

ART AND POLITICS: “TO COME”

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I will thus attempt to resist once more the impulse towards or expectation of position taking. To those who are waiting for me to take a position so that they can reach a decision [*arrêter leur jugement*], I say, “good Luck.”

(Jacques Derrida *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* p41)

What could it mean to write of a politics and art *to come*? A politics and art in terms of what remains *open, imperfect* and *always incomplete*. What sort of politics will be under scrutiny here, a politics that refuses the pragmatic specificity of present situations? And what kind of art are we referring to, one that would be endlessly deferred, always unfinished and resistant to both communication and consumption? Yet, as important as these questions are, the more pressing issue at this juncture, the quest that should not be delayed, is what relationship exists between these divided ontological categories of art and politics. From the caves of Lascaux and Plato, through the very different ‘ends of art’ in Hegel and Adorno, to the unstable condition of representation and interpretation in contemporary thought, art and politics have been in unremitting dis-agreement, either placed in intricate hierarchies of significance or seen as supplements and positioned as surplus to the requirements of a perfect state.

Therefore, the quest upon which I propose we embark is one that will ask: “What if the most crucial concern of politics were not its association with power and economics but rather its relationship with the experience of art and literature?” What if the traditional view of politics as relate to the organisation of law, capital and governance were secondary to our understanding of what it means to be a community of human beings. That beyond or before questions concerning nationhood and the allocation of resources, authority, goods and services, is the question of the relationship between the listener, reader or viewer and that of artist/author, which serves as a paradigm for the communications between human beings who participate in communities. It is with this in mind that this paper puts forward the formation of an ‘artistic an-archy’, where an-archy is recognised not only as a political thinking that

repeatedly disrupts attempts at the establishment of government and the interruption in formations of ideology but also as the continuous emergence of a radical form of passivity towards a politics 'to come'.



As with any project there are writers with whom we develop alliances and those we choose, because their ideas are thought-provoking, to contest on a number of levels. In what follows we will closely examine the texts of Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben in relation to coming communities and the role art plays within each of these writers various schema. We will also engage with the thoughts of Martin Heidegger, whose inquiry into the meaning or sense (*Sinn*) of being, in *Being and Time*, is an attempt to resurrect the question of being, what it means 'to be', by defining being itself as the question. If we use this methodology as our opening strategy we can begin to suggest that what we're doing here, what we're always doing, or perhaps ought to be doing, is setting out on a quest for the question. Yet this is no ordinary quest, no con-quest, it's one that reveals a paradox at the heart of every question. Because on the one hand any legitimate question requires that it be left unresolved, without resolution, for the reason that it is this openness that enables the question to account for the fluidity of the world, its universality or the manifold multiplicity of its being. But equally, any legitimate question also requires a form of closure, a resolution that may even enable it to be answered once and for all. Therefore, the legitimate question, in this sense, must be able to be completed; otherwise, to be rhetorical for one moment, why would we set off on the quest to begin with if we had no intention of finding an answer? It's for this reason that the closure or completion of the question can account for the fixed or singular resolution of being that we might refer to, in a teleological way, as its goal, truth, or death. This reveals the essential paradox at the heart of the question, in that the question is always already divided between openness and closedness, between responsibility and irresponsibility. Any question is concerned with our response-ability, or to put it in other words, our ability to respond to the question; where the term irresponsibility refers to our ability not to respond and in effect leave the question open. This duality lies at the heart of the paradox, because for an entity to be what Heidegger terms *Dasein*¹ it must have the ability to

either respond or not respond. Yet this choice is not the end of the paradox, because the ability to respond and answer the question once and for all is ironically the experience of subjection. The ability to fulfil the quest or answer the question is to bring it to an end, to experience death. For Heidegger, Dasein can only fully experience itself in its totality, in death; yet in death this possibility is exhausted, it becomes an impossibility. It is in the act of setting off on the quest that we perform irresponsibly by open up a space in which to find more quests, more questions. This act opens up the spaces in which to live, and it is in these paradoxical spaces of living, where we have the ability to respond or not respond, that power and powerlessness, lack and excess, life and death are doubled, and only in the experience of this double, this aporia, is it possible for Dasein to think. Or as Heidegger says “What is most thought-provoking in this most thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.”ⁱⁱⁱ It is this doubling, which, for Heidegger, allows us to re-think the question of being that we will attempt to explore a little further now.



Whereas, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger explores our ‘being-towards-death’ in terms of how it represents the possibility of impossibility, the likelihood that all our potentialities will draw to a close; Maurice Blanchot turns this around by accounting for death as the impossibility of possibility. For Blanchot, the notion of death is not merely concerned with the moment at which life comes to a close, but also with the wider concerns of why it is we embark upon a quest to write and make art. In relation to death, Blanchot suggests we first experience a sense of anxiety that subsequently exposes us to the nothingness at the core of our being which compels us towards writing and the making of art that will forge communicative links with others and will place us within a community. These forms of ingenuity, especially writing for Blanchot, give voice to the expression of our awareness of the illusion essential to all possibility that show themselves in our unattainable endeavour of naming the possible by responding to the impossible.

This engagement with the doubleness of the possibility of responding to the impossible, illustrates Blanchot’s commitment to that which is multiple and other than one. Yet, this does not lead Blanchot to either employ or renounce the dialectical mode of thinking, because to

take either of these two well trodden paths would be merely to confirm dialectical thought as the dominant mode of discourse which has to be either accepted or fought over. Instead Blanchot proceeds by using a more radically passive style of discourse that destabilises any concept that claims to have a consistent identity with itself, by creating notions of difference without identity. He does this through using language and syntax which communicates his thinking but never positions itself in fulfilment, or as a timeless idea, but rather as a percept of 'plural speech' which reveals an otherness without positionality, an otherness that is imperceptibly over the horizon as an idea 'to come'. This is explored in his text of 1969 *L'Entretien infini*, translated in 1993 as *The Infinite Conversation*, where he explores the 'Thought of the neutral' or neuter, which is an obscure percept, to use a Deleuzian term, rather than concept, of that which appears *neither* as the one *nor* as the other. As Blanchot writes:

Neutral speech does not reveal, it does not conceal... It does not signify in the optical manner, it remains outside the light-shadow reference that seems to be the ultimate reference of all knowledge and all communication ...

(Blanchot 2003: 386)

We will return to the light-shadow metaphor at the conclusion of the paper; but let us first explore Blanchot's methodology of the neutral alongside Heidegger's 'Orphic' methodology in *Being and Time*, that connects both our 'being-in-the-world' and our 'being-towards-death' to art and literature. Where Heidegger states "Discoursing or talking is a way in which we articulate 'significantly' the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world." (2000: 204) he is indicating that communication enables us to give meaning to the world. That by virtue of having language we can experience a coherent world in which things make sense to us by being different from one another whilst always remaining interconnected. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests that it is the individual, through the use of discourse, who is able give sense to the world and the situation of being-in-the-world. As Gerard L. Bruns remarks, "for Heidegger, the world is brought into being and upheld there by the energy of words...its appearance before man by means of words, is the Orphic poem."ⁱⁱⁱ The language of Orpheus, Bruns suggests, is that which seeks to unite poetry and man's experience of the world. It is a form of language that continuously attempts to create the world anew by calling the world

into being. Language in this respect has a transcendental aspect to it in that it stands both outside the world and that which has previously described the world.

For Blanchot, on the other hand, language plays a very different role; where in its literariness, language obliterates not only the structured view of objects in the world but also the writer of these words. In Bruns' terminology, this is closer to what he calls the 'hermetic tradition' where language is not the poet's calling the world into being but rather the "poet's activity towards the literary work as such, that is, the work as a self-contained linguistic structure",^{iv} language used entirely for literary and artistic ends. As Blanchot writes, "...the word has meaning only if it rids us of the object it names...It causes to vanish, it renders the object absent, it annihilates it."^v

The primary aspect of language for Blanchot is that it communicates the idea of something, let's say a 'cat', at the same time as it negates the reality of that thing by taking away its self-identity. The cat's particularity is erased because the same word is used to describe every cat we come into contact with. In the act of communication our pre-intellectual relationship to the immediacy of things in the world, is not merely lost to us, but we realise that in the act of communicating we construct the world and that no pre-intellectual immediacy with things in the world can ever exist. We become aware that as we use language to articulate meaning it is language itself that is always at a distance from any pre-linguistic, pre-intellectual contact with the world and is instead a mode of constructing worlds. However, we are also suspended in the absence of language, a suspension that prevents language not only from finding stability with any pre-intellectual reality but also with itself. Our everyday use of language, which we use for the exchange of information, conceals this absence and instability, whereas literature and art require that we experience this absence and instability up close and impersonal.

Everyday language calls a cat a cat, as if the living cat and its name were identical, as if it were not true that when we name the cat, we retain nothing of it but its absence, what it is not... That is the primary difference between common language and literary language. The first accepts that once the non-existence of the cat has passed into the word, the cat itself come to life again fully and certainly in the form of its idea (its being) and its meaning: on the level of being (idea), the word restores to the cat all the certainty it had on the level of existence... Common language is probably right, this is the price we pay for our peace. But literary language is made of uneasiness; it is also made of contradictions. Its position is not stable or secure.

(Blanchot 1995: 325)

This ‘inoperative’ aspect of literary language Blanchot refers to as *désœuvrement*, whereby words are not transformed from absence to a stable and productive concept of presence, but on the contrary they obstinately uphold this absence as absence. In this sense language appears in a state of idleness – a waiting for something to do. Therefore, modes of communication in both literature and art are in a state of idleness or worklessness, they do not refer to the thing but rather to themselves and their own chains of signification. They are waiting for something to do, to be continuously recreated in futures still to come. These chains do not finish up at any definitive symbol, sound or word, but instead, as the absence that is at the heart of both literature and art. These artistic referents have a very delicate presence that can never refer to things or concepts but only to themselves as texts in a process of waiting to be reinvigorated in new ways. When we erroneously suggest that a text has meaning we are avoiding this absence that all texts reveal to us; we are running away from our responsibility of constructing new opinions about them. It is this absence that is constantly revealed through the work of art.

[W]ords, have the power to make things “arise” at the heart of their absence — words which are the masters of this absence — also have the power to disappear in it themselves, to absent themselves marvellously in the midst of the totality which they realise, which they proclaim as they annihilate themselves therein, which they accomplish eternally by destroying themselves endlessly. This act of self-destruction is in every respect similar to the ever so strange event of suicide...

(Blanchot 1989: 43)

In the same way that art and literature destroy the reality of things, they also destroy the individuality of the artist and writer. Our modes of communication appear to emerge from nowhere and from no one. The individuality of the author and artist is destroyed in the making of the work. In our everyday pragmatic dealings with the world we repress or deny this, we basically get on with living. But the writer and artist have the ability to move beyond these basic ‘dead metaphors’ of everyday language by means of enabling the work to have a voice, to become text, and accepting that it must take their place. This is what it means to be a writer and an artist and why this activity is like no other. The artist like Orpheus can only find death

in creation but the work, the text, lives on. In 'The Space of Literature', Blanchot describes this annihilation of the artist by referring to the ancient Greek myth.

Orpheus does not signify the eternity and the immutability of the poetic sphere, but, on the contrary, links the "poetic" to an immeasurable demand that we disappear. He is a call to die more profoundly, to turn towards a more extreme dying... Through Orpheus we are reminded that speaking poetically and disappearing belong to the profundity of a single movement, that he who sings must jeopardise himself entirely and, in the end, perish, for he speaks only when the anticipated approach towards death, the premature separation, the adieu given in advance obliterate in him the false certitude of being, dissipate protective safeguards, deliver him to a limitless insecurity. Orpheus conveys all this, but he is also a more mysterious sign. He leads and attracts us toward the point where he himself, the eternal poet, enters into his own disappearance, where he identifies himself with the force that dismembers him and becomes "pure contradiction"...

(Blanchot 1989: 156)

This would seem to severely contest the separation between the orphic and hermetic idea of language, that we attributed to Bruns earlier; where Blanchot appears in opposition to Heidegger's Orphic approach. However, Bruns argument develops by suggesting that Blanchot ideas go beyond this Orphic and hermetic dialectic, as do those of Heidegger in his later work^{vi}. Bruns suggests, "that a literary use of language, as it approaches the condition of negative discourse—a discourse which disrupts or reverses the act of signification—is a way of holding the world in being against the annihilation that takes place in man's ordinary utterance. Understood in this way, the poet does indeed become a kind of Orpheus, a poet of the earth whose song shields the world against the void into which ordinary speech seeks to cast it."^{vii} For Blanchot, the paradox of poetry in the traditional sense, as a form of signification or representation, is destroyed by literary language. This death (rather like the death of Orpheus) moves poetry beyond the author/artist and comes to life in the form of literariness devoid of fixed ideas.

These fixed ideas appear as a kind of death in the work of Plato, they are comprehended as a placeless place, a nowhere or utopia, that one might think of as a 'distopia' of petrification, a world of 'ideal forms', that exists before life and after death, in which nothing changes and where we are able to grasp the truth of things. Whereas life, this world of flux and change where nothing can be known for sure, fills the human spirit with suffering. In the desire to

over-come this state of anxiety brought on by the encroachment, not merely of death, but of too much life; Blanchot suggests that the artist endeavours to realise the perfect work that will give to them the contradictory powers of “suicide as an absolute right”^{viii} and immortality. “The infinite nature of the work, seen thus, is just the mind’s infiniteness. The mind wants to fulfil itself in a single work, instead of realising itself in an infinity of works... However, the work — the work of art, the literary work — is neither finished nor unfinished: it is. What it says is exclusively this: that it is — and nothing more. Beyond that it is nothing.”^{ix} Both life and death cannot be over-come in this way, in other words the artists work will always remain unsuccessful in what it tries to achieve. It can only ever leave a trace at what the artist can never fully accomplish, it will always be the work or the book to come^x. For Blanchot, we can never comprehend death because, paradoxically, it reveals itself only in the practice of art and literature as a process of ‘dying’, if we take this word in the way that Blanchot uses it to suggest an approach to living which is constantly attempting to understand death, attempting to name the possible by responding to the impossible. This is a literature and art that will always miss any intended target, no matter how deliberately deceptive these targets may be; which implies a work that will be constantly in a process of becoming. In changing Heidegger’s possibility of impossibility to the impossibility of possibility, Blanchot is suggesting that death is not something that forces us to authentically grasp the significance of our life, death and individuality; but rather death is the breaking of the illusion of our individuality. In this sense death gives rise to a radical passivity that recognises the presence of the other and which also recognises the community of human beings dispersed as singular beings but always already dependent upon one another. In opposition to Heidegger, Blanchot is claiming that the impossible experience of death in the possibility of dying is not a solitary event but rather the source of our coming together as community through the expression of the possible in an artwork that will always be in a process of dying and always remain still ‘to come’.

ⁱ Da-sein, 'there being', is the term used by Heidegger to refer to the being that we ourselves are. It is just one kind of being, a thinking thing; which leads him to a detailed investigation of being *qua* being, the being that is not Being as such, with a capital 'B', but our everyday being-in-the-world, our practical concern with objects whose mode of being is that of a presence-at-hand, like a hammer or a weapon those isolated entities not related to any other as opposed to what he terms 'ready-to-hand' which is, a way of being.

ⁱⁱ Heidegger's 'What is Called Thinking?'

ⁱⁱⁱ (Gerald L. Bruns *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study*. Originally published in 1974: 3)

^{iv} (Bruns 1974: 1)

^v (Blanchot 1995: 30)

^{vi} *On the Way to Language*

^{vii} Bruns 1974: 201

^{viii} (Blanchot 1989: 105)

^{ix} (Blanchot 1989: 22)

^x See Blanchot's essay *The Book To Come* in his text of the same name. 2003: pp224-244)