3 Blanchot and the Anarchic Anachrony of Style

The fragmentary and the style of paradoxical anachrony

Blanchot’s relation to literary studies is problematic. His work is hardly containable within disciplinary boundaries – ‘critical essayist’, ‘experimental author’ and ‘philosopher’ are labels that promise to but do not quite do justice to his writing, which tends to radically hybridise if not transcend generic considerations. His status in that strand of continental literary theory, whose genealogy can be traced back through figures like de Man, Foucault, Derrida, Heidegger and Nietzsche, is firmly solid, although this tradition is in itself characterised by ambiguous relations to literary studies. And even here, Blanchot’s continued relevance is guaranteed primarily through the almost obsessive way in which a number of thinkers keep returning to Blanchot; Derrida, for instance, is very often on the marges of Blanchot. One way to account for this ambivalence is not only the difficulty of Blanchot’s work, which, it must be said, is not attributable to any obscurity of style or use of jargon, but the resistance of his thought to being developed into an applicable method. Indeed, resistance to linearity of thinking and to applicability, and a simultaneous attraction towards the fragmentary, interruption and what he terms ‘the impossible’ – that which is beyond conceptualisation – mean that Blanchot keeps escaping institutionalisation.

However, within the scope of a study on the event of style in literature, Blanchot’s work is decisive. What is most important, in this respect, is not what Blanchot says about style in literature – his direct pronouncements on the subject are few and far between – but the way his thinking enacts the non-teleocratic possibilities of style as a performative event. Indeed, his work echoes that of a modernist literary canon he is constantly engaged with – Mallarmé, Antonin Artaud, René
Char, Celan and Franz Kafka, among others – in which style is more than simply a way of expressing or transmitting an anterior essence but is, in itself, productive of thought through an encounter with reading. Indeed, Blanchot’s language has something of what Mallarmé associates with poetry, that is, the ability not simply to express meaning but to create it. As such, not only is Blanchot relevant to a consideration of the event of style but to ignore style in Blanchot is to fail to attend to the peculiar shattering force that his work has.

The conception of style that arises from reading Blanchot is not formalist. More than a series of linguistic features, style in his work appears as a quasi-phenomenological event of reading characterised by an infinite relation with the outside, interruption and what may be called a logic of ‘paradoxical anachrony’. Style arises as non-teleocratic, a mode of writing that relinquishes power and identity and that is marked by what Blanchot calls ‘the impatient waiting for the unknown’ (IC 48). While Blanchot would contest the reader-response claim that style is simply something that happens in the mind of the reader, the reader is structurally inherent in style as an event. Style is always oriented towards the readers, who, in reading, encounter the work in their singularity; however, style also creates its readers performatively thus being both anterior and consequential to them.

Blanchot’s emphasis on eventhood realigns our relation to literature, forcing us away from what he sees as the appropriation of art by culture. This issue is discussed in ‘Literature One More Time’, an essay in which Blanchot provides an ‘inventory’ of ideas that ‘have ceased to belong’ to literature (IC 397). The ‘masterpiece’, with its connotations of validation by institutional judgment, is pronounced to be obsolete (IC 400), and gone is the absolute faith in the ‘artist as a creative personality, the literary figure as an exceptional existence, the poet as genius’ (IC 397). The promise of immortality to which writers and artists were attracted is now ‘devalued’, and the idea of art as an extension of the artist in time, even after the end of his time, becomes less appealing and justifiable (IC 398). This shift, inevitably, urges us to rethink the notion of style as expression of the individual, human self, which may be used by the reader to retrace the profile of the writer as a powerful, ‘privileged individual’ who takes over from God and ‘create[s] something out of nothing’ (IC 401).

Significantly, however, the negation of the author’s primacy in the work of literature does not lead Blanchot to take the often trodden route of organicism or the new critical insistence on the unity of the form and content dyad that is prevalent in literary criticism (IC 398).