Aesthetics of Negativity

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Blanchot, Adorno, and Autonomy

Contents

Abbreviations

Where double page references have been used they refer to the French or German text and then the English versions, as translations have generally been modified.

A	Maurice Blanchot, *Aminadab* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942); tr. Jeff Fort as *Aminadab* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
Am	Blanchot, *L'amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); tr. Elizabeth Rottenberg as *Friendship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
AT	Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971); tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor as *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
Cap	Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, tr. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).
CC	Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, tr. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).
CM	Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. David McLellan, tr. Samuel Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Com	Samuel Beckett, *Comment c'est* (Paris: Minuit, 1961); tr. by the author as *How It Is*, ed. Édouard Magessa O'Reilly (London: Faber, 2009).
CPJ	Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, tr. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
DA	Max Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, *GS* 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980); tr. Edmund Jephcott as *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
DSH	Adorno, *Drei Studien zu Hegel*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, *GS* 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971); tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen as *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).
ED	Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980); tr. Ann Smock as *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
EI	Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); tr. Susan Hanson as *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
EL	Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955); tr. Ann Smock as *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).
Exp	Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973); tr. Leslie Anne Boldt as *Inner Experience* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).
FP	Blanchot, *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943); tr. Charlotte Mandell as *Faux Pas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
GS	Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–91); SW: *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003).
HLP	Blanchot, "How Is Literature Possible?," tr. Michael Syrotinski, in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 49–60.
M	Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998); tr. Edmund Jephcott as *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

MM   Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, *GS* 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979); tr. E. F. N. Jephcott as *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: New Left Books, 1974).

MS4/5   Adorno, *Musikalische Schriften* 4/5, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Klaus Schultz, *GS* 17/18 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982–84); *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

ND   Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, *GS* 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972); tr. E. B. Ashton as *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

NL   Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, *GS* 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974); tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen as *Notes to Literature*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991–92).

OGT   Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, tr. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977).

PAS   J. M. Bernstein, "Poesy and the Arbitrariness of the Sign: Notes for a Critique of Jena Romanticism," in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (London: Routledge, 2006), 143–72.

PF   Blanchot, *La part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949); tr. Charlotte Mandell as *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

PG   G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969); tr. A. V. Miller as *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

PH   Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, tr. John Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956).

PNM   Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, *GS* 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975); ed. and tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor as *Philosophy of New Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

S1   Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations 1* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

SN   Bataille, *Sur Nietzsche* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); tr. Bruce Boone as *On Nietzsche* (London: Athlone, 1992).

SW   (See GS, Benjamin.)

TN   Blanchot, *Thomas l'Obscur, nouvelle version* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); tr. Robert Lamberton as *Thomas the*

Obscure, in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1999), 51–128.

TP   Blanchot, *Thomas l'Obscur, première version, 1941* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

Acknowledgments

Where in a work lies the beginning of the moment when the words become stronger than their meaning and the meaning becomes more material than the word? When does Lautréamont's prose lose the name of prose? Isn't each sentence understandable? Isn't each sequence of sentences logical? And don't the words say what they mean? At what moment, in this maze of order, in this labyrinth of clarity, did meaning lose its way, at what turn did reasoning notice that it had stopped "following," that something was continuing, progressing, concluding in its place, something like it in every way, in which it thought it recognised itself, until the moment when, waking, it discovered this other that had taken its place? But if it retraces its steps in order to denounce the intruder, the illusion immediately vanishes, it is itself that it finds, the prose is prose again, so it goes further and loses itself again, letting a sickening material substance stand in for it, like a staircase that walks, a corridor that unfolds itself, a reason whose infallibility excludes all reasoners, a logic that has become the "logic of things." Then where is the work? Each moment has the clarity of a beautiful language being spoken, but the whole has the opaque meaning of a thing that is being eaten and that eats, that devours, engulfing and reconstituting itself in a vain effort to change itself into nothing.

—Maurice Blanchot, 1948

Negativity has a central place in Blanchot's writings, whether in terms of the experience of literature, the possibility of the work, or the nature of its language, and it thus provides a privileged mode of access to what can otherwise appear to be a forbiddingly obscure body of writings. However, its role in his thinking is unique and is not to be subsumed to the negativity found in the thought of Hegel or Heidegger, although it partakes of aspects of both. Instead, negativity for Blanchot operates at the level of the ontological status of language, which oscillates undecidably between the assertion and negation of meaning and thereby affects the experience of literature and the possibility of the work. To explicate the significance of this negativity it is necessary to turn to another figure for whom this notion has become as central and as ambiguous, Adorno, whose Hegelian background is much stronger, but who also works against this tradition to form his own negative understanding of dialectics that is crucially exemplified in the work of art. For Adorno, the work of art exists as a particular model of its historical and material context, one that both demonstrates its contradictions and indicates what has been obscured by them. The negativity of the work is thus both that of the critique that it levels against this context and of the possibilities that it negatively raises in its place. While remaining incommensurable in their approaches and concerns, the ways in which Blanchot and Adorno examine the place and role of negativity are mutually illuminating. What this double perspective then offers is an understanding of negativity that is neither nihilistic nor pessimistic but rather indicates how it persists within the body of language and thinking as a material ambiguity, one that is speculative insofar as it brings materiality to thought in the form of linguistic negativity, and critical insofar as it indicates how this experience arises out of, and in contradistinction to, its actual historical context.

Introduction: Abstract and Concrete Modernity

Blanchot's first novel, *Thomas l'Obscur*, begins with a scene that has long been regarded as paradigmatic for his approach to writing in general, and it is remarkable, as Jean Starobinski noted, how much of his later thought is already apparent in these opening lines:[1]

> Thomas sat down and looked at the sea. For some time he remained motionless, as if he had come there to follow the movements of the other swimmers and, although the fog prevented him from seeing very far, he stayed there obstinately, his eyes fixed on the bodies that advanced through the water with difficulty. Then, when a wave more powerful than the others reached him, he in his turn went down the sandy slope and slipped among the currents that quickly immersed him. [TP: 23; cf. TN: 9/55]

Thomas looks at the sea and then goes down into the waters, and so the novel begins. There is very little space here between a literal reading of this opening and an allegorical reading that would see it as an entrance into literature, for example, as each appears to give way to the other. Nothing in the text seems to prevent this slippage and fix it as one kind of text or another; on the contrary, the simplicity of the writing, its apparent lack of adornment or artifice, enables this ambiguity to emerge. For in its simplicity the writing seems to operate as if the literal and the figurative could not be definitively distinguished, and the figure of Thomas then proceeds as the exposition of this narrative ambiguity.

1

Later, Blanchot would cite those lines of Hegel's where he discusses the difficult situation of one confronted by his inability to start a work, which requires him to have already begun in order to begin, such that the "individual who is going to act therefore seems to find himself in a circle in which every moment already presupposes the other, and thus no beginning can be found for his actions" [PG: 297/240]. Hegel's solution to this problem is that the individual should simply start, immediately, without further ado. But, as Blanchot then remarks, for the writer this means that "the work cannot be planned [*projetée*], but only carried out [*réalisée*], that it has value, truth, and reality, only through the words that unfold [*déroulent*] it in time and inscribe it in space," thus the writer "will set to writing, but out of nothing and with nothing in mind [*à partir de rien et en vue de rien*]— and, following an expression of Hegel's, like a nothingness working in nothingness" [PF: 296/304; PG: 296/239]. But this means that such a nothingness is inherent to the continuance of writing, and as such this problem of starting, which is "the essence of literary activity," is one that "that the writer must and must not overcome" [PF: 295/303]. Blanchot's response to this problem is made apparent in these opening lines and throughout the remainder of his writings in the peculiar flatness of his style and, although widely noted, it has not been recognized how this style activates the movement of nothingness working in nothingness by way of its employment of a mode of abstraction. The nature of this abstraction is at once obvious but also hard to grasp, and the reasons for this would seem to lie not only in Blanchot's manner of persistently suspending the moment in which this abstraction would realize itself, but also in the nature of abstraction itself, which is both conceptual and aesthetic.

The difficulties associated with the notion of abstraction arise from the differences between the ways in which it is viewed when seen as part of epistemology and in terms of visual art. Coupled with this disparity is the further use of the term in sociology, where it takes on an even more daunting role as the means by which human relations are dominated by abstract values.[2] Typically the source for this multiplicity lies with the separation Kant makes between the conceptual and the aesthetic, in which the understanding withdraws from the particularity of the sensible in order to conceptually determine it. There is thus a sense of both generalization, through the loss of particularity, and mobilization, through the way that the sensible motivates thought, which is why it is a mistake to view abstraction as divorced from the concrete, since it only ever arises by way of it. It is this broader sense of abstraction as combining both a conceptual understanding and an attenuated rather than severed relation to the sensible that then underlies Hegel's adoption of the term. Nevertheless, the

problem reformulates itself insofar as knowledge of things is achieved by withdrawing from them: by generalizing away from their particularities their essence apparently reveals itself, since knowledge does not lie in the thing itself but in the universality of its determinants, which is how this process coincides with language. The sensible therefore remains the limit-condition for thought, just as it is in turn determined by thought through the process of abstraction. For Hegel then, there is a dialectical relation between the concrete and the abstract, in which the concrete becomes abstract in the form of concepts just as abstractions become concrete in terms of their force, a model later extended in Marx's understanding of the reifying effect of exchange-value on the relations between people and things, where the concrete relation to others is rendered abstract through exchange, while the abstract relations between things becomes concrete in their fetish-character. There is thus the smell of death in this language of abstraction, as Mallarmé was aware, but for Hegel this is only when it proceeds with its own interests in mind, rather than as part of the ongoing actualization of the absolute idea or concrete universal.

Abstraction within modern art has an even more complex meaning, as it designates the move away from figurative art toward a greater formalism or greater materiality, which conveys a relation that is either more conceptual or more aesthetic.[3] This formal-material bivalency of abstraction derives from the ambivalence of its withdrawal, which is at once a withdrawal from and a withdrawal into, and it is this undecidability that undermines any sense in which the essence might be discovered by way of this withdrawal. It is not the case that by removing or reducing some aspects of the artwork its essence will reveal itself; rather it is only an aspect of the work that is revealed by way of this attenuation—that is, abstraction is a form of (negative) pressure in which the work is induced to expose itself. And what is thereby expressed is only that aspect of the work that is exposed *in* the movement of estrangement, for abstraction does not solicit this material form of the work to appear in a perfect void but instead draws it out into a greater and greater remove. It is this movement of abstraction that is reflected in Blanchot's insistent demand to go further, when this means further away, toward the outside, and where this exteriority is the most extreme point of unfolding and fragmentation of the work, exposing a power of destruction or change within it that offers "the possibility of a radical transformation," as he would later write in relation to the opening lines of *Thomas l'Obscur*—a possibility that is inherent in the movement of language.[4] For language is already a power of abstraction, but within literature this abstraction is brought to bear upon itself, such that there is a withdrawal from language within language, and it is this immanent

movement that characterizes Blanchot's fiction, to actualize not its absolute idea but rather its "concrete emptiness" [PF: 86/81]. And it is in prose fiction that this power of abstraction is strongest, for insofar as it is a form of language that depends on nothing for its development, it is able to bring this nothingness to its point of greatest exposure. The negativity that Blanchot sees in language is the same as that which distances it from representation and figuration, but in order to understand its persistent negations it is necessary to examine not only what is negated and how but also what this leaves behind and where it leads language.

It is thus possible to suggest that Blanchot's approach to fiction demonstrates a departure from generic narrative fiction that is comparable to the contemporaneous changes found in visual art as it moved from Surrealism and Expressionism to abstraction. Such changes occurred in painting as it became concerned with the problems of representation and began to adopt approaches that were more extreme or more austere as a response to these problems. It was not a question of what to paint in the disenchanted world as much as how, given that the possibility and even necessity of painting were in question. The manner in which artists responded to this problem provides a vocabulary that can prove very illuminating when placed in the context of the equally intransigent problems that faced writers in this period, of which Blanchot is a particularly extreme example.

The terms of the history of art laid out in Hegel's aesthetics suggest that modern art takes on the forms that it does as it becomes more and more concerned with itself. That is, without the defining context of religious thought, artworks become preoccupied with the problem of defining their own context and necessity. This self-definition, which is a guiding theme of Enlightenment and Romantic thought, leads to the reflexivity and conceptualism common in modern art and takes the form of an increasing abstraction in the mode of its appearance. Hegel would see this as a mark of the decreasing significance of art as it ceases to be concerned with the highest things and is only concerned with itself, which ultimately means that it becomes less autonomous, as it now requires other discourses to provide its explication. The experience of the artwork is no longer a direct experience of its manifestation of truth, but rather is doubly refracted through its own reflexivity and its discursive dependence. Such a verdict arises from the comparison Hegel makes between the art of ancient Greece and that which follows it. But in his descriptions of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings there lies an alternative possibility that relates the sober and quotidian quality of these artworks to a sense of prosaic truth—that is, one that is not indirect in its manifestation of truth simply because it is no longer associated with a religious context. Rather, the secular world of