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FROM UTOPIA TO ETHICS OF THE IMAGE:
LITERATURE IN ROLAND BARTHES
AND MAURICE BLANCHOT

TABLE OF CONTENTS: *1. Introduction; 2. Literature as Utopia; 3. Literature as Mythology; 4. The Death of the Author; 5. Literature as Creative Absence; 6. Nothingness and the Mystery in Literature; 7. Ethics of Literature; 8. Conclusions.*

1. Introduction

In literature, various elements and components of the text are brought into complex relationship [Culler 1997, 29]. Literature is a way to express the surrounding world in an aesthetic form. We turn to literature when we want to read the story of our shared form of life: our moral and emotional, social for whatever aspects of life we think literature brings to [Vidmar 2015]. Literature, just like philosophy, can discuss such matters like politics and ethics, but literary texts are not seen in the same light as philosophy.

In some cases, literature can express the latest philosophical questions in a narrative that might be easier to understand than a philosophical text. Overlooking the literature qualities of philosophy omits important aspects of arguments and inappropriately trivializes the impact that literature has on thought [Jaima 2019, 13]

The separation between literature and philosophy can overlook the philosophical contributions of literature and ignore its philosophical impact. Oftentimes literature is understood as the complete opposite of philosophy, but it is possible to find the connections and interrelations between these two fields that might be beneficial for both disciplines.

The article investigates the notion of literature in two philosophers – Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot – and explores the philosophical dimensions of literature.

2. Literature as Utopia

Barthes wrote his book “Writing degree zero” as a response to Sartre’s “What is literature?”, in which Sartre relates literature to ethics and commitment. However, for Barthes, literature is an ambiguous activity that has meaning beyond the ethical dimension and functions as a potent power. Barthes viewed literature as something more than content and form, highlighting literature’s creative and liminal features that allow both the reader and the writer to enter into literature’s induced play of language and words.

Barthes stressed the importance of the third person in the novel. The third person is the essential voice that manifests literature through writing. The novel transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, and this transformation is achieved only in full view of society because it imposes the novel [Barthes 1968, 39]. The third person becomes a transgressional force that is impersonal at its core, but at the same time able to produce all kinds of signification.

Literature can be viewed as utopia because it creates a space of freedom from a fixed meaning, stable identity, and traditional structures of communication. Literature is a field where language can play, while signification can endlessly occur without being tied to any single interpretation because different readers can make different interpretations. This reflects Barthes’ view that writing (as well as literature) is not static, but continually reshaped by different styles, contexts, and ideologies.

The language of literature is not just a tool for communication, but is shaped deliberately for a specific “project” – a conscious, purposeful endeavour. The “project” can be understood as the author’s engagement with ideas, culture, or society through their writing. This newly produced literature is where language transforms into a kind of utopia – an imagined, perfect, impossible place. Literature becomes the site where language is freed from its traditional constraints and conventions, allowing it to embody new possibilities and meanings.

Literature, in this view, is a field where meaning is produced through the reader's engagement. One of Barthes' central arguments in "*S/Z*" is that literature is inherently plural and irreducible to a single interpretation or meaning. This challenges traditional literary criticism that seeks to pin down the "correct" meaning of a text. Instead, Barthes celebrates the multiplicity and openness that is central to literature's utopian character.

However, in "Writing degree zero", Barthes was critical of literature and its impact to writing. Literature is involved too much in bourgeois manners and that all forms of writing led to literature. He critiqued literature for adding unwanted meanings, conventional associations, the codes of tradition and dominant ideology to writing [Allen 2003, 20]. Such critique of literature led to the idea of "Writing degree zero" which refers to a neutral type of writing that doesn't have the voice of the author.

Thus, literature becomes not just a static aesthetic dimension, but a place where possibility of meaning and subjectivity is questioned. Literature becomes a philosophical practice that destabilizes metaphysical notions of origin and presence, which is later visible in Blanchot's theory of literature.

3. Literature as Mythology

While Barthes critiques much of literature for perpetuating myths, he also suggests that literature has the potential to resist and challenge mythical thinking. Certain avant-garde or experimental forms of literature, by disrupting traditional narrative structures or language, can expose the artificiality of myths and encourage readers to question dominant ideologies. Barthes values literature that reveals its own constructed nature, rather than pretending to offer a "natural" representation of reality.

In "Mythologies", Barthes sees literature as a mythical system that produces certain meaning, discourse and the process of signification. Writing is the form in which literature is "carved", writing signifies the literary myth. Every single thing in our society, whether it's an image or a text, produces some sort of narrative and meaning to us. The same

applies to literature, which is one of the main mythological systems in our society.

Barthes' connection between literature and mythology related to Levi-Strauss' view on the myth. Levi-Strauss noted that the myth is language because it has to be told, it is a part of human speech [Levi-Strauss 1955, 430]. Myth is made up from constituent units presented in language that are bundles of relations that, when combined, produce meaning [Levi-Strauss 1955, 431]. In a rather similar vein, literature consists of inner relations that produce a meaning without pointing to physical reality, but it can change the way we view physical reality when literature's inner relations allow us to produce a new adaptation and understanding of physical reality.

Barthes stated that there was a moral crisis of literary language in which the writer violently shifted his position toward a stance that rejects the naturalness of language [Barthes 1972, 134]. Literature was rejected as a mythical system, but Barthes stated that literature should not be merely reduced to semiology, and its signifying ability shouldn't be forgotten or neglected. The writer's language is not expected to represent reality, but to signify it.

By this, Barthes means that language gives meaning to certain aspects of reality instead of trying to depict reality [Barthes 1972, 136]. Literature is a fiction that resembles our life; it signals a reproduction of the living reality, but what it provides is the signification of certain aspects of reality which is formed into a narrative having world forming abilities.

Meanwhile, Georg Lukács suggested that literature can be connected to ideology and politics, which can manifest as an active, unceasing exploration of reality [Lukács 1962, 98]. Previously realistic literature assumed the unity of the world it described and saw a living whole, however, now literature can introduce elements of disintegration to portray contemporary world to reshape our relation to reality [Lukács 1962, 39].

Lukács believed that the reflection of the objective world by art, including literature, cannot be separated from the human beings' daily life because the human beings' real life makes up the entire social reality, while the objective reality reflected by art is not absolute, but historical, changing and dialectically evolving [Zhang 2024, 2-3]. Lit-

erature is seen as a dynamic process that captures reality in its historical becoming, revealing the contradictions and transformative movements within society which shapes how narratives form around the present and the past.

This can be related to Barthes' understanding of literature in "Mythologies". Similarly to Lukács, Barthes' focuses on literature's effective aspect of reality formation without naming it as revolutionary. Literature can be viewed as a power that is able to shape the way we see the world, and signifying ability allows us to emerge in a certain created image of the world. To achieve a critique of everyday life, modern literature must break the limits of form and dialectically unite the critique of everyday life and capitalist society with the art of holism [Zhang 2024, 5].

4. *The Death of the Author*

Literature is not the representation of what the author wanted to say, and it becomes independent of the author. Literature signifies and represents narratives and ideas represents narratives and ideas *autonomously*; it thus becomes a self-generating power that tells a story, without connecting it to the biography of the author. Barthes, similarly to Blanchot, viewed writing as neutrality in which the writer loses subjectivity and identity.

Writing begins when the writer enters his metaphorical death. When dealing with literature, the author is the center of the analysis focused on her identity, history, tastes, and passions. Barthes states in Mallarme's writing, the author is suppressed, the language speaks, and what we experience is the impersonality of the author:

It is language which speaks, not the author; to write is to reach, through a preliminary impersonality – which we can at no moment identify with the realistic novelist's castrating "objectivity" – that point where not "I" but only language functions, "performs": Mallarme's whole poetics consists in suppressing the author in favor of writing [Barthes 1988, 50].

Linguistically, the author is nothing but the one who writes, just as “I” is nothing, but the one who says “I”. The writer becomes an empty subject that has language and produces literature, which means that the written work creates the author, while the author withdraws from the text. Every text is written here, and the author is not trying to put her biography or life into words. In Blanchot, the author merely functions as a vessel for language and is in the realm of death as impossibility:

It is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks *in* me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared *between* me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because it contains the condition for all understanding [Blanchot 1995, 322]

The author becomes impossible because language depicts what the author is not. What we see here is the paradoxical presence of the author’s absence because when the author is writing, one is forgetting oneself. Barthes states that the text doesn’t have a personal destination: the author is not trying to depict their biography in writing, while the reader is reduced to a being without history, without biography, without psychology which makes writing and reading impersonal.

It is important to add Eco’s position of ‘open text’ and ‘possible worlds’ which enriches Barthes’ and Blanchot’s theories about the role of the reader. Eco stated that every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself [Eco 1984, 49]. ‘Open text’ allows for active participation in the creation of meaning, infinite possibilities of form and complete freedom of reception which is common for literature. While the concept of ‘possible worlds’ illustrates literature’s ability to construct multiple worlds, where literature’s ability to signify expands to infinite possibility.

5. *Literature as Creative Absence*

Blanchot's exploration of literature situates it as a unique, elusive experience that transcends the ordinary bounds of subjective existence. Literary experience lacks a clear starting point and places the individual in a realm where identity dissolves, ushering them into a metaphorical space of death. This "space of literature" is likened to death because it allows one to step outside one's normal self, experiencing a detachment from individual identity. Literature's space is a non-place because the person who is reading or writing the work is outside regular subjective experience. This reveals literature's philosophical dimension: it is a confrontation with absence and the void, forcing readers and writers to engage with the limits of language, existence, and identity.

The void of literature opens up infinite possibilities and creates a form of exile from the world. This detachment is phenomenological: in this impersonal realm, the experience of being changes. The literary space is thus not merely a place for creative expression, but a domain that transcends conventional notions of existence and identity. In this void-like space, both writer and reader confront their own absence, becoming part of the solitude of the work of art.

The work of art contains that absence that declares the impossibility of ever completing the work. When we read a work, we enter into the work's solitude which can be a solitude akin to the space of literature. It is a void-like experience in which we sense our own absence.

Blanchot points out that literature does not exist like any other things in the world. Literature exists not as a tangible object but through the experience it evokes that exists. Literature is not the physical words and sentences that exist in the book. Literature opens up an experience of "absence" – a key theme in Blanchot's thinking. The absence that literature brings forth is not simply a lack, but a blinding force that becomes present in its very absence.

Word in literature sustains its negativity by negating the concept and the thing at the same time. Literature, according to Blanchot, creates its inner world with inner connections between the words, while language in literature does not have any outer reality that would give a stable meaning. Therefore, in Blanchot's theory, literature represents the *double absence* of both word and the thing at the same time, while

what is present is a weak, trembling being of the words manifesting in the writer's poetics and style.

Blanchot emphasizes the work's separateness from the artist. Once created, the artwork exists independently, embodying an absence that neither affirms nor denies completion, where the solitude of the work is a void. This is where literature becomes a philosophical force that produces a liminal state of being in which both the writer and the reader engage with literature in an existential perspective.

To write is to break the bond that unites the word with myself [Blanchot 1982, 26]. Blanchot points out that one is able to start to write when one leaves the "I" and enters the realm of "him" or "her". As the writer transitions from the first-person "I" to a third-person realm, they shed their personal identity and enter a state of anonymity. This shift toward impersonality leads to a new mode of existence, a pure passivity of being, in which the writer does not express personal subjectivity but serves as a medium for the work of art to emerge. The writer commits the work to disappearance, and the fact of disappearing remains and appears as the essential thing because the work comes into being through its disappearance. Also, writing nurtures this death to give birth to a renewed relationship among things in and through language [Richtmyer 2007].

Blanchot relates impersonality and neutrality with the sightless, shapeless depth. Such definition of absence is interesting as it can be connected to Blanchot's later work "Madness of the day" in which the main character loses his eyelids and thus sees only light. The light in this context creates the absence of everything, nothing is seen in bright light, and the light becomes ever reaching powerful force that makes the absence of everything else present.

Blanchot's reflections on Kafka reveals a melancholic individual whose lack of subjectivity and drifting from oneself epitomizes this existential detachment. Kafka, in his attempt at autobiography, described himself as an ensemble of particularities, sometimes secret, sometimes explicit, endlessly throwing himself at the law, and not succeeding at having himself either recognized or suppressed [Blanchot 1995, 3].

According to Blanchot, Kafka represents something more than literature in such works as "The Trial" or "Castle" – Kafka inscribes the effect of disaster that manifests as horror of living on in a world that

resembles a never-ending maze. In Kafka's works, what we deal with is being dead while being alive, making such people survivors [Blanchot 1995, 8] who continue to exist in life without death. Perpetual and enigmatic characters of Kafka resemble the torture of being alive, but unable to reach any true justice or salvation, thus being stuck in ontological paradox without redemption where one experiences dying stronger than death.

Therefore, in Blanchot's perspective, literature offers a unique, transformative experience where the boundaries of identity, time, and existence are continually dissolved and reformed. Literature brings us to the limit of linguistic world, moving towards its impossibility. To write is to call into question one's existence, one's world of values [Blanchot 1995, 26], which is also the philosophical aim of literature.

6. Nothingness and the Mystery in Literature

Blanchot explains the relation between writing and literature which allows literature to be "born". Nothingness functions as the ultimate starting point of literature, but literature is not reduced to nothingness. In writing, "the writer has put himself to the test as a nothingness at work, and after having written, he puts his work to the test as something in the act of disappearing" [Blanchot 1995, 307]. Literature is paradoxically and metaphorically connected to death. Literature is oriented towards dying, while the author becomes detached from themselves, unable to live and unable to die [Hart 2023, 29].

Literature is not only illegitimate, but it is also null, and as long as this nullity is isolated in a state of purity, it may constitute an extraordinary force [Blanchot 1995, 301]. This is how Blanchot describes the paradoxical ability of literature to be everything at the same time and yet being nothing at its core.

Writing begins only when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself, where, at the heart of dissimulation, speaking is still but the shadow of speech, a language which is still only its image, an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary, the one nobody speaks, the murmur of the incessant and interminable which one has to silence if one wants, at last, to be heard [Blanchot 1982, 48].

Blanchot here has in mind that writing has to approach the nothingness – it has to go beyond already established limits of language. Blanchot asserts that literature transcends physical words and sentences, existing in its own void-like space. Writing approaches the limit where nothing is fully revealed, and it is through this boundary-pushing process that new, creative possibilities emerge.

Language consists of two distinct elements: one material (breath and sound), and one immaterial (thought, emotion, and meaning) [Blanchot 1995, 44], and these two qualities can be seen as form and content. Blanchot states that there's the issue of approaching literature. Some people see literature purely as a form, while others see it purely as content, and they conduct an investigation of literature from one of these perspectives without taking into consideration literature's dual quality.

Blanchot states that literature's mystery disappears once it is explained, which also means that literature is divided into content and form. Mystery is the metamorphosis of meaning in word and word in meaning. The mystery of literature is its essence that is unspeakable and impossible to put into words. However, as Blanchot stated, sometimes we experience the "double face of the star":

At rare moment, when it is a question of a piece of language in transformation or in decay, with expressions that are at once overused and usual, such as we use mechanically but that some stop or snag makes suddenly visible to us, we come to discover *at the same time* these two aspects of language: we perceive, in quick succession or annoying simultaneity, this double face of the star, as if, because of the disturbance, it had started to sway in front of us [Blanchot 1995, 47].

This is the moment when the mystery in language disappears because we see both sides of language at the same time. An interruption in language's flow makes us see the language itself, and its strangeness becomes perceptible. While literature, for Blanchot, "has a certain privilege it goes beyond the immediate place and moment, and situates itself at the edge of the world and as if at the time, and it is from this position that it speaks about things and concerns itself with men" [Blanchot 1995, 338-339].

Literature does not act: but what it does is plunge into this depth of existence which is neither being nor nothingness and where the hope of

doing anything is completely eliminated [Blanchot 1995, 340]. Literature becomes a space in which one is open to the passivity of literature, a place of non-action in which transformations are possible.

7. Ethics of Literature

Literature's space can be viewed as an abstract philosophical idea that describes a certain type of being in the world that is related to the process of creating and reading the work. By discovering literature's space, Blanchot is also able to explore and expand philosophical questions of being and experience in the realm of literature.

Blanchot's emphasis on the dissolution of the self and the embrace of impersonality in literature has significant ethical implications, particularly in relation to the concept of the Other. His view that the writer must let go of their personal identity and subjectivity to create literature suggests a radical form of openness to alterity (otherness), which mirrors ethical considerations in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas argues that language establishes a relation irreducible to the subject-object dichotomy: it reveals the Other, and only within language can this relation be constituted [Levinas 1979, 73]. Literature opens a new dimension in which the fictional other appears. We break the limits of the existing reality and create something graspable through literature, opening the possibility of ethical dialogue.

For both Blanchot and Levinas, ethics involves an encounter with the Other that goes beyond traditional self-centered frameworks. In literature, the writer steps outside their self, creating space for something radically new and impersonal, much like the ethical obligation to respond to the other without imposing the self's desires or understanding upon them. This ethical relation to the Other is marked by responsibility and a refusal to dominate or subsume the Other into the self's frame of reference. Blanchot's reflection on literature as an encounter with the "impossible" also resonates with philosophical themes, particularly those related to infinity, limits, and transcendence.

Also, for Blanchot, literature creates the ethics of the image. Literature creates dead-like images because what is written in the realm of literature instantly dies and becomes a corpse. Literature, unlike our

capitalist society, celebrates waste, because literature is created for no reason. The textual corpse, produced by every literary text, produces ethics of the image because these “dead-like” images embody radical alterity that cannot be mastered or consumed, thus resisting appropriation. This encounter with literature’s corpses is not aesthetic but ethical, because it calls us to face the limits of representation. Thus, literature teaches us to respect and encounter the Other, the ungraspable, and the inhuman.

8. *Conclusions*

Barthes’ and Blanchot’s understanding of literature transforms literature into a site of inquiry into meaning, being, and ethics rather than seeing literature merely as an aesthetic or narrative practice.

For Barthes, literature has a transformative power that shifts and creates narratives. Literature becomes the utopia of language because it is freed from physical reality and regular signification. However, in “Writing degree zero”, Barthes was critical of literature’s ability to add unwanted meanings and conventional associations, therefore he suggested the concept of “writing degree zero” which refers to neutral writing which is “free from literature”. In “Mythologies”, Barthes talks about literature as a mythical system in society, and literature should not be reduced to semiology. Literature has narrative constituting qualities that impact the way we see and understand reality.

Barthes in his essay “Death of the author” argues that the text does not reflect the biography, passions and opinions of the writer. This is a crucial element in understanding what is literature, because Barthes’ idea helps to view literature as independent of the author and becomes a self-establishing power.

Blanchot coined a term the “Space of literature” which refers to a conceptual void-like space. This space of literature is related to death because one leaves one’s regular subjective experience. In the space of literature, both writer and the reader experience the absence of themselves. Just like Barthes in his essay “The Death of the Author”, Blanchot also relates the space of literature with impersonality and dissolution of the subjective experience.

Blanchot's idea of literature as a "space of death" or "void" connects directly to philosophical concerns about the nature of being. His exploration of literature as a space where identity dissolves and the self becomes anonymous echoes existential and phenomenological questions about the nature of existence, presence, and absence. For Blanchot, literature is not just a creative endeavour but a confrontation with the limits of being itself.

Blanchot states that the very start of literature is nothing, and during the process of writing, the writer is able to transform this nothingness into a form. Literature is divided into content and form, while the collision of both sides is possible when both aspects of language (content and form) become visible. While literature is a passive space that expresses the double absence of the thing and the concept at its core.

Blanchot's concept of literature can be related to ethics. The dissolution of the self in the space of literature which becomes radically open to alterity and the Other. Literature creates a corpse that produces ethics of the image because we confront radical alterity in the form of literature. These dead-like images confront the reader with something unassimilable – images that resist aestheticization and challenge the reader to encounter the Other beyond representation.

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Keywords

literature; Barthes; Blanchot

Abstract

This work aims to present Roland Barthes' and Maurice Blanchot's views on literature and its relation to philosophy. The article presents Barthes' position of literature which is related to utopia, mythology, style, and the death of the author. Barthes stated that literature is a world-forming force, functioning like an utopia, and it cannot be reduced to semiology. Literature, in Barthes' sense, is a meaning producing power that functions in a mythological manner by creating never-ending interpretations. The death of the author allows literature to be freed from the context of the author. In a rather similar way to Barthes', Blanchot stated that the third person is more important than "I" in literature. For Blanchot, literature has its own abstract space in which various transformations of the writer and the reader are possible. In Blanchot's sense, the writer and the work are not identical to each other, and the writer has to give up her subjectivity in the process of writing literature. Blanchot also related literature to ethical dimension as ethics of the image which opens up the relation to the Other.

Il saggio presenta le prospettive di Roland Barthes e Maurice Blanchot sulla letteratura, con particolare riguardo al suo rapporto con la filosofia. In una prima parte, viene presentata la posizione di Barthes sulla letteratura in riferimento a concetti come utopia, mitologia, stile e morte dell'autore, grazie ai quali la letteratura è, rispettivamente, una forza capace di generare mondi (e irriducibile, quindi, alla semplice semiologia), una potenza generatrice di senso in chiave mitologica, un modo per emanciparsi, grazie al concetto di morte dell'autore, dal mero dato biografico e intenzionale. Anche per Blanchot in letteratura è più rilevante la terza persona che non l'"io": essa dispone di una propria spazialità astratta, in cui diventano possibili innumerevoli trasformazioni, capaci di coinvolgere tanto l'autore quanto il lettore. Da ciò deriva che autore e opera non coincidono, sì che l'autore è costretto, nel processo creativo, a rinunciare alla propria personalità, lasciando aperta una dimensione etica intesa da Blanchot come un'etica dell'immagine capace di dischiudere a una relazione con l'Altro.

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