Beyond Commitment: Intellectual Engagement in Politics in Postwar France, 1944-1962

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This dissertation was conceived and realized at two very different stages of my graduate student career. I had the idea for this project in 2005, when, after a brief hiatus in my studies, it became clear to me that if I were actually to complete a dissertation, it would have to be about Maurice Blanchot. It was his subtlety, perspicacity, intellectual dexterity, and above all, his fundamental dignity which made the value of the life of the mind clear to me, and which remain models to which I will forever aspire. The actual writing of this dissertation took place in the wake of the 2007-2008 race for the democratic presidential nomination, which was a period of increased political activity among the graduate students at the University of Minnesota. This dissertation's efforts to understand the ethics of intellectual engagement in postwar French politics are largely motivated by my own struggles with political engagement in the contemporary United States.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the way that French intellectuals engaged in major political debates in the years immediately after World War II. It examines three moments in particular: the purge of writers and intellectuals who collaborated during World War II, the Algerian war of independence, and the emergence of structuralism in the early 1960s. Initially, the mode of engagement developed by the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, called commitment, dominated the political debate over the postwar purge between 1945 and 1948. At the same time, Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus, and Jean Paulhan critiqued Sartrean commitment for its philosophical inadequacy, its political inefficacy, and its moral ambiguity. As a result, they developed their own mode of engagement, based on the articulation of political arguments through unlikely means, such as literature and philosophy, which achieved prominence by the end of the war in Algeria in 1962. This dissertation concludes with an examination of the mode of discursive, or textual analysis developed in an exchange between Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault at the beginning of the 1960s. This exchange reveals that their version of textual analysis itself served as a mode of engagement in politics, and was rooted in the critique of Sartrean commitment articulated during the postwar purge, and the war in Algeria.

This dissertation has the additional significance of redefining how the body of thought known in the United States as French theory is conceived. Ultimately, the move away from existentialism and its mode of political commitment was one of the main factors that contributed to French theory's growth in the 1960s. By historicizing French theory within the culture and politics of postwar France, this dissertation shows that

French theory must be understood as a large and synthetic intellectual community, rather than as a description of a particular kind of philosophical or literary thought. The relations which obtained within this community affected, and sometimes even determined the generation of theoretical ideas and texts. This dissertation shows that French theory has continued utility for contemporary scholarship when it is taken to indicate the relations of this intellectual community.

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INTRODUCTION

Intellectual Engagement in Postwar France

On March 28, 1962, the German philosopher Theodor Adorno gave a radio address titled "Commitment," in which he stated that "Since Sartre's essay *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* [published in 1948] there has been less theoretical debate about committed and autonomous literature. Nevertheless, the controversy over commitment remains urgent."[1] To Adorno, who had just witnessed the closing of the border between East and West Germany and the erection of the Berlin Wall seven months earlier, this was a travesty of epic proportions. The intensification of the Cold War – "the freezing of historical relations which nowhere seem ready to melt," as Adorno put it, heightened the urgency of finding new means of intellectual engagement in politics.[2] Looking across the border to France, Adorno bemoaned what seemed like the comfortable distance into which the proponents of committed literature – *littérature engagé* – and the proponents of autonomous literature had settled from each other. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist version of commitment seemed, lamentably to Adorno's way of thinking, to have become the orthodoxy purely by default.

Yet, the debate over committed literature had in fact continued without abating. In 1962, Sartrean commitment – the idea that each individual was responsible for changing the world because of the simple fact that he or she existed in the reality of the

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[1] Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in Adorno et al. *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 1980), 177. See Adorno, "Zur Dialektik des Engagements." *Die Neue Rundschau* 73, no. 1 (1962): 93-110.
[2] Ibid. 194.

world, and that this change could be achieved through literature – was by no means the only accepted way for intellectuals to engage in politics in France.[3] Since the Dreyfus Affair, the exigency of political engagement had been so deeply embedded in the identity of French intellectuals that a vigorous debate over the best way to pursue that engagement raged throughout the postwar years. After the fall of the Vichy regime, the ousting of the German occupation forces, and the thorough discrediting of the right, French intellectuals saw the reconstruction as an opportunity to remake the political and social organization of France according to radical leftist ideals. In the years following World War II, the question of committed versus autonomous literature was of paramount importance to French intellectuals, for the precise reason that what was at stake was not simply literature, but the very possibility of ideas affecting politics, and the possibility of theory being put into practice. French intellectuals were not simply concerned with literature, or even the literary. Rather, they were concerned with the possibility of affecting leftist, egalitarian political change through intellectual activity. For this reason, many French intellectuals were unwilling to concede hegemony to Sartre's concept of commitment without putting up a fight.

Adorno can hardly be blamed for having missed the many different arguments made about commitment in France. The debate had shifted context in the decade and a half since *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* was published in 1948. It had moved from the highly visible mediasphere in which Sartre operated, to the small, literary and

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[3] On the concept of commitment and its genesis before and during World War II, see David Schalk, *The Spectrum of Political Engagement: Mounier, Benda, Nizan, Brasillach, Sartre* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). For an interesting – if fundamentally theoretical and ahistorical – reinvigoration of the category of commitment, see Suzanne Guerlac, "Sartre and the Powers of Literature: The Myth of Prose and the Practice of Reading." *Modern Langauge Notes* 108, no. 5 (December 1993): 805-824.

philosophical journals that were the lifeblood of avant-garde French intellectual culture. In fact, this was where the debate had always taken place, as French intellectuals communicated with each other primarily through the medium of the journal article. Even *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* itself originally appeared as a series of essays in *Les Temps modernes*, the journal that Sartre edited. Further obscuring the debate over commitment, French intellectuals often responded to and argued against commitment in terms that could scarcely be recognized as theoretical reflections on the need for intellectual engagement in politics. In the particular idiom in which French intellectuals communicated, alternatives to commitment might be posed in esoteric debates over the nature of language and literature, over the nature of reality, even over something so seemingly far afield as the myth of Orpheus. In this world, superstar public intellectuals like Sartre and Albert Camus existed side by side with elite, but relatively unknown literary figures like Jean Paulhan and Maurice Blanchot. This world also encompassed a wide range of academics, including the literary critic Roland Barthes, the philosopher Jacques Derrida, and the historian Michel Foucault, each of whom has since become influential in the United States. In this world of French intellectual culture, commitment was critiqued, challenged, and replaced by other modes of intellectual engagement in politics. As Adorno sensed, commitment no longer received the same attention in 1962 that it had when Sartre originally articulated it in 1948. But this was not because the debate over commitment had come to an end, as Adorno feared. Rather, it was because the only committed intellectuals remaining were the existentialists gathered around Sartre, while others had found alternatives to commitment.

The use of the word commitment requires explanation. Sartre used the French word *engagement*, which is a cognate for the English word engagement, but which can also mean commitment. Adorno did not translate the French *engagement* into German, preferring instead to keep the original French term. His radio address was called "Engagement," and when it was published as an essay later in 1962, he retitled it "Zur dialektik des Engagements." In scholarship written in English, it is conventional both to use the cognate for the French, engagement, and to translate it with the word commitment. Yet, during the 1940s and 1950s, Sartre meant something very specific by the term *engagement intellectuel*. This difference is explored in Chapter One of this dissertation. It is necessary here to distinguish Sartre's version of intellectual engagement, from the general concept of intellectual engagement. For the sake of avoiding any possible confusion, I have chosen to use the term commitment solely in reference to Sartre's theory, while using the phrase intellectual engagement to indicate the practice of intellectuals taking action in politics more generally.

This dissertation at first began as an intellectual history of the thought of Blanchot, who was enormously influential figure in the closed circle of French intellectual culture, despite his lack of renown in the wider world.[4] Both Derrida and

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[4] A measure of Blanchot's anonymity beyond elite literary circles is the lack of attention his work has garnered among historians. The only historical treatments of Blanchot and his work that exist have been written by literary scholars, though none have yet produced a book-length study. See particularly, the work of Michael Holland, including, "'A Wound to Thought,'" in Carolyn Bailey Gill, ed., *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1996), 174-189; "Qui est l'Aminadab de Blanchot?" *Revue des sciences humaines* 253, no.1, (1999): 21-42; "Bataille, Blanchot and the 'Last Man,'" *Paragraph*, 27, no. 1, (2004): 50-63; "An Event Without Witness: Contestation between Blanchot and Bataille," in Kevin Hart & Geoffrey Hartman, eds., *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 27-45; and Rabaté, "The Critical Turn: Blanchot Reads des Forêts," trans. Thomas Pepper, *Yale French Studies*, 93 (1998): 69-80; Philip Watts, "Blanchot: Rebuttals," in *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to Postwar Trials of Writers an Intellectuals in*

Foucault, for instance, cited Blanchot as an important influence on their own work. Who was Maurice Blanchot? Blanchot was a literary critic and theorist who inhabited the avant-garde intellectual circles of postwar Paris.[5] He was born 1907, in the rural town of Quain, in the department of Saône-et-Loire, in the southeast quarter of Burgundy. A contemporary of the existentialists Sartre and Camus, Blanchot's career as a writer began in the 1930s and lasted through the 1980s. With such longevity, Blanchot was able to converse not just with the existentialists, but also with structuralists and post-structuralists like Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault. Blanchot's closest friends however, were those peculiar figures that bridged the gap between the pre and postwar eras, such as Georges Bataille, and Emmanuel Levinas. Like his existentialist peers, Blanchot worked in both philosophical and literary genres. He published several novels and short works of fiction, in addition to numerous critical and theoretical essays on literature, and

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France (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University, 1998), 83-105. Christophe Bident's biography especially provides an invaluable resource for the historian of Blanchot: Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998); see also Bident, *Reconnaissances: Antelme, Blanchot, Deleuze* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2003).

[5] Blanchot's reception in among contemporary scholars in France and the United States has been confined to the disciplines of literary criticism and philosophy, where his influence has been considerable. Indeed, literary reflection on Blanchot has grown to such an extent that Michael Holland is compelled to proclaim the existence of something like "Blanchot Studies." See Holland, "État Présent: Maurice Blanchot," *French Studies* 58, no. 4 (2004): 533-538. Examples of Blanchot Studies include Gerald Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Françoise Collin, *Maurice Blanchot et la question de l'écriture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); Gill, ed., *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*; John Gregg, *Maurice Blanchot and the Literature of Transgression* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Hart & Hartman, eds., *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot*; Hartman, "Maurice Blanchot: Philosopher-Novelist," in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958-1970* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970): 93-110; Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997); Philippe Mesnard, *Maurice Blanchot: Le sujet d'engagement* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996); J. Hillis Miller, "Death Mask: Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort*," in *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990): 179-210; Thomas Pepper, "Because the Nights: Blanchot's *Celui ne m'accompagnait pas*," in *Singularities: Extremes of Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 173-226; Pepper, ed., *The Place of Maurice Blanchot*, Special Issue of *Yale French Studies* 93 (1998); Ann Smock, *What Is There to Say?* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003); Marlène Zarader, *L'être et le neutre, à partir de Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Verdier, 2001).

philosophy. And like the structuralists and post-structuralists who followed him, Blanchot was dedicated to finding news ways of philosophizing that broke with the Enlightenment tradition that they held responsible for the atrocities of World War II. Although Blanchot's work never gained a significant audience beyond the elite intellectual circles of Paris, his influence within them was considerable.

As the dissertation on Blanchot progressed however, it quickly became apparent that Blanchot's thought did not develop in isolation, but rather in perpetual conversation with other thinkers and ideas. It was obvious that in order to understand Blanchot, it was necessary to study the intellectual culture around him. Studying Blanchot in relation to others made it clear just how much of his literary theory and philosophy was also a response to Sartrean commitment. In this way, Blanchot's relations with the other members of French intellectual culture provide an ideal lens through which to view the debates over intellectual engagement, and the move beyond commitment. On the one hand, Blanchot was himself at the very center of that culture. As a regular contributor to, and editor of the journals *Critique*, and *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, Blanchot was part of the central nervous system of French intellectual culture. From this position he was able to participate in all aspects of the debate over commitment directly. On the other hand, Blanchot's thought epitomized the obliquity with which French intellectuals attacked the notion of commitment. Indeed, it was Blanchot who was responsible for perhaps the most oblique contribution to the debate over commitment, a re-telling of the Orpheus myth that posited the linguistic nature of reality. Thus, Blanchot was central to the move beyond commitment both because of his affiliation with the institutions of

French intellectual culture, and also because his work epitomized the multifaceted way that French theory could be literary and political, philosophy and ethical, all at the same time.

Using Blanchot as a red thread holding French intellectual culture together, this dissertation examines the debates over commitment that occurred in France from the end of World War II to the end of the war in Algeria in 1962, as they occurred in the often hermetic language of French intellectual culture. This dissertation considers three central questions. First, what motivated French intellectuals to critique, abandon, and replace commitment in the decade and a half between 1944 and 1962? Second, what political, ethical, and philosophical arguments did French intellectuals make in their critiques of commitment? Finally, what alternatives to commitment were posed, and how did they relate to the French theory of the 1960s and 1970s that has been so influential in the United States?[6] This dissertation argues that French intellectuals critiqued, abandoned, and replaced commitment as a means of intellectual engagement in response to the political crises that France experienced after World War II. Commitment was found inadequate to meet the political challenges of the postwar years, and French intellectuals developed new ways of creating politically engaged thought and literature in response to this inadequacy. The consequence of the move beyond commitment was that all postwar French thought, from existentialism to structuralism and post-structuralism, contained an

[6] Sande Cohen and Sylvère Lotringer argue that French theory, which is known simply as "la pensée" in France, is an Anglo-American invention. However, one of this dissertation's key interventions is against the truncation of French theory in its Anglo-American reception, so it has seemed useful to retain that term, even when no *philosophe* would self-apply it. While Cohen and Lotringer see French theory as an American object, this dissertation argues that it is a French object, and that it must be understood within the context of French – and not just American intellectual history. See Cohen & Lontringer, "Introduction" in Cohen & Lotringer, *French Theory in America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1-13.

implicit – and sometimes explicit – political register that must be recovered if it is to be understood in all its valences. The title phrase of this dissertation, "beyond commitment" thus refers not just to the critique and abandonment of Sartrean commitment, but also to the mode of intellectual engagement in politics that came after commitment.

The move beyond commitment occurred in three distinct stages. The first stage, examined in Chapter One of this dissertation, was a political critique of commitment made during the postwar purge, in which writers and intellectuals were put on trial and executed for having committed "intellectual collaboration" with the Nazi forces, or the Vichy regime during the occupation. This purge became the occasion for a debate over commitment, in which Jean Paulhan, the editor of the journal, *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, and Maurice Blanchot critiqued committed literature's ability to produce viable political change on the grounds that it rested on an deficient understanding of the nature of language itself. In this way, the debate over commitment was marked by what Henri Rousso calls the Vichy Syndrome, the tendency for French culture and politics to be circumscribed within debates about the memory of the war, the occupation, and the resistance. French theory was not exempt from the Vichy Syndrome, as positions both for and against commitment were staked on the experience of the war, and the postwar purge.[7]

The second stage of the move beyond commitment, examined in Chapter Two, was the ethical abandonment of commitment during the war in Algeria, which lasted from 1954 to 1962. During the war in Algeria, French intellectuals developed a new

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[7] See Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

ethics of intellectual engagement in politics, building on Albert Camus' critique of the ethics of commitment in his 1951 book, *L'Homme révolté*, on the grounds that the imperative to change reality no longer served as an adequate justification for intervening in politics. Camus showed that commitment hypocritically advocated the killing of others, or was willing to allow others to be killed in the name of leftist political change, while at the same time claiming that the historical necessity of political change exculpated them of any guilt for this killing. As a consequence of this ethical critique, French intellectuals largely abandoned commitment by the end of the war, in favor of the exigency to create a new ethics that did not hypocritically proclaim its own innocence. This ethics was achieved by the important manifesto, the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie," co-written by Blanchot, Dionys Mascolo and Jean Schuster.

The third, and final stage in the move beyond commitment, examined in Chapter Three of this dissertation, was the replacement of commitment with a new mode of intellectual engagement in politics, which intervened at the level of the textual and the linguistic. What lay beyond commitment was the strategy of engagement in the text that has been so influential in the American academy. But the version of textual engagement practiced in the United States – the most widely recognized examples of which are discourse analysis and deconstruction – is a domesticated and sanitized version of what Blanchot and Foucault pioneered. Their notion of textual engagement did not seek simply to correct injustices, or to expose hidden oppression. Rather, Blanchot and Foucault's textual engagement was built on the political critique, the ethical

abandonment, and the theoretical replacement of Sartre's commitment, and as such it was intended to re-arrange the very fabric of reality.

It is necessary to pause at this moment in order to explain what is meant by textual engagement, and illustrate its historical implications, as well as its significance for contemporary intellectual engagement. In postwar France, Blanchot and Foucault were among the first French intellectuals to adopt the notion that the world is experienced only through the languages with which it is apprehended and described. These languages, commonly referred to as discourse, posed a serious problem for intellectuals who wished to engage in politics. The linguistic construction of reality was equivocal: it led both to the possibility that political change could be achieved through language, but also to the danger that material political changes might not be possible at all.

In postwar France Jean-Paul Sartre embraced the optimistic voluntarism of the former understanding of textual reality in his notion of committed literature. A linguistically constructed reality – which is to say, a textual reality – seemed to offer the possibility for reality to be rewritten. After all, if one experiences reality through language, could reality not be remade simply by altering the language one used? Sartre believed that language was constructive of reality insofar as language was the medium in which the self and the other became conscious of each other, and reflexively, of themselves. Sartre proposed to reorganize the world by disseminating committed literature into the vast pool of language, where it would help people achieve a more egalitarian sense of self-consciousness.[8]

[8] The linguistic aspects of Sartrean commitment are considered in detail in Chapter One of this dissertation.

To others however, a linguistic or textual reality seemed to put the material reality of things like politics, social relations, and economics – in short, all the real stuff with which intellectuals wished to engage – at an inaccessible distance. How could one affect social relations based in the material realm simply by rewording them? This charge was given its most pointed articulation in a slogan scrawled by student demonstrators on the walls of the Sorbonne during May 68. Flush with enthusiasm for the revolution they had made, and tired of what they saw as the arid structuralism of their professors, the students exclaimed, "structures don't march in the street." For the students, wholesale societal change depended not on the language with which society was represented. Rather it depended precisely on what they were doing: seizing political power by placing their bodies in the street.[9]

This debate over the political ramifications of the linguistic construction of reality survives to this day in Anglo-American scholarship, with proponents of one side or the other occupying a large portion of all theoretically-informed work. The Sartrean position is continued by those who advocate combating social oppression through appropriating and performatively playing with social and political categories, such as Judith Butler.[10] The students' position, by contrast, has been championed by Marxist scholars, who give priority to economic processes over linguistic constructions in their analyses of late

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[9] For a dramatic example of the confrontation between the students and their professors, see Jacques Lacan, "L'impromptu de Vincennes," *Le Magazine littéraire* 121 (February 1977): 21-25. For Lacan's immediate reaction to the slogan "structures don't march in the street," see his comments in Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 63 (July-September 1969): 104.

[10] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For Butler's analysis of her own relationship to Sartrean thought via Simone de Beauvoir, see "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault," in Seyla Benhabib & Drucilla Cornell, eds. *Feminism As Critique: On the Politics of Gender* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 128-142.

capitalism. The students' position has also been adopted by those such as Alan Sokal, who resist linguistic theory in all its forms.

This debate rages on, continuing to determine the contours of scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences to this day. Yet it does so often without taking its own history into account. The history of the move beyond commitment in postwar France was also the history of the acceptance of the linguistic construction of reality. Sartrean commitment was politically inadequate in Blanchot's eyes because it failed to follow the consequences of the linguistic construction of reality to their full conclusion. To Blanchot, Sartre's acceptance of a linguistic reality and his desire to affect change through language were a step in the right direction. Where Blanchot thought that Sartre's commitment was undone however, was in the latter's insistence the subject's sovereignty, the subject's ability to control the affect that his words had. To Blanchot it did not make sense that the subject continued to exert control over language with a consciousness anterior or exterior to language, while at the same time existing in a linguistically constructed reality. In the debates over the postwar purge, and the war in Algeria, Blanchot saw this logical contradiction in Sartrean commitment at work. During the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals, Sartre and his allies issued calls for writers who had written for collaborationist publications to be tried and executed, but sought to withhold their own writing from similar scrutiny. Likewise, during the Algerian war of independence, Sartrean commitment made an ethical condemnation of the French army's killing in Algeria on the grounds that killing was a moral wrong, while exonerating itself for calling for others to be killed in the name of the proletarian revolution. In these

reservations and exemptions, Blanchot saw Sartrean commitment's failure to fully adhere to the consequences of the linguistic construction of reality, for if one called for sweeping political change in and through language, and if language genuinely determined the experience of reality, one must be prepared for that change to sweep oneself away as well. Likewise, if one called for an end to killing, and established an ethical law prohibiting killing, one could not also exculpate oneself for advocating for the killing of others, however righteous and just the cause might be. These self-exemptions made Sartrean commitment ineffective, as members of the French intelligentsia, and French society at large quickly recognized its hypocrisy and dismissed its calls for political change.

In the latter half of the 1950s, and the early 1960s, Blanchot and Foucault posed a solution to the problem of how to engage in the politics of the world, while at the same time recognizing the world's linguistic construction. In doing so, Blanchot and Foucault used textual engagement to explicitly intervene in the political crises of postwar France. The problem, as Blanchot and Foucault saw it, with a linguistically constructed reality was not that it lacked materiality – it was, rather, that people mistook linguistic reality for material reality. People lived their lives as if the linguistic constructions with which they interacted were in fact naturally occurring material realities. The discursive institutions of literature and mental illness, the linguistic constructions with which Blanchot and Foucault respectively engaged, were believed to have a natural, material basis, when in fact they were nothing more than linguistic constructions. Blanchot and Foucault's textual engagement recognized that the world was linguistically constructed, and so it did

not seek to alter any material reality beyond the linguistic construction. Such an engagement was impossible. Rather, they sought simply to expose the linguistic construction of reality for what it was, so that people could take a different stance toward linguistic reality.

To Blanchot, a naturalist approach to the discourse of literature was a problem because it led people to believe that books were verisimilar representations of natural reality, or genuine reflections of an author's experience. Yet literature was, Blanchot argued, no more and no less than a series of words strung together. By treating literature as if it were verisimilar, readers erroneously believed that what they read was natural truth, while writers erroneously believed that what they wrote was reality. This led to positions such as Sartre's, who argued that the representation of political problems in literature would automatically lead readers to recognize those problems in the material world, and adopt the correct political stance. Blanchot, by contrast, sought to intervene not in the textual reality of literature itself, but in the way that people related to literature.

In order to make this intervention, Blanchot rewrote the foundational myth of literature itself. Instead of arguing that literature was created by an author's genius – that is, by some privileged person whose access to nature and ability to describe it allows them to communicate the natural world through fiction – Blanchot located the origin of literature in a rewriting of the myth of Orpheus (the classical Greek myth in which Orpheus descends into Hades to recover his dead wife, Eurydice). To Blanchot, fiction was nothing more and nothing less than fiction. An author simply made it up. It required no greater explanation than that, and certainly it required no elaborate recourse to an

author's privileged subjectivity as justification. By locating the origin of literature in the myth of Orpheus, Blanchot disavowed the notion of the privileged author, while at the same time casting those origins into the domain of the mythic. Blanchot's notion of mythic origins was designed to impress upon people the way that literature has no rational explanation, to help them realize that a story was just a story, and that authors simply created them. By locating the origins of literature in the myth of Orpheus, Blanchot's goal was not to change literature itself. After all, fiction was just fiction, and it would always be that way no matter what literary theory Blanchot advanced. Rather, Blanchot sought only to change the way that people related to literature.

To Foucault, who applied Blanchot's literary insights to the discourse of mental illness, a similar problem existed in the way that people related to mental illness. Like literature, the discourse of mental illness was nothing more and nothing less than a profusion of words strung together. Foucault's analysis of the history of mental illness in *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* led him to the conclusion that the discourse of mental illness developed by medical science was also contained within a linguistically constructed reality. What psychiatry and psychology portrayed as the scientific discovery of natural realities was really just the product of people thinking and writing about madness. This is not to say that Foucault wanted to deny that madness was real. To the contrary, it was the language that psychiatrists and psychologists used to describe madness with which Foucault wished to contend, not madness itself. From his early days as a student, Foucault was always a harsh critic of the way that the discourse of mental illness was allowed to label, medicate, and incarcerate people with society's

tacit acquiescence. By treating the discourse of mental illness propagated by psychiatrists and psychologists as if it were natural reality rather than a profusion of words, people ceded to it too much authority over then own lives and minds. The point of Foucault's textual engagement in the linguistic construct of mental illness was not that people should abandon the institution of psychiatry altogether. Foucault's point was, rather, for people to stop treating psychiatry as if it emanated from natural reality, and thereby be able to interact with psychiatrists on equal footing.

Like Blanchot, Foucault made his textual intervention in the discourse of mental illness by rewriting its origin myth. Instead of agreeing that mental illness had its origin in medical science, with its experiments and observations, Foucault suggested that the discourse of mental illness had its roots in the myth of the ship of fools. The ship of fools was a fifteenth century literary convention, in which poets and chroniclers claimed that the mad floated up and down the Rhine river on rafts, expelled from each city at which they arrived, and sent floating along to the next. From this, Foucault argued, came the sequestering and the incarceration of the mad that characterizes modern medicine's practices toward the mentally ill. By locating the origins of the discourse of mental illness in the myth of the ship of fools, Foucault intended to show that the language with which modern psychiatry labels and describes madness was essentially a literary, linguistic, and textual black box. Such labels did not possess any ontological power to describe a person's inner essence. As Blanchot had no wish to alter the discourse of literature, neither did Foucault wish to affect the discourse of mental illness directly.

Rather, he desired only to change the way that people related to the discourse of mental illness.

To Blanchot and Foucault, one could engage in the textual construction of reality and also have a real affect on the material world, only if one submitted to textuality absolutely. This required limiting oneself to changing the way that people related to linguistic constructions, and abandoning any residual temptation to directly affect the material world with linguistic constructions, or affecting those linguistic constructions themselves. In theory, this meant that one could, as an engaged intellectual, have an affect on politics by reading and writing about texts. In practice, this meant that one had to acknowledge the limitations of working within linguistically constructed reality. Textual engagement, for Blanchot and Foucault, was a way of exposing the institutions that dominated the world by demonstrating that they were indeed constructed linguistically. Textual engagement was a way of helping people establish a different mode of relating to linguistic constructions, in order to combat the ideological abuse to which linguistic constructions were submitted, whether by Satrean commitment, or the discourse of mental illness.

Blanchot and Foucault's notion of textual engagement emerged directly out of the political crises of postwar French history. It was formed through the political and ethical critique and abandonment of Sartrean commitment during the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals, and the protest of the war in Algeria. In the debate that accompanied the postwar purge, Blanchot and Paulhan, another advocate of the linguistic construction of the world, argued against Sartrean commitment, and its desire to affect the material

world through language. During the war in Algeria, the critique of Sartrean commitment was taken a step further by Blanchot and Camus, who critiqued commitment's ethics. It was during the war in Algeria that Blanchot, while attempting to forge a new way of making ethical demands that avoided commitment's hypocrisy, first developed the notion of acknowledging, and restricting oneself to acting within the limitations imposed on the subject by the linguistic experience of the world. Textual engagement emerged in its mature form, as a fully developed alternative to commitment, through an intellectual exchange between Blanchot and Foucault in the early 1960s. In their hands, textual engagement became a way to intervene not just in specific political crises, but also the experience of reality itself.

The prevailing narrative of the abandonment of commitment, suggested by Tony Judt in *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*, does not account for the way that French intellectuals actively critiqued and replaced commitment with alternative means of intellectual engagement in politics.[11] For Judt, commitment was always closely associated with the practice of fellow travelling, the support of the Soviet Union and the proletarian revolution by men and women who lived in liberal societies. Judt argues that intellectuals abandoned commitment as a means of intellectual engagement in politics because they grew disillusioned with communism when the atrocities committed by the Soviet Union became generally known, especially after the repression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. In Judt's narrative, French intellectuals realized that they had made a mistake, and they abandoned commitment in order to correct that mistake. This

[11] Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

argument relies however, on an implicit understanding of the innate superiority of liberal democracy over communism. For this reason, Judt arrives at the teleological conclusion that French intellectuals were fated to realize the error of aligning themselves with a regime as reprehensible as the Soviet Union.[12] While disillusion certainly was a factor, particularly in the case of Camus, French intellectuals moved beyond commitment not because they realized the virtue of liberalism, but because they realized the political, ethical, and philosophical inadequacy of commitment. Moreover, they came to this realization not because of international events, but in the face of local, political crises in France. They were active in their critique of commitment, rather than reactive to liberalism.

More recent accounts of the intellectual history of French theory, such as Julian Bourg's *From Revolution to Ethics: May '68 and Contemporary French Thought*, and Michael Scott Christofferson's *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Anti-Totalitarian Moment of the 1970s* argue that French intellectual politics were shaped by, and responded to May '68.[13] For Christofferson, the narrative of postwar French theory is one of radicalization, starting with the period immediately after the war, and culminating with the uprising of May '68. With the failure of May '68, French

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[12] Judt is not alone in his presumption of the supremacy of liberalism. Samuel Moyn argues that in the last two decades, French intellectual history has undergone a liberal turn that is symmetrical to the linguistic turn of the 1980s. See Moyn, "Intellectual History after the Liberal Turn," unpublished lecture. For examples of the liberal turn, see Luc Ferry & Alain Renaut, *La Pensée 68: Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1985); Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001); Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[13] Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May '68 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montréal, CA: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Anti-Totalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn, 2003).

intellectuals became disenchanted with the totalizing demands of revolutionary engagement, and engaged in political affairs through anti-totalitarianism. Similarly, Bourg's narrative is also one of radicalization up to May '68, after which French intellectuals transferred their efforts from political engagement, to an emphasis on ethical reflection. While they have differing interpretations of French thought in the 1970s – as Christofferson emphasizes its liberalism, and Bourg its ethics – both agree that it was the failure of May '68 to produce meaningful and lasting political change that pushed intellectuals away from commitment. This dissertation argues that the crucial move away from commitment occurred not from 1968 onwards, but between 1944 and 1962, during the purge of writers and intellectuals immediately after World War II, and the war in Algeria during the 1950s. Furthermore, it was not the failure of May '68 that spurred the move beyond commitment, it was rather, the critique of commitment's inadequacy in the face of political events, its ethical corruption and hypocrisy, and its philosophical superficiality that pushed French intellectuals to move beyond commitment.

Other philosophers and historians, such as Judith Butler, Vincent Descombes, Michael Roth, and Jean-Michel Rabaté, have asserted that the introduction of Hegel into French philosophy in the postwar years motivated the transition from existentialism to structuralist and post-structuralist thought, and by extension, the move beyond commitment.[14] For Butler, Descombes, Roth, and Rabaté, French thought shifted after Jean Hyppolite and Alexandre Kojève began to lead seminars on Hegelian philosophy

[14] See Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Vincent Descombes, *Le même et l'autre* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979); Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (London: Blackwell, 2002); Michael Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

and history. Prior to these seminars, there was relatively little knowledge of Hegel or Hegelian thought in France, or indeed the rich tradition of German philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kojève and Hyppolite brought Hegel into the mainstream, and revolutionized French thought in the process. Rather than arguing against Butler, Descombes, Roth, and Rabaté, this dissertation supplements their purely philosophical explanations for this shift away from existentialism, by providing an examination of the way that French intellectuals formulated many of their theories in the context of major political crises. This dissertation argues that French theory was always engaged in politics, and that it always had a political valence, which co-existed with its philosophical and theoretical import.[15]

French theory has a history, and this history had a significant influence on the theory itself. By examining this history, this dissertation contributes to a new, and growing body of historical scholarship that seeks to historicize the work of those thinkers grouped under the portmanteau of "French theory," whose history remains largely

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[15] It is one of the vagaries of French intellectual history – and historiography – that comparatively few of histories of twentieth-century French thought have been written by French historians. This is due in part to the fact that in France, the history of philosophy has tended to be written by philosophers rather than historians. It is also due to the dominance in France of the Annales school of historiography, which treats intellectual history under the wider rubric of the history of *mentalités*. Lastly, in the wake of the work of Raymond Aron and Pierre Bourdieu, intellectual history has been studied primarily as the history of intellectuals. For this reason however, analyses of post-World War II French intellectual history have tended to ignore the political valence of French thought itself, preferring instead to separate the study of the thought from the study of politics. For a helpful discussion of this puzzling situation, see François Dosse, "Afterword: For Intellectual History," trans. Julian Bourg and Arline Cravens, in Bourg, ed., *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 353-365. A representative example of French history of philosophy is Vincent Descombes', *Le même et l'autre: quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933-1978)* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979). For intellectual history as the history of intellectuals, see Jean-François Sirinelli and Pascal Ory, *Les Intellectuels en France: de l'affaire Dreyfus à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1986); Sirinelli, *Génération intellectuelle: khâgneux et normalien dans l'entre-duex-guerres* (Paris: Fayard, 1988); Sirinelli, *Intellectuels et passions françaises; manifestes et petitions au XXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1990); Michel Winock, *Le Siècle des intellectuels* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997). An invaluable exception to this rule is Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, 2 vols. (Paris: Découverte, 1991-1992).

unwritten.[16] This is distressing, considering the sizeable role that French theory has had in shaping academic inquiry in the humanities and social sciences in both France and the United States since the 1960s. Its concepts and vocabulary have become commonplace: discourse, deconstruction, power, the other, the gaze, etc. It has structured the questions that can be asked, it has opened new topics for study, it has even had a hand in the creation of entire disciplines. Yet, French theory is rarely ever encountered as a comprehensive entity. As Jonathan Culler notes, when people say French theory, typically what they mean is a collection of individual, unrelated theorists.[17] All too often contemporary scholars consider French theorists in isolation from each other. The methods and theory courses taught in history, English, and cultural studies departments present French theorists as though their ideas developed in a vacuum. Each theorist is offered like a piece of African art in a fashionable, modernist gallery, utterly stripped of the context in which it was formed, on display and for sale.[18] Yet, French theorists were all members of the same intellectual culture, they worked at the same publishing houses and in the same university departments, they lived in the same neighborhoods of Paris. Their ideas were forged in the relations that they had with each other, when they engaged in debates and intellectual exchanges. In order to fully understand French theory, it is

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[16] For useful overviews of this scholarship and its motivations, see the introductory essay Bourg, ed., *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France*. In addition to the works by Bourg and Christofferson mentioned above, additional monographic treatments include, Tamara Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Samuel Moyn, *The Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[17] Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Brief Insight* (New York: Sterling, 2009, Rev. Ed.), 1-2.

[18] See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed The Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

necessary to return to its source, to the debates and exchanges that were the context in which it was formed.

This dissertation contributes to the understanding of French theory by tracing its history through its debates and exchanges. Often, this dissertation was able to arrive at a complete understanding of a particular debate or exchange only by transgressing disciplinary boundaries. Each debate studied in this dissertation included voices from philosophy, from literary theory, from mythology, and sometimes from literature and poetry itself. This has not necessitated the combination of history and philosophy, or history and literary theory. Rather, it has required the development of a methodology whereby philosophy, literary theory, mythology, literature and poetry could be read as historical documents side by side with more traditional historical materials such as letters, diaries, and newspaper articles. This dissertation shows that an essay on intellectual engagement in politics could come in the form of an inquiry on the linguistic nature of reality, which might also be a reconsideration of the myth of Orpheus. Reading French theory requires that the reader be alive to all of these aspects of a text, which can only be brought out contextually, and historically. This dissertation redefines French theory in order to show how French theorists existed in a synthetic intellectual culture, rather than as a collection of isolated individuals.

In arguing for a historical understanding of French theory, this dissertation contradicts several normative paradigms. The first paradigm has to do with the definition of theory itself. Fredric Jameson suggests that, "theory begins to supplant philosophy (and other disciplines as well) at the moment it is realized that thought is linguistic or

material and that concepts cannot exist independently of their linguistic expression."[19] Jameson's definition differentiates theory from philosophy, claiming that theory's fundamental principle is the separation of language from things, while philosophy has always dealt with things themselves. This definition is useful for understanding one of the signal advances of twentieth century thought, but unhelpful to the scholar who wishes to understand the history of French theory. In this definition, every thinker and every text that does not adhere to the norm of the separation of the word from the thing is excluded from the category of theory. Yet this dissertation shows that French theory was a cultural phenomenon in which many different kinds of thought co-existed. The members of that culture did not draw lines of inclusion and exclusion based on the kind of thought one produced. Rather, they considered each other participants in a single culture, with many different debates and conversations. While it is common today to separate Sartre and Camus from Derrida and Foucault, this is a normative distinction that would not have made sense at the time. Derrida and Foucault existed on the same plane with Sartre and Camus, they were understood to occupy the same sphere. If French theory is to be understood historically, one must see the connections between different thinkers and different modes of thought, rather than separating them into a neat, but ahistorical taxonomy.

The second normative paradigm against which this dissertation intervenes is a historical definition of theory, but according to strictly philosophical criteria. Jeffrey Mehlman argues that theory is an inadequate term by which to set a definition, since

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[19] Fredric Jameson, "Symptoms of Theory or Symptoms for Theory?" *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 403.

theory's "fundamental proposition is the ultimate fictionality (or "textuality") of philosophy or "theory" itself." Instead, Mehlman suggests, "if one had to characterize the domain better it might be as the vicissitudes of a series of French readings of German-language texts (Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud)."[20] Mehlman's argument provides a better sense of the transnational influences that made French thought in the twentieth century so fertile, but it does little to explain what was French about French theory. Furthermore, by reducing French theory to its German influences, Mehlman's normative definition negates the conversations, debates, and connections that were such a large part of the history of French intellectual culture. This dissertation argues that French theory must be understood not just in terms of the transnational migration of ideas from Germany to France, but also in terms of the indigenous intellectual culture in which their ideas were received.

Embedded in the argument of this dissertation is an implicit appeal for the continued relevance of French theory, and the concept of intellectual engagement in particular. French theory has not only shaped the nature of academic inquiry in the United States, it has engendered political battles within the academy no less vicious than those of postwar France, for having been bloodless. The academic culture wars were one of the consequences of the introduction of French theory into the United States. Stanley Fish summarizes the effect of French theory on the American academy well in the post titled "French Theory in America," on his blog "Think Again," hosted by the *New York Times* website: "Careers made and ruined, departments torn apart, writing programs

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[20] Jeffrey Mehlman, "On Literature and the Occupation of France: Blanchot vs. Drieu," *SubStance* 27, no. 3 (1998): 6.

turned into sensitivity seminars, political witch hunts, public opprobrium, ignorant media attacks, the whole ball of wax."[21] The contemporary landscape of the American academy was shaped by the culture wars. To be sure, the intellectual battles of the culture wars were the result of the collision of many different social and political forces, but French theory was prominent among them. It was singled out particularly by the American right, which was offended by French theory's challenge to traditional western, humanist values. Yet this debate, and its consequences bore a striking resemblance to the battles over commitment that animated French intellectual culture during the late 1940s to the early 1960s. When French theory was imported into the United States it carried with it the political baggage of the debates over commitment. It should come as no surprise then, that many Americans saw French theory as a challenge to their values, for it was designed precisely to destroy the old political order, and replace it with a new one.

French theory developed in response to political events, and the history of the way that politics shaped theory can provide a new perspective on the theory itself. Other historians have made this suggestion with regard to the concept of the other. James Le Sueur shows how the concept of the other currently used in the humanities in the United States – which was partially, though by no means exclusively, created by French theory – developed in the context of the Algerian war of independence.[22] Le Sueur argues that the war forced French intellectuals to confront their own assumptions about identity and universality, and to question the legitimacy of speaking in the name of those who were

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[21] Stanley Fish, "French Theory in America," *New York Times*, April 6, 2008. http://fish.blogs .nytimes.com/2008/04/06/french-theory-in-america/ (accessed November 15, 2009).
[22] See James Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

racially, ethnically, or culturally other. At stake in the concept of the other is, then, much more than the liberal notion of respect, or tolerance.[23] Le Sueur's history shows that what is at stake in the concept of other is the acknowledgement of culpability for all the death and damage wrought by the colonial regime, and an exigency of extreme self-reflexivity with regard to the ethics of acting and intervening in the other's name. Intellectual engagement, then, was crucial to the notion of the other developed during the war in Algeria. This dissertation shows that it is necessary to treat intellectual engagement as an equally serious French theoretical concept, alongside others like deconstruction, discourse, or biopower. To the self-reflexivity that inhered in the concept of the other, this dissertation adds the humility at the heart of the move beyond commitment as a mode of intellectual engagement. French intellectuals saw commitment as an over-reaching attempt to accomplish what could not, and should not be done: the turning of thought into a force of violence for political change. For Blanchot and Camus especially, there was hubris in commitment's desire to fix the world by force of ideas. The concept of intellectual engagement that they developed to replace commitment was designed specifically in recognition of their limits. This did not mean that they restricted themselves to the intellectual sphere, and left "real" politics to the politicians. Rather, the humility on which the later mode of intellectual engagement was based, demanded that each intellectual confront the irresolvable aporia of the need for change, and the inadequacy of all means of creating change, on the ability to recognize injustice, and the inability to do anything about it.

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[23] On the critique of tolerance, see Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

The History of Intellectual Engagement in France

In what follows, this introduction will place the postwar debates over commitment in the larger history of intellectual engagement in France. Sartre's theory of commitment did not come of out nowhere. Rather, it was one in a long line of modes of intellectual engagement in politics that dated back to the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. In this sense, Voltaire was perhaps the first engaged intellectual in the modern sense of the word, as distinct from other categories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries like *homme des lettres*, or simply, *écrivain*.[24] While he did not possess all of the publicity, or share in the intellectual community that Sartre, Camus, or Blanchot did, Voltaire's name continued to serve as a kind of primordial point of reference throughout the history of the engaged intellectual. During the war in Algeria, General de Gaulle indicated such a continuity himself, when, upon being asked if Sartre would come under censure for his criticism of the war, he famously proclaimed, "One does not jail Voltaire."

The social category of the intellectual came into being in the 1890s.[25] It is typical to date the birth of the intellectual to the Dreyfus affair, when the novelist Émile Zola published his infamous "J'Accuse!" in the newspaper, *L'Aurore*. Venita Datta argues however, that the Dreyfus affair was but one of several forces at work in the 1890s, all of which produced the category of the intellectual together.[26] It was at this point that the intellectual emerged as an identity category distinct from that of writer, or poet – even

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[24] See Schalk, *The Spectrum of Political Engagement: Mounier, Benda, Nizan, Brasillach, Sartre*, 3-25.
[25] On the figure of the intellectual, see Lawrence Kritzman, "The Intellectual," in Kritzman, ed. *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 363-374.
[26] Venita Datta, *The Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

though intellectuals made their livings as writers and disseminated their ideas in writing.[27] For Datta, the birth of the intellectual was fundamentally intertwined with the emergence of the modern, democratic nation-state, and coincident with the decline of religious authority in France. Datta writes, "significantly, the intellectual in France was called at first "a cleric" (*un clerc*). Indeed, the new secular cleric supplanted the traditional priest as a source of moral authority in modern French society."[28] The intellectual was a "national icon" for the new nation. Yet the triumph of modern, secular society was never complete or total during the Third Republic, and there was always a challenge from the right, some of whom still sought the restoration of the monarchy, even at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, as the figure of the intellectual was born with the emergence of modern, democratic France, it was also always a bifurcated figure, with both a leftist and rightist face, each of which believed itself to be the true bearer, and shepherd of the spirit of the nation-state. It was not that the Dreyfus affair split French intellectuals into leftist and rightist camps. Rather, the already-existing leftist and rightist intellectuals simply became Dreyfusard, or anti-Dreyfusard. As a result of the inherent duality of the figure of the intellectual, these two images of the intellectual as a national icon remained current until the end of World War II.

After World War I, these leftist and the rightist images of the intellectual hardened, as the leftist intellectual came increasingly to be associated with communism, and the rightist intellectual with extreme nationalism, and even fascism. At the same time, a new French intellectual culture emerged, with groupings and associations of

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[27] See Christophe Charle, *Naissance des "intellectuels": 1880-1900* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990).
[28] Datta, *The Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France*, 1.

considerable complexity, and arcane ideological differences, even as they still adhered to the basic image of the leftist, or the rightist intellectual. French intellectuals emerged from World War I questioning the virtue of republicanism, and many on the left became Marxists, socialists, and sometimes communists.[29] While it is impossible to describe the full range of intellectual activities that went under the heading of communism with a single stroke, it is necessary to point out that the role of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) loomed larger during the 1920s and 1930s than at any other point during the twentieth century. Intellectual engagement through either works of art, or in politics directly, was designed to work towards the communist revolution. This was an important precursor to Sartre's notion of commitment, which, while not directly communist in its language, would have been recognized by other intellectuals during the 1950s as the successor to communism as a mode of intellectual engagement. During this period, the Surrealists emerged as an independent movement of engaged intellectuals.[30] Many rejected politics altogether, choosing instead to pursue "art for art's sake." Others, like André Breton developed an intricate philosophical and political program that interwove Hegelian philosophy with Freudian psychoanalysis. Breton maintained nominal relations with the PCF, but Surrealism was always more interested in affecting immaterial changes, than changes in material relations.

On the right, a new form of anti-establishmentarianism emerged. Labeled "non-conformists" by the historian Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, these intellectuals belonged to the generation that came of age in the 1930s. Born between 1900 and 1920, this

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[29] David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).
[30] Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1944).

generation was too young to have fought in World War I themselves, but was nonetheless deeply marked by its experience.[31] Maurice Blanchot was originally a member of this movement, and his participation in it remains the subject of heated debate even today.[32] Perhaps the intellectual who most embodied non-conformism was Julien Benda. Benda's polemic, *La Trahison des clercs*, argued that twentieth century intellectuals abdicated their task of safeguarding the principles of humanity and reason, when they began to engage in politics – which was properly the domain of what Benda called laymen, a capacious category that included everyone from peasants to princes.[33] For Zeev Sternhell, non-conformism was not so mild, and in his influential study *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, he went so far as to assert that French intellectuals like Thierry Maulnier and Henry de Man gave birth to a kind of platonic proto-fascism, purer than the version that emerged in Germany.[34] Further to the right of Maulnier and de Man was Action Française, a nationalist-royalist movement under the leadership of Charles Maurras, which emerged directly out of the anti-Dreyfusard camp during the Dreyfus affair.[35]

As a result of the widening gulf between the left and the right, the 1930s were a period of extreme instability in France. Leftist and rightist intellectuals were at the head of mass movements with broad popular support. Had World War II not erupted, and had Germany not invaded and conquered France, a civil war might have broken out within

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[31] Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *Les Non-conformistes des années 30* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969).
[32] This controversy is treated at length in Chapter One of this dissertation.
[33] Julien Benda, *La Trahison des clercs* (Paris: Grasset, 1927).
[34] Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).
[35] Eugen Weber, *Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).

France itself. Consequently, World War II actually intensified the differences between the French left and the right, rather than uniting them against a common German enemy. Many intellectuals on the right welcomed the invading Germans, seeing them as a necessary antidote to corrupting and polluting influence of the left. Some, like Robert Brasillach, actively worked with the occupation forces, serving as a French mouthpiece for German anti-semitism.[36] Others collaborated through the Vichy regime, which propagated its own right-wing, nationalist ideology.[37] Literary historians like David Carroll and Alice Kaplan emphasize that right-wing French intellectuals were not co-opted or brainwashed by the Nazi party. Rather, they argue that right-wing intellectuals saw the invasion and occupation as an opportunity to give full expression to their native French version of extreme nationalism.[38] Right–wing intellectuals thus experienced the invasion and the occupation as the validation of their claim to the role of protector of the national virtue.

The intellectual left was nonetheless galvanized by the war. The left's abstract republicanism and communism came face to face with concrete forces of oppression in the form of the occupation and the Vichy regime.[39] The left no longer argued against the threat of extreme nationalism. Rather, their intellectual enemy was given definite features and qualities, which would forever shape the way that the left conceived of itself,

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[36] Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
[37] See Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
[38] See David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
[39] James Wilkinson, *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

and the way it conceived of its opponents – whether they were right-wing nationalists or not. In this way, this dissertation argues that World War II was the decisive experience of the twentieth century for the intellectual left, and that the intellectual positions formed during, and immediately after the war, continued to determine the lines of intellectual engagement in politics throughout the rest of the century. It is important, however, to detach the legacy of the war from the war itself, and to detach the Vichy Syndrome from the actual experience of Vichy. During the war, leftist intellectuals were forced into a position either of silence, of unwilling consent and collaboration, or – much less frequently – a position of outright resistance. Having opposed precisely the right-wing, nationalist intellectual agenda that was ushered into power with World War II, leftist intellectuals were no longer able to speak freely. The occupation forces censored all publication within France, leaving leftist intellectuals with only clandestine publications, such as Albert Camus' newspaper *Combat*, to disseminate their work.[40] It is important however, to bear in mind that such cases were rare, and that most leftist intellectuals, like the rest of the population, were not in a position to participate in the resistance movement.

In the years immediately following World War II, to the end of the war in Algeria – the period under consideration in this dissertation – the dual left and right figure of the intellectual was submitted to a fundamental revision for the first time since the 1890s. The experience of invasion and occupation thoroughly discredited the French right, and intellectuals who had collaborated were purged in the postwar period. Some, like

[40] See Albert Camus, *Camus at "Combat": Writing 1944-1947*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Brasillach, were tried and executed, while others, like Maurras, received death sentences that were commuted to life imprisonment. It was during the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals that Sartre first articulated his notion of commitment, the first postwar theory of intellectual engagement in politics. With the Liberation came new hopes for the recreation of French society. Suddenly, with the Vichy regime removed, and the right thoroughly discredited by their association with the Nazis, it seemed possible for leftist ideals to be achieved in the real political sphere. If anything, Sartrean commitment was a sincere belief in the possibility of changing the world, and realizing radical leftist ambitions for egalitarianism, and political unity. At the same time, a critique of commitment's political efficacy emerged almost instantly, from within the left. Blanchot and Jean Paulhan immediately attacked commitment's capacity to actually affect political change. Chapter One of this dissertation examines the effects of the purge on the theory and practice of intellectual engagement, and the debates over commitment that occurred in the immediate postwar years. It is necessary here, however, to indicate the way that the experience of the war, and also the experience of the purge, effectively destroyed the figure of the rightist intellectual.[41] The debate was no longer between the right and the left, but between different factions on the left. Thereafter the figure of the intellectual was a predominantly leftist social category, and often a radical one at that.

Chapter Two of this dissertation looks at intellectual engagement during the 1950s, when the leftist intellectual was above all engaged in world politics beyond French borders. The 1950s were characterized by the Cold War on the one hand, and by

[41] Of course, some of the old members of the right continued to publish after World War II, but they were increasingly marginalized, and did not constitute a cohesive movement. See Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*.

decolonization on the other. Domestically, French intellectuals experienced the so-called Coca-Colonization of the Marshall Plan, which led them to look favorably on the spread of socialism, and the Soviet Union generally.[42] *Tiers mondisme*, an intellectual movement in support of the spread of the socialism in the third world, was closely linked to the way that French intellectuals sided against the United States during the Cold War. This did not last however, as the Soviet Union's violent repression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 strained relations between French intellectuals and the PCF. Sartre, whose notion of commitment was never explicitly attached to communism, broke with the PCF completely over the Hungarian Revolution. Prior to the Hungarian Revolution, however, French intellectuals like Camus and Blanchot had already begun to critique the ethics of commitment. Though commitment was the most visible form of intellectual engagement at the beginning of the decade, it had been abandoned in favor of ethical engagement by the decade's end. When Camus issued his charge of hypocrisy in 1951, it was initially rebuffed. But over the course of the 1950s, fewer and fewer intellectuals were willing to engage in commitment, and sought different means of engaging in politics that did not claim their own innocence. Finally, during war in Algeria, the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" provided French intellectuals with a definitive alternative to commitment, by offering a mode of collective action that avoided the hypocrisy of commitment.

The final episode studied in this dissertation, the exchange between Blanchot and Foucault that occurred at the beginning of the 1960s, took place in the context of the

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[42] See Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

ascendancy of structuralism, and the birth of post-structuralism. François Dosse argues that French intellectuals abandoned existentialism, and by extension commitment, because they saw it as an anachronistic product of the immediate postwar years.[43] The atmosphere of the hyper-modernized France of 1960 seemed a world away from the Liberation.[44] The existentialists around Sartre and *Les Temps modernes* were replaced by a new generation of postwar intellectuals, born around or after 1930, who were unmarked by the intellectual battles of the war and its immediate aftermath. This generation produced many of the thinkers commonly associated with French theory: Étienne Balibar (b. 1942), Hélène Cixous (b. 1937), Gilles Deleuze (b. 1925), Jacques Derrida (b. 1930), Michel Foucault (b. 1926), Luce Irigaray (b. 1932), and Julia Kristeva (b. 1941), to name just a few. Even as the debates of the 1930s and 1940s continued to exert a strong influence throughout the twentieth century, the new generation of French intellectuals consciously rejected commitment. In 1960, a group of young intellectuals started the journal *Tel Quel*, which defined itself in strict opposition to Sartrean commitment.[45] *Tel Quel* was influenced by the structuralism developed by the linguists Roman Jakobson and Ferdinand de Saussure, and its editors adhered to the principle of the linguistic construction of reality. This generation believed that the intellectual should engage in politics not through direct intervention, but rather, through the textuality of world. This was a radical departure from existentialism and commitment, which sought to engage in reality itself. For the intellectuals grouped around *Tel Quel*, to engage in the text was

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[43] Dosse, 19-25.
[44] Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1996).
[45] Danielle Marx-Scouras, *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel: Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

engaging with the very stuff of which reality was composed. In this context, Blanchot and Foucault held an intellectual exchange in which they debated and articulated the need for myths in contemporary society, as a way to prop up and sustain textual and fictional practices. In Blanchot's case, he suggested that the myth of Orpheus was needed to support the textual institution of literature. In Foucault's case, he argued that the medical discourse surrounding mental illness was also a textual and fictional institution. While contemporary society needed a discourse of mental illness, it could not be supported without an acknowledgement of its textuality or its fictionality. Drawing on Blanchot's work on literature, Foucault argued that the discourse of mental illness could only be withstood if its textuality and its fictionality was acknowledged. Foucault suggested the myth of the ship of fools as a replacement for the ideological argument that medical discourse was supported by natural, scientific reality. This form of intellectual engagement was particularly influential in the United States, where it opened up new political dimensions of the formerly a-political study of literature, philosophy, and culture.[46]

While the trajectory followed in this dissertation stops in 1962, French intellectuals continued to debate, and to posit new means of intellectual engagement throughout the rest of the twentieth century. While the figure of the engaged intellectual declined after the 1960s, the concept of intellectual engagement remained an important part of French theory. The most important political event for French intellectuals after the war in Algeria was the revolution of May '68, when millions of students and workers

[46] See Cusset.

tried to start a revolution in protest of the conditions of labor and cultural life. May '68 galvanized French intellectuals yet again, many of whom considered it a truly revolutionary experience. Yet the failure of May '68 to produce lasting political change forced French intellectuals to reconsider the value of intellectual engagement in politics itself. There were two main responses to May '68. The first, described as the "logic of failed revolt" by Peter Starr, set about a wholesale critique of the possibility for revolutionary political change.[47] Starr argues that after May '68, French intellectuals no longer believed in old models of revolutionary action, which they traced to antiquated political philosophies, and Marxism in particular. Instead, they articulated a logic in which the failure of political change was necessary – a political change based on failure. During the 1980s, this logic gave birth to a fully-fledged philosophical movement. Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of an "inoperative community," argued that all attempts to forge a community were doomed to failure, given the irremediable and constitutive singularity of each individual's subjectivity.[48] Political interventions should henceforth restrict themselves to finding ways to create associations between people that did not depend on their fusion into a unified whole. Blanchot himself contributed to this movement in 1986 with his notion of an "unavowable community."[49] While many saw the failed, "inoperative," and "unavowable" community a regression to apolitical abstraction, it epitomized the way that intellectual engagement had retreated from commitment, and taken refuge in theory. It was not that French theory had become apolitical. It was,

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[47] Peter Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory after May '68* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).
[48] Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986).
[49] Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986).

rather, that politics – which had been the province of practical reason for the better part of the twentieth century – had migrated into theoretical reason. No longer was intellectual engagement defined solely according to the terms of Sartrean commitment, where the intellectual worked tirelessly to affect change in the material world. Rather, many French intellectuals chose to engage in the immaterial world of textuality, as a means of affecting a change in the lived relationship to discursive institutions.

The second response to May '68 was the movement known as *nouvelle philosophie*, whose leading figures were Bernard-Henri Lévy, Alain Finkelkraut, and André Glucksmann. Born, for the most part, after World War II, the *nouveaux philosophes* defined themselves specifically against Sartrean commitment, a brush with which they painted many of their enemies within French intellectual culture, like Blanchot and Foucault, who had actually battled against Sartre's notion of intellectual engagement. For the *nouveaux philosophes*, the emergence of both right-wing and left-wing totalitarian governments during the twentieth century called for a categorical rejection of all philosophy tainted by Nazism or Stalinism, and a renewed adherence to liberal, rights-based political activism. The *nouveuax philosophes* achieved enormous and near instantaneous popular success, but they were deeply criticized by the previous generation of French intellectuals for their lack of rigor, and their lack of philosophical sophistication. Asked what he thought of the *nouveaux philosophes* in an interview, Gilles Deleuze responded, "Nothing. I think that their thought is null… they proceed by huge concepts, so huge that one chokes over them: THE law, THE power, THE master,

THE world, THE rebellion, THE faith, etc."[50] More substantively, at the same time that *nouvelle philosophie* advocated a return to liberal rights, Michel Foucault embarked on a deep, and wide-ranging critique of liberal, and neo-liberal society during the 1970s. With the recent publication of Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France, it has become clear that French intellectual culture was riven by a serious debate over liberalism, and that the radical leftism of the postwar period no longer had hegemony over the figure of the engaged intellectual.

By the 1980s, as a result of the failure of May '68, and the rise of *nouvelle philosophie*, intellectual engagement was no longer defined by the broad, sweeping ideals of Sartrean commitment. Today, intellectual engagement in politics is largely reserved to tactical interventions in discrete political events on the one hand, and to the continued theorization of the political on the other. This should not be regarded as a declension narrative, since there was no motor driving the concept of intellectual engagement to its height in the postwar years, and then to its subsequent decline after May '68. Rather, the concept of intellectual engagement in politics should be understood by qualitative measures of change and mutation, rather than quantitative indices of rise and decline. This dissertation examines the period between the end of World War II, and the end of the erection of the Berlin Wall, when French intellectuals debated the notion of engagement itself. In the context of the longer history of intellectual engagement, this period stands out as a pivotal moment when French intellectuals questioned the purpose,

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[50] "Rien. Je crois que leur pensée est nulle… ils procèdent par gros concepts, aussi gros que des dents creuses, LA loi, LE pouvoir, LE maître, LE monde, LA rébellion, LA foi, etc." Interview with Gilles Deleuze. First published in the journal, *Minuit*, May 1977. http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdeleuze9.htm (Accessed November 22, 2009).

and the methods of engaging in politics. By returning to the history of French theory in this period, it is possible to renew the self-reflexivity, and the humility with which they practiced intellectual engagement.

CHAPTER ONE

Death Is Loose in the World: Revolution and Repetition in the *Épuration*

"Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Caussodière for Danton. Louis Blanc for Robespierre…the nephew for the uncle."[51] Marx wrote this famous statement with regard to the revolution of 1848 and Louis Napoléon's coup in 1851 in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It might equally be applied however, to the Vichy regime's so-called "National Revolution" of 1940. Indeed, many historians see the Vichy regime in this way, even though it was a revolution that reversed the traditional roles of the left and the right. Robert Paxton writes that "the Vichy regime [was] another act in the long French drama of internal conflict opened in 1789 and still raging with the Popular Front election of 1936."[52] Laval for Danton, Pétain for Robespierre, Maurras for Rousseau, and so on. Continuing Marx's logic, it follows that if the Vichy regime was a tragic repetition of the revolution, then the postwar purge – known as the *épuration* – of collaborationist writers and intellectuals was a farcical Thermidor. But it was under the reign of this farcical Thermidorian purge that commitment, and the critique of commitment were first articulated.

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[51] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. International Publishers (New York: International Publishers, 1963).
[52] Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, Rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) xxxvi.

In order to understand the relationship between French thought and the purge, it is necessary to briefly review the history of the purge trials conducted in France after the war. Following the Liberation in 1944, Charles de Gaulle returned to France and quickly installed a provisional government, proclaiming that the "Republic has never ceased to exist." De Gaulle's assertion of continuity contained the promise of a new beginning, and the populace was seized by a sense of possibility bordering on revolutionary fervor. But this euphoria was accompanied by a wave of denunciations known as the purge. Thousands of accused collaborators were executed, imprisoned, or publicly humiliated. In all, there were some 10,800 executions, many of which came at the hands of vigilante groups.[53] After the Liberation, purge tribunals sentenced nearly 7,000 collaborators to death, though less than 800 legal executions were actually carried out.[54] These collaborators were seen by the public as a cancer that needed to be removed in order to preserve the continuity of the narrative of De Gaulle's undying republic.[55]

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[53] Peter Novick established this estimate, but pointed out the inadequacies and discrepancies in the court records that continue to founder attempts to concretize the history of the purge. See Novick, *The Resistance versus Vichy: The Purge of Collaborators in Liberated France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

[54] Henri Rousso discusses the conflicting court records in detail, which vary between 6,763 and 7,037 death sentences, and between 767 and 791 executions. See Rousso, "L'épuration en France une histoire inachevée," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 33 (1992): 78-105.

[55] The history of the purge is well established, if still contested. At this late stage of the "Vichy syndrome" the purge is no longer denied, nor is it hidden from public view, as it had been for the two decades following World War II. Henri Rousso suggest that the issue now is to disabuse the notion of the "purge sauvage" – the "black legend" that exaggerated the extent, and the violence of the purges. Against this fallacious notion, Rousso proposes that the legal purge be distinguished from the extralegal purge. Megan Koreman suggests however, that the perceived split between a "legal" purge and an "extra-legal" purge is the product of postwar myth-making. In reality, Koreman argues, the purge was split between the national and the local, where there was a shared understanding of the need for a purge, but divergent interpretations of how that purge should be conducted. There was a general consensus that the purges should be conducted legally, but there was widespread popular disillusion with the slow pace of the national purge tribunals. In some instances this led to vigilante justice, but far less than is commonly imagined. See Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), and "L'épuration en France une histoire inachevée."

In certain respects, however, the purge simply continued a protocol of retribution established by the resistance movement. A purge had been planned as early as 1941, long before the Liberation, and the resistance announced its intention to mete out justice to collaborators in a series of proclamations throughout the war. On March 15, 1944 the Conseil National de la Résistance (the CNR) issued a proclamation outlining the future that they envisioned for postwar France, promising to punish traitors and collaborators.[56] They even began administering their purge before to the allied landing on D-Day. Of the 10,800 total executions, 5,234 of the executions happened before D-Day. Of these, roughly one-quarter were preceded by a mock trial, while the largest portion by far were summary executions.[57] When the purge actually began it was understood as retribution visited upon collaborators by the Resistance.

The purge was also a national attempt to redefine and reshape the whole of France, and it was directed at every sector of society.[58] Henri Rousso argues that it was

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See also, Koreman, *The Expectation of Justice: France 1944-1946* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 92-147.

[56] The second provision of the "Program of the Conseil nationale de la Résistance" concerned the purging of collaborators. It "assur[ed] the punishment of traitors and the eviction from the administration and professional life of all those who have dealt with the enemy or who have actively associated themselves with the policy of the governments of collaboration." "Afin de veiller au châtiment des trîtres et à l'éviction dans le domaine de l'administration et de la vie proessionnelle de tous ceux qui auront pactisé avec l'ennemi ou qui se seont associés activement à la politique des Gouvernements de collaboration." See Henri Michel and Boris Mirkine-Guetzévich*, Les Idées politiques et sociale de la Résistance: Documents Clandestins, 1940-1944* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1954), 216.

[57] The number 5,234 was suggested by Tony Judt, though he fails to provide sources for his claim. Henri Rousso argues that the number of "extra-judicial" executions is impossible to determine, but cites several studies which place the total between 8,100 and 7,300. See Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 58. See also, Rousso, "L'épuration en France une histoire inachevée," 82.

[58] The *purge*'s most obvious targets were Vichy politicians, and government officials. But across France there were widespread denunciations of public and private individuals as collaborators. The popular image of the Liberation and of the purge features men in berets shaving the head of a woman, presumably for having sexually "collaborated" with the Nazis. Like so many of the memories of the Occupation and its aftermath, this was more myth than reality. The reality of collaboration and its punishment was both more

"a response to the barbarism, and the totalitarian Nazi system [and that] it was an occasion for the reaffirmation and the renewal of the foundational values of the Republic with a conception of the nation anchored in the tradition of 1789."[59] The purge must also be seen as part of the *guerre franco-française* – the ideological civil war fought over the destiny of France between those who wished to rebuild the nation on the spirit of revolutionary purity embodied by resistance, and those on the right who wished to rebuild the nation on old, conservative, nationalist values.[60]

As the French intellectual community had participated in the Resistance, they also participated in the purge, convening the Comité National des Écrivains (or CNE) for the purpose of identifying and punishing writers and intellectuals who collaborated with the German occupation and the Vichy regime.[61] During the Occupation, the German

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mundane, and more sinister. In all, there are records of only 586 women having suffered *la tondue* – having their heads shaved in public. Fabrice Virgili suggests however, that head-shaving reflected a deep crisis of French masculinity: French men felt the indignity of the Occupation in the loss of control over women's bodies, and the episodes of head-shaving that accompanied the Liberation were an attempt to regain that control. The wave denunciations during the *purge* followed similarly lines. They were often motivated as much by petty personal grievances as they were by concern for the body politic and criminal collaboration. For an analysis of sexual "collaboration" and the motivations for denunciation, see Robert Gildea *Marianne in Chains: Daily Life in the Heart of France during the German Occupation* (New York: Picador, 2004). For a detailed discussion of head-shaving, see Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France*, trans. John Flower (London: Berg, 2002), 177-217.

[59] "Une réponse à la barbarie et au système totalitaire nazi. Elle était l'occasion de réaffirmirmer les valeurs fondatrices de la République et de renouer avec une conception de la nation, ancrée dans la tradition of 1789." Rousso, "L'épuration en France une histoire inachevée," 87.

[60] See Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 15-59.

[61] Numerous scholars, from both historical and literary perspectives, have discussed the history of the CNE, the blacklists, and their role purge trials. The main synthetic work is Gisele Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains: 1940-1953* (Paris: Fayard, 1999). Using the literary sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (who was Sapiro's doctoral advisor), she traces the history of the authors, the journals, and the disputes that comprised the "writers' war" in order to establish their positions in the hazardous field of cultural production that existed in France during the Occupation and the immediate aftermath of the war. A more literary account is provided by Philip Watts, *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Watts argues that writers engaged in the "writers' war" used the trope of allegory to encode their attempts to negotiate the purge. Allegory, Watts suggests, was particular useful for dealing with something as difficult to reconcile

administration embarked on a large-scale program of censorship of all literary publication. In response, several writers associated with the resistance initiated a clandestine journal, *Les Lettres françaises*, edited by Jean Paulhan, whose exceptional stature within French literary circles gave to the journal the aura of carrying on the French literary tradition. The journal also had a second purpose however: to ferret out and denounce collaborationist writers and intellectuals, an intention announced in its very first issue.[62] The CNE, led by Paulhan (who would later break from the resistance and the CNE over the persecution of writers and intellectuals), along with Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, François Mauriac, among others, monitored the collaborationist activities of writers and intellectuals. The CNE published its first blacklist in September 1944 in *Les Lettres françaises*, just as the purge trials were gaining momentum. In this blacklist the CNE identified the most serious collaborators, comprised of some well-known and some less well-known French novelists, journalists, and essayists: Robert Brasillach, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Alphonse de Chateaubriant, Jacques Chardonne, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Jean Giono, Marcel Jouhandeau, Charles Maurras, Henri de Montherlant, Paul Morand, Armand Petitjean, and André Thérive.[63] One month later, Saurez, the first writer sent to trial, was convicted and executed.[64]

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as the purge, because of its fundamental ambiguity. See also, Pierre Assouline, *L'Épuration des intellectuels* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1985).

[62] For a discussion of the editorial policies of *Les Lettres françaises*, see Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains*, 467-562, and Watts, *Allegories of the Purge*, 15-58.

[63] Watts indicates that the first blacklist was published in September 1944, but he does not provide the number of writers accused. A second list was published in October 1944, in which some 60 collaborators were identified. Eventually the number of collaborators became as high as 148. Who were the collaborators? Most were writers with small reputations and little influence. Louis-Ferdinand Céline was the exception, rather than the rule. See Watts, *Allegories of the Purge*, 15-58.

[64] The alacrity with which the trials of writers and intellectuals began is alarming. Saurez was put on trial in October of 1944, while Pétain's trial did not begin until August 1945. Generally, the trials of Vichy

All in all, less than fifteen writers and intellectuals were tried during the purge – including some not on the CNE's blacklist: Georges Suarez, Paul Chack, Jean Luchaire, Paul Ferdonet, Jean Hérold Paquis, Henri Béraud, Lucien Rebatet, Abel Hermant, Ramon Fernandez, as well as Drieu la Rochelle, Céline, Maurras, and Brasillach.[65] What did one have to do to be blacklisted and brought to trial? What counted as collaboration was a thorny issue.[66] Initially the CNE defined collaboration as one of three things: having attended a writer's congress sponsored by the Germans, having received money directly or indirectly from the Germans, or having aided German propaganda either through words or deeds.[67] In reality however, writers were charged with treason primarily because of a general sentiment of having "betrayed France" with their words. It was precisely *as* writers that they were tried. Writers, in the eyes of the court, as in the eyes of the CNE, were gifted with the power of persuasion – a talent that gave them significant

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politicians began so much later because they were squirreled away in Sigmaringen, and did not return to France until after the war. For a detailed, chronological account of the trials of writers, see Assouline, *L'Épuration des intellectuels*, 167-168.

[65] See Watts, *Allegories of the Purge*, 22-24.

[66] A collaborator could be brought to trial under one of two laws. The first was Article 75 of the 1939 French Penal Code, a catch-all provision outlawing treason, defined as "intelligence with the enemy." This law carried the risk of the death penalty. A second law, Article 83 of the Penal Code, which was created in order to prosecute less grave crimes of collaboration, defined collaboration as a "national indignity." In most cases the penalty for the crime of national indignity was prison, and sometimes exile, and the loss of one's citizenship. The difference between these two laws was never clearly established, and they allowed for enormous latitude in the kinds of acts that were prosecutable. Article 75, the stiffer of the two laws, was used immediately following the Liberation, when most writers and intellectuals were tried. At this time, most Vichy government officials were in hiding in Sigmaringen, in Germany, and were not brought to trial until 1945, when the less strict Article 83 was used to prosecute collaborators. Thus the weight of the purge fell most harshly on writers and intellectuals not least because they were simply present in Paris, and had a body of writing with which their culpability could be established. As a consequence, the trials of writers and intellectuals in the summer and autumn of 1944 were among the most spectacular and widely reported. Indeed, the trial narratives of these writers and intellectuals became a cottage genre in the immediate postwar years. For a detailed discussion of these laws and the way they were applied to writers and intellectuals, see Philip Watts, *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals*, 16-19. See also, Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 45-74.

[67] See Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains*, 572.

ability to influence public opinion.[68] A collaborationist writer could be as guilty, if not more guilty, than a murderer, for inciting murder with his words, however indirectly.[69]

Compared with the 10,800 men and women executed, writers and intellectuals represented a relatively small portion of those victimized by the purge. But the purge's biggest impact on the community of writers and intellectuals registered not in terms of the number of writers purged, but in the intellectual consequences of putting writers on trial, convicting, and executing them on the basis of nothing more than their printed words. An entire polemic was manufactured in order to justify the purge, while an equally vocal anti-purge polemic denounced the trials. On the side of the purge were Sartre and Aragon from the CNE, as well as Simone de Beauvoir and Emmanuel Mounier, in addition to many others. To these writers the purge was an attempt to wipe clean the slate of France's history under the Vichy regime, creating a blank page on which a new revolutionary France could be established. Against the purge were Paulhan – who recanted his role as *maître des lettres* of the Resistance after the publication of the blacklists – François Mauriac, and eventually Albert Camus. The "writers' war," as Gisèle Sapiro has termed it, was a passionate debate between the CNE and those who defended the collaborators. It was an ideological battle, fought along baldly partisan lines, in which both sides believed that the fate of the nation was at stake.

Sartre developed his theory of committed literature during his time in the CNE, and in the debates over the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals.[70] In *Qu'est-ce que*

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[68] Watts, 32.

[69] These were the charges brought specifically against Maurras and Brasillach. See, Judt, 60-67. See also, Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

la littérature?, a collection of essays originally published in Sartre's journal, *Les Temps modernes*, he articulated his vision of what literature should be, and how writers should write.[71] The experience of the occupation and the Vichy regime demonstrated that writing could be used for evil. Collaborationist writers were guilty of having betrayed their community by offering their services to the enemy. To Sartre, who was on the extreme of the intellectual left, it was a writer's duty to write in service of their community, which, after the occupation and the Vichy regime, was construed strictly as the national community. Moreover, in Sartre's view, all writing should serve the end of achieving egalitarian political change within his or her national community. Whether a writer wrote novels, essays, or philosophical treatises, Sartre believed that he or she must commit themselves to affecting leftist political change through their written work.

At the very instant that Sartre developed his notion of commitment though, a counter-movement emerged in opposition to commitment. This counter-movement came from the moderate side of the intellectual left, which also condemned collaboration, but stopped short of calling for a purge. This group, led by Jean Paulhan, developed a critique Sartrean commitment's requirement that all written work contribute to leftist political change. In *De la paille et du grain* Paulhan argued that the purpose of writing,

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[70] The treatments of Sartre's work range from the hagiographical to the theoretical. The standard biographical work is Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A Life*, trans. Anna Concogni (New York: Pantheon, 1987). On the more critical end of the scale is Denis Hollier, *The Politics of Prose: Essay on Sartre*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), and Joseph Halpern, *Critical Fictions: The Literary Criticism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). For shorter treatments, see Watts, *Allegories of the Purge*, 59-82; Sunil Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 49-82; and Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 45-74. For treatments of Jean Paulhan's work see Michael Syrotinski, *Defying Gravity: Jean Paulhan's Interventions in Twentieth-Century French Intellectual History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[71] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littèrature?* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1948).

especially literary writing, was to give pleasure, and so writers should not be forced to commit themselves to politics.[72] Paulhan explicitly condemned the purge, and the entire notion that a writer would ever be tried before law for his or her writing.

The critique of commitment was completed by Maurice Blanchot, whose "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" intervened in between Sartre and Paulhan.[73] Falling in between Sartre's radicalism and Paulhan's moderation, Blanchot's critique of commitment sought to complicate the terms of intellectual engagement in politics by showing that one could not commit only to politics, nor could one commit only to literature. Unlike Paulhan, Blanchot did not explicitly condemn the purge – though his contribution to the purge debate was implicitly anti-purge. Rather, Blanchot entered the purge debate by critiquing the notion of commitment on which Sartre based his demand that collaborationist writers be purged. To Blanchot, commitment was politically ineffective: in Blanchot's view commitment misapprehended the nature of language, at the same time that it overestimated the writer's power to control the effect of his or her writing. Blanchot argued that all writers – the committed and the collaborators alike – were equally unable to master language, which remained forever beyond their power to control. In this way, Blanchot made it clear that commitment was an inadequate form of intellectual engagement in politics, because it failed to understand the very medium through which it sought to engage. This chapter argues that Paulhan and Blanchot

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[72] Jean Paulhan, *De la paille et du grain* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1948).

[73] Maurice Blanchot, "Le règne animal de l'esprit," *Critique*, 18 (November 1947): 387-405, followed by "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," *Critique*, 20 (January 1948): 30-47. The essays were published together, with no changes other than a suture where they met, under the title "La Littérature et le droit à la mort." See Blanchot, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," *La Part du feu* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949), 291-331. All references henceforth will be to the 1949 edition of the essay.

established a critique of commitment together during the debate over the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals that laid the foundation for French theory's gradual move beyond commitment throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Sapiro argues that this "writers' war" issued from a "crisis of representation." During the occupation and the immediate postwar years, when the recognizable poles of political orientation were thrown into chaos, it was no longer clear who represented France, nor what representing France even meant.[74] To be sure, those who had participated in the resistance had the biggest claim on France, and "*résistantialisme*" was a dominant factor in French politics after the war.[75] The resistance shrouded itself in the revolutionary legacy of 1789, granting historical as well as political legitimacy on its claim to represent France. The intellectual historian Michael Kelly argues that French intellectuals were "nationalized" in the immediate postwar years. It was their task "to produce the ideas, images, and stories which could knit French people together in an imagined community, which they could share, and which could be presented to France's international partners."[76] The writers and intellectuals of the CNE and *Les Lettres françaises* went even further in assuming the role of the Jacobin, and espousing an updated version of Jacobin radicalism.[77] For the writers and intellectuals of the CNE and *Les Lettres françaises* this Jacobinism was essence of Frenchness, and by extension,

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[74] Sapiro, 14-16.

[75] On *résistantialisme* and the predominance of former resistance fighters in French politics, see Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*.

[76] Michael Kelly, "The Nationalization of French Intellectuals in 1945," *South Central Review* 17, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 15.

[77] For extended discussions of this tendency within among French intellectuals to conflate French intellectual culture with the nation itself, see Sunil Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France*.

writers and intellectuals were the true representatives of France. With the right thoroughly discredited through its association with the occupying forces, and the Vichy regime, this claim to Jacobinism signified a renaissance of the intellectual left in France, intent on reclaiming its role as the self-appointed guardian of the nation's self-consciousness.

Yet if the crisis of representation identified by Sapiro was concerned with the question of the true representative of France, it was also always concerned with the concept of representation itself. For Sartre, Paulhan and Blanchot, the question of who was representative of France was subtended by the question of what was linguistic representation, and how did it work? In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre bracketed the question of a writer's commitment and responsibility within a discussion of linguistic representation. Likewise, in *De la paille et du grain*, Paulhan argued that writers should not be put on trial for what they had written, only after he elaborated a theory of linguistics. In "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," Blanchot also articulated his critique of Sartrean commitment by advancing his own theory of linguistic representation. By 1948, the year in which Sartre, Paulhan, and Blanchot published their purge polemics, the debate over the purge was no longer about whether or not collaborationist writers should be executed. Rather, it turned into a debate over language, what language was, and how language should be used.

The crisis of representation that fueled the purge debate thus rested on a homology drawn between two separate questions. The first question was who, or what was representative of France? The second question was how does linguistic

representation operate? This chapter argues that purge polemics such as *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, *De la paille et du grain*, and "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" linked these two separate questions together by figuring the purge as the repetition of previous revolutionary moments in French history. To Sartre the purge was the repetition of 1789. To Paulhan the purge was not a distinct event, but only an aftereffect of the German occupation, which was itself merely the repetition of previous German invasions, such as 1871. To Blanchot however, the purge was the repetition of the Thermidorian reaction of 1794.

What did repetition do to the problematic of representation that has been identified with the purge? Jeffrey Mehlman points to a possible interpretation in *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac* when – discussing the possibility of a Freudian reading of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* – he writes:

> It may be that rediscovering a certain Freud within Marx is itself *unheimlich* [uncanny], for the uncanny for Freud is thought above all in terms of repetition-as-failure. But then the site of that rediscovery, within one of the crucial texts on revolution in France, is precisely that of a traumatic repetition within history…an utterly new kind of catastrophe, the return of a Bonaparte.[78]

That is to say, history repeats itself, as in 1851 when Louis Napoléon repeated his uncle, Napoléon Bonaparte. The first Bonaparte was a tragedy, the second Bonaparte was a farce.

For Mehlman, what is lost in repetitions such as these, is the very possibility of representation itself, and what is gained, is polysemy. The introduction of repetition into Marx's dialectic wreaks havoc on the notion of representation, and specifically on the

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[78] Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 8.

notion that the state is able to represent society. Louis Napoléon – brought to office on the back of those outside of society, the *lumpen-proletariat* – represented the state only in its antagonism to society, only as the parasite through which one class dominated another. Once the state is figured strictly as an organ of domination, any notion of the state representing society falls apart.

> Within Marx's theory, but already breaking with a certain stratum of it, we see the project of advancing a *deluded* notion of the relation of representation between State and Society to a *true* notion of that relation – the State as instrument of exploitation of one class by another – give way to an affirmation of an antagonism between State and Society and consequently of the *irrelevance* of the category of (true or false) representation. But may we not, then, read this instance, which breaks, say, with the *philosopheme of representation* (and, consequently, of truth)…as the formation in the text most alive to that which never ceases recurring within it: to the fact that in an *unheimlich* manner, absolutely *anything* may come to occupy the positions of the repetitive structure? [79]

Mehlman's description of the breakdown of the state's representation of society applies to the Vichy regime, and to the purge. It was precisely as a perverse repetition of 1789 (since it was a collaborating regime which existed only for the convenience of Germany) that the Vichy regime was a state that did not represent French society. And it was as a perverse repetition of 1794 that the purge – claiming the same revolutionary heritage of 1789 – was unable to conclusively produce a representative of French society. It was under these conditions that the great purge debate over who represented France occurred. Just as in 1851, absolutely anything was able to occupy the position of representative of France during the postwar purge, "in an *unheimlich* manner."

This chapter argues that when French intellectuals like Blanchot, Sartre, and Paulhan experienced and encoded the purge as the repetition of the French Revolution,

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[79] Ibid., 19-20.

and attached it to various theories of the representation of the body politic, they injected the *unheimlich* force of repetition into their notions of representation. It was at this point that the concept of polysemy first became linked to the concept of the political in French intellectual culture. Sartre, Paulhan, and Blanchot each responded to this *unheimlich* linkage in different ways. It caused Sartre to produce a theory of representation and of political community based entirely on holding the dispersive effect of repetition at bay. It caused Paulhan to despair of the possibility of ever reconstituting the political unity of France. But for Blanchot, it was revelatory. It caused him to conceive a theory of linguistic representation as dependent on the emptiness of words effected by the repetitive structure, and a theory of the political as the perpetual negotiation and renegotiation within the literary of the relationship between polysemic language, and material community.

Unlike Sartre, whose political activism has long been an object of inquiry, Blanchot's role in the debate over the postwar purge has only recently attracted the attention of scholars. Though many Blanchot scholars consider Blanchot's postwar career entirely devoid of any political engagement, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" is now understood as Blanchot's contribution to the polemics of the purge debate.[80] While it is agreed that the purge and "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" are intimately

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[80] One trend in the scholarship on Blanchot has detected a glaring absence of politics in Blanchot's postwar work. To these scholars, Blanchot's political silence was designed to hide his pre-war journalism, some of which was polemically right-wing, and nationalist. This aspect of Blanchot's career is discussed at length below. For references, see Jeffrey Mehlman, "Blanchot at *Combat*: Of Literature and Terror." *MLN* 95, no. 4. (1980), 808-829. See also Mehlman, *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); *Genealogies of the Text: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Politics in Modern France*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For a more recent, full-length treatment see Steven Ungar, *Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France since 1930*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

connected, accounts of this connection founder on one of two problems. Either the history of the purge is privileged over the specific philosophical content of Blanchot's work, or Blanchot's philosophy is privileged over the purge. Two important essays illustrate this difficulty. Phillip Watts devotes a chapter of *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals in France* to Blanchot's "La Littérature et le droit à la mort."[81] Watts is more interested in proving that "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" allegorizes the purge, a goal which he accomplishes admirably, than he is in pursuing the essay's full implications. For Watts,

> allegory [became] the preferred figure of rhetoric in the post-war years precisely because it is a trope of indeterminacy. Allegory [allowed] writers not only to speak about World War II and its aftermath but also to speak indirectly about the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of putting in place a system of moral and legal precepts about the roles and responsibilities of literature.[82]

That is to say, the trope of allegory allowed writers to confront the crisis of representation in all of its ambiguity, by affording them the ability to discuss the war and its aftermath in indirect, and metaphorical terms. "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" scarcely made any mention of contemporary events. It was, on the face of it, not a purge polemic at all, but rather a theoretical essay on the possibility of literature. In *Allegories of the Purge* Watts analyzes Blanchot's covert but systematic usage of keywords from the purge debate to demonstrate that "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" was indeed a contribution to the debate over the purge. By conclusively demonstrating the way in which "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" participated in the postwar purge discourse through a close analysis of its vocabulary, Watts shows that Blanchot's text was engaged in the political battles of

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[81] See Watts, *Allegories of the Purge*, 83-105.
[82] Watts, *Allegories of the Purge*, 11.

1948. Watts establishes a critical space within which to consider Blanchot's work historically, rather than selectively reading its philosophical content.

Allan Stoekl takes a different approach to "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" in his essay, "Blanchot, Death, Language, Community and Politics."[83] Stoekl argues that Blanchot's essay was not about the purge, but rather, it was concerned with building a theory of politics and a theory of community. In this regard, Blanchot's participation in the polemics of the purge, and his use of its vocabulary were incidental to his larger goal of articulating a new vision of political community, a project which spanned the length of his corpus, and which culminated with the publication of *La Communauté inavouable* in 1983. Stoekl departs from Watts at this point, suggesting that Watts historicizes Blanchot's work at the sacrifice of the philosophical meaning of the work itself. But if Stoekl criticizes Watts for failing to recognize the kind of community implicit in Blanchot's "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," then it is important to recognize the way in which Stoekl himself evacuates Blanchot's essay of the history of the purge. Watts and Stoekl ultimately present a deeply dissatisfying dichotomy for any attempt to account for Blanchot's politics and his role in the purge debate: either the erasure of history, or the erasure of philosophy.

While Watts and Stoekl have made important contributions to our understanding of the literary and philosophical value of Blanchot's role in the debate over the purge, there has not yet been a systematic historical treatment of this episode in context of Blanchot's entire career. The result is that intellectual historians have been left with an

[83] Allan Stoekl, "Blanchot: Death, Language, Community and Politics," *Parallax*, Vol. 12, no. 2: 40-52.

incomplete understanding of the purge debates, and an incomplete understanding of how this troubled moment in French history affected Blanchot's thought. This chapter reconciles the dichotomy between history and philosophy, arguing that "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" was imbued with the history of the postwar purge in which it was created, and that "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" made a philosophical contribution to the purge debate. This chapter argues that Blanchot engaged in the purge debate by critiquing the political efficacy of Sartrean commitment. Like Sartre and Paulhan, Blanchot theorized the representation of political community and wedded the representation of political community to linguistic representation. Unlike Sartre and Paulhan, however, Blanchot was pessimistic about the possibility for the creation of a new political community, since such a community would always founder on the desires of its creators for an impossible version of representation.

In doing so, Blanchot's theory of linguistic representation paved the way for the much of the French theory of the 1950s and 1960s. Today, we take the political valence of French theory for granted. But the basic epistemological assumption that language is a determinate factor of the politics, was not always such a universally accepted proposition. Rather, the political valence of French theory was born during the debate over the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals, when the purge polemicists explicitly questioned the relationship of language to politics.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. The first part details Blanchot's personal, political, and intellectual history through an examination of the journals with which he was associated. Such a view provides the essential background of Blanchot's history, but

it also introduces the cultural atmosphere of Parisian intellectual life. The second part of this chapter is an analysis of the two texts that defined the poles of the purge debate, Sartre's pro-purge *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* and Paulhan's anti-purge *De la paille et du grain*. These texts introduce the lexicon of the purge debate, and provide the context within which to situate Blanchot's own purge polemic, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort." The third part of this chapter takes a close look at "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" and its response to the crisis of representation.

The Print Culture of French Intellectuals

Before turning to the analysis of the purge polemic, and to its effect on Blanchot's thought, it is necessary to review Blanchot's own history before, during, and immediately after World War II. One gets the best sense of Blanchot's historical context by considering his relationship with the intellectual world in which he lived, rather than through his personal biography. Blanchot himself organized his past by the journals in which he participated, and the encounters with others that they brought. In 1984 he wrote, "I recall once working for *France-Observateur*, which takes me back to earlier periods…For me, what mattered were the encounters, where chance transformed into necessity. Encounters with people, encounters with places. This is what my biography amounts to."[84] The history of his connection with literary journals simultaneously attests to Blanchot's publicity, and to his relationship with his contemporaries, while revealing some of the reciprocal influence that they had on each other. Indeed, it can be said these

[84] Blanchot, "Encounters," trans. Michael Holland, *Paragraph* 30, no. 3 (2007): 27-28.

sentences speak for the entirety of Blanchot's generation, which was absolutely consumed by journals. Journals were the primary venue of their intellectual activity. They founded new journals constantly, and after each inevitably failed, they began another one again with renewed optimism. There were journals covering the gamut of French intellectual activity. The resistance journal *Les Lettres françaises* has already been mentioned. But in addition to the literary journals, which were Blanchot's primary venue of publication, there were also Marxist journals such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, structuralist and post-structuralist journals like *Tel Quel*, and existentialist journals like Sartre's *Les Temps modernes*, not to mention the more academic journals like the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*. Just as Blanchot's history can be viewed through the journals that offered the chance encounters that mark his life, so too can postwar French intellectual history be traced by the rise and fall of its various journals.[85]

As journal after journal sprang up, publishing a few issues with the highest possible ambitions, only to peter out for lack of funding or attention, Blanchot could always be relied on to contribute something to a new venture. These journals ranged from the strictly literary to the wildly interdisciplinary. What united them was their boundless faith in the medium of the journal to create a renewed intellectual community after World War II. Perhaps this accounts for the stunning array of authors that published in these short-lived journals. In these years it was possible to purchase an issue of

[85] The history of the many, fascinating journals that sprang up in the post war decades only to die within a few months remains to be written. The major journals are well documented, however, and instructive histories include Anna Boschetti, *Sartre et "les Temps modernes": une enterprise intellectuelle*, (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985); Sylvie Patron, *Critique: 1946-1996, une encyclopédie de l'esprit modernes*, (Paris: Éditions de L'IMEC, 1999); and Patrick ffrench, *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel, 1960-1983*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

L'Espagne libre, and read an essay by Blanchot on André Malraux's role in the Spanish Civil War, as well as pieces by international figures like the existentialist Albert Camus, the Spanish poet Gabriel Garcia Lorca, and the American novelist Ernest Hemingway. Or the lavishly-printed art journal, *La Table ronde* (not to be confused with the long-running literary journal of the same name), which managed only three issues, but in which Blanchot's work appeared side by side with an essay by the English novelist Virginia Woolf, a facsimile reproduction of a letter by Ernst Renan, author of the essay "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" and a drawing of Charlie Chaplin by the surrealist poet and filmmaker Jean Cocteau.

Of all the journals that Blanchot participated in during his career as a literary critic, three stand out as especially significant, either for their place within French intellectual culture, or the encounters with others that Blanchot experienced through them. The first was *Combat*, a short-lived journal edited and organized by the Christian nationalist Thierry Maulnier in 1936-1937. The second was *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, which became his institutional home from 1953 to 1963, the most productive period of Blanchot's career. The third journal that Blanchot was affiliated with was Georges Bataille's long-running journal, *Critique*, to which he was a contributor and editor.

In the 1930s Blanchot dallied with the nationalist, interwar press. Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle named Blanchot among the "*non-conformistes des années trentes*," the disaffected intellectuals of the interwar period.[86] Initially, Blanchot gravitated to the

[86] See Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *Les non-conformistes des années trentes* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 61-62.

Jeune Droite out of his innate nationalist sympathy for France, which he felt was being sabotaged from within by the Popular Front, and assaulted from without by Hitler's Germany. Soon Blanchot turned to journalism to give expression to his political sentiments. For a brief time in 1936 and 1937 he authored nationalist, and even anti-semitic editorials directed against the Popular Front for the militant monthly journal, *Combat*. The main thrust of these articles was that the Popular Front, and especially its leader Léon Blum, had betrayed the *patrie* to foreign powers. In an article titled "Le Terrorisme, méthode de salut public," Blanchot wrote that the Popular Front government represented a "beautiful union, a sainted alliance which conglomerates Soviet, Jewish, and capitalist interests. All that is anti-national, all that is anti-social will be served [by the Popular Front]."[87] Such was Blanchot's reputation as a right-wing journalist that Sartre was still able to accuse him of "Maurrasism" in a 1943 review of the novel *Aminadab*.[88] Sartre alleged that Blanchot had been, and that he still was a follower of Charles Maurras, the principle "theorist" of right-wing French ideology, and one of the first writers tried during the purge.

As striking as the language of "Le Terrorisme, méthode de salut public" is, the incoherence of Blanchot's claim that the Popular Front served both Soviet *and* capitalist interests gives one the sense that Blanchot's politics were more anti-establishmentarian than anything else.[89] Indeed, he was a peripheral figure in *Combat*'s circle, drawn there

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[87] "Belle union, sainte alliance que ce conglomérat d'intérets soviétiques, juifs, capitalists. Tout ce qui est antinational, tout ce qui est antisocial sera servi." Blanchot, "Le Terrorisme, méthode de salut public," *Combat*, 7 (July 1936): 106.

[88] See Watts, *Allegories of the Purge*, 90-91.

[89] Zeev Sternhell has controversially argued that the *non-conformistes* were actually fully developed proto-fascists. Though he discusses Maulnier in great detail, Sternhell touches on Blanchot only on isolated

more by his "*non-conformisme*" than by his political conviction, and present more by the force of his intellect than by his physical person. Claude Roy, another writer for *Combat*, recalled seeing Blanchot arrive for the journal's meetings at the Left Bank café *La Coupole* like a "diaphanous and fragile apparition."[90] The few pictures that remain of Blanchot confirm Roy's memory. Pale, gray eyes affixed with otherworldly intensity, to some point beyond the camera, the sole features of an otherwise expressionless face. This image should not be read as a photographic record of Blanchot, but rather as a metaphor for his tenuous relationship of presence within and withdrawal from the world of French intellectual culture.

Blanchot abandoned his political journalism in 1938 along with his nationalist politics, and began to write literary criticism almost exclusively. During the war Blanchot split his time between Paris and his parents' home in Quain, just west of the border of the occupied north zone of France. Throughout the war Blanchot published book reviews in the *Journal des débats*, a journal with a distinctly anti-German editorial position. Blanchot's biographer, Christophe Bident, alleges that although Blanchot never attached his name to another political essay until the 1950s, many of the *Journal des débats* anti-German editorials published during the war are stylistically identifiable as Blanchot's. Bident writes that Blanchot was personally devastated by the invasion, and above all by France's willing surrender. It was at this point that Blanchot decided that the extreme left offered the only tenable solution to France's compromised situation, and

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occasions. He was never a major figure in the French right. See Sternhell, *Neither Right, Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[90] "Trés diaphane et fragile apparition." Claude Roy, *Moi je*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 233.

to the idea of the French nation. But Blanchot never openly wrote about politics. Nor did he contribute to any of the clandestine reviews, such as *Les Lettres françaises*.[91]

Even though Blanchot never formally joined the Resistance, that did not prevent him from engaging in the many tiny acts of resistance that constituted life in occupied France. For instance, Blanchot was active in hiding Jews during the first months of the occupation, when Vichy France collaborated in the deportation of French Jews to the concentration camps in eastern Europe, including the wife and daughter of his friend, Emmanuel Levinas. Blanchot even drove cars for the Resistance across the line of demarcation between the occupied north, and the "free" south.[92]

One incident in particular, much-discussed among Blanchot scholars, must be mentioned, even if it does not pertain directly to the subject of the present chapter. At the end of June of 1944, as the Allied army advanced across western France, a squad of retreating German soldiers dragged Blanchot and his family from their house in Quain, and lined them against a wall to be shot. Blanchot and his family were saved when the German officer was distracted by the distant sounds of a skirmish between another group of German soldiers and the Maquis. When the officer left to investigate, the soldiers revealed to Blanchot that they were not actually Germans, but members of the Vlassov army – anti-communist Russian soldiers who sided with Germany during World War II. While the German officer was preoccupied by the Maquis, one of the Russian soldiers gave Blanchot the opportunity to hide. When the officer returned, he half-heartedly tried to find Blanchot, but gave up quickly and ransacked the house instead. Blanchot

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[91] For Blanchot's wartime activity, see Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998), 151-157.
[92] See Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible*, 156.

recounted the story fifty years later in the short récit, *L'Instant de ma mort*, published in 1994.[93] This encounter with the Russian/German army deeply affected Blanchot. But the dangers that were seen in Watts' reading of "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" as an allegory of the purge would also threaten any attempt to read the essay as an allegory of Blanchot's personal history during the war. Reading the death risked by the writer in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" as an allegory of the death that Blanchot himself escaped in 1944 does not sufficiently problematize the relationship between a writer's texts and his biography.[94] For what we have of Blanchot's history during World War II is nothing more and nothing less than texts: many hundreds of texts. It is to these that one must look if one intends to trace Blanchot's history.[95]

Throughout the war Blanchot continued to publish book reviews. He quickly established his reputation as a critic, coming to the attention of Jean Paulhan in early 1942, who then served as the editor of the original *La Nouvelle Revue Française*.[96] Paulhan was the *éminence grise* of the Parisian intellectual scene and not easily impressed, but after reading Blanchot's novel, *Thomas L'Obscur*, Paulhan admitted to his co-editor that he "found [Blanchot] intimidating."[97] Even at this early stage Blanchot's

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[93] Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, bilingual edition (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). Though Blanchot waited fifty years to publish an account of this episode, by no means did he keep it a secret. Christophe Bident discusses a letter sent to Pierre Prévost, in which Blanchot told him of his encounter with the German/Russian troops. Bident also suggests that Blanchot told Georges Bataille, who incorporated it into his book, *Sur Nietzsche*. See Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible*, 228-232.
[94] Derrida addresses the difficult question of how to distinguish the récit from autobiography, fiction from testimony. See, Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1998).
[95] See the prolonged discussion of this mode of discretion in Chapter One.
[96] In 1943 occupation authorities closed *La Nouvelle Revue française*. See Martyn Cornick, *Intellectuals in History: The Nouvelle revue française under Jean Paulhan, 1925-1940*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995).
[97] "Je le trouve indimidant." Jean Paulhan to Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Paris, January 1942, *Choix de lettres*, II, 1937-1945, eds. Dominique Aury, Jean-Claude Zylberstein & Bernard Leuilliot, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), 262.

work was influential and imposing. Paulhan's opinion of Blanchot was cemented the following year when Blanchot published *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?*, which ambiguously reviewed Paulhan's manifesto of literary theory, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou, La terreur dans les lettres*. Despite his intimidation, and despite the ambiguity of Blanchot's assessment, Paulhan recommended and shared Blanchot's review with as many figures within the French literary scene as he could. By 1942 Blanchot's status had risen to such heights that Paulhan could select him as his successor for the editorship of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*.[98]

In 1942 Paulhan left *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, which had been co-opted by the German occupation, to join the clandestine resistance journal *Les Lettres Françaises*. He left *Les Lettres Françaises* in 1944, following the publication of the blacklists, and began to plot the revival of his old journal, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. The first attempt was *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, dedicated to art and literature, and whose editorial policy a sustained protest of the editorial policy of commitment at Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Temps modernes*. Blanchot became one of his most regular contributors. In 1953, after *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade* collapsed, Paulhan launched another venture, this time under the title *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* (the double *Nouvelle Nouvelle* indicating the new journal's distance from the collaborationist position of the original *La Nouvelle Revue Française*), and immediately enlisted Blanchot as a contributor. No longer performing in an editorial capacity, Blanchot became one of the most regular contributors to *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, publishing a monthly column from 1953 until

[98] Paulhan to Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, 9 June 1942, *Choix de lettres*, II, 1937-1945, 280.

1962. The essays from this column comprised the backbone of Blanchot's critical corpus, and were reprinted in *L'Espace littéraire*, *Le Livre à venir*, *L'Entretien infini*, and *L'Àmitié*. In these postwar essays for *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* Blanchot cultivated a significant readership among French intellectuals, and cemented his name as the preeminent literary critic of his time.

Out of their collaboration at *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française* Blanchot and Paulhan became acquaintances. Their friendship, if it can be called that, was characteristic of many of the relationships that Blanchot had with other writers: intense personal devotion, always in the service of literary and intellectual companionship, such that one almost suspects that Blanchot came to the personal strictly through the literary, and through the philosophic. When Paulhan died in 1968, Blanchot turned a critical overview of his literary and philosophical work, "La Facilité de mourir," into a panegyric for his lost friend, and published it in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*'s special issue commemorating Paulhan. In this essay Blanchot returned to the beginning of their friendship by a reference to the first letter he received from Paulhan: "I think that the first letter I received from Jean Paulhan is dated May 10, 1940: 'We will remember these days,' he said to me."[99] But Blanchot also returned to the beginnings of their intellectual relationship, retracing the steps of his initial review of Paulhan's work, *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* Thus, "La Facilité de mourir" was a eulogy for Paulhan, but through its philosophical reflection on his work, it was also a eulogy for what Blanchot

[99] "Je crois que la première lettre que je reçus de Jean Paulhan est datée du 10 mai 1940: "Nous nous souviendrons de ces jours," m'y disait-il." Blanchot, "La Facilité de mourir," *La Nouvelle Revue française* (May 1969), 743.

learned through his relationship with Paulhan, indicating the truth and intimacy of their relationship.

The next publication with which Blanchot participated was launched by another longtime friend: George Bataille's *Critique*. Since its founding in 1945 *Critique* has been an institution of French intellectual culture. *Critique*'s editorial policy was one of total authorial freedom over content, even if authors were bound to the format of the book-review. Each issue began with the masthead, "the authors of these articles freely develop an opinion which engages only themselves."[100] This policy was intended to counter the dogmatic conformism to the philosophy of commitment required at Sartre's *Les Temps modernes*. From the outset Bataille requested that Blanchot be consulted on all manner of editorial decisions, even though he was only a member of the editorial board, and not one of the principal editors. Bataille's letters to the other editors are laced with requests that Blanchot's opinion on every little detail be solicited before taking action. Blanchot was *Critique*'s lead reviewer for eight years, and he was given a relatively free hand to distort and expand the genre of the book review into radical re-considerations of literary creation. It was in the pages of *Critique* that "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" originally appeared.

"Let us suppose," the essay begins, "that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question…addressed to language, behind the man who writes and who reads, by language become literature."[101] This statement, with its paradoxical

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[100] "Les auteurs des articles développent librement une opinion qui n'engage qu'eux-mêmes."

[101] "Admettons que la littérature commence au moment où la littérature devient une question addressée au langage, derrière l'homme qui écrit et lit, par le langage devenu littérature," Blanchot, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," 293.

juxtaposition of literature and language, was characteristic of Blanchot's "reviews." Eventually this format became too restrictive for Blanchot, and he abandoned *Critique* in 1953 in order to gain more freedom. Shortly thereafter, Blanchot turned to Paulhan's *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, where he spent the next ten years. This parting of ways should not however, diminish our perception of the benefits that Blanchot received from his work with *Critique*. By his partnership with *Critique*, Blanchot's work rapidly developed into a fully-fledged theory of literature, with a unique style and logic, and it began to take on the significance for which it was renowned in the latter part of the twentieth-century.

Blanchot's friendship with Bataille began shortly before the founding of *Critique*, in 1940, at a series of salon readings that Bataille had organized for the presentation of his book, *L'expérience intérieure*. These meetings, which included such well-known figures as Michel Leiris, Pierre Prévost, and Raymond Queneau consisted primarily of a debate between Bataille and Blanchot. Witnesses described Blanchot as a diaphanous apparition, whose ghostly appearance was at odds with the tenacity with which he questioned Bataille, as others watched in reverent silence.[102] Bataille recounted the event himself in *L'Expérience intérieure*: "Conversation with Blanchot. I said to him: the inner experience has neither aim, nor authority, which is its justification.…He said to me that experience itself is authority."[103] This example indicates the intellectual exchange

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[102] For a description of this meeting, see Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002), 312-317.

[103] "Conversation avec Blanchot. Je lui dis: l'expérience intérieure n'a ni but, ni autorité, qui la justifient…. Il me dit que l'expérience elle-même est l'autorité." Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1943), 87.

between Blanchot and Bataille, which has been commented on numerous occasions.[104] More importantly however, this example indicates Blanchot's place in the intellectual culture of wartime Paris. Just as he was in Paulhan's literary circle, so too was Blanchot an integral member of Bataille's.

By 1966 Blanchot's renown was such that *Critique* published a special issue in his honor, long after he had resigned from the journal. With contributions from Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, Roger Laporte, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean Starobinski this special issue marked one of the first moments when Blanchot passed beyond mere membership in the Parisian intelligentsia, to become an object of study in his own right. At the same time, it also functioned as the postwar generation's acknowledgement of Blanchot's influence. It will suffice to take the example of Michel Foucault, who admitted that in the 1950s he "dreamt of being Blanchot,"[105] and again in the 1980s that he believed that "Blanchot made possible all discourse about literature."[106] François Dosse, a historian of structuralism, has noted that Foucault probably even derived his style, including his penchant for the oxymoron, from Blanchot.[107] But it was in the pages

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[104] Most accounts of this encounter tend to occult either Blanchot's influence on Bataille, or Bataille's influence on Blanchot. For an analysis of this tempting occultation, and an attempt to move in a different direction, see Michael Holland, "Bataille, Blanchot and the Last Man," *Paragraph*, 27, no. 1 (March 2004): 50-63; See also, Holland, "An Event Without Witness: Contestation between Blanchot and Bataille," in Kevin Hart & Geoffrey Hartman, eds., *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2004), 27-45.

[105] Michel Foucault, quoted in Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, trans. Betsy Wing, (London: Faber, 1992), 58.

[106] Foucault, "On the Ways of Writing History," in Ed. James Faubion, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. Vol. 2. General ed. Paul Rabinow. Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1998), 287.

[107] "In the early fifties, Foucault was also an avid reader of literature and was particularly fascinated by Maurice Blanchot's writing, which left its mark on Foucault's style, especially in his systematic use of the oxymoron." François Dosse, *History of Structuralism, Volume I: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 148-149.

of *Critique* that Foucault transmitted his appreciation of Blanchot into an essay, "La Pensée du dehors," which can be read as an allegory of Blanchot's influence on Foucault and his presence throughout Foucault's corpus: "It is only a formless and streaming murmur; its power is in dissimulation."[108]

The history of Blanchot's connections with journals, and the encounters that he experienced through them provides a rough, but accurate index of his place in the trajectory of twentieth century intellectual history. Blanchot's work was at the forefront of the connection between literature and philosophy, and by his connection with journals like *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française* and *Critique*, he helped to accelerate their convergence. It was in these journals, also, that the purge debate was fought. It is to the general political terrain of this debate that I now wish to turn, before examining Blanchot's relation to the purge debate itself.

The Politics of the Purge

It was in the journals and pamphlets that proliferated in postwar French intellectual culture that the debate over the purge occurred. After four years of occupation, after which the intellectual right was thoroughly discredited, the postwar purge offered the intellectual left the opportunity to reconstruct public discourse. This reconstruction of public discourse took the form of a debate over how to deal with collaborationist writers and intellectuals. Though the debate occurred entirely within the intellectual left, there were significant points of difference between those who wished to

[108] "Il n'est que rumeur informe et ruissellement, sa force est dans la dissimulation," Foucault, "La Pensée du dehors," *Critique*, 229 (June 1966): 544. This murmur is examined at length in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

put collaborationist writers on trial, and those who argued against the criminalization of the written word. Jean-Paul Sartre was in the former camp, and his policy of committed literature emerged out of his efforts to intervene in the debate over the purge in favor of putting collaborationist writers on trial. Jean Paulhan was in the latter group, and he argued against putting collaborationist writers on trial specifically because one could not criminalize language. Together, Sartre and Paulhan formed the extreme poles of the debate.

In a certain sense, the purge debate was a conflict over editorial policy between Sartre's pro-purge *Les Temps modernes*, and Paulhan's anti-purge journal, *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*. They articulated their respective positions in a series of well-known essays and books. While Sartre and Paulhan differed dramatically in their polemics, they each shared the same common problematic: the crisis of representation. Rarely was this identified as the explicit topic of their polemics, of course, as they were couched under the guise either of an investigation into the origins of literature, or into the propriety of the trials and executions of writers. Yet it was the homology drawn between the two questions of the crisis of representation that consistently enabled the polemicists of the purge debate to articulate their politics. The questions of who was representative of France, and how linguistic and literary representation operated, were one and the same to the polemicists who participated in the purge debate. A second trope subtended the polemics of the purge debate as well: the trope of repetition. World War II, the occupation, the Vichy regime, and the purge were all figured as the repetitions of prior events in French history. A close analysis of Sartre's contributions to the purge debate,

including his major articulation of his theory of commitment in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* and Paulhan's *De la paille et du grain*, demonstrates the central status that representation and repetition occupied in during the purge of writers and intellectuals. They served as poles that oriented the field of production in 1947 and 1948.

Today, it is necessary to historicize Sartre's work on commitment in order to see past the sometimes inflammatory cant of his polemics. Only by keeping in mind the historical moment in which Sartre articulated his notion of commitment is it possible to see Sartre's desire to create a genuinely egalitarian French republic. The end of World War II was a time of jubilant celebration, and limitless possibility. During the reconstruction, there was a palpable sense that France could, and should be remade from the ground up. It was a time when French intellectuals rethought the very foundations of French communal life. In this context, Sartre laid the foundations for his theory of commitment in a series of essays considering the war and its immediate aftermath, published in 1944 and 1945, just as the postwar purge was getting underway. In these essays Sartre questioned what had made France vulnerable to collaboration in the first place. His aim was to identify and exclude the preconditions of collaboration from the reconstruction of France, so that France could be remade in the most egalitarian way possible.

The most explicit of these essays, "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?" was published in August 1945. In this piece – which discussed several of the writers implicated by the CNE and who were on trial at the purge tribunal, including Alphonse de Chauteaubriant, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, and Robert Brasillach – Sartre was concerned not so much with

defining the act of collaboration, as he was interested in isolating the social and psychological profile of the collaborator. To Sartre, the collaborator was characterized by his or her failure to integrate into normal society: "Collaboration is a fact of disassimilation, in every case it has been an individual decision."[109] These poorly integrated collaborators became fascinated with foreign social life, precisely because of their own failure to assimilate into domestic social life, and the failure of domestic society to bring them in: "At bottom [collaboration] represents a fixation on foreign structures of collectivity by those elements who have been poorly assimilated by the indigenous community…Everywhere that social life remains intense, in the halls of religion or politics, [collaboration] cannot take hold."[110] To Sartre the collaborator was an outsider, a person whose own failings prevented them from joining society and participating in it fully.

In what was perhaps Sartre's most controversial claim made during the purge debate, he charged that the collaborator was unable to join and participate in society because of an innate weakness, which for Sartre was analogous to homosexuality and femininity. Not possessing strength of his own (after the humiliation of the occupation), the collaborator "appropriated for himself the weapons of weakness, and of woman. One will notice curious metaphors throughout the articles of Chateaubriant, Drieu, and Brazillach, metaphors which present the relations between France and Germany under the

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[109] "La collaboration est un fait de désintégration, elle a été dans tous les cas une décision individuelle." Jean-Paul Sartre, "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?" in *Situations III* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949), 46. Originally published in the periodical, *La République Française* (August 1945).

[110] "Elle représente à l'origine une fixation par des formes collectives étrangères d'éléments mal assimilés par la communauté indigène…Partout où la vie sociale est restée intense, dans les foyers religieux ou politiques, ces phénomènes ne trouvent pas de place." Ibid.

aspect of a sexual union in which France plays the role of the woman."[111] Not only was collaboration feminine, it was also a seduction: "The collaborator speaks in the name of strength, but he is not strength: he is the ruse, the trick which relies on force, he is even charm and seduction, since he pretends to play the lure that French culture exerts on the Germans through him."[112] Sartre even went so far as to allege that most collaborators were homosexual: "It seems to me that there is a curious mixture of masochism and homosexuality [in collaboration]. The homosexual milieu of Paris, and elsewhere, has provided numerous, and brilliant recruits."[113]

In order to appreciate the real import of Sartre's allegations for the debate over the purge, it is necessary to see past the sexism and homophobia of his allegations, and look closely at the progression that he made from the writing of collaborators, to their supposed femininity or homosexuality. Sartre began by highlighting the collaborators' writing. He started by pointing out "metaphors which present the relations between France and Germany under the aspect of a sexual union in which France plays the role of the woman" in the written work of Chateaubriant, Drieu, and Brasillach. But by the end of the same passage, the question of writing had been elided altogether, and the presence

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[111] "Il reconnaît donc sa faiblesse et ce prêtre de la puissance virile et des vertus masculines s'accomode des armes du faible, de la femme. On relèvera partout dans les articles de Chateaubriant, de Drieu, de Brazillach de curieuses métaphores qui présentent les relations de la France et de l'Allemagne sous l'aspect d'une union sexuelle où la France joue le rôle de la femme." Ibid, 58. The misspelling of Brasillach's name – wrongly printed with a z replacing the s, as Brazillach – is a telling error. Alice Kaplan argues that the misspelling was a graphamatic parapraxis, a Freudian slip in which the z betrayed the adequation that Sartre drew between collaboration and Nazism. See Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 14.

[112] "Le collaborateur parle au nom de la force, mais il n'est pas la force: il est la ruse, l'astuce qui s'appuie sur la force, il est même le charme et la séduction puisqu'il prétend jouer de l'attrait que la culture française exerce, d'après lui, sur les Allemands." Sartre, "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?" 58.

[113] "Il me paraît qu'il y a là un curieux mélange de masochisme et d'homosexualité. Les milieux homosexuels parisiens, d'ailleurs, ont fourni de monbreuses et brillantes recrues." Ibid.

of sexual metaphors now indicated that collaborationist writers were themselves feminine or homosexual. In rhetorical terms, this elision was metonymy: the rhetorical figure by which a quality of a thing (in this case, the collaborators' writing) is taken to represent the whole (the collaborators themselves). This metonymic elision between the collaborators' writing, and the collaborators' person was an early articulation of the homology between writing and the national community, later expressed through the question of who was representative of France, and the question of what was linguistic representation.

This priority given to the character of the collaborator over acts of collaboration reflected Sartre's interest in the reconstruction of the French national community. If those likely to collaborate could be identified by their telltale traits, then they could be excluded from the rebuilding of the national community through the purge. In making this argument, "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?" introduced the other major trope of the purge debate: the figuration of the purge as the repetition of the French Revolution:

> The collaborator, who may or not have had the occasion to manifest himself as such, is an enemy that democratic societies constantly carry within their breast. If we want to avoid collaboration that survived the war in other forms, it does not suffice to execute certain traitors. The unification of French society must be achieved, as much as possible, which is to say, the work that the Revolution of 1789 began, which will only be able to realize itself by a new revolution, this revolution that was attempted in 1830, in 1848, in 1871.[114]

[114] "Le collaborateur, qu'il ait ou non l'occasion de se manifester comme tel, est un ennemi que les sociétés démocratiques portent perpétuellement en leur sein. Si nous voulons éviter qu'il ne survive à la guerre sous d'autres formes, il ne suffit pas d'exécuter quelques traîtres. Il faut, autant que possible, achever l'unification de la société française c'est-à-dire le travail que la Révolution de 89 a commencé; et c'est ce qui ne peut se réaliser que par une révolution nouvelle, cette révolution qu'on a tentée en 1830, en 1848, en 1871." 60.

In other words, Sartre called not just for a purge, but a full-scale national revolution that would remake the national community entirely. Moreover, Sartre believed that only this wholesale reconstruction would be able to protect the national community from those collaborators whose collabortionist tendencies remained latent. In Sartre's view, this reconstruction repeated, and carried the mantle of previous revolutionary moments in French history: not just the revolution of 1789, but also those of 1830, 1848, and 1871.

While "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?" made a metonymic elision between the collaborators' writing, and the collaborators themselves, Sartre did not explicitly take up the question of writing – that is, the question of the nature of linguistic representation itself – until the essays collected in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Originally published serially from 1945 to 1947 in *Les Temps modernes*, and collected into a single volume in 1948, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* was an explicit contribution to the purge debate. Though it never reached the same inflammatory tone of "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?" Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* picked up the former's line of thought, including the homology between the national community and writing, and the figuration of the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals as a repetition of previous French revolutions. The central argument of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, which also became the *de jure* editorial policy at *Les Temps modernes* was that a writer must commit his or her writing, whether they wrote fiction, or non-fiction. The purge showed that a writer could be held materially responsible for what he or she writes before the law, before the body politic, and before the nation, sometimes on pain of death. For Sartre, it was as participants in the world that writers were responsible. In the first issue of *Les Temps modernes*

published just two months after “Qu’est-ce qu’un collaborateur?” Sartre announced in an editorial titled “Présentation des *Temps modernes*” that "the writer is situated in his time: each word has reverberations. Each silence as well. I hold Flaubert and the Goncourts responsible for the repression which followed the Commune because they did not write a line to prevent it."[115] Preventing such a repression, which meant preventing another occupation to Sartre, became the mantra of *Les Temps modernes*, and a first step toward the articulation of Sartre's theory of commitment.

Moreover, Sartre argued that the committed writer will do more than just try to prevent further Occupations, the committed writer will also work towards the betterment of society now, and in the future: "our intention is to help produce certain changes in the Society that surrounds us...[we] want to change, at the same time, the social condition of man, and the concept that he has of himself."[116] To desire these changes, and to write in a way that worked towards them was to be a committed writer. Articulating exactly what these changes might entail, and how they might be effected, required that Sartre explain the thing called writing, which itself required that he articulate his theory of representation. For Sartre, all writing was divisible into either prose or poetry, each of which had a different constitution, and a different purpose. The difference came down to what use that the writer made of language. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* Sartre wrote, "Prose is utilitarian in its essence; I would willingly define the prose writer as a man who

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[115] "L'écrivain est *en situtation* dans son époque: chaque parole a des retentissements. Chaque silence aussi. Je tiens Flaubert et Goncourt pour responsable de la répression qui suivit la Commune parce qu'ils n'ont pas écrit une ligne pour l'empêcher." Sartre, "Présentation des *Temps Modernes*," *Les Temps modernes*, 1 (October 1945): 5.

[116] "...notre intention est de concourir à produire certains changements dans la Société qui nous entoure...[nous voulons] changer à la fois la condition sociale de l'homme et la conception qu'il a de lui-même." Ibid. 7-8.

makes use of words."[117] Sartre defined poetry, by contrast, as that which "does not make use of [words] at all; I would say, rather, that [poetry] is made use of by words. Poets are men who refuse to utilize language."[118] A committed writer should use language like a tool. Language, for Sartre, was an instrument with a purpose. Each word had its entelechy: the goal, aim, or end towards which it tended. The committed writer must voluntarily take responsibility for guiding words toward that end. "Words...are 'loaded pistols'. If [the writer] speaks, [the writer] fires. He may be silent, but since he has chosen to fire, he must do it like a man, by aiming at targets, and not like a child, at random, with eyes closed, solely for the pleasure of hearing the shot go off."[119] The poet played with words irresponsibly, the way a child might play with its father's loaded gun. The child closes its eyes, squeezes the trigger without looking, and delights in the sound of the report. Who knows where the shot went, or what – if anything – it might have hit? Committed prose writers, by contrast, aimed their guns.

"The end of language," wrote Sartre, "is to communicate."[120] Moreover, as one who used the communicative tool of language, the committed prose writer's "function is to deliver messages to his readers."[121] Messages were little bullets of language, held together by meaning, which "alone can give words their verbal unity."[122] This mirrored

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[117] "La prose est utilitaire par essence; je définirais volontiers le prosateur comme un homme qui *se sert* des mots." Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 26.

[118] "...elle ne n'en *sert* pas du tout; je dirais plutôt qu'elle les sert. Les poètes sont des hommes qui refusent d'*utiliser* le langage." Ibid. 17.

[119] "...les mots...sont des "pistolets chargés." S'il parles, il tire. Il peut se taire, mais puisqu'il a choisi de tierer, il faut que ce soit comme un homme, en visant des cibles et non comme un enfant, au hasard, en fermant les yeux et pour le seul plaisir d'entendre les détonations." Ibid. 31.

[120] "...la fin du langage est de communiquer." Ibid. 28.

[121] "...fonction est de délivrer des messages à ses lecteurs." Ibid. 35.

[122] "...c'est en effet la signification seule qui peut donner aux mots leur unité veritable." Ibid. 19.

the place that Sartre accorded to language in the primordial constitution of subjectivity in *L'Être et le néant*. Sartre argued that the human subject, as someone whose subjectivity was constituted by being the object for another subject (which Sartre called being-for-others), was essentially a meaning for the other. Each person meant something for every other person. In this sense, language *qua* meaning was the primordial condition of the subject's being.

> Language is not a phenomenon added on to being-for-others: it *is* originally being-for-others, that is to say the fact that a subjectivity experiences itself as an object for the other. In a universe of pure objects, in no case could language be "invented," since it presupposes originally a relation to another subject; and in intersubjectivity of the for-others, it is not necessary to invent it, because it is already given in the recognition of the other. I *am* language by the single fact that, whatever I might do, my freely conceived and executed acts, and my projections towards my possibilities have a meaning beyond them that escapes me and that I experience.[123]

Citing Heidegger's essay, "Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung," Sartre wrote, "it is in this sense – and this sense alone - that Heidegger is right to declare that: *I am what I say*."[124] One is what one says because that was how one's meaning was expressed to the other, through whom one was able to recognize one's own existence. Unlike the poet, who relinquished control over the meaning toward which his or her writing tended, it was only with meanings, as Sartre put it, "that the [committed prose writer] has to deal."[125] The committed prose writer dealt with the human subject in its meaning, which is to say,

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[123] "Le langage n'est pas un phénomène surajouté à l'être-pour-autrui: il *est* originellement l'être-pour-autrui, c'est-à-dire le fait qu'une subjectivité s'éprouve comme objet pour l'autre. Dans un univers de purs objets, le langage ne saurait en aucun cas être "inventé", puis-qu'il suppose originellement un rapport à un autre sujet; et dans l'intersubjectivité des pour-autrui, il n'est pas nécessaire de l'inventer, car il est déjà donné dans la reconnaissance de l'autre. Du seul fait que, quoi que je fasse, mes actes librement conçus et exécutes, me pro-jet vers mes possibilités ont dehors un sense qui m'échappe et que j'éprouve, je *suis* langage." Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1943), 440.

[124] "C'est en ce sens – et en ce sens seulement – que Heidegger a raison de declarer que: *je suis ce que je dis*." Ibid.

[125] "L'écrivain…c'est aux significations qu'il a affaire." Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 16.

at the level of the subject's reality. In this way, for Sartre, being a committed writer meant committing to reality above all else.

There was, however, in both *L'Être et le néant* and *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* the repeated suggestion that meaning took precedence over language, that language itself was a parasite which only obstructed essential relations. In *L'Être et le néant* Sartre characterized language – the actual words one said – as subordinate to meaning, the means of intersubjective recognition. He wrote, "it is obvious that by language we mean all phenomena of expression, and not the articulated word that is a derivative and secondary mode whose appearance could be the object of a historical study."[126] For Sartre language was derivative and secondary, but also historical, contingent, and epiphenomenal. What was essential was that the meaning was transmitted, in order that the reader could be affected by the message. Language itself, especially poetic language, only got in the way of the committed writer's effort to communicate meanings with the reader. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre wrote that language should be as much like a window as possible: present, but absolutely transparent. "Words are transparent," Sartre wrote, "and the gaze looks through them."[127] To Sartre, words "must pass unperceived."[128] Trafficking with them, as opposed to through them, made no sense. This, Sartre suggested, was the trap that stylists fell into, who "consider only this

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[126] "Il va de soi que par langage nous entendons tous les phénomènes d'expression et non pas la parole articulée qui est un mode dérivé et secondaire dont l'apparition peut faire l'objet d'une étude historique." Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, 441.
[127] "...lest mots sont transparents et...le regard les traverse." Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 32
[128] "...il doit passer inaperçu." Ibid. 32.

secondary structure of the enterprise [of writing]."[129] Meaning was primary, a human host off of which a secondary, inhuman, and parasitic language fed.[130]

The literary historian Denis Hollier detects a tendency to privilege reality over language in Sartre's formulation of writing, which rested on a theory of representation that privileged semantics over semiotics. Hollier writes,

> Whether it is a matter of signs (or words) or of images, there is not a line of Sartre in which the inflationary precipitousness discrediting in advance any initiative that might be accorded to language is not (in one way or another) discredited. The definition from *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* will be recalled: the verbal phase is no more than a "secondary structure" in our enterprise.[131]

Hollier argues that this "antilinguistics" allowed Sartre to disentangle the confusion of words and things that poetry, and stylistics had been allowed to release into reality. This confusion had to be protected against at all costs, up to and including the purge. Sartre made commitment into a principle by which reality would be defended against the encroachments of a harmful parasite. Commitment was a "reality principle," as Hollier terms it, drawing on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[132]

But what was it exactly that Sartre thought had to be protected so dearly? And why did language, of all things, threaten it so seriously? According to Hollier it was the spontaneous community that sprang into the streets of Paris upon the Liberation that had

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[129] "...à considérer seulement cette structure secondaire de l'enterprise." Ibid. 28-29.

[130] At one point in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre described Rimbaud's poetry as inhuman, and as imposing inhumanity on its reader. He wrote, "Rimbaud invites us to see [the world] from the outside with him, its strangeness comes from the fact that in order to consider it, we place ourselves on the other side of the human condition: on the side of God." "Rimbaud nous invite à la voir du dehors avec lui, son étrangeté vient de ce que nous nous plaçons, pour la considérer, de l'autre côté de la condition humaine; du côté de Dieu." Ibid. 24.

[131] Hollier, *The Politics of Prose*, 58-59.

[132] Sartre himself alluded to a "reality principle" at work in his thought in his introduction to *Les Temps modernes*: "Thus we have recourse...to a synthetic conception of reality, whose principle is that of a whole." "Ainsi rcourons-nous...à une conception synthétique de la réalité, dont le principe est qu'un tout." Sartre, "Présentation des *Temps modernes*," 13. See also Hollier, *The Politics of Prose*, 51-64.

to be protected. Hollier writes: "It was the Liberation that accorded him for the first time an experience of the group in fusion, which can be described as the irruption in a public space of collective self-consciousness or even as the collectivization of self-consciousness."[133] It might be added that the Liberation was also perhaps the first time that Sartre experienced the collectivization of *national* self-consciousness as well.[134] In this moment of national celebration, Sartre felt, for the first time, the freedom of being-together. In that moment, "society [became] an act of freedoms realizing themselves by the simple fact of being-together."[135] It was this "group in fusion" that became so dear to Sartre. Returning to the definition of the committed writer from the "Présentation des *Temps modernes*," in which Sartre stated that the committed writer would help to produce changes in society, one sees Sartre's desire for the group in fusion made manifest in the editorial policy of *Les Temps modernes*. It was to be a journal that helped to produce a change in society, a change in which one experienced the freedom of the group in fusion perpetually renewing itself. It was to be a journal that protected the group in fusion by sorting out the committed from the collaborators.

The term "group in fusion" did not appear in Sartre's writing until the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, published in 1960, at which point his model was the storming of the

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[133] Ibid. 30.

[134] Tony Judt notes that the resistance and the purge were the first occasion in many twentieth-century intellectuals' lives that they experienced any kind of national cohesion or purpose, as the period in which writers like Sartre and Blanchot came to political consciousness was the dishevelment of the *années trentes*. Of the sense of national purpose offered by the Resistance and the desire to see it continued after the war, Judt writes, "Extrapolating from the Resistance years, the only experience of collective action most of them had ever known, unaffiliated intellectuals looked upon inaction as the worst of all options...They saw revolution, in this case the continuation and completion of the experience and objectives of the Resistance, as the only solution, the only way to prevent *France* from slipping backward." (Emphasis added). Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 36.

[135] Hollier, *The Politics of Prose*, 30.

Bastille in 1789. Sartre breathlessly described the mentality of the Parisians in the days leading up to the Bastille: "people were running in the streets, shouting, forming gatherings, and burning down the gates of the toll houses. The bond between individuals was, in its various forms, that of alterity as the immediate discovery of oneself in the Other."[136] There was elation and excitement, but not yet true unity. When the Parisians actually stormed the Bastille, the group, formerly a loosely bound collectivity of individuals, fused into a unity directed toward a single end. It was at this point, for Sartre, that France became a self-determined nation: "This type of group (a homogeneity of fusion) produces itself as its own idea...it is the sovereign nation."[137] Writing this in 1960, Sartre drew an analogy between the group in fusion and the nation, which began for him on July 14, 1789.

Hollier argues however, that Sartre's understanding of the group in fusion actually derived from his experience in the Liberation of 1944. Sartre repressed the Liberation from his consciousness in 1960, Hollier suggests, because it was tainted with the stain of literary commitment. For the Sartre of 1960, literature was degraded, bourgeois, superfluous, and secondary to the primary means of commitment: revolutionary political activism. But the logic of the group in fusion as nation was already present even in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* albeit not designated as such. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre drew a connection between the profusion of "freedoms" that

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[136] "On court dans les rues, on crie, on se rassemble, on brûle les barrières de l'octroi. Le lien des individus entre eux est – sous les diverses formes réelles qu'il peut prendre – celui de l'altérité comme révélation immédiate de soi en l'Autre." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1960), 387-388.

[137] "Ce type de groupe (homogénéité de fusion) se produit lui-même comme sa propre idée (nous verrons le sens de cela): c'est *la nation souveraine*." Ibid. 395

spontaneously erupted during the Liberation with what happens between the writer and the reader. Sartre argued that the writer was incapable of creating the work alone, and that the reader was required to complete the task of bringing it into existence.[138] This dialect of writing and reading engaged the writer and the reader in an intersubjective relationship: "To write is to make a call to the reader that he bring the revelation that I have undertaken by means of language into objective existence."[139] This was a call to the reader to exercise his or her freedom. It was not an injunction, since the reader could always put the book down, leaving the creation incomplete. It was a call, or an appeal for the reader to decide to participate in the creation voluntarily. Since it was voluntarily given, the reader participated through his or her freedom: "since this directed creation is an absolute beginning, it is thus realized by freedom of the reader, and by what is purest in this freedom."[140] Thus does freedom become the true essence and content of literature. "Whether he is an essayist, a pamphleteer, a satirist, or a novelist, whether he speaks only of individual passions or whether he attacks the prevailing social regime, the writer, a

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[138] The difference between Blanchot's conception of reading and Sartre's is that the latter thought that reading engaged and engendered both the freedom of the writer as well the reader. For Sartre, in a Cartesianization of the dialectic, this freedom affirmed the subjective agency of each party. Blanchot's concept of reading was, by contrast, strictly anti-humanist. Neither the writer's nor the reader's freedom are affirmed for Blanchot. Rather, Being violently imposes itself between them, such that they are subjected to its presence, rather than subjects that make it present. See Blanchot, *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* (Paris: José Corti, 1942), and the essays collected in *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1955).

[139] "Écrire, c'est faire appel au lecteur pour qu'il fasse passer à l'existence objective le dévoilement que j'ai entrepris par le moyen du langage." Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 59.

[140] "...puisque cette création dirigée est un commencement absolu, elle est donc opérée par la liberté du lecteur en ce que cette liberté a de plus pur." Ibid.

man freely addressing other free men, has only one subject: freedom."[141] And it was freedom that was brought into the world when the reader read.

As if to quell any doubt about precisely what kind of freedom he was talking about, and precisely who threatened it, Sartre enumerated the difference between and the free writer and a collaborationist writer like Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, whom he identified as the archetypical disassimilated, collaborationist writer in 1945 in "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?" If the free writer appealed to the reader's freedom, the collaborationist writer – working in concert with a regime that violently restricted France's freedom – made no appeal to freedom whatsoever. Indeed, the collaborationist writer made no appeal at all, he merely harangued, and grew increasingly estranged from the body politic for it:

> The first months of the Occupation [Drieu la Rochelle] admonished, chided and sermonized at his compatriots. If no one responded it is because they were no longer free to do so. He became irritated; he no longer *sensed* his readers. He pressed harder, but no sign appeared to prove that he had been understood. No sign of hatred, nor of anger either: nothing. He seemed disoriented, gripped by a growing distress. He complained bitterly to the Germans. His articles were superb; they became shrill. The moment came when he struck his breast; no echo, except among the sell-out journalists who he despised. He offered his resignation, withdrew it, spoke again, stranded in the desert. Finally he stopped talking, gagged by the silence of the others. He had demanded their enslavement, but in his crazy mind he had imagined it given voluntarily, as if they were still free.[142]

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[141] "Ainsi qu'il soit essayiste, pamphlétaire, satiriste ou romancier, qu'il parle seulement des passions individuelles ou qu'il s'attaque au régime de la société, l'écrivain, homme libre s'adressant à des hommes libres, n'a qu'un seul sujet: la liberté." Ibid. 81.

[142] "Les premiers mois il admonestait, chapitrait, sermonnait ses compatriotes. Personne ne lui répondit: c'est parce qu'on n'était plus libre de le faire. Il en témoigna de l'humeur, il ne *sentait* plus ses lecteurs. Il se montra plus pressant mais aucun signe ne vint lui prouver qu'il avait été compris. Aucun signe de haine, ni de colère non plus: rien. Il parut désorienté, en proie à une agitation grandissante, il se plaignit amèrrement aux Allemands; ses articles étaient superbes, il devinrent aigres; le moment arriva où il se frappa la poitrine: nul écho, sauf chez des journalistes vendus qu'il méprisait. Il offrit sa démission, la reprit, parla encore, toujours dans le désert. Finalement il se tut, bâillonné par le silence des autres. Il avait réclamé leur asservissement mais, dans sa tête folle, il avait dû l'imaginer volontaire, libre encore." Ibid. 81-82.

Collaboration, then, was aligned with a useless profusion of language. Sartre characterized Drieu as someone who spoke merely to hear the sound of his words, like the child that plays with a gun just to hear the sound of the shot. The collaborator threatened the fusion of the group because he said things that had no meaning, and that did not address the freedom of the reader. In this way, Sartre drew on his depiction of the collaborationist writer as an outsider in "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?" in order to articulate his theory of committed literature. It was not just Drieu who was outside the body politic: it was the things that he said. It was as a writer that Drieu was accused of collaboration, and though he committed suicide before he could be brought to trial, it was for his words that he was condemned. It was because they signified nothing. Collaborationist writing, like poetry, was literally unreal, beyond Sartre's reality principle.

Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, Sartre's purge polemic, drew the same equivalence between the group in fusion and the Liberation that *Critique de la raison dialectique* drew between the group in fusion and July 14. In a passage prescient of the enthralled account of the storming of the Bastille that he wrote twelve years later, Sartre connected committed prose writing with the foundations of French citizenship and statehood: "at the same time [that Drieu la Rochelle and others were collaborating], others who, happily, far outweighed them, understood that the freedom of writing implies the freedom of the citizen. One cannot write for slaves. The art of prose is at one with the only regime in

which prose has any meaning: democracy."[143] The freedom of the citizen, and the regime of democracy founded in the French Revolution were linked, in Sartre's view, with the writing of prose during the Liberation.

Similarly, the Liberation was conceived as the repetition of the French Revolution. As Sartre wrote in “Qu’est-ce qu’un collaborateur?” the Liberation was the repetition of 1789, 1830, 1848, and 1871. To these he added the year 1944. Conceiving of the purge as the repetition of the French Revolution vacated the content of the terms by which it was represented. Jeffrey Mehlman's formulation, that "in an *unheimlich* manner, absolutely *anything* may come to occupy the positions of the repetitive structure," haunted Sartre's purge polemic. When anything could represent the revolution, even the purge tribunals, then the revolution lost its specific content. "*Everything* would thus be vulnerable to seizure by that repetitive and disruptive movement," writes Mehlman. It was this loss of the reassuring stability of content that led Sartre to theorize representation as the invisible window of reality, and demand that a prose writer commit him or herself to a principle of representing only reality. A "reality principle" designed to protect the repetitive structure of representation from being occupied by someone or something that might threaten the purity, and the fragile cohesion of the group in fusion. And a conception of language rooted in the exigency to succeed in protecting that fragile purity: "one cannot write without the intention of succeeding perfectly," wrote Sartre, in *Qu'est-*

[143] "Au même moment d'autres, qui furent heureusement le plus grand nombre, comprenaient que la liberté d'écrire implique la liberté du citoyen. On n'écrit pas pour des esclaves. L'art de la prose est solidaire du seul régime où la prose garde un sense: la démocratie." Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 82.

ce que la littérature?[144] And, by extension, one could be judged based on whether one's shot had hit the target.

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It was precisely with Sartre's conception of language as success or failure that Jean Paulhan took issue in his response to the purge debate, *De la paille et du grain*.[145] Initially, Paulhan was a member of the resistance, a founding member of the CNE, and he was even drafted into an editorship during the early stages of Sartre's pro-purge journal, *Les Temps modernes*. His first split with the CNE and with Sartre happened over the publication of the blacklist of writers, which caused him to found his own anti-purge journal, *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*. Like *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Paulhan's *De la paille et du grain* was initially published serially in *Les Cahiers de le Pléiade* from 1946 to 1949, and it was an extension and amplification of the editorial policy that Paulhan installed there. Paulhan's polemic was the exact opposite of Sartre's, and as such, he defined the other pole of the purge debate. Paulhan was against the purge where Sartre was for it. He was against commitment when Sartre demanded it. He advocated pleasure, where Sartre insisted on reality. *De la paille et du grain* was playful and ironic where *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* was didactic and densely philosophical, though Paulhan's thought was equally rigorous and deep. And most importantly, Paulhan

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[144] "...on ne saurait écrire sans le projet de réussir parfaitement." Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 31.

[145] Paulhan, in fact, was a frequent participant in the purge debate, often engaging in petty skirmishes with members of the CNE, some of which were partially reprinted in *De la paille et du grain*. He also authored another anti-purge pamphlet after *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade* folded, titled *Lettre aux directeurs de la Résistance*, a polemic against the "résistantialiste" discourse that had come to dominate French politics. See, Paulhan, *De la paille et du grain*, 131-173. See also, Paulhan, *Lettre aux directeurs de la Résistance* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1952).

reveled in the ambiguous reversibility of words, while Sartre tried to batten them down to reality. For all of these reasons, Paulhan's contribution to the purge debate valorized a conception of representation and political community vacated of all stable content, and denounced the trying and executing of writers for their deviation from what was imagined to be the stable content of France.

The key difference between Paulhan and Sartre was that Paulhan did not conceive of the purge as a repetition of the French Revolution. To Paulhan, this proposition rested on selective memory, on picking and choosing the desirable parts of France's past and willfully ignoring its moments of ignominy. There was repetition in the Occupation and the Resistance for Paulhan, but for him it was a repetition of the previous instances when Germany invaded and occupied France. Paulhan's repetitive sequence was not 1789, 1848, 1870, 1944, but rather 1873, 1914, 1940.[146] Yet even as Paulhan's dates differed from Sartre's, the effect of repetition was the very same: an *unheimlich* reversibility, ambiguity, substitutability, and undecidability. For Paulhan, this came down to the fact that arguments claiming the French homeland, the *patrie*, as their justification could be made by virtually anybody. The patrie was, in a sense, subject to reversibility and substitutability. Yesterday's collaborators were today's resisters, and vice versa. Paulhan pointed out that several members of the CNE, who considered themselves the righteous representatives of France during the purge, had made vigorous arguments against France and Frenchness during the non-conformist 1930s. Ironically, it was the collaborators Maurras, Béraud, and others who defended France and Frenchness during the 1930s,

[146] In 1873 Prussian soldiers briefly occupied French territory in order to secure payment of reparations from the Franco-Prussian War.

while the writers who became members of the CNE heaped on abuse after abuse. "What a strange adventure: France almost ruined by the men who prayed to the Goddess France every morning. It was saved (among others) by those who threw the French army into the waste basket every day."[147] For Paulhan, *patrie* was, then, a word with no lasting, stable content, a word subject to absolute substitutability.

As Paulhan did not conceive of the purge as a repetition of the French Revolution in the same manner as Sartre, he did not think that it was the writer's job to stabilize the political or linguistic risks run by repetition. Quite the opposite, in fact. Paulhan considered such efforts to be inherently flawed, destined to be washed away with the inward and outward tide of repetition. As such, the writer was under no obligation to succeed perfectly. In a short piece that was the specular reversal of Sartre's "Présentation des *Temps modernes*," entitled "Présentation des '*Cahiers de la Pléiade*'," Paulhan wrote, "It [the *Cahiers*] takes the view that a suspect text is not always without merit, and that sometimes a work comes to the great writers while they're asleep. The *Cahiers* hopes simply to bring together certain curious and apparently useless texts."[148] Paulhan employed a vocabulary that directly contradicted Sartre's. Less than perfect texts had value. It was possible for a writer to not know what he or she was doing, to fall asleep at the wheel, and still produce something worthwhile. It was not a requirement of worthwhile literature that it have utility. Paulhan was entirely prepared to publish and

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[147] "Quelle étrange aventure: la France a failli être ruinée par des hommes qui priaient chaque matin la déesse France; elle a été sauvée (entre autres) par ceux qui jetaient chaque jour l'armée française au panier." Paulhan, *De la paille et du grain,* 124-125.

[148] "Ils estiment qu'un texte douteux n'est pas toujours sans mérites, et qu'il arrive aux grands écrivains de l'heure d'avoir leurs sommeils. Simplement espèrent-ils qu'il leur sera donné de recueillir divers textes curieux et apparemment inutiles." Paulhan, "Présentation des "Cahiers de la Pléiade," *Œuvres complètes de Jean Paulhan IV* (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1969), 368.

enjoy useless literature. Moreover, it was possible for someone whose commitments were unclear to write the best literature. Continuing his appropriation and inversion of Sartre's vocabulary, Paulhan wrote: "it can easily happen that children or madmen or the totally naïve and uneducated will hit the mark the first time, or straightaway catch the sort of visionary work that so enchants us."[149] Unlike Sartre, who inveighed against writers that played with words as a child played with guns, Paulhan believed that the child's errant, irresponsible shot, released solely for the pleasure of hearing the gun's sound, sometimes hit the target dead on.

As *Les Cahiers de le Pléiade* was the reverse of *Les Temps modernes*, Paulhan's *De la paille et du grain* was, likewise, the specular opposite of Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Where Sartre demanded perfect success, Paulhan hinged his argument on the writer's right to error. Literature, for Paulhan, was language. And language was imperfect. Words were ambiguous, had multiple meanings, and sometimes they were devoid of sense entirely. But this was precisely why the language of literature enthralled the world:

> What attracts us to a language and what gives us the desire of speaking it, is not that it is perfect. It is, rather, its confusions, its errors, its baroquialisms. It's that any given word can, fortuitously (by etymology or by pun), evoke twenty other words. In short, it is that it stirs the mind...Languages are destroyed through an excess of precision.[150]

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[149] "C'est qu'il arrive très bien à des enfants ou à des fous, à des gens tout à faits naïfs ou incultes de tomber juste du premier coup, d'attraper de prime abord cette sorte de voyance qui nous enchante." Ibid.

[150] "Ce qui nous attache à une langue et nous donne envie de la parler, ce n'est pas qu'elle soit parfaite. C'est qu'elle ait ses confusions, ses erreurs, ses baroqueries. C'est qu'un mot donné y évoque, au petit bonheur (par étymologie ou calembour) vingt autres mots. Bref, c'est qu'elle agite l'esprit. Mais les langues se détruisent par un excès de précision." Paulhan, *De la paille et du grain*, 43.

Not just poetry, but all language rested on the inherent imperfection of words, which was that each word held several meanings. A writer not only had the right to be in error, it was the writer's job to make errors. Literature depended, in fact, on the exigent risk run by the writer:

> We could even ask ourselves if [error] doesn't make a writer better, if error isn't a part of literature, if we don't have an interest becoming guilty quickly, and if must not invite the writer into error and madness one more time. Because, in the end, he exposes himself for all of us, who have placed him at the frontier of discovery and disquietude.[151]

For Paulhan, the writer was in the position of having to take the risks of language – the risks of erring through language – for the rest of society, which enjoyed the fruits of the writer's risks. And because the writer's business was to take risks for all of society, it would be hypocritical for society to then demand that a writer always be correct. Imperfection was at the core of what the writer did.

The purpose of literature for Paulhan, the end toward which it tended, was not to succeed at representing reality, as it was for Sartre. If Sartre argued that the revolutionary purge would adhere to a strict reality principle, as Hollier termed it, then it might be possible to continue Hollier's Freudian analogy and claim that Paulhan argued for a principle pleasure. "What a pleasure to read…" were to first words of *De la paille et du grain*.[152] The editorial declaration of intent that Paulhan announced in *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade* even defined literature as pleasure: "By "literature" and even by "poetry" we mean what honest people have meant for all time: not necessarily arguments in

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[151] "C'est même à se demander si ça ne réussit pas à un écrivain d'être coupable, si ça ne fait pas partie de la littérature, si nous n'aurions pas intérêt à devenir rapidement coupable, et s'il ne faut pas inviter une fois pour toutes l'écrivain à l'erreur et à la folie. Puisqu'il s'expose enfin pour nous tous, qui l'avons placé a l'extrême pointe de la recherche et de l'inquiétude." Ibid. 53-54.
[152] "Quel plaisir de lire." Ibid. 9.

support of an ethical position or thesis (however attractive), but rather works capable of bringing us a certain revelation, a certain pleasure."[153] Paulhan's policy was the very opposite of Sartre's, for whom every novel was a *roman à thèse*, to be read for nothing other than its ethical position or thesis.

Conceiving of literature as a pleasure, open to error and imperfection led Paulhan to a conception of political community that was also nearly the opposite of Sartre's. While both shared the basic idea that literature built community, and that it was only able to do so through language, Paulhan's notion of community was the polar opposite of Sartre's. His was open and indeterminate at every point where Sartre's was closed and solidified. For Paulhan the community was not a somber affair, guarded by a vigilant regulatory committee. Rather, it was a festival, free and open to any and all comers: "The point I wanted to come to, is that literature is a language, and also a festival for everyone, to which everyone is invited (even if one does not always attend it)."[154] Language and literature had a democratic quality for Paulhan. They were available to the first comer, who would always be welcomed. They existed, like festivals, specifically in order invite participants inside:

> I know that language, with its baroque or surprising words, was actually seen...as a grand public rejoicing. It gives pleasure, it is willfully arbitrary and surprising, like a festival. It can be sung and danced. It even draws a crowd (because ultimately, what end does language serve if it does not become popular?).[155]

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[153] "Où l'on entende par *littérature*, et même par *poésie*, ce que les honnêtes gens ont de tout temps entendu: non pas nécessairement des arguments à l'appui d'une morale ou d'une thèse (fût-elle sympathiqe). Non, mais des œuvres capables de nous apporter certain révélation, certaine joie." Paulhan, "Présentation des "Cahiers de la Pléiade," 367.

[154] "Où je voulais en venir, c'est que la littérature aussi est un langage, et (bien qu'il n'y apparaisse pas toujours) une fête pour tout le monde, où tout le monde est invité." Paulhan, *De la paille et du grain*, 31-32.

[155] "Je vois bien que le langage, avec tous ses mots baroques ou surprenants était plutôt regardé...comme une grande réjouissance publique. Il donne du plaisir; il est volontiers arbitraire et surprenant, comme les

Language was a public thing for Paulhan, a *res publica*, and not the oligarchy that the CNE wanted. Its entire purpose was to bring people together around the shared pleasure of the play of the festival. For this very reason it was best left to the first comer, the one who wandered into the democratic space of the festival unawares, and who would always be able to enjoy in the festivities unselfconsciously, without the calculations and the reservations of a regulatory committee like the CNE. Paulhan wrote, "It's not like pyrography on the bark of a willow tree, or embroidery on tarlatan, which it's to avoid if you don't know how to do it. Rather, it's like love, or dancing, it's better if you don't know how to do it well yet."[156] Furthermore, because it was open to any and all comers, the democratic festival of language should be a little bit dangerous. It was right that there were inherent risks. They should be invited, courted, and fostered, not protected against, as the democratic festival of language needed the threat of danger in order to keep people interested. The same was therefore true of literature conceived as a language: "And if it is true that literature is a festival, nobody would want it to be a festival without danger. It is a festival where a bomb might blow up in your face, and which could end (as with all true festivals) with the cut of a knife."[157] Paulhan's conception of literature, of literature as a language, and language as a *res publica* thus pulled together several of his

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fêtes. Il peut se chanter et se danser. Il réunit même les foules (car enfin, si le langage ne devient pas populaire, à quoi sert-il?)." Ibid. 12-13.

[156] "Ce n'est pas comme la pyrogravure sur écorce de saule ou la broderie sur tarlatane, qu'il vaut mieux ne pas faire si on ne sait pas. C'est plutôt comme l'amour, et le danse, qu'il vaut mieux faire, même si l'on ne sait pas encore très bien." Ibid. 32.

[157] "Et s'il est exact que la littérature soit une fête, personne ne voudrait qu'elle fût une fête sans danger. C'est une fête où il arrive qu'un pétard vous saute aux yeux, et qui peut s'achever (comme toutes le véritables fêtes) par des coups de couteau." Ibid. 53.

underlying metaprinciples: here the festival was conceived as giving pleasure because it was arbitrary, surprising, and dangerous.

Michael Syrotinski argues that *De la paille et du grain* was itself the very enactment of its theory, that it simultaneously produced a conception of community based on linguistic undecidability as it argued for the undecidability of the guilt of collaborationist writers. Syrotinski writes, "Paulhan's text only really begins to come into focus if the explicit political discussion is read as a version of the fundamental indifference informing linguistic analysis."[158] As the historical *patrie* discussed above was subject to reversibility and substitutability because of its repetition, so too was the word *patrie* also subject to these forces. The terms that Paulhan used to characterize the French *patrie*, whose undecidability, and substitutability derived from the fact that absolutely anything was able to occupy to position of the *patrie*, which is to say, from the fact that the *patrie* was subject to repetition, were the very same that he used to describe the situation of collaboration before and after the war: yesterday's patriots were today's collaborators. But, as Syrotinski argues, this undecidability made it impossible to determine the innocence or guilt of collaboration. Paulhan thematized this undecidability with a cliché:

> Here is the point that I wanted to come to: as long as they have not decreed that opinions exist that make one guilty, and condemn one to death, the pacifists of 1914 have no right to show such aggression to the pacifists of 1940. Nor do the executed of 1915 (if I might put it this way) look down from on high at the executed of 1945. From the simple point of view of the *patrie*, they're the same: it's six of one, a half dozen of the other [*blanc bonnet et bonnet blanc*].[159]

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[158] Syrotinski, *Defying Gravity*, 118.

[159] "Voici où je voulais en venir: tant qu'ils n'auront pas décrété qu'il existe des opinions coupables, et dignes de mort, les pacifistes de 1914 n'ont pas le droit de se montrer si agressifs pour les pacifistes de

The reversibility of the cliché "bonnet blanc et blanc bonnet" mirrored the reversibility of the *patrie*, from whose point of view, both were the entirely the same. Because of the repetition of the term *patrie*, no one could claim to be the true patriot, which is to say, no one could claim to be the true representative of France. In this linguistic confusion, it was impossible to tell who was a patriot, and who was not. For Paulhan, even the most perfectly aimed shot could not be guaranteed of hitting its target.

Paulhan did, however, offer one suggestion of who might be the true representative of France, almost as an afterthought and without much elaboration:

> Ah, I would like to be a Jew, to say with more authority than I have that I have pardoned France, once and for all, for its inability to defend me. I would like to be a Jew to work with more force than I have at returning to France all of its voices, its entire voice. I would like to be a Jew to become the best of France.[160]

This astonishing statement, like the "*blanc bonnet et bonnet blanc*," simultaneously collapsed the linguistic into the political, and the political into the linguistic, as Syrotinski suggests. Thus, it must be read ambivalently, as both having both a linguistic and a political edge at the same time. Paulhan's conception of France subject to repeated invasions and occupations, and constantly reversing definitions of collaboration and resistance meant that there was no stable core to France in 1948. France was a *patrie* without patriots, a community with nothing around which to commune. Here the figure of the Jew stood in for the representative of France by giving it voice. There were two

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1940. Ni les fusillés de 1915 (si je peux dire) de regarder de si haut les fusillés de 1945. Du simple point de vue de la patrie, ils se valent: c'est blanc bonnet et bonnet blanc." Paulhan, *De la paille et du grain*, 116.

[160] "Ah, je voudrais être juif, pour dire - avec plus d'autorité que je n'en puis avoir - que j'ai pardonné à la France, une fois pour toutes, son impuissance à me défendre. Je voudrais être juif pour travailler - avec plus de force que je n'en ai - à rendre à la France toutes ses voix, toute sa voix. Je voudrais être juif pour devenir le meilleur des Français." Ibid. 58.

reasons why the Jew should be able to represent France for Paulhan. The first reason concerned the ability of the Jew to forgive France. "I would like to be a Jew to be able to say with more authority than I have that I have pardoned France for its inability to defend me." This called upon the figure of the Jew as the true victim of WWII, of the Occupation, and of collaboration. That is, this called upon the Jew as an actually existing historical-political figure, with more authority than Paulhan (who was a member of the Resistance) to forgive France of its sins. But the second reason why Paulhan claimed that the Jew should represent France referred to the linguistic argument made within *De la paille et du grain* about the *patrie*. "I would like to be a Jew to work with more force than I have at returning to France all of its voices, its entire voice." In the context of *De la paille et du grain*, the restoration of France's voice referred specifically to giving voice to a *patrie* that had lost its voice through the repeated seizure and re-seizure of role of spokesperson for the *patrie*. That the Jew was the only figure who was able to return to France its voice depended, for Paulhan, on the emptiness of the *patrie*. For the Jew was the paradigmatic figure lacking a *patrie*, a figure perpetually without a homeland. The Jew was the only one capable of speaking for a *patrie* emptied of its content, because the Jew represented a people detached from its *patrie*. In Paulhan's logic, the Jew was able to represent France precisely because France was incapable of being represented by the French.

Between the cliché, "*blanc bonnet et bonnet blanc*," and the statement "I would like to be a Jew," Paulhan brought together the question of who was representative of France and the question of who was allowed to represent France in writing into a

homology with the question of how linguistic representation operates. All four were, from Paulhan's point of view, the same thing. The priority that Sartre tried to establish for certain writers over others, and for certain ways of writing over others, was impossible to decide. Thus, Paulhan derived the opposite lesson from the formulation of repetition, in which absolutely anything may come to occupy the positions of the repetitive structure. Sartre saw in repetition the need to secure the *patrie* against the chance that someone undesirable would wrest it for themselves. Paulhan, by contrast, saw in repetition the inability of anybody at all to secure the *patrie*.

On the one side of the purge debate was the idealist Sartre, who believed that the perfect community was possible by way of committing language strictly to reality, and who was willing to single out and condemn those who stood in the way of achieving this community. On the other side was the realistic Paulhan, for whom such perfection was impossible, and who believed that community fused only over the messy yet pleasurable imperfection of language. Here, in the field of the purge debate, the ravages of repetition produced an idealism that justified itself by reality, and a realism that based its claims on pleasure. Sartre conceived of the purge as the repetition of the French Revolution (1789, 1830, 1848, March 1871, August 1944), Paulhan conceived of World War II as the repetition of previous German occupations of France (1873, 1914, 1940). Collapsing the two questions of the crisis of representation (who was representative of France and how does linguistic representation operate) under the unifying problematic of repetition led both to the indeterminacy of the *patrie*. Sartre's response was to fix the *patrie*'s

indeterminacy to a reality principle. Paulhan's response was to let the *patrie*'s indeterminacy sway back and forth through a pleasure principle.

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It was between these two poles in the field of the purge debate that Blanchot intervened. Blanchot joined Paulhan in the critique of Sartrean commitment. Like Paulhan, Blanchot was deeply suspicious of Sartre's desire to affect material political relations through language. To Blanchot, as to Paulhan, language was far too volatile to be used as an instrument of political engagement without serious precaution. But unlike Paulhan, Blanchot did not think that language's sole use was pleasure. Rather, language was the universal condition of all political existence for Blanchot, and as such language was neither as pleasurable as Paulhan conceived it to be, nor did it have the hard and fast reality that Sartre hoped for. Blanchot critiqued the way that Sartrean commitment both overstepped the inherent limits of language, and failed to recognize language's true political register.

Blanchot also united the questions of the crisis of representation by figuring the purge as repetition, but for him it was the repetition of the massacres meted out to revolutionaries in the aftermath of revolution: 1794, 1851, May 1871, October 1944. In this repetitive sequence (Thermidor, the coup of Louis Napoléon, the massacre of the Commune, and the purge), language was neither that which secured reality, nor that which gave pleasure. Rather, for Blanchot, language was the compulsion toward death that united all communities. If Hollier drew on Freud in describing Sartre's conception

of language as a reality principle, and if Paulhan's conception of language might be called a pleasure principle, then Blanchot's "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" can be said to have articulated the death drive of the *patrie*.

Before publishing his major intervention in the purge debate, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" in the journal *Critique*, Blanchot was an occasional contributor to both Sartre's *Les Temps modernes*, and Paulhan's *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*. Despite the impartiality that participating in both journals might convey, Blanchot was decidedly closer to Paulhan's position than he was to Sartre's through 1946 and 1947. His contributions to *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade* followed Paulhan's editorial policy of giving precedence to art over reality, though they lacked the polemic edge of Paulhan's pieces.[161] Indeed, Blanchot reserved his first polemical contributions to the purge debate for *Les Temps modernes*, where he published three essays at the same time that he was contributing to *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, and each of which ran counter to the Sartrean editorial policy of commitment articulated in the "Présentation des *Temps modernes*." The first was a positive review of Jean Paulhan's *récit*, "Aytré qui perd l'habitude," titled, "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré," published in June 1946.[162] The second was the more pointedly anti-Sartrean, "Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi," from April 1947.[163] And the third – which appeared immediately before "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" – was a long essay on Sade, "À la rencontre de Sade," written in October 1947.[164] Yet it is not the scandal of these essays having appeared in *Les Temps modernes*, but rather their content

[161] These contributions included, for instance, a short passage from the novel *Les Très-Haut*. See Blanchot, "En Bonne Voie," *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade* 1 (April 1946): 141-151.
[162] Blanchot, "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré," *Les Temps modernes* 9 (June, 1946): 1576-1593.
[163] Blanchot, "Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi," *Les Temps modernes* 19 (April, 1947): 1304-1317.
[164] Blanchot, "A la Rencontre de Sade," *Les Temps modernes* 25 (October, 1947): 577-612.

that is historically significant. While none was a fully developed purge polemic in its own right, these pieces published in *Les Temps modernes* explicitly responded to the thought of both Sartre and Paulhan, by taking up the questions of the crisis of representation. As such, they laid the implicit foundation of "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," in which neither Sartre nor Paulhan appeared.

"Le Paradoxe d'Aytré," which appeared just two months after the first issue of *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, was Blanchot's attempt to answer the linguistic question of the crisis of representation: how does representation operate? At this point, however, in the summer of 1946, Blanchot answered this question without reference to the purge. "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré" considered linguistic representation through a comparative analysis of Pauhlan's "Aytré qui perd l'habitude," and the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. Between these two, Blanchot found a correspondence in which both Paulhan and Mallarmé thought that all language tended toward the poetic, and that all language paradoxically depended on the absence of the thing represented. Citing Mallarmé's "Crise de vers," Blanchot expressed the problematic simply: "I say: a flower!" and in order for this statement to be intelligible, it is necessary for the real flower to be removed, displaced, cast out of the scene, and replaced by the word flower.[165] What was crucial for both Paulhan and Mallarmé, in Blanchot's view, was the movement of absence followed immediately by presence. In the first phase of the movement, the power of creation enabled by the word, also pushed the thing away, made the thing absent, so that the word could exist on its own. This was the "power of representation and of signification which

[165] "Je dis: une fleur!" Blanchot, "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré," 1580.

creates a distance, an emptiness between things and their names, and prepares the absence where creation takes form."[166] In this sense, absence was at the foundation of language as words were only intelligible to the extent that they put the things they represented at a distance. Indeed, words were made possible by this absence, for they would not be necessary if the thing itself was present (in which case it would suffice to communicate entirely by means of pointing one's finger). Here Blanchot used Paulhan's *récit* to move beyond the terms of *De la paille et du grain*: absence was the necessary precondition of language, rather than its effect, as Paulhan believed of language's indeterminacy and substitutability.

With the second part of this movement however, Blanchot went further still than Paulhan, by arguing that when language became a part of thought, when it became consciousness itself, then it replaced this absence created by the word, with the materiality of the word itself. This thing was made of letters and ink when written down, or sound and rhythm when spoken. It was all of the tactile, material qualities of the word.

> Language must, in the moment when it allies itself to the movement of consciousness, to consciousness' ability to be present to things in holding them infinitely at a distance, when it allies itself to consciousness' right to know by the nothingness of what it knows, then language must also ally itself to the contrary of consciousness, to a thing, to a solidity, to a pure and simple material presence.[167]

Thus, Blanchot argued that language became a solid presence at the very instant it seemed to vanish behind an absence. By the simple movement of passing through

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[166] "...pouvoir de représentation et de signification qui, créant une distance, un vide, entre les choses et leur nom, prépare l'absence où la création prend forme." Ibid.

[167] "Il faut que le langage, dans le moment où il s'apparénte le plus au mouvement de la conscience, à son pouvoir d'être présente aux choses en les tenant infiniment à distance, à son droit de connaître par le néant de ce qu'elle connaît, s'apparente aussi le plus au contraire de la conscience, à une chose, à un bloc, à une pure et simple présence matérielle." Ibid. 1581.

consciousness, through the experience of thought, language became a thing. The absence on which language formerly rested became the heavy, handy things that composed the ordinary discourse of lived reality.

Blanchot illustrated this point through a reading of Paulhan's "Aytré qui perd l'habitude." The main character in this *récit*, a soldier named Aytré, keeps a journal recording each day's mundane events while he marches with the Fourth Colonial Division through Madagascar. Eventually, Aytré loses the ability to describe these mundane events anymore, and suddenly begins to describe not the day's banalities, but "hairstyles, judgments on colonization, strange landscapes," with heretofore unknown literary brio.[168] For Blanchot, the question raised by this outburst of language was, what lack in Aytré did this effusion of speech come to fill? Blanchot's answer was that language came to him in order to fill a fundamental lack within his consciousness, but it exited his consciousness with the full weight of a real, material thing:

> The paradox of Aytré is that speech comes to him as the response to a fundamental lack, and at the same time, speech itself is attained through this lack, sent back through Aytré to its beginning (or, one might equally say, condemned to end), and thus speech is made possible by what puts it in contestation, by what makes it impossible.[169]

This paradox was the paradox of language itself, that it was both substantive, and ineffable. For Blanchot, its ineffability came from the absence into which words dispersed the things they purported to represent. Its substantiality came from having passed through, and having been spoken by a historically situated consciousness in the

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[168] "Cheveux tressés, jugements sur la colonisation, paysages étranges." Ibid. 1588.

[169] "Le paradoxe d'Aytré est qu'en lui la parole vient comme la réponse à un manque fondamental, mais qu'en plus elle est elle-même atteinte par ce manque, renvoyée par lui à son commencement (ou, aussi bien, condamnée à finir) et ainsi rendue possible par ce qui la met en contestation, par ce qui la rend impossible." Ibid. 1592.

real world. In this way, Blanchot answered not only the question of how linguistic representation operated, but also the question of how it became significant within a specified historical context. Yet Blanchot managed to answer the latter question without yet conceding such historical significance to the political, to which Jean-Paul Sartre insisted that any article published in his *Les Temps modernes* commit.

While "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré" responded to the question of how linguistic representation operated through a consideration of one of Paulhan's *récits*, Blanchot's second contribution to *Les Temps modernes*, "Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi," attacked the Sartrean theory of commitment directly. Blanchot made a step-by-step critique of commitment by reviewing *Temps et roman*, a work of literary criticism by one of Sartre's disciples, Jean Pouillon, which advanced Sartre's argument about the necessity of the writer committing himself to reality. Blanchot disagreed with Pouillon at almost every turn. "Le roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi" was a relentlessly negative review: Pouillon "encountered more obstacles than he admits," Pouillon's book was flawed because it did not question its own "paradoxical character," there are things over which Pouillon "passes hastily," and "problems that he neglects," Pouillon treats Balzac in "a slightly specious manner."

These objections were, however, epiphenomenal to Blanchot's main point of contention, which was that novels were, first of all, works of fiction. To commit to the novel would be committing to fiction, even as Sartre and Pouillon believed it was committing to reality. No amount of philosophizing would be able to circumvent this irreducible fact.

> The novel is a work in which fictitious events and characters are realized in words through a double act of writing and reading, each one incommensurable to the other. That this fiction justifiably needs words to realize itself, and that outside of words it has no specific means of manifesting itself, is sufficient to demonstrate the extent to which fiction is the novel's proper reality.[170]

To be sure, Blanchot's version of fiction took on a reality proper to itself, but this reality was the reality of words, which required the passage through consciousness in order to manifest as reality. This was Blanchot's point in "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré," which he painstakingly recapitulated in "Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi," as if to remind Sartre himself that he published the former piece. For Pouillon, as for Sartre, there was a continuum between the writer, the words of the novel, and the reader. Together they established a circuit of reality. But for Blanchot no such continuum existed, there was always an absolute distance between one subject and the other, the distance of two separate consciousnesses who will never meet on the plane of reality.

> Even if it is recognized that the relations with the other are unmediated, they are such that they only allow us to meet the other as other, forever different from us. It is in the novel alone that we are able 'to put ourselves in the place of the characters'; only the reader can allow himself to slip into an existence which is not his, and thanks to the fascinating emptiness that reading creates, acquiesce to live outside himself, as if he were no longer anything but the other.[171]

For Sartre and Pouillon it was the act of sharing reality that established community, the fusion between two people. For Blanchot the contrary was true. It was in fiction that

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[170] "Le roman est une œuvre où les événements, les personnages, en tant que fictifs, se réalisent sur les mots par un acte double, en perpétuel porte à faux, celui de l'écriture et celui de la lecture. Que cette fiction ait justement besoin des mots pour se réaliser, qu'en dehors d'eux elle n'ait aucun moyen spécifique de se manifester, cela suffirait à faire comprendre combien la fiction est la réalité propre du roman." Blanchot, "Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi," 1311-1312.

[171] "Même si l'on reconnaît que les relations avec autrui sont des relations immédiates, elles sont telles qu'elles ne nous font rejoindre autrui que comme étant autre, à jamais différent de nous. C'est dans le roman et le roman seul que l'on peut 'se mettre dans la peau des personnages'; seul le lecteur se laisse glisser dans une existence qui n'est pas la sienne et, grâce au vide fascinant que crée la lecture, accepte de vivre en dehors de soi, comme s'il n'était plus rien qu'autrui." Ibid. 1315.

communion was established: communion between the reader and the characters, between the reader and the writer, and between the characters and the writer. This was, as Blanchot put it, not reality, but rather the fiction that was the proper reality of the novel. It was a secondary reality, made of the very same stuff as the material words that Blanchot discussed in "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré," which required passage through consciousness, and through lived experience in order to become a part of material reality.

To commit oneself to writing was thus to commit to fiction rather than to reality. It involved a bit of deception. Pouillon called those novels that established the circuit of reality between the writer, the characters of the novel, and the reader, "with-novels," rather like Heidegger's *mitsein*. For Blanchot, these involved deception more than any other novels. Blanchot wrote, "If the 'with-novel' invites us into a kind of relation in which it makes us live with someone other than ourselves, in exactly the same relation as we have with ourselves, a fundamental deception lies waiting to be discovered there, for existence presents nothing of the sort to us."[172] If the writing of the novel required a bit of deception, then the writer was by necessity a bit deceitful. For Blanchot, however, this was the "deceit essential to art, and to the art of the novel in particular."[173] Blanchot declared:

> The novel is a work of bad faith. Bad faith on the part of the novelist who believes in his characters and who at the same time sees himself behind them, who ignores them, who realizes them as strangers, and who finds the means to dispose of them in the words of which he is the master, without ever ceasing to believe that words escape him. Bad faith on the part of the reader who plays with the imaginary, who plays at being the hero he is not, who plays at taking fiction

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[172] "Si 'le roman-avec' nous invite à un genre de rapport où il nous faut vivre avec quelqu'un d'autre, exactement comme celui-ci vit avec soi, il faut bien y découvrir une tricherie de principe, car l'existence ne nous propose rien de semblable." Ibid.

[173] "Tricherie essentielle à l'art, à l'art romanesque en particulier." Ibid.

> for reality, and finally who, in this enchantment that holds existence at a distance, finds the possibility of living this existence with meaning.[174]

Bad faith was not a bad thing for Blanchot. On the contrary, it was preferable to commitment, which naïvely believed that it committed to reality through literature, but which succeeded merely in deceiving itself as to the nature of both reality and literature. Bad faith, on the other hand, held no illusions about the fiction it created. It was therefore able to realize a connection between people at the level of fiction, which was, in the summer of 1947, after the experience of the occupation, the Vichy regime, and the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals, the only level at which such a connection remained possible for Blanchot.

Blanchot's third, and final, contribution to *Les Temps modernes* was "À la rencontre de Sade," was published in October 1947, immediately before "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" was published in *Critique*. Unlike "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré" and "Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi," it did not respond to the polemics, or the polemicists of the purge debate. It stood apart from the purge debate, as an independent consideration of the entire *œuvre* of Sade.[175] Blanchot's explicit concern was with neither the mechanics of representation, nor with the politics of commitment, nor even with the formation of community, even though all were important subtexts. Nor was he concerned with the scandalous libertinage that Sade described. Rather, Blanchot was

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[174] "Le roman est une œuvre de mauvaise foi, mauvaise foi de la part du romancier qui croit en ses personnages et cependant se voit derrière eux, qui les ignore, les réalise comme inconnus et troube dans les mots dont il est maître le moyen de disposer d'eux sans cesser de croire qu'ils lui échappent. Mauvaise foi du lecteur qui joue avec l'imaginaire, qui joue à être ce héros qu'il n'est pas, qui joue à prendre pour réel ce qui est fiction et finalement s'y laisse prendre et, dans cet enchantement qui tient l'existence écartée, retroube une possibilité de vivre le sens de cette existence." Ibid. 1316.

[175] If "À la rencontre de Sade" had an interlocutor, it was Pierre Klossowski's *Sade, mon prochain*. See Klossowski, *Sade, mon prochain* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1947).

interested in what he called Sade's logic, which consisted of turning one dialectical term into the other's condition of possibility. For Sade, "the basis of...imperfect crimes is an impossible crime, of which the imagination alone is able to contemplate."[176] By this logic, the latter, impossible crime was a perfect, dreamt-of crime whose very inexistence made possible the existence of the many lesser, imperfect crimes that abounded throughout the work of Sade. This paradox, in which the impossible was the very condition of possibility for real crime, advanced the logic Blanchot offered in "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré." There, Blanchot suggested that the absence at the heart of language made all communication possible. In "À la rencontre de Sade," Blanchot extended this logic beyond the sphere of language to thought itself. The characters in Sade's novels always sought to approach a crime beyond the petty ones with which they busied themselves. They always strove to exceed the crimes that they were actually capable of committing. If they murdered someone, their depravity drove them to desire a murder that the victim would endure perpetually, and infinitely. This impossible, imaginary murder incited Sade's characters to commit ever more ordinary, possible murders. Without it, they could not have continued to commit any crimes at all. In this way, the impossible crime became the condition of possibility for the possible crime.

This logic, in which one dialectical term became the other's condition of possibility, informed Blanchot's key concept in "À la rencontre de Sade": the law. This was the exact opposite of the ordinary conceptions of natural law and positive law. Traditionally, natural law is held to be a law emanating from a universal natural

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[176] "Le fondement de...crimes imparfaits est un crime impossible dont seule l'imagination peut rendre compte." Blanchot, "À la rencontre de Sade," 597.

authority. A common example of natural law is cited in the United States Declaration of independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Positive law, by contrast, describes those laws conceived and enacted by people, such as contract law, for example. Both conceptions of the law share, however, the belief that subjects exist anterior to the law. Blanchot, on the other hand, drawing on Sade, viewed the law as a subject-forming discourse: subjects did not exist until they were made subject to the law. The law of god, for example, served to demonstrate the way in which the law could be construed to be wholly determinative of subjectivity. If one believed that all men were created by god, and therefore subject to god’s law, then one would also have to accept that all subjectivity was determined by god’s law. To Sade, this law indicated that humanity was never actually free, insofar as humanity was always subject to god’s law. Sade’s goal was to find a way to get outside, or beyond the law, in order to reach a place of pure freedom. For Sade, the only way to accomplish this move beyond the law was transgression. But during the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals, Blanchot was interested in Sade’s attempt to move beyond the law, and establish a new order of pure freedom because of the way that it paralleled Sartrean commitment’s desire to establish a new national community purged of the corrupting influence of collaborators.

In Blanchot's understanding of Sade, the law, in seeking to protect, actually ended up inciting transgression. In "À la rencontre de Sade," on the contrary, transgression was not possible until there was law. Like the impossible crime that drove the libertine to commit ever greater crimes, the law became the condition of possibility for its own

violation. The law was an inaccessible, unreachable limit, like the impossible: "Nothing arrests the law, because there is nothing higher than it, and it is therefore always above me. This is why, even if it serves me, it oppresses me."[177] Even the sovereign was subject to the law, since it was through the law that his sovereignty existed: "the Sovereign is only the sovereign, even if the law helps him to tyrannize the weak, entirely by an authority created in the name of the weak. It is only by substituting the false bond of a contract for the force of a single man that the sovereign becomes master."[178] The sovereign only "incarnated" the power of the law. The Sadean figure was driven to surpass this most high law, in order to achieve freedom. To the Sadean figure, the law was an unnatural fetter placed on the natural freedom of mankind. Only the power to commit the most deplorable transgressions of the law gave one access to the space beyond the law. This power was the energy of the Sadean figure. "In a world denatured by law, [Power] creates a haven where the law is silenced, a closed space where legal sovereignty is ignored rather than combated."[179] For Blanchot, the law operated with the same logic as the impossible, it was an unreachable limit that created the very possibility of transgression, even if this transgression was always thwarted by the law's inaccessibility. If there were no law, transgression would not need to exist.

Blanchot argued that the inaccessible law drove Sade's libertines not just to horrific transgressions, but also to the absurd repetition of transgression. The compulsion

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[177] "Rien n'arrête la loi, parce qu'il n'y a rien au-dessus d'elle et qu'elle est dès lors toujours au-dessus de moi." Ibid. 585.

[178] "Le Souverain n'est que le souverain, car même si la loi l'aide à écraser les faibles, c'est tout de même par une autorité créée au nom des faibles, c'est tout de même, et substituant à la force de l'homme seul le faux lien d'un practe, qu'il devient le maître." Ibid.

[179] "D'un monde dénaturé par la loi, elle se crée une enclave où la loi fait silence, un lieu clos où la souveraineté légale est ignorée plutôt que combattue." Ibid. 586.

to exceed the law drove Sade's figures to repeat their massacres two and three times a day, murdering four and five hundred victims at a time. These victims were stripped of all their individual qualities, reduced to the absence of their personhood before they were ever killed, in the same way that Mallarmé suggested that the word flower eliminated the actual flower. "The repetitions are infinite, and fabulous," wrote Blanchot.[180] The absurdity into which the crimes descended as a consequence of their repetition had the effect of evacuating them of all content. The victims' lives were rendered meaningless by being placed into the repetitive structure of the massacre:

> In these gigantic scenes of death, those who die have already lost even the smallest bit of reality, who, if they disappear under this derisive facility, were annihilated by an act of total and absolute destruction beforehand, are not actually there, and they only die to bear witness to this kind of original cataclysm, to this destruction which is not only for them, but for everyone else as well.[181]

As repetition evacuated words of their meaning, so too was it able to evacuate a life of its meaning, long before the victim's body actually expired. The libertine attempting to accede beyond the law thus lived alone in a desert: "the beings that he meets there have less reality than mere things, they are less than shadows, and, in tormenting them, in destroying them, it is not their lives that he seizes, rather he verifies their nothingness."[182] Blanchot cited a long passage from the *Les 120 jours de Sodom*, in which Sade described the women who will be the victims of the libertines, as beyond rescue, and already dead.

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[180] "Les répétitions sont infinies, fabuleuses." Ibid. 595.

[181] "Dans ces mises à mort gigantesques, ceux qui meurent n'ont déjà plus la moindre réalité, que, s'ils disparaissent avec cette facilité dérisoire, c'est qu'ils ont été préalablement annihilés par un acte de destruction totale et absolue, qu'ils ne sont là et qu'ils ne meurent que pour porter témoignage de cette espèce de cataclyseme originel, de cette destruction qui ne vaut pas seulement pour eux mais pour tous les autres." Ibid.

[182] "Désert; les être qu'il y rencontre sont moins que des choses, moins que des ombres et, en les tourmentant, en les détruisant, ce n'est pas de leur vie qu'il s'empare, mais c'est leur néant qu'il vérifie." Ibid.

"This must be taken literally," Blanchot wrote, "these women are already dead, eliminated, locked away in the absolute emptiness of a bastille into which existence no longer penetrates, and where their lives only serve to manifest this quality of "already dead" with which their lives are linked."[183] By being subjected to the dispersive effect of repetition, the women who will be the victims of Sade's libertines, entered into a space of emptiness, where they were present only by virtue of the absence of their lives, like Mallarmé's flower.

For Blanchot, Sade's logic was the logic of the attempt to surpass the law through repetition. Where the law gave meaning to people's lives, and determined their subjectivity, the repetition of transgressing the law evacuated those lives of all meaning, and hence the law was denuded of its tyrannical authority. Freedom could only exist in the vacancy established by repetition. Here repetition was an attempt to gain access to a zone beyond the law, where the law no longer held sway over existence. As Blanchot wrote in "À la rencontre de Sade," "This is also why Sade was able to recognize himself in the Revolution, only in the measure to which, during the passage from one law to another, it sometimes represented the possibility of a regime without law."[184] On this point Blanchot quoted Sade himself: "In order to annul its old laws, it is obligated to establish a revolutionary regime in which there is no law."[185] Repetition became a means

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[183] "Cela doit être entendu au sens propre: elles sont déjà mortes, supprimées, enfermées dans le vide absolue d'une bastille où l'existence n'entre plus et où leur vie ne sert qu'à rendre sensible ce caractère de "déjà mort" avec lequel elle se confond." Ibid.

[184] "C'est pourquoi aussi Sade n'a pu se reconnaître dans la Révolution que dans la mesure où, passage d'une loi à une autre, elle a pendant quelque temps représenté la possibilité d'un régime sans loi." Ibid. 585.

[185] "Pour abroger ses anciennes lois, il est obligé d'établir un régime révolutionnaire où il n'y a pas de loi." Ibid. 586.

of vacating old laws of their efficacy, and clearing a space within which to establish new bonds for the community.

Blanchot's work on Sade laid the foundation for his intervention in the debate over the purge of writers and intellectuals. Blanchot's intervention was a critique of Sartrean commitment's desire to found a new national community beyond the law, its desire for a community of pure freedom, removed of any cancerous collaborators. Sade's quotation about the necessity of creating a society in which there are no laws at all in order to leave an old order of society behind, might equally have been applied to the purge. Here Blanchot drew on Sade to illustrate that Sartre's desire for a pure national community could never be achieved through commitment's attempts to excise only a few traitors. Rather, real change could only be affected through the total annihlation of the old order. In order to establish the pure community that Sartre desire, Blanchot argued that a wave of revolutionary force would have to sweep through France, carrying everyone away with it, including Sartre's committed writers.

Why This Woman?

"À la rencontre de Sade" may not have been an explicit purge polemic, but it dovetailed with the trope of repetition that circulated throughout the writing of Sartre and Paulhan, and its discussion of the law formed a crucial third term in between the absence of language analyzed in "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré," and the notion of a community through fiction from "Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi." In "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," the first half of which was published immediately after "À la rencontre de Sade," in

November 1947, Blanchot used this logic to explain the purge, and to intervene in the purge debate. But while Blanchot's contribution to the purge debate was couched in the same terms, and used the same tropes as Sartre and Paulhan's, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" was a radical departure from their understandings of language, representation, and repetition's relation to politics. In this way "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" was more than just a critique of the political efficacy of commitment. It also shifted the terms of the debate away from the possibility of using literature to affect politics, to a consideration of the implicit collusion between literature and politics – that is to say, to the very literary quality of politics itself. Unlike Sartrean commitment, which sought to affect material political relations through the linguistic realm of literature, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" established that the political and the linguistic were one and the same. Blanchot's critique of Sartrean commitment was that if one wished to engage in the political through the literary, one must limit one's engagement strictly to the literary.

Just as both Sartre and Paulhan's purge polemics were situated by their association with *Les Temps modernes* and *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade* respectively, so was "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" partially defined by its institutional location. "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" was situated elsewhere in the landscape of French intellectual politics than his previous essays. Blanchot published it in the journal, *Critique*, which had largely abstained from engaging in the open politics of the purge debate. To be sure, *Critique* contested the editorial policy of commitment of *Les Temps modernes*, but by no means was it as openly polemical as *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*. Furthermore, even though *Critique* was founded by Blanchot's friend, Georges Bataille,

and even thought Blanchot was a member of the editorial board, his choice to publish his major intervention in the purge debate with a predominantly anti-polemical journal signified more than just a filial connection. It placed "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" at a distance from the open polemics of Sartre and Paulhan. It was recognizable as a purge polemic from the very first sentence (which called into question the very validity of Sartre's question, what is literature?), yet it was also immediately recognizable as a different kind of purge polemic, for it neither justified nor condemned the purge in explicit terms. While "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" had all the hallmarks of the purge debate (it was clearly articulated within the crisis of representation and it took up the standard questions of who was representative of France, and how linguistic representation worked), Blanchot's answers to these questions however, distinguished his the rest of the purge polemics.

"La Littérature et le droit à la mort" drew together all of the threads that Blanchot unraveled in the essays he published in *Les Temps modernes*, gathering them together into a single, unified whole, which together formed his contribution to the purge debate. The absence of words that Blanchot elaborated in "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré," the community through fiction elaborated in "Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi," and the repetitive transgression of the law from "À la rencontre de Sade" all came together in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort." Unlike Sartre, who saw the Liberation as the repetition of the French Revolution, and unlike Paulhan who saw the Occupation as the repetition of previous moments in French history when France had been occupied by Germany, Blanchot saw the purge as the repetition of Thermidor; his chronology included those

moments when France had undergone a revolutionary counter-reaction and a purge: 1794, 1851, May 1871, October 1944.

For Blanchot, literature was the fulfillment of revolution, and revolution necessarily ended in a Thermidorian coup. Literature and revolution were analogous, insofar as they both pass from nothing to everything, in a movement of pure creation. For Blanchot, literature and revolution shared the same power of creation:

> Revolutionary action is in every aspect analogous to the action embodied in literature: the passage from nothing to everything, the affirmation of the absolute as event and of each event as the absolute. Revolutionary action explodes with the same power and the same facility as the writer who only needs to line up a few words side by side in order to change the world.[186]

Moreover, the writer was analogous to the revolutionary for Blanchot, not because the writer incited revolution, as Sartre argued, but because the writer's activity was the same as revolutionary action: "Every writer who, by the very fact of writing, is not driven to think: I am the revolution, freedom alone makes me write, is not actually writing."[187] The writer who enjoys this experience of literature as revolution "can never completely recover, because he has known history as his own history and his own freedom as universal freedom."[188]

At the same time, writing, like revolution, necessarily led to terror for Blanchot. Writing also shared with revolution "the same demand for purity, and the certainty that

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[186] "L'action révolutionaire est en tous points analogue à l'action telle que l'incarne la littérature: passage dur rien à tout, affirmation de l'absolu comme événement et de chaque événement comme absolu. L'action révolutionaire se déchaîne avec la même puissance et la même facilité que l'écrivain qui pour changer le monde n'a besoin que d'aligner quelques mots." Blanchot, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," 309.
[187] "Tout écrivain qui, par le fait même d'écrire, n'est pas conduit à penser: je suis la révolution, seule la liberté me fait écrire, en réalité n'écrit pas." Ibid. 311.
[188] "Celui qui l'a connu ne peut tout à fait revenir, car il a connu l'histoire comme sa propre histoire et sa propre liberté comme la liberté universelle." Ibid. 309.

everything it does has absolute value, that it is not just any action performed to bring about desirable and respectable goal, but that it is the ultimate goal, the Final Act."[189] Such desires brought about the Terror. For Blanchot the Reign of Terror was nothing less than this demand for purity made public, without exception. The Reign of Terror was absolute in the very same way that literature was absolute. Such was the logic of both literature and the Terror's universality that it could broach no material interference. Both drove forward to a pure ideality: literature toward the pure word absent of its referent, like Mallarmé's flower, and Terror toward a pure community, absent of any real person who might impugn its purity.

But the examples Blanchot cited of the victims of Terror were not Camille Desmoulins or Georges Danton. Rather, Blanchot identified Robespierre and Saint-Just as the victims of the Terror. For Blanchot, Terror was not just the reign of the Committee of Public Safety. Terror was also the Thermidorian Coup that ousted the Committee, and executed its members. Robespierre and Saint-Just's deaths were inevitable, argued Blanchot, because the freedom achieved through Terror meant that everyone was subject to the death that Terror implied. "When the blade falls on Saint-Just or on Robespierre, in a sense it hits no one. The virtue of Robespierre, the implacability of Saint-Just, are nothing other than their existence already suppressed, the anticipated presence of their death, the decision to allow freedom to be affirmed completely in them, and to deny the

[189] "Elle a aussi la même exigence de pureté et cette certitude que tout ce qu'elle fait vaut absolument, n'est pas une action quelconque se rapportant à quelque fin désirable et estimable, mais est la fin, dernière, le Dernier Acte." Ibid.

reality of their own life by the universal quality of freedom."[190] Terror meant not just the death of Robespierre's enemies without and enemies within, it also meant Robespierre's own death. True freedom was absolute such that it required everyone submit to its rule. "The Terrorists are those who, desiring absolute freedom, know that by this desire, they desire their own death, who are conscious of this freedom that they affirm as their death."[191] Thus, the terrorists, by Blanchot's logic, actually desired Thermidor. "Death in the Terror is not only a method of punishing counter-revolutionaries, but it becomes the desired end of everyone, and as such it seems like the very work of freedom in all free men."[192] In Blanchot's logic, Thermidor was freedom realizing itself through the deaths of the directors of the Reign of Terror: "The Terror that they embody does not come through the deaths that they mete out to others, but through the death that they mete out to themselves."[193] In this logic, Robespierre and Saint-Just already knew that the Terror meant their own death, that the revolution they started already required a Thermidorian reaction. Like the women in Sade's castle who knew they were already dead, Robespierre and Saint-Just already knew in 1793 that they would be the victims of 1794.

In figuring the purge as the repetition of Thermidor in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," Blanchot injected it with a different kind of repetition than either Sartre or Paulhan had allowed into their purge polemics, for Thermidor was itself a kind of

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[190] "Quand le couteau tombe sur Saint-Just et sur Robespierre, il n'atteint en quelque sorte personne. La vertu de Robespierre, la rigueur de Saint-Just ne sont rien d'autre que leur existence déjà supprimée, la présence anticipée de leur mort, la décision de laisser la liberté s'affirmer complètement en eux et nier, par son caractère universel, la réalité propre de leur vie." Ibid. 310.

[191] "Les Terroristes sont ceux qui, voulant la liberté absolue, savent qu'ils veulent par là même leur mort, qui ont conscience de cette liberté qu'ils affirment comme de leur mort." Ibid.

[192] "La mort de la Terreur n'y est pas le seul châtiment des factieux, mais, devenue l'échéance inéluctable, comme voulue, de tous, elle semble le travail même de la liberté dans les hommes libres." Ibid.

[193] "La Terreur qu'ils incarnent ne vient pas de la mort qu'ils donnent, mais de la mort qu'ils se donnent." Ibid.

repetition. Figuring the purge as the repetition of the French Revolution, or the occupation as previous occupations led Sartre and Paulhan to a notion of language as substitutable, and undecidable. Sartre responded to this substitutability by demanding that committed writers protect the *patrie* from outsiders. Paulhan responded by claiming that no one had the right to represent the *patrie*, or make judgments against others on its behalf. But Blanchot's interpretation of the purge as the repetition of Thermidor had far more sinister implications than either Sartre or Paulhan's interpretations. "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" figured the purge as the repetition of Thermidor in two ways, each of which corresponded to one of the two questions of the crisis of representation. First, Blanchot figured the purge as a repetition of the acts of Thermidor. In this sense, the purge repeated the murders committed under Thermidor. The Vichy regime had styled itself as a revolution, and initiated its own regime of terror. Likewise, the postwar purge was a Thermidorian counter-reaction, in which the revolutions of 1940 were swept away by their own terror. In this second sense of repetition, the purge was the farcical return of Thermidor in Marx's sense of the term, disrupting the natural progression of History. Both senses of repetition, however, had the same effect on Blanchot's discourse: they volatized the notion first of linguistic representation, and secondly the notion of the representation of France. It is necessary to consider both in detail.

The figuration of the purge as the repetition of acts of Thermidor drew directly on Blanchot's articulation of repetition in "À la rencontre de Sade." Blanchot had described repetition as the result of the libertine's quest to surpass the law, where the law was the limit on the libertine's freedom. The desire for the freedom that existed beyond the law

compelled Sade's libertine to repeat his or her crimes to an absurd degree, killing an unfathomable number of victims. The victims, whose lives were previously defined by being subjects of the law, that is, by being citizens, were denied that meaning by the libertine, who inserted them into the repetitive structure of his or her crimes. By entering into the logic of repetition, the victims were deprived of all personal existence long before they were actually killed. They signified nothing other than the libertine's freedom. Blanchot described the deaths of the Terror and Thermidor in exactly the same way. Robespierre and Saint-Just's presentiment of already being dead applied equally to all:

> Each person ceases to be an individual working at a specific task, and becomes concerned only with the here and now: he is universal freedom which knows neither outside nor future, neither labor nor accomplishment. In such moments, no one has a right any longer to do anything, because everything is done. No one has the right any longer to a private life, everything is public, and the most guilty person is the suspect who has a secret, who keeps his thought alone, like an intimacy shared only with himself. And finally, no one has the right any longer to his life, to his existence as separate and physically distinct from everyone else.[194]

Here death appeared not as a punishment, but as the granting of a new freedom. Death was not a threat. Like Robespierre and Saint-Just, the person living under Terror was already actually dead, insofar as their previous life was one of personal, individual existence ended the very instant that revolution began. This life was sacrificed to the collectivity, it was effectively killed the moment that Terror was proclaimed. "Each citizen has a right to death, so to speak: this death is not his condemnation, it is the

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[194] "Chaque homme cesse d'être un individu travaillant à une tâche déterminée, agissant ici et seulement maintenant: il est la liberté universelle qui ne connaît ni ailleurs ni demain, ni travail ni œuvre. Dans de tels moments, personne n'a plus droit à une vie privée, tout est secret, qui garde pour soi seul une pensée, une intimité. Et, enfin, personne n'a plus droit à sa vie, à son existence effectivement séparée et physiquement distincte." Ibid. 309.

essence of his right; it is not his suppression as guilty. Rather he needs death to affirm himself as a citizen, and it is the disappearance of death that freedom gives birth to him."[195]

In the Terror, and the Thermidorian reaction that followed, everyone was subject to the same death. And in the same way that the deaths of the women victimized by the libertine served the creation of a greater freedom, insofar as the repetition of their deaths allowed the libertine to surpass the law, one's death under the Terror – or especially under Thermidor – served the creation of the highest, purest freedom. Likewise, as the victimized women lost their personal meaning in the libertine's castle, so too did one lose the meaning of one's personal private existence, which was sacrificed to the collective freedom of the community. The repetition of death deprived the law of its power to give meaning to people's lives, and acceded to a place beyond the law, the only place where absolute freedom existed. Only repetition of death allowed the old law to be surpassed, whether it was the law of Louis XVI in the case of Thermidor, the law of the most high in the case of Sade, or the law of the Third Republic and the Vichy regime in the case of the purge.

Blanchot's figuration of the purge as the Sadean repetition of the acts of Thermidor provided his answer to the question of how linguistic representation worked. In "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré" Blanchot described a version of linguistic representation based on Mallarmé's phrase from "Crise de vers": "I say: a flower." Blanchot suggested that Mallarmé's formulation was able to signify the flower "absent from every bouquet" only

[195] "Chaque citoyen a pour ainsi dire droit à la mort: la mort n'est pas sa condamnation, c'est l'essence de son droit; il n'est pas supprimé comme coupable, mais il a besoin de la mort pour s'affirmer citoyen et c'est dans la disparation de la mort que la liberté le fait naître." Ibid.

by relegating the real flower out of sight. The word flower could only exist in the absence of the flower itself. In this way, all language depended not on the presence of things, but rather on their absence. Blanchot repeated this formulation in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," although he made two crucial distinctions drawn from the repetition of death. In "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," "a flower" changed into "this woman." The repetition remained, in which the pronunciation of the phrase "this woman" became the *fort/da* of language: "I say: this woman, and immediately she is at my disposal, I push her away, I pull her close, she is everything that I desire her to be, she becomes the site of the most surprising transformations and actions."[196] Blanchot repeated the phase "I say: this woman" twice more in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," enacting the repetition of the word. Here, Blanchot used the phrase "this woman" because he drew on "À la rencontre de Sade," where the notion of repetition was articulated through a consideration of the Sadean libertine's repeated victimization and murder of women. It gave the writer tremendous freedom to be able to say "this woman," and instantly have control over her as the libertine had control over the victim. And, like the libertine's accession to pure freedom, it could only come at the cost of the death of the woman. In the case of the phrase "I say: this woman," this meant that what was lost was the particular being of this woman.

> The word gives me what it signifies, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say: this woman, it requires that I relinquish her flesh-and-blood reality in one way or another, it requires that I make her absent and annihilate her. The word gives me being, but it gives it to me stripped of being. It is the absence of this

[196] "Je dis: cette femme, et immédiatement je dispose d'elle, je l'éloigne, la rapproche, elle est tout ce que je désire qu'elle soit, elle devient le lieu des transformations et des actions les plus surprenantes." Ibid. 312.

> being, its nothingness, that which remains of her after it has lost being, that is to say, it is the very fact that it does not exist.[197]

The terminology that Blanchot employed in this passage concerning the repetition of "this woman" replicated the language in which he described the repetition of the libertine's crimes. Like the Sade's libertine, who was compelled to repeat his or her murders in order to surpass the law and accede to pure freedom, the writer was also compelled to a kind of repetition in order to surpass a law as well. But the law that the writer was compelled to transgress repetitively was the law of literature itself, which was the rule established in "Le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi," that literature may speak of anything, so long as it speaks of things only in fiction. The writer could possess "this woman" only so long as it was done in fiction. "This woman" could be had only so long as the writer relinquished the claim to her "flesh-and-blood" reality. In this way, the writer could possess everything, "everything is possible," but *only* everything was possible: *one* thing alone was absolutely impossible: "He is only master of everything, he only possesses the infinite, he lacks the finite, the limit escapes him."[198] Every time the writer said "this woman" it was an attempt to surpass the law which prevented accession to the thing itself. And every time the writer said "this woman," she was "annihilated," "made absent," stripped of all her particular being, just like the libertine's victims.

The literary historian James Swenson argues that the logic by which universality supplanted particularity in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" prevented Blanchot from

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[197] "Le mot me donne ce qu'il signifie, mais d'abord il le supprime. Pour que je puisse dire: cette femme, il faut que d'une manière ou d'une autre je lui retire sa réalité d'os et de chair, la rende absente et l'anéantisse. Le mot me donne l'être, mais il me le donne privé d'être. Il est l'absence de cet être, son néant, ce qui demeure de lui lorsqu'il a perdu l'être, c'est-a-dire le seul fait qu'il n'est pas." Ibid. 312.

[198] "Il n'est maître que de tout, il ne possède que l'infini, le fini lui manque, la limite lui échappe." Ibid. 306.

allowing that the writer could actually ever commit to any single revolutionary cause. Swenson writes, "the writer cannot commit himself to a cause because the activity through which this commitment would be expressed, namely literature, nullifies any particular purpose it would represent."[199] But for Blanchot there was an even stronger force within literature that prevented the writer from committing to any particular revolutionary cause. For Blanchot the "danger that [the writer] represents is even more serious" than the danger of revolutionary action.[200] "The truth is that he ruins action, not because he makes the unreal available, but because he puts the *entirety* of reality at our disposal."[201] Blanchot's writer was dangerous in precisely the same way that Sade's libertine was dangerous, not because they both drove themselves to the unreal, but because they sought an excess of reality. The "everything" of reality was made available to the writer at the expense of particular beings that existed in reality. Here Blanchot drew on the formulation from "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré," only now the logic of repetition introduced death into the word. The freedom experienced in literature that formerly fascinated the writer with the power of being about to say "a flower," now compelled the writer to annihilate "this woman." The writer was dangerous precisely because death was loosed into the world through the written and the spoken word.

> Of course, my language does not kill anyone. Yet: when I say "this woman," real death is announced and is already present in my language; my language wants to say that this person here, who is there now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and plunged suddenly in a nothingness of existence and of presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction; it is, at every moment, a bold allusion to such an

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[199] James Swenson, "Revolutionary Sentences," *Yale French Studies* 93 (1998): 25.
[200] "Le danger qu'il représente est bien plus sérieux." Blanchot, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," 307.
[201] "La vérité, c'est qu'il ruine l'action, non parce qu'il dispose de l'irréel, mais parce qu'il met à notre disposition *toute* la réalité." Ibid.

> event. My language does not kill anyone. But, if this woman was not really capable of dying, if she was not threatened by death at each moment of her life, bound and united to her by an essential bond, I would not be able to accomplish this ideal negation, this deferred assassination that is my language.[202]

The writer was a danger precisely because death sneaks into the world through the very action of writing. Death was what pushed thing named away from the word that did the naming:

> When I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that death is, at this very moment, loose in the world, between me and the being that I address. It is between us as the distance that separates us. But this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because in it is the condition of all understanding.[203]

Blanchot was not simply indulging in metaphorical histrionics. Death was the limit concept beyond which the writer had no access. Death was the only word in the entirety of language to which no concept could be attached, for the simple reason that no one was capable of experiencing his or her own death and speaking about it. The word death was thus split into two sides, one positive, and one negative. The positive side described death in the same way as "this woman" described a woman, deprived of being. But the negative side lost all meaning, because it was impossible to experience "dying." "'Is dead',” Blanchot wrote, “is the positive side of the freedom that has become the world:

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[202] "Sans doute, mon langage ne tue personne. Cependant: quand je dis "cette femme", la mort réelle est annoncée et déjà présente dans mon langage; mon langage veut dire que cette personne-ci, qui est là, maintenant, peut être détachée d'elle-même, soustraite à son existence et à sa présence et plongée soudain dans un néant d'existence et de présence; mon langage signifie essentiellement la possibilité de cette destruction; il est, à tout moment, une allusion résolue à un tel événement. Mon langage ne tue personne. Mais, si cette femme n'était pas réellement capable de mourir, si elle n'était pas à chaque moment de sa vie menacée de la mort, liée et unie à elle par un lien d'essence, je ne pourrais pas accomplir cette négation idéale, cet assassinat différé qu'est mon langage." Ibid. 313.

[203] "Quand je parle: la mort parle en moi. Ma parole est l'avertissement que la mort est, en ce moment même, lâchée dans le monde, qu'entre moi qui parle et l'être que j'interpelle elle a brusquement surgi: elle est entre nous comme la distance qui nous séparé, mais cette distance est aussi ce qui nous empêche d'être séparés, car en elle est la condition de toute entente." Ibid.

being is revealed there as absolute. 'Dying', on the contrary, is pure insignificance, an event without concrete reality, which has lost all value as a personal and interior drama, because there is no longer any interior."[204] Death served the function of a limit concept, or rather, it designated that which existed beyond the limit, to which no concept could be attached. Death named the law that the writer was compelled to surpass, like the libertine, in order to accede to the pure space beyond the law. Each word written by the writer affected the death of things, such as the phrase "this woman," which signified the ability of words to exist, at the expense of the death of the things the words named. For Blanchot, all words were directed toward death, they all depended on death for their meaning. "[Death] is in words as the sole possibility of their meaning. Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness."[205] This desire for death was the real danger of the writer, and not any specific revolutionary commitments that might be espoused in writing.

In "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" Blanchot answered the question of how linguistic representation operated by combining the repetitive transgression of the law, and the death discussed in "À la rencontre de Sade," with the absence and the distance imposed on things by words discussed in "Le Paradoxe d'Aytrè." The result was a conception of linguistic representation in which communicative speech or writing was only possible because of the internal capacity for death that rested within every named thing. The writer was not a murderer, but the writer's compulsion to transgress the law of

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[204] "Le 'est mort', c'est le côté positif de la liberté faite monde: l'être s'y révèle comme absolu. Au contraire, 'mourir' est pure insignificance, événement sans réalité concrète, qui a perdu toute valeur de drame personnel et intérieur, car il n'y a plus d'intérieur." Ibid. 310.

[205] "[La mort] est dans le mots la seule possibilité de leur sens. Sans la mort, tout s'effondrerait dans l'absurde et dans le néant." Ibid. 312.

death, which loosed death in the world, was what allowed made communication possible. Thus, "the writer recognizes himself in the Revolution. It attracts him because it is the time when literature makes itself history. It is its truth."[206]

In addition to figuring the purge as the repetition of the acts of Thermidor, "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" also figured the purge as the farcical historical repetition of Thermidor. While Blanchot used the former type of repetition to answer one question of the crisis of representation – how did linguistic representation operate – he used the latter type of repetition to answer the other question: who was representative of France. As Blanchot had volatized the meaning of words through the figure of the repetition of the acts of Thermidor, he volatized the notion of a community formed around a linguistic entity (like the *patrie*) through the figure of the repetition of Thermidor itself. For Blanchot, this question was, to a certain extent, irrelevant, first of all because it was impossible for the entirety of the *patrie* to be distilled into a single representative, and second of all because the death inflicted on things by language made it so that any connection between a person and the *patrie* would be severed. Instead, Blanchot suggested that community could only be formed – the kind of community formed through language – through acceptance of both the death carried within language, and also the materiality of words, first discussed in "Le Paradoxe d'Aytré."

Blanchot argued in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" that the death inflicted on things by words "is between us as the distance that separates us." At the same time however, words were also "what prevents us from being separated." In this way, the

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[206] "L'écrivain se reconnaît dans la Révolution. Elle l'attire parce qu'elle est le temps où la littérature se fait histoire. Elle est sa vérité." Ibid. 311.

absence created by words became "the condition of all understanding." Blanchot believed that the connection between two people was founded on words, but that nothing existed behind the word. The only thing that remained was the material existence of the word, the word spoken between two people. For Blanchot, communication, and by extension community, rested on the tension between these two aspects of language. Drawing on the definition of fiction and communication articulated in "le Roman, œuvre de mauvaise foi," Blanchot argued that the only place where this tension could be held in suspense was in literary language. "Literary language," Blanchot wrote, "is made of uneasiness, and it is also made of contradictions. Its position is unstable and insecure."[207] Literary language had the power to maintain the distance necessary for communication, but also provide a material reality through which communication might occur. That material was the word itself. "[Literary language] observes that the word cat is not only the non-existence of the cat, but the non-existence become *word*, which is to say, a perfectly determined and objective reality."[208] After the death inflicted on things by words, the only thing left was the materiality of the word. The ambiguity of language, however, was that the materiality of the word could only be embraced if the death of the thing it named was embraced as well. They were inseparable in Blanchot's eyes. For if one failed to accept the death on which the materiality of the word rested, one mistook the word for the thing it represented. Likewise, if one only accepted the death inflicted by the word, and failed to acknowledge the word's materiality, one never left the realm of

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[207] "Le langage littéraire est fait d'inquiétude, il est fait aussi de contradictions. Sa position est peu stable et peu solide." Ibid. 315.

[208] "Il observe que le mot chat n'est pas seulement la non-existence du chat, mais la non-existence devenue *mot*, c'est-à-dire une réalité parfaitement déterminée et objective." Ibid. 315.

negation and universality, one never approached the particularity of material words that actually allowed communication. It was essential to hold both sides of language in an indefinite state of suspense:

> If we want to restore literature to the movement which makes all its ambiguities understandable, this movement is here: literature, as the common speech, *begins* with the *end* that alone is the condition of understanding. To speak, we have to see death, we have to see it behind us. When we speak, we are leaning on a tomb, and the emptiness of the tomb is what makes the truth of language, but at the same time, the emptiness is reality and death made into being. There is being – which is to say, a logical and communicable truth – and there is a world, because we are able to destroy things and suspend existence. It is in this sense that we can say that there is being because there is nothingness.[209]

If being only existed because it leaned on the emptiness of the tomb, death was both the beginning and the end of the possibility for communicative language. Death, paradoxically, was what made humanity humane: "Death works in the world with us; it is a power that humanizes nature, that raises existence to being, it is in us, as the part of us that is the most human."[210] Holding being in tension with death was the only chance that Blanchot saw for community to be created: "Death is the possibility of man, it is his chance, it is through death that the future of a finished world remains; death is the greatest hope of men, their only hope of being men."[211] In this way, Blanchot came to see the effort to hold the death inflicted by words on things, and the material being

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[209] "Si l'on veut ramener la littérature au mouvement qui en rend saisissables toutes les ambiguiïtés, il est là: la littérature, comme la parole commune, *commence* avec la *fin* qui seule permet de comprendre. Pour parler, nous devons voir la mort, la voir derrière nous. Quand nous parlons, nous nous appuyons à un tombeau, et ce vide du tombeau est ce qui fait la vérité du langage, mais en même temps le vide est réalité et la mort se fait être. Il y a de l'être – c'est-à-dire une vérité logique et exprimable – et il y a un monde, parce que nous pouvons détruire les choses et suspendre l'existence. C'est en cela qu'on peut dire qu'il y a de l'être parce qu'il y a du néant." Ibid. 324.

[210] "La mort travaille avec nous dans le monde; pouvoir qui humanise la nature, qui élève l'existence à l'être, elle est en nous, comme notre part la plus humaine." Ibid. 325.

[211] "La mort est la possibilité de l'homme, elle est sa chance, c'est par elle que nous reste l'avenir d'un monde achevé; la mort est la plus grande espoir des hommes, leur seul espoir d'être hommes." Ibid. 324.

created out of that death, as the one thing that could bring a community into reconciliation with itself.

Blanchot thus conceived of death as the law, as the limit-threshold, of community, as well as of language. Death was the law toward which all communities must move, and which all communities must transgress, in order to exist, for it gave being to the language over which and through which they communed. Death was their internal and necessary death drive.

> Death ends in being: such is the hope and such is the task of man, because the very nothingness helped to make the world, nothingness is the creator of the world in the man who works and who understands. Death ends in being: such is the rending of man, the origin of his unhappy death, because death comes into being through man, and through man meaning rests on nothingness; we are only able to comprehend by stripping ourselves of existence, by making death *possible*, by infecting what we comprehend with the nothingness of death, of the kind that, if we depart from being, we fall outside the possibility of death, and the way out becomes the disappearance of every way out.[212]

Sartre desired the perfect community, in which all members were present to each other through language. Paulhan desired an imperfect community, a community that accepted its own imperfectness, and continued to exist in spite of its imperfection. Blanchot articulated the desire for a perfect but ambiguous community. Or rather, a perfectly ambiguous community, in which community was split between two perfect, but irreconcilable sides: death, and being. For Blanchot, this was the meaning of the repetition of Thermidor, itself an ambiguous tension between the Terror, and a counter-

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[212] "La mort about it à l'être: tel est l'espoir et telle est la tâche de l'homme, car le néant même aide à faire le monde, le néant est créateur du monde en l'homme qui travaille et comprend. La mort about it à l'être: telle est la déchirure de l'homme, l'origine de son sort malheureux, car par l'homme la mort vient à l'être et par l'homme le sens repose sur le néant; nous ne comprenons qu'en nous privant d'exister, en rendant la mort *possible*, en infectant ce que nous comprenons du néant de la mort, de sorte que, si nous sortons de l'être, nous tombons hors de la possibilité de la mort, et l'issue devient la disparitions de toute issue." Ibid. 331.

terrorist impulse. The repetition of Thermidor signified that the *patrie* could never be stabilized, never secured. It would always remain henceforth in perpetual suspension between its two sides: the desire for death, and the desire to arrest death. The purge repeated Thermidor to the letter, making it impossible for France to ever again lapse into the security of Sartrean commitment, or the exasperation of Paulhanian undecidability. For Blanchot, the purge signified that the future of France would rest on the will to hold both elements of the community in tension, on the one side its death drive, and on the other, its being. Forever France would be the tension within language that "*is the life that endures death and maintains itself in death* (italics in original)."[213]

What, then, was Blanchot's ultimate contribution to the purge debate? If Sartre could be definitively identified as pro-purge, and Paulhan as distinctly anti-purge, could such a polemic be extracted from "La Littérature et le droit à la mort?" If the readers of *Critique* in 1947 understood that "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" participated in the purge debate, what would they have understood its message to be? First of all, his critique of commitment, and of the Sartrean view of language and literature, indicated Blanchot's contestation of the purge. Though Blanchot never supported amnesty for the collaborators, he thought it was unjust for writers to be put on trial for what they wrote. Second, the notion of community presented in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" explicitly rejected the version of France being constructed through the purge trials. The purge trials essentially supported the Sartrean notion of committed literature, and indicated a desire for Sartre's perfect community. For Blanchot however, the writer's

[213] "*Cette vie qui porte la mort et se maintient en elle*." Ibid. 330.

sole commitment was to literature, the task of which was to maintain the tension between the death that made language possible, and the life that emerged from that death. For Blanchot, the writer was neither a committed writer treating language like a loaded pistol, aiming his shots with precision. Nor was the writer a child playing irresponsibly with a gun just to hear the shot go off. Rather, for Blanchot, language was a guillotine, and the writer's job was to make sure it fell on everyone's head equally.

In real terms, Blanchot's contribution to the purge debate was to thoroughly critique even the possibility of Sartrean commitment. Blanchot detonated both the notion of language, and the notion of political action on which commitment depended. "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" demonstrated that the writer had neither the control over language that was so central to Sartrean commitment, nor the control over the political ends of language. There was thus no way to establish whether a writer's language or writing was committed, or whether it collaborated, because both the committed and the collaborator were equally victim to the power of death that language inflicted on the world of things. In failing to recognize this, Blanchot argued that Sartrean commitment overestimated the writer's power to control the ends of his or her writing. At the same time, Blanchot also argued that Sartrean commitment failed to grasp the actual political power that resided in language, and by consequence, it failed to appreciate the actual way in which langauge was the foundation of all political community. For Blanchot, language was ultimately fictional. The consequence of this was that the writer did not have the power to affect material political relations. On the other hand, political relations were also established within language, in which the writer was indeed able to intervene

effectively. In Blanchot's view the writer's task was to continually make and remake the community through language in a perpetual process of linguistic death and rebirth. The writer's duty was to name and rename the community, without ever believing that his words would hold everlasting significance. Blanchot's main contribution to the purge debate, and his main critique of commitment was thus to insist on the limits of the writer's ability to affect political change. At the same time, Blanchot also placed the power of making and remaking the community in the hands of writers. To Blanchot this involved a change not so much in the ontological foundations of politics, as in the stance that one adopted towards politics. One should neither commit, nor collaborate politically. Rather, the only way to engage in politics was to commit to language itself.

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Shortly before or shortly after the publication of "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" (the exact date remains unknown), Blanchot left Paris and relocated in the South of France, to the small coastal village of Èze. As with Blanchot's encounter with the German/Russian firing squad in 1944, it is important to resist the temptation to see this episode of Blanchot's life allegorically reflected in his writings (the exact reason for Blanchot's departure also remains unknown). But the choice of self-imposed exile was a meaningful one in the context of the philosophical, literary, and political debates in which Blanchot was engaged in late 1947 and early 1948. He rejected the communities being formed in Paris by Sartre and Paulhan. By no means was Blanchot's rejection complete. He still maintained his friendships, and his family relations. He still wrote letters and

made visits. What he rejected, rather, was Sartrean commitment. Instead Blanchot chose solitude, in which he could devote himself to the literary. If there was going to be refuge for Blanchot after the purge, it would be in the literary, where he could work at the suspension of death and being which was the promise of language.

The meaning of Blanchot's contribution to the purge debate however, has implications beyond his personal life. To fully understand its historical significance, it is necessary to return to the comment of Marx's concerning revolution and repetition with which this chapter began. In the purge debate there was a historical movement similar to the one that Jeffrey Mehlman traces in *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac*. Mehlman shows how Marx's figuration of the coup of Louis Napoléon as the repetition of the first Napoléon's coup disrupted the theory of the state as the representative of the people. By figuring Louis Napoléon as repetition, Marx injected his discourse with repetition's volatility, which separated the state from the thing it purported to represent. Mehlman argues that when anything can occupy the terms of the repetitive structure, those terms are voided of their specific content. Thus, Louis Napoléon was a farcical repetition because he lacked any of the first Napoléon Bonaparte's content.

Similarly, the polemicists of the purge debate figured WWII, the occupation, the liberation, and the purge as repetitions of revolution. In every case, the repetition of the revolution led to a realization of the vacancy, substitutability, or corruptibility of words in general, and the words which bonded the community in specific (such as *patrie*). Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Paulhan represented the opposite poles of the debate, and each drew different conclusions from this repetition of revolution. Sartre saw the liberation and the

purge as the repetition of the French Revolution, whose signal moment was 1789, and he sought to protect the *patrie* from those who would use its substitutability to usurp the revolution. Through his journal, *Les Temps modernes*, Sartre developed a theory of committed writing, which he used as intellectual justification for the postwar purging of collaborationist writers and intellectuals. Paulhan, by contrast, saw the Occupation as the repetition of previous moments in France's history when it was occupied by Germany. Paulhan argued that because the France *patrie* could be substituted for a German one, that no stable *patrie* existed, and all claims to it must be relinquished. In *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, Paulhan pursued an editorial policy that advocated the writer's right to error, and criticized the hypocritical fervor of those who condemned writers to death simply for their written works. Blanchot, for his part, saw the purge as the repetition of the Thermidorian coup, from which he derived the essential ambiguity of the *patrie*. In his contribution to the purge debate, Blanchot neither attempted to stabilize the *patrie*, nor did he reject the possibility of the *patrie* ever existing peacefully. Rather, Blanchot established a third way that transcended both Sartre and Paulhan's positions. He argued that the tendency towards death contained within language must be held in tension with the being that language creates, without ever prioritizing one term over the other, so that the community could be preserved.

It is telling that the critique of commitment emerged simultaneously with Sartre's initial articulation of commitment. The critique of commitment should not be seen as a knee-jerk reaction to Sartre's popularity or influence. Rather, it should be seen as a measure of the extent to which language and politics had become intertwined in postwar

France. The critique begun by Paulhan and Blanchot during the postwar purge ultimately contributed to the abandonment and replacement of commitment that occurred during the protests over the war in Algeria, the subject of the next chapter of this dissertation. But it also helped to define the political implications of postwar French theory. Blanchot's critique of commitment laid the foundation for the current of postwar French theory that aligned language with politics. In this way, the history of Paulhan and Blanchot's intervention in the debate over the postwar purge, and their critique of Sartrean commitment demonstrates that French theory has a history. It was born out of a specific intervention into postwar French politics, and it is necessary to bear the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals in mind whenever one encounters a piece of French theory that argues for the alignment of language and politics.

CHAPTER TWO

Beyond Commitment: The Ethics of Engagement during the War in Algeria

On September 6, 1960, *Le Monde* reported that "one hundred and twenty-one writers, professors, and artists have signed a declaration on 'the right to insubordination in the war in Algeria.'"[214] The article – no more than a nine-line announcement appearing on back page of the newspaper, in the "last news" section – gave no indication of the signatories' identities. Nor was the article able to explain the content of the manifesto, other than to provide a brief quotation of its primary claim: "we respect and judge justified the refusal to take up arms against the Algerian people."[215] Three days later another announcement appeared, stating that the chief prosecutor of department of the Seine had opened an investigation against the unknown persons responsible – designated solely by an "X" – for inciting insubordination and desertion in the army.[216] The "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" was a mystery.

By the end of September the "Déclaration" was front page news, and it had become one of the grand affairs of the war in Algeria. The "Déclaration" was a short pamphlet of about four pages, written anonymously, but signed by one hundred and twenty-one writers, intellectuals, and celebrities, declaring the right to refuse to serve in

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[214] "Cent vingt et un écrivains, universitaires et artistes ont signé une déclaration sur "le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie." *Le Monde*, September 6, 1960.
[215] "Nous respecton et jugeons justifié le refus de prendre les armes contre le peuple algérien." Ibid.
[216] "Le Parquet de la Seine ordonne l'ouverture d'une information contre X." *Le Monde*, September 9, 1960.

the army.[217] It was the largest, and most effective act of collective, intellectual engagement in politics during the war. The "Déclaration" united the French intellectual community, deeply divided up to that point, against the war in Algeria. During a war that historian Jean-François Sirinelli calls "the war of petitions," the "Déclaration" was one of the most widely publicized and discussed.[218]

And yet for all of the publicity that the "Déclaration" received throughout September and October of 1960, those first, brief notices from September 6 and 9 captured the spirit of the "Déclaration" better than anything else. There was no explanation in the "Déclaration" itself, no definition of humanity, no appeal to historical necessity, no theory of justice. After a précis in which it detailed the catastrophe of the war in Algeria, the "Déclaration" made three, brief proclamations:

> The undersigned, considering that each one of us must speak out against the acts which it is no long possible to present as the news-in-brief of an individual adventure, considering that they themselves have the obligation to intervene, in their place and according to their means, not in order to give advice to people who must make decisions personally, in the face of equally serious problems, but to ask of those who judge them to not let themselves be taken in by the ambiguity of words and of values, declare:
>
> – We respect and judge as justified the refusal to take up arms against the Algerian people.

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[217] The "Déclaration" was set to appear in numerous journals and newspapers, before the government censored its publication from all but four tiny publications. Some of the journals from which it had been censored managed to show their solidarity anyways. *Les Temps modernes* for instance, intentionally left three pages of its September 1960 issue blank, where the "Déclaration" was to have appeared, with only a small note of explanation written by the editors on the first page. Additional copies of the pamphet were all seized by the police. Still, the "Déclaration" disseminated widely and rapidly, despite the government's efforts. Throughout this chapter I have used the version included in the collected edition of Maurice Blanchot's political writings. See Blanchot, *Écrits politiques: 1953-1993* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2008), 49-54.

[218] Jean-François Sirinelli, "Guerre d'Algérie, guerre des pétitions?" in Jean-Pierre Rioux & Jean-François Sirinelli, eds. *La Guerre d'Algérie et les intellectuels français* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1991), 265-306.

> – We respect and judge as justified the conduct of those French citizens who feel their need to give help and protection to the Algerians oppressed in the name of the French people.
> – The cause of the Algerian people, which contributes to the end of the colonial system in a decisive way, is the cause of all free men.[219]

In reality, the "Déclaration" had no other content, and no other authority than what these first announcements provided: one hundred and twenty-one people declaring that refusing to fight in the war was justified. The real mystery of the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" was not who had signed it, since the signatories made no effort whatsoever to hide their identities. Rather, the real mystery was the "Déclaration's" deeper philosophical content, which seemed not to exist at all.

And yet, it was the lack of justification, and the assumption of responsibility that was at the same time collective and impersonal that made the "Déclaration" so effective. The "Déclaration" merely affirmed the right to not bear arms against the Algerian people. Adhering to a strict form of ethical action, the signatories refused to claim sovereignty for themselves by dissolving their own individual authority into the impersonal collectivity. While each signatory fully admitted his or her culpability, no individual signatory claimed to be true "initiator" of the "Déclaration," as the magistrate charged with investigating the "Déclaration" put it, for to do so would mean to claim sovereignty. It

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[219] "Les soussignés, considérant que chacun doit se prononcer sur des actes qu'il est désormais impossible de présenter comme des faits divers de l'aventure individuelle; considérant qu'eux-mêmes, à leur place, et selon leurs moyens, ont le devoir d'intervenir, non pas pour donner des conseils aux hommes qui ont à se décider personnellment face à des problèmes aussi graves, mais pour demander à ceux qui les jugent de pas se laisser prendre à l'équivoque des mots et des valeurs, déclarent:

- Nous respectons et jugeons le refus de prendre les armes contre le peuple algérien.
- Nous respectons et jugeons justifiée la conduite des Français qui estiment de leur devoir d'apporter aide et protection aux Algériens opprimés au nom du peuple français.
- La cause du peuple algérien, qui contribue de façon décisive à ruiner le système colonial, est la cause de tous les hommes libres."

Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie, 52-53.

would mean the admission of a personal authority higher than anyone else's, which granted them the right to create new laws. Such an act of sovereignty resembled the Sadean libertine's desire for accession beyond the law, to a place where the libertine had sole sovereignty over him or herself, and over the entire world. And, such a act of sovereignty transgressed the laws of the state in a way that the state was entirely prepared to handle: such acts could be identified, the guilty parties tried and convicted, and the sovereignty of the state's law reasserted. By refusing such sovereignty however, the "Déclaration" became an ethical action that created a new law that granted the right to not bear arms. This new law was created outside the purview of the state, and the right that it granted was not granted by the state. Through their action the signatories of the "Déclaration" were able to challenge the very authority of the state, creating a space external to the state's law, within which one could act ethically. This was a new form of intellectual engagement in politics beyond commitment, that sought political change not through the revolution necessitated by historical conditions of oppression, but through ethical actions that made no appeal to higher justices, and for which the actors claimed sole responsibility, submitting themselves equally to the impersonality of the law.

The government instantly recognized the challenge made by the "Déclaration," and quickly acted to bring it back within the jurisdiction of the law of the state. The investigation opened on September 9 by the chief prosecutor of the Department of the Seine's main goal was to find the responsible parties, and assign guilt. On September 16, the government indefinitely suspended all university professors who had signed the

"Déclaration."[220] At the time, university professors were employees of the state, in France's nationalized education system. On September 23, the government created a new law, increasing the penalty for inciting insubordination or desertion if the guilty party was a civil servant in the employment of the state.[221] A week later, the government expanded the reach of the new law against inciting insubordination, to include acts of speech that excused or apologized for insubordination or desertion.[222] The government's reaction served to verify the force of the "Déclaration," as the new laws that it passed provided proof that the "Déclaration" had created a space for ethical action outside the law of the state. The "Déclaration" played an important role, then, in the challenges to the government's authority that eventually forced France to pursue peace talks with Algeria in the last two years of the war.

In the 1980s, nearly two decades after the fact, it was revealed that Maurice Blanchot had been one of the manifesto's primary authors.[223] Yet this did nothing to clarify matters. As Bernard Henri-Lévy wrote upon learning of Blanchot's authorship of the "Déclaration" in 1989:

> Just think! The author of *Thomas l'obscur*. The apostle of an empty, evanescent, absent literature. The man who was never seen, and who was never heard. The only French intellectual to have made to a point to never allow the image of his

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[220] "Des universitaires suspendus." *Le Monde*, September 18-19, 1960.

[221] "La provocation à l'insoumission sera punie plus sévèrement si le délit est commis par un fonctionnaire." *Le Monde*, Septmber 24, 1960.

[222] "Les sanctions contre les artistes et fonctionnaires signataires du manifeste sur l'insoumission." *Le Monde*, September 30, 1960.

[223] Blanchot's role in drafting the "Déclaration sur la droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" was first revealed by Dionys Mascolo, one of the other main authors, in response to questions posed to him by *L'Autre journal* in November, 1985. At first Mascolo said only that Blanchot had proposed the title, but over the course of the 1980s other participants in the "Déclaration" came forward and made it known that he played a more significant part in shaping both the philosophical direction of the "Déclaration," and the style of its language. See Mascolo, "Aux Heures d'un communisme de pensée," reprinted in Mascolo, *À la recherche d'un communisme de pensée* (Paris: Fourbis, 1993): 439-441.

> face to appear in any newspaper or in any archive. The invisible man, in so many words…And yet it is this man who is behind the famous 'Manifeste.' It is he who spent days, and nights, not only writing it, but discussing it…telephoning people to get their signatures. He left his lair on this occasion. He showed himself, exposed himself. This man whose face no one knew, this man whom it was difficult to imagine living, chatting, mingling like ordinary mortals…suddenly 'played intellectual' like Sartre or Zola. There is something almost unthinkable to me in this situation, in this gap between a man and his relation to himself and to his ethics.[224]

Henri-Lévy took it upon himself to ask Blanchot directly, sending him a letter soliciting an explanation of the "Déclaration" and Blanchot's role in its genesis – and in particular, asking Blanchot why he chose to intervene in the war in Algeria, but not during the Soviet repression of the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Blanchot's response, which Henri-Lévy published, only clouded the matter further: "Thank you for your letter. But pardon me for being unable to respond as you wished. I no longer receive even my closest friends, without our friendship being diminished. And today, I think only of Auschwitz."[225] At the time, there was a controversy over the erection of a memorial on the site of the Carmelite monastery at Auschwitz, which many (including both Blanchot and Henri-Lévy) thought should remain untouched. But what had Auschwitz to do with Algeria? Why was Blanchot so evasive? What were the real reasons behind the

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[224] "Pensez! L'auteur de *Thomas l'obscur*. L'apôtre d'une littérature blanche, lacunaire, évanescente. L'homme que l'on ne voit pas. Que l'on n'entend jamais. Le seul intellectual français à avoir fait en sorte qu'il n'y ait dans aucun jounal, dans aucune archive d'aucune espèce, une image de son visage….Eh bien c'est lui, cet homme-là, qui est derrière ce fameux Manifeste. C'est lui qui passe des jours, des nuits, non seulement à l'écrire, le discuter…mais à téléphoner aux gens, à recueillir leurs signatures. Il est sorti de son trou pour l'occasion. Il s'est montré, exposé. Cet homme don't personne, encore une fois, ne connaissait le visage, cet homme que l'on a peine à imaginer vivant, causant, circulant comme le commun des mortels…le voilà qui se met, comme Sartre ou Zola, à "faire intellectuel." Et il y a dans cette situation, dans cet écart d'un homme par rapport à lui-même et à son éthique, quelque chose qui, encore une fois, me semble presque impensable." Bernard Henri-Lévy, *Les Aventures de la liberté: Une histoire subjective des intellectuels* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 309.

[225] "Merci pour votre lettre. Mais pardonnez-moi de ne pouvoir répondre comme vous le souhaitez. Je ne revois même pas mes plus proches amis, sans que l'amitié soit diminuée. Et aujourd'hui je n'ai de pensée que pour Auschwitz." Ibid., 311.

"Déclaration"? This chapter investigates the origins of the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" to answer these questions.

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In order to understand the full scope of the "Déclaration," it is necessary to briefly review the history of the war in Algeria, and the responses that it elicited among French intellectuals. The war began in November 1, 1954 when the Fronte de Libération Nationale (FLN) staged a series of guerilla attacks against various French military and civilian targets. The French army responded to the FLN's guerilla tactics by employing equally vicious methods of counter-insurgency, and the entire conflict was characterized by horrific violence on the part of both combatants. While the war in Algeria was part of the larger decolonization of the French empire, and while it began just as the French Indochina War was ending, France invested much more energy and resources into maintaining its hold on to Algeria, because it was considered part of metropolitan France itself. The war was the defining political event of the 1950s in France, the political and social order of which was thrown into chaos through coups, assassination attempts, massacres, and torture.

One of the major events of the war in Algeria was the emergence of the army as a political force, leading to the collapse of the government of the Fourth Republic. Over the course of the war the French army grew increasingly independent from the French metropolitan and colonial administrations, which had become unstable under the pressure of the war. Dissatisfied with the government's support for military operations in Algeria,

on May 13, 1958 the army staged a putsch in Algiers ousting the colonial administration. On May 24 the army invaded the island of Corsica, as a prelude to an airborne invasion of Paris, in which they intended to take control of the civilian government, and replace the elected officials of the Fourth Republic with Charles de Gaulle, whom they still supported. In a series of public statements, de Gaulle made it clear that he thought of himself as independent from the army, but also that he was willing to help restore order by returning to power for the first time since 1946. To forestall the invasion, the French parliament itself asked de Gaulle on May 29 to serve as prime minister before the army could take action. In June, de Gaulle was installed in power, and given the authority to re-write the constitution. In October 1958, the Fifth Republic was formed, with the major change that the government shifted from a parliamentary system, to a semi-presidential one. To many in France, this was little more than a coup, despite de Gaulle's claims to neutrality. The result of this sequence of events was that from 1958 to the end of the war in 1962, there was a perpetual siege mentality in France.

While the May 1958 crisis contributed to a general sense of instability, other events related to the war incited tension between the French populace and the French government. There was a reciprocal cycle of hostility: on many occasions, the public responded to the army's actions by protesting, and the government responded to the protests by taking increasingly repressive measures. In 1957 and 1958 it became widely known that the French army had employed torture in its counter-insurgency efforts against the FLN, setting off a wave of demonstrations and denunciations.[226] Two events

[226] See Raphaëlle Branche, *La Torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie, 1954-1962* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2001); *La Guerre d'Algérie: une histoire apaisée?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005).

in particular turned public opinion against the government: the first was the trial of Djamila Boupacha, a young woman who was a member of the FLN, and who had been raped and tortured.[227] The second was the publication of *La Question* by the French journalist Henri Alleg, who had also been imprisoned and tortured by the French army.[228] Alleg's book was immediately censored. In addition to torture, the French army had resumed using the guillotine for both legal and extra-legal execution, recalling the excesses of state power during the French Revolution. This too, turned the populace against the government.

In France, the cycle of violence and state repression intensified after the revelation of torture and the public outcry against it. At the end of 1960, a small cadre of right-wing army officers formed the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), a guerilla organization dedicated to maintaining French control over Algeria. The OAS carried out terrorist attacks against officials both in France and Algeria who supported Algerian independence, including several assassination attempts on Charles de Gaulle. These acts of domestic terrorism were complimented by an FLN campaign in France itself, which targeted the French police, as well as muslims living in France who did not support Algerian independence. In response to these actions, the Parisian police set a curfew on the nearly 150,000 Algerians and muslims living in Paris. On October 17, 1961 some 50-200 Algerians living in Paris were massacred by the city police as they demonstrated against the curfew, their bodies thrown in the Seine after having been beaten to death.[229]

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[227] See Gisele Halimi & Simone de Beauvoir, *Djamila Boupacha* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1962).
[228] See Henri Alleg, *La Question* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1958).
[229] See Jean-Luc Einaudi, *La Bataille de Paris: 17 Octobre 1961* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991).

During this period of severe unrest, de Gaulle declared a state of emergency, lasting from April 22, 1961 to September 29, 1961, amplifying the government's repressive practices to an unprecedented level.

Like the postwar purge before it, the war in Algeria produced a vigorous debate among French intellectuals. At stake once more was the identity of the French nation, and the values of postwar France, just as much as its physical borders. As in the purge debate, French intellectuals appointed themselves the custodians of French identity, a trust in which it was their task to speak out against injustices. They were the champions of French politics, in the sense that they were the designated spokesmen of various political alignments, whose jousts were followed in the mainstream press as avidly as any speech by a parliamentary representative. Unlike the purge debate however, which took place principally between various factions of the left, the war in Algeria blurred the boundaries between right and left because of its violence, the complicated sentiments it aroused, and its implications for French national identity. Further confusing the matter, the positions in the debate evolved considerably over the course of the war, as the revelation of torture, de Gaulle's questionable legitimacy, and the inevitability of Algerian victory compelled French intellectuals to revise not just their stance for or against Algerian independence, but also the reasons behind their stance. While a full account of the intellectual debate surrounding the war in Algeria would require more attention than is currently possible, it is necessary to delineate the major positions of this debate for the purposes of the present study.[230]

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[230] The political groupings of the purge debate changed over time, and blurred the traditional boundaries between the left and right. For two foundational studies, see Paul Clay Sorum, *Intellectuals and*

At the beginning of the war French intellectuals were split into three camps.[231] The first camp opposed Algerian independence. This group was composed of an odd alliance between the traditional French right and liberal intellectuals. While the right insisted on France's sovereign possession of Algeria, many liberal intellectuals argued against Algerian independence with a rationale that combined the universal values of French republicanism, with the virtue of France's civilizing mission.[232] The remaining camps came from the left, which was split into two factions. The first faction acknowledged the necessity of Algerian self-rule, but still sought some form of Franco-muslim reconciliation. The most prominent advocate of this position throughout the war was Albert Camus. Outraged at the callous violence committed against civilians by both the FLN and the French army, and influenced by his personal devotion to French Algeria, Camus continued to argue for a Franco-muslim reconciliation in which the white French

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Decolonization in France (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); and David Schalk, *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). For a sense of the wide range of responses to the war, see Joël Roman, ed. *Esprit: Ecrire contre la guerre d'Algérie: 1947-1962* (Paris: Hachette, 2002).

[231] This taxonomy draws on other recent interpretations of the fault lines in the debate over the war in Algeria. For instance, Todd Sheperd argues that there were only two major positions. For Sheperd, these positions were not defined by the place on the political spectrum, but rather by the ideology mustered in their arguments: "The ideological confrontation at the war's close, then, can be understood best not in commentator's usual terms, of "republican" versus antirepublican, far right, or "fascist." Rather, the primary clash was between those who relied on historical determinism and others who looked to republican legalism." Sheperd's work makes an important contribution by demonstrating the extent to which traditional right and left political positions were blurred during the debate over the war in Algeria. Sheperd highlights the need to take seriously the ideological claims to republican legalism made by the OAS and their supporters, and at the same time underscores the way that arguments about the historical necessity of deconolization – a seemingly leftist position – allowed France to abandon the war without modifying any of its own structures of governance and identity. By sorting the debate over the war in Algeria into three main camps, this dissertation builds on Sheperd's work, but adds some new wrinkles in order to adequately demonstrate the unique position of the "Déclaration." See Sheperd, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[232] The most visible and vocal representative of the latter group was Jacques Soustelle, the governer-general of Algeria until 1960, and a former professor of ethnology at the École des Hautes Études et Sciences Sociales. On France's perceived civilizing mission, see Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Idea of Empire in France and West Africa: 1895-1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

settlers would be allowed to remain in Algeria, until his death in an automobile accident in January 1960.[233]

Camus was heavily criticized for this position however, and many leftist intellectuals argued for a Franco-muslim reconciliation in which French settlers were repatriated, but formal ties between France and Algeria were not fully severed. Still others sought a Franco-muslim reconciliation in which Algeria was granted full independence through a peace treaty. While this faction among the left mainly desired a peaceful end to the war, another, more committed faction openly supported the FLN, and argued for the necessity that the colonized Algerians violently oust the colonizing French. Prominent among this group were Jean-Paul Sartre, and Frantz Fanon, who have received much attention in the years since the war in Algeria. During the war however, the most widely recognized representative of the radical left, was perhaps Francis Jeanson, a Sartrean disciple who ran a clandestine network of Algerian and French operatives providing material support to the FLN in metropolitan France. In September 1960, the organizers of the Jeanson Network were put on trial, and the proceedings quickly devolved into political spectacle. The government saw the trial as an opportunity to make an example of the most famous of the "porteurs des valises," the "suitcase carriers" who aided the FLN. Likewise, the left saw the trial as an opportunity to make a stand

[233] This has been a point of considerable debate among intellectual historians for many years. Recently, David Carroll has persuasively argued that Camus' stance against Algerian independence requires a nuanced reading of Camus' personal history. See David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
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against injustice.[234] The result was that the trial of the Jeanson Network was a major point of public debate throughout the autumn of 1960, and it was by far the most visible example of the radical left's engagement against the war.

The differences between the members of the left thwarted any attempt to build a united coalition of intellectuals against the war. The most significant attempt to create such a coalition prior to the "Déclaration" was the Comité d'Action des Intellectuels contre le Poursuite de la Guerre en Afrique du Nord, founded in 1955 by Dionys Mascolo, Louis-René des Forêts, Robert Antelme, and Edgar Morin. The Comité d'Action fell apart when the various participants could not reach an agreement about whether to lend their support to the radical, muslim FLN, or the less violent Mouvement National Algérien, led by the Algerian nationalist Messali Hadj.[235] By the end of the war however, few intellectuals on the left still supported a diplomatic end to the war. Most had come to recognize the necessity of an independent Algeria, and the right of the Algerians to fight for their self-determination, though few went as far as Jeanson. Still, these three groups – those who supported French possession of Algeria, those who sought peaceful resolution to the war with some sort of Franco-muslim reconciliation, and the radicals who supported the FLN materially – represent the broad spectrum of positions in the intellectual debate over the war in Algeria.

If the trope that structured the debate over the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals was the crisis of representation (who represented France and how did

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[234] See Hervé Hamon & Patrick Rotman, *Les Porteurs des valises: La Résistance française à la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982).

[235] On the history of the Comité d'Action des Intellectuels contre la Poursuite de la Guerre en Afrique du Nord, see James Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

linguistic representation work) then the structuring trope of the debate over the war in Algeria was a crisis of legitimacy. James Le Sueur argues that the war in Algeria forced French intellectuals to reconcile their longstanding faith in the universality of French republicanism, with the sometimes irreducible difference of the Algerian other.[236] Reconciliation of these two contradictory notions required French intellectuals to reconsider the legitimacy of their positions and their actions. It was one thing to take on the role of spokesman for France, but quite another to take on that role for Algeria and Algerians. The two questions that animated the debate were: In whose name did one speak? And by what authority did one speak? Regardless of their position within the debate, French intellectuals felt obligated to state their qualifications for speaking on behalf of Algerians, and to proclaim the concepts of justice and of right that legitimated their speech.

Polemicists from positions as diverse as Camus and Sartre's all hewed to the same trope of the crisis of legitimacy. Both made explicit the groups in whose name they spoke, and the authority by which they had the legitimacy to speak. Camus' arguments against Algerian independence, for instance, were deeply intertwined with his heritage as a French-Algerian. Camus stressed that his status as a *pied-noir* gave him the personal authority to speak out on the necessity of a Franco-muslim reconciliation that would allow French-Algerians to remain in their homes. Additionally, Camus legitimated his position with a humanist sense of justice, and outrage at the violence perpetrated by both

[236] Ibid. 1-14.

sides in the war.[237] While Sartre argued for Algerian independence – often in direct contradistinction to Camus – he too was compelled to do so through a profession of the legitimacy of speech on behalf of Algeria and Algerians. It was a matter of historical justice, Sartre argued, that the colonized people of Algeria should win freedom, since the history of colonial oppression was synonymous with the history of the oppression of the global proletariat. In essence, Sartre's position against the war was an extension of intellectual commitment to cover situations beyond the metropole, and inclusive of the third world.[238] These positions were outgrowths of the spectacular falling out that occurred between Sartre and Camus in 1952, which happened largely because of their differences in opinion regarding the necessity of committed intervention in politics. In the debate over the war in Algeria however, the crisis of legitimacy intensified their differences, even as they both articulated their positions through the same tropes of legitimacy and authority. It was in the name of the Algerians that Sartre spoke, and by the authority of historical justice, just as Camus too spoke in the name of the Algerians, and by the authority of an ethical humanism.

While historians like James le Sueur and Todd Sheperd have discussed the use of these tropes, little attention has been paid to their philosophical stakes. By legitimizing their positions through appeals to justice and right, French intellectuals turned their speech into ethical action. In this way, the intellectual debate over the war in Algeria was qualitatively different than the debate over the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals. While the debate over the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals was essentially a

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[237] See Le Sueur, 87-131.
[238] See Le Sueur, 28-54; and Sheperd, 55-81.

political debate, the debate over the war in Algeria was an ethical one. The appeals to justice and right that French intellectuals made in their speech were intended to ground their actions in metaphysics. The philosophical question that motivated the debate was not what kind of ethical action should be taken, but rather, if one has a metaphysical or theoretical understanding of the world, was one enjoined to act on it? This chapter takes these philosophical stakes as a point of departure, and accounts for the "Déclaration" in order to follow the ethical critique and abandonment of Sartrean commitment.

The history of the "Déclaration" begins with Blanchot's friendship with Dionys Mascolo, the husband of Marguerite Duras, and the principal organizer of the failed Comité d'Action des Intellectuels contre la Poursuite de la Guerre en Afrique du Nord. Along with the surrealist Jean Schuster, Mascolo had founded an anti-Gaullist journal titled *Le 14 juillet* in order to protest the events of May 1958. Shortly after seeing the first issue later that summer, Blanchot wrote to Mascolo, breaking his decade of political silence. Mascolo recalled the striking words of Blanchot's unsolicited overture thirty-two years later in 1990: "I want to tell you my agreement. I refuse everything of the past, and I accept nothing of the present."[239] This brought Blanchot into the group of intellectuals known as the "Group of Rue Saint-Benoit," after the location of Duras' apartment where the members gathered, including des Forêts (the author of "La Bavard," and a major French writer in his own right, who worked with Mascolo as an editor at Gallimard), Robert Antelme (Duras' ex-husband), and Edgar Morin. The title of *Le 14 juillet* harkened to the founding moment of the French Revolution, and its pages were

[239] "Je veux vous dire mon accord. Je refuse tout le passé et je n'accepte rien du présent." Dionys Mascolo, "Un itinéraire politique." By Aliette Armel. *Magazin littéraire*, 278 (June 1990): 40.

punctuated by etchings of famous events and personalities of the Revolution, with supplementary quotations from Robespierre, Saint-Just, and others. Blanchot contributed one essay apiece to the second and third issues, titled "Le Refus," and "La Perversion essentielle," which made arguments against de Gaulle's legitimacy.[240] *Le 14 juillet* ceased publication in 1959, but the group of Rue Saint-Benoit continued to be active in the anti-war movement. To protest the trial of the Jeanson Network in 1960, Mascolo wanted to circulate a collective petition, reprising the coalition of the Comité d'Action.[241] He sought assistance from Blanchot and Schuster, with whom he co-authored the petition. This was the "Déclaration sur la Droit à l'Insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie."[242]

The "Déclaration" adhered to the theme of ethical action that motivated the rest of the debate over the war in Algeria, claiming that "a moral dilemma has been posed since the beginning of the war," regarding the possibility of acting in the absence of any clear values.[243] This was Blanchot's contribution to the debate over the war in Algeria however, and as he did with the debate over the postwar purge of writers and

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[240] See Blanchot, "Le Refus", *Le 14 juillet* 2 (October 1958): 3; and "La Perversion essentielle", *Le 14 juillet* 3 (June 1959): 18-20.

[241] Blanchot's role in the drafting of the "Déclaration" is discussed at length in Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998), 391-402. See also, Annie-Cohen Solal, *Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 694-717.

[242] The collective authorship of the "Déclaration" calls into question the extent to which it can be treated as the work of Blanchot, and consequently, as Blanchot's contribution to the debate over the war in Algeria. But for Blanchot, even the act of signing the "Déclaration" was binding, since it attached one's being to the words in the text. To this extent, it did not matter whether one was the author in a traditional sense. For Blanchot, he was responsible for the "Déclaration" not just because he was one of its three principal authors, but also because he took responsibility for it by virtue of his signature. In view of Blanchot's understanding of his own responsibility for the "Déclaration," this chapter will treat the "Déclaration" as the part of his corpus that represents his stance on the war in Algeria. This point is developed at length below.

[243] "Le cas de conscience s'est trouvé posé des le début de la guerre." *Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie*, 50.

intellectuals, he appropriated the form and the terms of the other polemicists, while going far beyond them. Any resemblance to the other positions in the debate over the war in Algeria ended with the exigency for ethical action: the commitment of the radical left, and the reconciliation of the liberal and humanist left were both inadequate to respond to the war in Algeria for Blanchot, and the other signatories. It was equally necessary to abandon Sartre's notion of commitment, which Blanchot had shown to be incapable of producing genuine political change during the postwar purge, and invent an alternative form of engagement. Likewise, it was necessary to make a clear intervention in the debate over the war in Algeria without resorting to the humanist notions of justice that Camus, and other liberals invoked in support of both reconciliation, and independence. For many French intellectuals, not least among whom was Sartre himself, Camus' humanism was abhorrent because it led him to support the continued French possession of Algeria. From this position, a notion of justice based on an ethics of humanism was inadequate because it blinded Camus to the manifest injustice of his political positions. But for Blanchot, the ethical humanism of Camus was inadequate for different reasons. Blanchot developed his opposition to Camus' ethical humanism when he was called on by *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* to respond to the falling out between Sartre and Camus.[244] His objection to Camus was not that his ethical humanism allowed for

[244] Blanchot's response to the split between Sartre and Camus was published in the summer of 1954, spread out over four issues of *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*. They were: "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan," *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, 15 (March 1954): 492-501; "Réflexions sur l'enfer (I)," *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, 16 (April 1954): 677-686; "Réflexions sur le nihilisme (II)," *La Nouvelle nouvelle Revue Française*, 17 (May 1954): 850-859; "Tu peux tuer cet homme (III)," *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, 18 (June 1954): 1059-1069. Though the first essay did not carry a roman numeral designating its place, it was an engagement Camus' reading of Don Juan. Its publication in March, immediately before the three-part piece which began in April, as well as its inclusion along with the three-part piece in the collection *L'Éntretien infini* under the title "Réflexions sur l'enfer," indicates that it

injustice to exist, but that humanism could never provide a stable ground on which to act ethically. Blanchot's response to the dispute between Sartre and Camus was, then, crucial for his development of an ethical critique of Sartrean commitment, and an important antecedent of the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie."

Today it is known that Blanchot was one of the principal authors of the "Déclaration," but at the time all one hundred and twenty-one of the signatories took responsibility for the text collectively.[245] Nor did any of them relent under legal pressure. In the many depositions, inquests, and interrogations that followed, none of the signatories were willing to single out any one individual as the document's true author. It was a text for which they all insisted on their collective responsibility. At its most basic level, it disavowed the right of a single author to speak in the name of anyone else, even if they had countersigned the text. The "Déclaration" was unique because it did not attempt to speak for anyone other than its signatories, and it did not profess a concept of justice. It affirmed the right to refuse service in the army, but the one hundred and twenty-one signatories made this affirmation only in their own name, collectively. It declared that the right to refuse service was justified, but it did not explain the notion of justice on which this right was based. This declaration was followed by the signatures of

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should be treated as a part of Blanchot's response to the split between Sartre and Camus. See *L'Éntretien infini* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), 256-288.

[245] This creates a difficulty for any account of the "Déclaration." On the one hand, there is substantial historical evidence that Blanchot wrote the "Déclaration." On the other, it is also necessary to refer to the collective responsibility of the signatories when discussing the "Déclaration" as an ethical act with definite consequences for the debate over the war in Algeria. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to Blanchot as the author of the "Déclaration" when discussing its philosophical genealogy in an analytical register. But when discussing its historical affect as an ethical action, I will refer to the collective responsibility of the signatories.

one hundred and twenty-one people, including Robert Antelme, Blanchot, André Breton, Simone Dreyfus, Marguerite Duras, Louis-René des Forêts, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Leiris, Dionys Mascolo, François Maspero, Maurice Nadeau, Alain Resnais, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Christiane Rochefort, Nathalie Sarraute, Simone Signoret, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet among others.[246]

As a result of the decision to not speak in anyone's name other than their own, and the decision to not provide any concept of justice on which their declaration rested, the signatories of the "Déclaration" performed a different kind of ethical action than either Camus, or Sartre's speech. The act of the "Déclaration" was able to create an ethical law outside the purview of the law of the state because those who wrote it did so only in their own names, and because they did not succumb to the pressure to attach their act to a notion of justice based on metaphysics. As an act, it provided an alternative to Sartrean commitment, which was an inadequate grounding for intervention in politics ever since the debate over the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals. At the same time, the "Déclaration" provided an alternative to the equally inadequate positions of the liberal and reconciliatory left.

As a text however, the "Déclaration" only served as the blank mask of its deeper philosophical content. It cannot be explained solely by contextualizing it within the debate over the war in Algeria, because it departed from the positions of that debate so

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[246] In a confusing turn of events Jean-Paul Sartre, Francis Jeanson, and Simone de Beauvoir all signed as well. At the time however, Sartre was in Brazil, pursuing interests there, and not in France. Sartre gave his signtature to the "Déclaration" to lend it symbolic weight, since he was France's most visible public intellectual. This should not be taken to mean that Sartre reached a philosophical or political rapprochement with Blanchot or with Camus. Rather he set aside his intellectual differences to further the anti-war movement. See Cohen-Solal, *Sartre*.

radically. Nor can it be explained solely by reference to Blanchot's corpus, because it bore none of the traces of his philosophical or literary concepts. The history of the "Déclaration" thus suffers from the same problems that plague the history of "La Littérature et le droit à la mort." Historical treatments have failed to account for its philosophical content by focusing on its place in the debate over the war in Algeria to the exclusion of Blanchot's role in its composition. For le Sueur and Sirinelli, the "Déclaration" was just one more petition in a war in which French intellectuals produced new petitions on a regular basis. Setting it beside the Alleg and Boupacha affairs, le Sueur folds the "Déclaration" into the trial of the Jeanson Network, and the protests that it occasioned. For le Sueur, the "Déclaration" demonstrated the gulf separating the radical left from more moderate intellectuals, who issued a counter-manifesto, which called for peace but stopped short of advocating desertion from the army.[247] Sirinelli takes a more detailed look at the affair inspired by the "Déclaration" itself, narrating its genesis, the trial that followed, and the petitions that flew back and forth between the manifesto's supporters, and its antagonists. For Sirinelli, the "Déclaration" was but one of many such petitions, and not even the most important, as its signatories tended too much to the avant-garde to exert a real influence on "civil society."[248] These treatments are helpful for having established the "Déclaration" within the wider field of the debate over the war in Algeria, but they do not go far enough in exploring the things that set it

[247] The signatories of this counter-manifesto included Raymond Aron, Roland Barthes, Georges Canguilhem, Jean Cassou, Jean-Marie Domenach, Jean Dresch, Claude Lefort, Jacques Le Goff, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edgar Morin, Daniel Meyer, and Paul Ricouer. See Le Sueur, 205-213.
[248] See Sirinelli, 265-306.

apart: the rejection of any claims to legitimacy and authority to speak on another's behalf, and the character of the collective ethical action.

Philosophical treatments, by contrast, have ignored the history of the "Déclaration" in the debate over the war in Algeria, in order to focus on its relation to Blanchot's later communitarian and utopian politics. Christopher Fynsk places the "Déclaration" in the context of Blanchot's efforts to establish an international journal, a reprisal of *Le 14 juillet* to be published collaboratively in French, German, Italian, and English, as a response to the abstraction of politics wrought by the Cold War.[249] Similar to Allan Stoekl's treatment of "La Littérature et la droit à la mort," Fynsk's essay argues that Blanchot's thought in the years between 1958 and 1962 was not concerned with the war in Algeria, but again with building a theory of politics and a theory of community. Fynsk's essay is subtle and nuanced in its critique of Blanchot's vision for a utopian project of collaborative literary creation, but by choosing not to pursue the deeper meaning of the "Déclaration," Fynsk misses a crucial opportunity to revise the prevailing understanding of Blanchot's politics, and redress what Henri-Lévy called an "unthinkable…gap between [Blanchot] and his relation to himself and to his ethics."

By tracing the genealogy of the "Déclaration" within Blanchot's thought, it is possible to recover its missing philosophical content. The content of the "Déclaration" lays not in the context of the debate over the war in Algeria, but in Blanchot's response to the controversy sparked by the split between Sartre and Camus in 1952. This split set the ideological lines of the debate over the war in Algeria, and determined Blanchot's stance

[249] Christopher Fynsk, "Blanchot in The International Review," *Paragraph* 30, no. 3 (2007): 104-120. Even more abstract in this regard is Patrick Hanafin, "The Writer's Refusal and the Law's Malady," *Journal of Law and Society* 31, no. 1 (2004): 3-14.

on the ethics of intellectual engagement. By following Blanchot's involvement in this debate, it is possible to understand the full significance of the "Déclaration" as an ethical act. That is to say, by examining the grounds which conditioned the positions in the debate over the war in Algeria – including that of the "Déclaration" – it is possible to determine Blanchot's stance on the war in Algeria. Following this line of inquiry leads to a relatively unknown corner of Blanchot's corpus, but an important one nonetheless. Blanchot's essays on the split between Sartre and Camus represented more than just his own voice. They were also *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*'s response to the split, and as such, they represented the position of the most influential and widely circulated anti-commitment journal, and its anti-commitment editor, Jean Paulhan. By tracing this genealogy, I argue that the "Déclaration" advanced upon to the critique of commitment made during the postwar purge by articulating a ethical mode of intellectual engagement in politics.

This was a key moment in the move beyond commitment. With the "Déclaration" Blanchot and his co-signatories found a grounding for ethical action which relied neither on the appeals to metaphysical and historical justice made by commitment, nor the Camusian appeals to humanism, nor the crisis of legitimacy's injunction to speak another's name. Indeed, the grounding for ethical action was found precisely in the refusal of these appeals and injunctions. The previous chapter charted Blanchot's critique of commitment's inability to produce a viable politics. This chapter charts Blanchot's abandonment of commitment *tout court*, in favor of an ethically, rather than politically grounded mode of intellectual engagement. Scholars of Blanchot's ethics typically focus

on his relationship with Levinas and Bataille, and his development of the concept of the radical alterity in later works such as *L'Écriture du désastre*.[250] Such scholarship offers a vision of Blanchot's ethics anchored firmly in theoretical reason. The history of the "Déclaration" however, offers a very different picture of Blanchot's ethics. It offers a picture not only of Blanchot's stance on the war in Algeria, but also of an ethics based on practical reason.

Blanchot and Camus during the 1950s

In 1960, at the time of the "Déclaration," Blanchot was a fully participating member of the Parisian intellectual avant-garde. But throughout much of the 1950s, as the war in Algeria developed, Blanchot remained in the exile he had imposed on himself after the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals. After World War II Blanchot fled Paris, and took a room on the French Mediterranean, in the village of Èze, from which he did not return until the winter of 1957-1958. At the time he was only 39 years old, and had published just two of his eventual thirteen major works of fiction, and only one collection of critical work, of an eventual six by the time of his death.[251] While he had achieved a measure of respect from the small circle of intellectuals that attended George Bataille's salon, he had not yet distinguished himself more widely. But personal renown

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[250] See, for example, Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing* (London: Routledge, 1997); and William Large, *Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot: Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing* (Manchester, UK: Clinamen, 2004).

[251] Since Blanchot died in February 2003, two new collections of previously unpublished material have appeared. The first collects all of Blanchot's political writing from the postwar period, including many of the pamphlets and tracts that he authored anonymously for the Comité d'action d'étudiants-écrivains. The second collects all of the critical pieces Blanchot published in the *Journal des débats* that were not released in *Faux Pas* (1943). See Blanchot, *Écrits politiques: 1958-1993*; Blanchot, *Chroniques littéraire du Journal des débats: Avril 1941-août 1944* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

was the furthest thing from Blanchot's mind. Between the end of 1947 the summer of 1958 his only presence in Parisian intellectual culture was his signature on the cryptic and obscure book reviews and literary essays that were published in *Critique* and *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*.

In Èze Blanchot found the solitude that he deemed necessary to be able to write, and which the constant circulation of Parisian intellectual culture prohibited. Indeed, while living in Èze, Blanchot developed the theory of writerly solitude that became a cornerstone of his philosophy. In Blanchot's inimitable manner however, he went beyond the solitude of being alone, to suggest that real solitude had nothing do with the writer at all, and everything to do with the solitude of the work of art. To Blanchot, the work existed in solitude because it was suspended between the writer and the reader. It was not the writer's, because once he had finished producing the work he set it aside. In an essay published in January of 1953, Blanchot wrote that the work emerges from its solitude and "is accomplished when the *œuvre* is the intimacy between someone who writes it and someone who reads it."[252] Blanchot believed that the work became a true work "only when, through it, with the violence of a beginning which is proper to it, the word *being* is pronounced."[253] And the work had being only when it became the intimacy between a writer and a reader. For Blanchot, solitude was not merely being alone – this common solitude was "concentration" – the essential solitude of the writer was the condition of being able to communicate.

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[252] "S'accomplit quand l'œuvre est l'intimité de quelqu'un qui l'écrit et de quelqu'un qui la lit." Blanchot, "La Solitude essentielle," *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1 (January 1953): 77.
[253] "L'œuvre n'est œuvre que lorsque se prononce par elle, dans la violence d'un commencement qui lui est propre, le mot être." Blanchot, "La Solitude essentielle," 77.

Blanchot's years in Èze were the most prolific of his career, both as a critic, and as a writer of fiction. During this period Blanchot published nearly one hundred critical essays, in a variety of journals. These pieces formed the bulk of the 1949 collection, *La Part de feu*, and the entirety of the collections *L'Espace littéraire*, released in 1956, and *La Livre à venir*, from 1959. Indeed, Blanchot published so many critical essays during this period that he was still able to return to them in order to fill out the collections he released in 1969 and 1971, *L'Entretien infini*, and *L'Amitié*. It was also during this period that Blanchot began his longtime residence at *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, which was to be the most enduring institutional relationship of his life, and the venue through which he established his centrality in French intellectual culture.

At the same time, Blanchot also experienced a period of greater literary production than at any other time in his life. While in Èze Blanchot published seven new works of fiction. This flurry of activity coincided with his decision to abandon the format of the novel. During the early 1940s Blanchot had published his first two novels, *Thomas l'obscur* and *Aminadab*. *Thomas l'obscur* was agonizingly written and rewritten many times between 1932 and 1940, before it was finally published in 1941. *Aminadab*, named for the brother of a friend, the Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, was published in 1942. Blanchot published his last novel, *Le Trés-Haut*, in 1948. That same year he published his first *récit*, *L'Arrêt de mort*. In French literature the *récit*, or account, is distinguished from the novel by its shorter length, and more importantly by its disavowal of the omniscient narrative position of the novel. Wholly embracing the minimalism of the genre, Blanchot titled his second *récit* simply, "Un Récit," which appeared in the

journal *Empédocle* in 1949. This *récit* was later republished under the title *La Folie du jour*.[254] In 1950 Blanchot revisited his own corpus, and published a severely truncated version of *Thomas l'obscur*.[255] *Au Moment voulu* and *Le Ressassement éternel* followed in 1951; *Celui que ne m'accompagnait pas* in 1953, and *Le Dernier homme* 1957.

If Blanchot was intellectually productive, it came at the expense of other concerns. During his time in Èze, Blanchot did not participate actively in the political arguments of the Fourth Republic, or the developments in the satellite states of the Soviet Union or the third world, which consumed the Parisian intelligentsia. Over the course of the 1950s, French intellectuals shifted their allegiances from international communism to decolonization. The Moscow show trials of the postwar period, Khruschev's secret speech denouncing Stalinism, and ultimately the brutality of the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution disenchanted the intellectual left from their commitment to the revolution embodied by the Soviet Union.[256] At the same time, freedom movements in both Indochina and Algeria shifted intellectuals' attention from the spread of communism to third world struggles. By the end of the 1950s *tiers mondisme*, the support for third world revolutions against colonial possession, replaced communism among the

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[254] Jacques Derrida has commented extensively on the ambiguity of the alternative titles "Un Récit," and *La Folie du jour*. See Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), esp. "Survivre," pp. 117-218, and "La loi du genre," pp. 249-287. For Derrida this ambiguity opens the polysemia of the text.

[255] On the choice to shorten *Thomas l'Obscur*, see Thomas Schestag, "Mantis, Relics," trans. Georgia Albert, *Yale French Studies* 93 (1998): 221-251. Schestag deals with a situation that is the inverse of Derrida's. While Derrida studies a single text that has borne alternate titles, Schestag deals with two texts that bear the same title. Interestingly, Schestag comes to the almost opposite conclusion: "They mean nothing. The version published in 1950 is essentially no different from the one published in 1941; thus it is also not the same, but the relation of the two versions to each is *in-different*." (248)

[256] See Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

intellectual left.[257] Blanchot's return to Paris in the winter of 1957-1958, and his radicalization by De Gaulle's seizure of power in May of 1958, persuaded him to rejoin the intellectual community and its engagement in politics.

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During the same period that Blanchot withdrew from Parisian intellectual society, Albert Camus became its champion, eventually winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. Yet from the moment he was born on 7 November 1913, to his premature death in a car accident on 4 January 1960, Camus was an outsider on the inside, a peripheral member of the elite societies in which he uncomfortably found himself.[258] Raised and educated in Algiers, Camus moved to Paris only in March of 1940 to work for the newspaper *Paris-Soir*. During World War II, he became the editor of the prominent resistance newspaper *Combat*, earning his reputation as the emblematic politically-committed intellectual.[259] In 1942 Camus published *L'Etranger*, the short novel that brought his first public success, and *Le mythe de sisyphe*, the philosophical text for which he is associated with existentialism. After World War II Camus continued to work for *Combat* until 1947, but by then his commitment had begun to wane. In 1951 he published *L'homme révolté*, in which he condemned the French communist party, and communism more generally, for turning a blind eye to all the suffering created in the

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[257] See Jean-Pierre Rioux & Jean-François Sirinelli, eds., *La guerre d'Algérie et les intellectuals français*.
[258] Two comprehensive biographies of Camus exist: Herbert Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), and Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: une vie* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1996).
[259] This daily newspaper put out by the resistance bore no relation to the right-wing weekly called *Combat*, to which Blanchot contributed in 1936 and 1937.

name of revolution. News was just reaching France of Stalin's gulags from sources such as Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, and the entire intellectual community was split over the question of whether to continue supporting the Soviet Union.[260] This debate crystallized in the highly publicized split between Camus and Sartre, who insisted that the Soviet Union remained the guiding light for humanity, despite its atrocities.[261] Such was Camus' fame that two prominent news-magazines ran headlines covering his split with Sartre: "The Sartre-Camus Break is consummated," announced *Samedi-Soir*, "Sartre against Camus" ran *France-Illustration*.[262] Camus continued to advocate, in ever more official capacities, for peaceful, non-violent resolutions to revolutionary conflicts during the Algerian War of Independence. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize Camus was confirmed as the avatar of Parisian intellectual culture.

Yet for all this, Camus was an outsider in the very culture that he led. He held neither of the two most important entry cards to Parisian intellectual culture. First, Camus was not educated at the École Normale Supérieure, nor at the Sorbonne, but rather in Algeria, so he did not belong to the exclusive club of *normaliens*. Secondly, Camus was essentially a moralist, a trait which the Parisian esthetes shunned.[263] But more than anything else, it was Camus' Algerian identity that barred his access, and prevented him

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[260] On French intellectuals' relationship to the USSR, see Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*. See also David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

[261] On the Sartre-Camus confrontation see Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Germaine Brée, *Camus and Satre: Crisis and Commitment* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972). The primary documents of the confrontation have been translated and assembled in David Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven, eds., *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation*, trans. Sprintzen and van den Hoven (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2004).

[262] Cited in Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It*, 2.

[263] Paulhan, one of Parisian intellectual culture's ringleaders during and after the war, was especially uncharitable toward Camus moralism. See Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biogrpahy*, 293-294.

from assimilating to Parisian intellectual culture. Camus was a *pied-noir*, one of the roughly 750,000 white, Algerian-born, French colonists that ruled over 8 million Arab and Berber Algerians. This proved to be an identity that Camus could never fully inhabit. While he enjoyed the privileges of membership in Algeria's racial elite, Camus grew up in poverty that prevented him from fully identifying with the wealthy French *colons*. David Carroll suggests that "the poor, uneducated *pieds-noirs* to which Camus' family belonged, even if the only official national identity they had was French, clearly considered themselves more Algerian than French and referred to France as if it were a foreign country."[264] Likewise, when Camus gained access to the highest echelons of Parisian intellectual culture through the success of his books and his friendship with Jean-Paul Sartre, he never fully assimilated into the role of the Parisian intellectual. Instead, he remained attached to what he saw as his Algerian identity. For Carroll, this accounts for Camus' refusal to march lockstep with other Parisian intellectuals into the Parti Communiste Français, for his quixotic pleas for a peaceful resolution to the Algerian War of Independence, and his calls for the establishment of a multicultural, multiethnic Algeria. For Camus, it was "the Algerian" in him that opened him up to the harsh, even *ad hominem* criticism that he encountered in the 1950s.[265]

It might seem startling then, to place Camus alongside Blanchot. In the annals of postwar French intellectual history Camus' name belongs in the tradition of humanism, while Blanchot gets listed next to anti-humanists like Althusser, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, etc. Most commentators on Blanchot's life and work also tend to treat

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[264] David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice*, 4.
[265] For a rigorous discussion of the multiple valences of Camus' self-identification with Algeria, see Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian*, 1-16.

his relationship to Camus dismissively.[266] Yet their lives intersected in a multitude of ways – professionally, and personally. Both worked as readers for Gallimard, Camus having joined the staff in 1943. Both served on the committee that awarded Gallimard's Prix de la Pléiade, given to young writers of promise.[267] Indeed, Blanchot may even have voted for *La Peste* for another of Gallimard's prizes in 1948, the Prix des Critiques.[268] Both published with Gallimard, though Camus was printed in much higher numbers, and distributed much more widely than Blanchot.[269] Finally, Blanchot wrote an article for the resistance newspaper *Combat* in 1946, while it was still under Camus' editorship.[270]

These ephemeral, professional connections are unable to account for the startling number of essays that Blanchot published on Camus, however. Significantly for a writer who was so sparing with his references to others, Blanchot published no less than eight articles on Camus from 1942 to 1960, more than he devoted to any of his other contemporaries. Blanchot reviewed both *L'Étranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* when they appeared in 1942.[271] He reviewed *Les Justes* and *La Chute* when they were published in

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[266] This includes philosophical analyses like those by Leslie Hill and Marlène Zarader, but also Blanchot's biography. Christophe Bident subsumes Blanchot's work on Camus underneath his work on Nietzsche, effectively denying the importance of the former to the development of Blanchot's thought. See Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998), 348. For analytical works that dismiss Camus, see Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, and Marlène Zarader, *L'être et le neutre: à partir de Maurice Blanchot*.

[267] See Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography*, 297; see also Bident. *Maurice Blanchot: partenaire invisible*, 224.

[268] *La Peste*, so close in theme and in tenor to Blanchot's *Le Trés-haut* – published only one year later – was the only of Camus' major works that Blanchot did not review. See Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography*, 426.

[269] See Todd, *Albert Camus: une vie*, 290.

[270] Maurice Blanchot, "L'intellectuel est toujours responsable", *Combat* (26 July 1946): 2.

[271] Maurice Blanchot, "Le Roman de l'étranger," *Journal des Débats* (19 August 1942): 3; "Le Mythe de Sisyphe," *Journal des Débats*, (25 November 1942): 3.

1950 and 1956, respectively.[272] And in the spring of 1954 Blanchot published his response to the Camus-Sartre split, which included the longest essay Blanchot wrote on a single author other than Mallarmé, Kafka, Rilke, Lautréamont or Sade. Written while Blanchot was on his sojourn in Èze, this response was published over the course of four months. Ostensibly a review of *L'Homme révolté* – the book that had initiated the split with Sartre – Blanchot's essay reunited the themes that he had been developing in his literary criticism, with the issue of ethics. Camus for his part became aware of Blanchot in December of 1942, when he read *Thomas l'obscur* and *Aminadab*, later pressing his friends to read them, along with Nietzsche.[273] While Camus was travelling through France in 1943 – his residency having been cancelled by the occupying German forces – he regularly read and discussed Blanchot's essays published in *Journal des débats*, sent to him by his friend Pascal Pia.[274]

In order to account for the affinity between Blanchot and Camus, it is necessary to move beyond the biographical anecdote, and consider their identity as writers and intellectuals. As an outsider on the inside of Parisian intellectual culture, Camus was actually closer to Blanchot than it appears at first. Like Camus, Blanchot also experienced Parisian intellectual culture as an outsider, having been educated at Strasbourg, rather than the École Normale Supérieure, and having dedicated himself to solitude, rather than the starlit publicity enjoyed by Sartre, André Malraux, and others of

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[272] Maurice Blanchot, "Les Justes," *L'Observateur* 15 (20 July 1950): 17; "La Confession dédaigneuse", *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* 48 (December 1956): 1050-1056.
[273] Camus made note of *Aminadab* and *Thomas l'obscur* in his notebooks under the heading "The metaphysical novels by Maurice Blanchot." See Albert Camus, *Carnets: janvier 1942 – mars 1951* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 65-66. See also Todd, *Albert Camus: une vie*, 320.
[274] See Todd, *Albert Camus: une vie*, 306.

the inner circle. In the two panegyrics that Blanchot wrote for Camus (later condensed into a single essay for the collection *L'Amitié*), Blanchot wrote of the way that Camus' work at once seemed to mask Camus' face, yet at the same time manifest his face in the only truthful way possible. In "Le Détour vers la simplicité," the second of the panegyrics, published in May 1960, five months after Camus' death, Blanchot wrote:

> *L'Etranger* is not Camus, which it would be simplicity to believe, no more than is the lawyer in *La Chute* or Doctor Rieux in *La Peste*: everything rejects this identification. However, we recognize, by a very certain presentiment, that these characters, however decisively drawn, are only characters, that is, they are masks: the figured surface behind which a certain voice speaks and, through this voice, a presence that could not reveal itself. Masked, what advances behind the mask – must I make this clear? – is not the man who is natural, and simple, and often direct, who is Albert Camus.[275]

Blanchot might as well have been writing about himself, for he too withdrew into his work, which became the patchwork material from which a mask of Blanchot was cut.[276] The use of the term "figured" (*figurée*) intimates the ambivalence of the French *figure*, which can mean both "figure," and "face." It was often assumed that the Henri Sorge, the main character of Blanchot's novel, *Le Trés-haut*, Thomas from *Thomas l'obscur*, and especially the nameless character from the *L'instant de ma mort* were each figures of the real Blanchot. Michel Foucault described the way Blanchot receded into his work, and the way that his work came to function as a substitute for Blanchot's physical

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[275] "*L'Étranger* n'est pas Camus, quelle simplicité que de le croire, et pas davantage l'avocat de *La Chute*, ni le docteur Rieux de *La Peste*: tout se refuse à cette identification. Pourtant, nous reconnaissons, par un presentiment très sûr, que ces personages, si décidément tracés, ne sont que des personages, c'est-à-dire des masques: la surface figurée derrière laquelle parle une certaine voix et, par cette vox, une présense qui ne saurait se découvrir. Masqué, ce qui s'avance sous le masque, - dois-je le préciser? – ce n'est pas cet homme parfaitement naturel, et simple, et souvent direct, qu'est Albert Camus." Maurice Blanchot, "Le detour vers la simplicité," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 89 (May 1960): 7.

[276] J. Hillis Miller concludes that this withdrawal was deliberate, and that Blanchot's corpus constitutes a sustained meditation on prosopopoeia. See Miller, "Death Mask: Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort*," in *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 179-210.

absence in "La Pensée du dehors": "So far has [Blanchot] withdrawn into the manifestation of his work, so completely is he, not hidden by his texts, but absent from their existence and absent by the marvelous force of their existence, that for us he is above all, that thought itself – its real presence."[277]

When Camus died in January of 1960, it was of his works that Blanchot wrote – as though they limned Camus himself. Blanchot contributed the preface to the March 1960 issue of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* dedicated to Camus, in which he wrote, entirely in italics "*that* [Camus' works] *should suddenly desert us, we must indeed be convinced of this, even if they are there, around us, with all of the strength that belongs to them…[yet] this desertion does not take them away from us, surely; it is the manner in which they are close to us*."[278] But it was also of their ethical resonance that Blanchot wrote, and it was also ethically that Camus' friendship remained with Blanchot. This he expressed not through declarations or protestations, but by issuing the reminder that Camus lived on only in the anguish a reader felt when confronted with the task of bringing a work into being: "[Camus' works remain close to us through] *the pain that this proximity introduces in our thought each time that, turning toward them, we come up against this presence of resistance proper to a work already closing itself up, and we cannot help it to close itself up by appreciating or calmly regarding it from a little farther*

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[277] "Tanti il se retire dans la manifestation de son œuvre, tant il est, non pas caché par ses texts, mais absent de leur existence et absent par la force merveilleuse de leur existence, il est plutôt pour nous cette pensée meme – la présence réelle." Michel Foucault, "La Pensée du dehors," *Critique* 229 (June 1966): 527.

[278] "*Que ceux-ci tout à coup nous manquent, il faut bien nous en convaincre, même s'ils sont là, autour de nous, avec toutes les forces qui leur appartiennent. Ce manqué ne les écarte pas de nous, assurement: il est la manière dont ils nous sont proches*." Maurice Blanchot, "Albert Camus," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 87 (March 1960): 403-404.

away."[279] Blanchot's implication was that Camus did not remain – and was not present in life – when others reduced his work to philosophically baseless humanism, and his politics to naïve complicity and toleration, "*cold-bloodedly*," and "*in ignorance of their shadow*," as was so often the case.[280]

If Blanchot and Camus are now considered to have inhabited separate spheres of postwar French intellectual culture, it is in spite of the many material connections that existed between them throughout the 1940s and 1950s. In truth, postwar French intellectual culture was a site where many such unlikely connections existed, both in the lives of intellectuals, and in the texts that they wrote. Many times, it was the context of these unlikely connections, that proved essential to the development of a particular idea, or a particular text. Such was the case with the "Déclaration sur la droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie." Taken at face value, the "Déclaration," seemed to exist at a significant remove from mainstream intellectual culture, which is to say, outside of the polemics of Sartre and Camus. It was written by Blanchot, Mascolo, and Schuster, all denizens of Duras' apartment on Rue Saint-Benoit rather than the cafés of Boulevard de Montparnasse. It refused to invoke the tropes that other polemics on the war in Algeria used so freely. Yet on closer inspection, the history of the "Déclaration," with its genesis in Blanchot's response to the split between Sartre and Camus in 1952, becomes clear.

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[279] "*...la douleur que cette promimité introduit dans nortre pensée, chaque fois que, nous tournant vers eux, nous nous heurtons à cette présence de dureté, propre à l'œuvre qui déjà se referme et que nous n'aiderons pas à se refermer en l'appréciant ou en la regardant calmement, d'un peu loin*." Ibid. 404.
[280] "*...sang-froid...en ignorant l'ombre...*" Ibid. 403.

The Ethics of Commitment

In 1952, the year of the split between Sartre and Camus, Sartre still held to the doctrine of existential commitment as a mode of intellectual engagement in politics that he had elaborated during the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals. Likewise, Blanchot was still convinced of the critique of commitment that he had articulated in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort." His response to the split between Sartre and Camus hinged not on any reappraisal of commitment, but on a deep and painstaking engagement with Camus. This split was occasioned by Camus's publication of *L'Homme révolté* in 1951, which launched its own full-scale critique of commitment, though from a distinctly different position than Blanchot's. It was this critique, and the ethics that Camus established out of it, to which Blanchot responded when he was commissioned by *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* to issue a statement on the split.

Before addressing Blanchot's work on Camus, it is necessary to first review the history of the split. *L'Homme révolté* directly challenged the ethical legitimacy of commitment. It was a turning point in Camus' philosophy and his life, which had formerly been devoted to the struggle against oppression. Sartre responded by disavowing his friendship with Camus in a series of condemnatory essays, which berated Camus' philosophy and accused him of naïveté and bad faith. Unlike the debate over the postwar purge, which was largely impersonal, and which was fought between the editorial positions of the journals *Les Temps modernes*, *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, *Critique* and *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* rather than individuals, the split between Sartre and Camus was intensely personal. It went back and forth for most of

1952, with Sartre, Camus, and Francis Jeanson trading ripostes in the pages of *Les Temps modernes*. As petty as the *ad hominem* attacks became in this feud, what was at stake was the very possibility of intervening in politics, and making a change for the better.[281] Camus charged that commitment was unethical because it condoned, and even suborned murder. This critique of commitment's ethics differed from Blanchot's political critique, which argued in 1947 that commitment was incapable of creating any kind of real political change.

L'Homme révolté emerged out of Camus' disenchantment with the treatment of political prisoners in the Soviet gulags, and with the French intellectual left's willful blindness to the atrocities that communism perpetrated in the name of freedom. Its central argument was that revolutionary movements begun in good faith always became enamored with their own power, and ended up becoming just another repressive regime, justifying murder with political doctrine. Camus' book was abominated by the left-wing intellectual community from the moment it was published in October 1951, costing Camus his friendship with Sartre, and isolating him politically from the vast majority of French intellectuals.

But *L'Homme révolté* contained two different critiques. The first was the critique of history, revolution, Hegel, Marx, and the Soviet gulags, which everyone recognized, and to which the intellectual left had profoundly hostile reactions. This was the critique

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[281] It is important to recognize the weight of what was at stake in the confrontation between Sartre and Camus in order to properly appreciate the ethical and philosophical quality of the "Déclaration." Despite this, there is a tendency among scholars to scoff at the pretension of French intellectuals, and thereby dismiss the stakes of this debate. Russell Jacoby notes, "To pursue this question requires taking French intellectuals as seriously as they take themselves. This is not always easy." Jacoby, "Accidental Friends," http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040405/jacoby, retrieved October 27, 2009. Originally published March 18, 2004.

about which Sartre quipped, "Hegel and I have at least this much in common, you have read neither of us."[282] In Camus' view, all revolutions fell prey to the temptation to take on more power than they deserved. This caused the totalitarianism and political terror that characterized so many revolutionary regimes. For Camus, the use of the camps in service of the proletarian revolution undermined its ideals of emancipation and egalitarianism, and revealed the revolution to have merely supplanted one oppressive regime for another. From this point of view, all historical revolutions were the same, whether they were made in the name of the French *peuple*, the Russian proletariat, or the German *Volk*: "Every modern revolution has led to a reinforcement of the state. 1789 begat Napoléon; 1848, Napoléon III; 1917, Stalin; the troubles in Italy during the 1920s, Mussolini; the Weimar Republic, Hitler."[283] Indeed, the very utopianism of revolutions based on Marxist philosophy led to state terror, since the perfection of the utopian ideal was necessitated by history itself. This utopia demanded total participation from its citizens as the condition of the achievement of its revolutionary goals: "If a subject of the [revolutionary state] does not believe in the revolution, then he is, historically speaking, nothing, by his own choice. He thus chooses sides against history, he is a blasphemer."[284] From the perspective of the revolution, these people who stood against history had to be exterminated. For Camus, such revolutions carried the logic of terror

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[282] "J'aurai du moins ceci de commun avec Hegel que vous ne nous aurez lu ni l'un ni l'autre." Jean-Paul Sartre, "Réponse à Albert Camus," *Les Temps modernes* 82 (August 1952): 344.
[283] "Toutes les révolutions modernes ont abouti à un renforcement de l'état. 1789 Amène Napoléon, 1848 Napoléon III, 1917 Staline, les troubles italiens des années 20 Mussolini, la république de Weimar Hitler." Camus, *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1951), 221.
[284] "Si le sujet de l'empire ne croit pas à l'empire, il n'est rien historiquement, de son propre choix; il choisit donc contre l'histoire, il est blasphémateur." Ibid. 300.

within themselves. For this reason, Camus argued that utopian revolution was itself corrupt.

This first critique was framed however, by a second critique that was less provocative, more elusive, and which went relatively unnoticed by critics. This other critique placed the political question of revolution inside the larger ethical question of murder. In the ten stunning pages that introduced *L'Homme révolté*, Camus turned the ethical question of murder into a critique of ethics *tout court*. He explained that his goal in this ethical critique was to find out "if we have the right to kill another human being, or the right to let him be killed."[285] Camus' immediate target was Sartre's concept of commitment, whereby the intellectual advocated the killing of others, or consented to let them be killed. Sartre's commitment granted itself the right to allow people to be killed in the service of a historically necessitated correction to a political injustice – and in the

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[285] "Si nous avons le droit de tuer cet autre devant nous ou de consentir qu'il soit tué." Ibid. 14. *L'Homme révolté*'s ethical questioning of murder was, at bottom, Kantian in nature. For instance, the terms that it employed to describe the motives for crimes – crimes of "passion" and crimes of "logic" – were strikingly similar to Kant's distinction in the *Critique of Practical Reason* between the "pathological" motives for actions, and "Reason." This aspect of *L'Homme révolté*, and by extension, the Kantian overtones in Blanchot's response to Camus, have not been developed explicitly in this chapter, though they are an important, implicit subtext. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002). In the course of conducting the research for this chapter, it became evident that the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was pursuing a re-evaluation of Kant's ethics during the 1950s in very similar terms to those developed by Camus and Blanchot. This too, is an important, but implicit subtext of the present chapter. Future research projects might pursue the intriguing relation between these unlikely partners in thought more explicitly. See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre VII: L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986); and "Kant avec Sade," in Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966): 765-790. Jacques Alain Miller's commentary on "Kant avec Sade" has been extremely helpful. See Miller, "A Discussion of Lacan's 'Kant avec Sade'," in Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink & Maire Jaanus, eds. *Reading Seminars I and II* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996): 212-240. The work of the Slovenian Lacanians, who are some of the few contemporary philosophers to have engaged with Kant's ethical thought, has been indispensable. See Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2002); Slavoj Žižek, "Kant with (or against) Sade," in *The Zizek Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1999): 283-301; Alenka Zupančič, *The Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000); Zupančič, "The Subject of the Law," in Zizek, ed. *Cogito and the Unconscious* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998): 41-73. Also helpful as been Russell Grigg, "Kant and Freud," in *Lacan, Language, and Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008): 95-108.

case of the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals, going so far as to call for the killing of specific people. Camus argued that this position was unethical not because it violated the sanctity of human life, as a common misperception holds.[286] Rather, commitment to historically necessitated killing was unethical because it allowed one to cede personal responsibility for one's own actions. In this second critique, Camus argued that it was impossible to determine whether killing was ethically legitimate. Neither the metaphysical principle of the absurd, nor the doctrine of positive law were able to establish whether one had the right to kill or not.

Camus' critique was that, in the absence of any principles by which to determine the legitimacy of killing, ethics – universalizable and absolute rules of conduct – no longer existed as such. In the absence of a general ethics, all decisions regarding the act of killing became contingent on one's personal responsibility. In place of ethics, Camus advocated a principle of reasonable culpability, as he termed it. It fell on each and every person to decide for themselves if they were able to kill in any given situation of injustice, and each person had to admit responsibility for their decision. As such, Camus argued that the principle of historical necessity by which commitment legitimated killing, was entirely unethical since it displaced one's personal responsibility onto an external, inhuman rationality. It might be necessary for people to kill in order to defend themselves against oppression, but they were never justified by the historical conditions of that oppression. They were justified only by their ability to make the decision to kill in that specific situation, and on their own responsibility. It was to this second, ethical

[286] See, for instance, Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian*, 101.

critique that Blanchot responded, rather than the first, political critique of revolution, or to the polemics that it generated, and so it is necessary to discuss it in detail before turning to Blanchot's response.

Camus' general critique of ethics, and his critique of the ethics of commitment in specific contained three parts: the first was a critique of the absurd and its inability produce a conclusive ethical position for or against killing. The second part was a critique of the law, and its similar inability to produce a statement for or against killing. This was not the law that Blanchot analyzed in his discussion of Sade during the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals. Rather, this was positive law: an agreed-upon, and codified set of statutes by which crimes could be adjudicated. The final part of Camus' critique of ethics was an articulation of "reasonable culpability," the principle he developed to define one's personal responsibility.

a) The Absurd

The key difference between Camus and Sartre was that Camus refused to allow that the necessity of correcting a historical injustice was a legitimate reason to kill, or to permit people to be killed. In Camus' assessment, the logic of the necessity of correcting historical injustice took on the status of a transcendental truth in the theory of commitment, something external to the human domain in which people actually lived. Such truths were anathema to the Camusian notion of the absurd, which he first articulated in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Today it is difficult to appreciate the philosophical import of the absurd, because structuralism and post-structuralism have discredited the

humanist and existentialist language in which the absurd was articulated. But in reality, Camus' version of the absurd was an extension of Nietzsche's thesis of the death of god, and an important point of reference for post-structuralist thought.[287] The question of the death of god was that if god was dead, and no longer able to guarantee one's system of values, was it actually possible to know if one's values were universally true, and not just the product of particular, local, cultural systems? The absurd was Camus' name for the state of affairs resulting from the death of god. In this way, it is possible to see that the real significance of the absurd was a serious, and all-encompassing critique of transcendental values.

For Camus, centuries of philosophical, theological, and scientific inquiry led to the fundamental conclusion that the human being was the only thing whose existence could be verified and relied upon. The implication of this conclusion was that life was meaningless and absurd, since all of the gods and religions that claimed to offer a meaning to life did not really exist. If one reduced everything that was not human out of the universe, nothing was left to guarantee the meaning of existence. There was no transcendental value to which one could turn. One was left with nothing but the naked absurdity of human existence. For Camus this manifested in every facet of life, from the moments of the deepest metaphysical reflection, to the most banal scenes on the street:

> In certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of [one's] gestures, one's meaningless pantomime makes everything that surrounds them stupid. A man speaks on the telephone behind a glass partition; he cannot be heard, but his

[287] Elaine Marks argues that Camus' articulation of the "death of God" was metonymically repeated in post-structuralist formulations, such as the Michel Foucault's death of man, Roland Barthes' death of the author, and Jacques Lacan's death of the subject. See Marks, "The Absurd and the Death of God," in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed. *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 131-134.

> idiotic mimicry can be seen; one asks oneself why he is alive. This malaise before the inhumanity of mankind itself, this incalculable fall before the image of what we are, this "nausea" as it is called by a writer of today, is…the absurd.[288]

For Camus, even historical injustices fell under the category of the absurd. Camus agreed that historical injustices existed, but not that there was a transcendental truth that demanded their correction. Such a necessity would have admitted that life had a transcendental value, which should not be compromised, or allowed to be compromised. And this value had no basis in the man-made world of the absurd, it could only come from a transcendental principle, like a god or a religion. Such valuation of life contradicted the terms of the absurd, which was entirely indifferent to humanity. In this way, the absurd took the place of metaphysics in Camus' thought. Where previously transcendental concepts had determined the metaphysics of the world, for Camus the absurd absence of any transcendentality became his anti-metaphysics.

For Camus, the absurdity of existence meant that there was no firm, transcendental law that could be used to decide whether one had the right to kill another human being, or to let another human being be killed. In *L'Homme révolté*, Camus even went so far as to claim that that the absurd was so indifferent to ethical questions in general, that it gave a contradictory response to the question of killing. On the one hand, the absurd's indifference to humanity seemed to imply that there was no prohibition against murder. The absence of any transcendental value to human life, and of any

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[288] "Dans certaines heures de lucidité, l'aspect mecanique de leurs gestes, leur pantomime privée de sens rend stupide tout ce qui les entoure. Un homme parle au téléphone derrière une cloison vitrée; on ne l'entend pas, mais on voit sa mimique sans portée; on se demande pourquoi il vit. Ce malaise devant l'inhumanité de l'homme même, cette incalculable chute devant l'image de ce que nous sommes, cette "nausée" comme l'appelle un auteur de nos jours, c'est…l'absurde." Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1942), 29.

transcendental principle guiding human actions, made it seem like the world was a place of anarchy where anything was possible, since nothing existed that would or could prohibit a person's actions: "If one believes in nothing, if nothing has any meaning, and if we can affirm no value, everything is possible and nothing has any importance."[289] Human life had no transcendental value that would prevent one from killing, nor was there any transcendental law that would punish one for killing. In this way, the absurd's indifference left the possibility of murder open. "The sense of the absurd," Camus wrote, "when one claims first of all to draw from it a rule of conduct, makes murder a matter of indifference, and consequently, possible."[290] It was not that the absurd affirmed humanity's right to kill, since the absurd would affirm nothing. Rather, it was that the absurd contained nothing that would prohibit killing, and thus killing remained a possibility.

On the other hand however, the absurd gave a contradictory response to the question of suicide, that is, the question of killing oneself rather than another. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus posed the question: given that life is meaningless, should one kill oneself? Camus' answer was no, that when confronted with the absurdity of life, it was logically incoherent to kill oneself. For Camus the absurdity of the world was an absolute fact of reality, and any attempt to escape reality – of which suicide was the most extreme example – was a denial of the only real meaning that one's existence had. It is important to note however, that as with the question of murder, the absurd did not

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[289] "Si l'on ne croit à rien, si rien n'a de sens et si nous ne pouvons affirmer aucune valeur, tout est possible et rien n'a d'importance." Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, 15.
[290] "Le sentiment de l'absurde, quand on prétend d'abord en tirer une règle d'action, rend le meurtre au moins indifférent et, par conséquent, possible." Ibid.

prohibit killing oneself – it merely created a condition in which killing oneself was not possible. The desire to escape the absurdity of reality caused only unhappiness, and sprang only from the false hope offered by religion, which claimed that the meaning of life lay outside the absurdity of this world. True happiness was accepting the absurd reality of one's existence, and not killing oneself. Killing oneself in such a situation was logically impossible: "Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. The error would be to say that happiness is born directly from the absurd discovery. It also happens that the presentiment of the absurd is born with happiness."[291] As an example of an absurd man who accepted his existence, Camus offered Sisyphus, the mythological figure who was condemned to roll a rock endlessly to the top of a mountain, after which it would roll right back down, and Sisyphus would have to begin again. That Sisyphus willingly went after the rock, and rolled it back up the mountain indicated his acceptance of the absurdity of the world. The absurd man said "yes" to his existence and was content.

The contradiction came in *L'Homme révolté*, when Camus reiterated the argument against killing oneself, but extended it to include murder: "The final conclusion of absurd reasoning is, in effect, the rejection of suicide, and the acceptance of this hopeless encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the world. Suicide would mean the end of this encounter, and absurd reasoning maintains that it could not consent to this

[291] "Le bonheur et l'absurde sont deux fils de la même terre. Ils sont inséparable. L'erreur serait de dire que le bonheur naît forcément de la découverte absurde. Il arrive ausi bien que le sentiment de l'absurde naisse du bonheur." Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 165.

without negating its own premises."[292] In claiming that suicide would end the encounter between the human and the absurd, and that absurd reasoning (of Sisyphus' kind) could not countenance the end of that encounter, Camus built human existence into the absurd. Now, the absurd needed the human in order to exist. The absurd was nothing other than the meaninglessness of life, and thus it did not exist outside of the encounter with the human. The human and the absurd required each other for their own existence. And just as Sisyphus found happiness in the absurd, so too did the human being signify what was good for the absurd. Camus wrote, "It is clear that absurd reasoning admits, in the same stroke, that human life is the only necessary good since it is precisely what permits this encounter."[293] Camus argued that because human life was the good, it was not logically coherent to suppose that one could not kill oneself, while also permitting the killing of others: "From the moment when the good [of human life] is recognized as such, it is the same for all men. It is not possible to make murder logically coherent if one refuses coherence to suicide."[294] Thus, even though it first seemed as though the absurd made killing possible, in the end, the impossibility of killing oneself extended to killing another. The absurd was at odds with itself over the question of killing. This contradiction made it impossible to rely on the absurd for a rule by which one could

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[292] "La conclusion dernière du raisonnement absurde est, en effet, le rejet du suicide et le maintien de cette confrontation désespérée entre l'interrogation humaine et le silence du monde. Le suicide signifierait la fin de cette confrontation et le raisonnement absurde considère qu'il ne pourrait y souscrire qu'en niant ses propres prémisses." Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, 16-17.

[293] "Il est clair que, du même coup, ce raisonnement admet la vie comme le seul bien nécessaire puisqu'elle permet précisément cette confrontation." Ibid. 17.

[294] "Dès l'instant où ce bien est reconnu comme tel, il est celui de tous les hommes. On ne peut donner une cohérence au meurtre si on la refuse au suicide." Ibid.

determine if the right to kill others, or to let others be killed existed. The absurd was not capable of producing an ethical rule on killing.

b) The Law

If the metaphysical fact of the absurd was not able to answer the question of killing, neither was positive law, the man-made law of the courtroom, by which killing was adjudicated in everyday life. For Camus, the law was just as incapable as the absurd of founding an ethical rule on killing, not because of excessive indifference, but because killing had become part of the very logic by which the law made its judgments. In Camus' conception of the law, logic stood in judgment of crime, which he divided into two categories: crimes of passion, and crimes of logic. In earlier centuries, Camus argued, it had been the case that all murders were crimes of passion, while logic was on the side of the law. In the twentieth century however, the philosophically justified killing in the gulags of the Soviet Union created a new category of crime, the crime of logic. But the fact that logic had been used to justify killing meant that logic itself had been corrupted. For this reason, logic, and by extension the law, was no longer capable of producing a verdict on the ethics of killing. Like the absurd, Camus' conception of the law was a serious and complex philosophical argument that was hidden underneath a seemingly reductive terminology. The simplistic chronology which restricted crimes of passion to pre-1900, when they could justly be judged by the law, betrayed Camus' larger argument that crime and law operated according to rationalities of passion and logic. In order to fully understand Camus' critique of the law, it is necessary to understand the way

in which his use of the terms passion and logic stood for entire jurisprudential rationalities.

In Camus' conception of crime and law, the only crimes prior to the twentieth century were crimes of passion: murders committed out of rage, out of love, or out of tyranny. To illustrate the crime of passion, Camus provided an example drawn from nineteenth century literature: "Heathcliff, in *Wuthering Heights*, would kill everybody in the world in order to possess Cathy."[295] In this example, Emily Brontë's Heathcliff was possessed by a passion that overwhelmed his logic, and that might have driven him to murder. The crime was motivated by passion, and logic was thoroughly excluded. Because it was excluded from crime, logic was always able to pass judgment based on its calculated, reasonable distance from passion. The absolute division between logic and passion guaranteed the smooth functioning of the law: "When the tyrant razed cities for his greater glory, when the slave chained to the conqueror's chariot was dragged through the rejoicing streets, when the enemy was thrown to the beasts in front of the assembled people, before such naked crimes conscience could be untroubled, and judgment clear."[296] Likewise, the criminal thoroughly understood that he committed his crime out of passion, and not by logic: "[Heathcliff] would not believe that his crime is reasonable, or justified by a philosophical system. He would accomplish it and that would be the end of things."[297] For Camus, crime itself was passionate, while law was the embodiment of

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[295] "Heathcliff, dans les hauts de hurlevent, tuerait la terre entière pour posséder Cathie." Ibid. 13.
[296] "Aux temps naïfs où le tyran rasait des villes pour sa plus grande gloire, où l'esclave enchaîné au char du vainqueur défilait dans les villes en fête, où l'ennemi était jeté aux bêtes devant le peuple assemblé, devant des crimes si candides, la conscience pouvait être ferme, et le jugement clair." Ibid. 14.
[297] "Il n'aurait pas l'idée de dire que ce meurtre est raisonnable ou justifié par le système. Il l'accomplirait, là s'arrête toute sa croyance." Ibid. 13.

logic. The law could judge such crimes clearly, and without confusion because of the absolute separation between passion and logic.

In the twentieth century however, "the boundary that separates [passion and logic] is uncertain."[298] For Camus, logic became indistinguishable from passion at the moment when logic was used to justify crime, at the moment that crimes of logic came into being:

> From the moment when…crime gives itself a doctrine, from the second that crime reasons about itself, it multiplies itself like reason, it takes on all of the characteristics of a syllogism. Crime used to be as solitary as a lone cry in the dark, now it is as universal as science. Yesterday it was just, today it has become the law.[299]

In Camus' understanding of crime, a crime of logic was an oxymoron, since crime was passionate by definition. Neither Brontë's Heathcliff, nor the tyrant would ever have considered explaining their crimes away with logic. But in the twentieth century, new philosophical justifications for murder appeared, such as the historical necessity of the gulags. Any time that reason was applied to legitimize killing, even for the sake of correcting an injustice, crime became logical. Passion and logic were no longer strictly separable, and therefore, logic was no longer adequate for adjudicating crime. "Slave camps under the banner of liberty," wrote Camus, "massacres justified by the love of mankind or by a taste for the superhuman, cripple judgment."[300] For Camus, the point was that logic itself was tainted by crime, and that the law itself had become criminal. In the twentieth century it was no longer the Heathcliffs, or the tyrants who were criminals:

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[298] "La frontière qui les sépare est incertaine." Ibid.

[299] "À partir du moment où, faute de caractère, on court se donner une doctrine, dès l'instant où le crime se raisonne, il prolifère comme la raison elle-même, il prend toutes les figures du syllogisme. Il était solitaire comme le cri, le voilà universel comme la science. Hier jugé, il légifère aujourd'hui." Ibid.

[300] "Les camps d'esclaves sous la bannière de la liberté, les massacres justifiés par l'amour de l'homme ou le goût de la surhumanité, désemparent…le jugement." Ibid. 14.

it was the judges themselves: "Our criminals are no longer these helpless children who invoked love as their excuse. They are adults, on the contrary, and their alibi is irrefutable: it is philosophy, which can be made to serve any end, even the transformation of murderers into judges."[301] For Camus, "Each day at dawn, assassins bearing the implements and ornaments of high office, slip into someone's cell: murder is the question of today."[302] The effect of explaining away the massive crimes of the gulags with logic, was that the law was corrupted with the passion of crime.

For this reason, neither the dictates of philosophy, nor the statutes of law were able provide a decision on the legitimacy of killing. Just as the absurd metaphysical basis of existence was incapable of establishing ethical rules, so too were the man-made laws of the state insufficient. For Camus, this meant that no ethical rule of conduct governing the killing of others, or allowing others to be killed was to be found, either in the transcendental realm, or in the mundane world of human affairs. Since there was nothing in the absurd, and nothing in the law to prevent killing, there simply was no answer to the question of whether one had the right to kill, or the right to allow someone to be killed. In the strictest sense of the term, there was no ethics.

c) Reasonable Culpability

In the absence of any ethics, Camus proposed what he called reasonable culpability, a principle of self-responsibility, and self-acknowledgement of guilt, which

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[301] "Nos criminels ne sont plus ces enfants désarmés qui invoquaient l'excuse de l'amour. Ils sont adultes, au contraire, et leur alibi est irréfutable: c'est la philosophie qui peut servir à tout, même à changer les meurtriers en juges." Ibid. 13.

[302] "À chaque aube, des assassins chamarrés se glissent dans une cellule: le meurtre est la question." Ibid. 15.

neither legitimated nor excused killing for the sake of fighting injustice, but which at least avoided the hypocrisy of logically-justified killing. Camus argued that the search for an ethical rule that would apply universally to all killing was doomed to failure, since the absurd was contradictory, and the law was corrupt. The only thing of which one could be sure was one's own existence in the face of the absurd. The absurd was "nothing other than a point of departure, a critique made flesh, the equivalent, on the plane of existence, of systematic doubt."[303] From this point of departure, Camus argued that each individual was responsible for choosing whether he or she had the right to kill, or the right to allow others to be killed based on the contingent circumstances of oppression. The fact that crime had taken refuge in the law, and that guilt now masqueraded as innocence in the twentieth century meant that one could no longer claim the excuse that logic justified killing in order to correct historical injustices. One could not seek refuge in revolutionary philosophy any longer. Instead, one had to admit culpability for the killing one did, or that one allowed to be done in the name of fighting oppression. Thus, Camus turned the principle of reasonable culpability into an ethics of individual responsibility and guilt, rather than logic and innocence. And while the ethic of reasonable culpability was not a specific code of conduct in the terms of traditional ethics (for instance, Christian ethics), it was similar to traditional ethics in the sense that the admission of culpability was intended to carry the same absoluteness as traditional ethics' universalizability.

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[303] "Rien d'autre qu'un point de départ, une critique vécue, l'équivalent, sur le plan de l'existence, du doute systématique." Ibid. 21

For Camus, the principle of reasonable culpability rested on a redefinition of the concepts of innocence and guilt. Camus' use of the term innocence differed from the standard notion in that he argued that both innocence and guilt needed to be redefined from the new perspective of the twentieth century in which crime and law had become indistinguishable. The standard notion of innocence corresponded to the legality and criminality of the crime of passion. Like Brontë's Heathcliff, one was simply guilty or innocent of having committed a crime of passion, and the law determined one's guilt or innocence by means of logic. In the twentieth century however, when crime was confused with law, and passion with logic, it was possible to be guilty of killing while also claiming that the philosophical justification for the historical necessity of that killing actually made one innocent. In such a period, innocence itself was suspect: "The day when crime adorns itself with the clothes of innocence, in a curious reversal which is unique to our times, it is innocence that is summoned to provide its justifications."[304] This claim of innocence appealed to the authority of an immutable philosophy principle of justice, which was a false transcendentality in the context of the absurd. As such, it displaced one's guilt for killing onto a philosophical doctrine that was logically unassailable, and un-convictable in any court of law. In this way, the guilty were able to claim that they were innocent, and that any killing they did, or allowed to be done, was mitigated by oppression, and justified by the historical necessity to fight oppression.

The notion of passing off one's guilt was crucial to Camus' conception of reasonable culpability. From Camus' point of departure – the absurd – this displacement

[304] "Le jour où le crime se pare des dépouilles de l'innocence, par un curieux renversement qui est propre à notre temps, c'est l'innocence qui est sommée de fournir ses justifications." Ibid. 4.

of guilt amounted to a hypocritical denial of reality, since the absurdity of existence meant that there were no transcendental principles onto which one could displace one's guilt. One was entirely alone in the face of the absurd, there simply was nothing that could exculpate one for the act of killing, or for allowing others to be killed. If one was to act against injustice in an absurd world, one had to take responsibility oneself:

> I declare that I believe in nothing and that everything is absurd, but that I cannot doubt the fact of my declaration and I must at least believe in my protest. The first and only evidence that is given to me, from within the experience of the absurd, is rebellion…Therefore, rebellion must find its reasons within itself, since it finds nothing in the other.[305]

For Camus, one had the ability to rebel, even to kill in order to correct injustice, since there was nothing in the absurd to prevent such killing. But, one had to take responsibility for such killing oneself. One could not look to the philosophical principle of historical necessity – one could only act based on one's own individual sense of injustice. There were no transcendental, extra-mundane principles that would guide one in acting, or that would exculpate one for action. There was only one's own sense of injustice in the local and contingent situation in which one found oneself. For this reason, Camus emphasized the principle of culpability instead of guilt. The term guilt implied that one could be judged by a transcendental rule, or a law that existed outside or beyond oneself, the existence of which Camus called into question with his critique of ethics. Indeed, it was the entire conceptual binary of guilt and innocence that Camus disavowed, since innocence too had lost all of its meaning. The opposite of culpability,

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[305] "Je crie que je ne crois à rien et que tout est absurde, mais je ne puis douter de mon cri et il me faut au moins croire à ma protestation. La première et la seule évidence qui me soit ainsi donnée, à l'intérieur de l'expérience absurde, est la révolte… Il faut donc bien que la révolte tire ses raisons d'elle-même, puisqu'elle ne peut les tirer de rien d'autre." Ibid. 21-22.

by contrast, was exculpation, a principle of innocence which did not require the judgment of the now-corrupt law, or justification by a hypocritical logic. The term culpability, in Camus' usage, implied that one acted on one's own recognizance, in keeping with the individual experience of the absurd. The task for rebellion was to "discover the principle of a reasonable culpability…without laying claim to an impossible innocence."[306] Camus' use of the term reasonable referred to the exigency for the individual to decide whether he has the right to kill, or to allow another to be killed in a local and contingent situation, based on the individual's own recognizance. Such culpability was reasonable only to the extent that the individual was able to justify action with personal reasoning. In this way, one had the right to rebel, and even to kill, but traditional law was inadequate to deciding if this right existed. In the absurd there was no general, universal ethics that could provide rules for governing such action. There was only the anti-ethic of the individual's reasonable culpability.

In her essay, "Broken Engagements," Debarati Sanyal argues that Camus' ethics applied to the field of the literary, rather than the situation of real killing. Sanyal skips over the concept of rebellion, and focuses her attention on the critique of committed writing made in *L'Homme révolté*. Sanyal argues that *L'Homme révolté* displaced political engagement into the literary, and demanded that the committed writer engage in the world through their writing, but on one's own individual authority, without appealing to the political and philosophical justifications of Sartrean commitment. Against the

[306] "Sans prétention à une impossible innocence, elle peut découvrir le principe d'une culpabilité raisonnable." Ibid. 24.

atrocities of the twentieth century, the only ethical objection was the writer's individual testimony to suffering:

> From the early articles in *Combat* collected under the suggestive heading of *La chair* to his speech upon receiving the Nobel prize, Camus maintained an unwavering conviction that writing should bear witness to the irreducible specificity of individual suffering, a living reality betrayed or eclipsed by historical processes….Camus was appealing for a realignment of the writer's *engagement* from the ambiguous exigencies of political practice to the equally complex dilemmas of a self-reflexive literary practice attentive to the ethical implication of its representational models.[307]

But Camus' critique of ethics extended beyond the ethics of committed literature, to include a general critique of ethics. It was not simply that the writer must act out of his own self-reflexive literary practice. Camus argued, rather, that all ethical action had to be rooted in self-reflexivity, and in one's reasonable culpability. Camus' critique of commitment was a critique not just of committed writing then, but also a critique of intellectual commitment as a mode of engaging in politics *tout court*.

The ultimate contribution of *L'Homme révolté* to postwar French intellectual culture was its argument for an abandonment of commitment, and its suggestion of the principle of rebellion with reasonable culpability. In this critique of ethics, and in the suggestion of reasonable culpability, Camus articulated two new requirements for an ethical act. First, an ethical act must not claim any notion of justice, since no transcendental principles of justice existed in the absurd. Second, an ethical must be done on one's own recognizance, since the only principle of judgment that could exist in the absurd was the principle of reasonable culpability. These two requirements for an ethical act provided Blanchot with the base with which to complete Camus' critique of

[307] Debarati Sanyal, "Broken Engagements." *Yale French Studies* 98 (2000): 43.

the ethics of commitment, and the groundwork from which to articulate his own ethics of intellectual engagement.

When *L'Homme révolté* appeared in 1951 however, hardly any of its critics focused on Camus' critique of ethics. Instead they dwelt on the rest of the book, in which Camus attempted to argue for a form of rebellion based on the principle of reasonable culpability. For Camus, the rebel was a slave, who recognized the oppression imposed on him by his master. Loosely Hegelian in inspiration, Camus' rendition of rebellion depended on the situation of slavery which would naturally provoke a feeling of injustice, of which the slave would be so certain, that he would have to take action: "In a certain way, he is confronted by an order which oppresses him, until he realizes a sort of right to not be oppressed any further than he can tolerate."[308] In recognizing this right within himself, the rebel is forced to take action against his master. For Camus, this rebellion called upon the rebel to recognize that he shared this basic right with his fellow men. Thus, the rebellion became the foundation of a community in *L'Homme révolté*, the community of rebels. Camus argued that there were other rebellions, however, which did not recognize this common right among men. In these rebellions, after the overthrow of the master, one rebel attempted to seize power for himself, essentially replacing the master: "It is right to say that every rebellion that claims authority for itself, or destroys this solidarity, simultaneously loses the name of rebellion, and becomes, in reality, an

[308] "D'une certaine manière, il oppose à l'ordre qui l'opprime une sorte de droit à ne pas être opprimé au delà de ce qu'il peut admettre." Ibid. 25-26.

acquiescence to murder."[309] All modern revolutions fell under this latter category, and those who committed to them, became the accomplices of murder.

The committed existentialists at *Les Temps modernes* failed to recognize Camus' critique of ethics – or perhaps they recognized it only too well. They responded swiftly and severely, defending commitment as the only ethical response to the state of the world. Sartre commissioned Francis Jeanson to write a review of *L'Homme révolté*. The review, "Albert Camus, ou l'âme révoltée," appeared in May of 1952, just seven months after *L'Homme révolté*. In it, Jeanson attacked Camus for taking a hypocritically transcendental view of revolution, and alleging that Camus' version of rebellion amounted to little more than solipsistic contempt for the world. For Jeanson, there were real conditions of injustice, oppression, and suffering in the world, which were the work of undeniable, historical processes. Camus either had to get his hands dirty in the muck of history, or abandon any claims to providing grounds for practical action: "If Camus' rebellion deliberately wishes to remain static, it no longer concerns anyone other than Camus himself. If, on the contrary, it pretends to influence the course of events, it must enter into the fray, insert itself in the historical context, determine its objectives there, and choose its adversaries there."[310] Sartre was even more pointed in his response, which came three months later, but his criticism was the same. "Our friendship was not easy,"

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[309] "Nous serons donc en droit de dire que toute révolte qui s'autorise à nier ou à détruire cette solidarité perd du même coup le nom de révolte et coïncide en réalité avec un consentement meurtrier." Ibid. 35.

[310] "Si la révolte de Camus se veut délibérément statique, elle ne peut plus concerner que Camus lui-même. Si peu qu'elle prétende, par contre, à influer sur le cours du monde, il lui faut entrer dans le jeu, s'insérer dans le contexte historique, y déterminer ses objectifs, y choisir ses adversaires." Francis Jeanson, "Albert Camus, ou l'ame révoltée." *Les Temps modernes* 79 (May 1952): 2089.

his response began, "but I will miss it."[311] For Sartre, *L'Homme révolté* failed to grasp even the most basic point of commitment: that human beings make the world, and it is therefore their responsibility to make it justly, particularly in the face of the twentieth century's injustices:

> Our freedom today is nothing other than the *free choice of struggling to become free*. And the paradoxical aspect of this formula expresses simply the paradox of our *historical* condition. It does not concern, you see, the *imprisonment* of my contemporaries: they are already in prison; it concerns, on the contrary, us uniting with them to break their bars. Because we too, Camus, we are imprisoned, and if you truly want to prevent any popular movement from degenerating into tyranny, do not start by condemning out of hand and threatening to retreat to a desert, especially since your deserts are nothing more than a slightly less crowded part of our prison. To be worthy of the right to influence men who are struggling, one must, first of all, participate in their struggle, one must first of all accept many things, if one wants to try to change some of them.[312]

Sartre's response to Camus echoed the arguments that he made during the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals. In 1952 however, Sartre was committed not to saving France, but to the global liberation of the proletariat. Like Jeanson, he criticized Camus for removing himself from the real struggles of the world, and abstracting them to high moral dilemmas which existed only for himself. In order to change the world, Sartre argued, one must commit to it. These were extremely damaging critiques in 1952, and they drove Camus into silence, never to return to the volatile public sphere that was

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[311] "Notre amitié n'était pas facile mais je la regrettterai." Jean-Paul Sartre, "Réponse à Albert Camus," 334.

[312] "Notre liberté aujourd'hui n'est rien d'autre que le *libre choix de lutter pour devenir libres*. Et l'aspect paradoxical de cette formule exprime simplement le paradoxe de notre condition *historique*. Il ne s'agit pas, vous le voyez, *d'encager* mes contemporains: ils son déjà dans la cage; il s'agit au conraire de nous unir à eux pour briser les barreaux. Car nous aussi, Camus, nous sommes encagés, et si vous voulez vraiment empêcher qu'un mouvement populaire ne dégénère en tyrannie, ne commencez pas par le condamner sans recours et par menacer de vous retirer au désert, d'autant que vos déserts ne sont jamais qu'une partie un peu moins fréquentée de notre cage; pour mériter le droit d'influencer des hommes qui luttent, il faut d'abord participer à leur combat, il faut d'abord accepter beaucoup de choses, si, l'on veut essayer d'en changer quelque-unes." Ibid. 345.

French intellectual culture in the 1950s. From then on, he was an outsider once again, and his stance on the war in Algeria distanced him only further.

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When Blanchot responded to the great debate between Camus and *Les Temps modernes*, he completely ignored the objections of the existentialists, paying them no heed whatsoever.[313] The existentialists saw *L'Homme révolté* as a political book, arguing against their political ambitions. Blanchot saw the book for what it was: a critique of ethics in general, and a critique of the ethics of commitment specifically. Blanchot sided completely with Camus against the commitment advocated by *Les Temps modernes*, seeing Camus' ethical critique as an extension of his own political critique of "La Littérature et le droit à la mort." Furthermore, Blanchot accepted Camus' two requirements for an ethical act: the prohibition on claiming any transcendental notion of

[313] A measure of Blanchot's utter disregard for *Les Temps modernes*' feud with Camus was that the one reference he actually made concerned not their reaction to *L'Homme révolté*, but rather, Jeanson's criticism of *La Peste*! Blanchot wrote, "It is in this sense perhaps, that Albert Camus, in *La Peste*, chose to made a doctor the symbol of the action that remains just, of what can be done in the situation where nothing can be done. It is a reasonable decision, which one is astonished to hear scornfully criticized, since it responds to the energetic will of the modern age." "C'est en ce sens peut-être qu'Albert camus, dans *La Peste*, a choisi de faire d'un médecin le symbole de l'action qui reste juste, de ce qui peut être fait là où pourtant rien ne peut être fait. Cela est raisonnable, c'est une décision qu'on s'étonne d'avoir entendu critiquer dédaigneusement, elle répond à l'énergique volonté de l'âge moderne." Blanchot, "Réflexions sur l'enfer," 679. This is the passage to which Blanchot responded: "*La Peste* was already a transcendental chronicle…Viewed from on high, the struggles of human beings down on earth could easily appear to be nothing more than vanity. But if you want to know what their existence is actually like, you must pick up the thread of your own life, and come back to down to live once more among men. There, each one gives meaning to his own life. You cannot renounce the meaning of your life and decide that, therefore, the meaning of all life is only an illusion." "Pour qui la contemple de haut, l'agitation des humains à ras de terre risque d'apparaître assez vaine; mais si vous voulez savoir ce qu'il en est de leur existence, il vous faudra reprendre le fil de la vôtre et redescendre vivre à nouveau parmi les hommes. Là, chacun donne un sens à sa vie, et vous ne pouvez quitter la vôtre pour décider que le sens de toute vie n'est qu'illusion." Jeanson, "Albert Camus, ou l'âme révoltée," 2073-2074.

justice or right, and the requirement to act entirely on one's own accord, and to assume reasonable culpability.

Yet Blanchot considered Camus' critique of ethics, and of the ethics of commitment incomplete, and insufficient in themselves for moving beyond commitment. Blanchot had two main criticisms of *L'Homme révolté*. The first was that the rebel was not a truly ethical actor. For Blanchot, one could not ground ethical action in the slave's rebellion against his master because the slave's rebellion relied on the existence of the master. For this reason, the slave could never fully assume reasonable culpability for his rebellion, since the master's oppression was always there, serving as an outside condition that exculpated the slave, and prevented him from acting entirely on his own. In this way, Blanchot argued that the rebel violated Camus' own requirements for an ethical act. Instead of the rebel, Blanchot proposed another figure from Camus' corpus as an example of a truly ethical actor: that of Don Juan, whom Camus had considered as a man of the absurd in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. While Blanchot's choice of Don Juan as an archetypical ethical actor may strike some as counter-intuitive, it is certainly the case that as a mythical and literary figure, Don Juan appealed to Blanchot's sensibility more than the rebel. But there was more in the selection of Don Juan than simply Blanchot's literary inclinations.[314] Blanchot critiqued Camus' version of Don Juan, rearticulating the myth in his own way. Even though Camus' Don Juan might have come closer to satisfying the

[314] Indeed, the subject of Don Juan was an *au courant* topic in Paris in the early 1950s. In addition to rewriting the Don Juan myth as a way to critique *L'Homme révolté*, Blanchot's essay on Don Juan also served as a review of a recent publication on Don Juan. Typical of Blanchot's reviews for *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, scant mention was made of the book actually under review. Instead Blanchot employed his usual tactic of reviewing a book by offering his take on the subject of the book rather than the book itself. See Micheline Sauvage, *Le Cas Don Juan* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953).

requirement for an ethical act than the rebel, Blanchot argued that he did not go far enough. Camus' Don Juan did not accept the full burden of reasonable culpability, and escaped from his crimes unpunished. For Blanchot, reasonable culpability imposed a strict law, such that any person who undertook an ethical action was subject to the law absolutely. As Blanchot demonstrated with regard to Robespierre and Saint-Just in "La Littérature et la droit à la mort," it was possible to establish a new law, but only if one submitted to it oneself, and did not hold oneself above the law. Through his serial seductions, Camus' Don Juan established an ethical code for the treatment of others in which all people were interchangeable, and devoid of any personal qualities, yet he himself never lost his personal identity. In holding onto his identity, Blanchot argued that Camus' Don Juan failed to submit to the rules of ethical action. Blanchot rearticulated the Don Juan myth, creating a version in which Don Juan subjected himself to the same law of individual abstraction as the women he seduced, by way of providing an example of a genuinely ethical actor, who followed the requirements for an ethical act absolutely, and completely.

Blanchot's goal was not to attack or damage Camus, but rather to take what was best from *L'Homme révolté*, critique its weaknesses, and go beyond them towards an ethics of intellectual engagement in politics. In this way, Blanchot's intervention in the debate between Sartre and Camus, and his re-articulation of the Don Juan myth provided the foundation for the ethical action of "Déclaration sur la droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie." In what follows, this chapter will examine Blanchot's two criticisms of *L'Homme révolté*, and his revision to the Don Juan myth in detail, in order to provide

the philosophical background of the "Déclaration," and explain Blanchot's ethical engagement in the war in Algeria.

Blanchot's response to the debate between Sartre and Camus was published between March and June 1954, just months before the war in Algeria began in November. Blanchot criticized *L'Homme révolté* for attempting to ground ethical action in the situation of the slave. For Blanchot, the requirement of reasonable culpability required that one start from a point of absolute beginning, where one could rely on nothing other than oneself for the means of action. Culpability itself had to be genuinely absolute, if it was going to satisfy the burden of ethics. One could not assume culpability for one's action unless it came from within oneself, without support from any external power or agency, since such a force acted as an external justification and exculpation by its presence alone. For Blanchot, such a person had to first be stripped of every human quality, and only then could they be sure of finding the will to act within themselves. Such a person existed below slavery, below poverty, in a state of near inhumanity, without relation to any other: "The man who is entirely unhappy, the man reduced by oppression, abjection, hunger, sickness, and fear becomes that which no longer has any relation with himself, nor with anyone else: an empty neutrality, a phantom who wanders in a space where nothing happens, methodically and submissively."[315] Real destitution cast one into a state of pure abjection, where all relations with other humans, even one's relation with oneself, became impossible to sustain. If one were to be able to withstand

[315] "L'homme tout à fait malheureux, l'homme réduit par l'oppression, l'abjection, la faim, la maladie, la peur, devient ce qui n'a plus de rapport avec soi, ni avec qui que ce soit, une neutralité vide, un fantôme qui erre, méthodiquement et avec soumission, dans un espace où il n'arrive plus rien." Blanchot, "Réflexions sur l'Enfer (I)," 679.

the experience of abjection, it was only by disavowing one's humanity. If one were to endure the endless humiliation of oppression, it was only by renouncing one's individuality, that last shred of dignity which would prevent one from being able to endure the experience of abjection. In this way, oppression was, "intolerable, but borne, because the one who bears it is no longer anyone, he is no longer there to experience it in the first person."[316] Blanchot had in mind the suffering of the Occupation, where one's individuality and one's humanity were stripped away by the irreducible fact of domination, or the colonial regime, which had a similar affect. Only here at this nadir, Blanchot argued, was one in a position to acknowledge absolute culpability, and act entirely of one's own accord.

The situation of the slave, invoked by Camus in *L'Homme révolté*, was not able to provide an adequate place from which to begin. Unlike the abject man, the slave began from a fundamental position of relation. The slave's relationship with the master was a significant improvement on the absence of relation of the abject man, even though the slave was still a slave, and his relation was one of domination. Blanchot wrote, "The suffering man, and the man of extreme unhappiness, or the man *subjected* to misery have become strangers to the master-slave relations which take on an almost attractive status, by their very relations."[317] The relation with the master excluded the slave from the possibility of taking on absolute culpability, since there was always another with whom he was in relation, even if that relation was antagonistic, and even if that relation was

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[316] "Intolérable, mais supporté, parce que celui qui le supporte n'est plus personne, n'est plus là pour l'éprouver à la première personne." Ibid. 680.

[317] "L'homme souffrant et l'homme de l'extrême malheur ou *soumis* à la misère sont devenus étrangers aux rapports maître-esclave qui constituent, par rapport à leur situation, un statut presque prometteur." Ibid.

what the slave revolted against: "The slave is the man who has already succeeded – an infinite progress – in encountering a master; he thus has this master for a support."[318] No matter how dire the slave's suffering, his revolt would always rest on the support of the master. In this way, the slave was incapable of acting on his own recognizance to the extent necessary to meet the requirements of reasonable culpability. For this reason, Blanchot argued that the situation of slavery was not capable of providing a ground for action.

Yet if the slave was not able to ground ethical action because his situation rested on the fundamental relation with the master, and if the abject man whose absolute lack of relation prevented him from being able even to speaking in the first person, let alone act, who, then, qualified as a genuine ethical actor? Who was able to act without legitimating their actions with a notion of transcendental justice, and willingly accept full culpability? Instead of the rebel, instead of even Sisyphus, Blanchot proposed Don Juan, whom Camus had described as a true man of the absurd in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*.[319] But for Blanchot, Don Juan was more than a mere man of the absurd, he was an allegory of ethical action. Through the numerical repetition of seduction and conquest, Don Juan rejected any relation with the women he conquered, which allegorized the impersonality of the law.[320] Nor did Don Juan make recourse to any to a logical justification for his

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[318] "L'esclave est l'homme qui a déjà réussi – progrès infini – à rencontrer un maître, il a donc ce maître pour appui." Ibid. 684.

[319] My understanding of the ethical issues involved in the Don Juan myth has benefited from the work of Alenka Zupančič. See Zupančič, "Kant with Don Juan and Sade," in Copjec, ed. *Radical Evil* (London: Verso, 1996), 105-125. See also Zupančič, *The Ethics of the Real*, esp. 106-139.

[320] The use of the Don Juan myth to articulate an ethical critique of commitment is troubling for its treatment of the category of woman. While it is not within the scope of the present undertaking to account

crimes. They were simply the crimes of a passionate man. At the same time, Don Juan's refusal to repent for his crimes – while at the same time acknowledging his culpability for them – accomplished the refusal of the slave in revolt more completely than the slave himself. In this way, Don Juan resolved the problem of transgression as a means of establishing a new law, which Blanchot first examined with regard to Sade and the postwar purge debate. The Sadean libertine sought to transgress the law as a means to accede beyond it. Don Juan however, submitted to his own law of transgression, surrendering himself to the same law of non-relation to which he had submitted his sexual conquests.[321]

Though there are many versions of the Don Juan myth – the most famous of which are Molière's play, Mozart's opera, and Byron's epic poem – both Blanchot and Camus chose to present their own interpretation of the myth, and both drew their own conclusions from it. That said, both Blanchot and Camus employ the same basic narrative of the myth. In the classic account, Don Juan – an eighteenth-century libertine who believed neither in God, nor in morals – went ceaselessly from one woman to the next, keeping a list of his conquests that tallied to 1,003. Eventually Don Juan encounters the ghost of the dead father of one of his conquest's, the Commander, in the form of a stone statue, who invites Don Juan to dinner with him. Don Juan cavalierly accepts, and is pulled down to hell when he takes the statue's hand.

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for the role of women in Camus and Blanchot's treatment of the Don Juan myth, further research will necessarily provide a complete account of the sexual and gender dynamics of their work.

[321] In some versions of the myth Don Juan seduces women, in others he rapes them. Neither Blanchot nor Camus specify. Both focus on the fact that Don Juan's actions were transgression – it did not matter whether Don Juan took women by force, or whether he violated their virginity. Don Juan's significance for ethics was simply that he transgressed. It was the form of his actions, which were a crime, rather than their content, which could be rape, seduction, etc, that mattered to the question of ethical action. I have chosen to use the word seduction throughout this chapter.

Camus told his own version of the Don Juan legend, giving it a very different meaning. For Camus, Don Juan was an absurd man because he saw the meaninglessness of existence, and sought instead simply to multiply his conquests ad infinitum. There was no meaning to Don Juan's list. It existed solely to verify the presence of the absurd. In Camus' version, Don Juan never meets the statue of the Commander, because the Commander represented a transcendental authority that would judge Don Juan's misdeeds.

> What else does the Commander signify, this cold statute put into play to punish the blood and the courage which dared to think? All the powers of eternal Reason, of order, of the universal moral, all the strange grandeur of a God open to wrath are summed up in him. This gigantic and soulless stone symbolizes only the power that Don Juan negated forever. The Commander's mission ends there.[322]

In reality, Camus suggested, there was no moral authority to judge Don Juan at all, and therefore the Commander never could have appeared. Camus had Don Juan living out his days, ironically in a Spanish monastery, contemplating the absurdity of the world. It was on precisely this point that Blanchot's version of the Don Juan myth differed from Camus'. Since Don Juan never met the Commander, the implicit meaning of Camus' Don Juan myth was that he was exculpated. Rather than accepting culpability for his crimes – which would require some kind of reckoning, or at least a confession – Camus' Don Juan simply went about his business.

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[322] "Que signifie d'autre ce commandeur de pierre, cette froide statue mise en branle pour punir le sang et le courage qui ont osé penser? Tous les pouvoirs de la Raison éternelle, de l'ordre, de la morale universelle, toute la grandeur étrangère d'un Dieu accessible à la colère, se résument en lui. Cette pierre gigantesque et sans âme symbolise seulement les puissances que pour toujours Don Juan a nîées. Mais la mission du commandeur s'arrête là." Camus, *Le Myth de Sisyphe*, 104.

For Blanchot however, Don Juan was the archetypal ethical actor, which meant that he not only had to accept culpability for his crimes, he also could not justify them with logic. Blanchot's Don Juan started from the fact of the absurd, just as Camus' did, to which he responded by engaging in serial seduction to an equally absurd degree. But unlike Camus's Don Juan, who relied on the absurd for his actions, Blanchot's Don Juan acted solely out of his passion and his desire:

> Don Juan, like the characters of Sade, is the one who has decided on numerical repetition: with an admirable effrontery, he accepts the pleasure of enumeration as a solution. To add encounter to encounter without end, to make a number of the innumerable, this is pleasing to desire…The myth of Don Juan essentially presupposes the *lista numerosa*, the Catalog in which joyful desire recognizes itself in the number, and recognizes what is stronger than eternity there, since eternity could no more exhaust desire than succeed in coming to the end of the number by a final figure.[323]

Blanchot's Don Juan chose to act in the face of the absurd. He chose to match the absurd meaningless of life by pursuing sexual conquest to an absurdly infinite number. Blanchot was careful, however, to insist that Don Juan acted out of his own desire. He did not foist his crimes off on the absurd, or seek exculpation from the absurd. Like Brontë's Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, Blanchot's Don Juan committed crimes of passion, fully cognizant that the only reason for his action was his own desire.

> Don Juan is not a man who desires in order to have, or to possess. His list is not like the list of Alexander's conquests, it does not give him the satisfaction of an immense empire: he desires, that is all. And this desire, certainly, is a desire that

[323] "Don Juan, comme le héros de Sade, est celui qui a pris parti pour la répétition du nombre: avec une force, une effronterie admirables, il acueille comme une solution satisfaisante le plaisir de l'énumeration. Ajouter sans fin des rencontres à des rencontres, faire de l'innombrable un nombre, cela plait au désir…le myth de Don Juan suppose essentiellement la *lista numerosa*, le Catalogue où le désir joyeux se reconnaît dans le nomre et y reconnaît ce qui est plus fort que l'éternité, puisque celle-ci ne saurait pas plus épuiser le désir qu'elle ne réussirait à terminer le nombre par un dernier chiffre." Blanchot, "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan," 494.

> seizes and takes, but with desire's joyous force and ravishment, without afterthought, without concern.[324]

For Blanchot, Don Juan's desire came from nowhere else, it rested on no relation, like Camus' slave. It was Don Juan's alone, and it pursued its ends strictly for the sake of pursuit. In this way, Blanchot's Don Juan thus met Camus' requirement that an ethical act not appeal to any transcendental notion of justice. But he also met the requirement for an absolute beginning, which Blanchot elaborated in his critique of *L'Homme révolté*, and which neither the slave, nor Sisyphus were capable of achieving.

Blanchot's version of the Don Juan myth differed from Camus' in a second, more important way. In Camus' version of the myth, the confrontation between the Commander and Don Juan never occurred. Camus allowed Don Juan to escape, since Camus saw a transcendental force in the Commander which cannot possibly exist in the absurd. But Blanchot saw this essentially as exculpation for Don Juan's crimes. If the myth was to serve as an example of a figure who fulfilled the requirements of ethical action, Don Juan would have to assume culpability. In Blanchot's version, Don Juan's culpability manifested through the Commander:

> And yet, inevitably, Don Juan comes up against the Commander, in the cold, empty, and impersonal night. What is he? In a way, the Commander is the other face of desire, the other demand of the passion that Don Juan has only recovered through an energetic action. He is not the representative of God, or even the beyond of death, the other world. He is always and still desire, but desire's nocturnal face.[325]

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[324] "Don Juan n'est pas l'homme qui désire pour avoir ou pour posséder. Sa liste n'est pas celle des conquêtes d'Alexandre, ne lui donne pas la satisfaction de l'immensité d'un empire: il désire, c'est tout, et ce désir, certes, est désir qui saisit et qui prend, mais par la force joyeuse et la ravissement du désir, sans arrière-pensée, sans souici." Ibid. 495.

[325] "Et, pourtant, épisode inévitable, Don Juan se heurte au Commandeur, à la nuit froide, impersonnelle et vide. Qu'est-ce que cela? En quelque sorte, l'autre face du désir, l'autre exigence de la passion que Don

In Blanchot's version of the myth, the Commander did not signify any transcendental principle that stood in judgment over Don Juan. In this much Blanchot followed Camus' definition of the absurd as the irreducible lack of transcendental principles. But that was as far as Blanchot followed Camus. For Blanchot, the Commander signified the culpability of acting on one's desire, and the acknowledgement of one's actions as such. One could act on one's own, but one was then obligated to take culpability: "The consequence is the Commander. And the Commander is the encounter of passion become the coldness and impersonality of the night."[326] For Blanchot, the Commander signified Don Juan's culpability itself.

The Commander was not simply consequence, however. He was not simply the penalty that Don Juan had to pay for the crimes he had committed. The Commander was rather, the rule Don Juan had applied to women, doubled back on himself. Blanchot revised the definition of culpability, drawing on the critique of the law that he elaborated in his work on Sade. Leaving the definition of the law as embodied logic that Camus developed in *L'Homme révolté* to the side, Blanchot applied the lesson of the Sadean libertine to Don Juan. During the purge debate, Blanchot examined the Sadean libertine's attempt to get beyond the law, to accede to the space above it through transgression, as a way of becoming higher than the law itself, to become a law unto oneself. Through repetition, the Sadean libertine's crimes stripped his victims of their personal identity, and in so doing deprived the law of its power to define its subjects. Yet

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Juan a seulement recouverte par un parti pris énergique. Ce n'est pas le représentant de Dieu ou même l'au-delà de la mort, l'autre monde. C'est toujours et encoure le désir, mais sa face nocturne." Ibid. 494.

[326] "La conséquence, c'est le Commandeur, et le Commandeur, c'est la rencontre de la passion devenue la froideur et l'impersonalité de la nuit." Ibid. 496.

the Sadean libertine failed to establish this new law in himself, on his own authority, for the very reason that he did not himself submit to his crimes – for a new law had to apply to everyone, it could not brook any exceptions. Similarly, Don Juan attempted to create a law – a rule of conduct for his own life, by which he could treat all others equally. Because Don Juan was a rogue, he created a law of serial seduction, a law of using women and disposing of them. Under Don Juan's law, all women were stripped of their personality, their individuality, and their humanity through his repeated conquests. As Blanchot wrote, "Don Juan could just as well limit himself to a single woman, whom he might possess only a single time, on the condition that he desires her not as a unique person, but as the unity that engages the infinity of repetition."[327] Don Juan's law, according to which he acted his entire life, was one which denied women their individuality and their personality. In order for Don Juan's law to be universally applicable – that is, in order for it to serve as a law – it was necessary for him to submit to the law himself. Thus, when he met the Commander, Blanchot argued that he encountered the very impersonality that he himself had imposed on the world. By treating the entire world of women as impersonal beings, Don Juan himself became impersonal. When he met the Commander, Don Juan was exposed to his own impersonality:

> What he encounters is not the All-Powerful, an encounter that would have fundamentally pleased him, this man of power, war, and combative desire. What he meets is not the extreme of the possible, but impossibility, the abyss of non-power, the frozen excess of the *other* night. At the bottom of the myth there is always the enigma of the stone statue, which is not only death, which is

[327] "Don Juan pourrait fort bien s'en tenir à une seule femme qu'il pourrait fort bien ne posséder qu'une seule fois, à condition de la désirer non comme l'unique, mas comme l'unité qui engage l'inifi de la répétition." Blanchot, "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan," 495.

> something colder and more anonymous than Christian death: it is the impersonality of all relation, the outside itself.[328]

Blanchot juxtaposed the heat of Don Juan's passion, the fire that drove him to take woman after woman, with the coldness and impersonality of his law. They were two sides of the same law, the same rule of conduct. The coldness of the Commander signified Don Juan's culpability for having created a law of coldness himself.

While Camus' version of the myth of Don Juan was exemplary of the absurd, Blanchot's was allegorical in two separate ways. First, Blanchot critiqued and revised the Don Juan myth, making it into an allegory of ethical action. Here, the impersonality of Don Juan's law for the treatment of women was akin to the absence of relation experienced by the abject man, who had no relation to the world, or to himself. Blanchot argued that ethical action could only be taken in the absence of any relation, even to oneself. The requirement to not rely on any transcendental notion of justice, and to take culpability meant that one could not rely on any other – neither another person, such as a master, nor a principle, even the principle of the absurd. In Blanchot's version of the myth of Don Juan, all women were subjected to a law of impersonality, and Don Juan's relation to them was a relation of repetition. It was, in fact, the absence of a relation. Likewise, when Don Juan met the Commander, what he met was the absence of relation that he had imposed on the world. If the Commander took Don Juan with him into death, then this death was not the normal death, the cessation of mortal life. In Blanchot's

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[328] "Ce qu'il rencontre, ce n'est pas la Tout-Puissance, rencontre qui au fond lui plairait, à l'extrême du possible, mais l'impossibilité, l'abîme du non-pouvoir, la démesure glacée de l'*autre* nuit. Il y a toujours au fond du myth l'énigme de la statue de pierre, qui n'est pas seulement la mort, qui est quelque chose de plus froid et de plus anonyme que la mort chrétienne, - qui est l'impersonnalité de tout rapport, le dehors même." Ibid. 497.

version of the myth of Don Juan, death was a metaphor for the absence of relation necessary for ethical action.

Blanchot's version of the myth was allegorical in a second way as well. If the first critiqued and improved Camus' notion of ethical action, the second returned to his critique of the Sadean attempt to found a law. For Blanchot, law could only exist if its founders submitted to it themselves. No single person could exist beyond the law, as its sovereign. In this way, the law was cold and impersonal. Blanchot's Don Juan myth provided an allegory of the necessary impersonality of the law. Don Juan did not reserve a space for himself beyond the law, where he could exist safely. Blanchot argued that Don Juan's rule of conduct was an ethical law precisely because Don Juan submitted to it himself, when he encountered the Commander. In this way, Blanchot's version of the Don Juan myth added a further requirement for ethical action to those elaborated by Camus in *L'Homme révolté*: one must submit to the ethical law that one founds to the same extent that one applies it to others. One must renounce one's personality, if one truly desires to found a law, since the law itself was impersonal.

In these two allegorical lessons drawn from the myth of Don Juan – the absence of relations as the ground for ethical action, and the impersonality of the law – Blanchot planted the genealogical foundations for his response to the war in Algeria. The "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" was composed, signed, and issued by means of these two lessons.

The Refusal of the War in Algeria

In November 1954, five months after Blanchot's response to the debate between Sartre and Camus was published, the war in Algeria began as the FLN staged their the first attacks on French civil and military institutions in Algeria. Blanchot remained silent until 1958, when he contacted Dionys Mascolo about participating in the journal, *Le 14 juillet*. Two years later, in 1960, Blanchot, Mascolo, and Jean Schuster drafted the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie." The preceding part of this chapter considered Blanchot's response to the debate between Sartre and Camus in order to explore the genealogical roots of the philosophy and the ethics behind the "Déclaration." The final part of this chapter will consider the "Déclaration" as an ethical act beyond commitment through an examination of Blanchot's contribution to *Le 14 juillet*, his testimony before the chief prosecutor of the department of the Seine, and an interview that he gave with *L'Express* magazine with several other signatories.

Before turning to Blanchot's contribution to *Le 14 juillet*, it is helpful to briefly review Sartre and Camus' responses to the war in Algeria. Since Blanchot's ethics were at the genealogical root of the "Déclaration," it is useful to bear in mind the kinds of actions that Sartre and Camus' ethics themselves produced. Sartre issued statement after statement demanding that French intellectuals commit to the freedom of the Algerian people. Camus, bruised from his confrontation with Sartre and Jeanson, tried to avoid the public spotlight during the war. His status as the leading French-Algerian intellectual guaranteed, however, that he would not be able to remain silent for long. When finally

Camus spoke out on the war, he pled for an end to the violence, and for a rapprochement between France and Algeria. He sought to secure a future in Algeria for French-Algerians, and in so doing, he argued for the continued French possession of Algeria. While these two positions by no means encompassed the entire array of stances taken by French intellectuals during the war, they were the extensions and continuations of the Sartrean and Camusian ethics of engagement against which Blanchot had defined his own ethics.

After Blanchot returned to Paris from his self-imposed solitude in Èze in the winter of 1957-1958, he did not immediately return to political activity, as there had not yet been a political event that necessitated an ethical – rather than strictly political – engagement. Such an event occurred in May 1958 however, when Charles de Gaulle returned to power after the reckless intervention of the army in domestic politics. This prompted Blanchot to contact Mascolo, the editor of *Le 14 juillet*, and the former organizer of the Comité d'Action des Intellectuels contre le Poursuite de la Guerre en Afrique du Nord. Through his contact with Mascolo, Blanchot placed himself at a distance from both Sartre and Camus in the debate over the war. Mascolo had been behind the largest effort to organize French intellectuals into a collective movement of protest against the war. Together, he and Blanchot were dedicated solely to collective action, while Sartre and Camus continued to issue individual statements based on their own personal reasoning. In this way, Blanchot's participation in the debate over the war in Algeria must be studied not just for the way it put his ethics into action, but also as a continuation of the collective protest against the war begun by Mascolo.

Blanchot's first contribution to *Le 14 juillet* was a one-page essay titled "Le Refus," which appeared in October 1958, with picture of Saint-Just in the upper right hand corner of the page with the legend, "All the arts have produced their marvels. The art of governing has produced only monsters."[329] This essay was the final genealogical building block of the "Déclaration." To the requirements for ethical action drawn from Camus' *L'Homme révolté*, Blanchot added the principle of refusal-in-itself. Of de Gaulle's return to power, Blanchot wrote:

> The movement of refusal is rare and difficult, though equal and the same for each one of us, once we have understood it. Why difficult? Because one must refuse not only the worst, but also what seems reasonable, a solution that could be called felicitous. In 1940, the refusal did not have to be exercised against the invading force (to not accept it was obvious), but against this opportunity that the old man of the armistice, not without good faith or justifications, thought himself able to represent. Eighteen years later, the exigency of refusal did not arise with the events of May 13 (which were refused in themselves), but against a power that pretended to reconcile us honorably with those events, by the sole authority of a name.[330]

In "Le Refus" Blanchot compared de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 with the ascendency of Maréchal Pétain's Vichy regime in 1940. Each event shared two common traits for Blanchot. The first trait was that in both 1940 and 1958 France was plunged into the chaos of wartime, and each time an old, legendary war hero appeared on the political scene to allow the French populace to reconcile itself with the new political order. In 1940 the German army invaded France, and Pétain allowed the French to make

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[329] "Tous les arts ont produit leurs merveilles. L'art de gourverner n'a produit que des monstres." Blanchot, "Le Refus," 3.

[330] "Le mouvement de refuse rest rare et difficile, quoique égal et le meme en chacun de nous, dès que nous l'avons saisi. Pourquoi difficile? C'est qu'il faut refuser, non pas seulement le pire, mais un semblant raisonnable, une solution qu'on dirait heureuse. En 1940, le refus n'eut pas à s'exercer contre la force envahissante (ne pas l'accepter allait de soi), mais contre cette chance qu le vieil homme de l'armistice, non sans bonne foi ni justifications, pensait pouvoir représenter. Dix-huit ans plus tard, l'exigence du refus n'est pas intervenue à propos des événements du 13 Mai (qui se refusaient d'eux-mêmes), mais face au pouvoir qui prétendait nous réconcilier honorablement avec eux, par le seule autorité d'un nom." Ibid.

peace with themselves over their surrender and occupation. In 1958, de Gaulle similarly stepped in to allow the French to reconcile themselves to the new political prominence of the French army, which took steps to invade in protest against the government's softening position on the war in Algeria, getting as far as Corsica. In both cases, the old general of the First World War and the old general of the Résistance were able to achieve reconciliation solely by the authority of their names – when no actual, political reconciliation was possible since the fact in both instances was that France had been invaded and occupied.

The first trait – the way that both Pétain and de Gaulle reconciled the political situation in France with the authority of their names rather than through actual political negotiation – recalled the farcical repetition of Thermidor elaborated by Blanchot in "La Littérature et la droit à la mort," with de Gaulle standing as the new Napoléon. In 1958, it was this trait that created the exigency of refusal for Blanchot, the demand that action be taken. The corruption of politics by a single name could no longer be borne when that corruption pretended that the populace need not distress itself in the face of chaos and invasion.

While this first trait provided the impetus for Blanchot's return to political debates, and provoked the need for refusal, it was the second trait that was the most significant in the genealogy of the "Déclaration." The second trait shared by 1940 and 1958 was the common fact that France had been invaded, and that these invasions required refusal, without any explanation or justification. "Not to accept" the invasion by the German army "was obvious," Blanchot wrote. The events of May 13 were "refused

in themselves." By designating certain political events as capable of being refused-in-themselves, without further elaboration, Blanchot drew on both the ethical requirement for personal culpability and the requirement that ethical action not justify itself with an appeal to a transcendental notion of justice. Both of these requirements laid down the formal conditions for ethical action, but neither of them indicated the specific content of an ethical act. That is to say, neither of these formal requirements for ethical action gave any indication of what kinds of things might qualify for ethical action. Strictly speaking, ethics had no content. It had no specific prescriptions or demands. The decision about what required action fell to the individual actor, who made judgments based on the cultural mores in which he or she had been raised. The requirements that one not seek justification in a transcendental principle, and that one act of one's own recognizance, made it so that the content of ethical actions were always determined by local, cultural rules. Thus, the formal principles of ethics were universal, while the content of ethics was entirely contingent. For Blanchot, the content of ethical action was "obvious" because one's ethical judgments were always personal, idiosyncratic, and contingent. Events that could be refused-in-themselves "obviously" required refusal, because they violated the standard codes by which one lived. It was "obvious" that one had to refuse the German invasion, just as it was "obvious" that one had to refuse the French army's plot to overthrow the government. This refusal-in-itself was a demonstration of the how an ethical actor bridged the gap between the formal requirements for ethical action (which provided no rules for conduct in themselves) and ethical action itself.

The "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" enacted precisely this principle of refusal of the war in Algeria in itself. Just as it was obvious that the invading German army and the mutinous French army needed to be refused, it was also obvious that the war in Algeria needed to be refused. The "Déclaration" was couched in the terms of a refusal-in-itself, citing only the exigency of action, without explaining it: "Are there no cases when the refusal to serve is a sacred obligation, when "treason" signifies the courageous respect of truth?"[331] The "Déclaration" did not provide any justification because it adhered to the formal requirement that prohibited any appeal to a transcendental notion of justice, and it did not provide any reasons for its ethical action because it was simply obvious that the war was unjust. Indeed, all the "Déclaration" claimed was that the one hundred and twenty-one signatories "respect and judge justified the refusal to take up arms against the Algerian people." The refusal of the "Déclaration" simply allowed others to not fight against the Algerians. The refusal of the war was implicit, unspoken, and obvious. This principle of refusal-in-itself did not mean that the war violated a universal code of justice. Rather, the principle of refusal-in-itself meant that for the members of the French intellectual left, whose cultural values were egalitarian, it was obvious that the unjust war in Algeria needed to be refused-in-itself.

In this way, the signatories of the "Déclaration" provided the content of their ethical action themselves. The war was refused-in-itself because it was obvious within the cultural codes of the French intellectual left that it was wrong. The "Déclaration" met

[331] "N'y a-t-il pas de cas où le refus de servir est un devoir sacré, où la "trahison" signifie le respect courageux du vrai?" Blanchot et al., "Déclaration…" 52.

the other, formal requirements of ethical action not through content, but through the form of the "Déclaration" itself. It met the requirement that ethical action not appeal to any transcendental notion of justice, lest it become a hypocritical claim to innocence. And it met the requirement of reasonable culpability, by which one must stake responsibility for one's own action. The only justification provided in the "Déclaration" was the signatories' own admission of culpability: "The undersigned, considering that each one of us must speak out…considering that they have themselves have the obligation to intervene, in their place and according to their means…declare." The signatories of the "Déclaration" refused to appeal to a transcendental notion of justice because that would absolve them of the responsibility. It would be to displace responsibility for their actions onto an other, which would, in turn, exculpate them from their act. The act of the "Déclaration" was only ethical insofar as it abstained from appealing to a transcendental justice, and only insofar as the signatories took culpability on themselves.

Blanchot reiterated the way that the "Déclaration" satisfied the formal requirements of ethical action in the one and only interview that he ever gave, with Madeleine Chapsal, of the magazine *L'Express*. With Blanchot in this interview was the novelist Nathalie Sarraute, the actress Simone Signoret (who, with her husband, the actor Yves Montand, had become a champion of leftist political causes), the surrealist Maurice Nadeau, and a Marxist history professor, Jean Baby – strange accomplices for the writer who spent the 1950s in utter solitude. The interview was instantly censored, and only appeared later, when François Maspero – himself one of the signatories of the Déclaration – published it in a collection called *Le droit à l'insoumission (le dossier des*

"121"), put out by his own publishing house.[332] When Chapsal questioned Blanchot on the nature of the "Déclaration," he responded:

> This is not a simple demonstration of protest. This is a Déclaration, and a declaration that decides, in the absence of a legitimate authority, on that which it decides to refuse and to proclaim. Is it thus only speech? In effect, but speech which has all the authority of a solemn oath, of which those who affirm it feel responsible henceforth, ready to support it calmly, firmly, as much as is necessary, whatever the consequences.[333]

The responsibility felt by the signatories was matched by their refusal to appeal to any notion of justice. Chapsal asked Blanchot why insubordination was a right, and Blanchot responded by explaining why it had to be a right, since the concept of a right let the decision fall on each individual who might be faced with the situation of having to bear arms:

> The right to insubordination. I say Right and not Obligation, as certain commentators, in a thoughtless way, would have wanted the Déclaration to express, doubtlessly because they think that the formulation of an obligation goes further than that of a right. But that is not the case: an obligation calls upon an anterior morality which covers it, guarantees it, and justifies it. When there is an obligation, one has only to close one's eyes and blindness is accomplished. In this way, everything is simple. Right, on the other hand, calls upon only itself, to exercise the liberty of which it is the expression. Right is a free power of which each one of us is responsible for himself, to himself, and which engages each one of us completely and freely. Nothing is stronger. Nothing is more serious. That is why it must be said: right to insubordination. Each one decides with sovereignty.[334]

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[332] Maurice Blanchot et al. interview by Madeleine Chapsal, in François Maspero, ed., *Le droit à l'insoumission (le dossier des "121")* (Paris: Maspero, 1961), 89-99.

[333] "Ce n'est pas un simple manifeste de protestation. C'est une Déclaration, et une déclaration qui décide, en l'absence d'une autorité légitime, de ce qu'il convient de refuser et de revendiquer. Ce n'est donc qu'une parole? En effet, mais qui a toute l'autorité d'une parole grave dont tous ceux qui l'affirment se sentent désormais responsible, prêts à la soutenir calmement, fermement, autant qu'il faut, quelles qu'en soient les conséquences." Ibid. 93.

[334] "Droit à l'insoumission. Je dis bien Droit et non pas Devoir, comme certains, d'une manière irréfléchie, auraient voulu que s'exprime la Déclaration, sans doute parce qu'ils croient que la formulation d'un devoir va plus loin que celle d'un droit. Mais cela n'est pas: une obligation renvoie à une morale antérieure qui la vouvre, la garantit et la justifie; quand il y a devoir, on n'a plus qu'à fermer les yeux, et à l'accomplir aveuglément; alors, tout est simples. Le droit, au contraire, ne renvoie qu'à lui-même, à

With the notion of right as opposed to obligation, Blanchot and the other signatories sought to invest each person with their own sense of reasonable culpability, deprived of any recourse to an "anterior morality." Each person was also charged with the self-sovereignty to decide whether they would exercise their right or not, free from any anterior morality, but also free from the sovereignty of the state to which the "Déclaration" was a direct challenge. In this way, the "Déclaration" attempted to create a new law of reasonable culpability.

Lastly, the signatories of the "Déclaration" completed their ethical act by submitting to the impersonality of the law that they had created. As Blanchot had argued in his re-writing of the Don Juan myth, the creation of a new law – a new rule of conduct – required that the creator or creators submit to the law equally, if it were to become a law, and move beyond the individual who declared. The law could only exist *qua* law if it applied to everyone. Thus, the nature of the law was that it was impersonal: one could create a new law, but only if one sacrificed one's own identity to it, relinquishing the very sovereignty that one had used to create the law. Don Juan was allegorical of this principle for Blanchot. Don Juan submitted women to a rule of impersonality. He treated all women as substitutable objects, with no individual characteristics of their own. They simply became another entry in his *lista numerosa*. In Blanchot's rendition of the myth, the Commander signified the "coldness" of Don Juan's law, the impersonality that his law imposed on the world. Don Juan was ethical precisely because he created a law

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l'exercise de la liberté dont il est l'expression; le droit est un pouvoir libre don't chacun, pour lui-même, vis-à-vis de lui-même, est responsible et qui l'engage complètement et librement; rien n'est plus fort, rien n'est plus grave. C'est pourquoi, il faut dire: droit à l'insoumission: chacun en décide souverainement." Ibid. 91.

of impersonality, and allowed himself to be governed by it as well. If the signatories wished their "Déclaration" to carry the force and the applicability of the law, they would have so submit to a principle of impersonality as well, in recognition of the fact that the law was beyond them, and that none of them stood sovereign over it, or anyone else. This task was made doubly difficult by the requirement that they also acknowledge personal responsibility for the ethical act of the "Déclaration."

The "Déclaration" itself made some effort live up to this principle. Though it was later acknowledged that the "Déclaration" had been written by Blanchot, Mascolo, and Schuster, at the time of its dissemination, no authorship was attributed. The "Déclaration" appeared only with the signatures of the one hundred and twenty-one appended to the bottom of the text. In this way, the signatories both acknowledged culpability, but did so equally and impersonally, none of them claiming authorship directly. The rest of the work towards submitting to the law of impersonality was done in an interrogation in front of a judge, who represented the law of the state, the very law that the "Déclaration" was no longer willing to recognize. Blanchot and other signatories were given the opportunity to violate their law of impersonality, and submit to the law of the state by taking sole responsibility for the "Déclaration." Blanchot held firm in his insistence on the collective undertaking of the "Déclaration," thus affirming his submission to the law of impersonality, and guaranteeing that the "Déclaration" became an ethical action that founded a law for ethical conduct outside the legal purview of the state.

On September 18, 1960, two weeks after the "Déclaration" was made public, Blanchot was charged with "inciting insubordination and desertion" by the chief prosecutor of the Department of the Seine.[335] The examining magistrate sought to "establish a hierarchy of responsibilities" of those who drafted and disseminated the "Déclaration."[336] With a resolve that remains striking fifty years later, Blanchot refused to accept the terms by which the magistrate questioned him, for the very reason that they compromised his submission to the law of impersonality. When the magistrate asked Blanchot if he was the principal author of the "Déclaration," Blanchot responded by affirming the impersonality of the collective text:

> The search that consists of dividing the responsibilities, to seek to establish a pseudo-hierarchy of responsibility, is a fundamentally erroneous search. It misunderstands the truth of every collective text, signed collectively: to know that "each one has his part and all have the entire thing." Everything that you are looking to make me say, which will go against this affirmation that is the meaning of every collective text, will be false, and I dismiss it in advance.[337]

At the same time, Blanchot also affirmed the individual responsibility he assumed for his signature, and the individual responsibility that each signatory took upon themselves, such that every one of them was its true author: "I add that if I admit to being fully

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[335] "Incitation à l'insoumission et à la désertion." "Premières inculpations de signataires de la déclaration sur l'insoumission," *Le Monde*, September 18-19, 1960.

[336] "D'établir une hierarchie dans les résponsibilités." Ibid.

[337] "La démarche qui consiste à diviser les responsabilités, à chercher à établir une pseudo-hiérarchie de responsabilité, est une démarche fondamentalement erronée, elle méconnaît la vérité de tout texte collectif, signé collectivement: à savoir que "chacun en a sa part et tous l'ont tout entière." Tout ce que vous chercherez à me faire dire qui ira contre cette affirmation qui est le sens de tout texte collectif, sera faux, et je le révoque par avance." Blanchot, "Interrogation avec le juge," *Écrits politiques: 1953-1993*, 84. At the end of his interrogation, Blanchot insisted on revising the transcript. It was the custom in French courts of law that the examining magistrate took down the transcript of the interrogation, and the accused signed off on the transcription. Blanchot refused to accept the judge's transcription, and demanded that he be able to revise the text so that the official document reflected what he had actually said. This is both a fascinating anecdote, and a materially significant fact, for it verifies that the transcript of Blanchot's interrogation provided in the *Écrits politiques* contains Blanchot's actual words. The text used for the *Écrits politiques* was found among Blanchot's papers after his death in 2003.

responsible for this text, each one of the signatories being equally considered as its single author, this responsibility I assume globally, in its ensemble, I am not going to go into detail."[338] Indeed, the signature, more than the fact of writing was what made one responsible for the text. The signature dissolved the individual signatories' identities into the text itself, as Don Juan's identity dissolved into the Commander's icy hand:

> I declare that I admit to being fully responsible for this text, from the moment when I signed it. The fact of the signature is the essential fact. It signifies that not only am I in agreement with this text, but that I merge myself with it, that I am this text itself. Each one of the signatories identifies himself in the text, such that each is there before your eyes, such that each has been made public.[339]

For Blanchot, the text was itself a law to which he had to submit, by the very fact of his signature. By the fact of the signature, each signatory gave up individual authorship, they gave up individual identity, and submitted to the law of the collective text. This collective text was impersonal, but fully binding for those who signed, such that to sign the "Déclaration" was to submit to the law of conduct that it sought to affirm, just as Don Juan submitted to the impersonality of the law he imposed on women when he met the Commander.

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The "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" threw the French government into disarray. It created a new law, outside the boundaries of the

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[338] "J'ajoute que si je me reconnais pleinement responsible de ce texte, chacun des signataires devant être *également* considéré comme son auteur unique, cette responsabilité, je l'assume globalement, dans son ensemble, je ne fais pas le détail." Ibid.

[339] "Je déclare que je me reconnais pleinement responsible de ce texte, à partir du moment où je l'ai signé. Le fait de la signature est le fait essentiel. Il signifie que non seulement je m'accorde avec ce texte, mais que je me confonds avec lui, que je suis ce texte lui-même. Chacun des signataires s'identifie au texte, tel qu'il est là devant vos yeux, tel qu'il a été rendu public." Ibid.

laws of the French state, and which the government was powerless to combat, since it denied the very power of the government. All the government could do was threaten the signatories with the traditional weapons of the law. The examining magistrate of the Department of the Seine wanted to affix guilt to single persons, to assign blame in a hierarchy of responsibilities. But the "Déclaration" confounded the magistrate's desire to assert sovereignty over the signatories by denying the very terms of responsibility, and individuality that the magistrate sought to impose. Against the concepts of responsibility and individuality enforced by the magistrate, the signatories of the "Déclaration" asserted a new law of ethical conduct. They made it valid by denying guilt before the law, and affirming their own culpability. They made it legitimate by submitting to it as a law, surrendering their individuality to its impersonality, althewhile disavowing any innocence that did not rightfully belong to them.

Moreover, the "Déclaration" also had material legal and political effects. First, the chief prosecutor of the Department of the Seine was eventually forced to withdraw many of his charges against Blanchot and the other signatories. Second, the "Déclaration" also helped to turn the tide of public opinion against the war. After 1960, popular disapproval of the war eventually pressured de Gaulle to negotiate a ceasefire with the FLN. The "Déclaration" achieved what no other intellectual protest had accomplished, and what Satrean commitment never succeeded in doing: it united the intellectual left against the war, it overrode the sovereignty of the state, and it contributed to the end of the war in Algeria.

With the ethical action of "Déclaration" Blanchot, Mascolo, and the rest of the Rue Saint-Benoit group initiated a mode of intellectual engagement in politics beyond commitment. They not only abandoned commitment in politics, they replaced it with a mode of ethical action capable of creating new laws. Unfortunately, Albert Camus' untimely death in January 1960 prevented him from taking part in the "Déclaration" – either for it or against it. But the signatories all owed much to his insistence that intellectual engagement in politics had to begin from a solid ethical point of departure, rather than from the dream of a political point of arrival. The genealogy of the "Déclaration" passed from the debate between Sartre and Camus, through Blanchot's response and his rewriting of the myth of Don Juan. While the "Déclaration" was not a Camusian document, it was a continuation and an expansion of the ethical critique of commitment that Camus made in *L'Homme révolté*.

After tracing this genealogy, it is now possible to return to Blanchot's vexing response to Bernard Henri-Lévy questions in 1989 regarding his participation in the drafting and dissemination of the "Déclaration," and his abstention from the protests against the Soviet repression of the Hungarian revolution. At the time Blanchot wrote: "Thank you for your letter. But pardon me for being unable to respond as you wished. I no longer receive even my closest friends, without our friendship being diminished. And today, I think only of Auschwitz." Just as the "Déclaration" initially appeared to lack any philosophical content, so too did Blanchot's refusal to answer Henri-Lévy seem not to have any higher justification. But in exactly the same manner as the "Déclaration," Blanchot's refusal to appeal to a higher justification in explaining why he contributed to

the “Déclaration” and not to the protests against the Soviet repression of the Hungarian revolution, only served to mask the deeper philosophical and ethical reasoning behind Blanchot’s actions. Blanchot’s refusal to explain his abstention from the protests of the Soviet repression of the Hungarian revolution corresponded exactly to rules for ethical conduct that Blanchot established during the 1950s: that he not appeal to any higher justification, and that he take his action entirely on his own recognizance.

CHAPTER THREE

Words Rent by Lightning: Origins after Structuralism

On Saturday, May 20, 1961 Michel Foucault defended his doctoral thesis, *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. Typically, doctoral defenses are not well-attended affairs. For Foucault however, the positively staggering crowd of nearly one hundred packed into Salle Louis Liard, an august, academic hall of the Sorbonne. Word had gotten out that something special was going to take place. Foucault's committee was comprised of venerable members of the French academy. His advisor, Georges Canguilhem, was a pre-eminent historian of science. The president of the defense, Henri Gouhier, was a respected historian of philosophy. The committee was rounded out by Daniel Lagache, a psychoanalyst who co-founded the Société Française de la Psychanalyse with Jacques Lacan; Maurice de Gandillac, a philosophy professor at the Sorbonne; and Jean Hyppolite, one of the principal philosophers responsible for introducing the work of Hegel to a French audience. Foucault was questioned on every aspect of his project, from his historical methodology, to his underlying metaphysics, to his rhetorical stylistics. Sensing that his defense was going badly Foucault offered the resigned conclusion, "To speak about madness requires the talents of a poet." His resignation proved unwarranted. Canguilhem leaned over the table and pronounced, "But you have those talents, sir."[340]

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[340] "Mais, vous l'avez, monsieur." This episode, and this quote are recounted in Foucault's biography. See Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), pp. 133. See also François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme I: Le champ du signe, 1945-1966* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1991), 190-192.

Thus began the career of one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. There is more to this episode than meets the eye. Foucault's exasperated claim, that to write a history of madness requires the talents of a poet, and Canguilhem's confirmation of those talents within Foucault himself, was not a romanticization of rational historical, philosophical, and psychiatric methods. It was symbolic, rather, of the idea of textual engagement that had been germinating ever since Jean Paulhan and Maurice Blanchot first critiqued Sartrean commitment during the debate over the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals. Blanchot laid the seeds of the move beyond commitment as a means of intellectual engagement in politics, and abandoned commitment entirely during the war in Algeria. But it was not until Foucault's *Folie et Déraison*, that the idea of a fully-fledged textual engagement in politics was brought to fruition.

This was the idea that the things of the mental world studied by Foucault, and the things of the literary world studied by Blanchot, had a shared origin not in tedious historical processes, but rather in a spectacular moment of poetic creation. Blanchot and Foucault argued that the lived experience of reality was fundamentally linguistic, and by extension, fundamentally poetic, or literary. For Blanchot, this meant that literature, far from expressing life, actually became life itself. For Foucault however, this meant that the human sciences – including psychiatry – which purport to know the human world intrinsically, positively, and absolutely, were made of the very same stuff as literature. Engagement with this textual world now meant engaging with its poetic creation. Canguilhem's comment that Foucault had the talents of a poet was no less than a

confirmation that Foucault's textual engagement with the discourse of mental illness was a success.

The crucial insight that Blanchot and Foucault developed was that if knowledge is just words, just a fiction, then it is also a fiction *invented* by humans. The human sciences came into the world by the very same process of creation as literature. And yet, Foucault argued, the human sciences were experienced as objective realities. The paradoxical mystery of psychiatry for Foucault was that people believed that it really knew the inner workings of the mind, and believed that it really could cure the diseases of the mind. Likewise, the paradoxical mystery of literature for Blanchot was that people believed it represented an author's insight into the human condition. That is, they believed it represented something *real*, the author's thoughts, whereas for Blanchot, the reality of literature was that it is pure fiction, representing nothing other than itself. What was it, Blanchot and Foucault asked, that inhered in psychiatry and in literature – things that were manifestly linguistic – that made people accept them as reality?

The answer to this question, which they developed over the course of a long exchange of essays and books between 1961 and 1966, lay in the concept of the origin. In "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire," published several years later in 1971, Foucault criticized the search for origins as "an attempt to capture the exact essence of the thing, its purest possibilities, its identity, carefully folded back on itself, its immobile form that precedes anything of the external world."[341] Origins were closely linked to essences, but

[341] "S'efforce d'y recueillir l'essence exact de la chose, sa possibilité la plus pure, son identité soigneusement repliée sur elle-même, sa forme immobile et anterieure à tout e qui est externe, accidentel." Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire," in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), 148.

because of the linguistic nature of the human world, such origins did not exist. Many historians have used Foucault's critique of origins to demystify essentialized notions race, gender, sexuality, nation, and empire.[342] This chapter argues that this was but half of Foucault's argument, and that historians could go even further in their project of demystification if they followed Foucault all the way. This chapter argues that Foucault, together with Blanchot, re-thought the idea of origins in the 1960s, prior to his "genealogical turn."[343] Together they articulated an idea about the origins of psychiatry

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[342] Take, for instance, the commonplace notion that the origin of the United States was in the Mayflower, the pilgrims, and Plymouth Plantation. The Mayflower is the origin myth of the United States, and in recent years historians have critiqued this myth by demonstrating its fallacy. Instead, historians have shown the complicated, uneven, and problematic history of the development of the United States. The actual United States had little to do with the perpetuation of the original Puritan essence of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and much more to do with apposite desires for territorial expansion, spiritual and racial domination, and self-interested gain. For a discussion of national origin myths, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

[343] One might argue, though this chapter stops well short of doing so, that Foucault's genealogical turn was really just an attempt to place the search for origins back on its feet, after so many false steps taken toward nonexistent essences. Indeed, Foucault gestured toward this position even in "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire," in which he wrote: "To this confused and anonymous European, who no longer knows himself or what name he should use, the historian offers alternative identities, apparently more individualized and real than his own. But the man with historical sense will not be deceived by this substitute that is offered to him; he will understand that it is only a disguise. Little by little, the Revolution was supplied with Roman models, Romanticism with knight's armor, the Wagnerian era was given the sword of a German hero – but these were rags whose unreality reflects our own unreality…The good historian, the genealogist will know what must be thought of all of this masquerade. He will not be held back by his serious mind; on the contrary, he will want to push the masquerade to its limit, and to make the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing into a work of art." "A cet homme emmêlé et anonyme qu'est l'Européen – et qui ne sait plus qui il est, quel nom il doit porter – l'historien offer des identités de rechange, en apparence, mieux individualisées et plus réelles que la sienne. Mais l'homme du sens historique ne doit pas tromper sur ce substitut qu'il offre: ce n'est qu'un déguisement. Tour à tour, on a offert à la Révolution le modèle romain, au romantisme l'armure du chevalier, à l'époque wagnérienne l'épee du héros germanique; mais ce sont des oripeaux dont l'irréalité renvoie à notre proper irréalité…Le bon historien, le généalogiste, saura ce qu'il faut penser de toute cette mascarade. Non point qu'il la repousse par esprit de sérieux; il veut au contraire la pousser à l'extrême: il veut mettre en œuvre un grand carnaval du temps, où les masques ne cesseront de revenir." See Foucault, "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire," 167-168. Here parody must not be understood as a rejection of all origins, and the liberation into a world free of origin. Rather it must be understood simply as a different approach to origins, one which parodies the fictional origin that pretends to reality, and instead venerates the actual origin that persists as a fiction. The argument of this chapter is that between 1961 and 1966 Blanchot and Foucault attempted to push the masquerade to its limit. Following this logic, the origin of the United States *qua*

and literature, respectively, which explained why people believed in them so completely, and which offered an alternative. Psychiatry promoted a story about its creation that was rooted in the scientific method, and the "discovery" of madness by toiling physicians. Likewise, literature promoted its own story of creation, in which the writer wrestled with his project until it became a book. But to Blanchot and Foucault these were red herrings – the fictions of a fiction, as it were – that shrouded the essential truth that psychiatry, like literature, was just words strung together. They were apocrypha, designed to make people believe that psychiatry could cure mental illness, and that literature contains insight into life.

Therein lay the key to the origin of the discourses of psychiatry and literature: if scientific discovery was a fiction, masquerading as the real origin of psychiatry, and if the writer's effort at writing was also a fiction, and not the real origin of literature, then the actual origins of psychiatry and literature clearly did not lay at the level of reality. Rather, Blanchot and Foucault reasoned, the actual origins of psychiatry and literature must be in their creation *as fictions*. If psychiatry and literature were really just fictions, then they must have been created in the very same way that all fictions are created. Fiction, as Blanchot pointedly argued in 1947/1948 in "Litérature et le droit à la mort," was nothing more than "[lining] up a few words side by side."[344] They come into being not by accurately capturing reality, but through *poiesis* – the power of words to make. They came into being, and they were accepted as reality, by the power of poetic speech.

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imagined community was indeed the Mayflower. As an imagined community, the United States has a fictional quality, and its origin must be equally fictional.

[344] "…d'aligner quelques mots." Blanchot, "Litérature et le droit à la mort," *La Part du feu* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949), 309.

As Blanchot wrote in 1942 in *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* the discourse of psychiatry and the discourse of literature were "words rent by lighting," they were words given the power of being, through their existence in poetic form.[345] Thus Foucault found real origins of psychiatry in the literary conception of madness contained in the ship of fools, which proliferated in Renaissance literature, but which never actually existed. Likewise, Blanchot found the origin of literature in the literary conception of creation contained in the myth of the first poetic creator, Orpheus. Together, they articulated the idea that discourses had origins, but that those origins were never "real." Rather, they always appeared under the halo of the mythic.

Yet textual engagement was not merely designed to expose the illusions by which the world operated. It was also designed to bring society to a healthy reconciliation with those illusions. The exposure of the linguistic or literary construction of discourses like mental illness, and literature was the first step in the program of textual engagement developed by Foucault and Blanchot. The second step was the replacement of each discourse' purported origins (ie. scientific discovery and the sovereign author) with mythic origins, like the ship of fools, or the myth of Orpheus. Unlike Sartrean commitment, whose attempt to remake the world through language had been demonstrated to be politically inefficacious, and ethically hypocritical, Foucaultian and Blanchotian textual engagement recognized the limits of any kind of intellectual engagement in politics that took the linguistic construction of the world as its base assumption. As Blanchot demonstrated during the postwar purge of writers and

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[345] "Paroles déchirées par l'éclair." Blanchot, *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* (Paris: José Corti, 1942), 27.

intellectuals in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," the linguistically-constructed world could not simply be remade according to the writer's wishes.

The term myth then denoted something quite different in the work of Foucault and Blanchot, than it did in the work other contemporaneous thinkers: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* on the one hand, and Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Anthropologie structurale* and Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* on the other.[346] For Adorno and Horkheimer, myth was the first step towards the disenchantment of the world achieved by enlightenment. The enlightenment placed humanity in an abstract relation with the world by processes of instrumental reason, measurement, and abstraction. Likewise, the Greeks invented their myths to mediate between humanity from the world. For Adorno and Horkheimer, myth was a concrete historical event, one stage in a larger trajectory toward total disenchantment. But for Blanchot and Foucault however, myth was not a historical event. Orpheus was not the origin of poetry because he was the first poet. Rather, Orpheus was the origin of poetry because the existence of poetry could not be explained and believed in purely historical terms. For Blanchot and Foucault, myth was what humanity used to explain a discourse's passage from a purely poetic potentiality, to a historical actuality. In this way, Blanchot and Foucault suggested that myth did not produce enlightenment rationality, but rather served as a corrective to the alienation imposed by instrumental reason.

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[346] See Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp Verlag, 1981). Claude Lévi-Strauss's "The Structural Study of Myth," appeared first in English. I have provided citations to both the English and French versions. See Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (Oct. – Dec. 1955): 426-444; *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958). See also Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957).

Similarly, Blanchot and Foucault's idea of mythical origins also departed the definition of myth established by Lévi-Strauss and Barthes. Though Lévi-Strauss and Barthes produced very different analyses of myths, they both approached myth as a discourse whose very existence required explanation. And furthermore, both Lévi-Strauss and Barthes thought that myth required structural analysis. Seen from this structrualist perspective then, Blanchot and Foucault's idea of mythical origins would seem to have essentialized myth. They did not take it as something that needed explanation and accounting for, but rather assumed it to be a regular part of human existence. This charge of essentialism requires qualification however. Blanchot and Foucault understood myth as a constituent element of humanity's cultural existence. In their view, myth worked on the same epistemological level as any other cultural construction. For them, myth was different only insofar as it had been rigorously excluded from the modern world by the discourses of mental illness, and literary production. Blanchot and Foucault saw myth as the antidote to an overly structured world.

In this sense, this chapter argues against the prevailing understanding of the relationship between Blanchot and Foucault, which focuses on the occasional essays that they wrote on each other's thought.[347] Foucault wrote an essay on Blanchot called "La pensée du déhors," for the special issue of *Critique* devoted to Blanchot in 1966. In this piece Foucault sutured together an intellectual portrait of Blanchot through readings of the latter's work, testifying to an *amor intellectualis* sustained in absentia. Blanchot, for

[347] The philosopher Gilles Deleuze's book, *Foucault*, provides an enlightening, if unsystematic account of Foucault's indebtedness to the thought of Blanchot. See Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986).

his part, published a panegyric for Foucault, two years after the latter's death in 1984, titled *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*.[348] Eleanor Kaufman analyzes these pieces in *The Delirium of Praise: Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski*.[349] She examines Blanchot and Foucault's essays on each other in order to theorize friendship as a relation that can exist, and even thrive in the physical absence of the other. Yet her primary concern is theoretical, and not historical. A systematic, historical treatment of Blanchot and Foucault's relationship, which takes into account the effect they had on each other's thinking, is still required. This chapter seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the history of Blanchot and Foucault's coextensive, and overlapping ideas of mythical origins.

This chapter focuses on the idea of mythic origins created between Foucault's *Folie et déraison* and Blanchot's essays on Orpheus. As such, it excludes the occasional pieces they wrote on each other, as well as numerous other essays that showed traces of each other's thought. During the first half of the 1960s Foucault published several works that closely mirrored Blanchot's method of literary criticism, and his choice of literary objects. These literary essays included "Le langage à l'infini," "La folie, l'absence d'œuvre," as well as the book *Raymond Roussel*, all three of which actively took on Blanchotian themes.[350] Foucault also published "Le "non" du père," "Préface à la

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[348] Blanchot, *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1986).
[349] Eleanor Kaufman, *The Delirium of Praise: Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
[350] Michel Foucault, "Le langage à l'infini," *Tel Quel* 15 (1963): 44-53; "La folie, l'absence d'œuvre," *La table ronde* 196 (1964): 11-21, *Raymond Roussel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

transgression," and "Le prose d'Acteon," each of which was implicitly Blanchotian in tenor, if not explicitly Blanchotian in content.[351]

These pieces are of considerable interest as precursors to Foucault's later work, yet within his exchange with Blanchot in the first half of the 1960s has gone entirely unnoticed by historians.[352] The exchange between Blanchot and Foucault over *Folie et déraison* and creation stands out for being the only moment in their respective careers when they actually engaged in a reciprocal exchange with each other at the same time, and were in a position to influence each other directly. By exploring this exchange, this chapter shows that Blanchot and Foucault together articulated a notion of textual engagement in the linguistic construction of reality. In this way, Foucault's comment at his dissertation defense, that writing about madness requires the talent of a poet, takes on added significance. Foucault viewed the reality of madness as Blanchot viewed the reality of literature. Both issued from a moment of poetic creation. Writing about either required the talents of a poet not because one's account needed to be poetic, but because only the poet was capable of apprehending and explaining the imaginary reality of madness or literature.

In this exchange Blanchot also clarified his position against the emerging field of structuralism. During the 1950s structuralism swept through the avant-garde French intellectual community.[353] As the French philosopher Étienne Balibar succinctly defines

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[351] Foucault, "Le "non" du père," *Critique* 178 (1962): 195-209; "Préface à la transgression," *Critique* 195/196 (1963): 751-769; "Le prose d'Acteon," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 135 (1964): 444-459.
[352] The same cannot be said for those who practice literary studies, to whom Foucault's work on literature ha been fundamental. See Simon During, *Foucault and Literature: Towards a Genealogy of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992).
[353] On the history of this movement, see Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme I*.

it, structuralism was the agreement on "the necessity of studying structures rather than histories, essences, figures of consciousness, or experiences, or on the "primacy" of structure with respect to subjectivity, life and historicity."[354] At the same time, Balibar insists that structuralism was also innately divided and pluralist, as the agreement on the object of study was "only possible insofar as the irreducibility of structures to a single epistemological model was immediately and collectively posited."[355] But for Blanchot the movement of structuralism was strictly peripheral to his project, and he articulated his position vis à vis structuralism entirely through his engagement with Foucault.[356] Structuralism was something that Blanchot felt he had to take cognizance of, if only because of its increasing presence in French intellectual culture, and if only to demonstrate the distance between it and his own position. He used his critical reviews of Foucault's work to stage an encounter with the central tenet of structuralism, arguing that any structuralist study was incomplete unless it took account of the mythic, and poetic origin of structures themselves.

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[354] Étienne Balibar, "Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject?" trans. James Swenson, *differences* 14, no. 1 (2003): 3.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Blanchot never fully engaged with the movement of structuralism outside of his work on Foucault, and the word scarecley appears throughout his corpus. Other than Foucault, Blanchot had little to say about the recognized avatars of structuralism such as Jacques Lacan, or Louis Althusser. Furthermore, Blanchot never discussed Lévi-Strauss's work in any detail. His engagement with Lévi-Strauss' thought was confined to two essays, one of which dealt with the problem of ethnograpy raised by *Tristes Tropiques*. The other dealt with *La pensée sauvage*, but only as a parenthetical statement in Blanchot's review of Foucault's *Raymond Roussel*. See Blanchot, "L'homme au point zero," *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* 40 (April 1956): 683-694; "Le problème de Wittgenstein," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 131 (November 1963): 866-875.

In making this argument, this chapter draws on Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*.[357] Copjec argues that during the 1970s Foucault had a debate with the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan over the origins of discursive structures. In his genealogical work of the 1970s, Copjec argues, Foucault came to believe that it was not possible for a historian to grasp the origins of discursive structures. The actual historical causes of discursive structures were always too contingent, too minute, and too diffuse to be apprehended by history's logic of linear causality. There was no transcendental principle guiding the movement of history. Foucault concluded that, absent of any origin, historical discourses could be understood only by examining the relations of power and knowledge that obtained within them. Copjec condemns this view as historicist. Indeed, Foucault's attempt to account for discourses strictly by examining their indwelling relations closely paralleled the historicist method of understanding historical phenomena strictly by examining their context.

Lacan, on the other hand, argued that this historicist approach was inadequate to understand what was going on at any given moment in history. For Lacan, human existence never completely coincided with discursive structures. While they determined the conscious and unconscious lives of human beings, discursive structures were never able to determine life completely, always leaving behind a remainder, an extra piece of humanity. This remainder was desire, the inassimilable, illogical, part of the human being that drove them to discursive structures in the first place. Moreover, desire was also always hidden from view by the very discursive structure that it brought into being.

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[357] Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1994).

Indeed, for Lacan, the logic of the discursive structure was to occlude this illogical cause. Any discursive structure necessarily occluded its cause, since it was not possible to believe in that structure's logic while also knowing that its origin lay in the messy illogic of desire. For this reason, Lacan argued that the historicist approach of explaining a discursive structure strictly by reference to its internal relations was not capable of accounting for the actual history that discursive structure.

To illustrate this abstract point, Copjec provides the example of Freud, who made a similar argument in *Totem and Taboo*. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud suggested that egalitarian society – the democratic society of equals – came into being when a primordial band of brothers murdered their tyrannical father, thus abolishing injustice. On the face of it, this is absurd. But on closer inspection, a subtle logic reveals itself. In Copjec's words:

> If this father of the primal horde is preposterous, then he is objectively so. That is to say, he is unbelievable within the regime in which his existence *must* be unthinkable if relations of equality are to take hold…For if we did not posit his existence, we would be incapable, without resorting to psychologism, of explaining how the brothers came together in this fashion. What Freud accounts for in *Totem and Taboo* is the structure, the real structure, of a society of equals, which is thus shown to be irreducible to the labile relations of equality that never obtain completely. The petty jealousies and feelings of powerlessness that threaten these relations, that block their permanent realization, betray their guilty origin, the cause that they must efface.[358]

Copjec points to this example because it shows how something that is taken for being absolutely natural, in this case human equality, is based on a shared illusion. Equality, like all discursive constructions, is never adequate to reality. In reality some people are

[358] Copjec, 12.

short and others tall. Some smart and some stupid. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as equality.

Yet, Copjec argues, there is more to it than that. It is not simply that discursive constructions represent reality only imperfectly, always leaving behind an unrepresented remainder, such as that part of humanity that is unequal. Rather, it is that the attempt to represent reality through discursive constructions produces the unrepresentability at the same time that it produces representablity. To put it less abstractly, humanity was not unequal until the moment when equality was invented. To be sure, inequality existed, but it was not inequality per se. Humanity became unequal only once someone had the idea that humanity could be equal. In Copjec's rendering of *Totem and Taboo*, inequality is the effect of the attempt to make humanity equal, rather than the cause of the brothers' murder and establishment of relations of equality. The primordial father is the symbol in inequality created by the principle of equality. He is absurd, but only within the order that tries to impose relations of absolute equality. He serves as a myth that explains the fact that at some point, humans invented equality.

It is in this way that the idea of the mythic origin that Blanchot and Foucault shared must be understood. Neither Blanchot nor Foucault suggested that the actual origin of literature, or of madness was a myth. Rather, their idea of the mythic origin was an intervention in the way that modern society had constructed literature and madness. The idea of the mythic origin was designed to intervene in the way that modern society understood and related to literature. Just as Copjec (via Freud) suggests that inequality came into being only with the attempt to impose relations of absolute equality, Blanchot

suggested that the unreality of literature came into being only when literature was taken for the mirror of nature. As Freud's band of brothers was designed to account for the contemporary belief in the imaginary equality of all people, so was Blanchot's rendition of the Orpheus myth designed to account for the contemporary belief in the verisimilitude of literature, while Foucault's ship of fools accounted for the belief in the scientific reality of psychiatry and mental illness.

This chapter begins by providing a brief description of Blanchot and Foucault's intellectual and personal biographies up to the moment when the exchange began in 1961. After this biographical précis, this chapter examines the exchange between Blanchot and Foucault in the context of postwar French intellectual culture, but also at a minute level of textual detail. The description and analysis of this exchange concludes by returning to the context of postwar French intellectual culture in order to reveal the exchange's wider effect and significance.

Two Generations of French Intellectuals

In 1961 Blanchot was a prominent figure among the radical intelligentsia. After eleven years of self-imposed exile in the coastal village of Èze, Blanchot returned to Paris in response to the political exigencies of the Algerian War of Independence and Charles de Gaulle's seizure of power. In 1960 Blanchot participated in the drafting of the *Manifeste des 121*, also known as the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie." Though hardly a public intellectual in the mold of Jean-Paul Sartre, or

Albert Camus, by 1961 Blanchot was no longer the reclusive writer he had formerly been.

For all this, however, Blanchot made the conversion to a politically engaged intellectual identity on his own terms. When Blanchot returned to Paris the frequency of his contributions to *La Nouvelle Revue Française* declined.[359] Where before he had contributed to *La Nouvelle Revue Française* every month, he produced only eight pieces in 1960, seven in 1961. By 1964 Blanchot was contributing only five essays per year. While he continued to publish significant essays with the journal – indeed, the bulk of Blanchot's exchange with Foucault occurred in the pages of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* – Blanchot began to devote his energies to other projects. His experience with *Le 14 juillet*, and subsequently with the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" encouraged Blanchot to pursue the establishment of another journal. This project became the ill-fated *Revue internationale*.[360] While this remarkable journal never managed to get off the ground, it occupied Blanchot from 1960 to 1964, when pieces of it were published in the Italian journal, *Il Menabò*. The plan was ambitious. It was to be published in three languages: French, German and Italian. The French contributors included Robert Antelme, Roland Barthes, Michel Butor, Louis-René des

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[359] The second "nouvelle" was dropped from the title of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* at the beginning of 1959.

[360] The internal communications pertaining to the establishment and publication of the *Revue internationale*, including several of Blanchot's letters and pieces intended for publication, were collected in a special issue of the journal *Lignes* dedicated to Blanchot. See Michel Surya, ed., *Lignes* 11 (September 1990). Several of Blanhot's personal writings for the *Revue* were re-edited and published in the *Écrits politiques: 1953-1993*, 91-134. For a general account of the history of the *Revue internationale*, see Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998), 404-417. For analyses of the review's philosophical and political significant, see Christopher Fynsk, "Blanchot in *The International Review*," *Paragraph* 30, no. 3 (2007): 104-120; and Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 211-217. See also, Christophe Bident, "R/M, 1953," trans. Michael Holland, *Paragraph* 30, no. 3 (2007): 67-83.

Forêts, Marguerite Duras, Michel Leiris, Dionys Mascolo, Maurice Nadeau; from Italy there was Italo Calvino, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Elio Vittorini; and from Germany, Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, Günter Grass, Uwe Johnson, Robert Walser. Blanchot had even enlisted the assistance of such far-flung writers as Carlos Fuentes, Leszek Kolakowski, Iris Murdoch, and Ernesto Sabato.

Like its predecessor, the *Revue* sought to respond to the political exigencies of the time. But where *Le 14 juillet* responded to the concrete event of De Gaulle's seizure of power, the *Revue* responded to the more abstract exigency of the Cold War. The catalyzing event for the participants in the *Revue internationale* was the construction, on August 13 1961, of the Berlin Wall. Christophe Bident, Christopher Fynsk, and Leslie Hill discuss the way that the uniquely collective project of writing the *Revue* sought to respond to the exigency of the abstraction of the Cold War. Fynsk in particular highlights the way that Blanchot's contribution to the first issue of the *Revue*, an essay titled "Berlin," "says very precisely what it means to live an insoluble problem."[361] For Fynsk "Berlin" was an attempt to create a material, and intellectual response to the irresolvable situation of the Cold War.

Yet there was more in Blanchot's "Berlin" than a political response. It also sought to respond to the general construction of reality in postwar Europe, and in doing so it was of a piece with Blanchot's more literary work, including his exchange with Foucault. The general argument of "Berlin" was that the division of the city in two by the Berlin Wall created a problem for thought that was simultaneously and inseparably a social, political,

[361] Fynsk, 113.

economic, and linguistic problem. In this situation, to think each of the aspects of the problem of Berlin individually was to abjure the whole, while attempting to think the whole did an irreparable violence to the particularity of each individual aspect. For Blanchot this - the inability to think Berlin either particularly, or wholely – was the real problem posed by the Berlin Wall. Moreover, this was the very problem of thinking about reality for Blanchot:

> The problem of the division – of the fracture – which Berlin poses, not only to Berliners, not only to Germans, but, I think, to every reflective man, and which it poses in an imperious, I would say painful way, is a problem which cannot adequately be formed in its complete reality by deciding to formulate it *fragmentarily* (which is not to say, partially). In other words, each time that we evoke a problem of this type - there are others, all the same - we must recall that speaking in a just manner, is a speech that also allows the lack of our words and our thoughts to be spoken, and which thus allows us to speak the impossibility of speaking in a manner which pretends to be exhaustive.[362]

The problem of speaking of Berlin in its complete reality brought to a head the problem of speaking of *anything* in its complete reality. It was not that the division of Berlin was the first issue to broach this problem. Rather, Berlin forced this problem into the political sphere. Blanchot did not assail the construction of the Berlin Wall directly – what he challenged, and what he sought to respond to, was the way in which the name of "Berlin" abstracted the unrepresentable reality of the political, social, and economic life of Berlin. Here abstraction did not mean imprecision. Here abstraction was the mode of thinking by which the unrepresentable reality of things was given a concrete, legible, audible,

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[362] "Le problème de la division - de la fracture - tel que Berlin le propose, non seulement aux Berliois, non seulement aux Allemands, mais, je crois, à toute homme réfléchissant, et le propose d'une manière impérieuse, je veux dire douloureuse, est un problème qu'on ne peut formuler adéquatement, dans sa réalité *complète*, qu'en décidant de la formuler *fragmentairement* (cela ne veut pas dire partiellement). Autrement dit, chaque fois que nous évoquons un problème de ce genre - il y en a d'autres, tout de même -, nous devons nous rappeler qu'en parler de manière juste, c'est un parler en laissant aussi parler le manque abrupt de no paroles et de notre pensée, en laissant donc parler notre inpossibilité d'en parler d'une manière prétendument exhaustive." Blanchot, "Berlin," *Écrits politiques*, 130-131.

communicable expression. It was only through the abstraction of the name "Berlin" that the reality of Berlin could be experienced at all. In this way, Blanchot argued that abstraction was the very world that people actually live in – not a world in which people had pure contact with the things in the world, but a world in which language's imperfection was the only reason people have contact with things at all.

This position, that the world was an abstraction that people experienced concretely, informed Blanchot's approach to the developments of the 1960s. And it also informed Blanchot's understanding of the reality of madness when he encountered Foucault's *Folie et déraison*.

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Blanchot and Foucault never met. Blanchot wrote at the beginning of *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*: "I have dwelled with Michel Foucault without any personal relationship. I never met him, except once in the courtyard of the Sorbonne during the events of May '68, perhaps in June or July (but I am told he wasn't there)."[363] It was not entirely unpredictable that they never met. They led entirely different lives. Though they were both members of the same avant-garde literary and philosophical community in Paris, their public personae took them in opposite directions. Blanchot was a recluse who devoted himself to solitude. He gave only one interview in his entire life. Foucault, meanwhile, had become the most famous philosopher in France. He held an appointment at the Collège de France where his lectures were attended by hundreds. He appeared on

[363] "Je suis resté avec Michel Foucault sans relations personelles. Je ne l'ai jamais rencontré, sauf une fois dans la cour de la Sorbonne pendant les événements de Mai 68, peut-être en juin ou juillet (mais on me dit qu'il n'était pas là)." Blanchot, *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*, 1.

television, gave interviews constantly, and created public controversies. He was a part of the university, while Blanchot was a professional writer. Foucault was a celebrity, Blanchot a private individual. While Blanchot's story in the 1950s is one of isolation, followed by political awakening, Foucault's story is dominated by the French university system, the *grandes Écoles*, and Parisian academic and intellectual society.

But another reason that they never met was that Foucault was many years Blanchot's junior, and belonged to an entirely different generation. A brief, necessarily selective, biographical sketch illustrates Foucault's remove from the pre-World War II generation of intellectuals to which Blanchot belonged. Foucault was born nineteen years after Blanchot, on October 15, 1926 in the provincial town of Poitiers, 210 miles to the southwest of Paris. He left Poitiers quickly however, when it became clear that the schools there could not prepare him to pass the difficult entrance examination for the highly selective École Normale Supérieure. In 1946 Foucault moved to Paris to attend Lycée Henri IV, a well-respected school with an excellent placement record. Aside from its elite status, Foucault's high school experience was notable also because his philosophy instructor was Jean Hyppolite. Until Hyppolite's course on Hegel, Foucault passion was for history. In Hyppolite however, he found a teacher that extracted philosophy from the Cartesian and neo-Kantian dogma that pervaded the French academy, and who breathed new life into philosophy.[364] Hyppolite, by contrast, taught a course that examined Hegel's concept of negativity in connection with Mallarmé's poem,

[364] This dogma strictly governed the syllabus of the *aggregation*, the graduation exam at the École Normale Supérieure. Plato, Descartes, and Kant were stalwarts on the syllabus. Aristotle, Hegel, and any philosopher who did not fit into the linear progression from Plato to Kant were excluded. See Descombes, *La Même et L'Autre*.

Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard.[365] Such was the impression that Hyppolite made on the young Foucault, that the latter henceforth devoted himself to philosophy.

Foucault passed the entrance examination for the École Normale Supérieure in 1947. While there he came under the tutelage of Louis Althusser, a young professor who had been placed in charge of preparations for the *aggrégation*, the written and oral exam required for graduation. Years later, in the 1960s Althusser made a name for himself with his provocative re-readings of Marx that sharply contrasted with the established interpretation. Like Hyppolite before him, Althusser made a strong impression on Foucault, but this time it was psychology rather than philosophy that drew his interest. Althusser was in the habit of taking his students to visit the Hôpital Sainte-Anne, the largest psychiatric hospital in Paris, not far from the École Normale Supérieure's campus. Each week they watched as psychiatrists interviewed their patients, and made presentations of their diagnoses, and attended lectures given by Henri Ey.

Foucault graduated from the École Normale Supérieure in July, 1951, at the age of 24, with twin interests in philosophy and psychology. Upon graduation Foucault gained admission to the Fondation Thiers, a prestigious fellowship organization in Paris that combined the roles of a library and a rooming house. Here Foucault intended to pursue academic studies, rather than teaching, as was the custom for graduate of the École Normale Supérieure. As was required of French students seeking a doctoral degree, Foucault proposed two theses, one in each of his fields. The first was a study of post-Cartesian philosophy through the eighteenth century. The second thesis was an

[365] See Eribon, 34-35.

examination of the role of culture in psychology. The first thesis was never completed, Foucault's attention having been drawn entirely into the study of psychology. The second thesis became the germ of *Folie et déraison*, which he defended ten years later, in 1961.

In the early 1950s Foucault engaged in a series of endeavors in psychology. Some were clinical, such as his apprenticeship at the electroencephalographic laboratory at Hôpital Sainte-Anne, and later at Fresnes, the general hospital for the French prison system. Others were more philosophical, such as the translation work that Foucault undertook with Jacqueline Verdeaux, his supervisor at Fresnes. Verdeaux introduced Foucault to Ludwig Binswanger, a Swiss psychiatrist who was attempting to combine psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and Heideggerian phenomenology into a single system called "existential analysis." Verdeaux was in the process of translating Binswanger's book, *Traum und Existenz*, into French, as *La Rêve et l'existence*. Foucault assisted with the technical points of Heideggerian philosophy, which he had read enthusiastically while at the École Normale Supérieure. Indeed, Foucault had learnt German expressly for the purpose of reading Heidegger's philosophy in its original language. Eventually Verdeaux suggested that he write a preface.[366] In this piece, Foucault first articulated the need to study forms of experience historically, as well as psychologically.[367] In 1954 Foucault published his first book, *Maladie mentale et Personnalité*.[368] The basic argument was that the diagnostic practices of ordinary medicine were inapplicable to diseases of the

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[366] See Eribon, 60-69.
[367] Foucault, "Introduction," in Ludwig Binswanger, *Le rêve et l'existence* (Brugge: Desclee, 1954), 7-128.
[368] Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954).

mind. Although Foucault later disavowed this book, and tried to bar its translation and re-publication, albeit unsuccessfully, *Maladie mentale et Personnalité* remains a document of his development during the 1950s, and a testament to the extent of Foucault's interest in mental illness.

Eventually, Foucault began teaching at the École Normale Supérieure. Immediately after Foucault graduated, Althusser was able to secure a teaching position for him, in which he instructed one course in psychology per term. In this post, Foucault's students included Jacques Derrida and Paul Veyne. He also continued Althusser's practice of taking his students to visit Hôpital Sainte-Anne. In 1952 Foucault became an assistant in psychology at the Université de Lille, albeit in the philosophy department. Foucault never intended to stay in Lille permanently, and he taught all of his classes Tuesday through Thursday so that he could return to Paris over the weekend. Even while at Lille, Foucault taught his regular course at the École Normale Supérieure on Monday night.

All of this changed in 1955, when Foucault left France for a diplomatic position at the Maison de France at the University of Uppsala in Sweden. Georges Dumézil, a professor of philology at the Collége de France, and an unstinting champion of Foucault, had arranged for him to be given the job. At Uppsala Foucault's duties included the teaching of a course on a topic of his choosing, and leading lessons in French language studies, as well as operating as a cultural liaison at the Maison. Since most of Foucault's students were specializing in French literature, his courses often dealt with themes in the history of literature, poetry, and theater. Most of the time however, he was left to

himself, and he used that freedom to begin working on his primary dissertation, which later became *Folie et déraison*. A local physician, whose hobby was the collection of rare medical texts, had donated his entire library to the University of Uppsala in 1950. Freed of all significant teaching obligations, Foucault began the massive historical research into this archive, which contributed the majority of the primary material used in *Folie et déraison*. In 1960 Foucault returned to Paris, when he was 33 years old, and ready to defend.

The Unlikely Origin

Folie et déraison recounted the history of madness, but with the operating assumption that madness had no biological essence. Instead, Foucault recounted the history of the way that madness had been defined by those who purported to have knowledge about madness. Madness ceased to be known on its own terms when doctors established a body of knowledge about it in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In earlier centuries madness had been understood as one stage on a longer continuum, on the far side of which lay death, the great unknown. Afterward, madness became associated not with the unknown, but with unreason, cordoned and confined safely by the regimes of truth. Foucault's aim, in *Folie et déraison* was to trace the history of madness effaced:

> We need a history of that other trick that madness plays – that other trick through which men, in the gesture of sovereign reason that locks up their neighbor, communicate and recognize each other in the merciless language of non-madness; we need to identify the moment of that expulsion, before it was definitely established in the reign of truth, before it was brought back to life by the lyricism of protestation. To try to recapture, in history, this zero degree of the history of

> madness, when it was undifferentiated experience, the still undivided experience of the division itself.[369]

The other trick of which Foucault wrote, was the trick that madness plays on the non-mad, convincing them of their sanity. Foucault described the age of reason as a regime of sanity, tyrannizing the insane by confining them and defining them, all in order to perpetuate its stranglehold on the mind. But, Foucault asserted that this was not the mind's natural state. There was a time prior to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when madness existed for itself. Preventing access to this history, and to its zero degree, was the rationality of science, of psychiatry – the pathologization of mental illness. To understand the history of this moment was to understand the origin of madness, so distant from madness as it was lived and understood in the modern age.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which Foucault termed the "classical age," a large and voluminous discourse was articulated from the position of reason, about what they considered unreason; in other words, reason came to define madness as the other of reason. This entailed a concomitant shift in the definition of reason: reason was now the other of unreason.

> For the classical age unreason had the value of a noun, and had a substantive function. It was in relation to unreason alone that madness could be understood. Unreason lay beneath it, or rather defined the space of its possibility. For men of the classical age, madness was not the natural condition, the psychological and human root of unreason, but rather its empirical form, and the mad, a humanity sliding down towards animal frenzy, revealed the backdrop of unreason that

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[369] "Il faut faire l'histoire de cet autre tour de folie, - de cet autre tour par lequel les hommes, dans le geste souveraine qui enferme leur voison, commmuniquent et se reconnaissent à travers le langage sans merci de la non-folie; retrouver le moment de cette conjuration, avant qu'elle n'ait été définitivement établie dans le règne de la vérité, avant qu'elle n'ait été ranimée par le lyrisme de la protestation. Tâcher de rejoinder, dans l'histoire, ce degré zéro de l'histoire de la folie, où elle est experience indifférenciée, expérience non encore partagée du partage lui-même." Foucault, *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961), i.

> menaced man and enveloped from afar each form of his natural existence...More than any other mode of thinking – more so than our positivism, to be sure – classical rationalism was on guard against the peril of unreason, the threatening space of absolute liberty.[370]

In the twentieth century unreason was no longer treated in this way. Foucault insisted that in the twentieth century unreason was not understood as a substantive thing, but rather as the condition of being unreasonable. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries however, unreason was understood as the real essence of madness. In the twentieth century, Foucault argued, only children, or someone in the throes of a temper tantrum, truly fit into the condition of being unreasonable. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries unreason was the condition of madness. Reason used unreason to solidify its grip on humanity by defining reason as normal, and unreason as madness. Prior to the seventeenth century the mad were exiled, and sent to the next town on the infamous ship of fools.[371] After the seventeenth century it became the standard practice to intern the mad in houses of confinement, where they could be sequestered, and monitored by the vigilance of reason. Though they existed chiefly in literary representation, Foucault argued that the ship of fools was the essential origin of the discourse on mental illness, as exile moved into confinement, and literature became

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[370] "La déraison, pour le classicisme, a valeur nominale; elle forme une sorte de fonction substantielle. C'est par rapport à elle, et à elle seule que peut se comprendre la folie. Elle en est le support; disons plutôt qu'elle définit l'espace de sa possibilité. Pour l'homme classique, la folie n'est pas la condition naturelle, la racine psychologique et humaine de la déraison; elle en est seulement la forme empirique; et le fou, parcourant jusqu'à la fureur de l'animalité la courbe de la déchéance humaine, dévoile ce fond de déraison qui menace l'homme et envelope de très lois toutes les formes de son existence naturelle…Plus que tout autre, mieux en tout cas que notre positivisme, le rationalisme classique a su veiller, et percevoir le péril souterrain de la déraison, cet espace menaçant d'une liberté absolue." Foucault, *Folie et déraison*, 195.

[371] Foucault used the Latin term for the ship of fools, *stultifera navis*, as the title of the first chapter of *Folie et déraison*.

scientific knowledge. Thus began the modern experience of insanity, in which the mad were spoken for, rather than given the ability to speak for themselves.

When *Folie et déraison* was first published, there were two interpretations of it: one was Maurice Blanchot's, which placed madness against the concepts of the *œuvre* and *désœuvrement*, discussed below. But the other interpretation was the structuralist interpretation, and it was by far the more common. Roland Barthes seized on the structural aspect of Foucault's study. It is necessary to discuss Barthes' reading of *Folie et déraison* before moving on to the Blanchot-Foucault exchange, because the latter occurred against the backdrop of the former. While Barthes focused on the composition and nature of the structure of the discourse of madness, and on Foucault's method of analyzing historical structures, Blanchot focused instead on the origins of those structures. Barthes' reading of *Folie et déraison* exemplified the type of structuralism that Blanchot attempted to argue against.

Reviewing *Folie et déraison* for the journal *Critique*, Barthes argued that Foucault described historical structures by identifying the components, and showing how they functioned together as a whole.[372] In an piece titled "Savoir et folie," Barthes wrote,

> Foucault shows, for each epoch, what should elsewhere be called *sense units*, whose combination defines the epoch, and whose translation traces the very movement of history; animality, knowledge, vice, idleness, sexuality, blasphemy, libertinage – these historical components of the demential image thus form signifying complexes, according to a kind of historical syntax which varies from epoch to epoch; they are, if you like, classes of what is signified, huge "semantemes" whose signifiers are themselves transitory, since reason's observation constructs the marks of madness only from its own norms, and since these norms are themselves historical.[373]

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[372] Roland Barthes, "Savoir et folie," *Critique*, 17 (1961): 915-922.

[373] "Michel Foucault met à jour, pour chaque époque, ce que l'on appellerait ailleurs des *unités de sens*, dont la combinaison définit cette époque, et dont la translation trace le mouvement même de l'histoire;

In this passage Barthes described both the historical, and the formal structures of *Folie et déraison*. On the one hand, *Folie et déraison* traced historical structures, historical combinations of "sense units" that created the discourse on madness for a given epoch. Animality, knowledge, vice, etc. operated together, to form a structural totality that defined madness for an epoch. In this sense, Foucault's object of analysis was the historical structure of madness.

On the other hand, *Folie et déraison* was able to describe these historical structures by applying a structuralist method that treated each constituent term as part of whole. "It is," as Barthes wrote, "a question, rather, of a *structure of structures*."[374] Each of these terms was a signifier of madness, which reason was able to fill with different semantic content based on prevailing historical norms. Madness, the actual experience of madness, was no longer the referent of the discourse on madness. Instead, reason was able to construct structural "semantemes," which were enormous bodies of knowledge capable of being invested with any meaning societies chose, including normative meanings. Meanings, that is, that were used to impose a norm: "Thus it is the excluded humanity which is named (mad, insane, alienated, criminal, libertine, etc.), it is the act of exclusion, by its very nomination, which in a positive sense accounts for both excluded and "included"…Thus it is on the level of this general structure that madness can be, not

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animalité, savoir, vice, oisivité, sexualité, blaspheme, libertinage, ces composants historiques de l'image démentielle forment ainsi des complexes signifiants, selon une sorte de syntaxe historique qui varie avec les ages; ce sont, si l'on veut, des classes de sifnifiés, des vastes "sémantemes", dont les sifnifiants eux-mêmes sont transitoires, puisque le regard de la raison ne construit les marques de la folie qu'à partir de ses propres normes sont elles-mêmes historiques." Ibid. 918-919.

[374] "Il s'agirait, si l'on peut dire, d'une *forme des formes*." Ibid. 919.

defined, but structured."[375] In Barthes' rendition, Foucault was able to connect the discourse on madness to the norms of society by approaching the terms of the discourse structurally, as links in a signifying chain, detached from their referent, whose power to include and exclude came from the act of naming and defining, and whose meaning could be apprehended only when taken as a whole.

Like Barthes, Blanchot's first reaction to Foucault's work came in a review of *Folie et déraison* as well, titled "L'Oubli, la déraison."[376] But while Barthes emphasized Foucault's use of a structuralist approach to the discourse on madness, Blanchot took Foucault's structures, and used them to meditate on the nature of origins. Blanchot used his review of *Folie et déraison* to articulate his own understanding of the meaning and the importance of structuralist thought, which boiled down to the question of origins. Blanchot's reading of *Folie et déraison* dwelt upon this question, which he saw as the principle question raised by Foucault's work. In other words, if the structure of the discourse of madness was real, and if it was indeed total, then how did it come into being? How was it created? If reason's discourse on madness was taken as a natural reality, how to explain the moment before reason's discourse on madness emerged? How was it that a natural reality descended onto earth fully formed?

The story of how Blanchot first encountered Foucault helps to explain why he alighted upon this aspect of Foucault's work. During the 1960s, it was still customary in France to publish one's dissertation. Typically this was done with a publishing house

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[375] "C'est donc l'humanité exclue qui est nommée (fous, insensés, aliénes, criminals, libertines, etc.), c'est l'acte d'exclusion, par sa nomination même, qui prend en charge positivement à la fois les exclus et les "inclus"…C'est donc, semble-t-il, au niveau de cette forme générale que la folie peut, non se définir, mais se structurer." Ibid. 919-920.

[376] Blanchot, "L'Oubli, la déraison," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 106 (1961): 676-686.

that specialized in academic work, such as Presses Universitaires de France. Foucault, however, dreamt of publishing with Gallimard, the famed avant-garde press attached to *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, and publisher of Blanchot and Bataille, but also more well known existentialists like Camus and Sartre. Gallimard was not in the habit of publishing doctoral theses, and Foucault's book was quickly rejected, but not before the manuscript fell to Roger Caillois, who sat on the editorial board at Gallimard. He admired *Folie et déraison*, but something about it bothered him. He wanted a second opinion, and he lent the manuscript to Blanchot.[377] Ultimately, without any of the fuss raised by Caillois, Blanchot recommended that Gallimard publish *Folie et déraison*. Still, the managing editors rejected the book, and Foucault was forced to publish with a new press, Plon, whose reputation was growing, but not yet fully made.

Blanchot felt so strongly about the incident that he revisited it in his panegyric for Foucault, *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*, published in 1986. Roger Caillois was another French polymath, whose background included participation in Bataille's anti-surrealist group, the Collège de Sociologie, and its journal, *Acéphale*. His interests ranged from literature, to anthropology and philosophy. It made sense, then, that *Folie et déraison* made its way to Caillois. First of all, he had been a student of Dumézil's at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. But more significantly, like Foucault, the diversity of interests had prevented him from gaining general acceptance in the French academic

[377] This episode is recounted in Eribon's biography, but the evidence is drawn from a letter Foucault wrote to Caillois in thanks for his efforts, and from Blanchot's reminiscences in his eulogy for Foucault. See Foucault, "À Roger Caillois," *Dits et écrits*, Vol. IV (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994), 162; Blanchot, *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*.

world.[378] Blanchot thought that it was this affinity, an almost eerie likeness between Caillois and Foucault that caused the former to gainsay his own opinion. In, *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*, Blanchot wrote, "[Caillois] had forged a very beautiful style for himself, even to excess, to the point where he thought he was destined to keep watch – a redoubtable watchman! – over the conventions of the French language."[379] Foucault, too, had developed a unique style that exploited the natural poetry of the French language in order to render the peculiar experience of madness. "Foucault's style," wrote Blanchot, "with its splendor and precision – seemingly contradictory qualities – left [Caillois] perplexed. He did not know whether this grand, baroque style ruined the singular knowledge whose multiple characteristics – philosophical, sociological, historical – overwhelmed and excited him."[380]

Clearly, Blanchot understood that Foucault's book had made a kind of shock to Caillois' senses. Blanchot even speculated that the psychological reason for this shock was that Foucault struck a little to close too home for Caillois: "Perhaps [Caillois] saw in Foucault another version of himself, who hid his legacy from him. No one likes to recognize himself, a stranger, in a mirror where he discerns not his double, but the one he

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[378] Another parallel between Caillois and Foucault is that, even though both were never completed accepted within the French university system, both acceded to its highest reaches: Caillois was given a seat in the Académie Française in 1971, and Foucault a chair at the Collège de France in the previous year.

[379] "Il s'était forge un style fort beau, parfois jusqu'à l'excès , au point de se croire destiné à veiller – veilleur farouche – sur les convenances de la langue Française." Blanchot, *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*, 11.

[380] "Le style de Foucault, par sa splendeur et sa precision, qualities apparemement contradictories, le laissa perplexe. Il ne savait pas si ce grand style baroque ne ruinait pas le savoir singulier don't les caractères multiples, philosophique, sociologique, historique, l'embarrassaient et l'exaltaient." Ibid.

would have liked to be."[381] And yet it is ironic that Blanchot wrote these words about Caillois, for Blanchot too, saw himself in *Folie et déraison* – and with good reason: nearly every page contained a Blanchotian concept, a stylistic device of Blanchot's, or an outright reference to Blanchot.

Why, then, did Blanchot choose to address the similarities between Foucault's work in *Folie et déraison* and the work of others through the figure of Caillois, when he could so easily have made such a comparison with his own work? Was it that he, Blanchot, experienced an undesired reproach from his own superego in the form of Foucault's work? Or was it that Caillois was a convenient stand-in for Blanchot's corpus? Was Caillois a figure onto which Blanchot could displace the burden of a coherent style, and a unified project, which he so often refused to admit, even in his most autobiographical moments? Michael Holland has suggested that Blanchot's autobiographical reminiscences were often attempts to revise a previously held position, not in order to cover them up, but rather, in order to expose them more clearly, and that often these attempts were displaced onto secondary, and sometimes tertiary figures.[382]

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[381] "Peut-être vit-il dans Foucault un autre lui-même qui lui déroberait l'héritage. Personne n'aime se reconnaître, êtranger, dans un miroir où il ne discerne pas son double, mais celui qu'il aurait aimé être." Ibid.

[382] Holland addresses the way that Blanchot attempted to confront his own early, conservative political commitments through the figures of Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of whose thought was "tainted" by association with National Socialism. By analyzing the revisions made to the 1958 version of Blanchot's essay, "Nietzsche aujourd'hui" when it was republished in *L'Éntretien infini* in 1969, Holland argues that, "Between these two dates…the way Heidegger's philosophy is presented changes fundamentally: first it is cited for its defence against Nazi ideology; then it is discredited for its defence of that ideology. In the process, Blanchot looks back for the first time in his post-war career to the pre-war period when he hiself became involved with extreme nationalist ideology. It is thus that the history of the writing of this chapter of *The Infinite Conversation* becomes the scene of a confrontation between Blanchot and his own history as a writer." See, Michael Holland, "'A Wound to Thought'," 176.

Blanchot attempted something like this in *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*. The story of Caillois' confrontation with Foucault was a blind for his own first reaction to Foucault's work in 1961 – which was not the story Blanchot told in *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine*. The story he told in 1986 was of an intellectual friendship, it was the story of Blanchot's relationship to Foucault, as Blanchot imagined it. But there was also a real relationship between the two, which went far beyond friendship, and which had a real impact on Blanchot's thought. Like Caillois, Blanchot saw himself in Foucault's work, but put to service in a historical argument about madness and the discourse of mental illness. It spurred Blanchot to revise and widen his own arguments about the literary nature of reality.

It was not that Blanchot saw his influence on Foucault in *Folie et déraison*, it was rather, that Blanchot saw that he and Foucault were talking about the same thing.[383] In a way, Foucault confirmed the historical implications of Blanchot's work, which had initially been directed strictly at the literary. Blanchot's theorization of the literary asserted that all human experience of reality was fundamentally poetic and literary, insofar as humans experience the world through the names given to the world's elements. Moreover, Blanchot asserted that this process of naming was none other than the process of literary creation. Foucault extended this thesis to the non-literary world, to actual institutions such as medicine, and actual discourses such as the psychiatric discourse of

[383] This is hardly to say that Blanchot had no influence on Foucault whatsoever. Foucault's "grand" and "baroque" style bore as much relation to Blanchot's as it did to Caillois. Francçois Dosse has even argued that Foucault adopted his use of the oxymoron directly in emulation of Blanchot. Rather, this chapter suggests that what happened when Blanchot read *Folie et déraison* was that he realized that Foucault had applied his concepts – the outside, the *œuvre*, etc. – to the world of medicine. Reading *Folie et déraison*, Blanchot realized the wider applicability of his ideas. See Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme I*, 188-189.

mental illness. This discourse, like every other, was made through the very same process as literature. That is, the discourse of mental illness was made through the naming of things. Seeing that Foucault's discussion of madness entailed the same principles as his discussion of literature determined Blanchot's response to Foucault's work, and began their intellectual exchange. It is necessary to survey these points of similarity between Blanchot and Foucault's work before moving on to a discussion of the content of Blanchot's response.

There were numerous points of overlap between *Folie et déraison*, and his own work that determined Blanchot's reading. It will suffice to highlight four of these points, prior to an examination of Blanchot's reading of *Folie et déraison*. These four are the concept of the outside, the dual concept of the *œuvre* and *désœuvrement*, the concept of madness, and the shared use of Nietzsche's concepts of myth and tragedy.

a) The Outside

Foucault employed the concept of the outside in the opening pages of *Folie et déraison*: "His exclusion was his confinement; if he had no *prison* other than the *threshold* itself, he was still detained at this place of passage. He is placed on the inside of the outside."[384] Here, the inside of the outside referred to the way that the mad were forced into exile, outside city walls, which paradoxically became a form of confinement. The outside became society's space of enclosure. Foucault's description of the inside of the outside paralleled the way that Blanchot described the writer's relation to the outside.

[384] "Son exclusion doit l'enclore; s'il ne peut et ne doit avoir d'autre *prison* que le *seuil* lui-même, on le reticent sur le lieu du passage. Il est mis à l'intérieur." Foucault, *Folie et déraison*, 14.

For Blanchot, the outside designated that function of literature, by which art always seemed to refer another world, outside itself. In the world, art is nothing more than ink on paper, nothing more than paint on canvas. But the power of art is to refer to another world – the world where words become literature, and where paint becomes a painting. Blanchot wrote of the outside, "art…is linked to what is "outside" the world, it expresses the profundity of this outside without intimacy and without repose, this outside which appears when the possible withdraws, even with ourselves, even with our death, we no longer have relations of possibility."[385] Blanchot's idea of the world, the real material world, in which literature was nothing more than ink markings on pieces of paper, corresponded to Foucault's society located within the city walls. That is, both were material worlds, whose outside was a space of a different mental order. Reading *Folie et déraison*, Blanchot saw that art corresponded to Foucault's figuration of madness.[386]

b) The Œuvre & Désœuvrement

Blanchot also saw connections between *Folie et déraison* and his own work in Foucault's systematic use of the term *œuvre*. Any member of the avant-garde Parisian intellectual community would have instantly recognized this usage as coming directly

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[385] "L'art…est lié à ce qui est "hors" du monde, il exprime la profondeur de ce dehors sans intimité et sans repos, ce qui surgit quand le possible s'atténue, quand, même avec nous, même avec notre mort, nous n'avons plus de rapports de possibilité." Blanchot, "Kafka et l'exigence de l'œuvre," *Critique*, 58 (March, 1952): 214.

[386] Blanchot developed his concept of the outside in the early 1950s, in several essays on Mallarmé and Kafka that were later assembled as *L'Éspace littéraire*. These essays were published between 1951 and 1953 in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, at precisely the time Foucault reports discovering Blanchot's work. Indeed, Foucault's prosopoetic portrait of Blanchot in "La Pensée du déhors," was based primarily on *L'Espace littéraire* and his novels *Thomas l'obscur*, *Aminadab*, and *Le Trés haut* – novels whose thematization of the outside Foucault went to great lengths to explain. On Foucault's early encounter with Blanchot's work in *La Nouvelle nouvelle Revue Française*, see Eribon, 78-79.

from Blanchot. Throughout the 1950s Blanchot, more than any other, gave shape to the French word *œuvre*, even as he modified it into *désœuvrement*. Foucault adapted the *œuvre* and *désœuvrement* to the history of madness. Madness, wrote Foucault, was "nothing other, undoubtedly, than *the absence of an œuvre*."[387] And if madness was the absence of an *œuvre*, then the historical development of the science of mental illness was the production of the *œuvre*. They moved together in tandem, madness perduring as the absence of the *œuvre*, as the absence of production, and achievement. At the same time, medical science produced the *œuvre* of mental illness through the labors of physicians. Foucault described the development of the discourse of mental illness in precisely the same way that Blanchot described the writer's efforts to write the book. To Blanchot, *désœuvrement* was the process by which the writer strove to achieve the work of art, but was always foiled by the impossibility of creating a perfect work. Indeed, the very concept of the perfect work of art prevented the writer from ever actually achieving perfection, since perfection always seemed to be beyond his or her grasp. At the same time, the writer was only able to write because he or she dreamt of creating a perfect work of art. In this way, Blanchot's concept of *désœuvrement* simultaneously named this desire to create the work of art, and the necessary failure of creating the work of art.[388]

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[387] "Rien d'autre, sans doute, que l'*absence d'œuvre*." Foucault, *Folie et déraison*, v.

[388] For a paradigmatic statement of Blanchot's *désœuvrement*, see Blanchot, "Mallarmé et l'expérience littéraire," *Critique* 62 (July 1952): 588. Blanchot writes, "Here is the most hidden moment in all of experience. That the work must be the unique clarity of that which fades and by which everything is extinguished, that it can only exist where the extreme of affirmation is verified by the extreme of negation, such an exigence we understand even as it runs counter to our need for peace, simplicity and sleep. We understand it intimately, like the brilliant intimacy of this decision that is ourselves, and which gives us being only when, at our risk and peril, we reject – with fire, with iron, with silent refusal – the permanence and the favor of being. Yes, we understand that the work is thus pure beginning, the first and last moment when being presents itself through the freedom we risk, which makes us exclude it with hubris, without, however, including it in the appearance of beings. But this exigency that makes the work declare being at

Just as the writer's effort to write the book never succeeded, just as they were always subject to *désœuvrement*, so the physicians' efforts to define madness were never able to tell the truth about madness, that is, they were never able to speak from madness' position. Foucault asserted that all social life, and all institutional knowledges operated in this way. Indeed, his project as a historian was to trace the history of the erection of these knowledges, all of which were founded on the silence of the thing about which they purported to speak, as the discourse of mental illness rested on the silence of the mad. "The great *œuvre* of the history of the world," wrote Foucault in the preface to *Folie et déraison*, "is indelibly accompanied by the absence of an *œuvre*, which renews itself at every instant, but which runs, in its inevitable void, unaltered through the length of history."[389]

In Foucault's use of the *œuvre* and the absence of an *œuvre* – so like *désœuvrement* – Blanchot saw his own theory reflected back at him. In the 1950s,

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the unique moment of rupture, that which we have known as the work of the work, "*these very words*: IT IS," this point on which the work shines, even as it is basked in its own consuming light – we must also understand that it is precisely this point that makes the work impossible, because it is what never permits arrival at the work. It is a region in which nothing is made of being, in which nothing is accomplished. It is the profundity of the *désœuvrement* of being." "Là est le moment le plus caché de l'expérience. Que l'œuvre doive être la clarté unique de ce qui s'étaient et par laquelle tout s'éteint, qu'elle ne soit que là où l'extrême de l'affirmation est vérifié par l'extrême de la négation, une telle exigence, nous la comprenon, bien qu'elle soit contraire à notre besoin de paix, de simplicité et de sommeil, nous la comprenons intimement, comme l'intimité fulfurante de cette décision qui est nous-mêmes et qui nous donne l'être seulement quand, à nos risques et périls, nous rejetons, par le feu, par le fer, par le refus silencieux, la permanence et la faveur. Oui, nous comprenons que l'œuvre en cela soit pur commencement, le moment premier et dernier où l'être se présente par la liberté risquée qui nous fait l'exclure souverainement, sans cependant encore l'inclure dans l'apparence des êtres. Mais cette exigence qui fait de l'œuvre ce qui déclare l'être au moment unique de la rupture, ce que nous avons saisi comme l'œuvre, "*ce mot même*: C'EST," ce point qu'elle fait briller tandis qu'elle en reçoit l'éclat qui la consume, nous devons aussi comprendre qu'il rend précisément l'œuvre impossible, parce qu'il est ce qui ne permet jamais d'arriver à l'œuvre, l'en deçà où de l'être il n'est rien fait, en quoi rien ne s'accomplit, la profondeur du désœuvrement de l'être."

[389] "Le grand œuvre de l'histoire du monde est ineffaçablement accompagné d'une absence d'œuvre, qui se renouvelle à chaque instant, mais qui court inaltérée en son inevitable vide tout au long de l'histoire." Foucault, *Folie et déraison*, vi.

Blanchot had even theorized the connection of the *œuvre* and of *désœuvrement* to history. When he read *Folie et déraison*, with its identification of the *œuvre* with history, and madness as the absence of the *œuvre*, Blanchot saw his own theory of the time of writing applied in service of the analysis of the discourses of madness. For Blanchot, genuine creation could occur only outside the mundane world of historical progress. The building of society, the erection of institutions, the conducting of affairs, these were the work of historical progress. They were achieved through time, and through effort; they were *œuvres*, in the sense that Foucault used the term apposite of madness. Yet, Blanchot argued, literary creation could not properly be called an achievement since it occurred outside of time, and it happened irrespective of the creator's actions or intentions. Apropos the diary that writers keep as they work, Blanchot wrote in "La Solitude essentielle": "The journal indicates that the one who writes is already no longer capable of belonging to time through the ordinary certainty of action, through the community of those who hold occupations... He is no longer truly historical."[390] Others, such as scientists, lawyers, doctors, might keep journals as well, but their journals marked the passage of time, denoting each moment on a trajectory towards some accomplishment. The writer's journal, in Blanchot's rendition, marked the absence of time. "To write is to abandon oneself to the fascination of the absence of time," Blanchot wrote.[391] He drew out the implications of this absence of time for history, concluding that it suspends the present, as a moment outside of time, a moment with no past, and with no future. The

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[390] "Le Journal marque que celui qui écrit n'est déjà plus capable d'appartenir au temps par la fermeté ordinaire de l'action, par la communauté du métier…Il n'est déjà plus réellement historique." Blanchot, "La solitude essentielle," *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Reveu Française* 1 (January 1953): 85.
[391] "Ecrire, c'est se livrer à la fascination de l'absence de temps." Blanchot, "La solitude essentielle," 85-86.

time of writing, Blanchot argued, was a time outside of the movement of history, the movement of the past to the present.

c) Madness

In *Folie et déraison*, Blanchot saw this logic applied to madness. This similarity indicated that Foucault approached madness in the same way that Blanchot approached literature. It even suggested that madness and literature might be made of the same substance. In order to indicate contemporary examples of madness, Foucault made recourse to modern authors known for their writing about madness, or known for their own madness. These authors included Sade, Hölderlin, Nerval, Nietzsche, Raymond Roussel, and Antonin Artaud. These writers attempted to write not from the sovereign position of reason, but rather from the position of unreason, all the way "to the point of tragedy – that is to say, to the point when the alienation of the experience of unreason pushed them into the renunciation of madness."[392] In Foucault's estimation, these writers gave voice to unreason through their literature, and through their philosophy, so much so that they became mad themselves.[393] Foucault argued that unreason was like the literature of Sade and Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Nerval. But Foucault also argued that the discourse on madness promulgated by medical science was just like a book produced by any other writer, and just like any other book in which the writer strove to represent the

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[392] "S'y sont risqués, jusqu'à la tragédie – c'est-à-dire jusqu'à l'aliénation de cette experience de la déraison dans le renonçement de la folie." Foucault, *Folie et déraison*, 411.

[393] Jacques Derrida famously objected to *Folie et déraison* on the basis of Foucault's claim that Descartes was the archetypical writer of reason for his rejection of madness. See Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie," in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 51-98.

world. In other words, the discourse on mental illness was a fiction whose authors were unable to admit its fictionality.

Blanchot too had written on madness. In the 1940s and 1950s Blanchot authored several essays in which he identified precisely these writers as some of the most true to the essence of literature.[394] True to it, because their madness expressed something essential about literature, rather than that their madness unleashed the essence of literature. In an essay titled "La Folie par excellence," Blanchot wrote of Hölderlin, whose madness was exceptional, that in his madness Hölderlin gave himself to the

> destiny of the poet, who becomes the mediator of the sacred, who is in immediate relation with the sacred and who envelops it in the silence of the poem in order to calm it and communicate it to men, a communication requiring that the poet remain upright, yet be stricken none the less, a mediation the consequence of which is not only a rend in his existence, but which is this very division of the poet, the effacement at the core of the word which, existence having disappeared, continues, affirming itself, by itself.[395]

Blanchot was insistent that madness is not creative in and of itself. Rather, madness is only capable of exposing the creator to the real power of poetry. The experience of madness that Blanchot described in "La Folie par excellence" was the rend in the poet's mind that allowed him to understand the power of words to paradoxically destroy and

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[394] These essays are too numerous, and too diverse to discuss synoptically. They include primarily pieces on Sade, Hölderlin, Lautréamont, and Nietzsche. I might also have chosen to discuss Sade, as Blanchot's engagement with Sade's thought was a continuing struggle throughout his career. Instead, I have elected to discuss Blanchot's work on Hölderlin in detail, because of all of his pieces on madness, it came the closest to expressing the innate affinity between his work and Foucault's. For a representative selection of Blanchot's work on Sade, "A la recontre de Sade," *Les Temps modernes*, 25, (October 1947): 577-612; "Littérature et la droit à la mort," in *La Part de feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) *Lautréamont et Sade* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1949); "L'inconvenance majeure," in Sade, *Français, encore un effort*...(Utrecht: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1965): 9-51.

[395] "Le destin du poète qui se fait le médiateur du sacré, est en rapport immediate avec lui et l'enveloppe dans le silence du poème pour l'apaiser et le communiquer aux hommes, communication qui exige que le poète demeure debout, mais cependant soit frappé, médiation dont l'existence déchirée n'est pas seulement une conséquence, mais qui est cette division même du poète, l'effacement au sein de la parole qui, l'existence disparue, continue, s'affirme seule." Blanchot, "La folie par excellence," *Critique*, 45 (February 1951): 110-111.

remake the things that they named, which Blanchot first discussed in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" during the postwar purge. It was a power given to prophets, seers, and poets, to be able to see the world beyond its mundane façade, which convinced people of its reality through daily use. It was the power to see the world as it was made, or constructed – that is, it was the power to see the very process of making the world. Blanchot argued that this required a rend in the mind order to be sustained, for one could not go about everyday life in such a reverie.[396]

While Foucault cited Hölderlin as an example of unreason, Blanchot cited him as an example of essential poetry. For Foucault, the work of Hölderlin testified to the actuality of unreason, it gave proof that the discourse of mental illness was a construct that concealed the essential speech of madness. But for Blanchot, the work of Hölderlin pointed to the essence of literary creation, itself beyond both madness, and mental illness. Yet, at the same time this mode of creation also supported the discourses of both madness and mental illness. When Blanchot wrote "La Folie par excellence," he argued that madness was linked to the creation of poetry. But after encountering *Folie et déraison,* Blanchot became aware that the discourse of mental illness too was a creation, and that it was a man-made creation. While it did not partake of the sacred power to which Hölderlin's madness testified, the discourse of mental still drew on the power of literary creation, even as it perverted the creative function into something mute, and tamed. The discourse of mental illness was created through the efforts of physicians, who sought to master madness by defining it. In "La Folie par excellence," Blanchot made intimations

[396] Derrida objected to Blanchot's characterization of madness too, which he reproached for making Hölderlin and Artaud exemplary of the essence of madness. See Derrida, "La parole soufflée," in *L'écriture et la différence*, 253-292.

in this direction, when he wrote of the discourse of mental illness' inability to understand schizophrenia purely through scientific reasoning:

> Causal explanation is a demand that tolerates no limits; but what science explains with causes is not necessarily understood. Understanding seeks what escapes it, and advances forcefully and purposefully towards the moment when understanding is no longer possible, when the fact, in its absolutely concrete and particular reality, becomes obscure and impenetrable.[397]

Folie et déraison was a sustained attempt to grasp the motivation behind that confounded effort to understand, an effort that was doomed to incomprehension *a priori*, but which medical science nonetheless pursued with dogged determination. It was almost as if Foucault realized a potential already present within Blanchot's essay on Hölderlin to explain the other trick of madness – the one whereby reason enchained the mad – that was at the heart of the project of *Folie et déraison*.

d) Nietzsche, Myth, Tragedy

The final connection Blanchot saw between his own work and Foucault's was the latter's references to Nietzsche in the preface to *Folie et déraison*, which was a reference that few French thinkers could make in 1960. If Foucault's lifelong project was broadly Nietzschean in scope, *Folie et déraison* was inspired specifically by Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. In *Folie et déraison*, Foucault argued that the experience of madness was hidden by the discourse of mental illness, exactly as Nietzsche argued that the Dionysian society of tragedy and myth characteristic of the archaic period (c. 8th- 5th

[397] "L'explication causale est un exigence qui ne souffre pas de limites; mais ce que la science explique par des causes, n'est pas, pour autant, compris. La compréhension cherche ce qui lui échappe, elle s'avance fortement et consciemment vers le moment où comprendre n'est plus possible, où le fait, dans sa réalité absolument concrète et particulière, devient l'obscur et l'impénétrable." Blanchot, "La folie par excellence," 102.

centuries B.C.E.) was eclipsed by the Apollonian culture of knowledge and individualism characteristic of classical Greece (c. 5th – 3rd centuries B.C.E.). Even more significantly, for Foucault and Blanchot, Nietzsche argued that tragedy, as his contemporaries in the late nineteenth century understood it, had its origins not in the theatrical technique of drama, but rather in mythic communion with the gods represented by the Bacchanalia. Each of these aspects of Nietzsche's argument must be examined in order to show how Foucault appropriated them in *Folie et déraison*, and also in order to show how Blanchot understood, and responded to Foucault's appropriation of Nietzsche.

Foucault appropriated Nietzsche's argument about the origins of tragedy because it helped him to explain the difference between the artifice of the discourse of mental illness, and the real experience of madness. Nietzsche argued that Dionysian tragedy placed humanity in its proper situation in the world by showing his essential connection to the rest of the world. Indeed, it was out of recognition of this connection that art, the images and symbols that described the world, could be born. The world could only be rendered artistically when the artist was conscious of its existence. Nietzsche wrote of the Dionysian artistic creator that he "perceives a world of images and symbols – growing out of his state of mystical self-abnegation and oneness."[398] Apollonian tragedy, by contrast, knew only the individual, and celebrated only individualism. Art required cognizance of the world, it required recognition of humanity's connection to the earth and to the gods. But the Apollonian creator, "this apotheosis of individuation knows only one law – the individual, i.e., the delimiting of the boundaries of the

[398] "Fühlt aus dem mystischen Selbstentäusserungs – und Einheitszustande eine Bilder – und Gleichnisswelt hervorwachsen." Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (Leipzig: E.W. Fritzsch, 1872), 40.

individual, *measure* in the Hellenic sense."[399] Apollonian tragedy refused to acknowledge the existence of the world. It refused to acknowledge the existence of all of the other things in the world beside the individual, and for this reason it was incapable of producing anything more than artifice. And artifice it did produce, Nietzsche argued, in the form of moralities, proscriptions, and a thousand other maxims that tore the human being asunder from its essential environment, and cut it off from its relation to everything outside itself.

What the Dionysian tragedy showed, by contrast, was not the world of artifice, the world of societal institutions, cultural conventions, and civic codes. Rather, what Dionysian tragedy revealed was the real level of human existence. Dionysian tragedy revealed humanity's existence prior to the fission of human beings from the being of the rest of the world. Dionysian tragedy revealed the lived mode of human reality, those agreed upon institutions, conventions, and codes, for their artificiality precisely by showing the real world, the world of human connection to the gods and to nature, through art. Dionysian tragedy achieved this by placing the satyr on stage, in whose figure the connection between the gods, nature, and humanity was definitively established. "This is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy," Nietzsche writes, "that the state and society, and the general gulfs between man and man, give way to an overwhelming feelings of unity leading back the very heart of nature."[400] The original condition of humanity was not a collection of atomized individuals, alienated from their essential

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[399] "Diese Vergöttlichung der Individuation kennt…nur Ein Gesetz, das Individuum d.h. die Einhaltung der Grenzen des Individuums, das *Maass* im hellenischen Sinne." Ibid. 36.

[400] "Dies ist die nächste Wirkung der dionysischen Tragödie, dass der Staat und die Gesellschaft, überhaupt die Klüfte zwischen Mensch un Mensch einem übermächtigen Einheitsgefühle weichen, welches an das Herz der Natur zurückführt." Ibid. 52.

bond to nature and the gods. Art restored humanity to that essential, primordial reality by representing the satyr chorus.[401] The half-human, half-divine satyrs provided a visual reminder of humanity's link with the gods and with nature.[402] They also transcended the barrier between art and reality by simultaneously acting as a spectator and a participant in the dramatic action. Thus, Dionysian tragedy forced the Greeks to displace themselves from the comforting, but illusory reality of society, and return to the primordial origin when humanity maintained its essential connection with the world.

Nietzsche's point was not just that humanity was alienated, and that a natural reality underlay the everyday reality that humanity experienced in its wakeful state. Rather, Nietzsche's point was also that the Greeks could only live in the artificial world of society, and of culture by simultaneously acknowledging its artifice and its reality. Maxims such as "know thyself," and "nothing in excess," inculcated society's rules into the Greek individual.[403] These tore humanity from its essential and natural experience of the world. Consciousness was bound to an invented concept of the individual and an invented concept of society, which failed to recognize the essential fact of humanity: that the human, like its natural world, was nothing more, and nothing less than life.[404] Societal maxims were tolerable only to the extent that humanity acknowledged their

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[401] Nietzsche explained how these two could coexist. Humanity lives in the everyday world, but this by no means suggests that humanity is unable to feel the presence, however remote, of the natural world. A "chasm of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality. But as soon as this everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experience as such, with nausea: an ascetic, will-negating mood is the fruit of these states." "So scheidet sich durch diese Kluft der Vergessenheit die Welt der alltäglichen und der dionysischen Wirklichkeit von einander ab. Sobald aber jene alltägliche Wirklichkeit wieder ins Bewusstein tritt, wird sie mit Ekel als solche empfunden: eine asketische, willenverneinende Stimmung ist die Frucht jener Zustände." Ibid.

[402] Ibid. 49-50.

[403] ""Erkenne dich selbst,"" ""Nicht zu viel."" Ibid. 36.

[404] For the opposition between maxims and morals on the one hand, and life on the other, see Ibid. 11-13.

artifice. In order to be able to cope with this artificial society, and this artificial selfhood-cum-individuality, the Greek mind had to remind itself of this artifice, which was accomplished through the art of the tragedy. What kind of society, Nietzsche asked, would have needed tragedy, an art of pessimism. "Greeks and the art form of pessimism?" Nietzsche asked. "The best formed, most beautiful, most envied type of humanity to date, those most apt to seduce us to life, the Greeks – how do we see it now? Of all people, should they have *needed* tragedy? And moreover – art? For what purpose was there Greek art?"[405] Nietzsche found an unlikely answer to his question: in effect, the Greeks required this artistic representation of a mythical creature, the satyr, because the vision of humanity that they had developed was completely artificial. They had invented a form of social life, based on the individual, that stood over and above the essential vitality of Greek life. Because society was an invention, they needed also to invent its origin. The origin that they invented was the art of myth: tragedy. "Art saves him," Nietzsche wrote, "and through art – life."[406] Thus, Nietzsche also argued that the Greeks were compelled to admit the mythical origin of humanity – insofar as its primordial essence was expressed in the satyr chorus – precisely in order to maintain the artificial norms of society. At bottom, Nietzsche argued that the essential origin of humanity – insofar as humanity lived according to social norms – was mythic.

Nietzsche hoped to hold a mirror up to the modern man of the late nineteenth century, the man standing at the apex of civilization, as the triumph of the reason and

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[405] "Griechen und das Kunstwerk des Pessimismus? Die wohlgeranthenste, schönste, bestbeneidete, zum Leben verführendste Art der bisherigen Menschen, die Griechen – wie? gerade sie hatten die Tragödie nöthig? Mehr noch – die Kunst? Wozu – griechische Kunst?" Ibid. 6.
[406] "Ihn rettet die Kunst, und durch die Kunst rettet ihn sich – das Leben." Ibid. 52.

Enlightenment, so that he could recognize the Greek individual in his reflection. He meant for the man of the late nineteenth century to realize that he too had allowed his life to become abridged and adumbrated by social mores and maxims. It was, ultimately, to modern man that Nietzsche pled for the recognition of the mythical, tragic origin of humanity.

Foucault appropriated this logic almost wholesale in *Folie et déraison.* First, Foucault argued that the experience of madness was defined by the discourse of mental illness. Second, Foucault argued that the discourse of mental illness was an artificial knowledge established not by the mad, but by medical scientists disconnected from the mad, secure in their conviction that madness was unreason. "Beneath the critical consciousness of madness," wrote Foucault, "and its philosophical, scientific, moral and medical forms, a tragic and mute consciousness of madness has never ceased."[407] Just as the Greek individual was alienated from natural reality and from fellow human beings by the imposition of society norms of individualism, the discourse of mental illness alienated humanity from the mad. And finally, Foucault also appropriated Nietzsche's argument about the mythical origin of humanity when he asserted that the origin of the discourse on mental illness lay in the *stultifera navis*, the ship of fools.

Foucault's ship of fools reproduced many of the Nietzsche's arguments about tragedy. Foucault argued that the real origin of the seventeenth and eighteenth century discourse on mental illness, and its practice of confining the mad in the asylum, lay not in scientific discovery, and medical knowledge. Rather, Foucault argued that its origin lay

[407] "Sous la conscience critique de la folie, et ses formes philosophiques ou scientifiques, morales ou médicales, un sourde conscience tragique n'a cessé de veiller." Foucault, *Folie et déraison*, 35.

in the fourteenth and fifteenth century ship of fools. The ship of fools was "a strange drunken boat that went the length of the calm rivers of the Rhineland, and the canals of Flanders…that led their insane cargo from one town to the other."[408] Rather than confining their mad in asylums, Renaissance towns and cities forced them into exile by placing them on barges and sending them down the river to the next town or city. Much has been made of the ship of fools, and many historians of science and medicine have questioned whether they actually existed.[409] But Foucault argued that the ship of fools was chiefly a literary invention, and that its advent occurred within the "landscape of the Renaissance imaginary."[410] Rather than haunting the rivers of Europe, Foucault argued that, "these ships of fools…haunted the imagination of the entire Early Renaissance."[411] Indeed, they may even have come directly from Greek mythology, derived "from the ancient cycle of the Argonauts."[412] Moreover, they participated in the common literary trope by which authors used ships to impart allegorical morality tales. Foucault argued that "such ships were a literary commonplace, whose crew of imaginary heroes, moral models, or social types set out on a great symbolic voyage that brought them, if not fortune, then at least the figure of their destiny or their truth."[413]

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[408] "Étrange bateau ivre qui file le long des calmes fleuves de la Rhénanie et des canaux flamands…qui d'une ville à l'autre menaient leur cargaison insensée." Ibid. 10.

[409] Erik Midelfort, "Madness and Civilization in Early Modern Europe: A Reappraisal of Michel Foucault," in Barbara C. Malament, ed., *After the Reformation: Essays in Honor of J.H. Hexter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 247-265.

[410] "Le paysage imaginaire de la Renaissance." Ibid. 10.

[411] "Et il se peut que ces nefs de fous, qui ont hanté l'imagination de la toute première Renaissance, aient été des navires de pèlerinage des navires hautement symboliques d'insensés en quête de leur raison." Ibid. 12.

[412] "Au vieux cycle des Argonautes." Ibid. 10.

[413] "La mode est à la composition de ces Nefs dont l'équipage de héros imaginaires, de modèles éthiques ou de types sociaux, s'embarque pour un grand voyage symbolique qui leur apporte sinon la fortune, du moins, la figure de leur destin ou de leur vérité." Ibid.

But if the ship of fools was primarily literary, and if it existed primarily in imaginary of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was understood to represent the real social condition of the insane in society. Like the satyr chorus in Nietzsche, the ship of fools was both literary and very real. The fact that it occurred on a ship, traveling down a river, highlighted the "*liminal* situation of the mad in the half-real, half-imaginary geography of medieval man, which was symbolized and realized at the time by the right of the cities to *expel* the mad outside the city *gates*."[414] Foucault's point was that even if it was only a literary convention, the ship of fools was generally understood to indicate the exclusion of the insane from the city. Like Nietzsche's satyr chorus, which was at once experienced as part of the human world, and also as a part of the world of the gods, the ship of fools existed only on the mental plane, which in no way mitigated its reality for those who lived on that plane. On the mental level, the ship of fools defined how the Renaissance mind understood madness.

Furthermore, as Nietzsche argued that Greek society needed the art of the satyr chorus in order to maintain its belief in the artifice of society, so Foucault argued that the ship of fools underlay the discourse of mental illness. This was the most Nietzschean aspect of *Folie et déraison*, because it pointed to the artificiality of the discourse of mental illness. Foucault argued that the discourse of mental illness was agreed upon, accepted, and lived as reality. It was granted truth, just as Nietzsche argued that the Greek society granted truth to the strictures and maxims of individualist, Apollonian society. Likewise, the discourse of mental illness was the artifice that overlay the real

[414] "D'une géographie mi-réelle, mi-imaginaire, la situation *liminaire* du fou à l'horizon du souci de l'homme medieval – situation sybolisée et realisée à la fois par le privilege qui est donné au fou d'être *enfermé* aux *portes* de la ville." Ibid. 14.

experience of being mad. It was a discourse invented by physicians and scientists who purported to speak for the mad, rather than allowing the mad to speak for themselves. Foucault argued that the discourse of mental illness was an artifice lived as reality by seventeenth and eighteenth century Europeans in exactly the same way that Nietzsche argued that Apollonian individualism was an artifice lived as reality by the Greeks. Foucault wrote,

> It is these extreme discoveries, and these alone, that permit us, in our time, to finally judge that the experience of madness common since the Sixteenth century owes its particular face, and the origin of its meaning, to that absence, to that dark night and all that fills it…Then it becomes apparent that beneath each of its forms it masks a more complete, more perilous tragic experience – which it is nonetheless capable of obliterating entirely. In the last moment of this constraint, an explosion was necessary, which we accelerate, ever since Nietzsche.[415]

Echoing Nietzsche's initial question in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, one might understand *Folie et déraison* best by asking of Foucault, what kind of society needed to recognize the reality of the ship of fools? The answer also echoes back from Foucault's appropriation of Nietzsche: a society that had lost touch with the genuine experience of madness, a society that had allowed madness to be hemmed in by the discourse of mental illness, a human society that had shielded itself from the fact that madness was human too.

Blanchot too, had made a similar argument in 1953 about the origin of literature, in an essay titled "Le regard d'Orphée."[416] This essay reproduced Nietzsche's argument about Greek tragedy nearly exactly, and it was unlike anything else in Blanchot's corpus

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[415] "Ce sont ces extremes découvertes, et elles seules, qui nous permettent, de nos jours, de juger enfin que l'expérience de la folie qui s'étend depuis le XVIe siècle jusqu'à maintenant doit sa figure particulière, et l'origine de son sens, à cette absence, à cette nuit et à tout ce qui l'emplit…alors il apparaît que sous chacune de ses formes, elle masque d'une manière plus complete, plus périlleuse aussi cette experience tragique, qu'elle n'est pas cependant parvenue à réduire du tout au tout. Au point dernier de la contrainte, l'éclatement était nécessaire, auquel nous assistons depuis Nietzsche." Ibid. 36.

[416] Blanchot, "La Regard d'Orphée," *Cahiers d'Art* 28, no. 1 (1953): 1075-1086.

in its style and content, as well as in the manner of its publication. Unlike the rest of Blanchot's work, which was made up of philosophical meditations that took literature as their point of departure, "Le regard d'Orphée" was a retelling, and re-interpretation of the Orpheus myth, with no reference to any author, contemporary or otherwise.[417] Orpheus was a mythological poet, whose wife Eurydice died on their wedding day, trying to escape a covetous satyr. Orpheus pursued Eurydice to the underworld, where his lamentations persuaded Hades and Persephone to release her. She would be allowed to follow Orpheus back to the world of the living, but only on the condition that he not look back at her until they reached the end of their journey. They had gone some way when Orpheus' anxiety got the better of him, and he turned around to see if Eurydice was indeed there. And as he gazed upon her, she disappeared, dissolving like an apparition. Orpheus' grief overcame him, and he wandered Greece alone until he came upon the Bacchae, orgiastic revelers of cult of Dionysus, who tore him apart in their frenzy.

As Foucault used the ship of fools to explain the origin of the discourse of mental illness, and as Nietzsche used the satyr chorus to explain the origin of Greek tragedy, Blanchot used the Orpheus myth to explain the origin of literature. "Writing begins and ends," Blanchot argued, "with the gaze of Orpheus."[418] When Blanchot argued that

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[417] Even the material publication of "Le regard d'Orphée" indicated its remove from Blanchot's other arguments about creation. Typically, Blanchot published his essays in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, *Critiques*, and sometimes in *Les Temps modernes*. But Blanchot abandoned these journals when he published "Le regard d'Orphée," choosing instead to publish in *Cahiers d'Art*, where his essay appeared punctuated by two separate reproductions of portraits by Picasso. Blanchot published only one other essay in *Cahiers d'Art*, an excerpt from his book on Lautréamont, which appeared sandwiched between an ongoing review of a show of dinner plates and serving bowls on which Picasso had painted some figures. See Blanchot, "Lautréamont ou l'espérance d'une tête," *Cahiers d'Art* 23, no. 1 (1948): 69-71.

[418] "Ecrire commence et finit avec le regard d'Orphée." Blanchot, "Le regard d'Orphée," 1080. When Blanchot republished "Le regard d'Orphée," in *L'espace littéraire*, two years later, he modified this

Orpheus was the origin of literature he did not mean that the story of the Orpheus myth was the first story, and therefore the origin of literature. Still less did Blanchot argue that Orpheus was the origin of literature because he was the first poet. For Blanchot, as for Foucault and for Nietzsche, the origin had nothing to do with order of precedence, or order of appearance. Moreover, when Blanchot argued that Orpheus was the origin of literature, he meant that Orpheus was the origin of all literature, for all time, from Archilocus to Flaubert, from Proust to Blanchot himself.

It was with the *gaze* of Orpheus that writing begins, Blanchot argued, which meant two things: first, the gaze of Orpheus was the name Blanchot gave to every writer's desire to see his book become a genuine work of art, insofar as the gaze represented Orpheus' desire to bring Eurydice back to the real world. Secondly, the gaze of Orpheus was a mythical origin of the agreed-upon discourse of literature, in precisely the same way that Foucault argued that the ship of fools was the mythical origin of the agreed-upon discourse of mental illness. Just as Nietzsche argued that the Greeks needed the myth of tragedy in order to preserve their faith in the illusion of society, and just as Foucault argued that the discourse of mental illness originated in the fantastical literature of the ship of fools, so too did Blanchot argue that the discourse of literature needed the myth of Orpheus in order to preserve the illusion of representation.

It is necessary to examine each aspect of Blanchot's argument in "Le regard d'Orphée," respectively, before proceeding to "L'Oubli, la déraison," Blanchot's review of *Folie et déraison*. At the same time that Blanchot responded to Foucault, he also

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sentence to emphasize the originary status of Orpheus: "Writing begins with the gaze of Orpheus." See Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire*, 234.

returned to his own arguments about origins, amending and revising them in the process. In "Le regard d'Orphée" Blanchot argued that every writer had a desire to see his labors transformed into a work of art, to see his book become an *œuvre*. Blanchot likened Orpheus' descent into the underworld, and his attempt to bring Eurydice back to the world of the living to the writer's attempts to create a work of art. Indeed, Blanchot argued that Orpheus' determination to bring Eurydice back was art itself: "When Orpheus descends toward Eurydice, art is the power by which he opens the night."[419] For Blanchot, Orpheus' descent and his return were analogues of the creative process. Orpheus' descent towards Eurydice, who had vanished from the world, and who was hidden by the veil of death, was the artist's struggle to get to the perfect representation of the world. Every work of art represented some object – whether an object that existed in the material world, or in the emotional life of the author – in words, in images, or in sound. The artist desired to represent this object perfectly, and he viewed the creation of the work of art as a process of moving towards a more and more perfect representation. Blanchot used Eurydice to analogize the object of representation, this point toward which the artist strove: "Eurydice is, for Orpheus, the furthest that art can reach. Under a name that dissimulates her and beneath a veil that covers her, she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art, desire, death, and night seem to tend."[420] But Orpheus cannot reach Eurydice, she is hidden and dissimulated by death. She is not there. She has no earthly reality. For Blanchot, this cemented the analogy between Orpheus' descent, and

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[419] "Quand Orphée descend vers Eurydice, l'art est la puissance par laquelle s'ouvre la nuit." Blanchot, "Le regard d'Orphée," 1075.

[420] "Eurydice est, pour lui, l'extrême que l'art puisse atteindre, elle est, sous un nom qui la dissimule et sous un voile qui la couvre, le point profondément obscur vers lequel l'art, le désir, la mort, la nuit semblent tendre." Ibid.

the creation of the work of art. Drawing heavily on "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," Blanchot argued that the work of art existed solely because of this absence. If the object were actually present, it would no longer be art – it would simply be life. Orpheus' task was not actually to reach Eurydice, his task was to bring her back, just as the artist's task was not actually to create the object, his task was rather to represent the object in the work of art. For Blanchot, "Orpheus' work of art does not consist however, in ensuring the approach of this "point," and the descent toward the deep."[421] Rather, Orpheus' "work of art is to bring [the point] out into the day, and give it form, shape, and reality in the day."[422] Blanchot argued that Orpheus descent, and his return, were like the creation of a work of art, in that he moved toward Eurydice with the intent of bringing her back. But the real creation of the work of art, like the actual task of bringing Eurydice back, required faith in her absence.

Blanchot argued that the Orpheus myth was the origin of the creation of the work of art not because Orpheus was the first poet, nor because the Orpheus myth was the first story, but rather because the Orpheus myth revealed the essential nature of creation. For Blanchot, the work of art could only exist because the artist failed to represent the thing in itself. The work of art was the failure to make the thing itself present to the viewer. In this sense, Orpheus failed to bring Eurydice back to the world of the live – to the day, as Blanchot put it. Orpheus' movement toward Eurydice, and her disappearance when he turned from the essential structure of *désœuvrement*. Orpheus did not create a perfect work of art, he did not create an *œuvre*. Rather, he failed to bring Eurydice back, his

[421] "Ce "point," l'œuvre d'Orphée ne consiste pas cependant à en assurer l'approche en descendant vers la profondeur." Ibid.
[422] "Son œuvre, c'est de le ramener au jour et de lui donner dans le jour forme, figure et réalité." Ibid.

descent and return were *désœuvrement*. Moreover, Blanchot argued that the creation of the work of art necessitated Orpheus' failure. Orpheus' dedication to Eurydice, like the artist's dedication to the object, required that he forget his song and look back to check if Eurydice was there:

> Orpheus, in the very movement of his migration, could only forget the work of art that must be accomplished, and forget it necessarily, because the ultimate demand of his movement is not that there be a work of art, but that someone face this "point," and grasp its essence where this essence appears, where it is essential and essentially appearance, at the heart of the night.[423]

Here, Blanchot described the way that the artist must necessarily care more for the object, than for the representation of the object. Orpheus necessarily cared more for the dead Eurydice, in his anguish, than for actually returning back to the world with her. His love for her necessitated that he forget his task. Blanchot claimed that "the Greek myth says: the work of art can only be created if the immeasurable experience of the deep – an experience which the Greeks recognized as necessary to the work of art, where the work of art endures its measurelessness – is not pursued for its own sake."[424] For Blanchot, there was no such thing as art for art's sake: such art made no sense to him. Art was the tragic attempt to capture an object in artistic representation, indeed what was artistic about the work of art was the trace of this failed effort that remained on the page, or on the canvas. The work of art was simultaneously the desire for the object, and the

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[423] "Orphée, dans le mouvement même de sa migration, ne peut qu'oublier l'œuvre qui'il doit accomplir, et il l'oublie nécessairement, parce que l'exigence ultime de son mouvement, ce n'est pas qu'il y ait œuvre, mais que quelqu'un se tienne en face de ce "point," en saisisse l'essence, là où cette essence apparaît, où elle est essentielle et essentiellement apparence: au cœure de la nuit." Ibid.

[424] "Le mythe grec dit: l'on ne peut faire œuvre que si l'expérience démesurée de la profondur – experience que les Grecs reconnaissent comme nécessaire à l'œuvre, experience où l'œuvre est à l'épreuve de sa démesure – n'est pas poursuivie pour elle-même." Ibid.

movement toward it, and at the same time it is the desire to make a work of art. Art would not be art without this failure.

But what was the substance of this failure? Blanchot argued that literary creation – if it was genuine literature – always failed when measured against the standards of rational thought. In Blanchot's view, the world could do nothing other than condemn Orpheus's failure, for it wanted only the real Eurydice, alive, and in the light of day. The world, "announces Orpheus' failure and declares Eurydice lost twice over…as if to renounce failure were much graver than to renounce success."[425] The rational world wanted only the real, it only wanted full and absolute presence. It wanted Eurydice brought back to life, and it wanted art to represent its objects perfectly. The rational world wanted the figures of a painting to actually become present. To the rational world this is the definition of successful art. To this rational world Orpheus lost Eurydice twice: first when she died running from the satyr, and the second time when Orpheus gazed back upon her.

But to Blanchot such art was neither possible, nor desirable. If the rational world defined art as truthful representation, and Orpheus's work as a failure to represent truthfully, Blanchot argued that "not to turn back toward Eurydice would be no less untrue."[426] Every work of art, literary or plastic, failed to make its object completely present. The figures of a painting made the objects manifest themselves for the viewer no more than "[lining] up a few words side by side" on the pages of a book made the world present itself to the reader. A work of art then, as Blanchot understood it, was not a

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[425] "Dit l'échec d'Orphée et Eurydice deux fois perdue…comme si renoncer à échouer était beaucoup plus grave que renoncer à réussir." Ibid. 1076

[426] "Ne pas se tourner ver Eurydice, ce ne serait pas moins trahir." Ibid. 1075.

perfect representation, but rather a failed representation. And as a failed representation it required that the creator fail. Blanchot's name for this failure was Orpheus' gaze. The work of art requires this failure, this desire to plunge toward the object of representation, without any care for the work itself:

> [Not to look would] be infidelity to the measureless, imprudent force of his movement, which does not want Eurydice in her daytime truth and her everyday appeal, but wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance, with her closed body and sealed face – wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible.[427]

For Blanchot the desire for the work of art was the desire for the unattainable, and disappearing object. It was the desire for Eurydice "in her nocturnal obscurity," as he put it, a dreamt-of Eurydice of fantasy. Blanchot argued that this desire, this imprudent desire to look back on Eurydice, and to move towards the unapproachable object, is what makes the work of art possible. "Had he not looked at her," Blanchot wrote, "he would not have drawn her toward him."[428] In Blanchot's definition of the work of art as the simultaneous desire to attain the object of representation, and the failure to attain this object, Orpheus' disastrous gaze became the work of art's origin, and its condition of possibility. Blanchot argued that Orpheus was the origin of literature in the sense that every writer experienced the descent into the measureless depths toward the object of his representations, and every writer felt the attraction, the anxious urge to turn back upon his object of representation. Orpheus' gaze, the gaze that doomed his effort to rescue Eurydice to failure, was the essential experience of all creation.

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[427] "Être infindèle à la profondeur de son mouvement, à la force sans mesure et sans prudence de ce mouvment qui ne veut pas Eurydice dans sa vérité diurne et dans son agrément quotidien, qui la veut dans son obscurité nocturne, dans son éloignement, avec son corps fermé et son visage scellé, – qui veut la voir, non quand elle est visible, mais quand elle est invisible." Ibid.
[428] "S'il ne l'avait regardée, il ne l'eût pas attiree." Ibid. 1076.

The argument of "Le regard d'Orphée" stood apart from the rest of Blanchot's corpus, in that it offered a very different version of literary creation. Only in "Le regard d'Orphée" did Blanchot link the failure implicit in *désœuvrement* to a mythical origin. But this choice was part of a conscious effort to distinguish "Le regard d'Orphée" from the rest of his corpus. In 1955, when the essay was re-published in *L'espace littéraire*, Blanchot further singled it out with a strange epigraph that identified "Le regard d'Orphée" as the vanishing center of the collection:

> A book, even a fragmentary one, has a center which attracts it. This center is not fixed, but is displaced by the pressure of the book and circumstances of its composition. Yet it is also a fixed center which displaces itself, if it is genuine, while maintaining itself in the same position and becoming always more central, more hidden, more uncertain and more imperious. The one who writes the book writes out of desire for, and ignorance of this center. The feeling of having touched it can only be the illusion of having reached it. When it is a matter of a book of explanations, there is a kind of methodological good faith in stating toward what point the book seems to be directed: here, toward the pages entitled "Le regard d'Orphée."[429]

This unique epigraph marked "Le regard d'Orphée" as distinct from the rest of *L'Espace littéraire*. By designating "Le regard d'Orphée" as the center of *L'Espace littéraire* – the rest of which was composed of the essays on Mallarmé, Rilke, Kafka, and Hölderlin that Blanchot published between 1951 and 1955 in *Critique*, *Les Temps modernes*, and *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* – Blanchot indicated that it had a special status vis à vis the discourse of literature. Where the rest of his corpus articulated his theory of

[429] "Un livre, même fragmentaire, a un centre qui l'attire: centre non pas fixe aussi, mais qui se dêplace par la pression du livre et les circonstances de sa composition. Centre fixe aussi, qui se déplace, s'il est veritable, en restant le même et en devenant toujours plus central, plus dérobé, plus incertain et plus impérieux. Celui qui écrit le livre l'écrit par désir, par ignorance de ce centre. Le sentiment de l'avoir touché peut bien n'être que l'illusion de l'avoir atteint; quand il s'agit d'un livre d'eclairissements, il y a une sorte de loyauté méthodique à dire vers quell point il semble que le livre se dirige: ici, vers les pages intitulées "Le regard d'Orphée." Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 5.

literary creation, "Le regard d'Orphée" articulated the origin of literature itself. It was less about the mechanics of creation, than about demonstrating the art and artifice inherent in all literature.

By locating the origin of literature with Orpheus, Blanchot replicated Nietzsche's argument in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. As Nietzsche argued that the satyr chorus of Dionysian tragedy made it possible for the Greeks to maintain their belief in the Apollonian society of individualism, and as Foucault argued that the ship of fools subtended the discourse of mental illness, Blanchot argued that the Orpheus myth was necessary to maintain the belief in literature. The discourse of literature – by necessity a discourse of the rational world, of the "day," as Blanchot called it – required that society agree that it represented the world. Literature could only be taken seriously, its moral lessons, its allegorical import could only have veracity if it was agreed that literature actually represented the world, including the world of the author's emotions. Literature required the reader to believe that the writer had special insight into the human condition, and that he imparted this insight through his work. In order to believe that a novel's message about love, for instance, had application in the real world, one had to believe that the author had special insight into love, and that he was capable of communicating it in novelized form. Similarly, the maxims that defined Apollonian society could only be followed when the Greeks agreed that the human being's true nature lay in individuality. The discourse of mental illness could only be taken seriously when society agreed that it was a genuine science, that mental illness really existed, and that physicians were able to diagnose and treat it. But of course, the Greeks also knew that there was no individual,

and that the individual was a fabrication, invented by Greek philosophers. It had reality only in the pages of their tomes. Likewise the discourse of mental illness existed only in the medical treatises on madness produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It did not actually represent the experience of madness. Literature too, did not actually represent the world. Literature was nothing more than "[lining] up a few words side by side." The worlds that literature represented were imaginary.

Blanchot and Foucault's idea, which they derived from Nietzsche, was that humanity needed a myth in order to sustain belief in these discourses – otherwise their unreality began to permeate the surface of the discourse, making it unbearable. Nietzsche argued that if the Greeks lived their individuality, while knowing that it was only the invention of philosophers they would not have been able to bear it. The Greek mind would have torn itself apart if it was required to believe that its exile from every other member of Greek society was the invention of a few philosophers. Similarly, Foucault argued that society would not have been able to tolerate the internment of fellow humans if the discourse of mental illness had not convinced them that it had scientifically discovered the real conditions of madness. In "Le regard d'Orphée" Blanchot made a parallel argument, that in order for literature to be convincing as a representation of the world, society had to forget that it was nothing more than "[lining] up a few words side by side," just as Orpheus "forgets the work he is to achieve," in favor of looking back to check if Eurydice was really following behind him.

Of course, each of these discourses provided their own myths. The Greek discourse of the individual purported to be a natural discovery, it purported that Greek

philosophers simply discovered the individual through rational logic. The discourse of mental illness also offered its own origin myth. It too claimed to be the discovery of a natural phenomenon by rational scientists. The discourse of literature asserted that writers created literature through reflection on the world, and then pouring the content of that reflection onto the printed page. But Blanchot and Foucault, like Nietzsche before them, argued that each of these were illusory myths: philosophers conjured up the individual, and physicians conjured mental illness, by the same process of stringing words together that writers conjured literature. Furthermore, they argued that these myths were insufficient. These were the myths created by the discourses themselves, the self-serving myths designed to convince society of their reality. These myths taught that their discourses occurred naturally, and inherently in the world. They were designed to cover up the essential unreality of the discourses.

Blanchot and Foucault argued that such covering up was no longer believable after their exposure. The satyr chorus, the ship of fools, and the gaze of Orpheus were all intended to replace the origin myths proffered by the discourses of individualism, mental illness, and literature. They were different in the sense that they allowed those subject to the discourse to know its artificiality, rather than forcing them to accept the illusion of natural reality. If life was experienced as an artificial creation, then they argued that it would be more tolerable to abandon the distinction between artifice and reality, and place everything at the level of art – since the actual essence of lived discourses was itself nothing more than creation. Only when the mind was not forced to split everything between real and unreal, only when everything was simply art, would humanity achieve

the dignity that belonged to the human. Thus it was that Nietzsche argued the Greek mind needed the satyr chorus in order to displace itself from the artificiality of individualism. Only at this level could one participate in individualism in good faith. Foucault argued that the real origin of the discourse of mental illness was the literary convention of the ship of fools because discourse of mental illness was itself essentially a literary creation. Only when the psychiatrist was forced to admit that his claims about the mind were literary creations could they be taken seriously. Finally, Blanchot argued that the origin of literature was the gaze of Orpheus because one could believe in the discourse of literature only when one understood that literature was a work of art, and not a true representation of reality.

The Need to Forget

Blanchot gathered these themes together in "L'Oubli, la déraison," the review of *Folie et déraison* that he wrote for *La Nouvelle Revue Française* after Caillois gave him Foucault's book in the spring of 1961.[430] When Blanchot read Foucault's *Folie et déraison* he saw his own work reflected back at him, only now it came back deformed, pressed into the service of structuralist and historical arguments.[431] But the structuralism

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[430] Elsewhere Blanchot used the term "oubli" to designate oblivion. In "L'oubli, la déraison," however, "l'oubli" consistently referred to forgetting. See Blanchot, *L'attente oubli* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969).

[431] In a footnote attached to the 1969 version "L'oubli, la déraison," Blanchot drew a direct an explicit link between Foucault's book and *L'espace littéraire*, as well as *La livre à venir*, and "La littérature et la droit à la mort." I argue that this reference accomplished more than establishing a link between the two: I argue that this footnote refers to *L'espace littéraire* in its entirety, including the epigraph. Curiously, this footnote was absent from the 1961 version of the essay. See Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 297. N.B. I have endeavored to indicate when the discussion shifts to the 1969 version of "L'oubli, la déraison," in the body of the text. All footnotes referring to the 1969 version refer to *L'Entretien infini*. I have designated the 1961 version as "L'oubli, la déraison," in all footnotes.

Blanchot saw in Foucault's book was very different than the structuralism that Barthes' saw in *Folie et déraison*. For Barthes, *Folie et déraison* proved that structures exist historically, and that the practice of history ought to dedicate itself to the excavation of those structures. Blanchot's understanding of *Folie et déraison* was no less historical than Barthes', but it focused not on the assemblage of structures, but rather on their lost origin. When Blanchot read Foucault's account of the ship of fools, he understood that Foucault's structuralism went beyond tracing the structure of the discourse of madness, to an assertion that its origin lay in myth. Moreover, Blanchot was concerned not with the loss of the origin necessitated by structures, as much as he was concerned with the effort of forgetting that structures required of those on whom they were imposed. The discourse of mental illness, like the discourse of literature, required that its subjects actively forget that it was nothing more than "[lining] up a few words side by side." For Blanchot, *Folie et déraison* was a book about forgotten origins, above all else.

In "L'oubli, la déraison," Blanchot argued that forgetting was essential for the discourse of mental illness. Forgetting was not a loss, rather forgetting was like the forgetful, neglectful gaze of Orpheus, the necessary gaze that nonetheless dispersed Eurydice before it. Blanchot argued that forgetting must be understood as an active power, it must be understood as making daily living possible.[432] "Forgetting is a power,"

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[432] Blanchot derived his argument about forgetting from Heidegger's comments on the forgetting of Being in *Being and Time*. There Heidegger argued that the everyday understanding of the being of things, in which their being was totally taken for granted, required that people forget the original Being. Indeed, insofar as humanity lived in the everyday, its relation to being was one of forgetting. Heidegger wrote: "The average everydayness of Da-sein must not be taken as a mere "aspect" [of being]. In it, also – and even in the mode of inauthenticity – the structure of existentiality lies *a priori*. In it, also, Da-sein is concerned with the particular manner of its being, to which it is related in the way of average everydayness, even if only in the mode of fleeing *from* and forgetting *it*." "Die durchschnittliche Alltäglichkeit des Daseins darf aber nicht als ein bloßer "Aspekt" genommen werden. Auch in ihr und selbst im Modus der

Blanchot argued, "we are able to forget and, thanks to this, able to live, to act, to work, and to remember – to be present: we are thus able to speak usefully."[433] After reading Foucault, Blanchot argued that living, acting, working, remembering, and utility occurred at the level of structural discourses. They were of the same stuff as the discourse of mental illness and the discourse of literature. One lived under the discourse of mental illness, and expected it to diagnose and cure madness. Forgetting was the power that enabled this expectation. It was not that forgetting allowed physicians to diagnose, or to treat madness. That sort of thing operated at the level of the individual physician, and required years of medical education and training. Rather, Blanchot argued that forgetting allowed people to expect physicians to be able to diagnose and cure them. If people had lived under the discourse of mental illness and remained cognizant that it was nothing more than "[lining] up a few words side by side," they never would have been able to credibly accept its diagnoses and its cures. Without people forgetting that the discourse of mental illness was nothing but "[lining] up a few words side by side," it never would have succeeded.

Furthermore, Blanchot argued that structural discourses required that people forget that they were forgetting. That is, they required that people believe that discourses were natural entities, and that there was nothing to forget in the first place. In "L'oubli, la déraison," Blanchot wrote:

Uneigentlichkeit liegt a priori die Struktur der Existenzialität. Auch in ihr geht es dem Dasein in bestimmter Weise um sein Sein, zu dem es sich im Modus der durchschnittlichen Alltäglichkeit verhält und sei es auch nur im Modus der Flucht *davor* und des Vergessens *seiner*." Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, in *Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 1, bk. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977). 59.

[433] "Oublier est un pouvoir: nous pouvons oublier, grâce à quoi nous pouvons vivre, agir, travailler et nous souvenir – être présent: parler ainsi utilement." Blanchot, "L'oubli, la déraison," 677.

> Forgetting forgotten: each time I forget, I do nothing but forget that I am forgetting, which is already at work in forgetting. To forget forgetting, however, and to enter into this movement of redoubling, is not to forget twice over; it is to forget in forgetting the depth of forgetting, to forget more profoundly by turning away from this depth, which lacks any possibility of being reached."[434]

In this passage, Blanchot argued that when one necessarily forgets the material origin of a discourse – the fact that it is nothing more than "[lining] up a few words side by side" – one also necessarily forgets the fact that one has forgotten that material origin. To not forget the second time would be to forget incompletely. It would allow the trace of the material origin to remain, and in order for structural discourses to be given credibility in the real world, it was necessary to eradicate every trace of its actual emergence.

Here, Blanchot replicated his argument in "Le regard d'Orphée" almost verbatim. The forgetting twice over reproduced the day's judgment that Orpheus lost Eurydice twice over. As Blanchot argued that Eurydice was not really lost twice over, and that Orpheus was obligated to gaze back upon her, so did he argue that the forgetting of forgetting was also necessary. Again, Blanchot argued that the forgetting of forgetting was as essential to the creation of the structural discourse, as Orpheus' gaze was to the *désœuvrement* of the work of art. As the day misjudged Orpheus' effort as a failure because he was unable to bring Eurydice back, it was also wrong to say that one forgets twice over, as if one ever had a genuine opportunity to remember. Blanchot drew an analogy between Orpheus and the movement of forgetting. Orpheus' mad desire to see Eurydice, and the artist's mad desire for the object necessarily failed to reach that object.

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[434] "L'oubli oublié: chaque fois que j'oublie, je ne fais rien qu'oublier que j'oublie et ce qui est en jeu dans l'oubli. Cependant oublier l'oubli et entrer dans ce mouvement de redoublement, ce n'est pas oublier deux fois, c'est oublier en oubliant la profondeur de l'oubli, oublier plus profondément en se détournant de cette profondeur, à laquelle manqué toute possibilité d'être approfondie." Ibid. 677-678.

Yet at the same time it also made the work of art possible, insofar as the work of art could not itself be the object. There could only be a work of art when the object was not present, when the object was represented. Similarly, there could be a structural discourse only when its origin was absent, and forgotten. In the 1969 version of "L'oubli, la déraison," published in the collection *L'Entretien infini*, Blanchot explicitly connected desire (such as Orpheus' desire for Eurydice) to forgetting:

> The relation of desire to forgetting as that which is previously inscribed outside memory, a relation to that of which there can be no memory, and which always forecloses memory, and which effaces the experience of a trace, this movement that excludes itself, and designates itself as being exterior to itself through this exclusion, thus requires an exteriority that is never articulated: inarticulate.[435]

The ship of fools, the literary creation that gave voice the inarticulate outside of the discourse of mental illness, was necessarily excluded from the structure of the discourse. Blanchot argued that the absent origin of the discourse of mental illness was like the dispersed Eurydice. Blanchot argued that people wanted so badly to believe in the discourse of mental illness, they wanted so badly to think that it described natural reality, and so badly to think that it could cure them, that they forgot the most obvious thing about its existence: that it was an invention, that it was a creation, that it was just "[lining] up a few words side by side."

In "L'oubli, la déraison" Blanchot argued that every structure necessarily occluded its own origin. The discourse of mental illness, the discourse of literature, even the discourse of individualism, all required that their humble origins be forgotten, and

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[435] "Le rapport de désir à l'oubli comme à ce qui s'inscrit préalablement hors mémoire, rapport à ce dont il ne peut y avoir souvenir et qui toujours devance, efface l'expérience d'une trace, ce mouvement qui s'exclut et, par cette exclusion, se désigne comme extérieur à lui-même, ainsi requiert un extériorité jamais articulée: inarticulée." Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, 291-292.

replaced with fictions that allowed people to believe in them. People needed to be able to trust the discourse of mental illness when they went to it for care, just like they needed to be able to trust the literature that they read. But people also needed to know that structural discourses were artificial. The ship of fools, and the gaze of Orpheus provided origin myths that at once allowed people to believe in the discourse of mental illness and the discourse of literature, while at the same time grounding them in art. In this way, Blanchot and Foucault intended to make it possible "to enter into an event that is necessarily inauthentic, a presence without a presence, an ordeal without possibility."[436] The discourse of mental illness was a literary creation, and thus it necessarily had its origin in literature with the ship of fools. The discourse of literature was also a literary creation, and it too necessarily had its origin in another literary creation, the mythical gaze of Orpheus. By recognizing these myths as the origins of structural discourse, Blanchot argued that society could have a more genuine relationship to the discourses under which they lived.

The definitive link between "Le regard d'Orphée," and "L'oubli, la déraison" was the essay "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan," discussed above in connection with the work of Albert Camus and the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie." The essay was published first in 1954, and re-published again in 1969 in the collection *L'Entretien infini*, with important revisions. When it initially appeared, "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan" was folded into Blanchot's engagement with the debate between Camus and Sartre, appearing in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*

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[436] "Entrer dans la consideration de l'événement nécessairement inauthentique, présence sans présence, épreuve sans possibilité." Blanchot, "L'oubli, la déraison," 678.

immediately before Blanchot's three-part intervention, "Réflexions sur l'enfer"/"Réflexions sur le nihilisme"/"Tu peux tuer cet homme." In the 1954 version, published just nine months after "Le regard d'Orphée," Blanchot connected the Orpheus myth to the Don Juan story, in an attempt to respond to Camus' discussion of the absurd, and the absurd man in *Le Mythe Sisyphe*. But when republished in *L'Entretien infini* it became the link between Blanchot's essays on Camus and his essay on Foucault, "L'Oubli, la déraison." The story of the 1969 re-publication of "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan" is significant largely for the additions that Blanchot wrote in order to make this connection.

The history of this revision indicates the trace of Blanchot's encounter with the thought of Foucault in 1961, which allowed Blanchot to realize latent aspects of the 1954 version of "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan," and raise them to prominence in the revised version of 1969. The 1954 version of "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan" ended with the sentence "Forgetting is the mute and closed space where desire wanders without coming to an end. Where someone is forgotten, there he or she is desired. But this must be a profound forgetting."[437] These were the last words of the final paragraph of the 1954 version. Here Blanchot linked forgetting to desire, to Orpheus' desire for Eurydice. In his desire for her, Orpheus forgot the injunction against looking back at her, and so she was lost. In 1954 Blanchot wrote that this was a "profound forgetting," but left the profundity unexplained.

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[437] "L'oubli est l'espace muet, fermé, où erre sans fin le désir. Là où quelqu'un est oubliée, là il est désiré. Mais il faut un profond oubli." Blanchot, "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan" *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* 15 (March 1954): 501.

In the 1969 version however, when coupled with "L'Oubli, la déraison" this forgetting became the very exigency that sustained the world. Rather than using the quotation above as the concluding sentence of a long, final paragraph, Blanchot used it as the beginning of a new paragraph in which he added a more explicit discussion of forgetting. The final, expanded paragraph of the 1969 version of "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan" now read:

> Forgetting is the mute and closed space where desire wanders without coming to an end. Where someone is forgotten, there he or she is desired. But this must be a profound forgetting. Forgetfulness: the movement of forgetting: the infinite that opens up in closing upon itself in forgetting – on condition that it be received not by the lightness that frees memory from memory but, within remembrance itself, as the relation with what hides and that no presence can hold. The Ancients had already sensed that *Lethe* is not merely the other side of *Aletheia*, its shadow, the negative force from which the knowledge that remembers would deliver us. *Lethe* is also the companion of Eros, the awakening proper to sleep, the distance from which one cannot take one's distance since it comes in all that moves away; a movement therefore, without a trace, effacing itself in every trace, and nonetheless – the expression must be used, however faultily – still announcing itself and already designating itself in the lack of writing that writing – *this senseless game* – remember outside memory as its *limit* or its always prior illegitimacy.[438]

This passage, which immediately preceded "L'Oubli, la déraison" in *L'Entretien infini*, condensed numerous references to texts and thinkers that emerged in the 15 years between the two versions of "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan." References to Jacques Derrida

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[438] "L'oubli est l'espace muet, fermé, où erre sans fin le désir; là où quelqu'un est oublié, là il est désiré; mais il faut un profond oubli. L'oubli: le mouvement d'oublier: l'infini qui s'ouvre, se fermant, avec l'oubli – à condition de l'acceuillir, non par la légèreté qui libère la mémoire de la mémoire, mais, dans le souvenir même, comme le rapport avec ce qui se cache et que nulle présence ne saurait retenir. Déjà les Anciens avaient pressenti que *Léthé* n'est pas seulement l'envers d'*Aléthéia*, son ombre, la puissance négative don't nous délivrerait le savoir qui se rappelle: *Léthé* est aussi le compagnon d'Éros, léveil propre au sommeil, cela, l'écart, dont il n'y a pas à s'écarter, puisqu'il vient en tout ce qui s'écarte, mouvement donc sans traces, s'effaçant ent toutes traces et qui pourtant – il faut en avancer fautivement l'expression – s'annonce encore, se désigne déjà dans le manque à écrire don't l'écriture – *ce jeu insensé* – se souvient hor mémoire comme de sa *limite* ou de son illégimité toujours préalable." Blanchot, "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan," *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 288.

("the lack of writing"), and Martin Heidegger (*Aletheia*) indicated the passage's philosophical influences. But the central message remained of a piece with Blanchot's encounter with Foucault. Blanchot wrote that *Lethe* was "not merely the other side of *Aletheia*." *Aletheia* was Heidegger's concept of unveiling, the mode of philosophical revelation in which truth was exposed after having lain hidden beneath its veil of presence. The implication of *Aletheia* was that *Lethe*, its other side, was the movement of hiding the truth of things from the apprehension of humanity. But Blanchot, after his encounter with Foucault, no longer saw *Lethe* as the negative of *Aletheia*. Rather, *Lethe* was the essential, and the essentially productive, forgetting that made interaction with the world possible. To forget the thing-in-itself (the infamous Kantian *das Ding an sich*) might have ruined the relation to the thing's essence, but nevertheless it allowed a relation with the thing that never could have existed with the thing-in-itself. By 1969 the Orphic had become *Lethe*, and creation had become forgetting.

This aspect of Orphic forgetting is brought to light by drawing an analogy between Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, and Blanchot's essay "Berlin." Citing Jacques Lacan, Copjec writes that "every phenomenal field occludes its cause."[439] Belief in a phenomenal field, whether the name of "Berlin" analyzed by Blanchot or the discourse of equality analyzed by Copjec via Freud and Lacan, requires that its cause be forgotten. As an abstraction that was lived and experienced concretely, the name of "Berlin" operated in the same way. The discourse of equality, taken for reality in Western, democratic societies, requires that its cause (it was

[439] Copjec, 11-12.

created by humans) be forgotten in order for it to cover up its inadequacies (there is no *actual* equality). The name of "Berlin," taken for a real social entity separated by the Berlin Wall during the Cold War, required that its reality be forgotten (the plurality of human life that was never completely contained in the name of the city "Berlin") in order for East and West Berlin to be "visible" and "tangible." Thus Blanchot wrote, the wall "recalls [to us], to we who constantly forget it, that abstraction is not simply a faulty mode of thinking or an apparently impoverished form of language, but that abstraction is our world, the one where we live and where we think everyday."[440] The same forgetting is required by the discourses of mental illness and literature, which also demand that their causes (they were created by humans) be forgotten in order for psychiatry's diagnoses and treatments to be accepted as real and effective, and for literature to be taken as the mirror of nature. All of these discourses – equality, "Berlin," mental illness, literature – were sustained by the same movement of forgetting, which forgets their essential, incomprehensible, unrepresentable reality so that they can be known and experienced in the everyday world. In the everyday world, Blanchot realized through his exchange with Foucault, living and thinking – however imperfect and inadequate – took priority over the achievement of transcendence.

This exchange played out in the context of the emergence, and growing preeminence of structuralism. Foucault's work forced Blanchot to realize the significance of his own work for structuralism. His statements on forgetting actively recalled and revised earlier positions that Blanchot articulated in "Mallarmé et

[440] "...rapelle, à nous qui l'oublions constamment, que l'abstraction, ce n'est pas un simple mode fautif du penser une forme apparemment appauvrie de langage, mais que l'abstraction, c'est notre monde, celui où nous vivons et où nous pensons quotidiennement." Blanchot, "Berlin," *Écrits politiques*, 132.

l'expérience littéraire," where he first introduced the concepts of the *œuvre* and *désœuvrement*. In this piece from 1952 Blanchot drew on the work of Martin Heidegger to describe the *œuvre* in terms of a linguistic structure that becomes a being in the material world: "We call this powerful linguistic construction – this structure calculated to exclude chance, which subsists by itself and supports itself – the *œuvre*, and we call it being."[441] In 1952 Blanchot was content simply to point out the difference between the ontic being of the *œuvre*, and the ontological category of Being. In the very same way that discourses of mental illness and literature had no real Being, as they did not actually reflect genuine reality, Blanchot argued in 1952 that the *œuvre* was a real being that did not participate in actual Being: "[it is] *a* being, and for because of this, it is apparently nowhere near to being, [nowhere near] to that which escapes all determination and every form of existence."[442] But in 1961, after "L'oubli, la déraison," however, Blanchot's statements had a somewhat different inflection. In 1961 Blanchot argued that the ontic being of linguistic structures required that its ontological Being be forgotten. It was not simply that the being of structures had no actual Being. Rather, Blanchot argued that society needed to forget that structures had no actual Being in order to live with them as existing beings.

After 1961, and after *Folie et déraison*, Blanchot was able to apply this logic to all of reality. In "Mallarmé et l'expérience littéraire" Blanchot wrote:

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[441] "Cette puissante construction du langage, cet ensemble calculé pour en exclure le hasard, qui subsiste par soi seul et repose sur soi-même, nous l'appelons œuvre et nou l'appelons être." Blanchot, "Mallarmé et l'éxpérience littéraire," *Critique*, 62 (July 1952): 584.

[442] "*Un* être et, à cause de cela, apparemment nullement plus proche de l'être, de ce qui échappe à toute détermination et à toute forme d'existence." Ibid.

> It is the total realization of this unreality, an absolute fiction which speaks being when, having "worn away," "used up" all existing things, having suspended all possible beings, it hits an ineradicable, irreducible trace, at the bottom of the nothing, affirms the nothing again as a being and makes the nothing become a being. What is left? "These very words: *it is*." These words sustain all other words by letting themselves be hidden by all the others.[443]

At the time Blanchot referred strictly to the being of the work of art, but after "L'oubli, la déraison, these words applied to all of reality for Blanchot. For what was the discourse of mental illness, if not the "total realization of [an] unreality"? For Blanchot, as for Foucault, the discourse of mental illness was an "absolute fiction," which was able to accede to the level of being strictly because society chose to forget that it was just a fiction. In this passage from 1952 the concept that reality was sustained by the words "it is" being hidden by all others functioned as a latent form of the forgetting that Blanchot articulated in "L'oubli, la déraison."

But this was the reality that human beings live and inhabit. For Foucault it took the form of medical sciences, words "lined up side by side" about madness, but which never approached the real experience of being mad. For Blanchot, it took the form of literature, and the world experienced as literature. In ""Mallarmé et l'expérience littéraire" Blanchot wrote in a footnote, "languages do not have the reality they express, for they are foreign to the reality of things, foreign to obscure natural profundity, and belong to that fictive reality which is the human world, detached from being and a tool

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[443] "Il est la réalisation totale de cette irréalité, fiction absolue qui dit l'être, quand, ayant "*usé*", "*rongé*" toutes les choses existantes, suspendu tous les êtres possibles, elle se heurte à ce résidu inéliminable, irréductible qui, au fond du néant, affirme encore le néant comme être et fait du néant le voile de l'être. Que reste-t-il? "*Ce mot même:* c'est". Mot qui soutient tous les mots, qui les soutient en se laissant dissimulé par eux." Ibid. 587.

for beings."[444] Here Blanchot argued that life was a "fictive reality" sustained only by the conviction in the reality of the being of linguistic structures. In "L'oubli, la déraison," Blanchot was able to advance this proposition even further, by suggesting that this conviction could only be sustained when the actual unreality of linguistic structures was forgotten.

Furthermore, Blanchot and Foucault together articulated the idea that this forgetting was sustained by a myth. In the case of the discourse of mental illness, its reality was sustained by the myth that physicians discovered the natural reality of mental illness by means of the scientific process. Foucault argued, on the contrary, that the real origin of the discourse of mental illness was in the literary trope of the ship of fools, since the discourse of mental illness was itself essentially a literary construction. Society would be far better off, Foucault argued, if it first admitted the discourse of mental illness was a fiction, and that its real origin was the mythic ship of fools. It was not that Foucault argued that the discourse of mental illness should be removed from reality entirely. Rather, Foucault argued that the practice of mental illness could be regulated more tolerably when it was accepted as having a literary essence. Likewise, Blanchot did not argue that the discourse of literature should be removed from reality either. Rather, he argued that the essential fiction of the world could be more readily accepted if were given origins, as a fictional world, unsupported by an origin, would be intolerable. In order for those origins to buttress the fiction of reality, they would need to be equally fictional. Insofar as humanity experienced reality through linguistic structures, and

[444] "Les langues n'ont pas la réalité qu'elles expriment, étant étrangères à la réalité des choses, à l'obscure profondeur naturelle, appartenant seulement à cette réalité fictive qu'est le monde humain, détaché de l'être et outil pour les êtres." Ibid. 581.

insofar as those structures were given their being *qua œuvres*, then humanity could achieve its rightful dignity.

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The history of Blanchot and Foucault's exchange sheds light on the scene of Foucault's dissertation defense. When Canguilhem announced to Foucault that he possessed the poetic talents necessary to write about madness, he was not, in all likelihood, referring to the fundamentally literary, and poetic nature of reality that Blanchot and Foucault saw in the discourse of mental illness and the discourse of literature. Rather, Canguilhem likely referred to the "grand," "baroque" style that allowed Foucault to describe the experience of madness so eloquently. But his comment was prescient nonetheless, for it gave utterance to the quintessence of Foucault's work, that the discourse of mental illness was fundamentally a creation like any other literary creation. It was this aspect of Foucault's work that Blanchot understood, and amplified in "L'oubli, la déraison."

Blanchot's review of *Folie et déraison* simultaneously accomplished two things. On the one hand it responded to Foucault's book, and generated a discussion between them. But on the other hand, "L'Oubli, la déraison," was also the site of Blanchot's return to his own corpus, and it was where he made a significant revision. After reading *Folie et déraison*, Blanchot surveyed his work from the 1950s, and attributed a new significance to it, which had been present only in a latent form. The *œuvre* no longer simply referred to the work of art. The *œuvre* now referred to all of human reality. In

this way Blanchot defined his position vis à vis structuralism. Structuralism held that structures could be understood by tracing their pieces, and explaining how they defined and shaped particular aspects human experience *a priori*: of madness, for example. Blanchot and Foucault argued that this was not enough to understand the way that people lived and inhabited structures. For Blanchot and Foucault, people lived in structures diachronically, perpetually forgetting that they were nothing more than "[lining] up a few words side by side," and perpetually putting false origins to those structures: physicians with scientific method, the author with special insight into the world. Indeed, Blanchot and Foucault argued that structures could only be lived as realities when one forgot their real origins, and believed in the origin myth offered by the structure. They went even further, in suggesting that people should admit the existence of structures, and try to live in them *qua* structure: that is, people should accept the essential fiction of the world, and accept that the world could exist only as fiction. In order to accomplish this, Blanchot and Foucault offered new origin myths. In order to live the discourse of mental illness as a fiction with the status of reality, Foucault offered the myth of the ship of fools, and in order to live the discourse of literature as a fiction that had the status of reality, Blanchot offered the myth of Orpheus' gaze.

For Blanchot and Foucault these myths separated the unlivable reality of structures as "a few words side by side," from the livable fiction of words rent by lightning, as Blanchot suggested in *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* Quoting Mallarmé, Blanchot wrote: "when [words] cease they finally present themselves: ("*at that instant they shine there and die in a swift efflorescence upon some transparency like*

ether"), "*a lightning moment*," "*a dazzling burst of light*.""[445] Words cease to exist as "a few words side by side" when they are accepted as actual beings. Blanchot argued that the moment when words are taken as Being is the "lightning moment" when structures become reality. That is, the myths of the ship of fools and the gaze of Orpheus were words rent by lightning.

[445] "Lorsqu'ils cessent, se présente ("*l'instant qu'ils y brillent et meurent dans une fleur rapide sur quelque transparence comme d'éther"*), "*moment de foudre*", "*éclat fulgurant*". Blanchot, "Mallarmé et l'éxpérience littéraire," 587.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to imagine a French thinker more firmly entrenched in textual engagement, and more firmly opposed to Sartrean commitment, that Jacques Derrida. In many ways Derrida's deconstruction epitomized the mode of textual engagement developed by Blanchot. Yet, in 1996, in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of *Les Temps modernes*, Derrida admitted the silent role that Sartre and *Les Temps modernes* played in his intellectual life:

> Nothing is more unstable, cleft, divided, antinomic than my friendship for what I would call Sartre and *Les Temps modernes*, and this instability would have been one of the most often traces of the *T.M.*, of the "epoch" of the *T.M.* in my life, nearly my whole life. Without doubt, with many other "intellectuals of my generation," as is said, I am, I should have been, that which will not have been and that which has been without the *T.M.*: I + *T.M.*, in two words.[446]

How to account for this unexpected admission from Derrida? This question might be answered more easily if it is re-formulated in a slightly different way: What was the relationship of textual engagement to Sartrean commitment? Derrida seemed to imply that Sartrean commitment was the necessary pre-condition of textual engagement – necessary precisely because commitment needed to be silenced, excluded, or moved beyond, in order for textual engagement to become possible. Textual engagement could never have emerged *sui generis*, and so it always carried its ancestor's imprint like a birthmark that could be acknowledged only fifty years after the fact. The history of

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[446] "Rien n'est plus instable, divisé, partagé, antinomique que mon amitié pour quoi que ce soit qu'on appelle Sartre et *Les Temps Modernes*, et cette instabilité aura été une des traces des *T.M.*, de l'"époque" des *T.M.* dans ma vie, presque toute ma vie, le plus souvent. Sans doute avec tant d'autres "intellectuels de ma génération," comme on dit, je suis, j'aurai été cela, ce qui n'aura pas été ce qu'il a été sans les *T.M.*: Je + *T.M.*, en deux mots." Jacques Derrida, "'Il Courait mort': Salut, Salut," *Les Temps modernes* 587 (March, April, May 1996): 14.

French theory based on textual engagement – the "intellectuals of my generation," as Derrida put it – was the history of the move beyond commitment.

This dissertation examined the history of the move beyond Sartrean commitment to textual engagement in French intellectual culture. The history of intellectual engagement in politics in France predated Sartrean commitment, beginning at least with the politicization of intellectuals that occurred during the Dreyfus affair, and perhaps even the pre-revolutionary *philosophes* such as Voltaire and Rousseau. In the twentieth century the field of engaged intellectuals was split between the left and the right, each enjoying an equal amount of prestige and respectability. After World War II however, the right was discredited by its association with the occupation and the Vichy regime, and the field of intellectual engagement came to be dominated entirely by the left. At the time, it seemed necessary to remake the intellectual and cultural foundations of France and French identity from the ground up, after the corrupting and polluting influence of the Vichy regime and collaboration. But this effort went far beyond simple reconstruction. French intellectual culture undertook to completely reinvent the ideals of political community around which the new French national identity would be based. Many French intellectuals experienced the liberation and the postwar reconstruction as a full-scale revolution. It was in this atmosphere that Sartre first articulated his theory of commitment in the opening issue of his journal, *Les Temps modernes*.

At the same time, the immediate postwar years witnessed the beginning of the cold war. While France was never at stake politically between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was an important cultural and intellectual front in the cold war.

Typically, intellectual historians have seen Sartrean commitment in this context, as supporting global communism in its battle against global capital. Tony Judt, an intellectual historian, argues that French intellectuals only abandoned commitment after the crimes that the Soviet Union had committed in the gulags and during the repression of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 became widely known. Before 1956, Judt argues, the only challenges to commitment came from moderate, and even conservative voices among the French intelligentsia. The implication of this argument is that there were no radical leftist challenges to commitment, and that after 1956 French intellectuals all but abandoned the radicalism of the immediate postwar years.

This dissertation restores commitment to its original context, the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals that immediately followed the liberation of France in 1944. Seen in this light, it is clear that there were significant challenges to Sartrean commitment voiced by equally radical French intellectuals. During the purge, intellectuals like Paulhan and Blanchot critiqued the legitimacy of commitment's demand that collaborationist writers be purged, on the grounds that the nature of language prevented any legal decision over whether or not writing could be judged to have collaborated. Furthermore, Paulhan and Blanchot showed that commitment's attempt to create political change through writing also foundered on a mistaken understanding of the nature of language. For Paulhan and Blanchot, no clear distinction between language and politics existed. One could not commit to changing politics through language, since language itself constituted the political. If one were to commit, they argued, one would have to commit to language itself. Paulhan and Blanchot's critique of commitment was

completed during the war in Algeria, when Blanchot and Camus demonstrated commitment's hypocritical ethics, and developed an alternative mode of intellectual engagement in politics through the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie." Ultimately, commitment was not abandoned because French intellectuals realized the folly of their radicalism, and the hypocrisy of supporting the Soviet Union, as Judt suggests. Rather, commitment was evaluated, dismissed, and surpassed because French intellectuals found it to be inadequate to meet the challenges posed by the political crises of the postwar era.

The history of the move beyond commitment is especially significant to the American academy today, because so much contemporary scholarship in the humanities employs concepts that were originally articulated in French theory. This is even more true of American scholarship that claims to derive political significance from its use of French theory. Without diminishing the important contributions made by such scholarship, this dissertation shows that French theory's political significance issued not only from the theory itself, but also from French theory's engagement in particular political events in postwar French history. In specific, French theory's adequation of language and politics grew out of the engagement in the postwar purge of writers and intellectuals, and the war in Algeria. To some extent, these events still reside in the concept of discourse as productive of subjectivity and experience – a concept which continues to provide a political edge to a wide variety of scholarship in the American humanities.

By ignoring the history of the move beyond commitment, scholars in the humanities have deprived themselves of some of French theory's most powerful and wide-ranging political implications. In specific, American scholars have passed by Blanchot's promotion of a mode of intellectual engagement based on self-reflexivity. During the postwar purge, and the war in Algeria, Blanchot advocated for intellectuals to recognize the limitations of engaging in the linguistic construction of the world. Blanchot did not think that French intellectuals needed to abandon the project of engagement altogether. But he did argue that French intellectuals needed to take cognizance of what engagement was actually capable of doing. In his view, one could engage in the linguistically constructed world, but one had to abandon any pretense to sovereignty. This meant that any intellectual engagement that intervened in the linguistic construction of the world could not pretend to exert control over the world. It was precisely control that the linguistic nature of the world prevented. One could create for political change – as Sartre tried and failed to do during the postwar purge – but one had to allow oneself to be swept away by that very change. One could establish new ethical laws – as the "Déclaration" did during the war in Algeria – but one had to submit to the law oneself. Blanchot and Foucault established their mode of textual engagement on the basis of the self-reflexivity that emerged out of the purge, and the war in Algeria. To Blanchot and Foucault, textual engagement was not capable of undoing the linguistic construction of the world. Rather, it was capable only of altering one's relationship to the linguistic constructions with which one interacted. It was not enough simply to try to do

good, as Sartre did. For Blanchot and Foucault, it was also necessary to self-reflexively take the limitations of operating in a linguistically constructed world into account.

This dissertation also addressed a second issue of contemporary relevance, which is the history of French theory. The operating assumption of this project is that the history of French theory is valuable because it provides context for a group of thinkers whose reception in the United States has sorely lacked that very thing. Some might argue that the portmanteau of French theory is too broad and diffuse to be of any analytic value whatsoever. The differences between existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis (to name but a few schools of French thought) are too great to be reconciled in a single category, let alone the differences between individual thinkers. Historians who research the history of French theory draw scorn from France itself, where intellectual historians object that French theory is an American neologism unsuitable to the reality of French intellectual life. But the reality of French intellectual life is that at no point in the postwar period were any French theorists not in conversation with each other. Their work was always the product of discussions, debates, and battles with each other, and with the current events of the day. No single French theory was created in isolation, and the term French theory helps the intellectual historian to re-establish the lines of communication between thinkers by offering a generic category of analysis. In short, the history of French theory helps to show the connections between theories and theorists that are quashed when the divisions between schools of thought, and between individual thinkers are drawn too rigidly.

Moreover, the history of French theory is useful because it demonstrates that the olympian thinkers grouped under this category were also living, breathing human beings. By treating French theorists as ordinary people, the history of French theory shows that their ideas are not timeless or universal. Rather, they were ideas – especially insightful ideas, to be sure – that emerged out of French history and out of the lives of their creators. It is important to study French theory within the disciplinary conventions of history, where the imperative placed on context and narrative helps to account for the genesis of French theory without descending into biographical anecdote.

The history of French theory also shows that French theory mattered beyond the confines of the elite intellectual circle that has become familiar in the United States. By adopting the general category of French theory, and placing it in the context of the political history of postwar France, this dissertation shows that French theory was a significant factor in French society and politics. In specific, chapter two of this dissertation demonstrated how French intellectuals became involved in a showdown with the French state over the war in Algeria. Their protest of the French involvement in the war was not simply a knee-jerk reaction to the atrocities of French imperialism. Rather, the "Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie" was inspired by French theory both in its form, and in its content. The "Déclaration" directly challenged the sovereignty of the state, and established a space for ethical action outside the state's legal purview. Precisely because of its theoretical form and content, the French state was unable to react to the "Déclaration," eventually dropping all charges against the manifesto's signatories, and exposing the limits of the state's sovereignty over its

subjects. The "Déclaration" was one of several well-publicized affairs that galvanized French opinion against the war, and led to the Évian Accords, the cease-fire agreement that ended the war. In this way, French theory – through its manifestation in the "Déclaration" – exerted a positive influence on the end of the war in Algeria, and the termination of the French Empire.

The history of the "Déclaration," and the history of the move beyond commitment in general, demonstrates that it is necessary to revise the standards by which the larger historical significance of French theory is judged. It is no longer possible to judge the historical significance of French theory based solely on its social influence, that is, by asking how many people actually read French theory. French theory influenced postwar society and politics in more ways than simply affecting the national mentalité. It is necessary to remove some of the disciplinary blinders that have impeded its reception until now in order to chart the ways in which French theory actually affected postwar France. To see how theoretical reflections on the work of Sade, for instance, became significant to the postwar purge of collaborators, it is necessary to see the two as coextensive. Likewise, in order to see how theory had an impact on the war in Algeria, it is necessary to see how theoretical reflection on the myth of Don Juan influenced the protest of the war. Only a historical view, with its careful attention to context is capable of attending to the multiple registers in which French theory circulated in the postwar period.

Lastly, the history of the move beyond commitment shows that the battles that French intellectuals fought offer a useful site of reflection in which to reconsider

contemporary intellectual engagement. It is useful because it demonstrates that there were then, and are now more options to the engaged intellectual than radicalism and conservativism, more kinds of intellectual production than just politicized writing and apolitical writing. Blanchot's lesson goes beyond cautioning engaged intellectuals to be vigilantly self-reflexive. Blanchot's lesson is also that engagement itself is something that requires deep self-reflexivity, not just so that one avoids the pitfalls of Sartrean commitment, but also so that one's intellectual engagements are effective.

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