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Amor: Blanchot since 2003

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‘AMOR’

Blanchot since 2003

John McKeane

20 February 2003 was the date of an event that Maurice Blanchot had described as ‘natural,’ as ‘more insignificant and more uninteresting than a little heap of sand collapsing.’[1] Fulfilment, release, an ‘immense pleasure’ for he who underwent it: such are a few ways of seeing this event.[2] But none of these ways speaks to the absolute unknowability of death that is the driving force behind his œuvre, even and especially as its author attempts to think *the instant of his death.*

That instant is now fixed in cold marble. The grave of Maurice Blanchot can be found in the cemetery at Le Mesnil Saint-Denis, the suburb of Paris where latterly he lived in a cul-de-sac named *Place des pensées*. He shares this grave with his sister-in-law Anne Blanchot (née Anna Wolf), and is remembered with the simple inscription MAURICE BLANCHOT 1907-2003. The tombstone’s last word is AMOR: whether added at the author’s request or not, it certainly echoes the openness and generosity of his work. *Amor, amour, amitié*: this loving friendship was offered to the near and to the far, it was offered to thought itself by an œuvre that privileges not knowledge but understanding, not sophism or sophistry but philo-sophy in the most demanding sense.

This was the end for the tall, thin, often unwell body that featured so prominently in Blanchot’s narratives, and which was thought about extensively by a man medically trained. The body that was exposed or exhibited in this way was not fixed or easily-comprehensible: as one critic writes, ‘there will always be a shoulder too many, an elbowing […]. This type of physical event—shuddering, shivering, distress, vomiting—, is what is constantly occurring in Blanchot’s narratives.’[3] But even such an unruly body eventually grew still. It was incinerated, and the ashes interred in a private ceremony. The eulogy was given by Jacques Derrida, who although he spoke elsewhere of incineration and inhumation, of the body’s destiny or *destinerrancy*, here concentrated on the question of legacy: ‘Blanchot did not have what is called influence, and he did not have disciples. Something entirely different is in play. The legacy he leaves will have reserved a more internal and more serious trace: a non-appropriable one. He will have left us alone, he has left us more alone than ever with our endless responsibilities.’[4]

Such a sense of Blanchot’s legacy being not an order but a demand, not a duty but a right, to dedicate oneself to thought, was also present at a major colloquium, planned before his death, that took place the month following it, *Maurice Blanchot: Récits critiques* (*Critical Narratives*). Christophe Bident opened proceedings with the following words:

> Maurice Blanchot has died [*Maurice Blanchot est mort*]. His passing was not unthinkable. But I gave it no credence at all. Over these two years in which Pierre Vilar and I have prepared this conference, not for a moment did I

> imagine that Blanchot could die before this morning's opening, nor—therefore—that he would die so close to today, 34 days beforehand. Whether in good or bad faith, but what does it matter now, we had good reasons to believe in another reprieve. But we had nothing but reasons. The reprieve has been withdrawn. This places our words in the temporality of a mourning that responds strangely to a future perfect: Maurice Blanchot has died, Maurice Blanchot will have died.[5]

Thus Blanchot's biographer became, as it were, his thanatographer: but he was well prepared for the role, given the constant meditations on death undertaken in *Maurice Blanchot: a Critical Biography*.[6] It is as if this work were a rehearsal for the uttering of the words 'Maurice Blanchot est mort' which seem striking in their simplicity (and indeed were reiterated by Derrida in the title of his talk closing the colloquium, '"Maurice Blanchot est mort"'). When we come to translate them, however, we realize that there are in fact two possibilities in English: 'Maurice Blanchot is dead' and 'Maurice Blanchot has died'.[7] I have chosen the second translation due to its greater emphasis on a connection to the present, whether that of 2003 or of today.

This connection to the present is very much alive, notwithstanding the death of Blanchot's body—a physical death which he referred to, citing Hegel sympathetically, as '"the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water".'[8] In the remarks that follow I wish to point out some of the ways in which Maurice Blanchot has continued to live (or continued to die) since the publication of Bident's work in 1998.[9] These include the controversial publication of a dossier of photographs of Blanchot, the appearance of several volumes of articles and correspondence, and some major critical interventions. The purpose of these remarks will be to signal the existence of various fault-lines and debates, rather to enter into them: but even in doing so, it will be necessary to point out modes of reading that have remained conspicuous by their absence.

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First, though, a few notes on translation, which has certainly proved to be a tool for re-thinking and re-reading as Bident's work has been brought across into English. The sinuosity of French syntax has been apparent, particularly in the passages of the work when Bident demonstrates Blanchot's metamorphic effects on one's own thinking and writing (a writing that draws on a 1992 thesis on Blanchot, Bataille, and Duras entitled *The Imaginary of Death*—much of its thinking is clearly present in this 1998 biography). In any case, it is sometimes said of pre-modern English that—to parody this style—*the words any way round one can arrange*. But this is less the case nowadays; for its part, formal academic French lies somewhere between the two (this mode of writing is in evidence in much of this work; however some of the more straightforward biographical passages go to the other extreme, and adopt the short, fragmented sentences of journalistic French, which is very different). I have sometimes stretched English syntax and expression to reflect Bident's academic French, but

on other occasions simplified matters.[10] In short, it has been necessary to listen to the sometimes-competing demands of both readability and accuracy.

The translation of tenses has proved a particular conundrum. Regarding historical events, Bident makes use of the possibility in French of referring to the past using the present tense: e.g. 'Blanchot ne se contente pas de témoigner son accord.' In English, whilst it is possible to use the present to refer to past historical events—'Blanchot is not content with demonstrating that he is in agreement'—, to do so is a stretch, adding a sense of strangeness not present for a Francophone reader of Bident's text. I have therefore used the past tense in English in such historical cases: 'Blanchot was not content with demonstrating that he was in agreement.' By contrast, with the French present tense when it relates to written texts—'Blanchot est Thomas au sens où Thomas n'est personne'—, there was the choice of either using the calm narration of the simple past—'Blanchot was Thomas in the sense that Thomas was no-one'—or retaining the strange dislocation of the literary present: 'Blanchot is Thomas in the sense that Thomas is no-one.' I have most often chosen the latter, so as not to relegate Blanchot's work to a reified, safely historical phenomenon, lacking the greater risks (and rewards) of the truth-claim made when writing is said to be speaking to us, here and now.

So two different approaches have been used in these two different areas. But where to draw the line between history and writing, politics and literature, the possible and the impossible? This is nothing other than the question of Blanchot's life and œuvre. The latter is not disconnected from his life, and concurrently, a great deal of his life had an intensive relationship to the strange, irruptive temporality of literature (above all the *instant of his death* in summer 1944, an episode I have retained in the present tense). There is a delicate balance, given the importance Blanchot accorded—or accords!—to erasing the distinction between life and œuvre. Thus, whilst events that are clearly historical have been rendered with the past tense, and discussions that are clearly literary with the present, there has inevitably been some shifting between the two. Sometimes the shifts come in quick succession or indeed within a single sentence (perhaps due to an adverbial phrase), when the balance moves from what *was* the case in the historical moment or context to what *is* discussed in the relevant Blanchot text. This balance often being very delicate, I have had—as it were—to *listen* attentively in order to discern the location of the tipping point. This is to say that I have had to listen for the moment when the literary comes together or coalesces: I have been able to better understand why Blanchot writes of literature as a metamorphosis or alchemical process. In this way translation has provided an excellent tool for thinking about the challenge posed by the strange temporality of Blanchot's life-writing, by his life spent writing: the challenge of a thinking relevant not just yesterday or today, but tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

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Whether it is in *Thomas the Obscure*, *Death Sentence*, *The Last Man*, or a host of other narrative and critical writings, in Blanchot's œuvre, the boundaries between life and death are constantly moved where we do not expect them, or even removed altogether. In that spirit, let us begin to look at some of Blanchot's strange resuscitations and afterlives since 2003.

The first concerns the question of the author's image. Bident's biography is named *Maurice Blanchot, Partenaire invisible*, and even though *A Critical Biography* has been chosen as the subtitle for this translation, the notion of invisibility lives on in the choice to avoid using a photograph of Blanchot for either the original cover, or for that of this translated version. This choice retains the public figure that Blanchot was—or rather wasn't—as a writer in 20th-century France. He opposed all attempts to publish photos of him, even the few that appeared in the 1980s in circumstances recounted by Bident. Blanchot's readers therefore knew him—or didn't know him—almost exclusively through his œuvre, something that gave it all the more power and insistency. While Roland Barthes has gone down as the name associated with the Death of the Author thanks to his short article of 1967 (if we are to play such a paradoxical game), surely the stronger claim is that of Blanchot, who in 1953 asked: 'isn't the writer dead as soon as the work exists?'[11]

The insistency, the weight of Blanchot's œuvre is therefore indissociable from such a complex relationship with his own image. Over and against this, however, a stir was created in 2014 with the publication of a Blanchot issue of the *Cahier de l'Herne*, one of France's most prestigious literary journals. Its large-format cover bears a photograph of him, and two dozen more are included inside: passport photos, portraits, holiday snaps. This is doubtless a significant event in the history of Blanchot's reception, and in that of his and others' efforts to write his (auto)biography, his (auto)thanatography. What's more, there is certainly an argument to be made that the time has come to make such images public: his statement that 'no man alive […] yet bears any resemblance' draws on the view that such resemblance and death go hand. Since 2003, therefore, one cannot have the same reservations as before.[12] It even seems possible—just about—that Blanchot himself would not have resisted the images being published, just as he scrupulously sought to leave critics the freedom to commentate on his work. One could maintain that losing control is precisely what is at stake when one dies.

The *Cahier de l'Herne*, however, argues very little, if anything at all. It justifies the publication of the images with just six lines of text, as part of a brief introductory page. These lines speak of 'giving this writer back his historicized element', but without any assessment of how large this element is, or what the other, opposing elements in his thought and œuvre are (for instance his immense resistance to the power of the image). This perfunctory approach does not seem befitting of the importance of the publication of these images of Blanchot: let us therefore briefly look at some of the arguments for and against the image, in Western thought in general and in that of Blanchot in particular.

First, the arguments for publishing images, these images. It is well known that 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image' is the third of the Ten Commandments (indeed it precedes 'Thou shalt not kill' by several places).[13] Used as an argument to justify the breaking of false idols of the true God, this commandment suggests that not to make, retain, or publish images, icons, or likenesses of someone or something is to hold them in great respect, to set them apart as irreducibly singular.[14] Publishing the images of Blanchot would therefore be a way of answering criticisms that writing on him often tends towards praise rather than analysis, i.e. that it tends to create a cult or a myth around him. Such a publication would be as it were iconoclastic (albeit, paradoxically, in the form of iconolatry, a praise of images). There is doubtless a cathartic pleasure in such a publication, and pleasure leads us on to our second example, also taken from religious thought. In traditional Catholic practice

before Vatican II in the 1960s—the practice with which Blanchot grew up, speaking Latin to his father—among the pleasures denied during Lent was that of the image. Paintings, statues, crucifixes were veiled, turned to the wall, or removed altogether. While it might seem strange to think in terms of the image or likeness as a pleasure (whether denied or not), this can be better understood when we realize how an image can summarize and fix a given situation for us. Images—and photographs especially—can come to define a moment or a person. And following this line of thought in relation to the publication of Blanchot's image, he can be found acknowledging this aspect when he writes of 'the gratifying aspect of the image' or of 'that ecstasy which is the image' (an ec-stasy because it takes one out of reality, but presumably also a pleasurable ecstasy).[15] He writes further: 'In this way the image fulfils one of its functions which is to quiet, to humanize the formless nothingness pressed upon us by the indelible residue of being. The image cleanses this residue—appropriates it, makes it pleasing and pure.'[16] In short, we like images because they summarize things for us, making them pure, simple, and easy: not requiring further thought.

So, there is an argument that publishing photographs of Blanchot lets the cleansing light of history in on something that otherwise risks remaining obscure or mythical. But can we be sure that the immediate gains and pleasures of such a publication do not fall into the trap of the argument above: that images summarize, define, make things easy? For Blanchot's life, his writing, his thought may be many things, but they were never and are not easy. What's more, his œuvre understands what Western thought has gained from preferring invisibility to images: for a long while, the lack of any author photo allowed this œuvre to remain interpretable, mobile, flexible, open to new combinations and arrangements. In short, it allowed it to remain alive. And this is all the more the case because in his explicit and influential writing on images, he saw the power of the image or icon, likeness or resemblance, as a deathly, murderous power. Let us see how.

Blanchot wrote on the image, and wrote with and through images, on various notable occasions.[17] But one piece that stands out is 'The Two Versions of the Imaginary' in *The Space of Literature*. The two versions of images and the imaginary in question are, first of all, the summarizing, definitive aspect of the image with its apparent ability to magically present us with an object that in reality is absent, elsewhere, even dead. The second is the fact that this object is not really present, but present in the form of absence, in a virtual and misleading copy of whatever the object might have been. He sets out these two senses as follows:

> The image, according to the usual analysis, is secondary to the object. It follows it. We see, then we imagine. After the object comes the image. 'After' means that the thing must first take itself off a ways in order to be grasped. […] Here the distance is at the heart of the thing. The thing was there; we grasped it in the vital movement of a comprehensive action—and lo, having become image, instantly it has become that which no-one can grasp, the unreal, the impossible. It is not the same thing at a distance but the thing as distance, present in its absence, graspable because ungraspable, appearing as disappeared. It is the return of what does not come back, the strange heart of remoteness as the life and the sole heart of the thing.[18]

According to the representationalist 'usual analysis,' then, images are able to magically overcome time and space, rendering something present to us in a triumphant overcoming of worldly difficulty. If I see an image of something, then I can see that thing itself: again, the image makes things easy. But Blanchot goes on to emphasize the reproduced, *ersatz* quality of the image: even and especially when we have an image of something, it is 'that which no-one can grasp, the unreal, the impossible.' While there is likeness or resemblance between the object and the image, this can only ever appear from a ground of difference.

Now, this discussion is doubly relevant to the publication of images of Blanchot following his death given that the analogy he uses for this resemblance is precisely the way a cadaver resembles the living body of the same person. We read:

> The image does not, at first glance, resemble the corpse, but the cadaver's strangeness is perhaps also that of the image. What we call mortal remains escapes common categories. Something is there before us which is not really the living person, nor is it any reality at all. It is neither the same as the person who was alive, nor is it another person, nor is it anything else.[19]

While we can tell that a dead body is dead, we can also tell that it is the body of a particular person. It has undergone the most fundamental of changes, and yet there seems to be a connection across the two sides of the abyss. But Blanchot has chosen the analogy of the cadaver in order to show that this connection is only ever an illusion, that the nature of this particular abyss is that nothing can bridge it (or inversely: that this abyss is whatever cannot be bridged). While the cadaver resembles the living person, in fact this resemblance immediately starts to break down. The ease with which the image had appeared to resemble its object is shown to be false as the cadaver starts to be affected by inevitable physical decay, and in a more eerie sense, starts to wander through the minds of the living:

> We dress the corpse, and we bring it as close as possible to a normal appearance by effacing the hurtful marks of sickness, but we know that in its ever so peaceful and secure immobility it does not rest. The place which it occupies is drawn down by it, sinks with it, and in this dissolution attacks the possibility of a dwelling place even for us who remain. We know that 'at a certain moment' the power of death makes it keep no longer to the handsome spot assigned it. No matter how calmly the corpse has been laid out upon its bed for final viewing, it is also everywhere in the room, all over the house.[20]

The cadaver will not remain where it is : instead it finds itself abroad, wandering, perhaps stumbling, as is made clear by an entire literature of the fantastic, and in Blanchot by *Thomas the Obscure*, *Death Sentence*, Orpheus returning from the dead, the repeated references to the resurrected Lazarus, and so on.[21] He gives a significant role to the fantastic, the gothic, the morbid. Keeping in mind that this is an analogy, his insistence on the mobility and instability of the dead body, its ability to haunt us, and the futility of trying to remove 'the hurtful marks of sickness,' is an insistence that relying on images is only ever a short-term strategy. The immediate pleasure we gain from them comes at the cost of any longer-term engagement with

what they represent; we lose sight of the underlying forces, pulling this way and that, at work in any life and in any written œuvre. So while one has every right to publish such images, we must also return to the first principle of why Blanchot touches us as a writer: and surely this is due to the way he conveys the suspension of the subject effected by the anxious difficulty, the suffocating pressure, the *ressassement éternel* or eternal rumination of doubt. We must not be against the publication of images per se, for fear of falling into a mysticization of this author. But the *Cahier de l'Herne* falls down because it does not even attempt to offer the full and frank discussion of the question of the image—too rapidly sketched out here—that Blanchot and his readers deserve.

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From the wandering cadaver we can move to another sense in which Blanchot's death remains unresolved: the changing profile of his corpus of writings. Whilst his major works have all been published, there has been considerable other activity since his death. On the one hand, several volumes have collected his previously scattered, shorter texts.[22] The difficult-to-locate *Écrits politiques: Guerre d'Algérie, Mai 68, etc.* (2003) saw a second edition of sorts in *Écrits politiques, 1953-1993* (2008), and then a translation with *Political Writings, 1953-1993* (2010). *La Condition Critique: Articles 1945-1998* (2010) brings together the vast majority of his post-war texts not collected elsewhere; many had already been translated either in *The Blanchot Reader* (1995) or in a special issue of *Paragraph* (2007). His wartime writings not featuring in *Faux pas* have given rise to a substantial volume, *Chroniques littéraires du Journal des débats, avril 1941-août 1944* (2007), which is being translated in four volumes, *Into Disaster* (2013), *Desperate Clarity* (2013), *A World in Ruins* (2016), and *Death Now* (2018). And the first volumes of his voluminous correspondence have appeared: with Vadim Kozovoï (2009), with Pierre Madaule (2012), with German translator Johannes Hübner (2014), and a letter to Roger Laporte addressing the 1930s in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Maurice Blanchot: Passion politique* (2011). Further volumes of correspondence (Jean Paulhan) have been announced or are known to exist in the archive (Laporte, Gaston Gallimard, others), and the process of publishing Blanchot's correspondence will no doubt last many years. In time, enough material for a new or a rewritten biography may even appear.

Two purchases by Harvard University mean that the archive is slowly becoming available. The first was of the page-proofs of *The Infinite Conversation*, and the second of 20 boxes of varied materials.[23] There seem to be several other caches of materials held by various private individuals in Europe. The *Cahier de l'Herne* presents a few materials and insights, but we still await a comprehensive and as it were scientific account or cataloguing of what the archive contains. Until then, the glimpses that are offered remain just that: amongst others, readers have been tantalized by references to Blanchot's practice as a translator, to his extensive note-taking, to a table he drew up sorting his works into categories for an abortive *Complete Works*, to *The Last Man* and *Awaiting Oblivion* being written concurrently in the same notebooks, to up to eight versions of *Thomas the Obscure* (each significantly different), and so on.

The Space of Literature reserves a central role for Orpheus, the legendary singer or poet who on his return from the underworld is ripped to shreds by maenads, with his song being disseminated around the world. In Blanchot's case, worldwide dissemination of his song certainly seems a laudable aim: it is after all a major motivation behind this translation. Let it not be accompanied by a bloodthirsty frenzy over a corpus.

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Not just in his political activities, but in his contributions to French literature and thought, Blanchot's signature was often tightly enmeshed alongside that of others. This is not to say that he had disciples or that one could convincingly write, after *Heidegger's Children: Arendt, Löwith, Jonas, Marcuse* (2003), a work with the title *Blanchot's Children.*[24] *Blanchot's Orphans* is perhaps more acceptable, but even then that supposes that his œuvre is essentially fixed, static, dead, whereas in fact—perhaps uniquely for a 20th-century writer of his stature—it remains alive, with many major areas still largely unexplored. The years since the publication of Bident's biographical essay have nonetheless seen many developments in the thinking in which Blanchot's œuvre is enmeshed.

Much writing on Blanchot's œuvre falls into one of two traps. The first is that of *académisme*, of being little more than the exegesis of the myriad implicit and explicit references in his works, of his moments of self-citation, or of the differences between subsequent versions of his texts (whether through contingency as with *Death Sentence*, or more systematically with the first and 'new' versions of *Thomas the Obscure*, or with a very great percentage of his articles, much of his œuvre was written *twice*). There is an infinity of textual detail to study, but just as infinite is the demand Blanchot makes on his readers, the void he creates and which one vainly tries to fill with information and knowledge. The second trap is the complementary one: to abandon rigor and to hone in unsystematically on one particular passage or work, before performing an often sub-Blanchotian analysis, an imitation or *mimétisme*. Such articles—and even books—often plunge into a self-regarding tailspin, leaving any concern for their reader far behind. Returning to Blanchot after such cases, one is reminded of the sobriety and force with which he thinks and writes.

An *état présent* of critical work on Blanchot was published a decade ago, and remains a helpful point of reference.[25] Since then, there have been developments such as the proceedings of the 2003 conference *Maurice Blanchot: Récits critiques*, and of those of the week-long conference at Cerisy-la-salle for his centenary in 2007, *Blanchot dans son siècle.* There have been monographs and collective volumes dedicated to particular ways of reading his work: *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred*, *Blanchot Romantique*, and *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: a Change of Epoch*.[26] In English, there have been further important monographs (*Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot and Exilic Writing*) and collective volumes (*Clandestine Encounters: Philosophy in the Narratives of Maurice Blanchot*).[27] And in French there have been monographs too numerous to mention, and a slew of collective volumes.[28] Lastly—although I do not pretend to have been exhaustive—these years have seen the launch of a book series promising to publish elements from Blanchot's archive, and a dedicated journal, the *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot*. In what space remains I wish

to briefly look at some of the major areas into which critical thought on and with Blanchot is—or, precisely, is not—advancing.

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We discussed above the notion of a wandering cadaver both *in* Blanchot's writings, and represented *by* them. To these two senses we can add a third, in which something refuses to die, haunting us spectrally but without being anything more than phantasmatic. This something is the question of Blanchot's politics.

Despite protestations to the contrary, it is well-known and well-documented that in addition to his post-war activities on the Left (particularly in 1958-1968), he is the author of extreme, nationalist newspaper articles dating from the 1930s. It is doubtless shocking to discover this, but extensive documentation has been provided by the publication of several of the articles in the mid-1970s in *Gramma*, and the careful work of Leslie Hill's *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (1997) and the French version of the present book, Bident's *Partentaire invisible: essai biographique* (1998).[29] Blanchot himself has written that the extremist texts in question are 'detestable and inexcusable;' he has spoken of 'the texts [...] for which I am reproached today, and rightly so,' and of 'the responsibility which is mine.'[30] Many of the texts in question have recently been made more fully available in the volume *Chroniques politiques des années trente, 1931-1940.*[31] This means that we have avowals of responsibility from Blanchot (cited in Bident's final chapter), and we have access to the texts: that may well be all we are going to get.

The point is surely a crucial one in the light of several recent works criticizing Blanchot: Michel Surya's *L'Autre Blanchot: l'écriture de jour, l'écriture de nuit* (The Other Blanchot: the Writing of the Day, the Writing of the Night; 2015), Jean-Luc Nancy's *Disavowed Community* (2014), and Henri de Monvallier and Nicolas Rousseau's *Blanchot l'obscur: ou la déraison littéraire* (Blanchot the Obscure: or Literary Unreason; 2015).[32] These texts are haunted by the idea of Blanchot's unpalatable past, but precisely they are *haunted* by it because there is not sufficient evidence to move to any full-scale condemnation (there is a clear difference of scale to the scandals surrounding Paul de Man and Martin Heidegger, for instance). There are indeed statements in Blanchot's work that he himself recognized as 'detestable and inexcusable.' But because they are so few, Surya for instance is often reduced to criticizing Blanchot's associates.[33] I will discuss below some of the major hypotheses of how the writer's itinerary can be understood, and Surya and Nancy's works in particular are certainly substantial enough to require fuller response elsewhere. But it nonetheless seems necessary to comment on the way that Blanchot's politics continues to haunt critics: 40 years after the publication of selected 1930s texts in *Gramma*, and 20 years after the comprehensive accounts of Hill and Bident, we need to realize that this incomplete line of thinking has run into the sand. Perhaps in due course archival information will arise allowing a full-scale condemnation of Blanchot. But in the meantime, sufficient evidence is lacking, meaning we exist in a half-light where strange shapes are seen in the shadows, and where the debate is one of insinuation and guilt by association. Therefore it is surely time to banish these particular spectres by switching on the lights of reading and analysis.

Carefully-judged critical material on Blanchot's œuvre does of course exist. For instance, the question of how (and whether) to divide his work into periods has given rise to several competing hypotheses. On the one hand, there are those for whom there is an underlying, second-order continuity between the assertiveness of the earlier texts and the infinite movement of the latter ones: Surya is amongst such critics. On the other, some argue that such divisions exist, the œuvre moving around one or more turning-point(s) or hinge(s). The precise location of these points is matter for detailed, ongoing discussion: did Blanchot move away from his early political period in 1937, later in the 1930s, or in the early 1940s? Was his return to politics in 1958 a sudden one, or had it been prepared by previous writings, readings, and encounters? Similarly, amongst critics who accept that such turning-points existed, there is debate over how many of them there were. Are there ultimately two parts to Blanchot's career, his early, right-wing writings and his later, left-wing ones? Or are there three parts, with his novels and narratives constituting a distinct middle phase? Did 1958 open a communist period that ended in 1968 in order to give way to a new phase centered around Judaism, or was there continuity? Proper treatment of these questions requires greater resources than I have time to deploy here. But we can at least note the existence of the argument based on the existence of one or more turning-points. One of Blanchot's major readers, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, has used the terms '"break"' [*coupure*] (a cutting, caesura, break) and 'transformation' to describe the death of a political voice discussed by *Death Sentence*, dating from the late 1930s.[34] Indeed, Blanchot's writings themselves provide us with the term 'turning-point'.[35] And in a recently-published letter from 1984, he speaks of 'a sort of conversion'. The context is a discussion of the 1930s, when he tells us that he engaged in political journalism during the day whilst writing completely differently—fiction, what would become *Thomas the Obscure*—at night. He states: 'if there was a fault on my part, it was doubtless in this division. But at the same time it hastened a sort of conversion of myself by opening me to awaiting and to comprehending the overwhelming events that were underway'.[36] The fact that the term 'conversion' is qualified as '*a sort of* conversion' emphasizes the striking nature of this term, more usually encountered in a religious context. Doubtless this qualification speaks to the radical nature of the shift in Blanchot's thinking. But before there can be any discussion of the implications of the term 'conversion', qualified or otherwise, we need to have greater clarity over the shift in question. There is no doubt that this is a shift *away* from a nationalist mindset: that never returns to Blanchot's writing. But what is it a shift *towards*: the novels and narratives, or a left-wing political activism?

Asking this question is a necessary stage for any serious work on Blanchot's writing. And of course, to properly ask a question, one must also critically assess it. In the present case, this means asking whether the division between narrative and politics post-1940 can truly hold water. On the one hand, there is a marked periodization, with the novels and narratives being produced predominantly in the 1940s and 1950s, and politics then taking the upper hand from 1958 through 1968. And similarly, what could be more different than the prose of *Thomas the Obscure* and the assertive fragment that is the Declaration of the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War? On the other hand, however, texts including *Death Sentence*, *The Madness of the Day*, *The Most High* can be read as political, as concerned with the extinction of the desire to narrate the world, to raise one's political voice as an individual, to take back control. Once again, this is not the place to enter into these debates per se. But

we can note that the two major and recent attacks on Blanchot's politics reserve little space for such a consideration of his fiction (or indeed, for any consideration of it at all). Michel Surya jumps straight from the politics of the 1930s to the period 1958-1968 and beyond, ultimately arguing against the existence of any turning-point, on the basis that any 'conversion' Blanchot spoke of did not alter the underlying extremism of his political engagement (whether on the Right or on the Left).[37] And Jean-Luc Nancy considers almost exclusively a single, later text, *The Unavowable Community.* Whilst both works adopt methodologies that appear to be largely sound as far as they go—Surya comparing texts from two periods, Nancy looking at the detail of a single text—, surely they are missing something bigger. Even if they can be said to be addressing the truth of Blanchot (something open to debate), they cannot claim to be addressing, as far as he is concerned, the *whole* truth. We must look at the whole truth of the whole man.

After all, the ground underlying any controversy surrounding Blanchot is that his writings are amongst the most striking and influential of the 20th century. That much is surely demonstrated by Bident's biography, with not only its mapping of that author's huge presence in the work of Derrida, Levinas or Bataille (to mention only three figures), but also the way it shows us the radical transformations of Blanchot's writing brought about by the sheer weight of his thinking of illness, death, and friendship. If we forget that it is first of all as a writer that Blanchot comes to us, and if we let insinuation and incompleteness govern our approach to him, then we risk remaining in the half-light. Without wishing or claiming to know how to read his œuvre in any single way, we must be wary of readings that conveniently exclude what is challenging about it. Blanchot's œuvre is not convenient, and it was never meant to be – but it is published, and it is translated: all that remains for us is to read.

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[1] Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (1980; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 71, trans. slightly mod.

[2] Maurice Blanchot in 'The Madness of the Day' in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, trans. by Lydia Davis, Paul Auster and Robert Lamberton (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1999), p. 191.

[3] Daniel Dobbels in 'Le grand récit du corps' [The Great Narration of the Body] in the Blanchot dossier in *Magazine littéraire*, 424 (October 2003), 45. My translation, as are those that follow, unless indicated otherwise.

[4] Jacques Derrida in 'À Maurice Blanchot' in *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (Paris : Galilée, 2003), pp. 323-32. For obvious reasons, the text on Blanchot did not feature in the earlier, English version of this work, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). See also Derrida's more developed text '"Maurice Blanchot est mort"' in *Parages*, 2nd ed. (1986; Paris: Galilée, 2003), pp. 267-300. Previously, Derrida had published the first edition of *Parages*, a collection of texts on Blanchot (and particularly on *The Madness of the Day*); and, focusing on *The Instant of My Death*, *Demeure* which is available in Blanchot/Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[5] Christophe Bident in *Maurice Blanchot: Récits critiques* (Tours/Paris: Farrago/Scheer, 2003), pp. 61-63. I wish to thank Christophe for his collaboration on the translation as well as his comments on this text.

[6] See the anonymously-authored obituary in the London *Times* (26 February 2003). In parallel to this and to Derrida's *Demeure*, a further work functions as bio/thanatography with regards to Blanchot: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Ending and Unending Agony*, trans. Hannes Opelz (New York: Fordham U. P., 2015). It is constructed around two key Blanchot texts, *The Instant of My Death* and '(A Primal Scene?).'

[7] This point was first made by Leslie Hill in 'Maurice Blanchot has died…' in *Nowhere Without No: in Memory of Maurice Blanchot*, ed. by Kevin Hart (Sydney: Vagabond and Stray Dog, 2003), pp. 20-22.

[8] Maurice Blanchot in 'Literature and the Right to Death' in *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell, p. 320.

[9] In the years preceding his death in 2003, Blanchot published nothing. In late 2002, however, he did sign the petition against the Iraq war—this despite its slogan, 'Not in my name', being in direct opposition to his activism of anonymity in the 1960s.
[10] There are localized issues of vocabulary: where there was no clear reason (beyond exoticization, something of which French studies in English is sometimes guilty) to keep a term in French, I have translated it: thus *il y a* has become *there is*. For Blanchot's commonly-used term *l'exigence*, I felt that *exigency* added an unnecessary layer of distance, and therefore used *demand.* But conversely, for *œuvre, work* was surely too literal and exclusive of the sense of foreigness and distance associated with Blanchot's use of the term; I have therefore used the English *œuvre.*
[11] Maurice Blanchot in 'The Essential Solitude' (1953), collected in *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 23.
[12] Maurice Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*, p. 258.
[13] *Exodus* 20:4.
[14] 'Icon' is from Greek *eikein*, to be similar/to be like.
[15] Maurice Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*, pp. 254, 262.
[16] Maurice Blanchot, ibid., p. 255.
[17] See also 'The Image' in 'The Essential Solitude' in *The Space of Literature*, pp. 32-33. For critical discussions, see Ian Maclachlan, 'Blanchot and the Romantic Imagination' in John McKeane and Hannes Opelz (eds.), *Blanchot Romantique* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 155-72; and Sergey Zenkin, 'Maurice Blanchot et l'image visuelle' [Maurice Blanchot and the Visual Image] in *Blanchot dans son siècle* (Lyon: Parangon, 2009), pp. 214-227.
[18] Maurice Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*, p. 256, trans. mod.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 256.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 259.
[21] See 'Orpheus's Gaze' in *The Space of Literature* and, for Lazarus, see *The Work of Fire*, p. 327; 'Reading' in *The Space of Literature*; *Thomas the Obscure*, trans. by Robert Lamberton (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1988), p. 38; and Blanchot's response to Jean Cayrol's *Pour un romanesque lazaréen* [For a Lazarean Novel-Writing], 'Les justes' in *L'Observateur*, 15 (20 July 1950), 17. Jean-Luc Nancy writes on 'Blanchot's Resurrection' in *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (2005; New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 89-97.
[22] Full publication details for works cited in this section are available in this volume's bibliography.
[23] On the latest acquisition, see http://blogs.harvard.edu/houghtonmodern/2015/10/01/maurice-blanchot-papers-acquired-by-harvard/ On the other, see my 'Change in the Archive: Blanchot's *L'Entretien infini*' in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 50:1 (2014), 69-81; and Kevin Hart, 'Une réduction infinie' [An Infinite Reduction] in *Cahier de l'Herne: Blanchot* (2014), 323-28.
[24] Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
[25] Michael Holland, '*État présent*: Maurice Blanchot' in *French Studies*, 58:4 (October 2004), 533-538.
[26] Monique Antelme, Gisèle Berkman, Christophe Bident et al. (eds.), *Blanchot dans son siècle* [Blanchot in his Century] (Lyon: Paragon, 2009); Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); McKeane and Opelz (eds.), *Blanchot romantique* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: a Change of Epoch* (London: Continuum, 2012); also by Hill, see *Radical Indecision: Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida and the Future of Criticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).
[27] Christopher Fynsk, *Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot and Exilic Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Kevin Hart (ed.), *Clandestine Encounters: Philosophy in the Narratives of Maurice Blanchot* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).
[28] Éric Hoppenot and Alain Milon, *Maurice Blanchot et la philosophie* [Maurice Blanchot and Philosophy] (Paris: Presses Universitaires Paris-Ouest, 2010); Éric Hoppenot (ed.), *L'œuvre du féminin dans l'écriture de Maurice Blanchot* [The Œuvre of the Feminine in the Writing of Maurice Blanchot] (Grignan: Complicités, 2004); Éric Hoppenot and Alain Milon, *Emmanuel Levinas-Maurice Blanchot, penser la différence* [Thinking Difference] (Paris: Presses Universitaires Paris-Ouest, 2007). Links to a further three collective volumes from this period can be found on the website *Maurice Blanchot et ses contemporains* [Maurice Blanchot and his Contemporaries).
[29] See *Gramma*, 3-4 and 5 (1976); Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997).
[30] Maurice Blanchot, letter of 24 December 1992 to Roger Laporte in *Maurice Blanchot: the Demand of Writing*, *op. cit*., p. 209.

[31] Edited by David Uhrig (Paris : Gallimard, 2017). This volume appeared after the main body of this afterword was written. Uhrig also writes that 'around sixty articles of literary journalism [of the 1930s] are being reserved for publication in a separate volume' (Preface, p. 9).
[32] Michel Surya, *L'Autre Blanchot: l'écriture de jour, l'écriture de nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015) ; Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désavouée* (Paris: Galilée, 2014), trans. by Philip Armstrong as *The Disavowed Community* (New York : Fordham University Press, 2016) ; Henri de Monvallier and Nicolas Rousseau, *Blanchot l'obscur: ou la déraison littéraire* (Paris: Autrement, 2015).
[33] The early Blanchot is attacked for having been 'the friend, the collaborator of overt Antisemites' (p. 20). Surya writes of a 'French fascism to which Blanchot was as close as it is possible to be, being close to some of its major representatives' (p. 97). Regarding the later period, the attack focuses on a misjudged statement on Judaism, not directly concerning Blanchot, and made by Dionys Mascolo (p. 122).
[34] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Ending and Unending Agony*, trans. Hannes Opelz (New York: Fordham U. P., 2015), p. 1. The scare quotes accompanying '"break"' are Lacoue-Labarthe's.
[35] See Michael Holland, 'D'un retour au tournant'[On a Return to the Turning-Point *or* From a Return to the Turning Point] (2009) in *Avant dire: Essais sur Blanchot* (Paris: Hermann, 2015).
[36] Maurice Blanchot, letter to Roger Laporte of 22 December 1984 in *Maurice Blanchot: Passion politique*, p. 61.
[37] Surya's book is divided into three 'sequences', the first addressing the 1930s, the second 1958-1968, and the third the period following 1968.