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Derrida, Blanchot, and "Living Death"

From revolution to Revolution and back to revolution.

From the revolution of "the extreme right" to the revolution of "the extreme left" (DP 143/118).[1] This is how Jacques Derrida describes the trajectory of Blanchot's thought. After treating Victor Hugo's writings on the inviolability of human life at the beginning of the "Fourth Session," Derrida turns to Blanchot's difficult essay which, according to its title, "Literature and the Right to Death," would seem to favor the exact opposite of Hugo's views. Hugo's passionate insistence on the responsibility of the writer in relation to the law, places him among the foremost critics of the death penalty while Blanchot's pages treating the revolution and the Terror could be read as "a terrifying document from a certain period of French literature" (DP 142/118).

In "Literature and the Right to Death" Blanchot yet again inscribes literature under the sign of revolution: "Literature contemplates itself in revolution, finds its justification there …" (DP 143/119).[2] But, as Derrida notes, this is not simply due to Blanchot's reference to literature's annihilating power of naming, but also to the Sadian version of the Revolution, that is, to absolute cruelty. Derrida paraphrases that, for Blanchot, Revolution is the truth of literature, the right to death thus remaining a temptation of literature. If not the only truth of literature, the right to death can be considered as an "essential *temptation*" "constitutive of the project of writing literature" (DP 146/121).

Derrida's wish is to demonstrate that there is a link between literature and revolutionary Terror that condemns to death, without stating that Blanchot is either in favor or in opposition to the death penalty. The text of Derrida's seminar functions by quoting extensively from Blanchot's dense essay. We have recognized in the writer, Blanchot comments in "Literature and the Right to Death," the movement "without pause and almost without intermediary [*sans arrêt et presque sans intermédiare*] from nothing to everything [*de rien à tout*]" (PF 308).[3] From the beginning of this essay, Blanchot observes this movement from nothing to the whole [*le tout*], which he associates with literature: "one moment literature coincides with nothing [*rien*], and immediately it is everything [*elle est tout*] (PF 294).[4] Then, "the whole [*le tout*] begins to exist: great marvel [*grande merveille*]" (PF 294). Dissatisfied with the negation involved in the act of writing, there arises in the writer the need to realize himself (*se réalise*) by negating something more real than words. Thus the writer is driven toward (*pousser*) a worldly life and a public existence. This is when he comes to encounter "decisive moments in history when everything seems put in question" (PF 309). In such periods, which are called Revolution, "freedom aspires to be realized in the *immediate* form of *everything* is possible [tout *est possible*]," in the passage from nothing to the whole (PF 309). Blanchot dubs this a "fabulous moment," for in this moment fable speaks, fable becomes action. In this way "revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature" (PF 309, quoted in DP 147/122). In the movement from nothing to the whole ("the affirmation of the absolute as event and of each event as absolute" [PF 309]), revolution and literature come together, since they both share the same demand for purity and the certainty that everything they do has absolute value. Revolutionary action bursts

forth [*se déchaîne*] with the same power and the same ease as the act of writing (PF 309). Both share the fact that what they do is "the ultimate goal [*la fin dernière*], the Last Act" (PF 309). This last act is freedom and there is only a choice between freedom and nothing (PF 309). When one is faced with this choice, the specter of Terror arises. Such is the meaning of the Terror: each citizen has, so to speak, a right to death; death is not his sentence (*condemnation*), it is the essence of his right. He needs death to affirm himself as a citizen and it is in the disappearance of death that freedom causes him to be born (PF 309).

The Terror that Saint-Just and Robespierre embody, Blanchot explains, does not come from the death they inflict (*la mort qu'ils donnent*), but from the death they inflict upon themselves (*la mort qu'ils se donnent*) (PF 310). The Terrorists are thus those who, by wanting absolute freedom, know that they also want their own death (PF 310). But the event of death no longer has any importance. During the Reign of Terror, individuals die and this is insignificant. Isn't death the acievement of freedom, the most important moment of signification? But such freedom is "still abstract, ideal (literary)" (PF 310).

The Terror, Derrida summarizes, also means that no man has a right to privacy, intimacy, or secrecy. There is no right to one's life any more because death does not belong to one but is the essence of one's right. Blanchot adds in the formulation that strikes the reader as Hegelian: Death "appears to be the very operation [*le travail même*] of freedom in free men" (DP 147/122). Derrida is concerned that whatever the originality of this "post-Hegelian and post-Mallarmean discourse," it reproduces whether consciously or not, "the classic philosopheme of all great right-wing philosophies that have favored the death penalty" (DP 147/123). Man risks his life and affirms his

sovereignty. The law [*le droit*] would have to inscribe the death penalty within it, otherwise it would not be a law [*droit*]. The very idea of law means that life must be "liable to be sacrificed" (DP 148/123). Thus the concept of law presupposes death because there must be something more important, worth more, than (individual) life. If, as Blanchot writes, "there is no law or right that would not be or imply a right to death," it is literature that would think this right (DP 149/124). Thus literature has as its condition the right to death (*le droit à la mort*). This right is the very "element" or "*situation*" of literature (DP 149/124).

Derrida admits that Blanchot's text can lend itself to a reading that can be considered as a terrifying, sinister, and terrorizing thinking of literature. Even though this reading would not be entirely incorrect, Derrida does not wish to condemn Blanchot's essay to death. He suggests three motifs that would allow us to contest a reading of the essence of literature as terror. I will simply mention the first and focus on the last two: (1) Literary language is contradictory; it is made of contradictions (see also PF 315). (2) "Death" is not simply a matter of putting to death or taking one's life, but the principle of death is also "a principle of resurrection and salvation" (DP 150/125).[5]

After providing a description of the nature of everyday language, Blanchot goes on to treat literature (PF 315). In naming, the "existent" was called out of its existence by the word and became being (PF 315-6). The "Lazare veni foras" of the Bible summoned (*a fait sortir*) the cadaverous reality and in exchange gave it only the life of the Spirit, in the same way that the word, in negating and 'murdering' the thing, gives it life (PF 316). This is because "language knows that its kingdom is the day and not the intimacy of the unrevealed" (PF 316). Language is the achievement of the negation of reality. In speech,

what gives life to speech, dies. This is what Hegel is suggesting when he writes that speech is "the life that bears death and maintains itself in it" (PF 316). Blanchot wryly remarks: "Admirable power [*puissance*]" (PF 316).

Blanchot describes the task of literature as the search for what was there and is no more and the language of literature as the search for this moment that precedes it. Generally, literature calls what it excludes in order to speak, what precedes it, "existence." It wants the cat such as it exists, wants the foundation of speech, what speech excludes in order to speak, "the abyss, the Lazarus of the tomb, not Lazarus returned to life, the one that already smells bad, who is Evil, Lazarus lost" and not the one "saved and resurrected" (PF 316). Thus, it is only "the materiality of language" (the fact that words are also things) that can come to aid (PF 316). "The word acts," Blanchot writes, "not like an ideal force," "but like a moment of the universal anonymity" (PF 317). Language can now engage in its play without man. "Literature now dispenses with the writer," becoming "*my* consciousness without *me* [ma *conscience sans* moi]" (PF 317). Literature "is no longer this inspiration that works, this negation that affirms itself;" it is not the world itself but is not beyond the world either. Literature is the presence of things *before* the *world* exists. Here, without noting it, Blanchot has subtly displaced the Hegelian paradigm and approach: "It [literature] is not the night, it is its haunting [*elle en est la hantise*]; not the night, but the consciousness of the night that without rest stands watch [*veille*] … It is not the day, it is the side of the day that the day has rejected in order to become light. It is not death either …" (PF 317, cited in DP 152/126).

If speech, in the Hegelian formulation recounted earlier by Blanchot, is "the life that bears death [*porte la mort*] and maintains itself in it" then literature "is not death

either, because it manifests [*se montre*] existence without being [*l'existence sans l'être*], the existence that remains beneath existence [*qui demeure sous l'existence*], like an inexorable affirmation, without beginning or end, death as the impossibility of dying [*impossibilité de mourir*]" (DP 152/126; quoting PF 317). The reader cannot fail to be reminded of Levinas's descriptions of the *il y a* from *De l'existence à l'existent.*[6] Literature is the manifestation of this endless murmur, this underlying existence, which, for Levinas, is aimed to displace the privilege of the Heideggerian being. This subterranean rustling is, for Blanchot, a reminder of the impossibility of dying. A few pages later, Blanchot calls literature "the sole rendering [*traduction*] of the obsession of existence," if by the latter is meant "the very impossibility of exiting [*sortir*] existence, being which is always rejected from being, what in the bottomless depth is already at the bottom [*au fond*], the abyss which is still the foundation of the abyss" (PF 320).

(3) Thus, as Derrida notes in his third motif, the right to death *fails* in the face of the impossibility of death, of death as impossibility (DP 150-2/125-6). Blanchot has already broached the topic of dying (*mourir*) a few pages earlier (PF 310). In contrast to death, dying is referred to as "pure insignificance, an event without concrete reality," for it no longer belongs to an interiority (PF 310).

This protocol for another reading of "Literature and the Right to Death" would allow B0lanchot to be considered as a third "alternative," a third alternative to Hugo's speech given to the Constituent Assembly on "the side of life" (to use a locution that Derrida employs in *H.C. pour la vie, c'est à dire …*) and to the invocation of the Terror, Robespierre, Saint-Just, and Sade by Blanchot on "the side of death." If Hugo is a proponent of the inviolability of life or of a right to life, if a certain Blanchot "powered"

by death is an advocate of a right to death, then this *other* Blanchot would stand for the impossibility of dying. In other words, literature would not find its "source" or "engine" in death, the annihilation of the thing, but would rather belong to this strange region, halfway between life *and* death. Looking back to the seminar that we discussed last year, we could link this impossibility of dying to the "living death" mentioned in the second volume of *La bête et le souverain*. Even though Derrida does not make such an argument in the Death Penalty seminar, he does do so in a piece entitled "Maurice Blanchot est mort," published in *Parages*, in which practically all of the section on Blanchot from "Session Four" that I have been commenting on is reproduced. In the "First Session (continued)" Derrida has already argued for the significance of the connection between literature and literary writers and the problem of death penalty (DP 40-1/33-4). What this *other* Blanchot may be said to stand for is not the contestatory view of literature, literature as favoring or opposing the death penalty, but an *other* literature that would allow us to think beyond the dichotomy of life and death of a *sur-vie*.

--Kas Saghafi

NOTES

[1] Jacques Derrida, *Séminaire: Pardon-parjure. La peine de mort (1999-2000*); *Seminar Pardon-perjury: The Death Penalty (1999-2000)*. All further refertences, abbreviated as DP, are cited in the body of the text with page references first to the draft of Peggy Kamuf's translation then to the French text.
[2] Blanchot had already linked literature and revolution in his writings of 1930s.
[3] Blanchot, *La part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949). All further references, abbreviated as PF, are to the French text. I have consulted Lydia Davis's translation but have mainly provided my own.
[4] The writer is the master of the imaginary. For Blanchot, the imaginary is not a region situated beyond the world; it is the world itself, the world considered as whole (*comme tout*) (PF 307).
[5] I take it that Derrida is using a classical definition of resurrection here. In a number of mainly unpublished papers, I have tried to show that an interesting *Auseinandersetzung* takes place between Derrida and Nancy pivoting on a reading of Blanchot, in particular concerning resurrection. Terms such as "ressusciter" and expressions such "traverser la vie et la mort" (and, needless to say, their rendering into English) become sites of contestation between the two thinkers. See my "*Salut*-ations," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 39, 3 (September 2006): 151-172; "The True Lazarus: Death and Resurrection in Blanchot and Nancy," presented at the "Maurice Blanchot and the Work of Thought" Symposium, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, August 8, 2007, "Thomas : Lazarus : : Blanchot : Nancy," to be presented at a Blanchot panel for La Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française (SAPLF), the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Montreal, Canada, November 6, 2010.
[6] The *il y a* is mentioned several pages later in a footnote on Levinas (PF 320).