

Maurice Blanchot

The writings of French novelist and critic Maurice Blanchot (1907–) have been influenced by a broad spectrum of philosophical thought, including that of Hegel, Heidegger, and Levinas, as well as by the literary and poetic work of Hölderlin, Kafka, Rilke, and Mallarmé. Blanchot's literary *oeuvre* may be regarded as a sustained meditation on and encounter with the limits of writing, its possibilities and impossibilities. In philosophical terms, the being of

language and its relation to mortality is Blanchot's central concern. The theme of death appears as the enduring locus of his work, articulating the possible and impossible relations between the artist and writer as creator, and the work that comes to exceed its presumed author. The following selection from *The Space of Literature* (1955) reflects on the distance and "void" intrinsic to the communicative potential of the literary work.

The Space of Literature

Communication

What most threatens reading is this: the reader's reality, his personality, his immodesty, his stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads – a man who knows in general how to read. To read a poem is not to read yet another poem; it is not even to enter, via this poem, into the essence of poetry. The reading of a poem is the

poem itself, affirming itself in the reading as a work. It is the poem giving birth, in the space held open by the reader, to the reading that welcomes it; it is the poem becoming power to read, becoming communication opened between *power* and *impossibility*, between the power linked to the moment of reading and the impossibility linked to the moment of writing.

Communication of the work lies not in the fact that it has become communicable, through reading, to a reader. The work is itself communication. It is intimacy shared in struggle by reading's demand and writing's: by the work as form and measure, constituting itself as power, and the same work's measureless excess, tending toward impossibility. It

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is intimate strife shared moreover by the form where the work takes its shape and the limitlessness where it is all refusal, by the resolution which is the being of beginning and the indecision which is the being of beginning over. This violence lasts as long as the work is a work. It is violence that is never pacified, but it is also the calm of an accord; it is rivalry, and also the reconciliation – an understanding. But it breaks off as soon as it ceases to be the approach toward what rules out any understanding.

To read is thus not to obtain communication from the work, but to “make” the work communicate itself. And, if we may employ an inadequate image, to read is to be one of the two poles between which, through mutual attraction and repulsion, the illuminating violence of communication erupts – one of the two poles between which that event comes to pass and which it constitutes by the very passage. But of course this comparison is inadequate. At most it indicates that the antagonism, which in the work opposes its two moments, reading and writing (or, more exactly, which makes of the work a tension where its moments seem to oppose each other two by two), opens the work by means of this radical disjunction to the freedom of its communication. But we should not so simply represent this antagonism as that of fixed poles opposing each other like two powers determined once and for all, called reading and writing. It must at least be added that this antagonistic exaltation, which eventually takes the personified form of the reader and the author, has never ceased to develop in the course of the work’s genesis. Although, in the end, the work seems to have become a dialogue between two persons in whom two stabilized demands have been incarnated, this “dialogue” is primarily the more original combat of more indistinct demands, the torn intimacy of irreconcilable and inseparable moments which we call measure and measurelessness, form and infinitude, resolution and indecision. Beneath their successive oppositions, these moments steadily give reality to the same violence. To the violence, that is, of what tends to open and tends to close, tends to cohere in the contours of a clear figure that limits, and yet tends to err without end, to lose itself in an ever restless migration, that of the *other* night which never comes but comes back again. In this communication it is obscurity that must reveal itself and night that must dawn. This is revelation where nothing appears, but where concealment becomes appearance.

The Reader Yet to Come

It is sometimes said that every author writes in the presence of some reader or that he writes in order to be read. This is a rather careless way of speaking. One ought to say that the reader’s role, or that which will become, once the work is complete, the power or the possibility of reading, is already present, in changing forms, in the genesis of the work. To the extent that to write is to snatch oneself back from the impossibility where writing becomes possible, writing assumes the characteristics of reading’s demand, and the writer becomes the nascent intimacy of the still infinitely future reader. But it goes without saying that this power is nonetheless power to write, only because of the opposition to itself which it becomes in the experience of impossibility. There is not power on one side, impossibility on the other; there is no such clash of these contraries. There is, in the event of the fact of writing, the tension which, through the intimacy into which the writing gathers them, demands of the opposites what they are in their extreme opposition, but demands also that they come into their own by quitting themselves, by detaining each other together outside themselves in the restless unity of their common belonging. The power in question is power only by comparison with impossibility, the impossibility which is affirmed as power.

The writer, inasmuch as he remains a real person and believes himself to be this real person who is writing, also believes that he willingly shelters in himself the reader of what he writes. He feels within himself, vital and demanding, the role of the reader still to be born. And very often, through a usurpation which he barely escapes, it is the reader, prematurely and falsely engendered, who begins to write in him. (Hence, to give only a simplistic example, those choice passages, those fine phrases which come to the surface and which cannot be said to have been written, but only to be readable.) This illusion, as we can now understand, comes from the fact that the moments which prefigure reading’s demand pass through the writer in the course of the work’s genesis. But these moments must, precisely, fall outside of him when they are gathered together in the final decisiveness of the reading – in the liberty of the welcome and of the sojourn near the work which alone constitutes an authentic reading.

The writer can never read his work for the very same reason which gives him the illusion that he does. "He is," says René Char, "the genesis of being who projects and of a being who contains." But in order for the "being who contains" – the being who gives form and measure, the form-giver, the "Beginner" – to attain the ultimate metamorphosis which would turn him into "the reader," the finished work has to escape from him. It has to escape from the one who makes it, complete itself by putting him at a distance, culminate in this "distancing" which dispossesses him conclusively, this distancing which then, precisely, takes the form of the reading (and in which the reading takes form).

The moment when that which is glorified in the work *is* the work, when the work ceases in some way to have been made, to refer back to someone who made it, but gathers all the essence of the work in the fact that now there is a work – a beginning and initial decision – this moment which cancels the author is also the moment when, as the book opens to itself, the reading finds its origin in this opening.

Reading is born, therefore, at this moment when the work's distance from itself changes its sign. In the course of the book's genesis this "void" marked the work's unfinished quality, but also the intimacy of its progression, the first precipitous advances of the "being who projects." This emptiness changes its sign, and the reading is born at the moment when the distance of the work with respect to itself no longer indicates incompleteness but perfection, no longer signifies that the work is not yet done, but that it never needed to be done.

In general the reader, unlike the writer, naively feels superfluous. He does not think that he fashions the work. Even if the work overwhelms him, and all the more so if it becomes his sole concern, he feels that he does not exhaust it, that it remains altogether outside his most intimate approach. He does not penetrate it; it is free of him, and this freedom makes for the profundity of his relation to the work, the intimacy of his yes. But in this very yes, the work's freedom still keeps him at a distance. It re-establishes the distance which alone assures the freedom of the welcome and which is constantly reborn from the passion of the reading that abolishes it.

This distance is what perfects the work – if, that is, the reader keeps it pure, and inasmuch as it is, moreover, the measure of his intimacy with the work. For he is close to the work to the degree

that he recognizes it as a work regardless of him. By removing it from any author and from all consideration of having been made, this distance gives the work for what it is. And so it would seem that reading's effacement, which renders it innocent of the work's making and exempts it from this responsibility, is, for that very reason, nearer to the accomplished work, to the essence of its creation, than is the author who always believes himself to have made everything and created all.

Abhorrence of a Vacuum

But this *distance*, which evokes the yes of the finished work (given as complete in the moment when, for the movement that completed it, is substituted the affirmation that it is) – this distance of the work with respect to itself, to the reader, to the world's doings, to other works – this distance which, precisely, constitutes reading's innocence also defines its responsibility and its risk. It seems to be very difficult to preserve such an interval. Here the natural abhorrence of a vacuum is expressed in the need to fill it up with a judgment of value. The work is said to be good or bad with respect to morality, laws, various systems of values, etc. It is declared to be successful or not with respect to rules (very precarious at present) which may constitute instances of an aesthetic, that is to say the simple impressions of a more or less refined taste or of a more or less vigorous absence of taste. The work is judged to be rich or poor with respect to culture, which compares it to other works, which does or does not draw from it an increase in knowledge, which adds it to the national, to the human treasury or yet again sees in it only a pretext to talk or to teach.

It is possible that the more a work is esteemed, the more it is imperiled. For when it is designated as a good work, it is assigned a place on the side of the good which uses it, rendering it utilitarian. A work which is judged bad sometimes finds room in this judgment to preserve itself. It is put aside, condemned to the nether regions of libraries, or burned, or forgotten; but in a sense this exile, this disappearance in the midst of flames or in tepid forgetfulness also extends the proper distance of the work. It corresponds to the force of the work's remove. This does not mean that a century later the work will necessarily find the readers it lacked. Posterity is promised to no one, and no book would consider it a happy ending. The work does

not endure over the ages; it is. This being can inaugurate a new age, for it is an appeal to the beginning, recalling that nothing is affirmed except through the fecundity of an initial decisiveness. But the work's very coming to be is revealed by the flash of its disappearance at least as well as by the false light shed by survival from mere habit. The feeling that works escape time originates in the work's "distance," and expresses, by disguising it, the remove which always comes from the work's presence. Our impression that works are ageless expresses, by forgetting it, what makes the work always accede to presence for the first time in its reading – its unique reading, each time the first and each time the only.

The risk which this reading entails, however, is no mere matter of chance. If the work's "void," which is its presence to itself in its reading, is difficult to preserve, this is not only because it is in itself hard to sustain, but also because it remembers, as it were, the void which, in the course of the work's genesis, marked the incompleteness of the work and was the tension of its antagonistic moments. That is why reading draws whoever reads the work into the remembrance of that profound genesis. Not that the reader necessarily perceives afresh the manner in which the work was produced – not that he is in attendance at the real experience of its creation. But he partakes of the work as the unfolding of something in the making, the intimacy of the void which comes to be. If this progression takes on the aspect of a temporal unfolding, it founds the essence of the literary genre called the novel.

This kind of reading – this presence to the work as a genesis – changes, and thus produces the critical reading: the reader, now the specialist, interrogates the work in order to know how it was fashioned. He asks it the secrets and the conditions of its creation, and examines it closely to see whether it answers adequately to these conditions, etc. The reader, having become the specialist, becomes an author in reverse. The true reader does not rewrite the book, but he is apt to return, drawn by an imperceptible pull, toward the various prefigurations of the reader which have caused him to be present in advance at the hazardous experience of the book. It ceases, then, to appear necessary to him and again becomes a possibility among others. It regains the indecisiveness of something uncertain, something altogether still to be achieved. And the work thus regains its disquietude, the wealth of its indigence, the insecurity of

its void, while reading, joining in this disquietude and espousing this poverty, comes to resemble the desire, the anguish, and the levity of a movement of passion.

All these metamorphoses belong to the authentic essence of reading. Its task is to keep what we call the work's distance pure, but no less to keep it alive: to make it communicate with the work's intimacy, to keep this intimacy from congealing and protecting itself in the vain solitude of the ideal. The "vacuum" which, in the course of the work's genesis, belongs to the torn intimacy of the work, seems, in the end, to fall out of it. While opening it altogether to itself, rendering it absolutely present, the emptiness seems nevertheless to make of this presence the remove which preserves its approach, giving us the impression that the painting is always behind the painting and also that the poem, the temple, and the statue escape the vicissitudes of time, whose mark, however, they bear.

It is as if this divisive void which, in the course of the genesis, is now the abyss where the work subsides, now the soaring energy by which it comes to light, now that empty violence where everything repeats eternally but then again the search from which everything begins – it is as if this "distant interior," as Michaux calls it, passed, at the moment of completion, altogether outside, isolating the work, forming around it that halo of absence so characteristic of the presence of masterpieces, which is like their aura of glory and which shelters them beneath a veil of empty majesty, unexpressive indifference. Thus are works immobilized in a lifeless distance. Isolated, preserved by a void which is no longer a reading but a cult of admiration, they cease to be works. The work of art is never connected to repose, it has nothing to do with the tranquil certitude which makes masterpieces familiar; it does not take shelter in museums. In this sense it never is. And if, clumsily transposing the idea that it is not an object someone has perfected, we say of it that its perfection is everlasting, at least this reminds us that the work never ceases to be related to its origin: that the incessant experience of the origin is the condition of its being, and also that the antagonistic violence due to which it was, in the course of its genesis, the opposition of its contrary moments, is not just a feature of this genesis, but belongs to the character of agonistic struggle which is the character of the work's very being. The work is the *violent liberty* by which it is communicated, and by which the *origin*

– the empty and indecisive depth of the origin – is *communicated* through the work to form the brimming resolution, the definiteness of the beginning. That is why the work tends ever increasingly to manifest the experience of the work: the experience which is not exactly that of its creation and which is not that of its technical fashioning either. This experience leads the work ceaselessly back from the clarity of the beginning to the obscurity of the origin and subjects its brilliant apparition, the moment of its opening, to the disquietude of the dissimulation into which it withdraws.

The reading which takes form in the work's distance – the reading which is the form of this void and the moment when it seems to fall out of the work – must thus also be a profound return to its intimacy, to what seems its eternal birth. Reading is not an angel flying about the work and, with winged feet, making this sphere turn. It is not the look which from without, from behind the window, captures what is happening within a foreign world. It is connected to the life of the work. It is present at all the work's moments. It is one of them, and it is by turns and at the same time each of them. It is not only their remembrance, their ultimate transfiguration; it retains in itself everything that is really at stake in the work. That is why in the end it alone bears all the weight of communication.

The Work and History

It is not surprising then, that, strengthened by such intimacy, reading, incarnated in the reader, should naturally proceed to take over the work, wanting to “grasp” it, reducing and eliminating all distance from it. Nor is it surprising that reading should make of this distance, this sign of the work's completion, the principle of a new genesis: the realization of the work's historical destiny. In the world of culture, the work becomes the guarantor of truths and the repository of meaning. None of this is surprising; this movement is inevitable. But it does not simply mean that the artistic work follows the course of works in general and obeys the law that moves them through their successive transformations. For this movement is also encouraged by the work's own nature. It comes from the profound distance of the work from itself, the remove due to which it always escapes what it is – seems, for example, definitively finished and yet incomplete; seems, in the restlessness that steals it from every grasp, to enter into complicity with the in-

finite variations of becoming. The distance which puts the work beyond our reach and beyond time's – where it perishes in glorious immobility – also exposes it to all the contingencies of time, showing it ceaselessly in search of a new form, of another culmination, acquiescing in all the metamorphoses which, attaching it to history, seem to make of its remove the promise of an unlimited future.

Thus the reading which initially projected itself into the intimacy of the work, only to fall out of it the better to maintain it and to fix it in a monumental immobility, finally projects itself outside and makes of the work's intimate life something which can no longer be realized unless it is displayed in the world and filled with the world's life and with history's.

This transformation is produced to the extent that the “empty” movement takes on content, while the work, momentarily or definitively losing the force and the intimacy of its constant genesis, unfolds as a newborn world where values are at stake and where these values call for arbitration by some criterion or contribute to the advent of such a standard, such a truth.

So: that which, in the work, was communication of the work to itself, *the origin blossoming into a beginning*, becomes the communication of a given thing. That which, opening it, made the work the advent and the brilliance of what opens becomes an opened place, in the image of this world of stable things and in imitation of this subsisting reality where, from a need to subsist, we live. And that which had neither sense nor truth nor value, but in which everything seemed to take on sense, becomes the language which says true things, says false things, and which one reads for instruction, for increased self-knowledge, or to cultivate the mind.

Through this realization then, the work is realized outside of itself and also on the model of exterior things, at their invitation. Through this movement – determined, so to speak, by gravity – instead of being the force of the beginning, the work becomes a thing beginning. Instead of getting all its reality from the pure, contentless affirmation that it is, it becomes an enduring reality, containing many meanings which it acquires from the movement of time or which are perceived variously according to culture's forms and the exigencies of history. And through all this, through all that makes it graspable – makes of it no longer the being of the work but the work functioning in the productive fashion of works of the world – it puts itself at the reader's service. It takes part in the public dialogue. It expresses or it

refutes what is generally said; it consoles, it entertains, it bores, not by virtue of itself or by virtue of a relation with the void and the cutting edge of its being, but via its content, and then finally thanks to its reflection of the common language and the current truth. At this juncture what is read is surely no longer the work; rather, these are the thoughts of everyone rethought, our common habits rendered more habitual still, everyday routines continuing to weave the fabric of our days. And this movement is in itself very important, one which it is not fitting to discredit. But neither the work of art nor its reading is present here.

This transformation is not definitive; it is not even an evil or a good for the work. Disappearance, even when it is disguised as useful presence, belongs to the work's essence; and we should add that it is also related to the dialectic of art. This movement leads from the hymn – where the work, art, and the world are absent – to the work where men and the world seek to make themselves present, and from there to the work where the very experience of the work – art, the communication of the origin as a beginning – is affirmed in a presence which is also disappearance.

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It is sometimes said regretfully that the work of art will never again speak the language it spoke when it was born, the language of its birth, which only those who belonged to the same world heard and received. Never again will the Eumenides speak to the Greeks, and we will never know what was said in that language. This is true. But it is also true that the Eumenides have still never spoken, and that each time they speak it is the unique birth of their language that they announce. Long ago they spoke as enraged and appeased divinities before withdrawing into the temple of night – and this is unknown to us and will ever remain foreign. Later they spoke as symbols of the dark forces that must be combated in order for there to be justice and culture – and this is only too well known to us. Finally, one day, perhaps they will speak as the work in which language is always original, in which it is the language of the origin. And this is unknown to us, but not foreign. And not withstanding all this, reading and vision each time recollect, from the weight of a given content and along the ramifications of an evolving world, the unique intimacy of the work, the wonder of its constant genesis and the swell of its unfurling.

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