

Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman (eds). *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004. ISBN: 0-8018-7962-0

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The principle of contestation is a pivotal theme in the thought of Blanchot, the scope of its significance being enduringly observable throughout the span of the French intellectual's career, and traversing the diversity of his critical concerns. When approached with the manifold notion of contestation in mind, the complex connections between these various intellectual concerns are elaborated, and a new dimension is brought to each, as is illustrated by each of the readings in *The Power of Contestation*.

The word 'contestation' conventionally communicates a sense of active dissension or disputation. Blanchot's singular treatment of this term, however, involves contesting the very form of power traditionally implicated in this term. *La contestation* figures in Blanchot as radical questioning, and is vital to his approach to language and literature, ethics, and politics. In the introductory chapter to this volume, the authors trace this concept to an early essay by Blanchot, "On demande des dissidents," which gives expression to his distinctive and somewhat radical views on the value of politics, and the conditions of "the true form of dissidence." What is manifest even here is that, for Blanchot, the "true conditions of struggle" cannot be described in terms of a simple opposition or contradiction, for "contradiction does not represent a decisive separation" (JC 8). Blanchot considers politics to be a movement of refusal, or contestation, which calls into question, and resists reacting in terms of, the dialectical economy to which conform power relations. Already, in this essay of 1937, Blanchot's formulation of non-dialectical negativity – the passive vitality of what would later come to

be articulated in terms of *le neutre* – is palpable. Contestation must be understood in relation to the notion of *le neutre*; “this non-power that would not be a simple negation of power” (IC 51), neither affirmation, nor negation, but, rather, the suspension of the dialectical economy which opposes the one to the other. Geoffrey Hartman describes this as “a negativity stronger than terror or nihilism ... or the contrariety of dialectics” (57).

The question of politics for Blanchot needs to be addressed – and can only be truly contested – from an intellectual space outside the political realm itself. Blanchot’s turn (noted by Geoffrey Hartman) from political journalism to literature in 1938, appositely (if not somewhat ironically) emphasises his radical notion of contestation, as a ‘politics’ of *le neutre*. The question that presented itself for literary criticism, in the wake of this retreat from politics, concerned the extent of this disengagement and the consequences that it posed for the value and status of literary practice. Vivian Liska articulates this concern as to how literature may be qualified as a source of contestation: “How deeply can literature involve itself in the world, in history, in politics, and culture, before it loses its own voice, its space and specificity? How far can it retreat within itself before it turns into acquiescence with things as they are?”(80). Her question conveys the intricacy implicated in the problem of the relation of literature to the political sphere, in displaying the fragile tension of which this relation consists, which in Sartre’s concept of *littérature engagée* is reduced to a determinate and unambiguous correspondence.

In his decisive essay of 1949, “Literature and the Right to Death,” Blanchot responds to the demand for justification implicit in the imposing question of philosophy, ‘What is literature?’, maintaining that this demand is extraneous to literature, the sole concern of which is the question of its very possibility. “Let us suppose,” he writes, “that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question” (GO 21), and with this gesture, literature is posed as the question of its very possibility, and as such, it becomes a nullity. This description of literature as void, and yet also as a site of resistance, contains a significant critique of the notions of the ethical and the political – of authenticity, responsibility, and legitimacy. Existing purely as the suspension of the question of its own possibility, literature is, for Blanchot, the site of contestation. As an interruption of the worldly temporality of power and possibility, the literary space holds the conditions for an experience of a ‘pure’ language of disengagement. Literature is a “power of contestation” in as much as it is maintained as the negation of itself, and preserves this radical disengagement from questions of legitimacy: “literature is not only illegitimate, it is also null, and as long as this nullity is isolated in a state of purity it may constitute an extraordinary force” (GO 22).

Blanchot's meditations on the relations of writing and death introduce thought to the possibility of writing experienced as disengagement. Literature engages the conditions for relation to the impossible – an experience of relation irreducible to dialectical appropriation. The aesthetic dimension of existence, for Blanchot, involves the subject in an experience of radical passivity. Indeed, literary contestation effects the dissolution of the 'meta-physics of subjectivity,' and suspends the play of mastery which conditions decisionist language. Contestation is thus enacted in the literary work by *désœuvrement*, which describes the force of double negation by which literature renders null and void its own power to name by conceptualisation. Contestation is the means by which is challenged the will to power involved in the practice of all totalising discourses and in this respect contestation in Blanchot is implicitly a concern with ethics.

Literature provides the conditions of possibility for a rapport with that which is outside the subject; an experience of communication that is irreducible to a logic of relation; a relation that is not one of dialectical appropriation, and that does not tend toward unity. In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot, through his engagement with Levinas (but also with Bataille), begins to think the conditions of possibility for communication as such in terms of the notion of double dissymmetry, by which is neither constituted a 'transsubjective' nor an 'intersubjective' relation (*IC* 69). His conceptual configuration of relationality (as *relation of the third kind*) in terms of meta-physical asymmetry institutes the factors of non-reciprocity, and radical separation that interrupt communication as an economy of exchange.

Notwithstanding the differences between Blanchot and Levinas, both would concur that the conditions of possibility for communication are circumscribed by the irreducibility of language, and in this respect, the question of ethics manifests in the work of each thinker, as a problem of response. The exigency of ethics in Levinas, is given in the demand for response to the other who calls into question the power of my being in the world. For Blanchot, the self – its power and authority – is subjected to questioning by the excessive demand of writing. In Blanchot, in order to approach the problem of response, one must first attend to the exigency of questioning, of perpetually turning oneself back into question (see *IC* 11). The experience of being put into question is thus the condition for relation with the Other. Contestation is linked to this experience, and indicates Blanchot's implicit concern with ethics. Blanchot renders these connections more evident even as early as his review of *L'expérience intérieure*:

Questioning, experience, communication are narrowly defined terms – to say no more. Questioning is the calling into question of a particular and limited being, and it is also, consequently, an effort to

break this particularity and these limits. ... Communication ... begins being authentic only when experience has stripped existence, has withdrawn from it that which linked it to discourse and to action, has opened it up to a nondiscursive interiority where it loses itself, communicates with itself outside of any object that could give it a purpose or that it could serve. It is no more participation of a subject with an object than union by language. (*FP* 40)

The most critical of all questions, for Blanchot would be that which “calls me into question most radically” – the question posed by the relation of a being to the death of another (*UC* 9). Blanchot finds the question of the death of the other to be that which founds the possibility of community (see *UC* 10-1).

These ethical concerns of Blanchot explicitly preoccupy a number of the chapters in *The Power of Contestation*. The problem of ethics entails an analysis of the question of testimony for both Michael Holland and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, for whom witnessing is also a form of contestation, which inevitably implicates, or brings into question, an *other*. This question merges with the question of language and responsibility in the discussion carried out by Hartman with regards to the problem of responding to the Holocaust. The problem of response is taken up again by Jill Robbins within the context of the encounter of Blanchot with Levinas. Robbins attends to the conditions of possibility for an ethical relation of communication, with reference to the figure of “Plural Speech”: the exigency underlying *The Infinite Conversation*. She considers the conditions for a language of contestation with respect to the structure of interlocution as a relation of interpellation and intervallic rupture. Gerald Bruns enters into a discussion of the ethics of relationality to illustrate the way in which there is an “internal coherence” between the experience of writing and friendship, both of which involve the calling into question of the philosophical subject of cognition. In both the experience of writing, and in interpersonal or interlocutory relations, an ‘interruption of being’ occurs such that the unity of discourse is contested.

The interruption of discourse occurs in literature in the instance of fragmentary writing. Both Bruns – in contemplating the ‘ontology’ of the artwork – and Leslie Hill – in reflecting on the self-contestation of art – meditate on the “politics of the fragmentary” (25). Hill identifies the writing of the fragment as the “essential embodiment of art’s self-questioning” (105). Fragmentary writing – which, as Bruns implies is not a form of discourse, but rather the interruption of it – features the quality of interminability and incompleteness; it effects the impossibility of narrative, and is in this sense (remarks Bruns) *an-archic*. The writing of the fragment is a contesta-

tion of the conditions of limitation prescribed in the form of genre. Writing, Bruns argues, is a “nonproductive expenditure” (125), exceeding the limits of genre. Thus, as Kevin Hart observes, contestation can be understood in parallel to the play of transgression.

Accordingly, Hill attends to the complexity of the relationship between literature, criticism, and philosophy, in view of the fragmentary demand in writing by which language thwarts the endeavour for generic delimitation. The literary ethic of self-questioning is the gesture by which is enacted the *désœuvrement* of the work of literature. Contestation in literature thus pertains to the irreducibility of difference to the form of genre, such that the figure of the border – the condition of the limit – is rendered unsustainable. Resisting the “logic of differentiation” involved in the conditions of limitation implicated in the form of genre is, for Hill, “the counter-law of singularity itself” (105). Writing, as Blanchot’s diverse work illustrates, cannot simply be situated outside or excluded from the philosophical, the ethical, and the political; the outside is not a category or a place of occupancy, but rather the space in which such categories come to be contested.

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