

# The Paradoxes of Fidelity: Blanchot, Philosophy and Critical Commentary

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*ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to explore the issue of the relationship between philosophy, critical commentary as Blanchot practises it and the literary work of art. I take issue with Gerald Bruns' claim in Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy in which Blanchot's critical practice is contrasted to philosophy. The "refusal" of philosophy attributed to Blanchot by Bruns is a subtle affair, as I indicate in readings of "Literature and the Right to Death" and The Space of Literature. Blanchot's critical commentary remains faithful to the literary work of art only insofar as he tolerates a paradox that pertains to the peculiar ontological or trans-ontological status of the literary work of art. In attempting to bear witness to the work of art insofar as it problematizes and even exceeds ontology, Blanchot can indeed be said to refuse philosophy insofar as it resists the impulse to resolve paradox.*

*RÉSUMÉ: Cet article cherche à explorer les enjeux relatifs aux rapports qu'entretiennent la philosophie, le commentaire critique tel que le pratique Blanchot et l'oeuvre d'art littéraire. J'engage un débat autour de la déclaration de Gerald Bruns, dans Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy, où la pratique critique de Blanchot est mise en contraste avec la philosophie. Le «refus» de la philosophie que Bruns attribue à Blanchot est une question subtile, tel que je l'indique dans des extraits de «La Littérature et le droit à la mort» et L'Espace littéraire. Le commentaire critique de Blanchot ne demeure fidèle à l'oeuvre d'art littéraire que dans la mesure où il tolère un paradoxe relatif au curieux statut ontologique ou trans-ontologique de l'oeuvre d'art littéraire. En cherchant à saisir l'oeuvre d'art en tant qu'elle problématise et même excède l'ontologie, on peut en effet prétendre que Blanchot refuse la philosophie dans la mesure où celle-ci résiste au désir de résoudre le paradoxe.*

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## 1. Refusing Philosophy

In *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy*, Gerald Bruns redraws the limit between philosophy and poetry through a reading of Blanchot. He argues that Blanchot is the “last romantic” insofar as he is said to acknowledge “the persistence of whatever is irreducible or excessive with respect to the Enlightenment’s unfinished project of housing everything in its condominium” (Bruns, 1997, p. xv). Poetry, Bruns tells us, “is the Enlightenment’s ‘other night’, not the dark age that it supersedes but that which accompanies it and keeps it awake. Poetry is a limit of reason that philosophy finds unthinkable” (Bruns, 1997, p. xv). In attending to the irreducible excessiveness of poetry, Bruns claims, Blanchot holds open a relation to that which exceeds the limit of reason. This attendance upon poetry as a mode of excess is to be demarcated from the practice of philosophy, which would, in employing the language of *theoria*, *ratio* or logic stand guard against the deployments of language that do not strictly conform to its inherent logic. On Bruns’s view, the border between philosophy and literature must be maintained if philosophy is to constitute itself as a discipline with a determinate realm of inquiry and an ongoing project. If the question of the limit of philosophy is always at stake in philosophy (if, that is, philosophical thinking must always demarcate itself against its nonphilosophical “other”) then the stabilisation of philosophy would depend, in turn, upon a stabilisation of the frontiers between philosophy and poetry.

However, Bruns is not reopening the question of the nature of this border simply in order to promote, within safely guarded parameters, what he calls the unfinished project of Enlightenment; at stake is a meditation on the implications of the unthinkability of poetry for philosophy. Philosophy is that discipline, for Bruns, which is incapable of reflecting upon these stakes; it demarcates itself from poetry even as it ostensibly thinks about it by installing, in advance, a guard rail along the border of its condominium that would prevent a real contact with its ostensible subject-matter. In this way, poetry cannot be thought as such by philosophy; it persists, merely, as an unthought excess – a “limit-concept rather than a genre-distinction” as Bruns puts it (Bruns, 1997, p. xv).

Bruns argues that in allowing for poetry as a *mode of excess* over a certain, irrevocably philosophical conception of the limit, Blanchot is claimed to *refuse* philosophy. In so doing, Blanchot would demarcate, once and for all, poetry from philosophy; the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry would be, if not *settled*, explicated anew in terms of an account of the dynamic interplay between visibility and invisibility. Blanchot’s critical practice would keep vigil on the border between philosophy and poetry, and according to Bruns, attest, without reduction, to the “other” night — to a darkness that

would not simply be the binary opposite of light. In escaping the measure that would mete out the play of light and darkness in the name of the Enlightenment project, this “other” night would retreat from any relation that would not allow for its otherness. Blanchot’s critical practice, Bruns implies, would be able to throw open a relation to the “other” night insofar as it dissimulates itself from the light; to an invisibility that preserves itself from the measure of reason, and, thereby from philosophy as such. In bearing witness to dissimulation *as such*, critical commentary would, at the same time, *keep the Enlightenment awake* by recalling philosophy to such invisibility. Blanchot’s *romantic* refusal of philosophy would pertain, for Bruns, to a fidelity to the literary work of art as the “other” night as evidenced in a critical practice that attempts to bear witness to the work of art in its invisibility, and, in so doing, perturb philosophy with the uneasy dream of an excess for which philosophy cannot account. This would mean that while the question of the limits is ostensibly at stake within its practice, philosophy *itself* would be unable to grasp the limnality of the limit between philosophy and poetry. Philosophy, for Bruns, *would not be romantic enough*; and the literary critic, in *refusing* philosophy, could also, in the name of romanticism, carry through the critical endeavour that would permit, at last, an understanding of limnality. The question of limits would be the question of the mode of existence of the literary work of art that, having dissimulated itself as philosophical aesthetics or rhetorics, would at last be given issue: an ontology of the work of art that, as an ontology of excess, would no longer capitulate to the philosophical demand to bring everything into the light. At stake here is a critical ontology, then, that would attend to poetry insofar as poetry dissimulates itself – that would recognise, in poetry’s refusal to come to light, a refusal of the measure of optics that would be definitive of poetry. At stake is an ontology that would have to drop the word, “ontology,” and, under the more neutral banner of critical commentary or critical practice, would attest to poetry *as* excess, as the sheer refusal of or resistance to philosophy, and, in this attestation, would run up against its own impossibility. Bruns argues that in refusing to name his practice, *philosophy*, Blanchot also refuses a tradition of Enlightenment with which philosophy, he claims, has been indissociably bound up. But this refusal renders paradoxical the *theoretical* aspect of the critical inquiry that Bruns attributes to Blanchot, since its object matter would be distinctive because it hides itself from the theoretical gaze. To gaze at the work of art as a literary commentator would be to gaze at that which resists and turns away from this gaze.

It is the paradoxes that pertain to such critical scrutiny that interests me here. I will ask how it is possible to speak of a theory of an unthought excess that, under the guise of a practice of critical commentary, could attest to that which would exceed theorisation. I will inquire, furthermore, into the

relationship of such a theory or practice to philosophy, and question Bruns's claim that philosophy is irrevocably bound up with a project of Enlightenment. I will consider these questions through a brief analysis of certain sections of Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death,"<sup>1</sup> which is intended as a preliminary introduction of some of the paradoxes that Blanchot claims is attendant upon literary creation, before proceeding to a more detailed reading of two sections of *The Space of Literature*, in which the role of the critical commentator is acknowledged to be inherently paradoxical.

## 2. Death and Language

According to Blanchot, certain poets – he names Hölderlin and Mallarmé – "have felt that the act of naming is disquieting and marvellous." The name, he writes, "may give me its meaning but it first suppresses it" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 322). If language is not going to be simply a list of proper names – if words are to designate things and thereby delegate for them in their absence – then each word must suppress its referent. According to Blanchot, "for me to say, 'this woman', I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 322). In order to represent a thing in its absence, words carry through what Blanchot calls an annihilation, since to name is also to lose the particular thing in its particularity. As such, given things are negated in their real existence – they can be even said, to use Hegel's analogy, to have been *killed* since being taken up into meaning also implies the withdrawal of things into nothingness.<sup>2</sup> Thus Blanchot writes, "to name the cat is, if you like, to make it into a non-cat, a cat that has ceased to exist, has ceased to be a living cat" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 322). At the same time, the cat itself is, obviously enough, not killed, and moreover, as Blanchot acknowledges, "once the nonexistence of the cat has passed into the word, the cat itself comes to life again fully and certainly in the form of its idea (its being) and its meaning" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 322). The *resurrection*, so to speak, of the cat at the level of ideas allows us to use language; meaning depends upon such a resurrection, in which the cat is represented at a distance by the word "cat." The condition of possibility of linguistic sense requires that we can distinguish between the word "cat" and its referent or "senses;" it in turn allows us to grasp objects as objects, and the world as an ordered place that is composed of the objects that language can pick out for us.

Blanchot argues that poetic language attempts to use language in a different way, since it understands that "there is a difficulty and even a lie" in the death of the named thing that grants life to language. The poet is conscious of what exists before language — something, he claims, "has disappeared:" the question that the poet asks is "how can I recover it, how

can I turn around a look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists in making it into what exists *after*?" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 327). For Blanchot, literary language attempts to recover what precedes the inauguration of sense — Literature itself is the search "for this moment which precedes literature" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 327). It wants the thing in its real existence – and in order to do so resorts to what Blanchot calls "the materiality of language", i.e. its sonorous and musical qualities that will stop the name "killing" the thing that it designates. In this way, he explains, the literary author, "everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of ink, the book" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 327). The poet seeks to alter language itself in order to present the things of which he writes in their real existence.

However, the poet is condemned as a language-user to kill the very things of which he would write. The task he sets for poetry is therefore inherently impossible. It is his task to use words not "as an ideal force but as an obscure power, as an incantation that coerces things, makes them *really* present outside of themselves" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 328). What, then, does literature reveal? The poet would strive to make language into something that is material and thing-like; at the same time, in order for the poet's words to mean, language would retain its ideality.

There is thus a tension between poetic language as an affirmation of its own physicality – i.e. as that which would say "I no longer represent, I am; I do not signify, I present" and that which condemns poetic language to mourn the absence of the real existence of its subject-matter (Blanchot, 1995, 330). Even as literature, like any work of language enacts "the movement of negation by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated," it is also concerned for "the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silent existence" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 330). In attempting to maintain the relationship to the real existence of things that is lost to language, poet attempts in the creation of the literary work of art to attest to that which escapes language – i.e. an exteriority that contests what is permitted in the order of meaning even as it is condemned to work within the limits of what is permissible.

The attempt to testify, beyond the idealising propensities of language, to the thing that has always and already been left behind is an effort to take account of that for which, *by definition*, language cannot account. The literary adventure consists in the attempt to realise the impossible – i.e. to reveal, through a specific kind of language-use, that which *cannot* be revealed. Blanchot's argument that the creation of poetry is premised on a fundamental *impossibility* is not a rejection of the possibility of literature, but an acknowledgment of its inherent paradoxicality. Literature is singular for Blanchot because the literary author bears a specific kind of relation to that

which allows meaning to mean in the first place. It is for this reason that poets would find the act of naming both disquieting and marvellous: they are aware of the deep equivocality of such an action.

Blanchot's critical work attempts to show how the author's work is marked by the attempt to bear witness *to* this dissimulation of things in their real existence – that is, to arrest the movement of idealising negation with which language is bound up. The critic would bear witness to such a bearing witness, in order to reveal the disquieting and marvellous act of naming at one remove from the poet. The critic discovers the hidden equivocality with which literary creation is bound up, and, stepping back from the “scene” of such creation, would show how the author's intentions are shaped by the uncanny awareness that this author has of the paradoxes that attend upon naming. But how would the critic gainsay such knowledge?

Blanchot writes that the movement of literary language even “dispenses with the writer; it is no longer his inspiration at work;” in literature, “language insists on playing its own game without man, who created it” (Blanchot, 1995, p. 328). At the very least (I do not have space for a specific analysis of this theme in the context of “Literature and the Right to Death”<sup>3</sup>), this would mean that what happens in literature conceals itself from the literary author. If this is the case, then Blanchot's work as a critic is to reveal that which conceals itself in the process of literary creation – it would be to chart a movement that is by no means transparent to the author of literary works. The paradoxes that attend upon literary creation are accompanied by a set of paradoxes that attend upon critical commentary. But while of the role of the critic is not thematised as such in “Literature and the Right to Death”, it is an important theme of *The Space of Literature*.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. The Centre of the Book

Blanchot claims in an untitled foreword to *The Space of Literature*, that the chapter called, “Orpheus's Gaze” is the centre of this book (Blanchot, 1982, p. v). This enigmatic chapter – no more than five or six pages long – restages the myth of Orpheus's descent into the underworld to reclaim Eurydice, in order to make it a figure of the process of literary creation itself. Orpheus has lost Eurydice just as the poet loses the real existence of that he would write about; he seeks Eurydice just as the poet would seek to recapture the real existence of that which is lost in language. In arguing that such a quest is at the heart of literary creation, Blanchot claims he can speak for the literary aspiration as such. But how can he gainsay this knowledge when he (Blanchot) *himself* is under the sway of the desire to gaze at Eurydice? For while Blanchot claims that his staging of Orpheus's descent into the underworld is the centre of *The Space of Literature*, he also acknowledges

that he who writes the book, “writes it out of desire for this centre and out of ignorance” (Blanchot, 1982, p. v).

How is it, then, that Blanchot himself is *preserved* from such ignorance? How is he able to begin *The Space of Literature* with an attestation to a scene that dissimulates itself as soon as writing gets underway? Blanchot is aware of this contradiction because he implicitly claims that he is not ignorant of that which would attract the author at the heart of the writing. At the same time, he warns us “the feeling of having touched (the centre) can very well be only the *illusion* of having reached it” (Blanchot, 1982, p. v; my italics). Blanchot's staging of the scene of inspiration thus risks *dissimulating* this scene – a scene which, at the same time, is *itself* a dissimulation; but it is a risk, it would seem, that must be taken in order to elucidate, to bring to light through what he calls a “methodological good faith” (Blanchot, 1982, p. v), the *theme* of this redoubled dissimulation. The risk is as follows: Blanchot stages literary creation in terms of the frustrated desire on the part of the author to bear witness to dissimulation as such. At the same time, he acknowledges that the critical work entitled, *The Space of Literature*, even as it thematisation of this frustrated desire at the heart of the literary adventure, was written under a similar compulsion – one from which writing as such, it would appear, is never immune.

Blanchot's thematisation of literary creation is, on his own account, paradoxical. The question I will consider in the following is whether Blanchot sidesteps this paradox by underwriting the relation that would reach from his critical commentary to the work of art in question. For such an avoidance would not only confirm the paradox with which literary writing and literary commentary are bound up, but would *redouble* it, introducing a constitutive failure into the heart of any critical enterprise.

### 4. The Other Night

In “Orpheus's Gaze,” Blanchot stages a movement implicit to literary creation by taking over the Greek myth of Orpheus. Orpheus becomes the literary author, intent upon realising the work of art. This realisation becomes the attempt on Orpheus's part to gaze at Eurydice which, in the myth, is forbidden. More precisely, Eurydice becomes she who has been dissimulated by language, the “this woman” of “Literature and the Right to Death,” whom the literary artist would capture in her real existence.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the literary artist cannot capture her – just as, for Blanchot, Orpheus cannot gaze at Eurydice without losing her. For Blanchot, Eurydice is “the furthest that art can reach;” she is “the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend” (Blanchot, 1982, p. 171). To name Eurydice is therefore to make her into a non-Eurydice, a Eurydice who has ceased to exist.

It is to lose Eurydice as she is ostensibly transposed and resurrected by language. In entering what Blanchot calls the “harmony and accord of the first night,” that is, in deploying language with the intention of realising, through an act of sovereign freedom, a finished work of art, Orpheus has lost her in her free and sovereign existence (Blanchot, 1982, p. 171). But even as he is welcomed by the first night, Orpheus is troubled by the intimation of what Blanchot calls, “the other night” (Blanchot, 1982, p. 171). Orpheus’s sole aim is, Blanchot writes, “to look in the night at what night hides, the other night, the dissimulation that appears” (Blanchot, 1982, p. 172). The literary author is not content to remain in the embrace of the “first night” – he is drawn, instead, to what lies beyond that night, to that which hides and dissimulates itself within the welcoming intimacy of the first night. Orpheus would gaze at what cannot appear as such; and gaze at it in such a way that its non-appearance would appear. Orpheus wants to see dissimulation *as* dissimulation – to gaze at what Blanchot calls the “essence” of the night (Blanchot, 1982, p. 172). In witnessing dissimulation *as* dissimulation, Orpheus seeks to gaze upon the essential night that is harboured within the intimacy of his relation to the first night, and in so doing, secure his ultimate aim. But this bearing witness is constitutively impossible — Orpheus cannot *see* the essential night; he cannot lead Eurydice back from the underworld, and is unable, in this sense, to realise what for Blanchot is the essential aim of art. For Blanchot, the work of art cannot reveal the dissimulation of the essential night as a dissimulation – that is, it can neither reveal the essential night as such, nor reveal it as a dissimulation. The dissimulation of the essential night cannot appear, since Orpheus’s desire and the desire of the literary author are fundamentally frustrated.

Orpheus, then, has plunged into the underworld in order to retrieve Eurydice. The author has entered the first night in order to reveal what dissimulates itself in that night. If we condemn Orpheus for his impatience – for his desire to gaze at what cannot be gazed at — then we condemn him, Blanchot writes, for the desire “which moves him to see and to possess Eurydice, he whose destiny is only to sing of her” (Blanchot, 1982, p. 172). Likewise, the impatience of the literary author in his desire to uncover the secret of the essential night that the first, welcoming night harbours, can never allow him to possess that secret; he can only write of the failure of this possession. In this sense, if, for Blanchot, Orpheus “is Orpheus only in the song” — if Orpheus “cannot have any relation to Eurydice except within the hymn” — then the author can be an author only insofar as he maintains a relation to that which removes itself from all relationality (Blanchot, 1982, p. 172). Thus while it is the desire to grasp Eurydice that makes Orpheus *Orpheus*, the author *qua* author is doomed to frustration. Orpheus would have power over Eurydice in the song; but this aspiration is thwarted, for to sing

of Eurydice is already to lose her. Orpheus, insofar as he is Orpheus in the song, is dispersed *qua* Orpheus. Likewise, in order to accomplish the task that solicits him in advance, the author must, *qua* author, be dispersed.

### 5. Dispersal

What is at stake in this dispersal? Above, I wrote of the so-called “first night,” the night that the author enters in order to realise the literary work of art by deploying negativity in order to make death *work* at the serve of meaning. This first night welcomes Orpheus into its midst, promising him the song he would sing of Eurydice, and, in this promise, granting him a certain power over her, i.e. the power that allows him to write of her and thereby negate her, and leave her real existence behind. But Eurydice does not offer herself simply and unequivocally to such a mobilisation: the work of death — through which the author would be able to make meaning mean, and thereby begin the literary work of art with the full confidence of completing it — meets, in Eurydice, in what it would write or sing about, that which resists such work. It is this resistance that disperses the author *qua* the writer of literary works in the world. In resisting what would render Orpheus “free, alive, and sovereign” (Blanchot, 1982, p. 173), Eurydice becomes the “other night” or the “other death” (I will come back to the theme of death below) – she who interrupts the work of death in order to install, at the heart of the process of literary creation that which actively undoes the sovereignty and freedom of the author.

Orpheus cannot grasp the essential night; Eurydice resists his grasp in such a way that the “essential” or “other” night contests his powers. Orpheus, whose being — whose defining essence — is to sing, is no longer Orpheus, because he cannot sing. The author, who is only an author insofar as he is drawn towards realising the work of art, is, in attempting to write of the *other* night, no longer an author, because his task is impossible. But how, then, are works of art realised? How does the author endure the other night in order to realise the literary work of art; how does Orpheus sing of Eurydice?

There is a disjunction, Blanchot claims, at the heart of literary creation. First of all the author enters the first night and deploys negativity in order to make meaning mean, that is, to create a literary work of art. But since the author wants to reveal the dissimulation of the essential night in the first night, that is, since he wants to recapture that which loses even as he deploys death at the service of sense, the work of literary creation is interrupted. For the literary author cannot but deploy language in service of the creative process – which means that he cannot but lose that which dissimulates itself from the “work of death” in which he is engaged. The revelation of dissimulation *as* dissimulation, which is the secret desire of the author, is out of his reach. But this does not mean that the author does not once again

resolve himself to realise the literary work upon which he labours. What it means, however, is that his most secret desire remains; with respect to that desire, the literary work of art that he realises is as nothing, since it is merely a failure to reveal what dissimulates itself at the heart of the literary enterprise. Thus the desire to reveal dissimulation as dissimulation, to undo language and to present that of which the author would write, is itself dissimulated in the ostensibly finished literary work of art. That finished product displays nothing of the vicissitudes of its composition to either its readers or to its author; neither is aware of the hidden dramaturgy of which Blanchot writes.

### 6. Losing Eurydice

From the foregoing, it could be assumed that the Blanchovian author's is an unhappy lot, since to be an author is to run up against the limits of authorial sovereignty. Certainly, the author can only be called an author for Blanchot because he wants what he cannot have and, even as this desire is disappointed, realises and presents a work of art to posterity that, in some sense, follows from this disappointment. At the same time, however, Blanchot does not claim that the author is necessarily *conscious* of this disappointment. As I have emphasised, the author's failure dissimulates itself from the author, and indeed, from the realised work of art; thus, the author can maintain himself in the happy alibi that he accomplishes real works in the world. The fact that artistic works are always and already compromised with regard to the secret desire of their creators is a truth that only *Blanchot* can uncover. In his critical work, Blanchot would tell us something about literary authorship that has concealed itself from these authors. *The Space of Literature* would grant us access to the secret heart of literary creation even as it cuts across the avowed intentions of the authors it discusses.

This leads me to the question I would put to Blanchot concerning the status of his own inquiry into the process of literary creation. For in letting his readers into the secret that Orpheus can never reach Eurydice, Blanchot can be said to have failed *twice over*. This failure is as necessary to Blanchot's endeavour as it is to Orpheus's — for to attempt to thematise that which the author seeks but cannot secure is to betray twice over the ungraspable clandestinity of Eurydice. She yields neither to the author, nor to Blanchot; if he "sees" her, it is only because he has been granted a vision of that which flees from him just as it flees from every other author.

In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot writes, ostensibly, as a critical commentator; and in so doing, overleaps the author in order to uncover and tell his readers what, all along, the author was seeking. Blanchot thematises an experience *par excellence* that can only be uncovered and retrieved as a theme by a form of commentary that would be summoned by a demand parallel

to that which holds sway over the literary work of art. Both the literary work of art and the work of literary criticism are attracted by an enigmatic centre; but the former allows it to seize as it were *without* seizing it. To face Eurydice is already to lose her; but literary commentary *bears a certain memory* of this loss. Blanchot, like the author, writes the book "out of desire for this centre" (Blanchot, 1982, p. v); but he is saved from ignorance — the secret of literary inspiration is vouchsafed to him. Whence the aspiration of *The Space of Literature* to comment on what escapes all literature, but that nevertheless has always and already solicited literature and determined its course. Such an aspiration is uncanny not only because it reaches, in a certain sense, the original *scene* of inspiration, but because this inspiration, at the same time, confers the possibility of a commentary upon literature. Granted, in order to secure knowledge of the ultimate aim of literature, commentary would have to range across all literary forms in order to discover the elusive source that nourished authorship. In this survey, literary commentary would discern what had been hidden, and in explaining such hiddenness and bringing it to thematisation would be privileged with regard to the question of the genesis of literature. The critical commentator could become expert in tracing the movement in which a literary work of art would dissimulate its hidden impulse — he would know what the literary author sought better than the author himself. The commentator would also know the scene of inspiration that sustained his own reflections on literary genesis — that, in advance, solicited his critical activity.

Blanchot is aware of this paradox; it is acknowledged in the untitled foreword to *The Space of Literature*. This book of critical commentary, Blanchot acknowledges, seeks the genesis of literary genesis, and in so doing, is itself caught up and implicated in the dissimulation of this genesis. In thematising this dissimulation — in acknowledging, in advance, that *The Space of Literature* is orientated towards the pages entitled "Orpheus's Gaze" — Blanchot accepts that he, too, seeks Eurydice and that he, too, mourns her.

Would critical commentary, also, be condemned to the same hopeless quest? Would discourse as such be nostalgic for an origin that escapes into anteriority? Would language, in its entirety, exhibit a secret and frustrated tendency towards the source that retreats into the past? If so, then Eurydice would also name a certain futurity, soliciting language and at the same time concealing herself from the ravages of negation, setting death in motion, summoning works of art, works of commentary, philosophy and discourse as such, only to confound the desire that impelled them. But it would be literature that is marked most strongly by the paradoxical attempt to attest to that which resists the measure of attestation; literature's unique capacity would be to present in ostensibly finished, accomplished works of art the "ruin" of a

discourse that imprudently sought to make a theme of its fidelity towards the measurelessness of Eurydice. For literature, Blanchot writes:

does not want Eurydice in her daytime truth and her everyday appeal, but wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance, with her closed body and sealed face – wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the foreignness of what excludes all intimacy, and wants, not to make her live, but to have living in her the plenitude of death. That alone is what Orpheus came to seek in the underworld. All the glory of his work, all the power of his art, and even the desire for a happy life in the lovely, clear light of day are sacrificed to this sole aim: to look in the night at what night hides, the other night, the dissimulation that appears. (Blanchot, 1982, p. 172)

To recall: Orpheus is Orpheus, the author only the author insofar as he is solicited and moves towards Eurydice, towards the essential night, and towards the plenitude of the *other* death. Critical commentary would attend to the sacrifice hidden in works of art themselves, to the betrayal of power and glory in gazing at Eurydice. Orpheus does not want her to live, that is, to bring her back to the daylight of determinacy and discreet identity, ruled by the principle of negation. Orpheus wants Eurydice insofar as she flees into the future, and, in fleeing, gives him no choice but to flee after her. The literary commentator keeps fidelity with a night beyond the night, with a death beyond death such that he too is staked in a movement that would implicate him and his critical discourse in the dispersion that, at the same time, he would thematise. Whence the *transgressive audacity* of his critical act: Blanchot's text would not, like those literary works he analyses, merely bear the traces of the ruin of a frustrated desire to whose traces the critical commentator is vigilant. Rather, it would thematise the ruinous contact with Eurydice, a contact at a distance sufficient to frustrate the attempt to reduce commentary to philosophy. In preserving this distance in its irreducibility, commentary would be capable, in a manner analogous to literature, to thematise ruin as such even as critical commentary is itself drawn to and ruined by the frustrated desire for Eurydice. While alert to the dangers of the literary enterprise, critical commentary would not be immune from the secret movement whose effect it traces across the works of those authors Blanchot discusses. Such alertness, keeping vigil against the other night, alive even as the other death approaches, cannot help but succumb to the movement that would reveal a dissimulation at the heart of the critical enterprise.

But, according to Blanchot, critical commentary is a kind of salvage operation; it saves, without saving itself, a memory of the sacrifice of which discourse is a victim. It would salvage a memory, shored against ruin, that commentary would retrieve; an *anamnesis* of a scene in which memory is lost. This is the paradox of commentary that would save for itself — and predicate its practice upon this salvation — an *other* memory, that, in the storm of the other death and the other night, would allow literary criticism to track the genesis of the work of art, to follow the secret vicissitudes of artistic composition, and, finally, to stand back while the author himself plunges into the other night. The vocation of the commentator would be to observe, but also, in observing, to remember just enough to allow for a critical practice that, registering the traces that attest, in the book, to the vicissitudes of its composition, would salvage the black box recorder that survives ruin, arrogating for himself the right to speak of a ruin that does not cease from ruining his own critical practice. To criticise, then, is to have been allowed to gaze at Eurydice in her dissimulation; to gaze and to remember this gaze, and, in remembering, to have witnessed what the author has witnessed and forgotten.

Thus, for Blanchot, Orpheus is Orpheus only when he sings; the author is the author when he realises the literary work — but this means, at the same time, that Orpheus can never be Orpheus, and the author can never be an author since their endeavour leads them to the brink of an encounter in which they are dispersed. But Blanchot lets us entertain the notion that the distinctiveness and specificity of both Orpheus and the author lies in the manner in which, returning, they bear the marks of a ruination in the works they present to us. Thus the song of Orpheus, though it does not sing of Eurydice, sings of the loss of Eurydice, of the impossibility of singing of Eurydice. Likewise, the author writes of the impossibility of writing the other night, or the other death; he writes leaving traces that only the critical commentator would follow in order to lead him, like the investigator retracing a crime from its clues, back to the original “scene” of dispersion.

In this sense, the commentator would be he (who else could this commentator be but a “he,” another “Orpheus”) who discovers Eurydice in the work of the art, and, in this discovery, attempts to write of the moment when Orpheus descends into the underworld in order to find what Orpheus will not be allowed to discover. But who gave the commentator this gift of divination? How can the commentator recover the memory of what is forgotten? By what *anamnesis* is the commentator permitted to retrace the steps of Orpheus, in order to witness what cannot, by definition, be witnessed? To what pre-understanding, upon what coat-tail could Blanchot seize, what secret path would lead the commentator back into the dimension with which the literary work kept fidelity?

### 7. The Paradoxes of Fidelity (Blanchot and Philosophy)

The strange, prior fidelity that Blanchot keeps with “the other death,” allows him to traverse the oeuvres of Kafka, or Rilke, or Mallarmé even as he seems to *betray* their legacy by speaking of that whereof they cannot speak. His engagement would free up the play of a dimension in literature that has been dissimulated in literary criticism; its betrayal, then, would be but a betrayal of certain canons and norms that would install a guard-rail between the critic and the secret heart of the literary work. But in order to commit such a betrayal, the critic would have to demonstrate the hidden impulse that has always and already ruined the work of art. Moreover, such an elucidation of the genesis of the literary work would put the very notion of critical commentary into question. For at stake here is a destruction of a certain tradition – both a tradition of a certain critical commentary and a tradition of a certain self-appraisal of the author.

Now in order to retrieve from such a tradition the hidden conditions of the genesis of the literary work of art, its categories – those of the author, the work of art and inspiration – will have to be submitted to a rigorous interrogation. Such an interrogation would anchor itself in a fore-knowledge that, in advance, would reach across to the desideratum of the author. Critical commentary would depend upon an investigation of the initial *belonging* of the author to his vocation – an investigation that would bear upon the belonging of commentary to the same calling. It would become a meditation upon calling as such, insofar as it is the same desideratum that animates both the author and the literary critic with respect to laying hold of Eurydice in her dissimulation. Commentary would be a reflection upon the nature of the relation that, in advance, condemns both literature and literary criticism to disappointment. It would speak of impossibility itself – of the impossible project that both the literary critic and the author would take on.

But in this aspiration, the task of commentary is doubly frustrated, for to speak of impossibility – to thematise the desideratum that, in advance, gathers both literary critic and author to their vocation whilst refusing to come to light – is more than that of which commentary would seem be capable. Neither the literary critic nor philosophy can throw out an anchor or a grappling hook to secure, once and for all, a hold on what, in advance, summons them from the heart of the work of art. In this sense, there is on the part of both a work of mourning that neither philosophy nor critical commentary could complete. It is because, we might suppose, neither philosophy nor critical commentary can reach back into the origin and ground of their endeavour — because neither can bring this origin which is the factual root of their procedure out of oblivion and speak of the bond between the Orpheus and Eurydice — that both are condemned, in the face of the work of art, *to speak of that whereof*

*they cannot speak*. It is because neither can perform the *anamnesis* through which they could once and for all explicate the ground of their prior inextrication with Eurydice, their Muse, that we might suppose that both critical commentary *and* philosophy dream of discourse that can speak of what cannot be spoken of that would overleap that which separates both philosophy and critical commentary from their common desideratum.

On this view, philosophy and critical commentary share the same distance from the work of art and therefore the same task, both, like Orpheus on the trail of that which cannot be discovered. In order to present what is distinctive about Blanchot’s practice, it is necessary to distinguish between philosophy – a certain philosophy that is allied with the aforementioned “traditional” literary criticism. I am using the word, philosophy to refer to that which inherits a way of dealing with the invisible in order to contrast it with Blanchot’s own critical practice. There is not the space here for a detailed examination of the way in which philosophy “traditionally” deals with the “hidden” or the “occulted,” not indeed to negotiate the subtleties of those philosophers who, whilst retaining the name philosophy would nevertheless venture to renew philosophy itself by recovering a relation to a certain outside. I will content myself with brief accounts of Blanchot’s account of Hegel.

For Blanchot, Hegel attempts, through the mobilisation of death *qua* negativity, to contain sense. Literature, insofar as it reveals death *qua* the unmobilisable indicates a hyperbolic negativity of which Hegel cannot take account. Now Blanchot concedes that what the literary author seeks is impossible – it simply cannot be envisaged in Hegel’s schema. But Blanchot subtly adjusts the sense of the word “impossible,” using it to refer not to that which is not possible but as that which interrupts a certain determination of possibility. The “impossible” *qua* the aspiration of the literary author refers to a desire that cuts through what seems possible within certain parameters. In thematising impossibility in this way, Blanchot is not just extending the horizons that are open to Hegelian philosophy by uncovering a pocket of heterogeneity that has not yet been accounted for in the totalising onroll of the dialectic. Rather, he is claiming that the impossible desire for Eurydice interrupts the Hegelian system of philosophy since it is impossible for that system to account for the “other death” to which the literary author is drawn. The otherness or alterity of this “other death” refuses the measure of negation or death. It restores, thereby, a limit to what is possible for Hegelian philosophy.

Thus, even as they belong to Eurydice *in advance*, philosophy and critical commentary are distinct from one another. For if both could be said to be two Orpheuses on the trail of the same, disappearing Eurydice, both attempting – and failing – to accomplish the impossible, critical commentary *bears the*



*marks of this failure* in a different sense than philosophy. This is because there is, in philosophy, the ever present effort to grasp the hidden principle that would finally legitimate its practice once and for all and ground its endeavour as such. The word, "philosophy" refers to a tradition that is simply too entrenched, too mired in what it inherits from the Enlightenment to sustain itself in its failure before that which it cannot recapture.

Critical commentary, on this account, is the discipline that confronts what troubles disciplinarity itself, in questioning and, crucially *allowing itself to be questioned*, from the heart of the work of art. The impossibility of thematising what solicits such commentary is marked upon that practice itself. This is because commentary bears and preserves a relation to what escapes philosophy since it does not seek relate the invisible to the visible, the other night to the first night, impossibility to possibility. It attests to the invisible as the invisible etc. because it does not attempt to assume its practice by assuming and thereby opening up the visible on the basis of assumption of this "blind spot." Commentary bears witness to the dialectic of the artwork because it does not ask Eurydice to reveal herself as she who would return to legitimate philosophy as such. In this way, it draws a boundary around its own theoretical endeavour, not in order to shore itself against the excess or the 'impossibility' that is at stake in poetry, but rather to welcome it, insofar as it keeps fidelity with this excess without reducing it.

Such, then, are the paradoxes of fidelity. Ordinary language fails, and forgets that it has failed to keep fidelity with the real existence of things. The poet remembers the failure of ordinary language, but in turn fails to keep fidelity with Eurydice in order to deploy language and realise a determinate work of art. Philosophy, investigating the work of art, loses that which it seeks because it always subordinates the other death to death, impossibility to possibility, etc. Critical commentary attests to that which ordinary language forgets and to that which poetry attests to its own failure to address this forgetting. It also attests to what philosophy passes over – i.e. the work of art in its sheer excessiveness. This is due to what Bruns calls its romanticism, since critical commentary maintains and safeguards the limit between what can and cannot be assumed by philosophy. The romanticism of critical commentary means that it can attest to what happens as the work of art since it is ruined in advance by that which it accepts is heterogeneous to its own theoretical practice. It must always stop short of the philosophical impulse to render the impossible possible and can only succeed in keeping fidelity with what happens as the working of the work of art insofar as it fails. Likewise, the critical commentator cannot take comfort in the works of art as the poet does. All he can accomplish – but this is also his paradoxical achievement – is a discourse that keeps fidelity with what dooms it to failure. For he must stop short at the primal 'scene' – i.e. the moment to which all works of art lead

when Orpheus, their author enters the underworld. This, indeed, is the *aporia* to where Blanchot's critical writings always lead us – i.e. to the impasse where the impossibility of possibility interrupts that which would make his work philosophy or poetry. To go no further than that – i.e. to keep fidelity with the work of art is to retrace Orpheus's descent, to follow until it is no longer possible to go any further as an author, but to stop before Orpheus re-emerges from his descent and, forgetting it, is able to realise a work of art just like any other "work" in the world. It is to remain at the moment where Orpheus *qua* Orpheus is dispersed, but also to resist the impulse to be swept along with Orpheus in the dispersal of his ipseity and his sovereignty. And it is to return to the surface by retracing his own steps, surviving in order to tell his story because he has only matched Orpheus's footprints with his own, and walked backwards in those same footprints in order to emerge from the underworld.

His is a strange achievement indeed: according to measure of philosophy, he has failed; according to the poet, he has said nothing whatsoever about what the poet remembers. He writes of what the poet does not remember, of what the philosopher remembers and forgets, and of that to which he who nonchalantly uses ordinary language is indifferent. There is no reward for he who picks over the wreckage in order to salvage the recorder that will tell of what the survivor of has forgotten; likewise, the private investigator who solves the mysteries of the "other death" will get no thanks from he who has undergone and forgotten it.

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## Notes

- 1 'Literature and the Right to Death' was originally published in two parts in the November 1948 and January 1949 editions of *Critique* and collected (with changes) as «*La Littérature et le droit à la mort*», the last chapter of *La Part du Feu* in 1949.
- 2 An understanding of Hegel's thematisation of death in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is vital in order to grasp Blanchot's juxtaposition of negate and kill here. For Hegel, death is "non-actuality [*Unwirklichkeit*]"; the life of Spirit, he writes "is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures and maintains itself in it." The vitality of Spirit, which allows it to progress, depends, for Hegel, on death. At the same time, Hegel equates death with the negative. Spirit wins itself, Hegel tells us, by "looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it". The dichotomy life/death thus maps onto the dichotomy, positive/negative for Hegel. To negate something is therefore, in this context, also to *kill* it (Hegel, 1977, p. 19).
- 3 Excellent pages on 'Literature and the Right to Death' can be found in Gasché (1996), Fynsk (1996) and Swenson (1998).
- 4 Neither Gasché (1996), Fynsk (1996) nor Swenson (1998) explicitly raise the question of the *grounds of possibility* of Blanchot's practice of critical commentary. Hill (1997) shows a subtle appreciation of the relationship between Blanchot and various philosophers, exploring, e.g. the relationships between Blanchot's thought and that of Hegel, Heidegger, Bataille and Levinas. He also poses and addresses the question of the relationship between Blanchot's writings and philosophy as such. In place of the lengthy analysis of *Blanchot — Extreme Contemporary* that this book — probably the best on Blanchot in any language — I will simply state that Hill does not broach the question of the status of the performativity of Blanchot's own readings of the texts of others in the way that I intend to.
- 5 See Huffer (1998) for important questions about the staging of the 'mythical romance' between Orpheus and Eurydice in *The Space of Literature* (Huffer, 1998, p.175). Huffer seeks to demystify Blanchot's writings by identifying an implicit appeal to nostalgic models of the relationship between men and women. Nostalgia, she writes, 'is inherently conservative: nostalgia wants us to retrieve the past, to return to the good old days when men were men and women knew their place' (Huffer, 1998, p. 175). Gasché (1996) gives a counter-argument to those who would remark "with barely withheld indignation" that the main example in "Literature and the Right to Death" of the destructive power of language

is that of a woman. “The choice of the example”, Gasché writes, “is not fortuitous”. Blanchot’s reflections on “the linguistic and ontological conditions under which a thing in general [...] can become Other to begin with”; Gasché opines that this inquiry “can be done most poignantly by taking ‘woman’ as the example” (Gasché, 1996, p. 68). But is the poignancy of this example not depend upon a certain determination of the relationship between genders? I have space to do no more than let this question resound here; however, I would aver that the exemplary status of women both in “Literature and the Right to Death” and in tableaux such as those Blanchot presents in *The Space of Literature* and that Huffer comments on in her ‘Blanchot’s Mother’ demands a more considered and more lengthy approach than Gasché provides.