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‘As Nobody I was Sovereign’: Reading Derrida Reading Blanchot

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Received: 1 October 2012; in revised form: 18 December 2012 / Accepted: 20 December 2012 /
Published: 4 January 2013

Abstract: In Session 7 (26 February 2003) of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Volume II, Jacques Derrida engages again with Maurice Blanchot, two days after the latter’s cremation. This intervention also appears as a post-face to Derrida’s 2003 edition of *Parages*, his collection of essays devoted to the work of Blanchot. In this article, I examine Derrida’s affinity to the work of Blanchot, as the one whose work ‘stood watch over and around what matters to me, for a long time behind me and forever still before me’ [*The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*, p. 176]. In doing so I look at the manner in which Derrida engaged with Blanchot in his work and how in examining this engagement another reading of sovereignty emerges, one which is not tethered to liberal models of sovereign will but one which eludes biopolitical ordering and may be seen as a form of disappearance. Through a reading of Derrida’s readings of Blanchot’s *The Madness of the Day* I emphasize the link of this alternative sovereignty to both writing and literature in order to demonstrate how a more radical thinking of sovereignty can be discovered in Derrida’s thought.

Keywords: Blanchot; death; Derrida; sovereignty

1. Introduction

From this first encounter, interruption anticipates death, precedes death [1].

it is at the moment when Derrida himself, a living man about to die (*lui mourant vivant*), survivor in reprieve, faces his own death, that he carries, bears and endures with the greatest lucidity, without turning

away, the philosophical question *par excellence* of death ‘as such’ that will have haunted his entire oeuvre from the beginning [2].

we cannot

speak until

we hear

the words from

one who has

died

before [3].

Maurice Blanchot’s spectral interruption of the Beast and the Sovereign seminars can be seen as a continuation of the mutually productive interruptions performed by Blanchot of Derrida during the former’s lifetime and a means of further underlining the importance of Blanchot for Derrida as an influence and critical interlocutor. Indeed this caesura provokes a thinking of the interpenetration of death, sovereignty and literature in a seminar which itself has become a testament to Derrida’s life and work, an oration before the fact. As Michel Lisse has put it: ‘L’adieu a Blanchot precede le sien, mais aussi le prepare... prepare et analyse a l’avance la phrase <<Jacques Derrida est mort>> [4]. In this seminar, Derrida engages in a testimony in which a silent (now dead) third party is always present. Derrida speaks not for but *as* Blanchot. Blanchot speaks in him, recalling Blanchot’s words in a letter to Derrida: ‘You know, I will be by your side/always. Those who would want to estrange me/from you do not know us [5]. Derrida here takes on the role of the *superstes* which for him denotes: ‘the one testifying in the sense of surviving, someone who, having been present then having survived, plays the role of the one who testifies’ [6]. In effect he speaks as the neutral to borrow a phrase from Roberto Esposito [7]. Indeed Derrida’s speaking and writing of Blanchot in the seminar can be seen to enact what Esposito calls the move from ‘the first to the third person’ ([7], pp. 157–158). For Esposito this speaking as the third person or neutral represents: ‘a one hundred and eighty degree turn in our entire semantic and logical apparatus’ ([7], pp. 157–158). It is as no-one or third person that he bears witness for Blanchot.

This no-one or third person (also a witness) can also be found in writing itself. Celan’s words ‘No-one bears witness for the witness’ which echo throughout the Beast and the Sovereign seminars resonate here, as it is as no-one that Derrida bears witness and indeed bears Blanchot in the seminar. There could be no better performance of witnessing as simultaneous appearance and disappearance than Derrida’s bearing witness to the one who has disappeared. Blanchot’s interruption of Derrida’s seminar allows us to see a simultaneous appearance in disappearance. This disappearance of Blanchot in death mirrors the becoming imperceptible of the writer in life. As Blanchot had put it: ‘before the work, the writer does not yet exist; after the work, he is no longer there: which means that his existence is open to question’ [8]. This could be seen as an instantiation of the impossible “right to disappearance” to which Derrida refers in the tenth session of the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*. There he observes that ‘there is no right to disappearance’ [9] yet such a disappearance has an uncanny and paradoxical way of making itself felt from time to time.

2. Witnessing, Writing, Disappearing

This right to disappearance heralds an alternative sovereignty, which is like the sovereignty of the writer who does not exist either before or after the literary work. This living as disappearing reflects the practice of writing as performed by Blanchot. In disappearing, one is engaged in a writing as effacement, just as the one who is living is already dying, disappearing. The non-existent right to disappearance co-exists with the duty to appear, to be formed as a sovereign subject of power. It exists as its impossible companion, its silent double. While Derrida in the *Beast and the Sovereign* seminars links the notion of the right to disappearance explicitly to the corpse and the choice between inhumation and cremation, I want to take this notion and extend it into the realm of the relationship between the writer and the text and in particular the manner in which the text bears testimony to another spectre, the absent writer. This right to disappear may be linked to the written word which entails the absence of the author and is thus in a certain sense structured by the possibility of death. Another way of conceptualizing such a right to disappearance may be seen in Blanchot's notion of the 'narrative voice' [10]. This notion is marked by a writing as a form of effacement, which 'produce[s] the absence of the work (worklessness)' ([10], p. 424). This is a writing that escapes assimilation into a fixed genre or identity. It refuses to produce an account of itself. For Blanchot, the narrative voice conveys what it is:

to live once again in another, in a third person, the dual relation, the fascinated, indifferent relation that is irreducible to any mediation, a neutral relation, even if it implies the infinite void of desire; finally, the imminent certainty that what has once taken place will always begin again, always give itself away and refuse itself... But who is telling the story here?... it is rather the one who cannot recount because she bears—this is her wisdom, her madness—the torment of the impossible narration, knowing herself... to be the measure of this outside where, as we accede to it, we risk falling under the attraction of speech that is entirely exterior: pure extravagance ([10], p. 462, n. 4).

This 'one who cannot recount because she bears... the torment of the impossible narration, knowing herself... to be the measure of this outside where... we risk falling under the attraction of speech that is entirely exterior', is that singularity (the third person, neuter), which exists outside of the frame of legally and politically imposed personhood. As Derrida once put it, the narrative voice is

a neutral voice that speaks the work from out of this place without a place, where the work is silent. The placeless place where the work is silent: a silent voice, then, withdrawn into its "aphony". This "aphony" distinguishes it from the "narrating voice", the voice that literary criticism or poetics or narratology strives to locate in the system of the recit, of the novel, or of the narration [11].

For Derrida then this voice is interestingly a-phonetic. Here we see writing as the performance of a stubborn refusal to accept the condition of being formed. Thus, as Gerald Bruns observes, the narrative voice is 'the unconstructed voice of the singular and the irreducible, that which cannot be assimilated into a system or theory of constituted subjects, objects, and relations' [12]. This unconstructed voice lives within the work. It does not come in response to a call but rather emerges from the margins unsolicited, an instance of 'unexpected speech' [13]. This thinking with and against a law of ordering allows us to think writing not as a work in the sense of a completed object, a monument to memory,

but an opening to the future. The narrative voice points to a story not yet recorded, to the possibility of a future, the not yet assimilated. The voice of the law of legally sanctioned testimony is the narrating voice, which, as Derrida reminds us is:

the voice of a subject recounting something, remembering an event or a historical sequence, knowing who he is, where he is, and what he is talking about. It responds to some “police”, a force of order or law... In this sense, all organized narration is “a matter for the police”, even before its genre... has been determined ([11], pp. 130–131).

This impossible “right to disappearance” may well assist us in thinking another form of sovereignty, not one bound to sovereign will or power but intimately linked to becoming imperceptible, a right to live dying. This sovereignty as disappearance is one that escapes formation and surveillance, and subsists elsewhere, not in the Day of biopolitical ordering but in the Night, beyond the scopic order of law. Like the narrating I in Blanchot’s *recit The Madness of the Day* it is ‘[a]s nothing [that one is] sovereign’ [14]. This paradoxical statement overturns the appropriative Enlightenment model of the subject who in owning, claiming and being something is sovereign, like the figure of Robinson Crusoe, with whom Derrida engages in the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign* seminars. Contrary to this individualist model of the political subject, the ‘right to disappearance’ or this becoming imperceptible points to another sovereignty beyond that of the liberal political state, becoming nothing and in so doing being sovereign. It is ‘as nobody [that one is] sovereign’ and it is in this paradoxical state that one’s power of resistance resides. Indeed as Blanchot has reminded us elsewhere, the prohibition of the right to disappear is the hallmark of the biopolitical order. For him ‘the right to disappear... [is] a right that is still refused to us today under one form or another’ [15].

The narrator in *The Madness of the Day* is asked to give an account of himself to the representatives of power/knowledge, namely, the psychiatrist and the ophthalmologist. This narrator interrupts his own representation by the law. He is asked to explain himself, to relate a narrative which would be useful to the state in its (re)imposition of order. The representatives of power attempt to force him to speak in order to form himself as a citizen with an identity. They attempt to form him and make him visible, to identify him. As Gilles Deleuze would have it: ‘Formed substances are revealed by visibility’ [16]. In not allowing himself to be given form, he performs the impossible right to disappearance. The law demands everything and demands an identity. What the law cannot abide is non-identity. Such non-identity escapes the law’s appropriating grasp. It is formless and cannot be categorized and therefore contained. What occurs here is close to what Blanchot articulates as the reversal of the ordered dyadic relationship of inquisitor and victim:

The Powerful One is the master of the possible, but he is not master of this relation that does not derive from mastery and that power cannot measure: the relation without relation wherein the ‘other’ is revealed as ‘autrui’... Hence the furious movement of the inquisitor who wants by force to obtain a scrap of language in order to bring all speech down to the level of force. To make speak, and through torture, is to attempt to master infinite distance by reducing expression to this language of power through which the one who speaks would once again lay himself open to force’s hold; and the one who is being tortured refuses to speak in order not to enter through the extorted words into the game of opposing violence, but also, at the same time, in order to preserve the true speech that he very well knows is at this instant merged with his silent presence—which is the very presence of *autrui* in himself ([10], p. 132).

In beginning to disappear out of the story this whatever singularity, being without categories of identity taunts and undoes the law and its representatives:

when at last nothing was present but my perfect nothingness and there was nothing more to see, they ceased to see me too. Very irritated, they stood up and cried out, “All right. Where are you? Where are you hiding? Hiding is forbidden, it is an offense ([15], p. 14).

In refusing to be formed, he reverses the power relation. The State officials have no power if there is no object to govern. The State ‘disappears’ objects and makes them appear, forms them. However, this does not happen with he who refuses to make himself appear and resolves to disappear of his own accord. As Derrida would put it, the narrator in *The Madness of the Day*:

not only troubles the representatives of the law... who demand of him, but are unable to obtain, an organized *recit*, a testimony oriented by a sense of history or his story, ordained and ordered by reason... he alarms... the lawmen, he radically persecutes them and... conceals from them... the truth they demand and without which they are nothing [17].

3. Contesting Sovereignty

This disappearing points to another thinking of sovereignty. For Roberto Esposito, Blanchot developed a means of translating the notion of the neutral or the third person into a politics, ‘by locating a public language which corresponds to a philosophy of the impersonal... [which] consists in the programmatic cancellation of the proper name—of every proper name—in favor of anonymous and impersonal activity’ ([7], p. 161). This praxis of disappearance as anonymous and impersonal activity which is simultaneously political can be glimpsed in an appropriately oblique way in Blanchot’s own encounters with politics. It is the striving for the creation of a right that does not and cannot exist, an impossible right but as such one which must be striven for continuously. It is an ‘inoperative’ right. This linking of the neutral to the political can be found in Blanchot’s essay ‘Refusal’ written in 1959, in opposition to Charles De Gaulle’s capture of power and denigration of democratic citizenship in France. Blanchot observed that refusal was a means of exposing the perversion of democracy that was being carried out. He noted that: ‘Those who refuse and who are bound by the force of refusal know that they are not yet together. The time of common affirmation is precisely what has been taken away from them’ [18]. As such, this is a refusal to be constructed as an identity to be managed by the state. Such a strategy of refusal to be constructed as an identity has the advantage of allowing one to remain beyond the grasp of the State’s ability to make visible and incorporate such identities into the biopolitical regime, to dis-appear.

For Blanchot the relationship of writing to the political is, of necessity, an intransitive one, not a committed literature of the Sartrean variety but something that lives within the political as an almost silent murmur. As Blanchot observed, writing never knows ‘what will become of it politically: this is its intransitivity, its necessarily indirect relation to the political’ [19]. Such a living with the political of the poetic or literature may be likened to what Derrida in the first volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign* seminars refers to as a ‘poetic revolution’. As he observes:

It is as if, after the poetic revolution that was reaffirming a poetic majesty beyond or outside political majesty, a second revolution, the one that takes one’s breath away or turns one’s breath in the encounter with

the wholly other, came to try or to recognize, to try to recognize, or even—without cognizing or recognizing anything—to try to *think* a revolution in the revolution, a revolution in the very life of time, in the life of the living present [20].

This revolution within the revolution, the breathtaking instant of encounter with the other sums up perfectly Blanchot's mode of linking the impersonal to the political. It is a thinking in which something barely happens, a silent encounter, a breathturn.

One episode from Blanchot's political praxis demonstrates this happening as non-happening the silent revolution within the revolution. In 1960 Blanchot was one of the authors along with Dionys Mascolo of *The Declaration of the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War* [21]. This *Declaration*, more commonly known as the *Manifesto of the 121*, issued a call to refuse to take arms against the Algerian people. It was part of a strategy of insubordination in response to the persecution of those who supported the anti-colonial cause in Algeria and coincided with the trial of Francis Jeanson and other so-called 'porteurs des valises' in September 1960. In this trial the authorities used treason laws against those who carried money out of the country for the FLN, the Algerian anti-colonial movement. The Jeanson trial was an example of the State's attempt to re-impose order on those who threatened national unity by supporting the cause of the anti-colonial movement in Algeria. Such a strategy of is one of refusing to accept that citizens and their words can be formed by the state. As the *Manifesto* states:

The undersigned—considering that everyone must come to an opinion about acts that it is henceforth impossible to present as trivial episodes of an individual adventure... considering that they themselves, in their place, and according to their means, have the duty to intervene, not to give advice to men who have to decide personally when faced with such grave problems, but to ask those who judge them not to be taken in by the equivocal aspect of words and values—declare:

- We respect the refusal to take arms against the Algerian people, and we judge this to be justified.
- We respect the conduct of the French citizens who consider it their duty to bring help and protection to the oppressed Algerians in the name of the French people, and we judge this to be justified.
- The cause of the Algerian people, which contributes to ruining the colonial system in a decisive way, is the cause of all free men.

It is a response to state violence, which is both an act of witnessing and an active witnessing in Blanchot's sense of the term, an act of contestation. It is a call for an effacement of the sense of community built on identity. The *Manifesto* is an example of a writing that moves from the 'we' of 'we the people' to the third person, the undefined singularity without identity. As such, it is emblematic of Blanchot's attempt to seek 'liberation from [the] exclusionary powers of concepts themselves' [22].

In his encounter with the law after the state instituted criminal legal proceedings against the co-authors of the *Manifesto*, Blanchot himself experienced the State's attempt to violently give form this insubordinate singular and anonymous life. It set up a biopolitical strategy of imposing form and visibility on the citizen, which was counter-posed by Blanchot's enactment of the impossible right of disappearance. Blanchot's (dis)appearance before a representative of the law mirrors the position of

the narrator in *The Madness of the Day*. He was, uncannily, like the narrating I in *The Madness of the Day*, asked to explain himself, to relate a narrative that would be useful to the state in its re-imposition of order. However, like the narrating I in the *recit*, Blanchot's inability to narrate in the words required by the law 'inspire[d] fear in the law' ([17], p. 245).

The magistrate attempted to impose identity and therefore guilt on Blanchot when he asked him to reveal the identities of those who had devised and written the *Declaration*. Blanchot refused to see things in this way and observed that the text itself was written by a collection of individuals who each had a singular and collective responsibility before the text and the call it made. It was therefore impossible to allot responsibility on the basis of individual involvement and degree. Blanchot noted:

The approach that consists in dividing responsibilities, in an effort to establish a pseudo-hierarchy of responsibility, is a fundamentally erroneous one; it fails to recognize the truth of all collective texts, signed collectively: that is, that "each one has his share and all have it entirely." Everything you are trying to make me say would go against this affirmation, which is the meaning of every collective text, will be false, and I revoke it in advance [23].

In his repudiation of the investigating magistrate's demands Blanchot stated:

I declare that I recognize myself as entirely responsible for this text, from the moment that I signed it. The fact of the signature is essential. It means not only that I agree with this text, but that I am merged with it, that I am this text. Each one of the signatories identifies with the text, just as you have it before your eyes, just as it was made public ([23], p. 29).

In this regard the text was a collective speaking out delivered by an assemblage of singularities, coming together provisionally to bear testimony to state violence and refusing to be spoken and acted for by a State which had betrayed any responsibility to its citizens and to the principle of political representation.

4. Conclusion: Towards a Poetics of Disappearance

It is another kind of witnessing in which Blanchot engages. For him, forced confession is part of a political apparatus which imposes obedience and order and which puts the citizen-subject in their place. To not speak, to not respond, in such circumstances, with an account of oneself, would be to produce a rupture in the circuits of biopower. This points to another thinking of being together in relation with others. As Gerald Bruns has put it:

the refusal to speak is the starting point of Blanchot's poetics... that is, his *arche* is ... resistance to the extracted confession as a kind of transcendental event: resistance to the power that "wants one to speak"... that compels us to speak *its* truth under the auspices of a freedom bestowed on us- a sovereignty, according to our only philosophical definition of sovereignty, that is given first of all in the logic of language and culture, or in the total fabric that constitutes the conditions of possibility of speech as such. Blanchot's "refusal" is a refusal of these conditions, that is, a refusal to speak [24].

The refusal to divulge in such circumstances is a form of power as non-power, a non-positive affirmation rather than a withdrawal into silence. This is the imperceptible moment of subversion, which, as workless, as pure excess, achieves nothing, but this is its very force. It counter-poses

worklessness to the work of power, non-identity to identity, responsibility to one's own non-responsibility. This 'counter-law' is: 'the condition of the possibility of the law... an axiom of impossibility... [which] confound[s] its sense, order and reason' ([17], p. 220). Indeed, it can be seen as the performance of what Michel Foucault has called: '[the] right to bear witness, to oppose truth to power... That right to set a powerless truth against a truthless power' [25]. This is a move to a form of witnessing as contestation, as active intervention in the political life of the community, as opposed to a subject-forming and subject-ordering witnessing as confession. As Michael Holland reminds us Blanchot engages in a more radical form of witnessing which is both active and contestatory. As Holland argues: 'For Blanchot... contestation restores the appeal to witnessing which it originally contained by establishing two languages each of which is the site of the expiation of authority which experience as contestation endlessly endures' [26].

Blanchot's (dis)appearance at the Beast and the Sovereign seminars is then yet another instance of the poetics of dis-appearance which he had practiced during his lifetime. His spectral presence at the seminars is a further example of his living with Derrida as the silent double who makes the revolution of thought possible. It is in this sense that Pierre Joris' description of Paul Celan fits Blanchot perfectly: 'someone who should be dead, because he comes/is there after death, as someone whose life is in suspension, is a mere supplement of death—bears witness to, is another, a new way of speaking [27]. In speaking as Blanchot in this seminar Derrida continues to bear witness to another way of speaking and thinking beyond the order of extracted speech.

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