

H-France Review Vol. 15 (Month 2015), No. 27

Christopher Fynsk, *Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot's Exilic Writing*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. viii + 297 pp. Notes and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780823251025; \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780823251032.

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The “last steps” that grace Christopher Fynsk’s engaging study of Maurice Blanchot with its title are in fact transposed from the title of *Le pas au-delà*, the maddeningly abstract series of prose fragments that Blanchot published in 1973. On the one hand, the “pace” (*pas*) or step beyond, an invitation to transgression; on the other, a veto of that very proposition: the negative *pas* declining to affirm any “beyond” or transgression at all. These are “steps” that seem to be canceling each other out, figuring a form of paralysis that might also be characterized as labyrinthine, essentially thwarted. And that thwartedness, canceling out every would-be advance or progress, figures in turn the exilic aspect of Blanchot’s writing alluded to in Fynsk’s subtitle. Writing is a journey or “exodus” into the wilderness, a protracted exercise in disorientation that sees Blanchot invoking the second book of the Bible, the epic of wandering or suffering Judaism, of Jews in sufferance, as a kind of core fantasy (or reality) of literature.

The precision of that double inscription—the transgressive step (*pas*) beyond that which is simultaneously “not (*pas*) beyond”—as formula for a paralysis akin alternately to the disorientation of the wilderness and the experience of being at sea, will call to mind the dimension of dissemination or *différance* that became touchstones of deconstruction. For however off the mark, it is surely not random that Blanchot would end up comparing Derrida to a kind of second Moses in “*Grâce (soit rendue) à Jacques Derrida.*”[1] The term “*hymen*” in Mallarmé is accorded particular importance by Derrida to the extent that it is assumed to mean simultaneously the ceremony of marital consummation and the membrane protecting virginity—i.e., impeding consummation. “*Hymen*” in Derrida’s reading of Mallarmé, that is, functions much as the word “*pas*” does in *Le pas au-delà*. Whence, moreover, the interest of the stray phrase from Mallarmé’s “*Mimique*,” “une apparence fausse de présent,” that surfaces early in *Le pas au-delà*. [2] For it is the text of Mallarmé around which Derrida organizes his reading of that poet.

Blanchot as the patron saint of deconstruction? One finds oneself all but submerged by that sentiment when one reads a footnote in *Last Steps* such as the following: “I allude to ‘recitation’ in this paragraph because I first learned of [Blanchot’s] *The Madness of the Day* by hearing it read aloud by Jacques Derrida at the time of its publication in a small seminar, an experience I cannot fail to record in gratitude” (p. 263). There is a feeling of cult-like solidarity between Derrida and Blanchot, a sentiment that would appear to be underwritten by the exemplary use of double inscription we have seen each of them practice with characteristic virtuosity. But if writing is metaphorically the domain of exhilarating disorientation opened up by the paralysis or self-cancellation of double inscription, this is no less the case for what one hesitates to call death itself. Consider a title such as *L’Arrêt de mort*, Blanchot’s narrative of 1948 (which is set in 1938), on which Derrida would comment at length in a programmatic text written for the volume *Deconstruction and Criticism*. [3] The title’s “arrêt” means simultaneously a decree (or death sentence) and an “arresting” or impeding of whatever it is that is being decreed.

Such a double bind no doubt plays its part in the de-subjectivizing disorientation of death, but perhaps it is time to turn to what one hesitates to call a more poignant experience of death, one that, in fact, involves Derrida's own disorientation on the occasion of Blanchot's demise. The survivor had prepared a eulogy, with a poignancy one can readily imagine, on the occasion of Blanchot's death in 2003 but, according to Benoit Peeters, Derrida's biographer, was stunned to realize that those in attendance at the memorial ceremony failed to understand what he was saying, not because he, Derrida, was famously abstruse, but because, for the most part, those present spoke Portuguese and not French. For, at the end of his life, Blanchot had adopted a Portuguese daughter, and it was her people--Portuguese speakers one and all--who dominated the cremation. Avital Ronell, in a beautifully Blanchotian image, is quoted by Peeters as linking the sensation of "speaking in the void" that day with the fatal disease which would declare itself shortly thereafter and take Derrida's life.[4]

There is a comparably traumatic experience of disorientation that comes with a literary payoff. I refer to the strangeness of discovering that Blanchot, prepared though he may have been to situate the saga of Jewish errancy, the book of Exodus, at the very heart of "literary space," had a flourishing career in the 1930s as a propagandist for acts of terrorism against Jews and Communists in retribution for the risk at which their anti-Hitlerian furor was placing the French. For some of us, the discovery of texts such as Blanchot's call to terrorism, "Le Terrorisme, méthode de salut publique," was every bit as disorienting as Derrida's exposure to a Blanchot funeral in which French seemed somehow beside the point.[5]

Others have made it their business to write off occasional pre-war lapses into anti-Semitism (on the part of France's premier literary philo-Semite) as ultimately irrelevant. Perhaps the most tireless of the group is Leslie Hill, whose rhetoric is worth sampling: "The *possible* association of [Blanchot's] name with *some form of* anti-semitic discourse seems therefore to have been a price that, *up to a certain point*, in 1936 and 1937, Blanchot the journalist was prepared to pay." [6] Hill is a champion of Fynsk's, and Fynsk is basically of the same persuasion as Hill: occasional bouts of anti-semitism or calls to acts of terror against Jews and Communists need in no way affect one's appreciation of subsequent invocations, in the wake of May 1968, of "Judaism" and a "Communism without heritage" as exemplary realms of being.[7]

Fynsk, ever the loyalist, reacts to any discomfort with the Blanchot of the 1930s by dismissing it as the result of a "crude trial" he would never be sufficiently lacking in finesse to be party to (p. 111). This is particularly clear in his discussion of the curious text Blanchot called *L'Instant de ma mort* and which Derrida has discussed at some length in an essay titled *Demeure*. [8] The subject, inspired in part by Dostoyevsky, is the firing squad before which Blanchot was apparently placed by the occupying forces on July 20, 1944, and from which he was allowed to escape as a result of a random confusion disrupting the scene. As in *L'Arrêt de mort*, death is decreed but arrested, impeded--with appropriately traumatic results. Derrida, with a nonchalance worthy, alas, of his defense of Paul de Man, turns into a lawyer for the defense still again: "L'auteur pouvait se compter parmi les Résistants. Il a fait la guerre contre... les anti-Semites génocides." [9]

Derrida, it will be appreciated, has tied his defense of Blanchot to a single date, July 20, 1944, and the victim of Nazism that the writer almost came to be. One is inclined to reply that July 20, 1944, was a bit late in the day to be establishing one's ethical credentials in World War II. Fynsk, meanwhile, shying away from political history, does not give us much more than a brief for enrolling the Blanchot of "L'Instant de ma mort" in the contingent of Derridean *différance*.

Curiously enough, there is another Blanchot  *récit* caught up in the political turmoil of the mid-twentieth century and that is linked with a specific date: *L'Arrêt de mort*. The time is October 1938, the most somber phase of the Munich crisis. The narrator finds himself participating in the death throes of his

female friend J. and may ultimately be responsible for her death. J's mother is referred to as the "queen-mother"; her sister is named Louise. At this juncture, reference to another Blanchot fiction published in 1948 proves auspicious: the novel, *Le Très Haut*. Foucault, as I have pointed out elsewhere, accurately detected the mythic substratum of the legend of Orestes in this novel. [10] And Orestes, in that novel, has a sister named Louise. Their mother, moreover, is referred to, as in *L'Arrêt de mort*, as the queen-mother. But this would mean that J., the sister of Louise-Electra (and the daughter of the queen-mother), would have to be...Iphigenia, sacrificed so that the unworthy war to protect the dubious honor of a harlot (Helen in the case of ancient Greece or the Third Republic in the case of modern France) might begin. The sacrifice of Iphigenia would correspond to the sacrifice of Blanchot's political investments in the 1930s, which, had they continued, would most probably have situated him as a future ally of France's national enemy, Germany.

In sum, the cause of Blanchot's honor was far better served, I believe, by the argument (which I have developed under the title "Iphigenia 38") that he was narrating the liquidation of his investment in fascism in *L'Arrêt de mort*, than by the claim that *L'Instant de ma mort* was a convincing defense of Blanchot's politics based on the confusing events of July 1944. None of which, it should be stated, prevented Blanchot, in a letter to Pierre Madaule of October 10, 1994, from dismissing my reading outright: "Quelle extravagance que l'interprétation par Mehlman de *L'Arrêt de mort*." [11] To which one may reply with Thoreau at Walden, here just west of Boston: "I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extravagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced."

There is a context in which Fynsk's loyalism with regard to the Blanchot-Derrida nexus takes on a certain pathos. One learns from Wikipedia that Fynsk was, at the outset of his career, a student (and perhaps a protégé) of those two acolytes of the Strasbourg temple of the cult, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. One suspects, in fact, that his careful, if not exactly surprising rehearsal of the intricacies of Blanchot's thought in *Last Steps* drew on an inspiration originally received from Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe. And then the loyalist bond or defense came undone. In the preface to a facsimile edition of a long letter sent by Blanchot to Roger Laporte in 1984, Nancy states simply of Blanchot's alleged anti-semitism: "il fut." [12] Fynsk claims to be saddened "by this crude, almost incomprehensible operation carried out by an old friend" (p. 280). In a subsequent interview, Nancy, on the subject of Blanchot's anti-semitism of the 1930s, writes that "les textes sont là--meme si peu nombreux." [13] Whereupon, Nancy, countering the loyalist consensus, invokes the urgency of a commitment; the need to attempt to clarify the political and ethical scandal of the Blanchot of the 1930s within a year's time: "nous sommes en mars 2013, d'ici un an il faut que ce soit fait." [14] To my knowledge, that task has not yet been completed.

So much for Nancy..., but Lacoue-Labarthe himself would weigh in with a posthumous volume, *Agonie terminée, agonie interminable: Sur Maurice Blanchot*, a title in which Freud's "Analysis terminable and interminable" seems to meet up with Blanchot's *L'Arrêt de mort*. It is a book haunted by the imperative of coming to terms with the political writings of Blanchot in the 1930s, comments (carefully avoided by Fynsk) whose "fascist" and "anti-semitic" tenor--and the scare quotes around "fascist," but not around "anti-semitic," beg consideration--he hoped to return to "as soon as possible." [15]

A final case of the collapse of fortress Blanchot occurred this spring when a journal known for its Blanchotian loyalism, *Lignes*, and its editor, the distinguished biographer of Georges Bataille, Michel Surya, in a special issue of the journal titled *Les Politiques de Maurice Blanchot, 1930-1993*, all but pulled the rug out from under the Blanchot who made bold, in 1981, in an interview in the pages of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, to posit the Judaic saga of the exodus from Egypt as the primal scene of literature itself. Indeed, Surya, under the auspices of that very journal (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, March 30, 2014) would quote the ringing endorsement of Pétain's National Revolution that appeared in an unsigned editorial in the journal Blanchot was then editing, *Aux écoutes*, and offer it as proof positive of a fundamental lie

informing Blanchot's claim, in a text to which Fynsk pays considerable attention, that his "refusal" of Vichy was, from the beginning, absolute. [16]

The word "*mensonges*," applied to Blanchot, which introduces the Surya interview, smacks of the extremism that might be expected from a former believer. The world of Blanchot's reception, however, is beginning to shift. I suspect it will continue to do so despite the unwavering loyalism of Fynsk in his carefully crafted tribute to an author we have been inclined to characterize as the patron saint of deconstruction.

The next step? One is inclined to speculate. The twofold *pas* paralyzing the "last steps" with which we began this essay, the *pas doble* Blanchot appeared to be dancing with the Derrida of the latter's essay on Mallarmé... Might the next step be a consideration of the dialogue between Heidegger and Jünger, a dialogue about crossing the line, "*Über die Linie*," *trans lineam*, but also on (the subject of) the line, "*Über 'die Linie,' de lineā*?" Heidegger's response to Jünger is in fact titled *Zur Seinsfrage*. [17] It will give us the word "deconstruction" and place the word Being "under erasure," the very gesture with which deconstruction, in France, would begin. It would also be part of an exchange with a writer who had been an officer in the occupying forces in Paris. We would thus be thinking in striking proximity to the very circumstance that saw the recent issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur* accuse Blanchot of mendacity. But in order to perceive what might and might not be at stake in such a configuration, one would have to approach the work of Blanchot in a spirit of greater freedom and considerably less orthodoxy than is to be found in the all-too-subtle readings of Christopher Fynsk.

#### NOTES

[1] "Grâce (soit rendue) à Jacques Derrida" in *Revue philosophique*, 2(1990).

[2] *Le pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 22.

[3] Jacques Derrida, "Living On" in Harold Bloom, ed., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1979).

[4] Benoît Peeters, *Derrida* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), p. 684.

[5] Maurice Blanchot, "Le Terrorisme, méthode de salut publique" in *Combat*, 1/7(July 1936).

[6] Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 38, my emphasis.

[7] See Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 192.

[8] Blanchot, *L'Instant de ma mort* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994); and Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Galilee, 1998).

[9] Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 92.

[10] Jeffrey Mehlman, *Genealogies of the Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 89.

[11] Maurice Blanchot and Pierre Madaule, *Correspondance, 1953-2002* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), p. 138.

[12] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Maurice Blanchot: Passion politique* (Paris: Galilée, 2011), p. 34.

[13] *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot*, 2(Winter 2013-2014): 45.

[14] *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot*, 2(Winter 2013-2014): 46.

[15] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Agonie terminée, agonie interminable* (Paris: Galilée, 2011), p. 24.

[16] *Maurice Blanchot: Passion politique*, ed. Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris: Galilée, 2011), p. 59.

[17] Martin Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1956).

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ISSN 1553-9172