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MAURICE BLANCHOT: AVANT-GARDE ICON OR OBSCURE AUTHORITARIAN?

How thirty years of controversy have stifled debate

RELIEF 9 (2), 2015 – ISSN: 1873-5045. P 51-65

<http://www.revue-relief.org>

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18352/relief.916>

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Controversy has surrounded Maurice Blanchot from the 1980s to today. Whilst claims of excessive formalism, obscurity and radicalism were often levelled at his generation, the Blanchot controversy has been sustained by the failure of critics to dispassionately appraise his 1930s political commitments. However, recent interventions by Jean-Luc Nancy, Michel Surya and *Lignes* could end thirty years of stifled debate.

Maurice Blanchot was one of his generation's most significant writers. He profoundly influenced French thought and, despite his famous seclusion, was often politically engaged. Yet controversies surrounding Blanchot still abound, from denigrations of his work as obscurely pretentious to claims that he was a fascistic anti-Semite. Whilst these polemic debates erupted in the 1980s, Blanchot still provokes heated responses today. Henri De Monvallier and Nicolas Rousseau recently caricatured Blanchot's work as an intellectual imposture, whilst the *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot* is repeatedly accused of downplaying Blanchot's 1930s affiliation to the extreme-right.

This article explores the main sources of controversy surrounding Blanchot: the dominance and subsequent marginalisation of the 1968 generation; Blanchot's association with extreme-right activists in the 1930s; and his cultivation of a group of committed defenders. It argues that these recurrent controversies have prevented an objective analysis of aspects of Blanchot's life and work. Yet since 2011 Blanchot's 'friends' - Michel Surya, Jean-Luc Nancy and the review *Lignes* - have made efforts to clarify both Blanchot's politics and the significance of enigmatic works such as *La*

Communauté inavouable. Though Nancy's and Surya's interventions are also controversial, they have advanced scholarly debate and created a platform for future discussion.

Blanchot and Generation '68

Monvallier and Rousseau's *Blanchot L'Obscur* is characteristic of the aggressive reactions Blanchot still provokes. Yet despite the authors' insistence that they undertake a detailed reading of Blanchot's *œuvre*, their many citations superficially characterise Blanchot's work as senseless and obscure rather than substantially engaging with his thought. Here, rather than defending Blanchot's texts (a task left to the detailed body of Blanchot scholarship), I wish instead to historicise their arguments. Introducing *Blanchot L'Obscur*, Michel Onfray suggests that the book represents the dawning of "un nouveau style [...] une nouvelle génération" (11). However, Monvallier and Rousseau's arguments largely repeat the debates instigated in the 1980s, representing the continuation of a controversy now thirty years old.

Monvallier and Rousseau's complaints are broadly moral, aesthetic and philosophical. Firstly, in emphasising Blanchot's fascination with death (129), his obsessions with violence, revolution and Sade (131), and his friends' penchants for frequenting brothels (171), they imply that Blanchot was a subversive character. Blanchot's degeneracy is blamed on his poor physical health: "ce corps malade produit inévitablement une pensée malade" (42). Mentally and physically ill, pathologically of dubious morality, Blanchot is deemed unsuitable for those of sound mind. As documented by Michel Surya in *Lignes*, this kind of morally motivated criticism became frequent in the 1980s as part of a backlash against the transgressive 1960s and a renewed desire for moral norms and social stability. The principal question here is the social role of literature: Surya criticised Tzvetan Todorov, amongst others, for demanding that the aesthetically beautiful and morally good coincide, a stance requiring art to conform to certain social and moral norms (1991, 113); for Blanchot's generation, literature was instead a means of exploring conceptual and experiential limits, a space therefore undermining norms. As a result, morally castigating such 'immoral' works is a very limited critical act: it raises questions as to the kind of society one wants to live in, but says little about the aesthetic and intellectual value of literature.

Blanchot becomes, therefore, representative of his generation's amorality. Similarly, for Monvallier and Rousseau his fiction is also paradigmatic of the 1960s formalistic excess, "une fascination modern (ou postmoderne) pour le vide, la raréfaction et l'effacement" (202). They negatively associate Blanchot with the *nouveau roman* and visual artists such as Malevich in a repeat of the 1990s controversy surrounding contemporary art. Then, Jean Molino and Jean-Philippe Domecq had disparaged an entire lineage of artistic modernity from Baudelaire and Picasso, through Duchamp to Christian Boltanski, pleading instead for a return to linear narratives and mimetic representation.¹ Georges Didi-Huberman (1994) described these criticisms as motivated by *ressentiment*, a moral disgust for experimental works which did nothing to evaluate their aesthetic and intellectual value. Likewise, Monvallier and Rousseau do not explain *why* Blanchot's formalism was so pronounced or influential: they simply deplore that it was.

However, what irritates Monvallier and Rousseau most is not Blanchot's fiction, but his subsequent consecration as a philosopher (149). They therefore set out to show "comment et pourquoi [la pensée de Blanchot] ne peut déboucher que sur une forme élégante et raffinée d'irrationalisme" (30). Their chief complaint is Blanchot's stylistic obscurity, his use of dense mythological imagery, circuitous logic and contradictory phrases. To an extent, all readers of Blanchot can agree: his texts *are* difficult to parse, and as we will see even adept critics such as Jean-Luc Nancy found *La Communauté inavouable* notoriously enigmatic. Yet since critics such as Leslie Hill, Michael Holland and Timothy Clark have succeeded in producing lucid accounts of Blanchot's thought, especially his relationship to existentialism, it is clear that his work is not lacking in substance. Blanchot's profound influence on Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and the belated reception of Emmanuel Levinas also testifies to his conceptual fecundity. Yet it is precisely Blanchot's association with phenomenology, structuralism and Heideggerianism that is problematic for Monvallier and Rousseau, who describe them as "les trois grands obscurantismes du XXe siècle" (108). Whilst Blanchot remains their key target, Foucault, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Sartre, Barthes, Lacan, Deleuze, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe are all cited in *Blanchot L'Obscur* as similarly overrated thinkers. Blanchot is thus once again associated with his generation, a generation apparently unable to express itself clearly (17). Therefore, although there is some cursory discussion of Blanchot's thought (focusing on the concept of the *neutre*), Monvallier and Rousseau's argument functions principally by denigrating the entire legacy of what has variously been called 'French Theory', (post-)structuralism or *la pensée* 68.

The rise and fall of *la pensée 68* has been well documented by François Cusset and Gérard Noiriel. The 'textual terrorism' of *Critique* and *Tel Quel* made thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault and Blanchot internationally famous in the 1960s, yet by the late 1970s the 'new philosophers' accused structuralism of nihilism and moral relativism, spearheading a return to humanist and Enlightenment values. Characterising the political radicalism of the 1960s as totalitarian, *Esprit*, *Commentaire* and *Le Débat* fostered a renewed interest in democratic liberalism, abandoning Marxism and polemic debate for a reasoned consensus. Yet this consensus was itself confrontational, Pierre Nora launching *Le Débat* by asserting that it was necessary to destroy the intellectual climate of *la pensée 68* to normalise French thought (12). Aggressive attacks on the structuralist generation became common, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut's *La Pensée 68* demanding the abandonment of 'anti-humanism' for a return to rational humanism and a political philosophy guided by social and moral norms.

This mainly French controversy was internationalised through works such as Jürgen Habermas' *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Habermas' approach is useful as it most clearly explains both this hostility to *la pensée 68*, and also the moral and aesthetic qualms Monvillier and Rousseau have about Blanchot. In Habermas' conception of modernity, contemporary civilisation relies upon the separation of different discursive spheres: the cognitive (science), aesthetic (art), and juridico-moral (social norms) realms are now autonomous, and anything threatening the distinction between pure reason, practical reason and aesthetic judgement undermines modern civilisation (Norris, 65). Public debates about social organisation should be rationally argued in a clear, communicative manner to foster the consensual establishment of moral and legal norms. Art, as an ambiguous and disruptive force, should not interfere in public life. Blanchot's generation were clearly the antithesis of such a stance: they revelled in the breaking of social and moral conventions; their jargon-laden theoretical texts promoted radical novelty over consensus; and they undermined the distinctions between literature and philosophy, formally experimenting with all genres.

Writers have been subverting norms for centuries. What was problematic about 'French Theory' for Habermas was that this specialised discourse expanded its influence "to a point where it command[ed] the whole field of communicative action" (Norris, 55). In the 1980s, the influence of Derrida and company pervaded many international Humanities departments, also impacting on the social sciences. With Blanchot and Derrida's emphasis on radical textuality, Habermas complained that 'all genre distinctions are

submerged in one comprehensive, all-embracing context of texts' (Habermas cited in Thomassen, 17). This levelling of genre distinctions made rational argumentation impossible, as scientific, legal or philosophical texts become fictions without any truth content. Derrida responded that he had not really reduced "logic to rhetoric" or "the concept to metaphor"; whilst deconstruction had destabilised genre distinctions, it had not levelled them entirely (cited in Thomassen, 41). For Derrida and Blanchot, texts can contain "both literary value" and "philosophic cogency" (Norris, 65). Yet this destabilising of Western thought and civilizational norms was precisely the goal of many thinkers of this generation, and so confrontational clashes between these two critical groups became inevitable.

International controversy began, therefore, to dog 'French Theory'. Derrida, one of Blanchot's biggest champions, fought particularly hard to maintain his position in an increasingly hostile intellectual climate. He became "a polarizing figure, admired to the point of adulation by his fans but denounced as a charlatan by his adversaries" (Hazareesingh, 209). He courted controversy, and in doing so generated hostility. Just as in France, American universities in the 1980s and 1990s became divided into distinct critical blocks of those vigorously defending Derrida, Blanchot and company, and their liberal, conservative opponents who complained of French thinkers "storming the ramparts" (Wolin 2004, 9). Further controversy erupted in the UK when, in 1992, analytical philosophers attempted to prevent Derrida from receiving an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University as his work was insufficiently rigorous. Evidence that this controversy continued in France up until the new millennium can be found in the debate surrounding the International College of Philosophy. Set up by Derrida, François Châtelet, Jean-Pierre Faye and Dominique Lecourt in 1983 to teach forms of philosophy that were marginalised in the Academy, the College was seen by critics as a bastion of *la pensée 68*. Therefore in *Le Débat's* 1998 dossier, 'Que faire du Collège international de philosophie?', it was criticised as a nepotistic institution misusing public funds, but above all Alain Renaut lambasted it for privileging the 'French Theory' adored by American 'amateurs' yet not taken seriously by French philosophers (144). Issue 35 of *Lignes* provided a robust response, with a familiar cast of Derrida, Michel Deguy and Françoise Proust all defending the intellectual legacy of *la pensée 68* against *Le Débat*.

Maurice Blanchot played a key role in the development of Derrida's thought. He therefore became embroiled in this intellectual controversy and was subject to attacks by opponents of *la pensée 68* in France and abroad. With their claims regarding Blanchot's irrational lack of clarity, excessive formalism

and dubious morality, Monvillier and Rousseau ally themselves with Habermas, Ferry and Renaut and perpetuate this longstanding controversy. The perplexing question remains: why now? Since the turn of the millennium, on both sides of the Atlantic 'French Theory' is no longer anywhere near as influential as it once was. Most of its principal exponents have passed away, and in later life even Derrida and Habermas made peace and discovered they had much common ground. The excessive formalism of the 1960s has given way to a more commercial literary style and, although the legacy of May '68 is still often denigrated by French politicians, the social liberalisation it ushered in has become the new norm. Why, then, resurrect the largely moribund debates of the 1980s? Monvillier and Rousseau seem irritated that Blanchot remains part of the national curriculum, complaining that they had to buy both *L'Espace littéraire* and *Le Livre à venir* for their *khâgne* classes (33). A more likely reason is their desire to exploit a popular genre pioneered by the 'new philosophers': the polemic slaying of the master thinkers of a previous generations. Blanchot had yet to be the victim of such a volume, and so by setting him up as a straw man, they are able generate controversial publicity by producing what Michel Onfray celebrates as "un jeu de massacre" (11). Yet if the debate surrounding *la pensée 68* has largely come to a close, there is still a very live debate concerning Blanchot in particular: the reaction to a perceived cover-up related to his political affiliations in the 1930s. It is to this that we now turn.

Blanchot: fascist, non-conformist, anti-Semite?

The polarisation of critical blocks surrounding *la pensée 68* was intensified by Victor Farías' *Heidegger et le nazisme*. Whilst Heidegger's affiliation to the Nazi party was known in academic circles, Farías' book revealed the controversy to a public outraged by the concealment of this knowledge. As Derrida, Nancy and Blanchot had been heavily influenced by Heidegger, detractors now argued that 'French Theory' could "hardly seem an entirely innocent affair" (Wolin 1993, 275). The situation was exacerbated when Paul de Man, an American critic close to Derrida, was similarly discovered to have written anti-Semitic articles in the 1940s. Derrida's response was largely seen as overly apologetic, further fuelling suspicions of a cover-up. Books exploiting the controversy to associate *la pensée 68* to fascism multiplied, from Wolin's *The Seduction of Unreason* to Ferry and Renaut's *Heidegger et les modernes*.

The scandal inevitably engulfed other French thinkers who had previously held dubious political affiliations. Rumours circulated that Blanchot had also written for newspapers of the extreme-right throughout the

1930s. Eugen Weber's *Action française* and Loubet del Bayle's *Les Non-conformistes des années 30* had tentatively inscribed Blanchot within right-wing milieus. In 1976, *Gramma* reproduced a few of Blanchot's pre-war articles and attempted to establish a bibliography of his journalistic texts. By the 1980s, then, it gradually became known that Blanchot had contributed to far-right newspapers such as *Combat* and *Le Rempart*. From 1937-38, he was the principal editor and one of the financial backers of *L'Insurgé*, a paper frequently containing anti-Semitic cartoons and violent rhetoric for which the editorial board was arrested. Yet even when the first Blanchot biographies (by Christophe Bident and Philippe Mesnard) appeared in the mid-1990s, the full extent of Blanchot's activities remained unclear. Whilst it was commonly assumed that Blanchot stopped writing political texts for the far-right in 1938, in 2011 David Uhrig revealed that in 1940 Blanchot had publicly supported Vichy and actively militated for full powers to be granted to Maréchal Pétain (137).

Until then, the absence of concrete facts fuelled a climate of suspicion. Jean-Michel Rabaté argued that to end the controversy all of Blanchot's journalistic texts should be republished: "Blanchot n'a pas vraiment à rougir de son passé" (921). Yet if not embarrassed, Blanchot was certainly loathe to expose the full details of his past. In letters to critics (Jeffrey Mehlman) and friends (Roger Laporte), and in his preface to Dionys Mascolo's *À la recherche d'un communisme de pensée*, Blanchot's accounts of his past have since been described as full of "atténuations, euphémisations, défaussements" (Surya 2015, 34). Claims that he was closer to Jean Paulhan than Drieu La Rochelle, that he worked for Jeune France only use the Vichy regime against Vichy, and that anti-Semitic comments were inserted into his articles by others, have not stood up to scrutiny. When coupled with Blanchot's public reticence and his assertions in favour of the self-effacement of the author, these evasive accounts accentuated the impression that he was whitewashing his past.

Hostile critics exploited the controversy to attack 'French Theory'. Jeffrey Mehlman's *Legacies of Anti-Semitism* not only labelled Blanchot anti-Semitic, but also implicated a "Foucault-Glucksmann nexus" (18) of French thinkers with fascistic tendencies. Daniel Lindenbergs's *Les Années souterraines* used Blanchot's past to tarnish both *Critique* and structuralism as dangerously nihilistic (271). Those friendly to Blanchot were thus placed in a difficult position. They realised that there was much in Blanchot's past they could not support, but the extent to which Blanchot's post-war writing was also implicated was unclear, and a nuanced public discussion was difficult in such a polemic climate. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe tried to edit

an issue of *Cahiers de L'Herne* devoted to Blanchot's politics in 1984, but the project stumbled as Blanchot's friends were reluctant to add to the voices attacking him. A projected issue of *Lignes* also stalled, eventually appearing in 2014. Nancy remembers feeling silenced by the vociferous manner in which Blanchot was being denounced (2014b, 155). Surya also states that two opposing fronts had been created, and *Lignes* had naturally belonged to Blanchot's side "qui a trop longtemps protégé ce qui n'aurait pas dû l'être" (2015, 17). Thus critical debate was stymied: those who discussed Blanchot's past either already held grudges against Blanchot or did so to de-legitimize *la pensée 68*; those friendly to Blanchot felt silenced by the controversy.

Blanchot's actions in the 1930s were not the whole story. It was generally accepted that Blanchot left the war a changed man, though what prompted his political conversion (his friendship with Georges Bataille, a process of ethical maturation through writing, or the revelations of the horrific extent of the Holocaust) is still undetermined. One option open to friendly critics was to highlight Blanchot's more laudable post-war engagements, from his opposition to the Algerian war to his participation in May '68. Special issues of *Lignes* in the 1990s thus focused on Blanchot's post-war left-wing engagement, followed by the publication of his *Écrits politiques*. These important publications documented significant acts of intellectual engagement that had, up to then, been forgotten. However, they also fuelled speculation that Blanchot's friends were unwilling to confront his past. Steven Ungar charitably assumed that Surya was 'presumably unaware' of Blanchot's 1930s politics (xviii); Philippe Mesnard instead described Blanchot as being protected by "un système de défense amicale" (38). The same critical blocks for and against *la pensée 68* were even more crystallised and tense surrounding the sensitive issue of Blanchot's past. Whilst the polemics surrounding 'French Theory' faded in the new millennium, the suspicion that the Blanchot controversy has never been fully resolved has kept hostility alive.

This is significant because many critical discussions of Blanchot still revolve obsessively around the thorny issue of his political past. For example, whilst reviewing Christopher Fynsk's *Last Steps* in 2015, Jeffrey Mehlman once again points out that Fynsk and company 'have made it their business to write off [Blanchot's] occasional pre-war lapses into anti-Semitism [...] as ultimately irrelevant' (2). Mehlman names Hill, Fynsk, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy and Surya as tireless in their 'loyalism with regard to the Blanchot-Derrida nexus' (3), and cites examples of Fynsk's continued resistance to fully acknowledge Blanchot's anti-Semitic writings. Subsequently, Mehlman devotes three out of four of the review's pages solely to the subject of Blanchot and politics. As a

result, the reader comes away with little of an idea of what Fynsk's book contains: the political controversy completely overshadows the scholarly work. Until Blanchot's supporters fully address Blanchot's past, his detractors will continue to use this reticence to discredit their accounts and stall critical debate.

Yet, as Mehlman notes, "the world of Blanchot's reception [...] is beginning to shift" (4). One of the institutions particularly criticised by Monvallier and Rousseau is the *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot*, founded by Monique Antelme, Danielle Cohen-Levinas and Michael Holland, which they describes as "une petite secte vouée à encenser leur dieu désormais à jamais absent" (180). The *Cahiers* first issue, in 2011, was largely celebratory and did not mention Blanchot's political past, yet the second issue in 2014 displays the schisms in Blanchot scholarship caused by Jean-Luc Nancy's muted assertion that anti-Semitic comments were present in Blanchot's writings. This issue was dedicated to Monique Antelme, one of Blanchot's closest friends who passed away in September 2012. In their tributes to her, Bident, Nancy and Surya all refer to the fact that she could not tolerate mentions of Blanchot's anti-Semitic texts. Under her stewardship, then, the *Cahiers* would have struggled to publish anything too condemnatory. Whilst accusatory works are still not necessary welcomed by the *Cahiers*, the discussion in the two issues of 2014 suggests that the embargo has at least now been lifted.

Of others singled out by Mehlman, since 2011 Surya, Nancy and *Lignes* have been much more openly critical. Surya's *Sainteté de Bataille* and *L'Autre Blanchot*, Nancy's *Passion politique* and *La Communauté désavouée*, and a 2014 issue of *Lignes*, have all treated Blanchot's political past. Much of the material in the *Lignes* issue was not factually new: Uhrig's article revealing Blanchot's support for Vichy in 1940 was first published in *H-France review* in 2011. However, statements by Surya, and criticisms of their previous stance by Uhrig, do amount to a *mea culpa* for the review's former participation in Blanchot's defence. Crucially, the issue shifts the debate away from what Blanchot *was* to what he *did*. Even when acknowledging that Blanchot's texts contained anti-Semitic comments, sympathisers have felt uneasy ascribing a deep-seated anti-Semitism to Blanchot, and Holland takes issue when he is glibly described as a fascist (159). Instead, focusing on his actions, what is clear is that *L'Insurgé* was the militant newspaper of an anti-Semitic milieu which Blanchot edited and financed. Anti-Semitism was its ideological lynchpin and, given that Blanchot's pieces in this publication fit within its overall political outlook, he clearly sat comfortably within such milieus. Rather than just journalists, those around *L'Insurgé* were an activist group

with a practical agenda, organising public meetings and demonstrations. There was also a real threat of physical violence behind Blanchot's words. In July 1936, *Combat* called for the assassination of Popular Front members, with Blanchot designating Albert Sarraut, Pierre-Étienne Flandin and Georges Mandel as desirable targets: Mandel was killed by a Vichy militia in 1944. Whether Blanchot was actually an anti-Semite, then, takes less precedence than the fact that he produced anti-Semitic texts within an active milieu that was arrested for encouraging violent conduct: regardless of his own ideological viewpoint, for François Brémond this is behaviour that is properly fascist (79).

Whilst the essays collected in *Lignes* allow for a greater deal of conceptual clarity with regards to Blanchot's activities in the 1930s, its publication was not without controversy. Michael Holland was surprised at Surya's aggressive stance towards Blanchot, seeing his text as "un acte de jugement moral" (150). This accusation of moralising is surprising given Surya's own frustration with the moralisation of literary criticism. Surya's tone is judgmental: Blanchot's claims that he was not anti-Semitic as he had Jewish friends are described as 'puerile' (2015, 19), and his taste for violent rhetoric 'immoderate' (76). Yet as Blanchot was especially severe regarding Heidegger's silence over his political past, whilst remaining taciturn over his own, Surya would argue that his uncompromising stance is justified. Surya's strategy throughout *L'Autre Blanchot* is to turn Blanchot's own high moral standards back onto his own behaviour: the result is certainly unforgiving, but not factually inaccurate, and such a harsh tone may be necessary to dispel years of cumulative suspicion and misinformation.

The failure of critics to dispassionately appraise Blanchot's political past has stymied debate for over thirty years. Whilst controversies surrounding *la pensée* 68 have died down, Blanchot will remain critically contentious for as long as his detractors feel that his past has been insufficiently exposed. Whilst the recent publications by *Lignes* were controversial, they have laid the groundwork for future discussion. And, as we shall see, Surya and Nancy have built on this new clarity to further elucidate the links between literature and politics in Blanchot's writing, the enigma of *La Communauté inavouable*, and the kind of personal authority that Blanchot has wielded over the years.

Right-Wing Anarchism

Nancy and Surya have relaunched the discussion over the relationship between writing and politics for Blanchot. In essence, Blanchot's literary output after the war holds no explicit relationship to fascism. Furthermore, his

post-war *œuvre* bears no traces of anti-Semitism, instead displaying a marked engagement with Judaic thought. However, though his fiction is largely apolitical, there are constant returns to political themes in other texts, many displaying the remnants of his former radicalism. In 1996, Mesnard had already noted the symmetry between Blanchot's 1930s and 1960s political texts (252). The most obvious similarity is the persistence of the word *refus*, which in the 1930s signalled Blanchot's growing intransigence and manic nationalism, for which there was no practical solution except for a revolution overthrowing the entire current order to purify France and begin anew. Initially, after the war, it seems as if Blanchot's use of the term *refus* to protest the return of Charles De Gaulle to power in 1958 has an entirely different quality:

Quand nous refusons, nous refusons par un mouvement sans mépris, sans exaltation, et anonyme, autant qu'il se peut, car le pouvoir de refuser ne s'accomplit pas par nous-mêmes, ni en notre seul nom, mais à partir d'un commencement très pauvre qui appartient d'abord à ceux qui ne peuvent pas parler (2003: 12).

Having seemingly learned from his former bellicose nationalism, the *refus* Blanchot is proffering here is far from the intransigence of old, but instead is an ethical plea for an open, non-exclusive solidarity on behalf of those who cannot protest themselves. This was a hallmark of his post-war politics, and heavily influenced Derrida. And yet in other post-war texts, his vehement hatred of De Gaulle, the rhetoric of violence, terror and revolution, and a continuing disdain for everyday society sometimes undermine this more ethical, pacified register. Blanchot's political extremism also returned, a fervour Surya describes as also enacting a "*suicide passionné de la pensée*" (2015, 81).

Furthermore, whilst the *refus* above was anonymously made on behalf of others, Surya and Nancy both note a telling slip in an interview discussing the 'Manifesto of the 121' in which Blanchot argued that he was speaking specifically "*en tant qu'écrivain*" (2003, 37). And, in documents for the aborted *Revue internationale*, again Blanchot describes literature as a fundamental experience and responsibility all of its own (55). Nancy emphasizes that Blanchot drew an aristocratic distinction between "*l'écrivain (la figure que Blanchot pense et veut incarner) et les autres intellectuels*" (2014b, 176). This is not new: from Zola to Sartre, writers have either implicitly or explicitly believed that their literary vocation gave them a unique insight into public affairs. Yet elsewhere Blanchot had declared that intellectuals should speak on

the behalf of others, stressing the effacement of the author rather than granting them a specific, personal authority.

In fact, Blanchot's famous public withdrawal accentuated his personal authority. The Romantic ideal of artistic genius had been adapted by the Surrealists into the "metaphorical criminal" or "outlaw" for whom madness and violence generated true art (Dean, 206); with Blanchot's generation, writers subjected themselves to (textual) violence, sacrificing their identity to a neutral space of authorless writing. Yet a residual Romanticism remains: through the author's sacrifice, the 'authenticity' remains in the text itself and its authority nevertheless still clings to the author's name. Purposefully or not, Blanchot cultivated this kind of authority. Critics refer to Blanchot's "acolytes" (Mehlman 2015, 3), and sympathisers agree that Blanchot saw literature as a quasi-divine task devoted to "la célébration secrète et superlative d'une parole toujours inouïe" (Nancy 2014a, 157). For some of Blanchot's readers, the author's reserve created a mythic aura surrounding him, and his almost religious emphasis on the role of literature granted his words a weighty authority.

That writers attract the adulation of fans is again nothing new. Yet Blanchot wielded his personal authority to impact how his texts were received, especially *La Communauté inavouable*. Critics as acute as Nancy have admitted finding this text both difficult to understand and intimidating (2014a, 16-17). Yet since 2011, Surya and Nancy have returned to this text to clarify its significance. Part of the problem was Blanchot's manipulation of Georges Bataille's thought in an attempt to make it compatible with Emmanuel Levinas. Whilst Blanchot presents the first section of *La Communauté inavouable* as a discussion of Bataille's intellectual legacy, Surya emphasises that Blanchot is extolling his own theory of community (2012, 95). Surya gives examples of where Blanchot misquotes or misreads Bataille: for example, in replacing 'semblable' with 'autrui' in Bataille's texts from the 1930s, instead of an account of sacrificial death as the violent act that drew a restricted community together, Blanchot instead implies that humankind's shared finitude binds us all in a radical community of ethical responsibility (101). In *La Communauté inavouable* Blanchot was both repudiating his radical politics of the 1930s and the 1960s, and embracing the ethical injunction of responsibility to others championed by Levinas. In a period in which both Blanchot and Bataille's political actions were coming under scrutiny, Surya argues that Blanchot is trying to make his and Bataille's thought coalesce with Levinas in order to whitewash both of their former radicalism (105). Yet Surya

argues that Bataille would have found Blanchot's ethical claims idealistic (100), and describes this mixture of Bataille and Levinas as insipid (103).

That Surya and Blanchot have different readings of Bataille is not controversial. However, both Surya and Nancy agree that Blanchot drew an additional authority for his reading by presenting himself as "l'ami par excellence de Bataille" (Nancy 2014a, 53). Surya argues that Blanchot has thus been seen as the definitive interpreter of Bataille, privileging his manipulation of Bataille and distorting subsequent scholarship (2012, 103). Nancy adds that he sensed a further reproof from Blanchot: that of being a philosopher, not a writer (2014a, 62). Therefore as both a friend of Bataille, and as a writer, Blanchot took a position of authority over other interpreters of Bataille, a stance Nancy found intimidating and which thwarted attempts to clearly interpret *La Communauté inavouable*.

In this enactment of personal authority, Nancy also sees an extension of Blanchot's former intransigent exceptionalism. Blanchot closes the first part of *La Communauté inavouable* by arguing that communities are regulated by either "le cœur ou la loi" (1983, 47). Subsequently, Blanchot pits the political demands of *le peuple* against the exclusive desires of a community of lovers (57). Blanchot argues that not only are the lovers' desires more important than the people's, but Levinas' ethics, the cornerstone of Blanchot's late thought, are *also* jettisoned in favour of "l'abandon passionnel" (Nancy 2014a, 139). Love becomes an exception above all law: "si la loi jamais ne peut faire cœur, le cœur en revanche peut faire loi au-delà de toute loi" (58). In a text which evokes both friendship as an ethical structure of open solidarity, and the immanent will of the people represented by May '68, Blanchot also cites an intractable force that trumps both, reducing the idea of community to the smallest possible unit: the couple. Nancy links this passionate intransigence to the *refus* of the 1930s and 1960s, a continuation of Blanchot's desire to exclude himself from society. Coupled with his aristocratic elevation of the writer, Nancy argues that this stance "est emporté par une méfiance envers le commun et la communauté – méfiance envers le vulgaire, le grégaire et le normatif" (2014a, 152). Blanchot's tendency to take an aristocratic position, rejecting all social norms for an extreme exceptionalism, is identified as a trait that traverses his writings from the 1930s to the 1980s. Nancy usefully describes this as a form of right-wing anarchism.

Unlike Surya, Nancy reserves judgement to some extent, asking how many of us are also affected by this impulse to reject merging our voices in communal political initiatives to retain our own, radical autonomous scepticism (131). However, that *La Communauté inavouable* is now seen to be

pervaded by Blanchot's aristocratic exceptionalism helps to explain the previous difficulty in interpreting it, as such an attitude runs completely counter to Blanchot's investment in the ethical imperative which also informs this text. The attachment of what Nancy all calls an 'ultra-politics' to Blanchot's accrued authority as a writer is troubling. It is not the same as his former proto-fascism, as it was not attached to a political project or accompanied by calls to violence. However, it was only by dispassionately appraising the pre-war period, and tracing these similar impulses in Blanchot's later work, that Nancy could identify this trait in *La Communauté inavouable*. Such a close reading, by a 'friend' of Blanchot, was virtually impossible whilst the polemic controversy surrounding Blanchot's past continued to impede debate.

We can see, therefore, that discussion of *La Communauté inavouable* has been stalled since its appearance thirty years ago. Blanchot's enigmatic prose, his conflation of different intellectual trajectories, and his intimidating personal authority all contributed to this impasse. As we have seen, however, controversy also split critics into two distinct and opposed groups, preventing a dispassionate debate over Blanchot's intellectual and political legacy. Whilst the battles over *la pensée 68* and the associated aesthetic formalism and moral subversions that raged in the 1980s and 1990s have largely died down, the heated debates surrounding Blanchot were sustained by the sentiment that his militant activism in the 1930s had not been adequately addressed. Since 2011 much progress has been made, and Nancy and Surya have provided a platform for future discussion. The controversy is sure to continue, as the contents page of the forthcoming volume of the *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot* advertise a long dossier devoted to Nancy's *La Communauté désavouée* and another response to Surya's *L'Autre Blanchot*: it is by no means certain that these texts will be warmly welcomed. Yet the conceptual clarity and progress made over the last four years will, surely, help to take the polemic sting out of Blanchot scholarship henceforth.

Notes

1. See articles by Jean Molino and Jean-Philippe Domecq in 'Quels critères d'appréciation esthétique aujourd'hui?' in *Esprit*, volumes 173, 179, 185 (1991- 92).

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