-master.[326] This is a politics of instability and disarray, both of which are features of the literary endeavor.

The new politics—what I have been referring to as a politics of passivity—is implicated with the impossibility at the heart of literature. Literature demonstrates the decay of the will, an immobilizing loss of power, and thus catastrophe. The only activity attributable to literature is that of writing and it belongs to the absence of work and possibility; "writing without any reference to power: this supposes that one go by way of writing."[327] Essentially, literature provides a dissimulation of the politics of activity or power by being catastrophic: "I can no longer appeal to any ethics, any experience, any practice whatever—save that of some counter-living, which is to say an un-practice, or (perhaps) a work of writing."[328] Writing is thus indirectly political: "Writing, since it persists in a relation of irregularity itself with itself—and thus the utterly other—does not know what will become of it politically: this is its intransitivity, its necessarily indirect relation to the political."[329]

Like literature, the politics of passivity is a politics of failure: "failure is inevitable, but the byways of failure are revelatory, for these contradictions are the reality of the literary task."[330] Writing that produces the absence of meaning does not produce a categorical product, but rather a vigilant approach: the openness of questioning. The politics of passivity, vigilance, or watchfulness, is a form of passivity as careful

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[326] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 9.
[327] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 12.
[328] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 26.
[329] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 78.
[330] *The Book to Come*, 45.

mindfulness. If anything could be considered its slogan, then perhaps Blanchot has written it best for his literate community: "*keep watch over absent meaning*."[331]

[331] *The Writing of the Disaster*, 42.

CONCLUSION

> *The artist and the poet seem to have received this mission: to call us obstinately back to error, to turn us toward that space where everything we propose, everything we have acquired, everything we are, all that opens upon the earth and in the sky, returns to insignificance, and where what approach is the nonserious and the nontrue.*[332]

Blanchot's entire literary endeavor begins with the question of art and its possibility. What is art? How is something called art possible? Can we talk about it in any meaningfully coherent way? I have emphasized the political and ontological implications of the question of art. 'What is art' inquires as to the being of the artwork; it asks about the ontological status of the artwork. Also, if the question is about art, then it is a politically charged question for two reasons. First, literature has been historically conditioned and implicated politically, for example, as a means of expression or through the censorship of contentious material. Secondly, art is inextricably linked to the political through the essential refusal that Blanchot stresses throughout his writings spanning more than half a century. Yet what most concerns Blanchot is how *l'oeuvre* possesses the autonomy of refusal.

But, what is literature? *L'oeuvre* is this question, but not its answer. For Blanchot, *l'oeuvre* is not an instrument of communication; neither is it a useful output for action. If literature acts, then it acts ineffectively because what could be more subversive than the insubordination of questioning in a chain of means and ends? *L'oeuvre* as the question of

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[332] *The Space of Literature*, 247.

literature's very possibility is the refusal of subordination, usefulness, and instrumentality. Fundamentally, Blanchot's literature is *not* committed to anything whatsoever outside of itself.

Through *l'oeuvre*'s lack of commitment, literature exists as a power of contestation. This is the meaning of the question of literature: the refusal of the grounds for choice or action in any decisive sense. Before there can be political action, there must be this foundation conditioning action; preceding an affirmative or negative action is always a refusal of both options, but this is not always clear. However, refusal is clearly manifested in literature. Art exists as this power of contestation and thus artworks have a characteristically political ontology, which I have elaborated through the thread of impossibility.

I have addressed the impossibility of Blanchot's theory of literature in three ways as it concerns three other major philosophers. Aristotle's impotentiality allows *l'oeuvre* to have its peculiar ontological status of not-yet-having-obtained, an existence uniquely impossible to conceptualize through traditional categories of process. As impotentiality, *l'oeuvre* has no necessary existence; it is not woven into the determined fabric of nature and for this reason the possibility of something called art is fascinating. Hegel's dialectic, driven by desire and possibility of negation, is the relevant background for establishing what cannot be worked upon in any meaningful sense, how art remits us to the impotence of impossibility, and why Blanchot's literature is the place of *désoeuvrement*. As the absence of work, *l'oeuvre* cannot be something someone is intent on producing; *l'oeuvre* is precisely that which eludes being a product of an intentional consciousness. If one

cannot work toward the production of literature, then artistic activity is characterized by uselessness. So, the making of the artwork is distinct from the making in technological achievement, as I have shown through the medium of Heidegger's essays on *techne*. Since art is not a useful rendering, like technology, it has a separate ontological status outside of the category of work as work's absence, *désoeuvrement*.

Blanchot's theory of art and literature as utterly destitute and out of work is reminiscent of death, but not death in the commonplace (i.e. possible) and merely biological meaning. Blanchot accepts the reality of a biological death, but in perhaps what constitutes an atheistic move he affirms the importance of an unthinkable, impossible *other* death; this is the death in literature, the impossibility of possibility.

Art is not dead; it is not a dated medium or category. Rather, art confronts us with the reality of something that cannot be assimilated by consciousness; this is the *other* death with the autonomy of refusal. In affirming literature's autonomy of refusal through the death that is impossible, Blanchot depicts *l'oeuvre* as ontologically independent. The combinatory status of *l'oeuvre* as bearing both the autonomy of refusal and a non-referential, non-dependent ontological status makes it an 'object' of consequence for political ontology, which is a claim I derive from Blanchot's writings.

A theory of art implicated with death and impossibility also indicates a peculiar type of relation with the artistic audience, which in the case of literature is a community of readers. Blanchot seems to take up the question: how do we read what cannot be accomplished, yet is important for the very reason that it does not obtain? The community fascinated by this question is the condition of a specific literate community of

readers. It is not enough that a book be written; it must be read to be the artwork as *l'oeuvre*. Therefore, the community of readers is one of the conditions for the possibility of literature because the unfolding of the narrative is much more than the continuation of an inner monologue, like a kind of daydreaming. There is something dream-like about literary reading, but not in any sense that refers back to an 'I' thinking. Consequently, *l'oeuvre* is no more the product of an author than the product of an individual reader. The impersonal and communal neutrality of art's autonomy cannot be understated in Blanchot's case. Since the reader cannot be too involved (i.e. too impositional) in *l'oeuvre* generation, the reader must heed to a most profoundly passive unconcern.

Through the passivity of the reader, we arrive at the insubordinate fundament of Blanchot's politics of literature. The connection that I have elaborated between the inability for work and the refusal to be an active participant in the world, which is a kind of passive insubordination, should evidence the new politics that Blanchot's theory of literature gestures toward. However, this is a politics that cannot be reduced to an agenda; if anything, it is like death because one cannot make a meaningful power out of that which one does not overcome (i.e. death).

What are we to do? Blanchot does not give an answer to this question. Perhaps it is not even an appropriate question. What we can do, however, is conceive of Bartleby as exemplary and remain vigilant for a new politics through the most profound passive unconcern through literature. When we are truly passive we refuse. That which is purely passive is art and it refuses us measurelessly. This is Blanchot's catastrophe.

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