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Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: A Critical Biography*, trans. John McKeane. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. v + 614 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0823281756.

Review by Adam Potts, Newcastle University.

Christophe Bident's *Maurice Blanchot: A Critical Biography* was originally published in French in 1998, with the title *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible: Essai biographique*.<sup>[1]</sup> This vital contribution to Blanchot scholarship is now accessible to English speakers, thanks to the careful and elegant translation by John McKeane. While this text does everything one would hope a biography might do—the reader comes away from this text with a rich account of Blanchot's life—this is not a simple biography. Bident understands that any account of Blanchot's life must take the ideas in his writing seriously. This means that the historical account of Blanchot's periods of solitude, illness, engagement with communities, and his friendships are shadowed by the conceptual/philosophical meaning of these terms found in Blanchot's writing. It is Bident's control of these two modes of the personal, one historical and one philosophical, that makes *Maurice Blanchot: A Critical Biography* such an impressive text.

The notion of biography, when considered in the context of Blanchot's life and work, is rendered more complex throughout the text. For example, in addition to the translation, McKeane authors the final section of the text called "Amor: Blanchot since 2003"—a chapter that reflects on Blanchot's reception since his death in 2003. In it, McKeane explains how despite "*A Critical Biography*" being chosen as the subtitle for this translation, thus leaving out the phrase "*Partenaire invisible*" from the original, "the notion of invisibility lives on in the choice to avoid using a photograph of Blanchot for the cover" (p. 469). Not only is this choice significant because it respects Blanchot's own opposition to the use of his photo, it also respects the fact that "Blanchot's readers knew him—or didn't know him—almost exclusively through his work" (p. 469); this is work that, as McKeane suggests, made death its business well before Roland Barthes announced the death of the author (p. 469). Bident also writes at length about this in chapter sixty-one, where he quotes Blanchot's own reasons for refusing to supply a photograph of himself to the Vu Agency in 1986, asking that his letter to the editor be used instead. In the letter, he explained his desire to "appear as little as possible, not so as to privilege [his] book, but to avoid the presence of an author with a claim to existence of his own" (p. 427).

All of this speaks to Blanchot's problematizing of the notion of biography, which makes writing a text like Bident's almost impossible. How is one able to give presence to the life of an author whose work is both a commitment to, and an embodiment of, self-effacement and self-

immolation? Indeed, this contestation of traditional notions of selfhood is integral to Blanchot's work. The self, for Blanchot, is only meaningful when it is pushed to its limits, when one starts to think about it in terms of plurality, excess and fragmentation, rather than individuation or through the lens of solipsism. This is why things like friendship, community and death are so important for Blanchot; they are the markers of limits and/or encounters that turn the self inside out.

Bident addresses this head-on when he discusses Blanchot's unusual account of solitude in *The Space of Literature*. In this text, Blanchot presents solitude as a way of describing the experience of the writer. He explains how even when the writer is in solitude, which is a state where one might expect to achieve an intimate knowledge of oneself, one's sense of self gives way to something other. [2] According to Bident, this means that the personal for Blanchot "can only be understood in terms of personality melting away, through a violent and often unpredictable rupture, into the impersonality of time" (p. 274). Blanchot's work exhibits an obsessive concern for this moment, as it speaks not only to the experience of literature but other phenomena that draw the subject outside of the limited confines of selfhood, such as friendship, community and death. The problem for Bident, then, is how to capture these two versions of the personal: how can he account for the personal in a chronological, factual, way that would tell us something about Blanchot's actual life while also capturing the personal as the violent rupture into the impersonality of time, in which the personal is turned away from individuation and toward something anonymous?

The temptation when writing a book like this would be to refuse, altogether, all biographical tropes, favoring a style that tries to mirror the depersonalized, almost dream-like prose of some of Blanchot's own work. Thankfully Bident avoids this. He makes a deliberate effort to tell the story of Blanchot's life. The book is structured in six parts, with each part capturing a different period of time (for example, part one: 1907-1923; part two 1920s-1940). Each part contains its own chapters that deal with events in Blanchot's life and his writing projects during that time. Although there is some overlap with the dates, things nevertheless proceed chronologically and sequentially. At the beginning of the text, the reader finds themselves at Blanchot's birthplace in Quain, "a hamlet of Devrouze" (p. 3), on September 22, 1907, at 2am. At the end of this version of the text, published after Blanchot's death and with the addition from McKeane, the reader arrives at the date of the event ("the absolute unknowability of death") that "is the driving force behind his [Blanchot's] work" and which is "now fixed in cold marble" (p. 465). In between these points, Bident offers a rich version of Blanchot's life, circling key events and relationships while mapping the different places he lived and worked.

However, Bident also conforms to his stated aim in the preface to "interrogate the presence, visibility, readability, vitality, and possibility of *the biographical*" for a life "bequeathed infinitely through *narrative writing*" and one "sustained through the most extreme confrontations with death" (p. xi). The life that Bident describes pivots around the event of writing and those other things that summon the personal, and therefore the biographical, to this interrogated space: these things include, among others, friendship, community, illness and solitude. But perhaps most interestingly, and before Bident gets to these themes, he positions Blanchot's account of the "primal scene" at the center of his work.

In chapter one, titled "Blanchot of Quain: Genealogy, Birth, Childhood (1907-1918)," Bident recounts Blanchot's childhood while painting a vivid picture of Quain. Bident tells us how

Blanchot was born into a “well-off and distinguished family” who owned farmland and a large home in Quain. He was one of four children (he had two brothers and one sister), who were all precocious in their own ways and all received a “solid classical education” at their father’s request (p. 6). All of this accounts for the biographical dimension of this chapter. However, in this chapter, Bident also draws a link between this period in his life and the primal scene.

The primal scene is a passage from *The Writing of the Disaster* where a child, aged around seven or eight, is looking out of the window at the garden of a house and at the ordinary, grey clouds in the sky.[3] This scene quickly turns into something unnerving. Bident quotes the passage at length, illustrating how Blanchot describes the sky suddenly opening and being “*absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had been broken) such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein – so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond*” (p. 7, italics original). Blanchot explains how the child is left with feelings of joy, which are taken to be sorrow by the adults, who thus make efforts to console him. But, crucially, the child says nothing and instead chooses to “live henceforth in the secret” (p. 7). This is not an easy passage to interpret, but Bident’s analysis and placement of it in the opening chapter frames it as an inaugural moment in Blanchot’s life: he imagines Blanchot, in Quain in 1914 or 1915, as the child staring out. For Bident, this is a retrospective piece of writing by Blanchot that marks an “opening onto the entire atheological reach of [his] work” (p. 7). This was Blanchot’s first encounter with solitude--“solitude as children experience it [...] ‘great inner solitude’ [...] ‘with grown-ups going to and fro around us’ indifferent to the profundities of childhood” (p. 7)—the sort of solitude which would become the solitude of the writer. The primal scene, then, is a key moment in Blanchot’s childhood for Bident, but only as it signifies a “childhood outside of mere representation or discussion” (p. 7). It is the moment the child (Blanchot) would “confide his entire inner experience” to the profundity of “the outside” (p. 7) rather than some notion of inner self.

This is not the only time Bident discusses the primal scene; it recurs at key intervals of the biography because, as Bident understands it, almost everything that interests Blanchot occurs within this scene. The primal scene describes an experience where the subject loses any grip on their sense of being and the world. All notions of identity, and distinction between subject and object, collapse into the chasm of nothingness. That experience is akin to the experience of literature as Blanchot values it. The type of literature that interests Blanchot does not content itself with the certainty of language. Instead, it plumbs the depths of the ambiguity and uncertainty of language, drawing forth the absence upon which naming, through the act of denaturation, is predicated. The writer, like the child, is thus drawn to what Blanchot elsewhere refers to as “the dark reality of this indescribable event”. [4] Everything is, therefore, contained in the primal scene because, as Bident explains, “events, objects, and places only ever refer back to language” (p. 294) and so back to this primal scene.

Bident also draws links between the primal scene and a number of other ideas that were crucial to Blanchot’s life and work, including friendship: “The entire friendship of thought is already there [in the primal scene], saturating the scene, binding it together” (p. 8). Bident gives an extraordinary insight into the friendships that were so important to Blanchot. The likes of Robert Antelme, Georges Bataille, Roger Laporte, Emmanuel Levinas, Dionys Mascolo, Denis Rollin and later Jacques Derrida, all (among others) play a pivotal role in Bident’s retelling of Blanchot’s life. But, again, this is not simply a historical account of encounters and exchanges, although that information is there. Bident constantly reminds the reader how these friendships, in their own

unique ways, guided Blanchot to new ways of writing, which, in turn, affected Blanchot's understanding of those friendships. For instance, Bident explains how it was impossible for him to complete the final form of the *récit* called *Death Sentence* [5] "before the years he knew Denise Rollin and Georges Bataille" (p. 237). Blanchot's friendships referred him back to language in a way that infused the primal scene of writing with the ethical dimension of the other—making writing a plural, rather than singular, space. Bident captures this by always keeping Blanchot's reflections on friendship close by when describing the friendships that were dear to him.

Blanchot's friendships played a crucial role in his philosophical thinking, particularly in his writing about community, and Bident captures this interrelationship carefully as the biography progresses. Although not entirely distinct, community distinguishes itself in Blanchot's work from friendship through a heightened political tone: it consolidates the inaugurating demand of friendship through a collective form of writing that would eventually consume Blanchot's political thinking. According to Bident's account, one of the most significant events in Blanchot's life that led to the thinking of community were the events that surrounded the publication of "The Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War," published in 1960. This publication, coordinated by his friend Mascolo, was written in support of the Jeanson network which helped the Algerian National Liberation Front and served to express the right of "writers and thinkers to be insubordinate" (p. 316). It was also a collectively written declaration that was a turning point in Blanchot's thinking and writing.

In what is arguably the most riveting section of the book, Bident carefully maps out Blanchot's involvement in the declaration and the fallout, particularly in terms of future writing projects. What is apparent in Bident's account is the significance that this collective endeavor had on Blanchot's subsequent writing and his thinking about "community." After the publication of the declaration, the idea of collective writing became a key instrument in Blanchot's thinking. It cemented his thought, first given in the primal scene, that language is not there to consolidate the thoughts of an individual. Likewise, collective writing "did not mean seeking out equally shared solutions" (p. 327). Collective writing, Bident explains, "had to allow one 'to internally go beyond [one's] own thoughts' and 'to give rise to new ones'" (p. 327). With each effort to create communal writing, all detailed carefully by Bident, Blanchot gravitates to the notion of community that would occupy the pages of *The Unavowable Community* [6] and his exchanges with Jean-Luc Nancy (pp. 435-444).

On the topics of friendship and community Bident captures some of the most important people and events in Blanchot's life. He also captures the uniqueness of Blanchot's understanding of these terms. Friendship is not reducible to the qualities of the individuals involved and community does not refer to any kind of geographical proximity. Friendship, as Bident explains, is a manner of thinking that effaces "all arbitrary boundaries between the public and private, between the political and personal" and involves openness to the dimension of the other based on an infinite nonreciprocity of "attentiveness, listening, generosity" (p. 247). The type of community that interests Blanchot is the kind that is founded on precisely this notion of friendship. But what Bident captures so carefully is the way both friendship and community find their greatest expression in writing, as Blanchot gravitates to a mode of writing that no longer pivots around one central voice or point; his writing evolves into a non-standard form that welcomes fragmentation and interruption as markers of plurality.

Rather strangely, then, this means that when Bident is discussing solitude—another theme that is crucial to his historical and conceptual retelling of Blanchot’s life—it is closely related to events and ideas connected to friendship and community. Bident’s account of Blanchot certainly paints him as a reclusive and private individual more often than not. There were periods in Blanchot’s life that “correspond to the image of the writer who was solitary” (p. 245), such as Blanchot’s time living in Èze. Even as Bident recounts anecdotes of those who met Blanchot, what emerges is an image of a respectful yet quiet man. And Bident documents how Blanchot’s life was burdened by chronic illness. From a young age, Blanchot had to deal with a number of medical problems that, when at their worst, would cut him off from the outside world. However, while this creates an image of the solitary or reclusive writer, these things were more often a gateway to the kind of solitude discussed in *The Space of Literature*. Bident captures how Blanchot’s withdrawal from the outside world, whether forced through illness or voluntary, often led to some of his most profound reflections on friendship and community as, increasingly, his writing became an effort to connect “what is personal (the genesis of creation) in relation to what is public (the demand of refusal and the possibility of community)” (p. 263). In other words, through a careful interweaving of the historical and philosophical, Bident demonstrates how solitude for Blanchot was often lived and thought in proximity to friendship and community.

With this layering of dense philosophical content on top of the historical details of Blanchot’s life, *Maurice Blanchot: A Critical Biography* is not an easy read, despite being wonderfully written. Bident makes very few concessions to those readers new to Blanchot. This text would feel more comfortable in the hands of a reader with a sound knowledge of Blanchot’s philosophy. But it is not meant to be an introductory text to Blanchot’s philosophy. As Bident explains in the preface, writing the “incessant back-and-forth between writing and life, between life and writing, is the task of every biography, and is the task none can fulfil” (p.xii). Bident’s aim is to get us as close as possible to that blurred space between life and writing, while confronting the complexity of impossibility that is the nature of this core demand. With this in mind, not only is Bident’s text essential reading for anyone working on Blanchot, it is essential in a distinctly Blanchotian way.

## NOTES

[1] Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible: Essai biographique* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 1998).

[2] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*. Translated by Ann Smock. (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 3.

[3] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*. Translated by Ann Smock. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

[4] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by Susan Hanson. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 35.

[5] Maurice Blanchot, *Death Sentence*. Translated by Lydia Davis. (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1998).

[6] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*. Translated by Pierre Joris. (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 2006).

Adam Potts  
Newcastle University  
[Adam.potts2@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Adam.potts2@ncl.ac.uk)

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