

Chapter Title: Blanchot and Mallarmé: 'The double state of the word'

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Blanchot and Mallarmé: 'The double state of the word'

The Greek term *techne* refers to both what is understood today by technology and what we call art, poetry or literature. To oppose art and the utilitarian is to imply that there are two states or varieties of language: the one reserved for artistic, poetic or literary expression and the other given over to utilitarian communication and subject to a contrasting logic, economy or set of conventions that more clearly belong to what we know as modern technology. This division maps on to the distinction made by Heidegger between truth as a fundamental mode of revealing by which the world is disclosed, and truth as agreement between word and thing in functional language. The reduction of truth to mere correspondence in Western philosophy has dangerous consequences for Heidegger because it leads to the treatment of everything as a resource to be exploited in the era of modern technology. It is in this context that Heidegger appeals to poetic language as a more fundamental mode of revealing through which we might remember our ontological mode of existence and begin anew. Poetic language and functional language are therefore modes of *techne*, but the former is more originary because it provides the foundation for human existence. What at first seems like an innocuous distinction between two modes of language, and two modes of *techne*, has profound implications.

Blanchot subscribed with very little apparent qualification to the Heideggerian view of poetry in the early 1940s, but by the end of the decade he refused to see art as embodying any sort of truth. This stems from his own experience as a novelist and from his role as critic whose task, if they are to communicate the truth of the literary work to the public, requires there to be something particular about the work that sets it apart from the everyday.

The question of *techne* far exceeds the narrow realm of the literary or the aesthetic, and touches more widely on the relationship between writing, politics and philosophical thought in general.

Writing in the early 1940s, when the chief editorship of the once independent *Nouvelle Revue française* (*NRF*) had been transferred from Jean Paulhan to the collaborationist Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, under whose editorship Blanchot refused to publish in the *NRF*, it seems likely that Blanchot sought to shield the literary domain from being compromised by collaboration with the Nazis. Essays from this time reveal a writer and literary critic profoundly changed by the events of the late 1930s and the unconstitutional dissolution of the Third Republic in July 1940. Blanchot later told Roger Laporte that he was present when the Assemblée nationale voted overwhelmingly in favour of Philippe Pétain as leader of the newly installed Vichy regime: ‘My decision was immediate. It was refusal. Refusal before the occupying forces of course, but refusal no less obstinate with regard to Vichy, which in my view represented what was most degrading.’¹ He goes on to explain that his life at this time was divided into writing of the day and writing of the night: a dichotomy was imposed between journalism and literature (he completed *Thomas the Obscure* in May 1940, and *Aminadab* was published in 1942), and so the latter was, at the start of the 1940s, a refusal of the everyday world of war and politics.

The call for literary autonomy is often associated with the collaborationist right but it was not solely their prerogative: Paulhan – the pre- and post-war editor of the *NRF*, founding member of the Comité national des écrivains and of *Les Lettres françaises*, a member of the Resistance, and a close associate of Blanchot – was a vocal opponent of the politicisation of the literary and the call for a committed literature by writers such as Sartre and Camus.² The circumstances in which Blanchot promoted literary autonomy during the war were very different to those in which Sartre was writing directly after the Liberation, and these changing political circumstances provide some explanation for the considerable shift in Blanchot’s thought during this decade, which is not to say that he moved from literary autonomy to a committed literature, but that this led him to question the very possibility of literature.

In his criticism from the 1940s one of Blanchot’s most persistent points of reference is the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, in whose work he identifies a writer similarly grappling with the question of the status of language as *techne* in both senses of the word: as an essential naming which reveals or finds human existence and as a tool for everyday communication. This chapter examines the distinction between poetic and everyday language made by Mallarmé when he described ‘the double state of the word’, before considering how Blanchot’s reading of Mallarmé developed over the course of the 1940s. Blanchot is

often seen as committed to a belief in this double state of language.³ This might have been the case at the beginning of the decade, but the distinction between the essential and the everyday collapses as order, foundation and truth in literature give way to instability, suspension and imposture. The relationship between the aesthetic language of art and the utilitarian language of technology becomes one of slippage rather than opposition for Blanchot by the 1950s. This slippage has far-reaching consequences for the relationship between literature and the world, and it allows a broader conception of literature that does not exclude technology.

‘The double state of the word’

At the end of the nineteenth century Mallarmé, prompted by the crisis of poetry represented by free verse and the prose poem, famously identified a difference between essential and immediate language: put simply, the former is characterised by a necessity that shields it from the contingency of the everyday. Poetry was no longer restricted to verse following the advent of the prose poem, and so, with the traditional formal distinction undermined, Mallarmé sought characteristics to distinguish between the two forms of language; in so doing, he set the agenda for writers and writing about literature for generations to come. The extent to which Mallarmé perceives an uncomplicated distinction between essential and immediate language is, however, up for debate: ‘An undeniable desire of my time is to distinguish between two kinds of language as though according to their different attributes [*comme en vue d’attributions différentes*]: taking the double state of the word [*la parole*] – brute and immediate here, there essential.’⁴ This view is seemingly attributed to the Symbolist poets of his time, and the use of *comme* in the original French makes this a somewhat hypothetical statement. Blanchot will later pick up on this hesitancy. The reading of Mallarmé as it develops in Blanchot’s critical work provides an insight into the evolving relationship throughout the twentieth century between the aesthetic and the technical.

Mallarmé demonstrates that free verse has unsettled traditional expectations of poetry in ‘Crisis of Verse’ and that the effects of this new form are the fragmentation of language and a violent rupture within language. This ‘crisis’ within poetry may be seen as symptomatic of the broader crisis of modernity; it is akin to a revolution, but one much more subtle than that of 1789: ‘we are witnessing, in this fin-de-siècle, not – as it was during the last one – a revolution, but,

far from the public square: a trembling of the veil in the temple, with significant folds, and, a little, its rending'.⁵ This revolution will not take place on the streets but in literature, which has become a temple, inheriting a quasi-holy function following the failure of religion. In a godless world and in the aftermath of the 1870 Franco–Prussian War, this was a time of crisis but also a time of hope for Mallarmé, who believed that literature could fill the void left by modernity with its own idea: 'What good is the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance according to the play of language, however: if it is not, in the absence of the cumbersomeness of a near or concrete reminder, the pure notion.'⁶ Literature will not replace like for like, it will not provide humanity with a concept by which to understand the world, as would be the case in immediate language. Instead, literature will provide an indeterminate idea, one that is difficult to grasp, that sets itself apart from the world and is based in the non-realistic.

Replacing what had been lost in modernity required a structure that would unite the fragmentary in a time of transition and crisis. Roger Pearson stresses Mallarmé's desire throughout his work to 'lay a verbal pattern over the void of a godless universe'.⁷ Free verse is evidently not as free as some of Mallarmé's contemporaries might have wished it to be and it is no accident that some similarities remain for Mallarmé between free verse and previous forms: 'some kind of regularity will last because the poetic act consists of seeing that an idea can be broken up into a certain number of motifs that are equal in some way, and of grouping them; they rhyme; as an external seal, the final words are proof of their common measure'.⁸ Mallarmé, here and throughout 'Crisis of Verse', points to the benefits of this form but also to its limitations, arguing that free verse is descended from other more structured and traditional forms of poetry.⁹ The underlying structure that persists in free verse unifies the fragmented idea and gives the poem orderliness. This structure and basis in the non-realistic are characteristics of the modern myth as deployed by writers such as James Joyce in *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* and Guillaume Apollinaire in 'Zone'. Myth provides ahistorical order when there is no order and when history has failed, a state observed by Stephen Dedalus: 'history [. . .] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake'.¹⁰

The pure idea that sets essential language apart from ordinary language is a meticulously structured linguistic construction without reference to the world of things. 'I say: a flower! And, out of the oblivion where my voice casts every contour, insofar as it is something other than the known bloom, there arises, musically, the very idea in

its mellowness; in other words, what is absent from every bouquet.¹¹ Mallarmé is not referring to a particular flower or a knowable bunch of flowers; this idea is detached from primroses, tulips or daffodils and all the associations with, for instance, springtime which might be evoked in the day-to-day use of the word by a musicality, a system of references between words that exist in isolation from the world of objects. Pearson notes how in the French word 'flower' [*fleur*] there is an echo of 'hour' [*l'heure*] and 'lure' or 'trick' [*leurre*], and so the idea that arises musically from this word might include temporality and unreliability rather than a flower's traditional value as a symbol of transient beauty associated with the object in the world.¹² It is the syntax of poetry, its rigorous construction, even in free verse, that renders the most utilitarian words rich and strange: 'As opposed to a denominative and representative function, as the crowd first treats it, speech, which is primarily dream and song, recovers, in the Poet's hands, of necessity in an art devoted to fictions, its virtuality.'¹³

Some might argue that Mallarmé's reference to 'the crowd' here and elsewhere in this essay introduces a political dimension that demonstrates disdain for common, vulgar, mass society, but the masses to whom Mallarmé refers are most likely the *nouveaux-riches* middle class who deal with numbers and currency ('a denominative and representative function') rather than the working class. His politics were anarchistic rather than aristocratic: 'I know of no other bomb than a book.'¹⁴ He gave the work of art a political effectiveness, but in doing so distanced the work from the real, by insisting on its resistance to usefulness or functionality. He writes elsewhere that the poet will 'Give a purer sense to the words of the crowd.'¹⁵ There is hope for Mallarmé that poetry will be the vehicle for revolution.

Mallarmé recognises that the language of the poet is characterised by a necessity which sets it apart from the real ('of necessity in an art devoted to fictions'). The struggle between necessity and contingency is a central concern of the modern novel, and this is why Blanchot will later use Mallarmé as a reference point when reading Melville, Joyce and Lautréamont. This struggle is famously played out in *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*, in which Mallarmé uses the image of a shipwreck hanging over an abyss and the motif of metaphysical gaming to paint a picture of contingency and risk which the mind tries to control by finding pattern and purpose in this experience.¹⁶ Malcolm Bowie describes this as 'a splendidly organised and overflowing portrait of contingency'. Bowie continues: 'The "impossible" chance-abolishing thought is present as a permanent temptation to which minds are subject and, in the final, culminating pages, as the only hope worth retaining amid chaos and dissolution.'¹⁷

This poem reveals that thought necessitates chance, and so the divide in language between order and chaos, mind and world, necessity and contingency, the essential and the immediate, does not appear quite so impermeable – an impermeability that might be said to be reflected more broadly in Mallarmé’s work, which tested the boundaries between poetry and narrative prose, as well as traditional genres such as lyric and drama.¹⁸ The divide between the aesthetic and the technical is not, then, as clear-cut as it might first appear for Mallarmé, and we will see how a reading of this slippage plays out in Blanchot’s literary criticism during the 1940s.

Literary Autonomy and Foundation

Reading Mallarmé in the early 1940s, Blanchot is interested in the way he purifies words in order to restore an inventive force to them. In his first article to appear after a year-long hiatus in April 1941, Blanchot expresses profound admiration for Mallarmé, ‘a man who, in total and obscure solitude, was able to hold sway over the world through the pure exercise of an absolute power of expression’ (ID 11). And in another essay that year, Blanchot likens the task of the artist to the creation of a world: everything depends on an internal order, a network of necessities all submitted to the force of invention; men obey the law of poetic order in this universe (ID 32). This world or universe exists autonomously beyond the boundaries of the everyday where Blanchot works as a journalist, and it is achieved through the poetic expression of Mallarmé, who is described at the end of 1941 as the poet who was ‘capable of creating everything while expressing almost nothing’ (FP 102). Others might come close, but Mallarmé is the name Blanchot employs to signal the most glorious creative ambition which ensures that poetic language is separated from functional use.¹⁹

Blanchot commits in essays from 1941 to a distinctly Mallarméan literary autonomy which is characterised by a structure and basis in unreality and not confined to poetry or prose. The struggle between the poetic and the everyday defines Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, which Blanchot describes in a review of Jean Giono’s French translation in terms of myth: the structure of the novel – its perpetual abstract digressions that interrupt and distract the reader from the story – and its basis in the non-realistic – a world of tempests and foam rather than solid visible objects – ensure its status as myth. This is not a struggle against the whale but against a mythic force, to which the everyday world is destined to succumb:

Sometimes his officers try to pull him back up the slope down which they are all slipping; they tell him: let's stop, go back, put an end to this foolish trip so that we can rest and enjoy the pleasures of dry land; but of course no one really believes these platitudes [*paroles de la vie banale*]. Ahab is now merely a witness of an invisible order in which he is subjected to the commands of something nameless, unfathomable, supernatural; in the struggle which he believes himself engaged in, he is but the destitute and tragic servant of the terrible unforgiving sovereign. (FP 242)

The officers on board speak of earthly pleasures, but this world is disappearing from beneath their feet as they are delivered alongside their captain to another invisible place. The comparison is made to *The Songs of Maldoror* where language says everything in place of the world, attracting the reader, who is comparable to these sailors, into its wake and obliging total obedience (FP 243). *Moby-Dick* enacts a struggle between the literary and the everyday, and the name of Mallarmé, cited at the beginning of the essay, overshadows this project.

In his early criticism the reference to 'myth' is a coded rejection of literary realism, and it is in these terms that Blanchot praises Melville for writing a novel that aspires to be the written equivalent of the universe; Poe, Nerval, Lautréamont and Joyce also wrote books which help us to understand Mallarmé's lofty ambition to 'raise a page to the power of the starry sky' (FP 239).²⁰ Blanchot traces a line from the romantics to the modernists in the essay on Melville, and at the heart of this literary genealogy is the name of Mallarmé, whose work acts as a passage between the two movements and exemplifies the defiance towards reality and the structured unity which lends these other texts their mythic quality. The work might be fragmented, as is the nature of the artwork in modernity, but a union in the non-realistic endures thanks to this overarching structure: 'Interminable anecdotes burst forth and catch our attention, distracting us from our object, and now and then the recollection of an eternal design rises like a cloud above these anecdotes' (FP 242).

A shift in Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé and his view of literature is prompted by closer engagement with Heidegger in the early 1940s, for whom the view that poetry is detached from world in an imaginary realm makes it seem like the most innocent of occupations, when it is in fact concerned with the founding of Being – Heidegger is here paraphrasing Hölderlin. According to Heidegger, the poetic act is the originary event when the ontological ground is laid for the disclosure of beings in history and when language gives us the horizon against which we appear as beings-in-the-world, and so it is, as Hölderlin

famously writes, poetically that man dwells on the earth.²¹ Language therefore serves comprehension only because poetry is foundational: ‘a naming of being and of the essence of all things – not just any saying, but that whereby everything first steps out into the open, which we then discuss and talk about in everyday language’.²² For obvious political reasons the name Heidegger appears only once in essays written by Blanchot during the Occupation, but his critical stance during this period is very close to that of the German philosopher; so close, in fact, that Blanchot is able to lift phrases and expressions from the essays on Hölderlin and apply them in turn to Mallarmé.²³

The Heideggerian view of the primacy of poetic over functional language is unambiguously repeated by Blanchot in ‘Is Mallarmé’s Poetry Obscure?’ (1942), a review of Charles Mauron’s *Mallarmé l’Obscur* in which Mauron provides a line-by-line and word-by-word explanation of each poem in an attempt to offer an approximate sketch of the network of relations that constitute the poetic work. Blanchot is critical of Mauron’s systematic approach, which takes for granted that every poem has an objective meaning that can be expressed by a prose translation and accessed by rational thought (FP 108). He points to the original and irreducible structure of the poetic work – where there are no insignificant or accidental details, which is non-transferable and cannot be expressed otherwise because what the poem signifies coincides exactly with what it is – which leads Blanchot to a markedly Heideggerian view of the division between these two modes of techne: ‘in the poetic act language stops being an instrument and reveals itself in its essence, which is to found a world, to make possible the authentic dialogue that we ourselves are, and, as Hölderlin says, to name the gods’ (FP 109). Rather than offering itself as the ‘written equivalent of the universe’, the poetic act is now described as an originary event, a point Blanchot repeats one year later in ‘Mallarmé and the Art of the Novel’ (1943) when he clarifies, in a revision of his earlier comments, that language cannot be reduced to instrumentality: ‘The mistake is to believe that language is an instrument that man uses in order to act or in order to manifest himself in the world; language, in reality, uses man in that it guarantees him the existence of the world and his existence in the world’ (FP 167).²⁴ Poetic language founds human reality – Blanchot is here using Henry Corbin’s controversial French translation of *Dasein* as ‘la réalité humaine’²⁵ – and it is far from the instrumental language put to use in practical life (FP 167).

Myth, the motif that dominates Blanchot’s earlier discussion of *Moby-Dick*, nonetheless remains a central concern of ‘Mallarmé and the Art of the Novel’ because it is one way of resolving the struggle

between necessity and contingency, and the aesthetic and the technical. In the opening paragraphs, Blanchot quotes a letter in which Mallarmé explains that he aspires to a structured and calculated book shielded from the everyday, which fulfils the duty of the poet by providing an Orphic explanation of the earth (FP 165). The conception of creation offered in Mallarmé's letter is so broad that no genre of literature is excluded and the writer of prose is similarly obliged to maintain the linguistic hierarchy and the necessity of the artwork in modernity; Blanchot references Novalis, Hölderlin and Joyce as examples of this struggle, but one could also cite Flaubert and Gide, for whom it was an unavoidable aporia. The relationship between the artwork and chance happenings of the everyday is under closer scrutiny here than it was in earlier essays: not only was Mallarmé's letter only brought to our attention by chance, but the requirement for the work to have a meaning for others is an accident which the novelist must accept as an external constraint, while still trying to ensure that the book is as absolute and as necessary as possible, and it seems that the writer of prose – who is more accustomed to structuring their work around the world in which we live and does not think to separate their language from that tarnished by everyday use – is only by accident attentive to what they write (FP 170). The task of the novelist is to found a world by granting the text its own law and by containing the text within itself so that it does not lapse into the hazardous everyday, which is perceived as a constant threat to the strict limits of the novel.

This threat is acknowledged by Heidegger, who argues that mistaking the essential for the everyday is 'the danger of dangers', because the slippage between these two modes of *techne* results in the forgetting of Being which is characteristic of modernity.²⁶ Blanchot borrows this phrase in an amendment to 'Mallarmé and the Art of the Novel' for its publication in *Faux pas* (1943), where he adds that this 'supreme danger' drives to silence, 'by the exercise of an intelligence caught in infinite labours and by the rigour of a mind that keeps finding chance', the creator who rejects any impure or inauthentic form (FP 168). Blanchot had explained in 'The Silence of Mallarmé' (1942) that this silence achieved through a methodical arrangement of words is 'a pure intellectual act, capable of creating everything while expressing almost nothing' (FP 102); this is not the mere keeping quiet of functional language but a silence that allows us to retain hope of that chance-abolishing thought about which we necessarily know nothing. It is a silence negotiated by Mallarmé's biographer Henri Mondor, who is praised by Blanchot for hiding nothing of the poet's work while maintaining his reader in a state of pure ignorance.²⁷

The question of what it means for the poet or novelist to write in the wake of Mallarmé, and of what it means for the critic trying to say something about this mode of creation, had been raised by Blanchot in a 1941 review of Jean Paulhan's *The Flowers of Tarbes, or Terror in Literature*, where there is early evidence of the shift in Blanchot's view of literature which would play out over the course of this decade. Paulhan identifies a shift from a pre-Revolutionary classicism – Rhetoric – in which linguistic commonplaces were a necessary part of communication and expression, and literature was a matter of submission to the rules and traditions of genre, to a post-Revolutionary romanticism – Terror – in which accepted literary forms were abandoned in the search for authentic and original thought.²⁸ The former gives priority to language over thought while the latter prioritises thought over language, named the Terror thanks to this belief in the purity of thought and this mistrust which verges on hatred of words.²⁹ Paulhan reveals the futility of the Terrorists' project: seeking to affirm the precedence of thought and to rid their language of all commonplace, they demonstrate an excessive concern with that very language. Through the metaphor of the garden in Tarbes – where visitors prohibited from taking flowers from the garden find ways around this interdiction by claiming to have brought their own flowers in – Paulhan questions how we are to tell whether authors intended their words to be read as commonplaces or as original thoughts. His solution is to turn back to Rhetoric; he argues that we must submit to the authority of commonplaces if we are to free ourselves from such a preoccupation with language: visitors to the garden are now forbidden from entering without carrying flowers so that they do not think to gather more.³⁰

Blanchot demonstrates how Terror flips to Rhetoric and vice versa as both try to express authentic thought: literature cannot be deemed Terror or Rhetoric with any certainty because both share a common goal. The Rhetoricians aim to express thought in a manner that does not draw attention to discourse, writes Blanchot, so that the words vanish as they are pronounced. The Terrorists, he continues, seek to express themselves in a language that is not an instrument of expression and where expression does not bring along the wear and tear of everyday life. 'The writer's mission, in both cases, is therefore to make an authentic thought – truth or secret – known, one that an excessive attention to words, especially to words frayed by everyday use [*mots usés de tous les jours*], could only endanger' (FP 79).

While heavily paradoxical, Paulhan's account of literary language is nonetheless controllable: the ambiguity at the heart of the relationship is resolved as the writer seeks mastery of words by accepting commonplaces. Blanchot's move in his review is to radicalise

this account to reveal that literature escapes everything one can say about it. He refers to these commonplaces as ‘monsters of ambiguity’ because they are at once transparent and clear while also being characterised by a double meaning that is not fixed or understood (FP 78). Such monstrous ambiguity governs the distinction of literature from everyday language: Terror rejects all commonplaces in the search for authentic expression, but any such expression, once expressed, becomes a commonplace like any other. On this Blanchot draws attention to what it means to write in the wake of Mallarmé: while the poet restored the power of creation to words – seeming to invent or to discover them anew – for those who follow him and similarly seek to rid language of its functional aspects, these terms are already corrupted by use (FP 80). Terror therefore becomes another name for literature and reveals its impossible conditions:

It is a fact: literature exists [*existe*]. It continues to exist [*être*] despite the internal absurdity that inhabits it, divides it, and makes it strictly inconceivable. In the heart of every writer there is a demon which pushes him to strike dead all literary forms, to become aware of his dignity as a writer insofar as he breaks with language and with literature; in a word, to call into question in an inexpressible way what he is and what he does. (FP 80–1)

It is for this reason that Paulhan concludes his study: ‘In fact, let’s just say I have said nothing.’³¹ This is not a throwaway remark to be ignored, because it reveals the secret of Paulhan’s text, which is that it articulates, through these unresolvable paradoxes, the impossible foundations, the void or the abyss, that constitute literature. This idea is repeated by Blanchot in relation to Mallarmé only a few months later: ‘this silence, this fact of having remained silent in the midst of so many words, may seem like the very secret whose existence was not supposed to be revealed to us’ (FP 106).

Blanchot’s essay on Paulhan has proved controversial, with more than one critic reading it in the context of his political shift between the 1930s and the 1940s. Jeffrey Mehlman reads the dismantling of the ‘terroristic imperative’ as an ‘encoded farewell to plans for French fascism’: this is evidence of a withdrawal of literature from Blanchot’s political engagement of the 1930s.³² Gerald Bruns considers this ‘politics of refusal’ in slightly different terms, arguing that this is less a renunciation of violence than a relocation of it within the ongoing currents of Blanchot’s thinking: terror, violence and anti-rationalism remain basic features of Blanchot’s poetics. Working from Zeev Sternhell’s understanding of fascism as an ideological revolt against modernity which had substantial appeal in France

in the 1930s, Bruns situates Blanchot within this tradition without labelling him a fascist as such.³³ According to Bruns, Blanchot is a ‘last Romantic’, perhaps someone ‘who has just never been modern’.³⁴ Elsewhere in this study, quoting the following passage from 1964 but omitting what comes after ‘to make possible a non-transitive speaking whose task is not to say things’, Bruns claims that early German Romanticism is the tradition in which Blanchot would most likely situate himself.³⁵

One can indeed say that in [Novalis’s] texts we find the expression of the non-Romantic essence of Romanticism and all the most important questions that the night of language will help to generate in the day: that to write is to create a work of language [*qu’écrire, c’est faire œuvre de la parole*], but that this work is worklessness [*cette œuvre est désœuvrement*], and that to speak poetically is to make possible a non-transitive speaking whose task is not to say things (and to disappear in what it signifies), but to say (itself) by letting (itself) be said [*mais de (se) dire en (se) laissant dire*], yet without making itself the new object of this language without object (for if poetry is simply a language that claims to express the essence of language and of poetry, we return, and only slightly more subtly, to the use of transitive language – a major difficulty by which we will eventually identify the strange lacuna within literary language which is its own difference and as if its night; a night somewhat terrifying, comparable to what Hegel thought he saw when gazing into men’s eyes). (IC 357)³⁶

The omission of the concluding lines of this passage by Bruns produces a distorted reading of Blanchot as a writer for whom literature is characterised by self-reflexive autonomy. In the lines that follow Blanchot shows that transitive and non-transitive language are one and the same once they adopt a fundamental teleology, such as the expression of authentic thought, and this exposure to the lacuna at the heart of literary language, the nothing of which Paulhan writes, turns writing endlessly outwards. This is night not as Hegel understood it – the pre-subjective and impersonal basis for self-conscious subjectivity and historical time – but that other night which is irreducible to the day–night binary because it puts history and world in parentheses. The aporetic logic is Mallarméan: necessity necessitates chance, depriving literature of any secure and stable foundation, and the beginning of this view of literature was evident in the early essay on Paulhan. Rather than a coded farewell to fascism or a revolt against modernity, the early review of Paulhan’s *The Flowers of Tarbes* reveals that literature, contesting its own limits, is never autonomous.

The realisation that the literary work is always under threat from the everyday leads Blanchot to the view that any founding law cannot

belong to the text itself.³⁷ This repudiation of the view of poetry as foundation, plus the expanded understanding of poetic creation in ‘Mallarmé and the Art of the Novel’, coincides with the publication of Blanchot’s first novel *Thomas the Obscure* in 1941. The opening pages of this novel, as Thomas swims in the sea and struggles with an implacable sense of danger, echo the sense that poetic language is pressed on all sides by a threat which pushes it towards complete necessity; but indicated here is also the beginning of a departure from a Heideggerian view of poetic language as Thomas hangs above a watery abyss:

Then he noticed that his limbs, whether from fatigue or for an unknown reason, gave him the same feeling of unfamiliarity as the water in which they flailed. Every time he reflected on the disappearance and reappearance of his hands in a state of total indifference to the future – with a sort of unreality he had no right to know – he was willing to believe that he would experience unforeseeable difficulties when it came to getting out of this bind. He was not discouraged. The sense of danger was quite unrelated to the discomfort he felt because of this situation. What did he have to fear? Yet his position did not improve with this realisation, because although he could have remained indefinitely in the water, or in this strange element that had taken its place, there was something intolerable about swimming this way, aimlessly, with a body whose only use – he now realised – was to make him think that he was swimming.³⁸

Thomas exists in a world marked by its unreality and strangeness: the water is an unfamiliar element where he is pure consciousness; he swims only in his imagination; his body is alien to him and seems to melt into the surrounding water or whatever element – the language of this fiction – has replaced that water. In an earlier version of the novel, written between 1931 and 1937, the emphasis in this much more concise opening scene is on the inexhaustible power of the sea and Thomas’s growing physical fatigue, which prompts him to return to the safety of the beach where the crashing of the waves continues to ring in his ears in place of the usual sound of passing coaches.³⁹

The ability of Thomas to remain in this state indefinitely and the indifference of his hands to the future, in the version of the novel published in 1941, suggests a suspension of time which is indicative of the phenomenological epoché as it is conceived by Husserl. Husserl sought to break with unfounded but deep-rooted assumptions about the structure and meaning of experience; he did this by placing the world within parentheses, by taking nothing for granted, not even the existence or non-existence of the world presupposed in metaphysics,

and by progressing from the certainty of the transcendental phenomenological Ego to establish certainties via a rigorous scientific method which worked from the intuited-real and not the mathematical-ideal, which he considered an error of the sciences since Galileo.⁴⁰

The stress on certainty found in Husserl is not, however, reflected in the passage from *Thomas the Obscure* quoted above, where the narrator hangs above a watery abyss and comments that there is something unbearable about this state in which he is estranged from himself. This opening scene indicates a shift from the foundation of a world in literature to the suspension of world altogether, and it was articulated in clear terms by Blanchot thirty years later when reflecting on the opening lines of the later 1950 edition of *Thomas the Obscure*: 'it – the sea [il – la mer]'. Literature is an uprooting force and what results is disunity and fragmentation rather than any unified structure.

◆ Writing as a question of writing, a question that bears the writing that bears the question, denies you this relationship with being – understood primarily as tradition, order, certainty, truth, all forms of rootedness – that you once received from the past history of the world, that domain you were called upon to manage in order to fortify your 'Ego' [*ton 'Moi'*], although this had seemingly been split asunder [*fissuré*] since the day when the sky opened to reveal its emptiness.

Try as I may I cannot picture the person who was not me and who, without wishing it, began to write, writing (and then realising it) in such a way that as a result the pure product of doing nothing introduced itself into the world and into his world. This went on 'at night'. During the day, there were acts of the day, everyday words, everyday writing, statements, values, habits, nothing that counted and yet something one dimly had to call life. The certainty that in writing he was putting this certainty into parentheses, including the certainty of himself as a subject of writing, led him slowly, but also immediately, into an empty space whose void (the barred zero, like a heraldic device) in no way prevented the twists and turns of a lengthy itinerary. (SNB 2)

Blanchot pushes the logic behind the phenomenological epoché to the limit in this fragment, as brackets open on to brackets, which open on to further brackets, in a movement that endlessly undermines the possibility of certitude. In suspending the everyday world in this way, the writer becomes unfamiliar to himself or herself and so the certainty of the night, the certainty that they write, is undone. The same workless logic evident in the early review of Paulhan that interrogates the distinction between Terror and Rhetoric here undoes

the possibility of writing. Foundation gives way to suspension in the development of Blanchot's thought over this period, which is not to say that the stress returns to pure consciousness, because the subject who writes is effaced in this process.

Literature as Imposture

Blanchot's engagement with Heidegger on Hölderlin therefore significantly informs his reading of Mallarmé and others during the 1940s, but not in an unchanging and uniform way. The radical undecidability of literature will soon challenge the view that poetic language can be differentiated from instrumental language, with implications for the critic whose task it is to comment on the work. We have seen that the distinguishing feature between aesthetic and technical language for Heidegger maps on to the difference between truth as a mode of revealing which founds a world and truth as mere correspondence between thing and idea, associated with metaphysical representation and modern technology. Later in the 1940s, Blanchot would accuse literature of imposture because it claims to offer up some truth but does not engage in work in the world and so cannot respond to worldly criteria; the epigraph to *The Most High* (1948) says as much: 'I am a trap for you. Even if I tell you everything; the more loyal I am, the more I will deceive you: it's my frankness that will catch you.' 'Please understand: everything that you get from me is, for you, only a lie, because I am the truth.' The hierarchy between the essential and the everyday, the aesthetic and the technical, becomes unstable and impossible to maintain with the realisation that literature will always deceive and never give up any truth.

This is a danger that Heidegger had already identified: language can be deceptive because it might express the essential, but it also preserves beings as such in the work and so equally expresses the common or the everyday: 'Thus language must constantly place itself into the illusion which it engenders by itself, and so endanger what is most its own, genuine utterance.'⁴¹ According to Heidegger, the 'danger of all dangers' is the slippage from Being to beings by which we mistake Being for a being like any other, and the subsequent forgetting or loss of Being which is characteristic of modernity. Blanchot similarly recognises that the essential may lie in the simplest of phrases; he writes in 1943 that the literary word can act as a trap because it can appear simple, clear and innocent when it is in fact concerned with the founding of all being (FP 166), and that it is the

novelist's and the poet's task to ensure that the essential does not lapse into the banal by maintaining this hierarchy (FP 168).

The traditional task of the critic to present works in more accessible terms, and to draw a meaning or truth from these works, leaves them susceptible to the trap set by literature; this became more pressing for Blanchot after the publication of *Faux pas* in 1943, his first volume of collected essays, and in the years following the Liberation when writers such as Sartre were calling for a literature that would reveal some truth about the world. The danger of the slippage between essential and everyday language is articulated in 'The Myth of Mallarmé' in 1946, which responds to the treatment of Mallarmé's work by his close confidant Paul Valéry. At the centre of this essay is the idea that Mallarmé's thought cannot easily be reduced to the unity and simplicity of a doctrine, which is, in Blanchot's view, precisely what Valéry attempted. Valéry is focused on method – take, for example, the reduction of the distinction between poetry and prose to the difference between dancing and walking, or two forms of language that follow different rules⁴² – but Mallarmé, Blanchot argues, is interested in the means only in view of the end, which is the creation of a poetic language. The distinction between the poetic and the functional, which had once seemed so clear-cut, is now attributed to Mallarmé rather than stated by Blanchot and is much more precarious than Valéry would have us believe: 'Mallarmé believed in the existence of two languages, one essential, the other crude and immediate. That is a certainty that Valéry will reassert and that has since become very familiar to us. Why? That is less obvious' (WF 29).

These reflections on the difficulties of criticism are nothing new. Blanchot had considered his own role as literary critic in the 'Prière d'insérer' – an editorial note on a loose sheet of paper slipped between the pages of a book – of *Faux pas*. The critic's task is difficult, perhaps even impossible, as they attempt to expose the secret of the work without falling foul of the trap set by literature:

Every book of any importance hides a secret which elevates it above what it would otherwise be. The critic, swept along by the duty to make new publications known to readers, moves towards this secret while it pulls away from him. His progress [*marche*] is therefore sluggish and difficult. If sometimes it seems that the goal is close, this is nothing more than a misstep [*faux pas*].⁴³

The critic might appear to approach the essential concealed in the work, but this is never truly the case; they are bound by their duty to communicate the appearance of new works to the public,

to articulate these useful facts in everyday language, and so the possibility of a meta-language becomes increasingly complicated by the contradictory aims of this task. An essay from 1944 develops this point when Blanchot, reviewing Paulhan's study of Félix Fénéon, claims that criticism is even more out of reach than the novel or poetry. It is, Blanchot writes, not at all certain that criticism exists. A discussion then proceeds from a consideration of the double state of language: literature protests the abuse of words in everyday language by destroying discourse, ruining practical words to render them useless; in literature, language is the victim of a sort of sacrifice and the writer hopes that this destruction will raise banal language to the status of the sacred. Blanchot argues that the critic should be no different in their treatment of language – they should not deal in understandable simplifications but must work within the same destructive medium as the poet or novelist – and that their status as critic should be perpetually in doubt: Paulhan is, after all, able to identify only one 'critic' from the last one hundred years (DN 13)!

The realisation, through a reading of Mallarmé, that the destruction characteristic of literature is also a defining feature of everyday language leads Blanchot to the view that literature is radically undecidable. Mallarmé is struck by the capacity of language in all its forms to be both meaningful and abstract: in order to function as language – to be understood in different contexts – language must negate or destroy the presence of the thing it names. The hierarchy maintained between the aesthetic and the technical in earlier essays is suddenly inverted: 'If poetry exists, it is because language is an instrument of comprehension' (WF 30). Blanchot turns to the famous example of 'I say: a flower!' to show that in both forms of language the presence of the thing is negated or destroyed; what differentiates between the two is that the poet does not replace this absence with an ideal presence or truth, and therefore does not reduce language to a question of knowing or of learning (WF 30–1). The absence created by the destruction of the thing becomes the defining characteristic of the poetic, but it is clear from the 'common word' that this absence is readily filled by the idea of a presence, and so the poetic must maintain what Blanchot variously refers to as an unstable image, the art of movement, a perspective of parentheses, a more evasive reality in which everything must vanish in turn, 'a series of fugitive and unstable nuances, in the very place of abstract meaning whose emptiness it claims to fill' (WF 31). The 'reality' founded by essential language is unstable and unachievable: the rigid structure and solid foundations of Mallarmé's text have disappeared. While differences remain between the two forms of language, they are not dialectically

opposed: 'the essential language that does not exclude prose [. . .] is poetry, and implies verse' (WF 33). The poetic is instead presented as the radicalisation of instrumental language.

The danger of a slippage is now inherent to poetic language rather than some external factor from which the poet, novelist and critic can shield the work. While everyday language destroys the world by reducing it to an abstraction, poetic language goes one step further and destroys this abstraction by the sensual tracing of the word: in order to create such absence, poetic language calls out to a form of presence which denies the presence of anything other than words themselves. The danger of a slippage between absence and presence is clear: 'the sensuality of language here carries it away, and the word dreams of uniting itself with the objects whose weight, colour, and heavy, dormant aspect it also possesses' (WF 38). If poetry retains one defining feature it is as an art of movement that does not allow its unstable images to solidify. What matters in Mallarmé is literature as the epochal suspension of world:

[Language] is a sort of consciousness without subject; separated from being, it is detachment, contestation, the infinite power to create emptiness and to place itself within absence [*un manque*]. But it is also an embodied consciousness – drawn to the material form of words, to their sonority, to their life – which gives the impression that this reality opens up some path toward the obscure basis [*fond*] of things. Perhaps that is an imposture. But perhaps such trickery is the truth of every written thing. (WF 42)

The first aspect of literary language described here, impersonal and separated from the world, is informed by the phenomenological epoché. The second aspect of literary language is the material form that literature requires in order to create this void; this presence deceives us, leads us to believe that the literary will give up a truth when in fact it only deals in creating a void and does not work in the world. The epochal view of the world presented to us by literature, in which the world is constituted rather than constitutive, implies that there is something beyond world which literature cannot include – 'But "up there" does not concern us: it is, on the contrary, the singularity and wonder of language to give creative value, a startling power, to the nothingness [*rien*], the pure emptiness [*vide pur*], the oblivion [*néant*] that it approaches without ever attaining' (WF 40–1) – and so the traditional way of seeing the work of art as giving truth is undermined.

Blanchot writes that the fate of poetry is tied to imposture thanks to the 'scattered trembling of a page'; Valéry calls this a feeling or

nascent thought, but it would be more accurately described according to Blanchot as ‘a still suspended meaning, of which we hold only the empty outline’ (WF 41). Literature creates an emptiness, and Valéry is at fault for attempting to fill this void with sensibility because seduced by the material form of words, which are only one aspect of poetic language.

‘But when is there literature?’

The literary becomes an experience of its own limits, and its relationship to the everyday appears unstable as dialectical opposites are undermined, and any sort of truth – truth as correspondence or truth as revealing – becomes inaccessible in literature. Blanchot argues again in ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ (1947/8) that literature is imposture but, in a statement far from the critical position he adopted at the beginning of the decade, he states that such fraudulence is precisely what makes it interesting: ‘if literature coincides with nothing for just an instant, it is immediately everything, and this everything begins to exist: what a miracle!’ (WF 302). This focus on the trickery innate to literature stems in part from Alexandre Kojève’s reading of Hegel which had appeared earlier the same year. Kojève, interpreting Hegel, states that it is only by working in the everyday world that man realises himself objectively as man; the intellectual, in contrast, does not engage in work in the everyday world and therefore fails to negate and to transcend himself, and remains a ‘natural being’ cut off from society. Any attempt by the intellectual to pit his ideal universe against the world is therefore deception, fraud, imposture.⁴⁴

This view of literature as imposture contradicts the account of literature offered by Sartre, who argues that the writer can have an engaged relationship with the world. In 1947 Sartre stated unequivocally: ‘To speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence.’⁴⁵ For Sartre, literature is engagement in the world because speaking inevitably changes the world through the process of naming and thus revealing. For Blanchot in ‘Literature and the Right to Death’, literature is not the gradual mediated transformation of the world over a period of time as Sartre claims it is, but the immediate negation of the world in its totality which results in the unreal or the epochal suspension of the world. It is for this reason that literature is imposture and does not correspond to worldly criteria: ‘As for the task that is the world, literature is now regarded as more of a nuisance than a serious help’ (WF 339). Literature is what Sartre would deem bad faith, whereas

for Blanchot what distinguishes all literature is the impossibility of avoiding such imposture.

There is little discussion of a divide within language in Blanchot's essay. Literature eludes a single definition, and characteristics that might once have been associated with functional language are now related to one of the slopes (*pentés* and *versants*) of literature identified by Blanchot. The first slope is associated with the destructive and communicative function of language: literature negates things so that they might be known and communicated. On the second slope, however, literature is concerned with the reality of things and destroys the abstract idea we have of them to make way for their unknown and silent existence. The second slope inevitably turns back to the first, which is why, if anything defines literature, it is the refusal to fall resolutely on either side of this arête, to have a clearly functional or aesthetic purpose, which results in an endless oscillation between these two states (WF 330). The focus has shifted from an opposition between the necessity of the poetic and the contingency of the everyday to the ambiguity common to all language: 'This initial double meaning, which is the basis of every word [*ce double sens initial, qui est au fond de toute parole*]' (WF 344).

Blanchot and Sartre might share the reference to ambiguity, but it leads them in two very different directions. Sartre argues that the poetic attitude considers words as things rather than signs; the treatment of the word as sign in prose ensures that words can be manipulated, mastered and used to act in the world: 'For the ambiguity of the sign implies that one can penetrate it at will like a pane of glass and pursue the thing signified, or turn one's gaze towards its *reality* and consider it as an object.'⁴⁶ Ambiguity is a way of raising questions in the audience's mind about good and bad courses of action, thereby prompting a dialectical understanding of action in the real world. Denis Hollier argues that the existential heroes of Sartre's work are failures in that they all fall victim to bad faith, a view which confirms Blanchot's view that 'good' faith in art is impossible.⁴⁷ Ambiguity in Blanchot reflects a state that is prior to the world and to the possibility of any horizon, and is not restricted to prose but is a feature of all language:

Literature is language turning into ambiguity [*qui se fait ambiguïté*]. Ordinary language [*langue courante*] is not necessarily clear, it does not always say what it says; misunderstanding is also one of its paths. This is inevitable. Every time we speak, we make words into monsters with two faces: reality which is physical presence and meaning which is ideal absence. But ordinary language limits uncertainty. It solidly encloses the absence in a presence, it puts *a term* to under-

standing, to the indefinite movement of comprehension; understanding is limited, but misunderstanding is limited too. In literature, it is as if ambiguity is abandoned to its excesses by the opportunities it finds and exhausted by the range of abuses it can commit. (WF 341)

A considerable conceptual shift has taken place for Blanchot over the course of the 1940s. The poet and the novelist (and Ahab) turned aside from the everyday to found another world in the essay on *Moby-Dick*; the everyday was the norm and the literary was the abnormal journey. By 1949 what is normal has been inverted; literary ambiguity is more inclusive because excessive or unlimited, and the literary cannot have a solid opposing relationship with the everyday now that ambiguity is everywhere, and so literature is marked by instability.

Husserl had shown that given with language is the possibility of suspending familiar assumptions, and so the epochal worldview of literature which Blanchot had explored in *Thomas the Obscure* is treated as the norm in essays published after the Liberation precisely because it is more inclusive. 'Unreality begins with the whole', Blanchot states, and he goes on to argue that literature stands neither in the world nor beyond it, but at its very limit, which it precedes and constitutes: the imaginary is the world 'grasped and realised in its entirety by the global negation of all the individual realities contained in it, by their disqualification, their absence, by the realisation of that absence itself, which is how literary creation begins' (WF 316). Literature is a power without foundation, because the work of art simulates being while providing only the absence of being; 'this initial double meaning which is the basis of every word' instigates an oscillation between presence and absence at the origin of the work, which results in what Blanchot in *The Space of Literature* will call 'worklessness' [*désœuvrement*]. Blanchot looks to Levinas and the force of the *there is* to name this state: 'this anonymous and impersonal flow of being that precedes all being, being that is already present in the heart of disappearance, that in the depths of annihilation still returns to being, being as the fatality of being, nothingness as existence: when there is nothing, *there is* being [il y a *de l'être*]' (WF 332).⁴⁸

The *there is* stands outside history, time, world and the dialectic posited by Hegel and supported by Kojève; it is the lack of foundation from which all beings and things originate, and it is comparable to what Bataille had previously referred to, using an anti-philosophical paradox, as 'unemployed negativity'.⁴⁹ From a Hegelian perspective, unemployed negativity is a self-contradictory nonsense: Hegel resolves contradictions by sublating them into dialectical thought. Rodolphe

Gasché remarks that paradox is essential in Blanchot, it is a necessary but insufficient condition for the happening or chance of literature, and that none of the contradictions staged by Blanchot in ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ is ever resolved because the condition for any such solution must be what makes it impossible. Literature is this solution premised on its own impossibility: ‘The opposite pulls between which writer and work find themselves do not lend themselves to a reconciliation. No causal, mechanical, logical or dialectical solution can be conceived. And yet, the work *is*, in its very underderivableness from the insurmountable ordeal, the *impossible solution* of that conflictual situation.’⁵⁰

When the conceptual ground has shifted to such an extent that literature is the norm, we move from art to world and not vice versa, as Ahab did for Blanchot in 1941 aboard his ship. The beginnings of this shift were evident in ‘Mallarmé and the Art of the Novel’, when Blanchot declared, in agreement with Heidegger, that the poetic precedes and founds the world and is constitutive of human existence and experience. The danger of a slippage – evident from his early reflections on the role of criticism – has inevitably been played out: no essence or truth is available in poetic language, which is now only imposture.

The double state of language is therefore untenable for Blanchot by the 1950s. Literature, if any such thing can be defined, aims for absence, remains attached to some form of presence and is governed by an oscillating worklessness. Blanchot writes in 1952 that silence defines both states of language according to Mallarmé, and repeats the view of language that had been developing in his work since ‘The Myth of Mallarmé’. Crude, raw or natural language negates the reality of things in the world of tasks and ends: words disappear into their usage in this language of pure exchange. The language of thought has more in common with the everyday than we might at first assume; aiming for the pure idea, it also returns us to the world of tasks (SL 37–42). The world might be suspended in ‘essential’ language, but words nonetheless retain their capacity to disappear:

Writing never consists in perfecting language in use [*qui a cours*], in making it purer. Writing only begins when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself, where, at the heart of dissimulation, speaking is still but the shadow of speech, a language which is still only its image, an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary which no one speaks, the murmur of the incessant and interminable which one has to *silence* if one wants, at last, to be heard. (SL 48)

The work of art might appear to silence the world in a way that everyday language does not, but it only pretends to split itself from all presence and being. Yun Sun Limet identifies a continuity and coherence in Blanchot's reflections on language from the 1930s to the 1980s in which there is a continued distinction between the literary and the everyday. Limet argues that Blanchot thinks silence as double throughout his career: a sort of literary silence which speaks while imposing a different sort of silence on the noise of the everyday world, ensuring the limits of literature.⁵¹ The idea that there is a more profound silence, to be distinguished from the trivial 'keeping quiet' of the everyday, is dismissed by Blanchot in 'Mallarmé's Experience', where he remarks that there is no way of telling the difference between 'the silent nullity of ordinary language [*la parole courante*]' and the 'accomplished silence of the poem' (SL 48). Silence, as that capacity of words to disappear, is attained neither in 'common' nor 'essential' language and unworks any linguistic hierarchy. The impoverished language that is never silenced is the only proof we have of the literary and looks more like the banal – Blanchot would later write about Beckett's work in such terms.

Mallarmé remains an important reference for Blanchot from the 1950s onwards, but the name is now associated with the question of the absence of the work and fragmentation rather than any dichotomy between the aesthetic and the functional. This is not to say that Blanchot denies a double state of language, but that he refuses any dividing line between two opposing forms:

By means of a violent division, Mallarmé separated language into two almost unrelated forms: raw language [*langue brute*] and essential language [*langue essentiel*]. This is perhaps true bilingualism. The writer moves toward a speech [*parole*] that is never already given: speaking, waiting to speak. He makes his way by drawing ever closer to the language [*langue*] that is historically intended for him, a proximity that nonetheless challenges, sometimes gravely, his belonging to any native tongue [*langue natale*]. (F 148)

The division of language which neatly delimited the poetic and the everyday, poetry and prose, was violent, forced and unsustainable. The two forms of language do not stand in a stable opposing relationship to one another; both exist in perpetual flux as they shift and overlap without any binding or separating relationship, in what Blanchot, writing in 1971, deems to be true bilingualism. The crisis that Mallarmé sought to negotiate in *Crisis of Verse* again comes back to haunt Blanchot in 1984: '[Poetry], exhausting all definition, launches me [. . .] towards a definitive crisis due to the indefinite

which it incessantly provokes.⁵² Mallarmé reached out to the distinction between the poetic and the everyday when the boundary between poetry and prose became confused. Blanchot recognises that this crisis cannot be resolved, as all boundaries within language – between poetry and prose, the essential and the everyday, fiction and criticism, the aesthetic and the technical – are indeterminable because constantly shifting.

The authoritative self-referential distinction which meant that literature was characterised by myth and necessity in 1943 was impossible by the 1950s: literature cannot be defined in contradistinction to everyday language, to the real, to chance, now that it has become an unanswerable question in which differences infinitely proliferate. During this period, it becomes a question for Blanchot of when one starts thinking about literature, or of how to police the boundaries between literature and politics. Autonomy can take on various guises depending on the circumstances, and the sort espoused by Blanchot at the beginning of the 1940s, when the text gives itself its own law, is very different from the autonomy from political appropriation supported in 1945, with the admission that literature is not action in the world but only ever imposture. When the limits of literature are challenged, as they were for Blanchot during the Occupation and in the years following the Liberation, the radical non-essentiality of art and literature is exposed: ‘the profound labour of literature which seeks to affirm itself in its essence by ruining distinctions and limits’ (SL 220).

This is why the question of literature is also the question of *techne* (the Greek term encompassing technology and art); and it is why, as later chapters will demonstrate, it is significant that Blanchot chooses to use the French term *technique* and not *technologie* to refer to techniques, methods, modern instruments and machines, and to writing that precedes, exceeds and therefore necessarily includes these technologies. Blanchot anticipates what Derrida would later argue in *Of Grammatology* (1967): writing functions according to a logic of the supplement which is an indication of abundance that is also proof of a deficiency, lack, absence; this is a sort of originary prosthesis unworking the opposition between nature and culture, or nature and technology.⁵³ Blanchot’s account of literature in essays from 1946 onwards had already shown that literature is nothing essential. In the place of literature, there is only doubt, uncertainty, a question: ‘literature is the sort of power [*puissance*] that takes account of nothing. But when is there literature?’⁵⁴ We will see in Chapter 2 that the shift in emphasis or understanding in Blanchot has significant implications for his relationship with Heideggerian fundamental ontology and the possibility or impossibility of an ‘authentic’ relation to death and dying.

Notes

1. Blanchot, 'Lettre de Maurice Blanchot à Roger Laporte du 22 décembre 1984', in Nancy, *Maurice Blanchot: passion politique*, p. 59 (my translation).
2. Hadrien Buclin considers how the political right became associated with literary autonomy during and after the Occupation, and he associates Blanchot with this position. He argues that it was in this climate that, opposed to the notion of a 'pure literature', Jean-Paul Sartre in *Les Temps modernes* and Albert Camus in editorials for *Combat* called for a committed literature. See Hadrien Buclin, *Maurice Blanchot ou l'autonomie littéraire* (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2011), pp. 17–32.
3. See, for instance, Antoine Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, trans. Carol Cosman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 82; Mark Hewson, *Blanchot and Literary Criticism* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 37–65; and Buclin, *Maurice Blanchot ou l'autonomie littéraire*, pp. 9–16.
4. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crisis of Verse', in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 201–11 (p. 210) (translation modified).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
7. Roger Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance: The Translation of Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 8.
8. Mallarmé, 'Crisis of Verse', in *Divagations*, p. 206.
9. Rosemary Lloyd presents the correspondence between Mallarmé and his peers on these issues and their articulation in 'Crisis of Verse', in *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 189–95.
10. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 34.
11. Mallarmé, 'Crisis of Verse', in *Divagations*, p. 210.
12. Roger Pearson, *Stéphane Mallarmé* (London: Reaktion, 2010), pp. 141–2.
13. Mallarmé, 'Crisis of Verse', in *Divagations*, pp. 210–11.
14. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Sur l'explosion à la chambre des députés', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1998–2003), II, p. 660. Blanchot, loosely quoting Mallarmé – 'There is no explosion but a book' – relates the book as explosion to a fragmentary writing which contests everything, including itself. The explosion, simultaneously unveiling and destroying, is the book to come which never arrives: '[the book] points to itself as the violence that excludes it from itself, the convulsive [*fulgurant*] refusal of the plausible: the outside in its fractured becoming [*en son devenir d'éclat*]' (WD 124).
15. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe', in *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E. H. Blackmore and A. M. Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 70–1 (translation modified).

16. See Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Dice Throw at Any Time Will Never Abolish Chance*, in *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, pp. 136–81.
17. Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 133, 128.
18. See Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, pp. 27–41.
19. Compare, for instance, Blanchot on Lautréamont in 1941, who is described as striking dead all work content with the imitation of reality, placing us in the presence of a world that no usual experience allows us to approach (FP 173); Lautréamont's project is similar to that of Mallarmé but the language employed by Blanchot in this review is never quite as superlative: 'As unique as this seems, there is nothing in this movement [the moment of invention] that must be regarded as the personal exactingness of an overly original author' (FP 176).
20. Blanchot is loosely quoting Valéry on *A Throw of the Dice*: 'He has undertaken, I thought, finally to raise a printed page to the power of the midnight sky.' See Paul Valéry, 'Concerning *A Throw of the Dice*: A Letter to the Editor of *Les Marges*', in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. Jackson Mathews, 15 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957–1975), VIII: *Leonardo, Poe, Mallarmé*, trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler (1972), pp. 307–16 (p. 312).
21. Martin Heidegger, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, p. 53. The quotation from Hölderlin: 'Is God unknown? Is He manifest as the sky? This rather I believe. It is the measure of man. Full of acquirements, but poetically, man dwells on earth. But the darkness of night with all the stars is not purer, if I could put it like that, than man, who is called the image of God.' Hölderlin, 'In lovely blueness . . .', in *Poems and Fragments*, pp. 600–5 (p. 600).
22. Heidegger, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, pp. 51–65 (p. 60). This was originally given as a lecture in 1936 and first published in French translation by Henry Corbin in 1938.
23. The only explicit reference to Heidegger in essays first published during the war comes in 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (1942): 'From Husserl to Heidegger, from Kierkegaard to Jaspers to Chestov, [Camus] identifies a whole family of minds whose influence on our time is obvious and who have all made some face of absurdist thought appear. It is not enough to say that these philosophers have blocked the way to reason; not only have they left the reasonable universe in ruins, they have made these very ruins their domain, made exile their home [*patrie*] and – in contradiction, paradox, emptiness and anguish – they have embroiled man's reality in a situation where it can only exist as an enigma and as a question' (FP 55).
24. This subtle but important shift is stressed by Leslie Hill in 'Blanchot and Mallarmé', *MLN* 105, no. 5 (1990): 889–913.

25. For the French translation of *Dasein*, see Martin Heidegger, 'Hölderlin et l'essence de la poésie', trans. Henry Corbin, in *L'Approche de Hölderlin*, trans. Henry Corbin et al. (Paris: Gallimard, [1963] 1973), pp. 39–61. Derrida describes this rendering into French of *Dasein* – later adopted by Sartre – as a 'monstrous translation'. See Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), pp. 109–36 (p. 115).
26. Heidegger, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, p. 55.
27. On this essay, Blanchot's response to Mauron and his reading of Mallarmé's silence, see Michael Holland, 'From Crisis to Critique: Mallarmé for Blanchot', in *Meetings with Mallarmé in Contemporary French Culture*, ed. Michael Temple (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998), pp. 81–106.
28. See Jean Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes, or Terror in Literature*, trans. Michael Syrotinski (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
29. For a useful summary of Paulhan's argument and Blanchot's response, see Michael Syrotinski, 'How is Literature Possible?', in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 953–8.
30. Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, p. 92.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
32. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Genealogies of the Text: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Politics in Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 92.
33. Gerald L. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 23–33. See also Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). Sternhell writes: 'Maurice Blanchot, who was to become in post-war France a famous writer and literary critic, provided a perfect definition of the fascist spirit in claiming that it is a synthesis between a left that forsakes its original beliefs not to draw closer to capitalist beliefs but to define the conditions of the struggle against capitalism and a right that neglects the traditional forms of nationalism not to draw closer to internationalism but to combat internationalism in all its forms' (p. 223).
34. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy*, p. xv.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 148–9.
36. Hegel as quoted by Kojève: 'This is the night we glimpse when looking into a man's eyes: through this gaze we plunge into a night that becomes terrible (*furchtbar*); the night of the world presents itself (*hängt entgegen*) to us.' Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: leçons sur la 'Phénoménologie de l'esprit' professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'École des Hautes Études*, ed. Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 674 (my translation). The section from which this quotation

- is taken, 'L'Idée de la mort dans la philosophie de Hegel' [The Idea of Death in Hegel's Philosophy], is not retained in the abridged English translation of Kojève's text.
37. The same applies to genre, as Jacques Derrida shows in 'The Law of Genre', trans. Avital Ronnell, in *Parages*, pp. 217–49. Derrida argues that in order for art to declare itself as art, there has to be something in its presentation that was not part of the genre: 'this supplementary and distinctive trait, a mark of belonging or inclusion, does not properly pertain to any genre or class. The re-mark of belonging does not belong' (p. 228).
 38. Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas l'Obscur* (Paris: Gallimard, [1941] 2005), p. 26 (my translation). Sections of this passage are retained in the abridged 1950 version of the text; see Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, trans. Robert Lambertson (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988), p. 8.
 39. See Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas le Solitaire*, ed. Leslie Hill and Philippe Lynes (Paris: Kimé, 2022), pp. 11–12.
 40. See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970). For an introduction to Husserl's philosophy, see Dermot Moran, *Husserl's Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For Husserl's influence on Blanchot, see Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing* (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 51–60.
 41. Heidegger, 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, p. 55. *Blendwerk*, translated as 'deception' in the English edition, is given in Corbin's French translation as 'vide sonore' [sonorous emptiness] (p. 47).
 42. 'Prose and poetry are therefore distinguished by the difference between certain links and associations which form and dissolve in our psychic and nervous organism, whereas the components of these modes of functioning are identical. This is why one should guard against reasoning about poetry as one does about prose.' Paul Valéry, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, VII: *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (1985), pp. 52–81 (p. 71).
 43. Prière d'insérer, *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) (my translation). The author of this passage is not indicated, although the style suggests that it may have been written by Blanchot.
 44. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: leçons sur la 'Phénoménologie de l'esprit'*, pp. 106–9; this section is not retained in the abridged English translation. Several critics have noted the influence of Kojève on this essay: see, for instance, Rodolphe Gasché, 'The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the Null-Space of Literature', and Christopher Fynsk, 'Crossing the Threshold: On "Literature and the Right to Death"', in

- Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 34–69, 70–90. Leslie Hill argues that Jean Hyppolite's *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* and his translation of Hegel are just as important to Blanchot as Kojève's work. See Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing*, pp. 254–6 n. 9.
45. Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p. 12.
 46. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 47. See Denis Hollier, *The Politics of Prose: Essay on Sartre*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
 48. Blanchot here cites Levinas. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978). See Chapter 2 for a discussion of Blanchot's engagement with Levinas in the context of their responses to Heidegger.
 49. Georges Bataille, 'Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel', in *The College of Sociology, 1937–1939*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 89–93.
 50. Rodolphe Gasché, 'The Felicities of Paradox', in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. Gill, pp. 34–69 (p. 42).
 51. Yun Sun Limet, *Maurice Blanchot critique: essai* (Paris: La Différence, 2010), pp. 49–60, 118.
 52. Maurice Blanchot, 'La Parole ascendante ou sommes-nous encore dignes de la poésie?' (1984), in *La Condition critique: articles 1945–1998*, ed. Christophe Bident (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp. 381–90 (p. 381) (my translation).
 53. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
 54. Maurice Blanchot, 'Allow me to reply briefly . . .' (1992), trans. Michael Holland, in *Blanchot's Epoch*, ed. Leslie Hill and Michael Holland = *Paragraph* 30, no. 3 (2007): 43.

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