Literature, Ethics, and Decolonization in Postwar France

The Politics of Disengagement

DANIEL JUST

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Against the background of intellectual and political debates in France during the 1950s and 1960s, Daniel Just examines literary narratives and works of literary criticism arguing that these texts are more politically engaged than they may initially appear. As writings by Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus, and Marguerite Duras show, seemingly disengaged literary principles – such as blankness, minimalism, silence, and indeterminateness – can be deployed to a number of potent political and ethical ends. At the time the main focus of this activism was the escalation of violence in colonial Algeria. The poetics formulated by these writers suggests that blankness, weakness, and withdrawal from action are not symptoms of impotence and political escapism in the face of historical events, but deliberate literary strategies aimed to neutralize the drive to dominate others that characterized the colonial project.

DANIEL JUST is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Bilkent University. He has published a number of articles in journals including *Modern Language Review*, *New Literary History*, *MLN*, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, and *Philosophy and Literature*.

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To Aida

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Acknowledgments

Note on translations

Throughout the book English translations were used whenever possible, and sometimes modified to follow original texts more closely. Where English translations were unavailable, translations are mine and references are given to original editions.

Introduction
Literature and engagement

A major challenge of literature is that it is stubbornly indeterminate. Both a vice and a virtue, the indeterminateness of literary language has acquired the status of an impasse, one which was perhaps most directly and resolutely faced by Jean-Paul Sartre and Stéphane Mallarmé. The question of whether the indeterminateness of literary language is a vice or a virtue, however, has rarely been treated without some degree of ambiguity. Not even for Sartre and Mallarmé was the issue so neatly polarized. Although for Sartre indeterminateness was clearly a vice, for Mallarmé it was not necessarily a virtue. Mallarmé too saw it as a vice, but one which he, unlike Sartre, did not want to, or did not think could be, overcome. Whereas Sartre, as his *What is Literature?* (1947) and *The Roads to Freedom* (1945–1949) demonstrate, wanted to correct the propensity of literature to defer and diffuse meaning, and make literary language and what it talks about coincide by finding a transparent language in which words – in a twist on J. L. Austin – would *do* things, Mallarmé chose to follow the imprudence of literary language and, because it could be neither ignored nor directly contested, accepted the stakes and decided to defeat language at its own game. What these two projects, in their ever intensifying versions – the increasing frenzy of Sartre's writing that could not hide the anxiety that if it came to a standstill it would expose the unsteadiness of its language, and Mallarmé's growing obsession with silence and the vision of the blank page, as his preface to *Un Coup de dés* reveals – bring to our attention is that both the effort to stabilize meaning and the attempt to dispose of it prove equally futile.[1] The more one tries to make literary language convey the intended meaning, the more it slips away; and the more one attempts to eradicate it, the more obvious it becomes that referentiality will not go away. As meaning can be neither fixed nor destroyed, literary language is forever suspended between the referential and the figural.

   This book discusses writers and critics who related to the indeterminateness of literary language in a new and original fashion: by way of suspending

the vehement struggle with referentiality and the resulting dialectical return of either meaning or its volatility. Heirs to both Sartre and Mallarmé, Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus, and Marguerite Duras wrote and theorized a type of literary narratives, addressed here as exhausted, slow, and minimalist. This type of narrative borrowed from Sartre the conviction that literature and politics are not isolated endeavors, and from Mallarmé the goal, with a substantially modified strategy of achieving it, of weakening signification. Detailing the particular literary and historical circumstances under which the two diverging practices, Sartrean and Mallarméan, lost their incompatibility, this book suggests that all language is political and that even apparently self-involved, semantically deficient, and narratively minimal types of stories can carry substantial ethical and political weight. The premise of the political nature of literary language rests less on the conviction that language and literature always take place in concrete historical milieu, and that their relation to it, or refusal to assume one, inevitably generates political effects. What is more important than the belief that even art for its own sake, in spite of its apoliticism, is political, is the problematic nature of the prevailing understanding of the relationship between literary language and politics. Based on the myth of fixedness and semantic stability, language that serves as the foundation of political society, that is, conceptual language, is not stable, because like all language it oscillates between the referential and the figural semantic fields. As the political dimension of language cannot be limited to its referential aspect and separated from the unavoidable instability that defines all language, language is political precisely to the extent of being unstable. And literature is where this instability is most sharply brought into the open. As a privileged site of revealing the interplay between language's stability and instability, literature is political because it deliberately and systematically shapes the tension between the two semantic fields of language. Literature is political because it is sensitive to its fictionality and dependence on figural language, and because it exercises the workings of language and its indeterminateness in a rhetorically self-conscious fashion. When Paul de Man discussed Rousseau's discovery of mankind's "linguistic deceit" with respect to the possibility of government, he argued that literature is "condemned to being the truly political mode of discourse."[2] Literature is aware of how language works and self-aware in enacting it. Roland Barthes expressed a similar idea, claiming that "the 'truest' literature [la littérature la plus 'vraie']" is the one that uses its knowledge of language to explore "the *unreal reality* of language [la *réalité irréelle* du langage]": Literature, he proposed, is "*the very consciousness of the unreality of language* ... that tension of a consciousness

which is at once carried and limited by words, and which wields through them a power that is *both absolute and improbable.*"[3]

The war of writing

When conceptualizing the relationship between literature, politics, and ethics, this book keeps to the classical unity of time and place. The main focus is on France in the 1950s, and the writers who receive most attention are Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus, and Marguerite Duras. The choice, although not fortuitous, does not suggest that these writers and critics formed a group, let alone that they composed a common program. In fact, with the exception of Blanchot and Duras in the late fifties, and again the late sixties, there was only modest contact among them. They devoted a substantial amount of writing to each other's works – especially Blanchot and Barthes – but there was very little collective effort and coordination. Neither is their association a generational issue. Although they were born within only eight years of each other – between 1907 (Blanchot) and 1915 (Barthes), with Camus, Duras, and Barthes within just three years – whereas Blanchot and Camus were already established figures by the early 1950s, Barthes and Duras, having written in the 1940s, were still awaiting their breakthroughs. The writers also came from different backgrounds. Camus and Duras came from impoverished families from the French colonies, and Blanchot and Barthes from a middle-class environment in provincial France; Barthes had training in classics, Blanchot in philosophy, and Camus and Duras had literary and journalistic ambitions. But despite this absence of instantly recognizable links, the loose set of ties that connects these writers does not discredit the relevance of what they had in common as public personae. If writers of varying personal histories, political backgrounds, and ideas about writing express, relatively independently, an analogous set of concerns, it is all the more reason to describe these concerns, as they reveal something important about their time and the urgency of their call. What Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras had in common was their critique of the genre of the novel, a penchant for a certain type of storytelling, and desire to be politically engaged while at the same time remaining writers of literature. In other words, all of them were in a dialogue with Sartre and wanted to recast his notion of committed literature in light of recent events.

Much changed for Sartre and those who challenged his take on the indeterminateness of literary language in the decade following his *What is*

Literature? (1947), with its vigorous appeal to committed writing and renunciation of the Mallarméan approach as disengaged. The most crucial event, one that for many redefined their understanding of literature and the role of the writer, was the war in Algeria that took place between November 1, 1954 and March 19, 1962. The Algerian war, a "battle of writing," as Michel Crouzet dubbed it, or, as Jean-François Sirinelli called it, a "war of petitions," was both a decisive and a divisive event for the self-definition of many French writers and intellectuals.[4] With the dream of French universalism finally disintegrating, the ensuing discussions about freedom, violence, and national identity produced surprising alliances (between the left and conservative Christians, for example) and rifts and separations (the famous discord between Camus and Sartre, or the making of Raymond Aron into a major polemicist on the more conservative side of the political spectrum). Political allegiances were rearranged again in 1956 after Nikita Khrushchev's revelation of the crimes of Stalinism at a Communist Party congress and the Soviet invasion of Hungary later that year, undergoing further shifts (e.g., Sartre's move towards Tiersmondism) and detachments (e.g., Maurice Merleau-Ponty's distanciation from the far left, and especially from Sartre).

With the exception of Camus, and slightly later Pierre Bourdieu, most French intellectuals, however, knew relatively little about Algeria first-hand or from extensive research. Neither did they perceive it as a problem. Personal experience and comprehensive knowledge were often thought to act as a restraint, preventing one, as the main line of Sartre's reproaches against Camus went, from seeing the larger picture and endorsing historically necessary changes. Even the preference for political factions in Algeria and Algeria's future directions were sometimes driven by this greater historical vision, as demonstrated by, for instance, the support for the National Liberation Front (FLN), with its younger progressive activists, over the Algerian National Movement (MNA), with its older, more conservative, and less revolutionary-leaning members. It was this dismissive attitude that led to Tony Judt labeling the postwar decade in France an "age of irresponsibility" during which everyone – except Camus and Aron, in Judt's view – accepted the fact that they had to pick sides: left or right, East or West, pro- or anti-colonialism.[5] Notwithstanding their perspective and depth of insight, nevertheless, for most French intellectuals – with perhaps the exception of those affiliated with the French Communist Party (PCF), which, as Danièle Joly insists, kept a dual and alibistic stance (illustrated by the PCF's abstaining from a vote of confidence on Algeria in June 1956 while supporting the government's proposal on "special

powers" for the Minister-Resident in Algeria earlier that year) of being in favor of the French presence in Algeria but not supporting military intervention: being in favor of "French Union," as the party put it, in which Algeria would not have independence but "liberty"[6] – the Algerian war was a site of genuine political interests and engagements, serving as a vehicle for intellectuals' self-conceptions and redefinitions, regardless of whether they argued for unconditional independence or only social, cultural, and political transformation.

This book engages in a conversation with historical events, but it is not primarily about the political views of the writers and critics that it examines. It is mainly about their ideas on literature. It describes how these writers and critics responded to historical events, not so much in terms of their political interventions, but in their fictional narratives and essays on literature. Interestingly, for them it was literature and writings on literature that became the focal point of major political contentions. Their position was shaped throughout the 1950s in response to Sartre's growing insistence that even the most committed literature proved useless to deal with reality in any practical way, and hence had to be condemned.[7] Sartre wanted to abandon literature altogether, and even though he ultimately was not able to do so, he was adamant in promoting concrete political acts in relation to which literature was relegated to an ever more inferior position, a diversion of attention, or, at best, a second-rate fellow traveler.

As Sartre was urging for a move from literature to politics in order to facilitate a more direct and effective critique of the French campaign in Algeria, popular writers within mainstream French culture who were in support of the state policy appealed to the power of literature to lend itself to the status quo and externalize prevalent values. Literature has always shown a remarkable ability to subvert the status quo. But it has perhaps even more often done the opposite, that is, it has reflected taken-for-granted beliefs and presented unquestioned values as natural. One of the central topoi – or, "myths," as Barthes would say – of the second case, by which writers of more conservative stripes appealed to these spontaneous values during the Algerian war, was the figure of the paratrooper. Best exemplified by Jean Lartéguy's bestselling *The Centurions* (1960), a novel about a group of paratroopers who, though alienated from French society after leaving Indochina, prove themselves and their devotion to France in Algeria, the figure of the paratrooper symbolized steadfastness to national values and functioned as a conduit of the view that the Algerian conflict was a defense of Western civilization. Although *paras*, as they came to be called, often went directly to Algeria from France's humiliating 1954 defeat

at Diên Biên Phu, Vietnam, they retained their heroic reputation and, as John Talbott showed, held an important place in French imagination as symbols of physical strength and high moral principles[8] – strength, as Barthes points out, is often "mythified" by being given the moral "form of a duty"[9] – despite attempts to debunk this vision as a quasi-fascist delusion. Although the central place of paratroopers in popular French imagination during the Algerian war was a blatant distortion of facts – Philip Dine underlines how paratroopers "dominated the news coverage of the conflict, in spite of the fact that they made up less than 5 per cent of the total French forces in Algeria"[10] – this misrepresentation was in line with the deeply embedded evocation of the Maghreb as a place where the French naturally belonged: a Latin place, a Mediterranean culture of undeniably Roman origins.

Much of the response to the Algerian war in mainstream French literature and media was an expression of frustration at France's loss of stature and identity. As suppressed memories of the Vichy regime, the defeat in Vietnam, the loss of Tunisia and Morocco, and the increasingly precarious situation in Algeria undermined France's sense of national prominence, its blatant exclusion from international politics exacerbated this feeling of disappointment. France's status as a non-nuclear power, the way it was kept out of the intelligence exchange loop between the US and the UK, and how it was sidelined from any political decisions on Germany were, among other humiliations – as these blows were perceived in France and which, as Irwin Wall details, France countered with calculated anti-American foreign policies[11] – both symptoms and consequences of the loss of grandeur. The US' very critical stance on French involvement in Algeria, driven, as Matthew Connelly argues, by the concern that Algeria might become a Cold War battleground, only fueled the French complexes.[12] After the 1956 Suez crisis – with France feeling betrayed when Britain, under US pressure, rapidly withdrew from a joint French, British, and Israeli attack on Egypt, an operation that France joined with the goal of suppressing the potential spread of pan-Islamism espoused by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser into its holdings in Northern Africa – France decided to reassert its importance and independence. France would now induce a massive modernization of its industry, work towards developing atomic capability, and, most importantly, hold onto Algeria, as it was seen as a question of national identity and prestige.[13]

It was this old-fashioned sense of national identity and prestige that, together with its cultural articulation and reiteration in mainstream culture, was put into question by left-leaning intellectuals. What united

otherwise diverse leftists against the predominant national sentiment was their opposition to axiomatic truths, cultural shortsightedness, and national myths. While for Christian critics, such as François Mauriac, the problem was not so much the tradition itself but its implementation – not too much tradition, but too little of it – for Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras the problem was more profound. Although these writers and critics lacked a unified political position – Camus was a moderate leftist whose views on Algeria were seen increasingly as conservative; for Blanchot the Algerian war continued his slow departure from a dubious prewar far-right agenda to his late 1960s leftist radicalism; Duras was a self-proclaimed communist operating outside the PCF; and Barthes was a progressively more politically engaged literary and cultural critic – what they had in common was a critique of their culture and its unquestioned values, and what differentiated them from more radical activists, such as Sartre, Francis Jeanson, and Frantz Fanon, was their rejection of the latter figures' unconditional endorsement of action.

The writers and critics that are examined in this book formulated their approach to literature and politics against the various national frustrations and the way they were culturally enacted, as well as against the radical views of those such as Sartre. They not only refused to use literature as a tool of agitation, whether one of opposing the status quo or reinforcing it, but also to abandon literature altogether in favor of direct political engagement. Not that they ignored the need for concrete political action. Their public involvement sometimes rivaled that of Sartre. Neither did they merely point to the obsolete nature of Sartre's conception of literature and its unsuitability to cope with the latest narrative forms. What bound them together was their attempt to readdress the notion of literary commitment while at the same time showing that Sartre's call to action was part of the problem it wished to rectify, not its solution. Their concern was that Sartre's rhetoric of work, projects, and action replicated what it wished to overcome. More was needed, they believed, and literature – a specific type of literature – was vital to the enterprise.

Literature and politics

The dominant view of literary engagement in France at the beginning of the Algerian war was still that of Sartre's *What is Literature?*, which stressed the obligation of prose literature to represent reality and communicate with a concern for clarity. What this utilitarian approach meant in the 1950s was that writers and critics who wanted to be politically committed

needed to articulate an unambiguous opposition to mainstream culture. Mainstream French culture during the Algerian war was at the peak of repressed memory through which the Fifth Republic tried to suppress all past divisions (i.e., the Vichy regime) in the name of modernization and for the sake of a new beginning.[14] France's rapid socio-economic transformation and soaring prosperity – which, as Tony Judt remarked, were surprisingly unaccounted for and often completely ignored by the intellectual left[15] – were accompanied by a discourse of ahistoricity that enacted the state-induced modernization, facilitated erasures of both the past (Vichy) and the present (Algeria), and promoted a dehistoricized and form-driven art. An unequivocal opposition to this mainstream cultural trend was seen as paramount to any engaged response.

When during the course of the Algerian war Sartre, inspired by Francis Jeanson's unmitigated dedication to direct action, further radicalized his view of engagement, urging for a turn from literature to politics because even the most committed literature, he started to realize, averts our attention from real events in the present, he was not defending an entirely different set of principles than before. He still advocated action. Both at the present moment – political action as an instance of real and consequential public involvement – and before – committed literature as a means of awakening freedom and inciting action via a literary language that is *in actu*, directed outside of itself, towards reality and the future, instead of being contemplative and self-involved – the emphasis on action was the driving force of his conception of engagement. Except in this instance, this conception challenged the very existence of literature. According to Sartre's amended scenario of engagement, one becomes part of history not by writing fiction, but only by taking part in political action.[16]

Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras were not unsympathetic to the questions Sartre raised. They were neither against political action, nor did they think that literature could be a substitute for action. Their problem was Sartre's persistence in promoting categorical action, including violence, which stemmed from his unshakable conviction of the inevitable historical progress and individual's role in it. Others too, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lefort, drew attention to the peculiarity of Sartre's mix of necessity and voluntarism and his reduction, as Howard Davis puts it, of all human relations to a conflict between consciousnesses and all historical activity to a voluntarism that bows to the inevitability of historical progress.[17] What is intriguing about Sartre's views is that after the escalation of violence in the 1957 Battle of Algiers, a majority of the urban French public turned against the war and favored negotiations with the

FLN, suggesting that in 1957 the nation was already opposed to violence and open to the idea of Algerian independence; a view supported by John Talbott, who shows that as of the following year 56 percent of the population supported withdrawal from the war, with the figure rising to 78 percent in April 1961 at the onset of negotiations with the FLN.[18] Even though Sartre's resoluteness and devotion to militancy after 1957 – arguably shaped, at least in part, by his guilt over not getting engaged enough when the opportunity had presented itself previously (i.e., the Spanish Civil War and the Resistance) and by his fear of not missing the train of history again – were instrumental in shifting public opinion even more against the war, Sartre's explanations and theoretical justifications were often questionable. As James D. Le Sueur claimed, Sartre's expositions contributed to Algeria's "epistemological recolonization" after independence by influencing Algeria's leaders with political philosophy that, as Pierre Bourdieu added, was irresponsible because it did not fit Algeria's demographics and history.[19]

What Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras found objectionable about Sartre's argument for unconditional political action and against literature was the pragmatic evaluation and functional comparison of literature and politics. Indeed, at times of great emergencies literature interrupts itself in favor of action. But this interruption cannot be posited as literature's duty. Although there are moments in history that are more critical than others, and that is when literature gives way to action, there is never a time of absolute tranquility and inconsequentiality of action when all is resolved and when one can finally turn to literature. As there is always a need for social change, and thus for action rather than literature, the functional assessment of the two is predicated on the false assumption that literature and political action pursue the same goal with identical means. Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras do not suggest that there is a time for literature and a time for action, and that one needs to find a balance between the two, or know when one takes precedence over the other. Their critical and fictional writings, which were never bereft of political considerations, unsettle the dichotomy between literary intransitivity and direct political engagement. In this respect their position is less extreme than that of Georges Bataille, who proclaimed that literature is, in fact, guilty – and not only when measured against political, ethical, and social concerns that he deemed utilitarian, but essentially and inevitably.[20] For Bataille, the purpose of literature, as well as any other fundamental and not merely utilitarian human activity, such as eroticism, ritual, and sacrifice, is to resist practicality and preserve the distance from anything that could be

transformed into utility. If Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras complied neither with the rhetoric of duty nor with the paradigm of guilt, it was because for them the choice was not between responsible politics and guilty literature, between only utility or only a resistance to utility. Theirs was a conception of literature that was political, but that did politics differently – as *literature*.

The main conviction behind Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras's contributions to the issue of literary commitment is that true change, the aim of all engagement, cannot rely solely on politics. One surely needs to get involved in political activities, but while keeping to them, a more fundamental, even if less conspicuous, change has to take place, because without it all politics falls on barren ground. This change is not a mere transformation of the imaginary. Even though much of what these authors offered in their literary and essayistic writings in the 1950s are either fictional responses to reality or critical reflections on similar responses by others, these writings regard the changes in the imaginary as inseparable from the changes in reality. Literature not only introduces new ways of perceiving reality. It also transfigures what can be thought, felt, and imagined. Literature is not a matter of political activism and the constitution of political subjects. Literature and politics are driven by demands that emerge only in their respective realms, with the role of the former being a catalyst of new perceptual forms. By augmenting ethical and political sensibilities, literature opens different and innovative ways for conceiving the self and its interaction with others. Only rarely, though, are these new directions descriptive and prescriptive in an unequivocal fashion. Arguably they even cannot be, because in such a case they would be expressed in a language burdened with conventional meanings and tied to the old mode of perception. Instead of depicting a positively described counter-order to the status quo, literature fashions alternatives by suspending established orders of meaning and signification. What binds together Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras is the particular form of this suspension. The type of literature they theorize and practice suspends the order of signification by creating a literature that repels any new hierarchies because it undermines the transmission of meaning. Against literature of action and denotation defended by Sartre, these writers propose literature that is engaged because its mode of writing destabilizes the dominant conception of the self and the concomitant valorization of action.

When Pavel Zemánek, a character from Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke* (1967), insists that to turn away from politics is not an apolitical gesture, he talks about how young people do not want to sit at endless political

meetings, hoping to change the world through political debate and engaged action. They want to travel and do things, and that, he concludes, is how they will actually change the world. The writers and critics that are studied in this book agree that political action alone does not shape the world. The way people think and feel plays an equally important role, and literature is instructive in steering the course of these experiences. But unlike Pavel, their position does not endorse a shift from politics to private life and personal interests. Pavel is an opportunist who goes with the flow of historical changes; successful both at the time of political reforms in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, in which the book is set, and a decade earlier during Stalinist repressions. When Pavel lectures to his former university friend Ludvík about young people and changing the world, he displays the same enthusiasm as in the early 1950s when he supported political purges, of which Ludvík was, ironically, a victim. Whereas Pavel celebrates action – political action in the past and private activities in the present – and encourages a shift from the public to the private, the writers that are examined in this book were skeptical about both the privileging of activity and action, and the privatization of life, which, as Henri Lefebvre showed, was a major systemic shift in French society at the time.[21] Their stance on engagement was curiously dual: an active involvement in urgent political issues while fostering the principles of literary commitment that undermine action. In their fictional works and essays on literature, these writers promoted principles that differed greatly from what governed their political involvements: inactivity, weakness, and exhaustion.

Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras's works in the 1950s – in particular, Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*, Blanchot's *The Last Man* and an array of his critical texts, Camus's *The First Man* and stories *Exile and the Kingdom*, and Duras's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* – show that the main issue with respect to literature and politics is not in choosing between either retreating from politics or dedicating all one's energy to politics. Neither is it in finding a balance between the time devoted to literature and the time devoted to politics. And even less so is it in tenaciously guarding the either/or division between the two endeavors, or in defending the viewpoint of caution and poise of Aron's "committed observer." What these writers and critics conceive of is a mode synchronization in which literature and politics remain separate ventures, as the tools of literature and politics can never fully coincide because there is always a need for political action. By their distinct means, however, these ventures follow the same goal. Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras suggest that one has to engage in political action, at times resolutely and categorically, while at the same time cultivating an attitude

that goes against resolute action. As a privileged place for such cultivation, literature is supposed to *do* nothing. Although a complement to political interventions, the role of literature is to systematically undermine action. Not only is literature not supposed to expound concrete politics and incite political action; it is supposed to promote withdrawal from action. If the common goal of active politics and inactive literature is change – alteration of established models of thought, perception, and imagination – literature's role is to withdraw from action and representation because only this withdrawal holds the potential for a radical transformation of what can be thought, perceived, and imagined. The aesthetics of bareness and emptiness, a product of a literature of inactivity, weakness, and exhaustion, allows for a new arrangement of relations in both literature and beyond it, not in a naive gesture of assuming that this arrangement will be simply adopted, but by contributing to a change of dominant aesthetic forms, cognitive patterns, and political models.

Literature and ethics

Although the question of ethics is never too far away when one examines the political aspirations of literary works, and this is particularly true for the writers that are discussed in this book, the affinity between ethical and political issues in literature does not imply an uncomplicated coexistence. The fact that sometimes there is as much contiguity between ethical and political issues in literature as there is adversity owes something to the same ambivalent condition of ethics and politics in general: "Politics is always permeated by the recognition that ethical belief, however strong or complete, is necessarily insufficient to promote the fulfillment of human interests, though politics-talk cannot consolidate and extend particular interests—cannot achieve hegemony—without the rhetorical invocation of ethics."[22] The dilemma of ethics and politics is in their frequent congruence of goals but incongruity of means of achieving them: While ethical concerns often drive political involvement, politics has to accept provisional and often insufficient solutions to ethical demands; and while political channels might be key to any radical changes in the ethical domain, ethics has to renounce the merely provisional solutions provided by politics. In the former case, the danger is a pragmatic *Realpolitik* that postpones ethical demands indefinitely, as there is always one more pressing political issue and practical decision to make that compromises ethics. And the risk of the latter is that it can dissolve into a kindhearted, but ultimately ineffective, idealism that abdicates the political altogether.

In literature, the dilemma of ethics and politics loses none of its acuteness. Also here the predicament is a situation in which one is forced to choose between ethics and politics, but in which favoring one might lead to a compromise of the other. This dilemma still has all its intensity. Contemporary literary theory continues to be divided as to whether it is the ethical or the political that should have the upper hand in literary studies. Martha Nussbaum, for example, believes that literature plays an important social role because of its essentially ethical nature. She presents literature as vital to nurturing people's moral faculties by cultivating readers' emotions, moral thoughts, and capacity for empathy. Literature is a medium of ethical thought that is different from abstract theorizing because it unites thought, emotion, and imagination in concrete and practical situations without the limitation of formal argumentation.[23] As a result of this ability, literature's role is to help in forming a society governed by the Universalist belief in goodness and reason. Literature does not just tell us more about ourselves and reveal previously unseen things, as if literature were a commentary on life, and thus similar to philosophical investigation. Literature brings into the open the intrinsic impossibility to achieve happiness if one is left, as Nussbaum puts it, in the "coziness of one's fat ego."[24] Nussbaum believes that literature is irreplaceable in this opening of the self to the other, and that it is only through our relationship with literary works that others become accessible in their singularity. We learn how to deal with alterity by reading literary works. According to Nussbaum, literature, and particularly the genre of the novel, serves as a model for social reforms and judicial policies because it engages both reason and emotions: As we contemplate lives of other people, we experience sympathy, which incites "vivid and empathetic imagining" that changes our views and approaches to others.[25] Nussbaum insists that this openness to the other needs to be maintained, not distorted during the transition from ethical motivations to political deeds, and that literature can do that.

Fredric Jameson is one of the most towering figures of the defense of the political in literature and literary criticism. Jameson would agree with Simone de Beauvoir that politics sometimes needs to reject ethical benevolence, "to the extent that the latter thoughtlessly sacrifices the future to the present."[26] For Jameson, ethical criticism – "still the predominant form of literary and cultural criticism today," he notes – is driven by metaphysical thought and humanistic ideals of wisdom and the meaning of life.[27] The problem with the focus on the ethical in literature is the often moralizing and didactic attitude that comes with it. However much ethical critics wish

to resist this attitude, ethics implies not only openness to the other, as Nussbaum argues, but also exclusion and postulation of certain types of otherness as evil. Ethics is always tempted to "recontain itself by assigning hostile and more properly political impulses to the ultimate negative category of *ressentiment*."[28] Jameson insists that as the focus on the ethical is more often than not psychological and psychologizing, and thus preoccupied with the self rather than the other, moving toward an interpersonal dimension in which the subject would be truly decentered necessitates a political approach. Only a political approach – what Jameson calls "interpretation proper," a "strong" rewriting that is opposed to the weak rewriting of ethical codes that merely replicate the unity and coherence of the self – can reveal all the notes of the text and bring to the surface what we always seek in literature: levels of meaning that are not immediately apparent. In the modern world and literature, individuals and literary characters face, beyond ethical choices in interpersonal relationships, a much greater determining force in the shape of society and the movement of history. According to Jameson, we cannot understand literature without placing "its ethical concerns in their historical situation, without seeing them as a response to an essentially social dilemma."[29]

The polemic between Camus and Sartre is instructive with regard to the issue of literature, politics, and ethics, and Nussbaum's and Jameson's opposing views on this issue. Accusing each other of privileging, in the first case, ethics, and, in the second, politics, Camus represented the politically impotent moralist who chose ethics and Sartre was the stubborn militant ready to sacrifice ethics to political objectives. According to Sartre, the ethical principles of calm, uncertainty, and self-doubt championed by Camus led to political castration, while those of action, confidence, and strength put forth by Sartre, according to Camus, resulted in a politics of unrestrained and self-righteous acts. Although both Camus and Sartre denied that their positions necessitated relinquishing, for the former, politics, and, for the latter, ethics, Camus criticized Sartre's emphasis on action as a politics that originated in the abstract concept of history, was removed from reality, and condoned acts of ethical violence whenever they facilitated the envisaged historical progress; while for Sartre it was Camus whose stance of defending ethical causes perpetuated ethical injustices, because it failed to deal in a politically effective fashion with the larger social and historical wrongs. These mutual allegations applied to literature as well. Sartre dismissed Camus's narratives as parables of moral dilemmas that entailed political passivity, an accusation that Camus denied, pointing to Sartre's narrow concept of the political. Camus, in turn, saw Sartre's

defense of committed narratives of resolute actions and strong-minded decisions as violating the ethical by centering on the self that is vigorous, confident, and absorbed in its own idea of what constitutes proper action.

But there was another issue to which the writers and critics that are studied in this book drew attention, an issue that explains why Camus deemed Sartre's understanding of the political too narrow and why he believed that one did not have to choose between ethics and politics, neither in literature nor in real life. This issue concerns literary forms and modes of narration. Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras suggest that the dilemma of ethics and politics in literature rests on an unquestioned conviction that only narratives that capture historical details, depict the urgency of characters' actions, and describe the complexity of their inter-action with others are ethically and politically committed. They find this conviction problematic because it only deems as engaged narratives that foreground the mimetic principle. Against the position that deems show-ing, depicting, explaining, and postulating indispensable to literature's ethical and political merit, Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras insist, each in their own way, that the ethical and political in literature cannot be limited to propositional discourse of representation and explanation. While Sartre's notion of commitment presupposes stability of literary expression, in literature, even more than in everyday speech, language and referentiality cannot be stabilized. If these writers and critics take anything from Mallarmé, it is the recognition that language cannot offer a final, stable, and complete picture – oddly enough, something that is confirmed by the rapid tempo of Sartre's writing, which, in order to stay connected with the immediate reality and the course of history, and so as to prevent anything in reality from slipping away, tries to take a hold of the entirety of experience in a frantic attempt to record everything.

As for Sartre, for Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras literature must be engaged with its time. But what is at stake is more than direct repre-sentation and promotion of concrete ethical and political values. Language, style, and form are equally important as vehicles of the ethical and political in literature. Instead of indicating a turn to ahistorical formalism though, this particular shift to language, form, and style heralds a different concep-tion of the ethical and political in literature, one which mitigates the tension between literature's ethical and political concerns. What matters in the type of literature advocated by these writers and critics is neither a language that serves as an ethical call to action by instructing us what to do and how to feel, nor a language that depicts socially and politically complex situations (or hides this complexity behind an ideologically constructed

explanation of the status quo). Theirs is a version of literary ethics and politics that is engaged with interpersonal relationships and their ethical dimension, as well as larger social, political, and historical forces, but that does not reside in the mimetic principle and direct enunciation of its message. Positing language, style, and form as the means through which the ethical and political in literature appear aesthetically, and via which the aesthetic reveals itself as endowed with ethical and political meanings, the type of literature these writers create and theorize (in Barthes's case, only theorize) draws attention to the falseness of the dilemma of having to choose between, on the one hand, an engaged literature of density, concreteness, and representation, and, on the other hand, a depoliticized and de-contextualized literature for its own sake. Circumlocution is literature's strength rather than its weakness. Writers should accept it and work with it, rather than attempting to find a transparent language of constative utterances designed to secure meaning. With regard to ethics and politics, literature's indirection is potentially liberating. Literary narratives that conceive the ethical and the political as neither prescription nor action liberate ethics and politics from their tendency to absolutism and hegemonic oppression. As Carol Jacobs suggested with respect to ethics, but one can extend the argument to politics as well, the indirection of literature when it comes to ethical issues "challenges the potential tyranny of an ethics that threatens to become unquestioned compulsion."[30] Literature is not a didactic genre of instruction. Thomas Keenan argued that instead of offering fables that give us moral and political lessons, literary works expose us to something that "breaks with the regimes of meaning and sense it purports to offer."[31] By undermining the conceptual priority of the self, identity, and meaning, literature opens us to something new and irreducible to ourselves and to what we already know.

Literature, ethics, and politics

Form is something specific to the way that art, and literature above all, communicates. In literary narratives, form communicates something that is irreducible to denotative statements. Attention to form gives literary inquiry rigorousness without which all critical statements and theoretical conclusions would be unsubstantiated. As Jan Mukařovský declared, form is "an indirect semantic factor" that carries meaning.[32] Attention to form does not imply hostility to what lies outside of the confines of the text. Rather than retreat into technical formalism and introspective aesthetics, attention to form enables literary studies to fully capitalize on the

developments in this discipline, developments that have increasingly emphasized cultural, social, and political aspects of literature. According to Ellen Rooney, attention to language, style, and form "is a matter not of barring thematizations but of refusing to reduce reading entirely to the elucidation, essentially the paraphrase, of themes—theoretical, ideological, or humanistic."[33] As the writers and critics that are studied in this book suggest, language, style, and form come to the forefront of literary writing and criticism especially at times of great political upheavals. In direct reference to Barthes's theory of literature, developed in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Paul de Man confirms that at times of political turmoil or political unfreedom literary form serves as a site of reflection, justification, or critique.[34]

The main trait that connects Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras with regard to literary language, style, and form is their emphasis on narrative exhaustion, stylistic austerity, and minimal form. Abandoning in literary texts and criticizing in essayistic texts instrumental language, traditional plot construction, and strong characters that actively project themselves into the future, these writers and critics favor linguistic indeterminateness, narrative slowness, and characters that as subjects of action are weak and inactive. This version of literary exhaustion, a quality that Dominique Rabaté elevated to the aesthetic program of an entire epoch of postwar literary narratives, nonetheless is not a culmination of the long history during which literature tried and used up all of its aesthetic options.[35] For Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras, exhaustion is not merely a reaction to previous narrative modes, or a result of coming to terms with literary tradition in order to find innovative techniques or announce that it was no longer possible to do so. Exhaustion, weakness, and emptiness are not symptoms of the exhausted retreat from literary history. This book suggests that the shift in modes and theories of storytelling that took place in France in the 1950s was a historically conditioned response to the most immediate occurrences. The ambition in the call for austere style, weak characters, and inhibited pace of storytelling was a vision of literature that would do justice to the demands raised by the present moment and serve as the foundation of a new politically and ethically committed aesthetic.

In the 1950s, the demands related to the present moment meant mainly Algeria. But there was more to Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras's reactions than responding to only a single event. Already before the war they – especially Barthes, Blanchot, and Camus – had identified a more general problem with their time, with Algeria soon to become its grave, but not sole, manifestation. The problem in question was the deeply seated

trend in Western modernity of an increasingly more vigorous social
and cultural validation of the image of an individual as a strong self. They
believed that the socially and culturally valorized notion of a strong, self-
conceiving, and self-enclosed type of individuality encouraged a dialectic of
action and struggle for recognition that was violent because it closed in on
itself, blind to what fell outside its field of vision. Their objective in
rethinking literary commitment was to provide a critique of the position
of strength and action by undermining the strong self as an agent of action
and formulating a literary figuration of a different type of selfhood. Pre-
senting slow narration and exhausted literary characters, they envisioned a
thin textual space with virtually no plot, and with characters that do not
stand out as strong individuals and sharply delineated subjectivities. This
uneventful literature, which borders on semantic blankness, gives no sup-
port for allusions, understatements, and concealed dramas. The attention
falls not on action, but on slow and exhausted language, with the desired
effect of deactivation: deactivation of the struggle to stabilize meaning by
constantly compensating for its slipping away, deactivation of literary
characters' internal dialectic of reflection and projection, and deactivation
of characters' interpersonal struggles for recognition. The ultimate aim of
this remodeling of literary commitment on the basis of narrative exhaus-
tion, semantic thinness, and an idiosyncratic form of aesthetic minimalism
is both political and ethical: to change the dominant understanding of the
self and its cultural symbolization and representation in literature.

   If we follow Leo Bersani's recent claim that "art is the site of being as
emergence into connectedness," because art "celebrates an originating
extensibility of all objects and creatures into space," a literature of phe-
nomenological blankness and semantic thinness described in this book is
an art that not only celebrates, but also facilitates, such connectedness.[36]
The notion of the self based on strength, self-assurance, and appropriative
relation to the outside makes everything outside the self into an image of
the self, and thus, instead of connectedness, encourages separation and
self-enclosure that are fundamentally flawed because, as Bersani shows,
they lead neither to self-possession nor to a possession of the outside, but
rather to a loss of both the self and others.[37] Questioning the social and
cultural dominance of this notion, as well as its ethical and political
implications, Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras formulate a type of
literature that is engaged because it weakens the self and exhausts the
dialectic of its egotistic drives (narcissistic, sadistic, and masochistic). They
propose that in a thoroughly exhausted textual space the self is divested of
its subjectivity and turned into a depersonalized self that relates to the

outside differently. Exhaustion circumvents the negative repercussions of strong individuality and determined action by making the self less aggressive and self-involved. Envisioning a different relational regime, one which would not perpetuate self-involved action and the struggle for recognition, this type of literature posits that the role of the writer is to articulate an increased connectedness to the world and to others. Narrative minimalism, slowness, and exhaustion offer this new relational regime. Slowness, exhaustion, and small forms suspend meaning, corrode the characters' self-enclosure, and expose them – flattened and emptied of private concerns – to one another. In this ascetic literature of bareness and nakedness, in which thin and weary words draw attention to the emptiness of language, characters, and the present moment, the self is undone slowly and non-aggressively. As non-possessive states that imply openness to other people, exhaustion, slow language, and disarmed self become symbolic means of representing human togetherness and openness to others.

   Modes of storytelling that sometimes appear to be detached and self-absorbed are not always mere exercises in style locked within the confines of the text. Similarly, a strategy of downplaying descriptive details does not automatically qualify for apolitical formalism and erasure of history. Undermining the division between the literary, the ethical, and the political, exhausted literature is not apolitical. Neither is it culturally conformist and in political compliance with the ideology of timelessness that supplemented the rapid modernization of France and its transition to individualism in the 1950s. Weakness, exhaustion, and blankness do not indicate a fatalistic capitulation in the face of the presumably unstoppable force of history toward individualism, self-centered values, self-confidence, and self-assured action. On the contrary, they uphold the self that is exposed to others and interlaced with them. By challenging the literary language of declaration and description, exhausted literature opposes individualism. What Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras offer in response to history, the present moment, and the political and cultural ideals that led to it is a literature that is ethically and politically committed because it creates the image of a deinteriorized personhood that allows both for interpersonal connectedness and intimacy, and for otherness.

From exhausted literature to blank memory

Although this book describes patterns and themes rather than abiding by a strict chronology, it observes some sense of sequence and thematic order: It starts with issues of literary history and theory in Chapters 1 and 2, and

moves toward political questions and closer literary analyses in the chapters that follow. And while the central chapters traverse the decade of the 1950s more than once in both directions, an idea of temporal succession is maintained throughout, with most of the earlier texts featuring in the first half and most of the later ones in the second.

The first chapter examines Roland Barthes's interest in stories of low dramatic energy and inhibited narrative tempo. In the Anglo-American world, Barthes is usually associated with the antimimetic turn in literary criticism in the early 1980s, which replaced the traditional concern for the subject, history, and reality with the poststructuralist notions of deferrals, traces, absences, and the pleasure of the text. This chapter offers a different picture of Barthes, one of a writer who never abandoned his penchant for neutral writing. Starting with the notion of writing degree zero and continuing with his later texts on film and photography, this chapter analyzes Barthes's preference for stylistic asceticism, an exhausted aesthetic, and literature that suspends the transmission of meaning. Against the background of postwar debates about literary commitment, the chapter reconstructs Barthes's theory of exhausted literature and conceptualizes it as a form of writing that is engaged because, as Barthes suggests, it offers an alternative to the dominance of novelistic principles in storytelling.

The hallmark of Maurice Blanchot's contribution to literary narratives and literary criticism is his ideal of emptiness, narrative slowness, and stalled action. Blanchot devoted many of his fictional and critical texts to literary stories in which the narrative voice is weak, exhausted, and unable to achieve the fullness of a speaker who can confidently tell a story. Chapter 2 discusses Blanchot's theoretical writings – both the most famous and those lesser known – by focusing on the unique manner in which stories of impoverished means that Blanchot studies in his essays construct literary characters. Praising narrative slowness and unadorned compositional devices in these stories for their ability to desubjectivize characters, Blanchot argues that the slow and exhausted type of story radically changes the way literature has conceived of literary characters. Similarly to Barthes, Blanchot links the traditional conception of literary character to the genre of the novel and proposes that exhausted literature is engaged – ethically, historically, as well as politically – because it changes the novelistic depiction of individuals pursuing self-mastery.

The emphasis on stylistic asceticism and narrative exhaustion in Barthes's and Blanchot's texts is not a question of simple aesthetic preference. The third chapter describes the historical and political milieu in which Barthes and Blanchot introduced their arguments for literary slowness and exhaustion.

The issue of colonization and the process of decolonization were particularly decisive for their defense of exhausted literature, and, especially in Blanchot's case, also for the decision to get involved directly in political debates over the ongoing war in Algeria. Challenging the principle of self-mastery, an underlying tenet of not only the novel, but, as he believed, also the era's egocentrism and ethnocentrism, Blanchot suggested that if the West wants to overcome its self-absorption, it has to avoid all resolute gestures because these gestures repeat the same self-assured principles that in fact led to the West's self-centeredness. The focal point of discussions is Blanchot's narrative *The Last Man* (1957). Reading this story as a critique of the position of mastery and resolute action, this chapter discusses *The Last Man* as a foil to Blanchot's literary essays and presents weak characters and a slow mode of narration as two pillars of a new engaged form of storytelling.

The critique of the position of action and mastery is further developed in Chapters 4 and 5 in reference to Albert Camus, his later literary works, and his controversial views on the Algerian war. For Camus, it was Sartre whose literary texts and political interventions personified the position of resolute action and a longing for mastery. In response to Sartre's plea for firm action and unconditional commitment, a plea which according to Camus perpetuated self-righteous acts and thereby nourished a cycle of violence, Camus proposed weakness. Chapter 4 discusses the protagonist, the narrative technique, and the themes of blank history and empty memory introduced in Camus's unfinished novel *The First Man* (written between 1958 and 1960, and published in 1994) as a literary attempt to symbolically represent the subjective disposition of weakness. Placing *The First Man* in the context of Camus's project of redefining the notion of engaged literature, this chapter describes how Camus imagined that a literature that champions weakness, slowness, and blankness can be instructive in preventing violence and can provide a foundation for reconciliation between antagonistic groups. *The First Man* offers a literary portrayal of personal weakness that opposes individualism and promotes an understanding of commonality that bypasses the violence inherent in political appeals to unified action, common history, and shared ethnicity of a given group.

Chapter 5 looks at two of Camus's shorter works of fiction that immediately predate his work on *The First Man*: the novella *The Fall* (1956) and a collection of stories *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957). As literary contributions to political issues, primarily colonialism and decolonization, and to a lesser extent the topic of ideological fanaticisms and the legacy of World War II, these narratives emphasize wide implications of the behavioral

principle of shame. Camus's characters are often exposed to the gaze of others and as a result frequently experience shame. Pertaining to one's own dishonorable behavior and the shame experienced by others – someone else's shame in Camus's stories is shameful also to those who witness it – the spectatorial mechanism of shame as Camus presents it is inseparable from a dialogic concern for others. Unlike guilt, which perpetuates the logic of violence and, as Camus maintains, is behind Sartre's notion of engagement, shame is more directly intersubjective as both ethical and political principle. This chapter discusses shame as a complement to Camus's uncertain, subjectively weak, and slow and cautious characters. Turning the acting self into a being for others, shame makes each character act so as to avoid both experiencing shame and shaming others. In this chapter, Camus's literary argument in favor of shame is presented as politically motivated because, as a guiding principle of action, shame neutralizes violence, fosters dialogue, and ensures a minimal level of cohabitation in conflict-ridden situations.

As the chapters on Barthes, Blanchot, and Camus demonstrate, the technique of exhausting narration, obstructing deixis, minimizing action, and emptying out literary characters served these writers as a way of interacting with their immediate reality and the present moment. The concluding part of the book examines the political and ethical aspects of this technique in regard to the past and the future. Chapter 6 discusses a renowned text by Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1960), written and published at the height of the Algerian war. Drafted as a film script and rewritten a year later, this story of a love affair between a French woman and a Japanese man was an important literary and political event. This chapter describes how *Hiroshima Mon Amour*'s technique of foregrounding absences and silences conveys historical events and how it interacts with reality. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* introduces three political themes: the bombing of Hiroshima, the end of World War II in central France, and colonial exploitation. Nevertheless, these themes are not depicted directly. Composed of fragments of the past and the present, Duras's text stages its themes by displaying their resistance to being comprehensively represented and incorporated into a literary story. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* proposes not that certain historical events cannot be represented, but rather that they should not be represented authoritatively and conclusively. This chapter addresses Duras's technique of resistance to representation as a politically inspired choice: Similarly to Camus's fiction, this technique endows literature with the role of suspending the violence of monologues and single perspectives on traumatic events.

The final chapter conceptualizes an idiosyncratic genre, a hybrid cross-breed between the short story and the play, developed by Marguerite Duras as an extension of her experiments with compositional devices and character construction in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Designed as an alternative to the novel, these hybrid stories exhibit an unusually low dramatic voltage, a great simplicity of plot, and characters that are almost entirely devoid of psychological interiority. This chapter presents the blank aesthetic of Duras's hybrid stories as radicalization of her previous style with the vision of creating a literature that would undo the self as an individual and uphold radical otherness. Duras understood radical otherness in both ethical and political terms – as an ethical opening of the self to something beyond the sphere of its narcissistic self-extension, and as a politically engaged opening of the present to the future. In response to the events of May '68, examined here as an expansion of the primary focus of the book on the political event of decolonization, Duras conceived of the blank aesthetic as literature's answer to the unusual forms of political activism and alliances that emerged in May '68 and its aftermath: She posits the blank aesthetic as literature's way of cultivating an ethical and political sensibility that signals a fundamentally different political and social future.

The title of this book is not an endorsement of disengagement. While deliberately an oxymoron, *the politics of disengagement* stresses politics, not disengagement. As the writers and critics examined here demonstrate, there was a politics specific to what many have interpreted as plain apoliticism. This politics was not an escapist stance of disengagement, but a form of engagement of its own accord. The principles of blankness, minimalism, silence, indeterminateness, weakness, and even shame are not negative, not to mention impotent. They are dis*engaged*, having been deployed to a number of potent political and ethical ends.

Neutral writing and Roland Barthes's theory of exhausted literature

In *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) Roland Barthes sets for himself a truly colossal task: to trace the relationship between a "history of literary expression [histoire du langage littéraire]," that is, a history of writing that is purely formal, and "the deeper levels of History [l'Histoire profonde]."[1] The enormity of this task becomes immediately apparent, as Barthes frequently capitalizes terms such as Literature, Novel, and History, which, as Susan Sontag points out in her preface to the English translation, suggests an understanding of history as a rather abstract and generalized notion.[2] Although Barthes exerts great energy to endow his typology of literary styles with a concrete feeling for historical process, he is not always convincing. Parallels between social systems of given periods and literary styles that correspond to them are rarely described with the necessary detail. This fact becomes most obvious in sections devoted to the most recent form of writing – writing degree zero [le degré zéro de l'écriture]. Considering the title of the study and its clearly stated historicizing intention, writing degree zero gets very little space, a surprisingly brusque formal analysis, and the least specific treatment of its place in both History and a history of literature.

Writing Degree Zero has a unique place in the evolution of literary theory. It uses both historicizing and structuralist terminology, and yet at this early date Barthes is not forced into taking sides or trying to find their common ground, as the incompatibility of the concepts of History and Structure, which would soon come to preoccupy French literary critics for more than a decade, has not yet fully emerged as a problem. In *Writing Degree Zero*, it is not yet clear whether Barthes will join Sartre's camp – or those Marxists such as Lucien Sebag and Lucien Goldmann who will be open to Structuralist ideas – or that of Lévi-Strauss, or those Structuralists such as A. J. Greimas and Jean Pouillon who will remain open to Marxist concerns for History. Neither unreservedly Marxist nor yet Structuralist, Barthes's eclectic method in *Writing Degree Zero* offers neither a comprehensive

answer to the question of History nor a methodical text-based analysis of the neutrally blank mode of writing in a Structuralist fashion. The slimness of the volume and the obliqueness and curtness of the analyses it offers make it clear that, in spite of the opening declaration, the goal of *Writing Degree Zero* is different: a response to Sartre's conception of literature and literary commitment. The concept of writing degree zero that Barthes formulates with barely concealed enthusiasm could not be more unlike the type of literature defended by Sartre in *What is Literature?* (1947). The most important question in *Writing Degree Zero*, one around which Barthes constantly circles but does not tackle directly, is what kind of political commitment does writing degree zero represent if its modus operandi, as Barthes stresses, undermines the very instance of meaning? What does this type of literature allow us to say about its historical place and political relevance if its literary purpose is to avoid transmitting messages?

Writing degree zero and the novel

Even though *Writing Degree Zero* was immediately hailed as a major contribution to the study of narrative discourse, it was not planned as a genealogical treatise. Many years after its publication, Barthes admitted that the book was initially conceived as a short study of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942).[3] We can only speculate what led Barthes to this shift of emphasis, which confined the parts covering *The Stranger* to only a very small portion of the final volume, but the genealogical argument proposed in *Writing Degree Zero* suggests that the originality of *The Stranger* as a prototype of writing degree zero becomes apparent only when seen vis-à-vis the novel and against the background of its development as a genre. *The Stranger* takes on an emblematic role in *Writing Degree Zero* as the defining moment of change of literary and philosophical paradigms. Camus's first novel is both a condensation of a new narrative trend and a symbol of the joint crisis of the novel and the metahistorical consciousness. Barthes identifies this novel as the turning point after which both the novelistic discourse and the Hegelian scheme of consciousness, after being seriously challenged by early twentieth-century modernist experiments, finally disintegrated, having dealt a mortal blow to the nineteenth-century idea of narration that, according to Barthes, united History as a teleological notion and the novel. Problematizing both the previous use of literary language and the socio-cultural realm with which it was bound, the type of narration in what Barthes sees as Camus's "antinovel" does not only reveal that History and Novel are historically conditioned forms of representation. It also offers an alternative to them.

The most crucial element in *The Stranger* is its peculiar mode of writing. According to Barthes, this mode fundamentally questions the instance of style and language as mere mechanical reflections of historical necessities. It is not a coincidence that the perspective from which *Writing Degree Zero* examines various literary styles and modes of writing (*écriture*) coincides with the moment when literature suddenly turns against the genre of the novel and against itself as literature. At this moment of questioning the novel, it is as if the sole purpose of literature suddenly becomes destruction of itself as a means of communicating meaning. Aptly enough, the theme of silence and literary devices capable of generating it assumed a central place in postwar French criticism. At this time, literature and criticism put an end to the aspiration of the arts to execute mastery over reality, an aspiration that Georg Lukács famously posited as the crux of the genre of the novel.[4] Although Lukács was right to underscore that the immanence of life and its meaning have become a problem in the modern era, literature now rejects novelistic principles and refuses to continue in unifying heterogeneous social experiences in order to reconstitute the lost immanence.[5] Barthes christens this new literature writing degree zero, a category that encompasses all literary narratives that systematically suspend the domineering tendencies of the novel to master reality.

Writing degree zero is a distinctive type of writing in which signification is not of primary concern and in which the disposition of language to stabilize meaning is largely neutralized. What for Sartre in *What is Literature?* represented the strength of all prose literature, namely its power to convey meaning, becomes for Barthes an obstacle with which literature is destined to struggle. Barthes's main dispute with Sartre concerns the fact that to stabilize meaning, as Sartre believed is a duty of the novel and any engaged writing, means to transform to a static form "the ineffable binding force running through existence [la liaison ineffable de l'existence]" (38). Barthes suggests that as a way of writing and constructing a story the novel petrifies human existence. He identifies the preterite and third-person narration as the two most dominant novelistic principles. Dismissing first-person narration as a viable alternative – Barthes describes it as an "obvious solution" (35) that takes the reader into an all too easy confidence – he insists that the preterite and third-person narration create an artificial sense of self-sufficiency and completion. By giving "the imaginary the formal guarantee of the real" (33), the preterite and third-person narration try to eliminate the opacity, uncertainty, and solitude that define modern life. However much the novel tries to fashion a reality that is complete and in which the individual is not isolated, the outcome is irrevocably illusory.

Not only does the novel present bourgeois values as universal by carrying them over to sections of society and social groups for which they remain heterogeneous but, more importantly, as a genre it destroys the duration that defines human existence and its immanent progression. In its quest to compose an intelligible and reassuring type of narrative, the novel reduces reality to an order, a point in time that is part of a causal chain. Barthes concludes that "the Novel is a Death [because] it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an oriented and meaningful time [le Roman est une Mort [. . .] il fait de la vie un destin, du souvenir un acte utile, et da la durée un temps dirigé et significatif]" (39).

The question is whether the mortification of life described by Barthes is not an unavoidable consequence of literary language as such, and whether it does not appear in all literary narratives. Sartre took this question very seriously, leaving what he came to see as novelistic necrophilia behind and slowly abandoning all literature in favor of political engagement and nonfictional writing. Barthes, however, does not give up on literature. Although he believes that most literary narratives stifle life and turn it into either dead or illusory images, he singles out those works of modern literature that have tried to avoid this predicament by lingering on what he calls "the threshold of Literature" (39). It is not entirely clear what this notion of the threshold between literature and life exactly designates, but Barthes uses it as a benchmark against which he measures both literary genres and individual works in terms of how long they manage to balance on this threshold. The longer they can do it, the greater they are. If we follow his openly anti-Sartrean statements about the essence of literature being its disappearance and the nature of literary language a tendency "towards its own destruction [propre destruction]" (37), Barthes clearly validates the kind of literature that, short of silence, successfully adapts to and prolongs its own disappearance. By suspending denotation and refusing to compose positive messages, literature at the point of vanishing, "in a sort of miraculous stasis" (39), successfully holds onto the threshold between literature and life because it is "stretched but not yet destroyed by this crowning phase, an order of signs [par le couronnement d'un ordre des signes]" (39).

Flaubert and the literature of silence

When tracing instances of stylistic experiments that draw close to the threshold of literature, *Writing Degree Zero* reserves a special place for Flaubert. Barthes is fond of Flaubert's obsession with silence and his

opposition to the novelistic pretense of a total language experience. Flaubert challenged the traditional notion of storytelling and told a story while simultaneously creating the impression of silence. Flaubert's is a self-confessed literature that makes its rules visible and puts literature's artificiality on display. By making verbal tenses perform the function of "*signs* of Literature" (65; italics in the original), Flaubert's narratives put a mask in place and point to it at the same time. In Barthes's historical view, Flaubert is both a father of the modern novel and its saboteur, because already in this first instance of modern writing there is a seed was planted for its destruction. Flaubert's *écriture* – the first to unsettle the novel and the first in the line leading to the blank style of the antinovelistic writing degree zero – gives another meaning to Barthes's phrase, "The Novel is a Death." The novel is a death not only because it freezes duration, which defines human existence. Neither is it only because as "a gesture of sociability" the novel reduces literature to a dull commodity and "establishes Literature as an institution" (37). As Flaubert's self-destructive style demonstrates, the novel is a death also because it perpetuates the death that Flaubert instituted into it as a genre.

Regardless of whether we accept Barthes's somewhat hurried assessment of Flaubert's place in the history of the novel, what is potentially more damaging to Barthes's genealogical project is the superficiality of his analysis of Flaubert's novels. While the argument that Flaubert revealed the inner contradiction of the genre of the novel might hold as convincing, the almost complete absence of a comparison of Flaubert, whose work foreshadows writing degree zero, and Camus, where the concept finds fuller flowering, weakens Barthes's emphasis on the difference between the novel and writing degree zero. If Barthes wishes to give his concept the kind of validity which he imagines it has, he must differentiate it from other, seemingly similar, techniques. What exactly are the stylistic elements that make Flaubert's technique into the precursor of writing degree zero?

Flaubert's major stylistic innovation is his ability to create an impression of silence and emptiness, which is exactly what draws Barthes's attention to him. As Proust was first to observe, Flaubert's style relies heavily on the use of the imperfect, which has the effect of entangling the lives of everyone involved in a state of motionless self-prolongation. *Sentimental Education* in particular, according to Proust, gives a long account of an entire life "without the characters, as it were, taking an active role in the action."[6] Flaubert's narratives accentuate this universal sense of motionlessness by means of the text's sudden hypersensitivity to detail. At crucial moments of action Flaubert's narratives, often abruptly, shift to irrelevant details. As the following passage from *Sentimental Education* shows, Flaubert's

clotting descriptions, which interrupt the story in the middle of dramatic situations with unnecessary descriptive details, have a numbing effect on action as well as narration:

> The street lamps shone in two straight lines, indefinitely into the distance, and long red flames flickered in the depths of the water. The water was the color of slate, while the sky, which was brighter, seemed supported by the great masses of shadow that rose on each side of the river. Buildings, which the eye could not distinguish, intensified the darkness. Beyond, over the roof-tops, a luminous haze floated; all noises melted into a single murmur; a light wind was blowing. [Les réverbères brillaient en deux lignes droites, indéfiniment, et de longues flammes rouges vacillaient dans la profondeur de l'eau. Elle était de couleur ardoise, tandis que le ciel, plus clair, semblait soutenu par les grandes masses d'ombre qui se levaient de chaque côté du fleuve. Des édifices, que l'on n'apercevait pas, faisaient des redoublements d'obscurité. Un brouillard lumineux flottait au-delà, sur les toits; tous les bruits se fondaient en un seul bourdonnement; un vent léger soufflait.][7]

When citing this passage, which depicts Frédéric's walk through Paris while dreaming of Madame Arnoux, Leo Bersani notes that one never finds such self-contained sections in Stendhal or Balzac. What is more, in Flaubert these parts are not scene developments or preparations for action, but, as it were, the main "events." Bersani points out that although on its own this passage might give us an impression of naturalness, because it is the main event, rather than a scene development, its economy of description and attention to detail suggest calculation and artificiality. "It is as if an excessive concern with the realistic immediacy of impressions," Bersani argues, "led, finally, to the reduction of the real to some transparent mechanical tricks."[8] In Flaubert's novels, passages like this have a congealing and immobilizing effect on the narrative. By making words heavy and unmanageable, Flaubert's prose – a combination of what Bersani describes as "the frozen tableaux in the *style indirect libre*, the nonconnective *et* to introduce a final clause, the adverb at the end of a sentence, and the deadening *c'était* at the beginning of descriptions" – creates the characteristic sense of Flaubertian silence and emptiness.[9] Gérard Genette calls Flaubert's periodic moments of inhibition an "escape of meaning into the indefinite trembling of things."[10] This carefully crafted technique of paralyzing both action and meaning gives Flaubert's narratives the powerful feel of a petrifying gaze of things that fascinated Sartre. Caught in the net of this idiosyncratic style, Flaubert's narratives and characters appear as if struck numb, with the resulting de-dramatized action leading, as Genette concludes, to a "denovelization of the novel [déromanisation du roman]."[11]

Barthes would agree with Genette's assessment that Flaubert succeeds in making language "lose its meaning in order to accede to the silence of the work [œuvre]," but only partially.[12] Although Barthes initially celebrates Flaubert's ability to make language fall silent, this celebration gradually turns into criticism. Barthes's problem with Flaubert is that he introduces a mode of writing that lays down the foundation for the notion of writing as a craft (*écriture artisanale*). According to Barthes, Flaubert institutes a normative concept of writing that betrays the original antinovelistic impetus of his innovative style. Flaubert is a writer who participates, however consciously and subversively, in what he undermines. Although he launches traps into his novels and makes his characters get caught in them, his mode of writing remains relatively conventional because it hinders narrative progress and the transmission of meaning only sporadically and for short periods of time. In the end, and in spite of the state of prolongation generated by imperfect tenses, Barthes remarks, "it is still possible to lose oneself reading Flaubert" (68).

Barthes's preferences in *Writing Degree Zero* are unmistakable, and Flaubert did not go far enough to satisfy them. With the novel as his main target, Barthes praises Flaubert for his ambivalent approach to this genre, but criticizes him for not offering a definite alternative to it. Moreover, Flaubert's approach to the novel was not only inadequate; it inadvertently helped to advance the novel by partaking of this genre's inherently Hegelian nature. Barthes argues that albeit imaginary, the world depicted by novels gains solidity simply by virtue of being sustained for an extended period of time. Novels create an imaginary space that is believable because it receives the formal guarantee of the real: By making literary characters and the reader journey in its imaginary space, the novel starts generating real effects that defictionalize its fictionality. According to Barthes, the crux of the instrinsic Hegelianism of both the modern subject and the novel as its symbolic representation is precisely in these purely intellectual and imaginary acts that, via a series of dialectical reversals, create the effect of the real. By doubling the movement that starts with the imaginary and ends with the real, novelistic characters, as well as readers who follow their story, engender themselves as totalities that, like the novelistic story, little by little lose their fictionality. The modern self is nothing but a dream of the subject who, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, echoing Barthes's argument, "theorizes its own conception and engenders itself in seeing itself to do so."[13]

In *Writing Degree Zero*, the novel features as a dominant cultural force of modernity whose primary role is to provide a symbolic representation

for the modern individual. In spite of various attempts to undermine the Hegelian nature of the novel, its most fundamental principles survive. In many respects, it is in the nature of Hegelianism to pose its own contradictions so as to incorporate them and grow through this movement of negation. Lukács's claim that the novel is a formless genre explains exactly this ability of the novel to come out of its own ashes revived.[14] But Barthes, while supporting the argument that the novel be seen as a literary implementation of the mechanism of self-conception of the modern subject, nevertheless admits that on the narrative level there is something much less amorphous that defines the novel. In spite of its groundlessness and formlessness, the novel harbors three very specific literary principles: the organizing role of emplotment, the progression of narrative time, and the use of denotative language.[15] If novelistic language utilizes the disposition, shared by all language, to signify and, as Barthes will argue in *Mythologies* (1957), create myths, then only a subversion of this tendency – namely a "murder of Literature as signification" – reveals the relativity of the novelistic image of the self and undercuts the function of literature as a mythical system.[16] Rather than Flaubert, whose saboteurial mode of writing, as Barthes insists, remains inextricably bound with the novel, it is Camus who represents this subversion and murder.

Camus's *The Stranger*

The Stranger is the first narrative to introduce writing degree zero as a truly "neutral" and "colorless [blanche]" (76) mode of writing. The main weapon of *The Stranger* in suspending composition and denotation is its quality as an oral style of writing. Barthes describes literary language in *The Stranger* as "a spoken level of writing" (87), calling it "transparent" and "innocent" (77). He argues that this plain and simple form of writing "achieves a style of absence" (77), tautologically adding that this style of absence is "almost an ideal absence of style" (77). Astoundingly, this is where the analysis ends. Similarly to his brief account of Flaubert, Barthes does not take a closer look at Camus's technique. If the genre of the novel inevitably participates in the totalization of existence and its transformation into a lifeless image, as Barthes argued earlier, one would expect him to explain why Camus's mode of writing is only *almost* an ideal absence of style, and what kind of writing, or which writer, is more faithful to this absence – if it is, indeed, at all possible. Considering the title of the book, Barthes devotes surprisingly little space (approximately three pages) to the discussion of the concept of writing degree zero. What is more, he refrains

from any formal, structural, and text-based analyses of this mode of writing. As with Flaubert, he does not cite from Camus to demonstrate his points and instead goes straight to theoretical conclusions. When in the second part of *Writing Degree Zero* the implicit polemic against Sartre's reading of Camus slowly disappears, one gets an impression that Barthes never finishes the line of argument he started. If *The Stranger* is the prototype of writing degree zero because it almost achieves the absence of style, how exactly does it challenge the novel? Even more importantly, what does this challenge reveal about this new mode of writing and its historical position?

It is true that after its publication *The Stranger* became such a frequent subject of commentaries that Barthes felt no need to repeat what had been already said. Having been both celebrated and denigrated for his unusual use of the present perfect tense (*parfait composé*), Camus came out of these debates as an original stylist. As famously described by Sartre, the effect of Camus's use of the present perfect tense, which English translations render in the simple past, was a sharp isolation of each sentence, as the following passage illustrates: "I took the two o'clock bus. It was very hot. I ate at the restaurant, at Céleste's, as usual. Everyone felt very sorry for me, and Céleste said, 'You only have one mother'. When I left they came with me to the door. [J'ai pris l'autobus à deux heures. Il faisait très chaud. J'ai mangé au restaurant, chez Céleste, comme d'habitude. Ils avaient tous beaucoup de peine pour moi et Céleste m'a dit: 'On n'a qu'une mère'. Quand je suis parti, ils m'ont accompagné à la porte.]"[17] According to Sartre, this was a style in which each short sentence, by refusing to profit from the impetus accumulated by the preceding sentence, presented a new beginning, a new present, an isolated sensory unit.[18] One can add that, because of the faltering transitive character of verbs, each single sentence in *The Stranger* fails to unroll smoothly. As the verb loses its active function to shift language forward and generate a sense of action, what holds sway over Camus's narrative is an overall atmosphere of immobility and a very slow delivery of meaning. It was this effect that made Sartre wonder if *The Stranger* was still a novel. As the genre of the novel is inseparable from continuous duration and because this duration is broken in *The Stranger*, as there is no becoming here, no "manifest presence of the irreversibility of time," Sartre concluded that it is not a novel.[19]

Many of the reasons given by Barthes in support of his claim that Camus's mode of writing is no longer novelistic draw closely – and paradoxically, given *Writing Degree Zero*'s anti-Sartrean gist – on Sartre's conclusions. But for Barthes, *The Stranger* is not a novel because the

foundation of its unique way of narrating lies neither in the content of the story nor in its compositional form, but in the language that refuses to create a referential unity with its supposed object of description. Opposing those prevalent readings of *The Stranger* that interpret it as a literary expression of an anguished world, Barthes presents Camus's mode of writing as an outcome of crisis of the mimetic principle that takes for granted stability of literary expression. Notwithstanding the fact that the predominant imagery in *The Stranger*, such as late afternoons, warmth, and the sun, evokes the opposite to anguish, interpretations that rely on propositional language do not capture what is unique about Camus's technique. If there is a sense of desolation in *The Stranger*, Barthes suggests, it is a product of the difficulty experienced by the reader to proceed with reading and overcome obstructions imposed on a smoothly functioning process of signification. With its short and inactive sentences that state plain facts and refuse to establish connections between separate moments, *The Stranger* destabilizes both denotation and temporal orientation of the story. Because of these effects Barthes elevates Camus above Flaubert with respect to his proximity to the ideal of writing degree zero.

And yet, even Camus's terse style of self-enclosed sentences and present perfect tense does not avert the insistent progress of the narrative towards its end. Meursault's death, as Wayne Booth pointed out, inscribes *The Stranger*'s isolated sentences into a mythological whole of an absurd existence.[20] Even Sartre, who was skeptical about Camus's fragmented style, noted that *The Stranger* takes us by surprise at the end with a "ceremonious style [un style de cérémonie]" that heightens the tone and transforms disjointed sentences into a more complex syntax and a more continuous kind of movement.[21] Interestingly, Barthes too becomes uncertain about the purity of Camus's version of writing degree zero. He admits that writing degree zero is "fickle [infidèle]" because "mechanical habits [les automatismes] develop in the very place where freedom existed" (78). After setting his objective as a search for literature that suspends meaning and that is not yet co-opted by myth, Barthes's admission that this literature is very rare, and, when found, it is unstable and inconsistent, raises doubts about why he kept to his project and published *Writing Degree Zero*. Considering that Camus is his primary illustration of writing degree zero, it is puzzling to read that even *The Stranger* does not avoid reinscribing novelistic elements into its antinovelistic mode of writing. The two writers who serve as Barthes's primary points of reference for his concept of blank writing – beside Maurice Blanchot and Jean Cayrol, whose names are mentioned briefly in the introduction – remain its only inadequate incarnations: Where one

could *still* lose oneself reading Flaubert, one can only *almost* experience an ideal absence of style in Camus.

What does Barthes's failure to find adequate examples reveal about his theory of writing degree zero and its professed historical dimension? Does the notion of writing degree zero designate a merely abstract ideal and an unreachable limit? And if so, why should we worship this ideal? Is colorless writing, as Genette maintains, always doomed to be tinted with some degree of style that, in turn, reinstitutes the mythological power of literature?[22] These questions are not meant to discredit Barthes's argument in *Writing Degree Zero* as hopelessly speculative. What is worth noting is the fact that Barthes never abandoned his search for a blank mode of writing and the type of aesthetic that does not create myths, and that this search remained an underlying tenet of many of his subsequent works. Barthes repeatedly returns to the aesthetic effect of blankness and neutrality in his texts on film and photography, using terminology that is very close to *Writing Degree Zero* – e.g., "message without a code," "suspension of language," and "blockage of meaning"[23]; production of "obtuse meaning"[24]; and creation of "limited recognition" and "incapacity to name."[25] These texts turn to movie stills and photographic images because, unlike literary narratives that are destined to struggle with referentiality because they use language that is closely tied to its practical function, film and photography are better equipped to suspend the ever-present and recurring instance of meaning. Barthes suggests that only that which hinders conceptual understanding and the power of the myth to reinscribe signs as meaningful can weaken the effect he associates with novelistic principles.

Exhausted literature

Barthes's interest in *Writing Degree Zero*, as well as in his later texts on film and photography, is in a type of literature and art that suspends meaning. This interest comes together with an inquiry into the historical place of this art and its social and cultural role. The notion of writing degree zero and its later spin-offs goes against both the conventional understanding of committed literature, which emphasizes concreteness, descriptive detail, and historical context, and against cultural expectations on a more general level. The type of aesthetic to which writing degree zero points defies our expectations not only from literature that aims to be historically, socially, and politically engaged, but from literature as such. Literature is often expected to give us something concrete: to describe, show, educate, explain, enrich, convey ideas, open new horizons, or at least to gratify. Literature is

supposed to offer something real and valuable as a reward for reading. By suspending, undermining, blocking, and hampering, in short, taking away instead of giving, literature that suspends meaning goes against the didactic and emancipatory responsibility with which modern cultural valorization of artistic production has entrusted literature. By confronting the function of literature as a source of knowledge and transmitter of meaning, writing degree zero challenges the culture that has delegated this role to literature. Barthes's ultimate motive for writing *Writing Degree Zero* and theorizing the concept of writing degree zero as a form of literature that undermines the novelistic drive to master meaning, reality, and the self is to question the appeal to mastery with which modern literature has been associated.

More recently, Leo Bersani has raised a similar set of issues related to the social role of literature as Barthes. Also, Bersani examines art which renounces the redemptive role with which our society endows cultural products. According to Bersani, the cultural valorization of artistic production in the modern West gives art a redemptive value that, if not fulfilled, renders art pointless.[26] For Bersani, the primary literary example of this art is Samuel Beckett. It is not only an issue of unfavorable timing that made Barthes choose Camus rather than Beckett as an illustration of writing degree zero. Indeed, Beckett's celebrated Trilogy novels started appearing just about when *Writing Degree Zero* was already completed. But the reason why Beckett, whose narratives otherwise display a similar refusal of the *Bildungsideal* of the novel and that produce effects resembling those of writing degree zero, does not feature in *Writing Degree Zero* is not only because of bad timing. Although a few years later Barthes would write keenly on Beckett, when theorizing writing degree zero he had something else in mind than techniques pioneered by early Beckett. Separating writing degree zero from Beckett, and above all Bersani's reading of Beckett, is instructive because it gives Barthes's notion of writing degree zero the kind of conceptual solidity it sometimes lacks in *Writing Degree Zero*, thereby bringing the rationale of Barthes's argument into sharper relief.

The crucial point that distinguishes Bersani and Barthes's takes on non-redemptive art is the force with which the writers they champion declare their non-redemptive intentions. The concept of "impoverished literature" developed by Bersani and Dutoit in *Arts of Impoverishment* conceptualizes a literature that openly rejects any redemptive aspirations, claiming that it has nothing to say, nothing to show, and nothing to give.[27] Consisting of threadbare content, simple or no dialogues, a limited number of characters, and literary devices that draw attention to this poverty, impoverished literature, for example Beckett's Trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The*

Unnamable, as Bersani argues, tortures words out of their significance, mocks their expressivity, mutilates language, and makes it insignificant, even boring.[28] This tendency intensifies throughout the Trilogy, with action becoming increasingly more impoverished, situations progressively more austere, and wishes and plans of characters ever more trivial, with the Unnamable simply trying to stop talking. The opening of *The Unnamable* (1953) can serve as an example here:

> Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on. Can it be that one day, off it goes on, that one day I simply stayed in, in where, instead of going out, in the old way, out to spend day and night as far away as possible, it wasn't far. Perhaps that is how it began. You think you are simply resting, the better to act when the time comes, or for no reason, and you soon find yourself powerless ever to do anything again. No matter how it happened. It, say it, not knowing what. Perhaps I simply assented at last to an old thing. But I did nothing. I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me.[29]

The effect of this style of colloquial grammar, light irony, repetitive vocabulary, very short sentences, one-word phrases, and longer sentences sprinkled with commas that destroy clauses and isolate sentence segments from one another, is that the argument moves in circles and that literary language, with its jolted and discontinuous thrust, equalizes the value and homogenizes the meaning of each small unit in the text.

According to Bersani and Dutoit, the method of impoverished literature is to attack the appropriative tendency of language to fix and control meaning. The literary devices of impoverishment are meant to destroy meaning, question the authority of art, and display a breakdown of signification. In Beckett's "literature of the unword" that inhibits reading by putting an unprecedented emphasis on language – and similarly in Rothko's black canvases whose very existence manifests the sole purpose of blocking vision, and in Resnais's films that fail to proceed because their intention is to stall movement and exhibit this stillness – what is at stake is performance of the paralysis of meaning.[30] As the very texture of impoverished art serves the task of blocking meaning and displaying this obstruction, this art immobilizes the audience and undermines its appropriative movement toward the work of art. The conclusions that Bersani and Dutoit draw from the impoverished art's strategies to present the ruin of meaning are neither historicizing nor socially prognostic. Their conclusions pertain to the realm of psychology and libidinal economy. As one of the effects of being immobilized is a sudden feeling of "pleasurably painful

self-absorption," impoverished art is a form of libidinal investment by which the artist, the writer, the viewer, and the reader willingly expose themselves to a shattering experience of self-containment and immersion into themselves, because this "jouissance of self-loss" is violently gratifying.[31] Within their adopted psychoanalytic framework, Bersani and Dutoit interpret suspension of meaning as a libidinal investment of the ego that enjoys the situation when signification collapses. As this situation revives the moment of narcissistic self-containment that dominated the ontogenetic period of the ego before the acquisition of language, impoverished art reopens the same violently pleasant conditions under which one can experience the explosiveness of self-contained identity and undo one's self.

Although impoverished literature produces a similar effect of hampering the delivery of meaning as writing degree zero, unlike impoverished literature, writing degree zero does not utilize literary devices purely for their negating faculty. Engaged in a violent action against language, impoverished literature's primary goal is to create a technique of obstructing meaning with the goal of stimulating ecstatic experiences of self-dissolution. Impoverished literature does not try to minimize signification so as to say nothing. It uses textual matter to display its insufficiency as a means of expression, exerting a great energy on struggling violently with meaning. Instead of eliminating meaning, however, impoverished literature makes it return in an inverted form. The ardent struggle with language in this type of literature posits an internal link to that which it opposes, thereby repeating its logic in a reversed form. When the suspension of signification presents itself only as a suspension, it remains, however negatively, related to signification. The difference between impoverished literature and writing degree zero is that the latter's narrative technique is not limited to obstructing meaning. Writing degree zero is a mode of writing in which language is not attacked and meaning forcefully contested. Neutral, colorless, and blank, it is a writing that is fundamentally exhausted. As a result of this exhaustion and slowness, writing degree zero is not caught in violent attempts to destroy language. Writing degree zero and impoverished literature are two different aesthetic and literary forms: while the former does not intend to mean, the latter intends not to mean.

The motivation that lies behind the concept of writing degree zero and that prompts Barthes's continuing interest in the artistic effect of suspending meaning is his attempt to find an aesthetic that radically undermines the dialectic of meaning and referentiality. He chooses Flaubert and Camus to illustrate this aesthetic, although neither Flaubert nor Camus,

as seen, lives up to the standard of exhaustion that Barthes postulates for exhausted literature. Both Flaubert and Camus fall back into the same dialectical trap: Their oscillation between momentary suspension of meaning and its subsequent recuperation never allows enough of a repose before the return of meaning. If Camus is the best example that Barthes finds of writing degree zero, then Beckett, with his ironies and impoverished style, is even further away from it than its second best instance, Flaubert. As Beckett's mode of writing takes part in the vehement struggle with language and destruction of meaning, it supplies that which it opposes with the negativity that is never left unincorporated. Beckett makes meaning an indispensable accomplice in the quest to undermine it.

Barthes is certainly well aware of the intricacies of dialectics to simply posit some ideal state of language out of its reach and beyond meaning. The fact that he refers to Camus as the closest yet flawed instance of writing degree zero is a clear indication of his caution. But more is at stake in *Writing Degree Zero* than merely suggesting that the suspension of meaning is never total. Barthes does not speculate about a model of ideal language that would a priori evade dialectics. Instead, he is interested in literary ways of neutralizing and suspending meaning. Exhaustion is the medium that prevents the inevitable recuperation and dialectical return of meaning. Barthes suggests that, rather than a literature of violently opposing meaning and waging war against language, a depleted mode of writing can devitalize language and suspend meaning. Only when literature becomes thoroughly exhausted does the question of meaning cease to function as its modus operandi. Exhaustion deactivates language, diffuses meaning, and takes away the ground for the relentless drive of dialectics to overcome opposition and come out of its efforts revived.

Some of the goals and approaches that Barthes associates with writing degree zero resemble the goals and approaches of the New Novel, which emerged at around the time of Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*. The two share their resistance to traditional forms of literary representation and the literature of introspection, psychological analysis, and character and story development. However, in the New Novel the distrust in metaphor, psychological depth of characters, as well as the committed literature for which literary text plays a secondary role, takes on a shape that is not the same as writing degree zero. The New Novel's objective style of description, which tries to capture constellations of objects in a systematic and almost scientific manner, is not what Barthes had in mind when conceptualizing writing degree zero. The New Novel refuses to assign psychological, social, and functional meanings to things. Instead, as Alain Robbe-Grillet explains,

it searches for a "new realism," one which would be "less anthropocentric" and more open to things as independent objects: to the intact, plain, and calm surfaces of "insignificant objects."[32] As the following passage from *Jealousy* (1957) demonstrates, in Robbe-Grillet's novels of the 1950s this new realism shifts narrative emphasis from human relations to objects by giving detailed accounts of things in one's field of vision:

> The three windows are closed and their blinds are only half-open, to keep the noonday heat out of the room. Two of the windows overlook the central section of the veranda. The first, to the right, shows through its lowest chink, between the last two slats of wood, the black head of hair—at last the top part of it. A. . . is sitting upright and motionless in her armchair. She is looking out over the valley in front of them. She is not speaking. Franck, invisible on her left, is also silent, or else speaking in a very low voice. Although the office—like the bedrooms and the bathroom—opens onto the hallway, the hallway itself ends at the dining room, with no door between. The table is set for three. [Les trois fenêtres sont fermées et leurs jalousies n'ont été qu'entrouvertes, pour empêcher la chaleur de midi d'envahir la pièce. Deux des fenêtres donnent sur la partie centrale de la terrasse. La première, celle de droite, laisse voir par sa plus basse fente, entre les deux dernières lamelles de bois à inclinaison variable, la chevelure noire—le haut de celle-ci, du moins. A. . . est immobile, assise bien droite au fond de son fauteuil. Elle regarde vers la vallée, devant eux. Elle se tait. Franck, invisible sur la gauche, se tait également, ou bien parle à voix très basse. Alors que le bureau—comme les chambres et la salle de bains—ouvre sur les côtés du couloir, celui-ci se termine en bout par la salle à manger, dont il n'est séparé par aucune porte. La table est mise pour trois personnes.][33]

In this passage, the transparency of language and clarity of description neutralizes the psychological dimension that obstinately attaches itself to literary language. The surveilling eye that describes what it sees without being seen corresponds to the geometrical space of the optical objects it views, and this space, in turn, is a correlate to the objective, dispassionate, and factual language that hides its voice and the source of this voice.

When Barthes discusses Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur* (1955), he argues that the descriptive technique in this novel makes the plot recede "under the weight of objects," and that these objects "invest the story in a military sense [investissent la fable]."[34] Robbe-Grillet does not choose important things to describe. He describes everything minutely and indiscriminately, thereby making everything equally important – or unimportant. The world in his novels becomes a surface of total visibility, with no depth and intentionality. Similarly, when Blanchot describes the style of *The*

Voyeur, he calls it fastidious and even boring, admitting that most readers likely skip over these long descriptions in an attempt to get to action, only to realize that "nothing were to happen" because everything in this novel "only contributed to making the room just visible, always more visible."[35] Surely things happen in Robbe-Grillet's novels. But descriptions are not preparations for these rare, and in any case non-climactic, events. Tzvetan Todorov insists that Robbe-Grillet's emphasis on description makes his novels into a succession of scenes rather than narratives. In narratives, change is a result of slicing up time into discontinuous units, something that is weakened whenever variations in characters' behavior are posited as simultaneous, as Todorov believes is what takes place in Robbe-Grillet's novels.[36]

Although Robbe-Grillet's novels, as many critics have shown, are not lacking in ethical, social, and political dimensions, particularly with respect to colonialism and decolonization, their scrupulous emphasis on things and their obsessive recording of them differs from a seemingly similar approach to the legacy of literature of verisimilitude and psychological motivation that Barthes envisions for writing degree zero.[37] According to Barthes, "thing-oriented" narratives, while able to relieve things of the undue meanings we constantly deposit on them, and without any induction of poetic meaning and fascination of the narrative, nevertheless do not make a comprehensive use of the entire fabric that literary narratives provide.[38] Barthes emphasizes the importance of memories, sensations, and, above all, the presence of someone else who, whether in conversation or in quiet sharing of time, humanizes the imperviousness of one's surveilling gaze and the resulting methodicity of description.

Writing degree zero and history

The main issue Barthes raises in *Writing Degree Zero* still remains perplexing: its historical argument. Given the lack of fitting examples, how are we to understand the historical dimension of exhausted writing? What are Barthes's reasons for promoting the literary practice of weakening denotation, suspending meaning, and neutralizing the force of dialectics? If Barthes favors literary tools that devitalize language, immobilize the rejuvenation of the dialectical struggle between meaning and its absence, and circumvent the emancipatory role of literature, what does this preference tell us about the historical place of these tools and of literature that uses them?

In Barthes's genealogy of modern writing, literary modernity starts in the middle of the nineteenth century, when literature includes itself among

its objects of interrogation. After the preclassical period, when the "not yet ritualistic" (55) style of writers such as Rabelais embraced a genuine many-sidedness of both their subject matter and their approach to it, and the classical and the romantic periods in which a single mode of writing coincided with the transparent language in which thought stood out clearly against words, in the mid-nineteenth century literature finally opens itself to its "hidden depths" (3). Linking this shift of forms of narration to the disintegration of the ideological unity of French bourgeoisie after the revolutionary events of 1848, Barthes interprets the turn of literature to itself as an issue of language: By problematizing language, modern litera-ture "either exaggerates conventions or frantically attempts to destroy them" (38). Flaubert is the epitome of this turn of literature to language. As a craftsman who polishes his work in solitude, "like a piece of pottery or a jewel" (4), Flaubert believes that writers must face the fact that the bourgeois state is an incurable ill clear-sightedly, in a style that draws attention to its artificiality. In Barthes's view, the subsequent stage in the odyssey of modern writing, Naturalism, is a mere detour – an utterly conventional storytelling that tries to reestablish the lost universality of signs, but ends up in their purely artificial arrangement. The next genuine mode of writing is Mallarmé's. Mallarmé's abrupt words devastate the functional nature of language even more than Flaubert's style. Mallarmé presents a grammar without any practical purpose, with words standing out as monoliths with no past and no environment in which to subsist. Where Flaubert created literature "as an object [la Littérature en objet]" (4), Mallarmé poses it "as Object [la Littérature-Objet]" (5). Whereas with Flaubert literature emerged as an object of craftsmanship, an outcome of focused work, a product of labor elevated to the status of a value imposed for the first time on the reader "as a spectacle" (4), with Mallarmé this objectification of literature reaches an extreme point at which the object of craftsmanship, namely literary language, becomes an object of destruction and literature a testimony to this destruction.

   Although understated, Mallarmé plays a crucial role in *Writing Degree Zero*. Mallarmé is not only presented as someone who shifted modes of writing into their next phase. He has a central place in the overall argument of Barthes's study. Parts devoted to Mallarmé use the same terminology as sections that discuss writing degree zero. Sounding alike, these parts some-times make it seem as if Mallarmé were a poetic counterpart to writing degree zero. However, there are a few moments when Barthes reveals his unease about Mallarmé. At one point he calls Mallarmé's discourse of gaps and absences "terrible and inhuman" (48). Elsewhere, Mallarmé's writing is

said to decimate language and reduce literature to its own carcass (5). Similarly to impoverished literature, Mallarmé's writing reels in annihilated language and persists in a typographical agraphia only so that it can "sing the necessity of its death [chanter sa nécessité de mourir]" (75). The problem identified in Mallarmé's mode of writing is strangely reminiscent of Barthes's reproaches to the genre of the novel. Barthes describes both of them by invoking death and inhumanity. We have come full circle: While the novel is a death because it freezes duration by imposing order of signs on it, Mallarmé's mode of writing, entirely aware of the deadening effect of literary language, nonetheless presents, without any ado, a dead language. Mallarmé is not a poetic counterpart to writing degree zero. His literature creates a world of unrelated objects that exclude men: an inhuman world in which man is related "not to other men but to the most inhuman images" (50).

Despite the fact that Barthes leaves the description of writing degree zero and its historical dimension markedly blank, *Writing Degree Zero* gives two indications of why it demands of literature to follow the principle of exhaustion. The first is the critique of the genre of the novel and the second the critique of Mallarmé's inhumanism. On the most rudimentary level, the historical status of writing degree zero is its role as a substitute for the novel. *Writing Degree Zero* is a colorless and neutral state of form driven neither by fabrication of meaning nor by its destruction, but by the absence of judgment. Notwithstanding Barthes's optimism about writing degree zero's ability to free itself from its bondage to a preordained state of language and allow literature to "at last achieve innocence" (67) in the absence of myths, his taxonomy of narrative forms, as well as his method for separating writing degree zero from the novel and other modes of writing, is decidedly historical. Barthes argues that modes of writing arise from writers' confrontations with society and that these confrontations refer them back to a confrontation with instruments of literary creation (16). The result of neither a straightforward determinism nor a gratuitous aesthetic choice, a mode of writing is a historically conditioned decision. In the case of the novel, its historically conditioned role is to narratively codify the notion of the self as an individual. The slow and exhausted writing degree zero corresponds to a different historical experience than the novel. A product of the same freedom demanded by history as the novel, but rooted in the social experience of a different place and time, writing degree zero is a historically conditioned response to the novelistic representation of the self. Barthes formulates writing degree zero as a politically engaged literary reaction to the novelistic representation of the self as a monadic type of individuality.

For the most part, Barthes oscillates between, on the one hand, positing writing degree zero as representation of the historically new experience of different place and time, and, on the other hand, portraying it as preparation for this experience in an anticipatory manner. Arguably, this oscillation was Barthes's deliberate strategy of avoiding both the accusation of historical determinism, and consequently an attack on the lack of evidence in support of the argument for such determinism, and the allegation of theoretical abstraction and an idealistic projection far removed from reality. In the closing pages of *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes offers a rare peak at the political rationale behind his project. He declares, suddenly and abruptly, that writing degree zero is the "anticipation of a homogeneous social state [l'anticipation d'un état absolument homogène de la société]" (87). As a new form of storytelling, writing degree zero moves, as he puts it, "towards a dreamed-of language whose freshness, by a kind of ideal anticipation, might portray the perfection of some new Adamic world where language would no longer be alienated" (88). The neutral and exhausted mode of writing is neither a simple mirroring of reality nor a product of pure imagination divorced from reality. It is also not Mallarmé's language of inhuman absences and silences. Barthes believes that such a language has no valid political purpose and no "ethical scope" (51) because it fails to relate the self to the other. As an alternative to both the novel and Mallarmé's answer to the crisis of literary language and the novel, writing degree zero is literary figuration of a non-alienated world that is concerned with both history and the interpersonal dimension. An outcome of literature's confrontation both with its own creative devices and with history and the present moment, writing degree zero is literature's reaction to social fragmentation.

Although Barthes's concept of exhausted literature promotes a literature that silences descriptive and historical details, it is an outcome of a pronouncedly historicizing imperative. The oft-repeated motto in *Writing Degree Zero* suggests that literature does not, and should not, replicate historical necessity. In *Mythologies*, Barthes reiterates that literary critics need to be attentive to how literary works relate to society outside the text and constantly demystify ways in which the seemingly depoliticized literary discourse transforms historically construed meanings into something deceptively natural.[39] Against critics, such as Fredric Jameson, who argue that by leaving very little space for descriptive detail writing degree zero erases history, thereby complying with the ideological move to individualism, Barthes maintains that as a narrative mode writing degree zero is a response precisely to social atomization.[40] Should writing degree zero be an

endorsement of the hyperindividualism that followed postwar consumer-ism and the ideology of timelessness, individualism, and the end of history, Barthes would not insist on its difference from the novel. Writing degree zero would not be a mode of writing of its own accord, but merely the most recent manifestation of the novel, adapted to and reflecting the increased atomization of society. Barthes distinguishes between writing degree zero and the novel because the notion of writing degree zero is meant as a reaction to individualism and the reduction of the social realm into an aggregate of solitary individuals.

As a contribution to the issue of committed literature, writing degree zero is a type of literature that drains the myth-generating propensity of literary language and thereby prevents storytelling from squeezing the life out of literary narratives by weighting them down with conventional meanings. According to Barthes, it is not action but exhaustion that defines the type of political and ethical engagement that is specific to literature at this historical moment. As the peculiar logic of Barthes's argument goes, if the novel dissolves social links or presents them in an illusory way, the absence of descriptive detail brings them back together. Barthes proposes that by immobilizing dialectics, weakening the subjective drive, and suspending the violent struggle with language and denotation, exhausted literature recovers the preindividual experience of sharing language. Exhausted literature is politically and ethically engaged because by divesting the self of its protective, but ultimately frustrating, self-enclosure, it lays bare essential human togetherness.

Maurice Blanchot and the politics of narrative genres

The *récit* [narrative, story] is an obscure genre and an elusive literary concept. Simultaneously too broad and too specific, the *récit* is an indefinite category that embraces many prose genres, to the point of extending to all literary stories, while at the same time serving as a term that has been used to identify stylistic and compositional specificity of the select works of only a few writers. Narratives by André Gide and Maurice Blanchot, as well as their own taxonomy of literary genres, are the most notable examples of the latter use of the notion of the *récit*. Differentiating between his novels and *récits*, Gide associates the novel with the technique that provides a complex image of human experience and the *récit* with the portrayal of life from a single point of view. Blanchot's distinction is equally scrupulous, but his classification follows a different rationale. According to Blanchot, the difference between the *récit* and the novel is not stylistic and structural. Even less so is it a question of scope. The *récit* is neither novella nor short story, because the difference between this literary form and the novel has nothing to do with formal features or the number of perspectives it includes in its narrative account. Although the use of the term *récit* changes in Blanchot's writings – ranging from a designation of literary narratives, both his own and those of others, to a concept which, as Ann Smock pointed out, is almost synonymous with that of conversation (*entretien*) – as a literary term the *récit*, especially in Blanchot's texts from the 1950s and 1960s, names a mode of narrative writing defined by the scarcity of both action and depiction.[1] In narratological terms, the *récit* is a type of storytelling that has very little of either narration and description, and that stands for a literature of utmost slowness, exhaustion, and thinness of meaning.

The *récit* and the novel

In the frequently cited segment from the first chapter of *The Book to Come* entitled "The Secret Law of the Récit" (1954), Blanchot discusses what he

believes is an essential difference between the novel and the *récit* using an allegory of the lure of the Sirens. Evoking the famous scene from *The Odyssey*, he compares the novel to the cautious preparations that Ulysses undertakes in order to resist dangerous temptations that lie ahead. Both Ulysses and the novel, Blanchot suggests, choose careful navigation over the beautiful but destructive chant of the Sirens. Blanchot calls this novelistic maneuvering an "entirely human story [histoire toute humaine]," and contrasts it with the way the *récit* answers the lure of the Sirens: "The narrative [*récit*] begins where the novel does not go but still leads us by its refusals and its rich negligence. The narrative [*récit*] is heroically and pretentiously the narrative of one single episode, that of Ulysses' meeting and the insufficient and magnetic song of the Sirens."[2] Where the novel turns away, the *récit* pauses and exposes itself to whatever comes. Where the novel finds recourse in the infinite detours of *histoire toute humaine* – a too human story as well as history – where, in other words, the novel turns into a tale, the *récit* gives itself solely to the Sirens' song. Instead of leaving the lure behind and reporting other events, the *récit* remains focused on the song, sustaining its destructive beauty.

Blanchot points out that the fixation of the *récit* on the lure, and the lure alone, does not mean that the *récit* chooses one novelistic episode out of others. The lethal appeal of the lure of the Sirens does not provide any concrete material for storytelling, and is therefore not just another episode in the long sequence of events. Whereas the novel tells a story of many events that either have happened or are happening in the present – events that are narrated by the narrator who imposes narrative order on them and who in turn is manipulated by an author who is in control of the narrator, the style, and the action – the *récit* aspires to stand for the lure itself. But if the *récit* does not give an account of events, if it begins, as Kevin Hart suggests, "by being drawn toward the point where being and image pass endlessly into one another, a point that is real only while the narrative is being written or read," how can it restage the Sirens' lure while at the same time telling a story about it?[3] In spite of his elusive language, Blanchot is clear on this: The *récit* has to invent a new type of language, one that would be able to circumvent the denotative power that narrative language always exerts. Where the novel turns away from the devastating lure and describes other events, the *récit* perpetuates the Sirens' lure without portraying everyday comings and goings. As the *récit* is a genre with no fixed content and structure, and as what happens in it falls out of the order of describable daily occurrences, instead of desig- nating a set of rules, the *récit* is a type of literature that, similarly to

Barthes's notion of writing degree zero, is not primarily concerned with referentiality, describing, showing, and telling.

As with many of Blanchot's essays, "The Song of the Sirens" has a curious history as well. Composed of several short segments, including "The Secret Law of the Récit," this essay appeared originally in 1954 as "The Song of the Sirens." In 1959 it was renamed as "The Encounter of the Imaginary" and published as part of *The Book to Come*. Why the change of title? What is imaginary in the encounter with the Sirens? If the novel reports only everyday, mundane, and insignificant experiences, is the encounter with something that falls out of the order of the everyday imaginary? Quite the contrary. Blanchot insists that both the novel and the quotidian are made of fictional stories. Both the novel and daily life turn away from the beguiling lure of the Sirens in favor of a safe navigation through potentially dangerous but exciting waters. As the novel describes only everyday events, it imposes fictionality on both the quotidian and the story about it. For Blanchot, the novel "says nothing but what is credible and familiar," while at the same time it "wants very much to pass as fiction" (6). The *récit* is of a different order. Neither fictional nor familiarly factual, the *récit* rejects everything that would connect it to the frivolity of fiction. As a mode of storytelling, the *récit* is neither frivolously fictitious nor dully familiar, because these two apparent opposites nevertheless represent the same narrative logic. Blanchot does not say much about this logic, except that it unites the everyday and the novel and that it makes the intention of, on the one hand, producing realistic representation, and, on the other, distancing oneself from the familiar in ostensibly fictitious literary stories, ultimately come to the same thing. But his statement that the *récit* is irreconcilable with both novelistic dullness and frivolity suggests that the language of the *récit* must be neither transparent and representational, nor self-reflective and figurative.

In "The Song of the Sirens," the *récit* is opposed to the familiar world of daily activities, its recognizable reflection in the realm of the fictitious, and the time of recounting stories about these actions. Although this essay does not offer any concrete description of the type of literary language that undermines the everyday practical speech, this issue is a frequent topic in Blanchot's critical essays. In many respects, most of his texts gravitate to the single topic of a language that does not speak *about* things. Georges Bataille noted this tendency very early, arguing that Blanchot's writings, both fictional and nonfictional, have "only one subject, silence": "the final silence beneath the words, [. . .] incapable of intention."[4] Roger Laporte added that Blanchot gives preference "to all the forms of language that

evoke silence [qui font *penser* au silence]."[5] Blanchot's preoccupation with the issue of language and silence came to the fore for the first time in a series of articles on Mallarmé written between 1942 and 1946.[6] However, Blanchot soon found Mallarmé's method of emptying out the meaning of words and sentences insufficient – and, interestingly, for almost identical reasons to those discussed in Chapter 1 and given by Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero*. The key to understanding what "The Song of the Sirens" presents, still very abstractly and metaphorically, as the *récit* – and how this genre fits into the literary and political milieu of France in the 1950s and why Blanchot deems it relevant particularly at this time – are his texts on the relationship between language and silence not in poetry, but in literary narratives.

Language and chatter

The relationship between prose literature and silence gets the most direct and least metaphorical treatment in "Idle Speech" (1963), an essay about a short narrative by Louis-René des Forêts *The Talker* [*Le Bavard*] (1947).[7] "Idle Speech" posits chatter as an easy escape from silence. Blanchot argues that chattering is not speaking, but a disgrace of language. At the same time, he nonetheless admits that language is inclined to chatter and that, "in truth, everyone chatters, but everyone condemns chatter."[8] Chatter is not simply denounced here. Blanchot questions two other possible reactions to a seemingly unavoidable chatter of language: a literal silence and a positing of a strict opposition between chatter and authentic speech. Understood literally as an absence of speech, silence is as evasive and hopeless as chatter, because as an outcome of dissatisfaction with the expressive capacities of language, silence acquires a role of the nonlinguistic tool of expression. Equally problematic is hypostatizing some genuine form of authentic speech. In a tacit conversation with Heidegger, Blanchot suggests that the heroism of an authentic self that decides to take resolute control over its speech in reaction to the impersonality of chattering redeems the chatter of language even less than literal silence.

The reason why Blanchot turns to *The Talker*, whereby answering Bataille's request, mentioned at the beginning of "Idle Speech," to write about des Forêts's story, is the latter's unusual use of narrative voice. Blanchot believes that the narrative voice in *The Talker* offers a solution to the chatter of language because it renders silence *through* speech. The narrator of *The Talker* is far from a vigorous orator and a source of confident speech. He is an unstable instance and a very feeble guarantor

of narrative unity. Blanchot describes this voice in a series of syllogisms –
"The Bavard is the narrator," "The narrator is, at first glance, the author" –
only to immediately problematize them: "But who is the author? What is
the status of this 'I' who writes, and who writes in the name of an 'I' who
speaks?" (119). These questions are not meant to highlight the functional
difference between the author and the narrator. After all, one can also
experience the intimacy of the self-identical narrative voice in stories that
deliberately expose this difference. The purpose of these questions is to
draw attention to the fact that in *The Talker* the narrative voice does not
manage to form a stable identity. According to Blanchot, the reason for
this failure is not a discord between the narrative and the authorial voice,
but the internal splitting of the narrative voice itself. Were it the former,
the narrative voice would be unstable only to the extent of oscillating
between two identities, one of the author and the other of the narrator.
But in *The Talker* the narrative "I" is hollow and empty. Contrary to a self-
identical pronoun and more akin to Roman Jakobson's concept of the
shifter, this hollowness of the narrative voice attracts Blanchot's attention.
Arguing that "if the 'I' of the Talker attracts us insidiously, it is in what it
lacks that it attracts us [because] we know neither to whom it belongs nor
to whom it testifies" (120), he explains that this attraction is a result of our
implicit understanding that the unity provided by the ego is false: "to live
in the first person, as we all naively do, is to live under the guarantee of the
ego whose intimate transcendence nothing seems able to attack" (120). For
Blanchot, literature is this attack.

After reading just the first few pages of *The Talker*, one quickly realizes
that the title of the book is a misnomer. The narrator who is supposed to
be a chatterer is unexpectedly timid and reserved. Warning us that "my
friends say that I am silence itself," he lets us know that his speech will not
be "one of the confessional."[9] His manner of speaking is cautious, hesitant,
and slow. He tries to be nonintrusive, and dilutes his presence, which is by
default at the center of our attention because it is his voice that speaks, by
continuously effacing what he says. His sentences are slow, exhausted, and
devoid of rhetorical figures. This self-effacing language that is neither
sensory nor abstract is where Blanchot locates the underpinning of the
effect of emptiness in this story. Inquiring into what makes this *récit* a
psychologically non-descriptive type of narrative, "Idle Speech" repeatedly
returns to the ability of des Forêts's language to tell a story while making us
realize that words are being spoken. The narrative voice in *The Talker*
neither speaks about everyday occurrences, nor does it turn to self-inspection
or a poetic play with language and meaning.

In "Idle Speech" Blanchot suggests that the kind of language that allows the *récit* to render silence through speech is neither an exuberance of chattering nor the authentic speech of a resolute individual who intends to transmit a message. The *récit*'s language is weak, slow, and exhausted. Instead of bringing meaning, identity, and intimacy, the *récit* dissipates them. This narrative form does not give; it takes away. By incessantly falling back to silence as it tries to speak, the *récit*'s narrative voice never attains the fullness of the self capable of generating discourse. This genre can never be a first-person confessional, as Gide understood the *récit*, because its narrative voice deposes the point from which it tells the story. As Blanchot argues elsewhere, in "The Narrative Voice" (1964), the emptiness of the *récit*'s narrative voice "unseats [destitue] every subject, just as it disappropriates all transitive action and all objective possibility."[10] What is at stake in the exhausted language of this mode of writing is neither silence nor language, rather it is silence *and* language. As the self-erasing narrative voice can exist as a void only when it presents itself as such, thus being more than just a privation of something, silence, in order not to give an assurance of a substantialized nothingness, needs to emerge as language. *The Talker* is an example of this mutual contamination of language and silence. In Blanchot's theory of the *récit*, "Idle Speech" states more explicitly what "The Song of the Sirens" hints at only in metaphors: The *récit* is a mode of writing that allows silence to exist in language in a slow and exhausted speech in which the materiality of language, as well as the difficulty of the narrative voice to say "I," constantly draw attention to themselves.

Literature and silence

As seen in Chapter 1, the question why literature should turn to narrative slowness and exhaustion is never too far away in Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*, and yet it is rarely discussed explicitly. The situation is similar in Blanchot's essays from the decade between 1954–1964 – from "The Song of the Sirens" to "Idle Speech" and "The Narrative Voice." Part of the reason why these texts only circle around the issue of what the *récit* wishes to accomplish in its slow and exhausted language is Blanchot's conviction that literature does not try to say, do, or accomplish anything. Blanchot expressed this conviction most directly in his 1953 review-essay of Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*, "The Search for Point Zero." Here he declares that the goal of literature is to reach "the point of absence where it disappears" and where "language becomes the idle profundity of being [la profondeur

désœuvrée de l'être], the domain where the word becomes being but does not signify and does not reveal."[11] But even if silence and disappearance are what literature is after, none of these essays describes exactly how the *récit*, as a genre that for Blanchot, as Kevin Hart notes, personifies the vocation of all literature, tells a story that conveys the profundity of being – silent, idle, and yet infinitely potent.[12]

Before literary silence became an issue of genres in "The Song of the Sirens," it was a subject of a series of articles from 1946 in which Blanchot discussed a very diverse set of writers: Mallarmé, Hemingway, Saroyan, Lautréamont, Henry Miller, Jean Paulhan, and Joë Bousquet.[13] With Blanchot's typically uniform conclusions about writers with very different styles, themes, and characters, these articles propose that all these authors strive to give silence a literary form by translating it into words. This conclusion is perhaps the least contentious in "The Myth of Mallarmé." Blanchot's argument suggests that Mallarmé's poetry does not merely talk in the absence of things, as if words tried to represent absent objects; Mallarmé's words try to express, not things, but their absence. They eliminate objects and speak in their absence. Instead of merely killing the object to which the word refers – this happens in any language, not just literary – Mallarmé exposes the emptiness of the word itself. He shows not only that once there is a word, the object is lost, but also that the word never was a plenitude capable of compensating for the eliminated object in the first place. While praising Mallarmé's insight into the workings of language, Blanchot nevertheless finds his solution problematic. For the same reason as Barthes, who in *Writing Degree Zero* complained about Mallarmé's reduction of literature to Object, Blanchot finds Mallarmé's replacement of things with their "vibratory disappearance [disparition vibratoire]" (39) flawed because it makes words "the material emblem of a silence that, to let itself be represented, must become a thing" (37). For Blanchot, literary narratives, rather than poems, can deal with the paradoxical nature of literary language revealed by Mallarmé. Mallarmé's relevance is in diagnosis, not in effective treatment.

In "The Paradox of Aytré," published a few months after "The Myth of Mallarmé," Blanchot reiterates that Mallarmé, "just as he gives poetry a language of extreme physical density, sees himself finally tempted to attain silence by a simple material emblem" (66). Mallarmé's architecture of typographical blanks and odd punctuation is ultimately inadequate for what it pursues because it gives in to the temptation to offer a consummation to the paradox of language. "The Paradox of Aytré" insists that the paradox of language must be preserved unresolved. If a text aspires to be a

work of literature, it has to avoid both the strategy of incorporating silence as an expressive means of language and the strategy of creating a material figuration for silence. What literature has to do is to perpetuate the recognition that it "has *nothing* to say [n'a *rien* à dire]" (69; italics in the original). Similarly to "Idle Speech," language and silence, speaking and having nothing to communicate, are already here presented not only as non-contradictory endeavors, but as inseparable companions. As William Saroyan's dictum, "do not write with words, write without words, write with silence," which opens "The Paradox of Aytré" suggests, for Blanchot writing and silence are an indivisible couple, and literary narratives a place where the emptiness of both the word and the object is disclosed – but without turning into a thing, which is exactly what happens in Mallarmé's poetry.

With regard to the question of how writing with silence functions as a mode of narration, "Mystery in Literature" continues where "The Paradox of Aytré" ends. Characteristically, Blanchot phrases his topic as a dilemma: "if we honor the mystery in literature from afar, calling it secret and ineffable, it makes itself an object of disgust, something perfectly vulgar," and "if we approach it to explain it, we encounter only that which conceals itself [ce qui se dérobe]" (43). Even though unrepresentable, the mystery – and this, it has to be pointed out, is what separates Blanchot's conception of literature from mysticism – exists only in language. As mystery does not exist apart from speech, the notion of mystery is, strictly speaking, an empty word that stands for the paradox of language as it materializes itself in literature. Not only is the concept of mystery unthinkable apart from language and silence, but both language and silence cannot be considered one without the other, nor without the concept of mystery. Silence is the inner contradiction and the outer boundary of language, as well as a point where language speaks the best. If literature has an obligation to reveal the paradoxical nature of language, rather than conceal it, the notion of mystery is nothing more than a word for how literary language works. Blanchot calls the language that reveals the mystery a "silent language [langage silencieux]" (60), an "impersonal speech [parole impersonnelle]" (57), and "*a language that speaks itself on its own* [*langage qui se parle tout seul*]" (57; italics in the original). Although this line of reasoning is still similar to the abstract and metaphorical language of "The Song of the Sirens," Blanchot makes a more overt argument here that literature does not articulate anything that precedes it and that would be expressed only *post factum*. The conception of literature in "Mystery in Literature" offers something more extreme than mystical irrationality. As literature is expressive of nothing but silence and

emptiness of both the word and the thing only because of the paradoxical nature of language, this conception asks literature not to express the ineffable, but, as Leo Bersani explains, "*not* to express it."[14] Pierre Klossowski adds that what Blanchot demands from literature is not to represent nothing, but to endure it and "maintain itself in it."[15]

The last essay in the series, "Translated From...," is an allusion to Joë Bousquet's book *Translated from Silence* (1941), though the focus is mostly on the issue of stylistic monotony in the American novel. Blanchot interprets the monotonous style of American novelists, such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck, although it is the first one who gets by far most attention, as a literary device that, yet again, makes silence exist through words. Finally, however, he offers an illustration of what this writing looks like. (Similarly to Barthes, who in *Writing Degree Zero* made only cursory illustrations of his notion of neutral writing, Blanchot is evasive when it comes to demonstrating with concrete examples how the *récit* looks.) Blanchot finds the uniqueness of the American novel in its technique of inhibiting the transmission of meaning by estranging the language it uses. American novelists defamiliarize words, disrupt the transparency of language, and introduce sentences in which both words and the things to which they refer become difficult to identify. In their style of short sentences and slow rhythm of narrating, these works create a prose in which both the narrator and the reader cease to be the focal points of language, and in which the austerity of expressions and the slow tempo of their delivery weaken the role of characters as agents of action. In the fierce sobriety and simplicity of American novels, readers encounter "an ensemble of words or events that we understand and grasp, no doubt, perfectly but that, in their very familiarity, give us the feeling of our ignorance, as if we were discovering that the simplest words and the most natural things could suddenly become unknown" (177). Literary language in these stories, by emaciating the character, the narrator, as well as the reader, renounces its function as a tool for communicating meaning and becomes utterly impersonal.

What is striking about "Translated From..." is that Blanchot, suddenly and without any explanation, ascribes to the genre of the novel all the attributes that he normally associates with the genre of the *récit*. The "thin" and "quiet dialogues" (188), the language that does not draw attention to itself but to "the obstinately silent voice [la voix obstinément silencieuse]" (188), and interior monologues that "keep the silent nature of words [gardent le caractère muet de paroles]" (187) – these descriptions of American novels are the same oxymoronic expressions that in "The Song of the Sirens" and "Idle Speech" serve to differentiate the *récit* from the

novel. In "Translated From...," the novel gets all the qualities that are elsewhere given to the *récit*. Or, more accurately, it is not the novel as such that gets them, but its American version and, even more narrowly, its Hemingwayan strain. Blanchot presents Hemingway's lethargic and impersonal language as non-novelistic, and his novels as narratives that remain faithful to the mystery of language and literature in the same way as the *récit*. Referring to "French novels" (187) as the opposite of the impersonality and innerlessness of Hemingway's novels, Blanchot denovelizes American novels and postulates the French novel as a synecdoche for the genre of the novel as such, a condensation of the novel's most characteristic traits.

Despite the fact that Blanchot's conclusions about writers as different as Mallarmé and Hemingway sound oddly alike, the essays from 1946 announce a recurrent theme in Blanchot's critical and fictional writings: a type of story that exposes and preserves the abyssal nature of language, its unavoidable indeterminateness, and permanent parabasis. Blanchot insists that silence and emptiness cannot be separated from language because they appear only in language and as language. Similarly, language cannot be separated from silence and emptiness, because silence and emptiness are the irrevocable origins of language. It is only when literature lays bare the constitutive role of silence in language that it can speak – and when, as "The Paradox of Aytré" avows, it "speaks best" (59). Already in these early essays, language that aspires to be truly literary is endowed with attributes of slowness and exhaustion. Only slow and exhausted language can embrace both the emptiness of the word and the absence of the thing, which define literature. Literature, Blanchot suggests, is a way of getting closer to the fundamental void language opens. If literature complies with this vocation and with what constitutes its essence, it has to display the signifier's emptiness as a positive element and the content as a negative element of the text. The purer the difference between the positivity of the signifier's emptiness and the negativity of the content's reality, as Blanchot proposes in "Literature One More Time" (1963), the more the text is a work of literature.[16]

The *récit*'s (in)humanity

Blanchot's theory of the *récit* is not devoid of contradictions. It is not only that from "The Song of the Sirens" onward Blanchot starts stressing the generic difference between the *récit* and the novel, while his earlier essays did not show a need for such a distinction, and sometimes even conferred the same characteristics on the novel that in the later texts serve to separate the *récit* from the novel. The problem pertains also to the later texts, in

which it is not always clear according to which criteria Blanchot differentiates between the two genres. Applying the same terminology to very different writers, he often comes to identical conclusions about them. Leaving aside the question of whether Blanchot does justice to the writers he analyzes and whether rather than examining them he is interested in explicating his theory of literature, the contradictions that appear in his writings are crucial for reconstructing the larger political and ethical role that Blanchot assigns to the genre of the *récit* and its specific mode of writing. Interestingly, nowhere are these discrepancies more palpable than in "The Song of the Sirens." Pitted against the novelistic frivolity and its depiction of everyday events, the *récit* is said to reduce action, suspend deixis, and withstand the lure of the Sirens and perpetuate it without giving it any particular content. What is perplexing – and what explains Blanchot's firmness about the question of genres as well as his difficulty to maintain it with conceptual clarity – is his choice of examples. The exemplary *récits* are Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.

It is astounding to read that out of all existing narratives two prominent novels come to exemplify the genre of the *récit*. After Hemingway, in Blanchot's hands two other famous novelists undergo a thorough generic transformation and become writers of *récits*. The sheer volume of these two novels, as well as the space they devote to reports that clearly fall into what Blanchot denounces as *histoire toute humaine*, an all too human story and history, make *Moby Dick* and *In Search of Lost Time* very unlikely *récits*. Blanchot explains his surprising choice of examples by the ability of Melville's and Proust's narratives to resist the inclination to which every literary story is susceptible, namely to "hide itself in novelistic density [se dissimuler dans l'épaisseur romanesque]."[17] Unlike the novel that, to recall Barthes, "transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an oriented and meaningful time," the *récit* preserves life by eliminating everything from the narrative that is not essential for the task of upholding the lure of the Sirens.[18] Ignoring the long encyclopedic passages in *Moby Dick* and the minute descriptions of the everyday life of the decadent aristocracy in *In Search of Lost Time*, Blanchot argues that these two *récits* demonstrate a very low level of stylization because they focus solely on, in the first case, a single image, and, in the second, pure moments freed from the intrusions of voluntary memory. This narrative focus and the absence of stylization in Melville's and Proust's texts, as Blanchot claims in the second chapter of "The Song of the Sirens," are signs of "a purer art [un art plus pur]" (19).[19]

In a similar way as the disappropriating effect of the narrative voice in *The Talker*, Melville and Proust's *récits* create a pure art of "essential moments": "pure time, without events, moving vacancy [vacance mouvante], agitated distance, interior space in the process of becoming, where ecstasies of time spread out in fascinating simultaneity" (13). On the level of storytelling, the purity of *Moby Dick* and *In Search of Lost Time* lies in their complete absorption in their objects of fascination to which the protagonists, Ahab and Marcel, readily succumb. Blanchot likens this fascination to the frightening emptiness of the present moment that all writers must endure in order to experience inspiration. For Ahab, Marcel, and the stories about them, their all-absorbing fascination is in their unconditional openness to something that threatens to engulf them: for Ahab the mute whiteness of the whale, for Marcel the labyrinth of the lost past, and for the reader and the writer Ahab's and Marcel's stories. Blanchot presents *Moby Dick* and *In Search of Lost Time* as examples of the genre of the *récit* because they are not primarily concerned with telling a story. What they care about more is to cultivate a self-destructive fascination of the character, the narrator, the writer, and the reader in the pure art of ascetic linguistic, stylistic, and compositional devices.

The inconsistencies, contradictions, and unexpected examples that mark Blanchot's theory of the *récit* reveal an important motivation behind the shifts in Blanchot's argument. By departing from the thematic concerns that dominate "The Song of the Sirens" to the more stylistically oriented analyses in "Idle Speech," "The Narrative Voice," and "Literature One More Time," Blanchot moves away from the type of objects that "The Song of the Sirens" posits as stimuli for fascination. In *Moby Dick* the object of fascination is the whale, that is, an animal, and in *In Search of Lost Time*, it is the self, or more precisely, the self lost in the forgotten past and communicating via Marcel's involuntary memory. In both cases, what thus serves as a stimulus for and a vehicle of fascination is something nonhuman. Similarly to the writer of the *récit* who disappears in the moment of impersonal inspiration, the narrator and the character of the *récit* voluntarily expose themselves to something that puts them at risk of losing themselves as individuals. Ahab and Marcel, Melville and Proust, as well as the readers of *Moby Dick* and *In Search of Lost Time*, give themselves willingly to this nonhuman element. It is this object of fascination that changes in Blanchot's later texts. During the decade between 1954 and 1964 Blanchot gradually replaces the lead vocalists in his theory of the *récit*. It is no longer the animal or the past that sing the *récit*'s destructively beautiful songs. What now opens a narrative void and depersonalizes the

self is another human being. Although the score of the *récit*'s song remains the same, that is, blank, with the different singer the emptiness takes on a different quality. Indicative of Blanchot's increasing interest in politics and ethics throughout the 1950s, an interest we will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, the *récit*'s emptiness becomes endowed with the ability to expose the self-enclosedness of the character, the writer, and the reader to the absolute otherness of the Other (other characters and other human beings). Blanchot turns away from the *récit* as a literary instrument of a self-involved kind of self-destruction and redefines it, similarly to Barthes's notion of writing degree zero, as a privileged literary codification of intersubjectivity.

The *récit* and history

Ann Smock is right to argue that the *récit* is close to Blanchot's concept of conversation. But while Blanchot's understanding of the *récit* as a form of narrative extends over time to include more discursive types of prose, the *récit* is not simply replaced with more general and less literature-specific notions, such as conversation (*entretien*) and writing (*écriture*).[20] *Narrative*, *writing*, and *conversation* remain separate, none fully coinciding with the other, and each sharing adjacent, but essentially separate frontiers with what lies outside of them: the *narrative* with the novel, *writing* with journalism and the diary, and *conversation* with chatter and self-involved monologue.

What is there to say, then, in a narrative that aspires to be faithful to the true vocation of literature, as Blanchot defines it? It is certainly not that there is nothing to be said. Words have to be spoken, but words that are slow and exhausted. For Blanchot, slowness and exhaustion are the necessary ingredients of a genuine *narrative*, *writing*, and *conversation*. Narratives must be strenuous, taxing, and in a certain sense even "impossible."[21] Similarly, dialogues, both in literature and in real life, as Blanchot points out in an essay on Marguerite Duras, "The Pain of Dialogue" (1956), must be difficult if they are to be real dialogues: "slow, but uninterrupted, never stopping for fear of not having enough time: one must speak now or never; but still without haste, patient and on the defensive, calm too, [. . .] and deprived, to a painful degree, of the ease of chatter [facilité du bavardage]."[22] What is genuinely dialogic is not the chatter of the novel. Turning Bakhtin upside down, Blanchot suggests that rather than the novel, with its polyphony and intricate plots, the minimalist, slow, and exhausted *récit* is dialogic, because it gives the other person a more important role than the

self rather than an equal one. Against the disappearance of the other in the complexity and density of novelistic narration, the *récit* offers a figuration of the contentless present in which the immutable singularity of the other person comes to the fore. Slow, exhausted, and minimal story clears the space, so to speak, for the other.

But there is a price to be paid for Blanchot's promotion of the genre of *récit*. The price is nothing less than erasure of history. If the uniqueness of the *récit* as a mode of writing and form of storytelling is the narrative purging of the story with the vision of literary exhaustion, slowness, and emptiness, the *récit*'s *blanchissement de l'histoire* is a bleaching and purging of both story and history. The transaction at stake is similar to that proposed by Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero*: a literary exposure of intersubjectivity and essential human togetherness in exchange for the erasure of descriptive and historical detail. In the *récit*, the silencing of story and history, which is supposed to bring both of them back in a purer, more open, and less self-involved form, rests on factual erasures that appear in the story. Moreover, these erasures are curiously reproduced also in the theory that conceptualizes the *récit* as a narrative mode that erases historical details. One example of such an erasure is "The Paradox of Aytré." In this essay, Blanchot is not concerned with the historical aspects of Jean Paulhan's story of Aytré, and instead uses the story to illustrate the notion of the *récit* as a pure art of only essential and non-descriptive moments, despite the fact that the colonial setting is vital to Paulhan's story. The paradox of language to which Paulhan draws attention, and which Blanchot celebrates as the key element that identifies the story as the *récit*, emerges in Paulhan's story only as an eerie echo of colonialism: It is when trying to come to terms with the culture it wants to civilize that European language falters, thereby revealing the paradoxical nature of language as such.

It seems as if Blanchot's theory of the *récit* could not be more disconnected from history and with what lies outside the text. As the following chapter will show, however, Blanchot was painfully aware of the fact that the dehistoricizing tendency of bleaching the story and history in the *récit* is a delicate enterprise. When he nevertheless deemed it worth undertaking, it was because he believed that the *récit*'s silencing of historical detail, as a counterweight to the novelistic *histoire toute humaine*, holds the prospect of a more humane kind of both story and history. Unlike the novel, the *récit* is not attached to the narrative role of symbolically representing the monadic type of individuality. The notion of the *récit* – an outcome, as we will see in the next chapter, of Blanchot's confrontation with the demands raised on literature by the historical events taking place

in the 1950s – is a historically, socially, politically, and ethically conditioned response to the novelistic representation of the self as separated from others. Similarly to Barthes's writing degree zero and its mechanism of divesting the self of its selfhood and preventing the story from stifling language with meaning, Blanchot theorizes the *récit* as a mode of writing that recovers the preindividual, and thus essentially interpersonal, experience of sharing language. Although Blanchot never clearly states how exactly the concept of the *récit* is linked to its immediate historical environment – in this respect he is even more enigmatic about the political dimension of the *récit* than Barthes about writing degree zero's, with his candid admission that writing degree zero is a literary anticipation of a homogeneous society – he, like Barthes, rejects the ideology of timelessness and individualism that dominated France in the 1950s, with its drive to modernize and quickly surpass the legacy of the postwar era. Chapter 3 will return to the predicament of resolutely moving ahead, as well as to the question of the extent to which the essentially ethically motivated shift in Blanchot's writings was in a dialogue with its time and why Blanchot thought that this shift was a form of political engagement.

Literary weakness
Maurice Blanchot, commitment, and decolonization

In one of the footnotes in *Inner Experience* (1943), Georges Bataille describes his conversation with Maurice Blanchot regarding an earlier version of Bataille's manuscript. During this conversation Blanchot suggested to Bataille that if the inner experience destroys the cohesion of the self that undergoes it, the subject of the inner experience is the last man. Bataille agrees, but adds that in this case the last man must not perceive himself as the last man. While effectively being the last man, he cannot see himself as one, because even if one willingly opens oneself to the ruin of the interior experience, its devastating effect can be neither ordered nor heroically mastered. Bataille insists that the last man must never posit himself as the ultimate instance that faces the destructive emptiness brought by the inner experience.[1] This is where the reported conversation ends. Although Blanchot never told his part of the story, some of the thematic preoccupations of his writings reveal that he had his own stakes in this exchange with Bataille. In many respects, Blanchot's interest in nondialectical speech and nonreferential types of literary language discussed in Chapter 2 bears a clear mark of his encounter with Bataille, which took place in Denise Rollin's apartment in the fall of 1941 on the occasion of Bataille's reading of the manuscript of *Inner Experience*.[2]

What interested Blanchot the most among the issues raised by Bataille was the aspect of sharing the inner experience. Following Bataille's claim that the inner experience must be communicated, Blanchot wondered how – with what kind of language, words, and sentences – one talks about the experience that destroys the very self that tries to communicate it. Furthermore, if the last man must not perceive himself as the last man, and if therefore someone else has to recognize him as such and put this recognition into words, how would such a report look? Even more so, how would this report look as a literary narrative? As seen in Chapter 2, Blanchot's theory of the *récit* offered answers to some of these questions. But these answers were given in texts of literary criticism, which comprised

only one of the places in which Blanchot addressed them. Another such place was Blanchot's fictional work. From among his literary narratives, nowhere were these questions and answers to them formulated more compellingly than in the aptly titled, *The Last Man* (1957). If Blanchot introduced the concept of the *récit* so as to conceptualize a type of literary story that, as Chapter 2 suggested, opens a possibility of the experience of an essential sharing of language, his *récit The Last Man* is instructive in demonstrating how the narrative strategy of bleaching and reducing story and history was designed as a form of literary commitment, and how this strategy was in a dialogue with history, reality, and the immediate present.

The Last Man

The Last Man is a story about the relationship between three nameless characters residing in a non-specified house, most likely a sanatorium. They are not alone there, but the reader does not get to know the other inhabitants, their daily routine, details about the place, or the reason why the three characters are there. All that is revealed about the narrator, the woman, and the man nicknamed "the last man" – a man who radically questions his selfhood and departs from a strong sense of the self – transpires only in passing, as an unimportant technicality in the narrator's account of his relationship with the other two characters. For the most part, the story is narrated as if the narrator were simply thinking aloud, trying to clarify to himself how his relationship with the woman and the last man has affected him, and what kind of bond they share with each other. Presenting very little description or narration, this *récit* provides only sparse descriptions, a weak plot, and a very slow and non-happening story.[3]

At the beginning, the narrator contemplates what a strange person the last man is, pondering why he is attracted to him and why he likes to spend time with him. He notes that the last man talks very little and that instead of talking, he prefers to be quiet and listen to others. When he speaks, he utters "very poor words," his speech resembling "an all-encompassing murmur, a barely perceptible planetary song [un imperceptible chant planétaire]."[4] The narrator is befuddled that somebody can disregard oneself to such an extent that he does not want to express his own concerns in a conversation, and that instead of putting himself forth he is there to merely affirm the speech of his interlocutors. Wondering why he undergoes a company of someone with whom the only thing he does is to quietly pass time, the narrator admits that initially it was difficult to be with the

last man precisely because of his imposing silence and the stillness of their conversation. Nevertheless he slowly realizes that he has grown fond of the quiet and unobtrusive presence of the last man. The last man is fully present to those he accompanies, and although this is sometimes uncomfortable, the narrator appreciates their quiet passing of time together. After first trying to escape the last man's intimidating presence by seeking a refuge in hurried speeches and confident self-expressions, he grows at ease with the last man's presence. The strange, imperturbable, and almost aloof presence of the last man has a calming effect on the character of the narrator:

> I only noticed by degrees that he turned me away from myself [Qu'il me détournât de moi, je ne m'en apercevais qu'insensiblement]. He didn't demand any attention from me, he demanded less than a thought. It was this *less* that was strongest. I owed him a limitless distraction, and even less, the opposite of expectation, the reverse of faith, which wasn't doubt: ignorance and neglect. But this still wasn't enough: this ignorance had to ignore even me and leave me to one side, gently, uncertainly, without any sense of exclusion or aversion [me laissât de côté, doucement, sans exclusion et sans aversion, par un mouvement incertain]. (10)

As *The Last Man* proceeds, the narrative turns from the narrator's self-scrutiny, which at the beginning still has an air of self-indulgence, to the interpersonal dynamic among the three characters. It becomes more and more difficult as the story progresses to differentiate among the three characters. In particular, the boundary between the last man and the narrator becomes increasingly blurred. The narrator spends a lot of time with the last man. On occasions when he is not with him, he thinks about him when alone, or talks about him when with the female character. Early in the story, when the narrator is still trying to come to terms with the last man's imposing presence, he decides to spend more time with the female character – who with her casual manner of speaking and active take on things is the last man's antithesis, but who is inexplicably drawn to him as well. His most frequent topic of conversation with the female character is the last man. The narrator is fixated on the last man's frailty and weakness, repeatedly referring to his "measureless weakness [faiblesse sans mesure]" (17), "extreme weakness" (20), "immense weakness" (21), "the strangeness of his weakness (16), and "the intimacy of his weakness" (20).

The last man's weakness, silence, and "self-effacement" (28) have had a profound effect on the narrator. The very fact that the last man is constantly present, either by being with the narrator or by being the subject of his reflections, conversations, and, now, even telling a story about him, reveals not only how much the last man has affected the narrator, but increasingly

also how much the narrator starts resembling the last man. By the midpoint of the *récit*, the two characters become almost indistinguishable. The same gaze that the narrator used earlier to describe the last man – a gaze that, "not looking at anyone in particular, [...] distinguished no one in us but us, and, in us, the most distant part of ourselves [ne distinguaient en nous que nous et, en nous, le plus lointain de nous-mêmes]" (25) – becomes the narrator's own way of looking at others. When the female character brings this fact to his attention, the narrator is taken aback, but accepts it. "She was not surprised to see me watching her constantly, without any other concern, but without insistence either," he remarks, and continues: "She said my look had little weight, that it made the things around her lighter" (59). This progressive blending of the two characters comes to a sudden relief in the second part of the *récit*, when the text simply ceases to differentiate among the characters altogether. The narrator's voice then turns into that impersonal and neutral narrative voice that, as seen in Chapter 2, Blanchot often discusses in his critical essays. This voice, which is no longer identified with the narrator, now speaks in the first person plural.

The Last Man does not have a clear chronological sequence and a strong temporal thrust. As a story, it generates some sense of narrative progress, but this progress is not a result of dramatic action or unexpected turns in the plot. The *récit* proceeds because it does not allow all three characters to be part of the same scene all together. The impression that someone is constantly absent – not only the last man, whenever the narrator is with the female character, but increasingly also the woman, whenever the narrator is with the last man or when she, at one point, leaves the house for an indefinite, but presumably long period of time – is what creates narrative tensions. The changing pattern of characters' absences simulates temporal progress because the person who is absent is often the main subject of thoughts and conversations of those present. This sense of absence and vagueness is further accentuated by the indefinite temporal markers, such as "later," "sometimes," or "one day" (34), as well as the indefinite beginning and end of the *récit*. Opening with a statement that draws attention to time while at the same time being temporally indeterminate – "As soon as I was able to use that word [dès qu'il me fut donné d'user de ce mot], I said what I must always have thought of him: that he was the last man" (1) – *The Last Man* closes with a similarly open sentence: "Later, he ... [Plus tard, il...]" (89). Further adding to the confusion of the sequence of reported events is the prominent, but temporally ambiguous theme of dying. The last man is introduced as

someone who is dying, while the woman is a very animated person. Not only does this polarization quickly fall apart, as it becomes less and less apparent who is dying and who possesses the hidden vitality, but it also becomes unclear whether someone is not dead already, and if so, when they died. On a close reading, one realizes that the ambiguity of life and death, presence and absence, and strength and weariness, which contributes to the sense of temporal confusion, has been in the narrative from the very start. Already on the first page the narrator speculates that perhaps the last man "did not always exist or that he did not yet exist" (1). A few pages later he adds an even more enigmatic statement: "I had first known him when he was dead, then when he was dying [je l'avais d'abord connu mort, puis mourant]" (4). As the narrative proceeds and the narrator starts exhibiting the same features as the last man, he himself becomes uncertain whether he is dead or alive. In the same contradictory fashion as when speaking about the death of the last man, the narrator notes, "perhaps I am not dead" (74), only later to wonder, "it is as though I had died in order to recall this [j'étais mort pour me rappeler cela]" (85).

The openendedness, weak narrative momentum, shattered chronology, and the perplexing theme of dying are the main devices that stage the gradual break down of literary characters and their blurring into one another. Something happens in the unrestrained presence of the last man's diminished selfhood that makes the other two characters lose interest in exerting themselves as well. In the last man's company, the other characters are given priority, but after at first claiming it, they soon renounce it and follow in the footsteps of the last man's self-erasure. In particular, the narrator becomes uprooted from himself and turned into "a little more, a little less than myself" (2). Growing accustomed to his new self-destitution, he slowly realizes that this gradual self-loss has opened him to a more potent connection with others than previously, when his relationships were between him as a firmly defined individual and someone else with a similarly firm self-composition. This new form of intimacy, which, as he says, "holds us together and in which we are neither one nor the other" (26), is a product of inactivity, receptivity, and feeble existence that originated with the last man and which he extended on others. The narrator notes that in the exhausted and silent company of the last man, "what had been 'I' had strangely awakened into a 'we', the presence and united force of the common spirit [ce qui avait été moi se fût étrangement éveillé en 'nous', présence et force unie de l'esprit commun]" (2).

As a literary counterpart and illustration of Blanchot's theory of the *récit* discussed in Chapter 2, *The Last Man* epitomizes the kind of engagement

Blanchot envisages for this literary genre as a distinct form of storytelling. *The Last Man* presents a narrative of slowness, exhaustion, and emptiness as an ethically and politically committed type of literature because, similarly to Barthes's argument in *Writing Degree Zero*, it disables the self and its narcissistic self-involvement. Prefiguring Blanchot's statement that exhaustion is "*a state that is not possessive*," *The Last Man* posits exhaustion and weakness as a foundation of interpersonal bonds that are not self-centered, possessive, and aggressive.[5]

The Last Man and the reader

As a trial of the limits of dissolution of literary characters as well-demarcated individuals, *The Last Man* puts an unprecedented pressure on the partitions between characters, a strategy announced a year earlier by Nathalie Sarraute as an objective of all contemporary fiction.[6] Similar to the inner experience of Bataille's last man and Blanchot's concept of mystery and its expression in literature examined in Chapter 2, in *The Last Man* dissolution of the self cannot be separated from language: Language, style and narrative structure here serve as both catalysts and vehicles of the blurring of characters as individuals.

Striking with its uneventfulness and low dramatic voltage, *The Last Man* presents lengthy passages in which very little happens. Characters rarely do anything except spend extended stretches of time together. They are simply there, with each other, in the atmosphere of time and action coming to a standstill. Beside the shattered chronology, weak narrative progress, and the unsettling theme of dying, the most manifest instrument that undermines both narration and representation is the combination of a very evocative vocabulary with an unconventional syntax. The bareness and stillness that hold sway over this *récit* and that create its characteristic impression of emptiness are a result of a literary style that Georges Poulet described as "dull, colorless, opaque, without timbre and without warmth," a "style-less" style that lacks the qualities necessary for creating the "stylistic magic" that we normally associate with literary narratives.[7] The crux of this style is the frequent use of certain words: nouns, such as emptiness, silence, immobility, lightness, slowness and weakness; verbs, such as lay bare [mettre à nu], efface and whiten [blanchir]; and adverbs, such as almost and perhaps. The effect of these tentative qualifiers and words suggestive of emptiness and silence is amplified by the syntactically idiosyncratic sentences in which they are embedded. Often oscillating between the first person singular, the third person singular, and the first

person plural in a single sentence, sentences in *The Last Man* progress only by diverging from the grammatically correct course set at their beginning. As the following passage demonstrates, this tendency permits addition of disparate segments to complex grammatical structures, creating those ramifying compositions typical of Blanchot's style of writing:

> What he said changed meaning, was no longer directed at us, but at him, at someone other than him, another space, the intimacy of his weakness, the wall, as I said to the young woman—"he has touched the wall"—and what was most striking then was the threat that his quite ordinary words seemed to represent for him, as though they risked unclothing him before the wall, and he expressed this by an obliteration that whitened what he said even as he prepared to say it. [Ce qu'il disait changeait de sens, se dirigeait non plus vers nous, mais vers lui, vers un autre que lui, un autre espace, l'intimité de sa faiblesse, le mur, comme je le disais à la jeune femme, « il a touché le mur », et le plus frappant était alors la menace que ses paroles, si ordinaires, semblaient représenter pour lui, comme si elles avaient risqué de le mettre à nu devant le mur, ce qui se traduisait par un effacement qui blanchissait ce qu'il disait au fur et à mesure qu'il se préparait à le dire.] (20)

Along with demonstrating *The Last Man*'s syntactic peculiarity, this passage also explains, as well as performs, the last man's speech. It shows how the syntax in this *récit* imitates the narrator's inability to place himself firmly in a rapport with the last man. At this point in the story, the narrator already speaks the same way as the last man. The last man's speech does not only efface what it says. Neither does it merely postpone denotation by constantly modifying the meaning of sentences. Rather, when the last man finally gets to speak, his speech at every moment displays his reluctance to talk about things. In the slow and heavy rhythm of his speech, the act of speaking becomes more important than what is said. Saying nothing definite and addressing neither himself nor the narrator, the last man's speech brings to the fore the simple fact that the two characters are together, sharing time and language. Similarly for the narrator, who from the beginning of his telling of the story is already telling it in the same way as the last man, the act of narrating is more important than the narrated.

   With its convoluted syntax and mono-semantic vocabulary, *The Last Man* imitates the last man's speech and itself serves as a medium of exhausted talk. What we get in both cases is a slow and careful preparation for talking, but not a message-transmitting speech. In the static language of this *récit*, the preparation for talking does not crystallize into a fully formed discourse. It remains, as Paul de Man argues is the case with all Blanchot's

fiction, very close to an entirely "unpunctuated temporality."[8] *The Last Man* does not try to tell a story; it tries to *say* nothing. Literary language in this *récit*, as Hans-Jost Frey puts it, says "what cannot be said without losing it as unsayable by saying it."[9] Apart from the fact that to create such a literary language is difficult because of the proclivity of language to representation, temporality that remains largely unpunctuated is also difficult to undergo. Many readers undoubtedly struggle with the exhausted talk of this *récit*, its uneventfulness, and textual desolation. However, this struggle is not left unaided. The reader is reminded that the narrator experienced the same unease when he encountered the last man. The reader's discomfort becomes a mirror image of the narrator's initial discomfort with the last man's speech. The reader experiences unease precisely because he is exposed to the same effect that the last man's speech had on the narrator and his subsequent way of telling a story about the last man. But as the narrator emphasizes that his irritation with the last man's speech underwent a thorough reversal during his extended exposure to it, the reader is led to follow the same path. By doubling the narrator's encounter with the last man via the act of reading, the reader is an inherent part of this narrative because he enacts the position in which the narrator found himself before the act of narrating.

The Last Man consists of two homological relations. The first and most obvious is the one between the narrative and characters. This homological relation is the simple fact that through the voice of the narrator this *récit* says what it says in the same way as the last man speaks. The second relation involves the reader. *The Last Man*'s narrative structure and devices introduce a functional correlation in which the reader enters into the homological relation between the last man and the narrator. By reading about the narrator's difficulty to adapt to the last man's speech, the reader replicates the narrator's coming to terms with the exhaustion, weakness, and emptiness that the last man's presence brings to being. The act of reading implies that the reader encounters the same experience as the narrator when facing the last man. While the reader naturally cannot be forced as far as to comply with the narrator's speech, the weariness that *The Last Man* begets via the reader's enacting of the narrator's imitation of the last man's speech demands that the reader withstand the language of this *récit*. In other words, *The Last Man* requires exhausted readers. It is perhaps not surprising that the exhaustion of this narrative exhausts the reader as well. But this effect is a predictable, rather than merely unfortunate, outcome of a narrative that is slow and exhausted – an outcome of a boring story being a boring reading experience. This effect is a deliberate

strategy: Only an exhausted reader, Blanchot suggests, can enact, like the narrator before him, the kind of fatigue and emptiness that define the subjective disposition of the last man.

The Last Man, history, and reality

In *The Last Man* and in the critical essays examined in Chapter 2, Blanchot devoted considerable energy to promoting exhaustion, weakness, and emptiness. The time could not be more inopportune. In the midst of the war in Algeria, a time when Sartre lost his conviction about the usefulness of even the most active, strong, and committed literature, and when Camus tried to revive hopes for a peaceful French Algeria by starting work on *The First Man*, *The Last Man*, it would seem, could not be more detached from its historical context. Where Sartre urged political action in the name of a future first free man, and where the first man as Camus pictured him looked at history with innocent eyes full of future expectations, as we will see in Chapter 4, Blanchot's last man is withdrawn from both history and concerns for the future. Blanchot's espousal of such a withdrawal might not have been surprising to many, as his views on literary commitment were clear for some time. Blanchot had spent a good part of the preceding years refuting Sartre's notion of engaged literature, from the 1948 "Literature and the Right to Death" through the articles published in the early 1950s and collected in 1955 as a book-length anti-Sartrean theory of literature, *The Space of Literature*. But why did he still remain opposed to commitment even during the political turmoil of the second half of the 1950s? Unlike a decade later when historical events surrounding May '68 would take him to the streets and put his pen to work on collective political manifestoes, his answer to the prevailing situation was far less practical. Instead of a clear discourse capable of conveying meaning, an attempt to silence language; instead of energy and dedication, weakness and exhaustion. Given Blanchot's politically controversial texts from before the war, this reluctance to take a stance was probably what many expected.

However, in 1958 Blanchot finally became involved politically in the debates on the Algerian war. In October, he wrote a tract "Refusal" for the second issue of the anti-Gaullist journal *Le 14 Juillet*, initiating collaboration with the journal's editor, Dionys Mascolo, which in September 1960 led to the Declaration of the Right of Insubordination in the Algerian War – the legendary "Manifesto of the 121" – in which the signatories openly challenge the government by arguing for the right of French

soldiers in Algeria to disobey. Although Paul Ricoeur had already offered a milder version of this argument in 1957, the Manifesto was a decisive act of political revolt with considerable consequences.[10] It mobilizes heated political debates and opposition to the war, as well as inciting governmental retaliation and persecution – arrests, trials, and blacklistings of the signatories, many of whom were artists, writers, and filmmakers. Blanchot would later recall his reasons for contacting Mascolo as a feeling of urgency that something, as he says, "had to be done."[11] Is this sense of urgency a sudden shift in Blanchot's position? Is his decision to get involved politically in 1958, to *do* something, rather than continue writing seemingly disengaged literary narratives and essays on literature, an abrupt change from Blanchot's previous defense of inactivity, weakness, and exhaustion? Does Blanchot unexpectedly and all of a sudden become engaged in a dialogue with his time?

The work that immediately predates Blanchot's political involvement in 1958, *The Last Man*, contains no historical references. True, it is a story and not a critical text, let alone a political pamphlet. But even as a story, it puts an unusual emphasis on exhaustion, weakness, and emptiness. Not only is this story devoid of any clear links to outside reality, or any clues as to how it sets itself apart from it, but its main character, the last man, is frail to the point of lacking the psychic energy necessary to exert his difference from others. Moreover, this frailty spreads contagiously to the narrator, and is meant to absorb the reader as well. The last man's lack of energy to differentiate himself from others – a symptom of what was popularized in French literary circles by Roger Caillois as "legendary psychasthenia"[12] – makes both the last man and those he affects merge, without reserve, with each other and with their environment. The problem with this attitude, especially under the prevailing political circumstances, is that it is deactivating. Even Caillois admitted that under historically pressing conditions – in his case, the threat of World War II – the lessening of psychic subjecthood had to be opposed. In 1958, Blanchot agreed. Not unlike *The College of Sociology* in Caillois's prewar time, the group around *Le 14 Juillet* was meant to provide such a center of centrifugal energy. In prior years, however, Blanchot's works seem to offer no obvious constricting force to self-dissipation and desubjectivization.

And yet, Blanchot's endorsement of impractical and essentially useless and non-utilitarian (*inutiles*) sentiments in *The Last Man* and the literary essays that preceded it was not a defense of straightforward disengagement. Similarly to the questions pertaining to modes of writing discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the figure of the last man was a focal point of larger

concerns and a form of Blanchot's engagement in various public debates. Blanchot was not the only one who wrote on the last man in the mid-1950s. This Nietzschean notion was revived in 1953 with the translation of the, at last, complete text of Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* (1947). As Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kojève returned to the center of attention, the concept of the last man inspired passionate polemics about humanism and its future, ranging from Sartre's critique in *Search for a Method* (1957) of his earlier evocation of humanism in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946), through Marxist attempts to reawaken humanism, such as Lucien Goldmann's in *The Hidden God* (1955), Marxist denunciations of the bourgeois ideology of man, such as Louis Althusser's *Montesquieu* (1959) and "On the Young Marx" (1961) – prefiguring his later antihumanism of *For Marx* (1965) and *Reading Capital* (1965) – to Claude Lévi-Strauss's project of the dissolution of man in *The Savage Mind* (1962). These polemics about the fate of humanism were further fueled by the revelation of crimes of Stalinism in 1956. After the legendary twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, during which Khrushchev denounced Stalin and called for radical changes in the benefit of man, discussions about either revitalizing the humanism of the young Marx or overcoming humanism altogether overtook the PCF intellectuals as well. Blanchot was a cautious participant in these polemics. Not involved directly in their political aspects, his was a contribution that was quite understated. He reintroduced the figure of the last man as a condensation of what he believed was a deeply entrenched problem of his era and an undeclared enemy around which all political debates revolved: the epoch's egocentrism and ethnocentrism. Blanchot's espousal of the ostensibly impractical and disengaged activities in both his fictional and essayistic writings was an attempt to formulate a new conception of engagement and of committed literature.

The first time Blanchot drew attention to the return-of-the-repressed symptom of the end-of-man philosophy was in his article on Mallarmé in 1953, "The *Igitur* Experience." Taken nonfiguratively, this essay is anything but politically engaged, examining the literary technique of Mallarmé's prose poem *Igitur* and the actions of its protagonist. Following a similar argument as in the two essays on Mallarmé examined in Chapter 2 – "The Silence of Mallarmé" (1942) and "The Myth of Mallarmé" (1946), in which, to recall, Blanchot showed an admiration for Mallarmé's technique, but concluded that it was ultimately flawed because the poetic strategy of circumscribing language and emptying out the meaning of words was too preoccupied with the struggle with language, and thus driven by the desire to offer a consummation to what Blanchot insisted was the incurable

paradox of language – the present essay suggests that *Igitur*, as well as Igitur the protagonist of the poem, is too forcefully engaged in the struggle to relinquish the self. The text of *Igitur* does not accomplish the renunciation of the self it sets out to perform. Reminiscent of the argument presented in Chapter 1 about the difference between Barthes's notion of *Writing Degree Zero* and Leo Bersani's concept of impoverished art, the provocative thesis of "The *Igitur* Experience" proposes that *Igitur* is not about the renunciation of the self, but about its mastery. Although preoccupied with the renunciation of the self, or rather precisely because of it, the poem is about the mastery of the self.

Blanchot finds Mallarmé's prose poem problematic because of Igitur's desire to master his own death, become the last man, and disappear as such. He also questions Mallarmé's poetic technique of trying to facilitate this disappearance. Blanchot insists that both of these efforts are self-defeating. The problem with Igitur's actions and with Mallarmé's technique is that their sole goal is to purify Igitur's consciousness by making it contemplate the nothingness in which this consciousness plans to disappear in a suicidal moment of merging with it. In his self-renunciation and exposure to death, Igitur, according to Blanchot, is "still searching only for himself," striving to achieve an assurance of the self that he could then annihilate.[13] Igitur wants to attain nothingness of his consciousness only so that he can be present at his own disappearance. Mallarmé too is driven by this goal of mastery. In a letter to Henri Cazalis of November 14, 1896 cited by Blanchot, Mallarmé complains to Cazalis that all of his previous works proved impotent to stop both the splitting of consciousness that is immanent to the act of self-reflection and the multiplication of meaning that is inherent in language. The main rationale behind *Igitur*, as this letter reveals, is to defeat this impotence. Mallarmé identifies with Igitur's desire to be in charge of disappearance, and joins him in the pursuit of defeating the impotence of both language and consciousness. In the same way as Igitur wants to be in charge of his self-abolition, Mallarmé strives to master the self-implosion of language that he stages in *Igitur*. Because of the imitation of Igitur's suicidal desire to purify absence in order to dominate it, Mallarmé fails, as any effort to master the slipping away of language and consciousness is not only futile, but self-contradictory: It both presupposes and reinstitutes that which it tries to abolish.

Despite its strictly literary subject matter, "The *Igitur* Experience" contains an early formulation of Blanchot's critique of his time. As Blanchot suggests, any resolute gesture of doing away with the last remnants of the shortsighted humanism that has dominated his time is as self-defeating as

Igitur's staged suicide because it brings back what it tries to overcome. When immediately after "The *Igitur* Experience" Blanchot in 1953 started working on *The Last Man*, he designed the structure, the themes, and the language of this *récit* as an alternative to Igitur's resolute gesture of taking his lastness into his hands. Unlike Igitur, the last man never posits himself as a master of his lastness. In "The *Igitur* Experience" and *The Last Man* Blanchot proposes that if the Western humanist concept of man has become politically questionable and ethically obsolete, then, raising oneself into a position of the last man who brings about this end of man is as hopeless as clinging to the old-fashioned humanist concept of man. Similarly to the last man, who, as Bataille noted, cannot perceive himself as the last man, the end of the ideology of man cannot be precipitated in any conceited and resolute gesture. Gestures of this kind attempt to master not only what they want to do away with, but also what they try to bring about. Blanchot warns that if the position and the rhetoric of mastery remain the central operative principles of Western thought, the West will never surmount the shortcomings of its beliefs.

Blanchot was well aware of what was happening around him even before he committed himself to a direct political engagement in October 1958. What he saw as problematic in both the philosophical discussions about the end of man and literary attempts to find a more genuine, ethically and politically appropriate form of communication was their tendency to perpetuate self-centered values. Although the awareness of Western ethnocentrism and egocentrism entered a more general cultural discourse when it became part of the vocabulary of political discussions about decolonization and the debates about the purpose of ethnology that were triggered by the start of the Algerian war in 1954, Blanchot did not think that much was solved. It is not a coincidence that the object of his critique in many articles from 1953–1958 was the heroism and the self-proclaimed lucidity of the self, or that a few years later he was one of the first to hail Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* (1961) as a critique of the ethnocentricity of Western reason.[14] In spite of the attempts to undermine the drive for self-assurance and mastery, Blanchot believed that the Western intellectual discourse as it was practiced in France at that time was merely reproducing the logic of mastery by trying to heroically overcome its self-centered humanism. As a contribution to literary, philosophical, and political discussions, *The Last Man* offered not only a critique, but also a new direction for alleviating the limitations of humanism and the contradictions in the practice of overcoming it. In *The Last Man*, exhaustion, weakness, and the last man's "naked powerlessness [une impuissance aussi

nue]" (14), are posited as subjective states that have the potential to introduce a new and different type of interpersonal relations, "not human yet," as the narrator notes, because they are "more exposed, less protected, though more important and more real" (63).

Blanchot's literary politics

An intersection of several debates, the figure of the last man took on an emblematic role in Blanchot's continued questioning of Sartre's concept of committed literature. Although Sartre's and Blanchot's takes on literary commitment promote a similar project of narratives that aim to erase self-enclosure and isolation – what in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) Sartre christens "seriality": a merely mechanical unity of an ensemble of individuals among whom the synthesis between reciprocity, as a relation of interiority, and the isolation of individuals, as a relation of exteriority, forms a passive intersubjectivity and a preestablished type of collectivity that are lacking in both genuine alterity and true links among individuals[15] – their idea of engagement was anything but alike. At the end of the decade, Sartre and Blanchot were still as apart as two literary theorists could be. When in the foreword to André Gorz's *The Traitor* (1958) Sartre ventured a very Blanchotian statement that prefacing someone else's book meant going to the brink of death, for Sartre this meant only that in comparison with the author the writer of a preface is a mere academic, far removed from the passionate quest of the book and the action of writing.[16] On some level, Sartre seems to have still believed that writing could be action, suggesting that writers embrace their vocation with the conviction that they carry out a legitimate activity that stimulates action. Blanchot, for his part, kept diligently to his practice of detaching writing from any idea of action and pragmatic politics. He offered an even more polarized version of commitment than Barthes who, on the one hand, wrote more directly politically engaged interpretations of literature and culture, such as those collected in 1957 in *Mythologies*, and, on the other, did not join the Manifesto of the 121 and signed instead – together with Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Marie Domenach, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Le Goff – the Manifesto's moderate counterpart, *For a Negotiated Peace in Algeria*, whose signatories did not endorse open rebellion, but pledged to follow the Manifesto's participants to prison, should they be arrested. Unlike for Sartre, for Blanchot it is not only the writing of prefaces that requires the perspective of death. All writing has to start with, and adhere to, the perspective of death, inactivity, and emptiness. In

"The Passion of Indifference" (1958), Blanchot again questions Sartre, arguing that Sartre's reading of Gorz is yet another instance of Sartre's tendency to misconstrue literature by conflating it with politics. Sartre shows an unrelenting penchant for transforming writing into action and manages to find, Blanchot argues, an authentic "transparency of an I" behind even the most impersonal and indifferent of narrative voices, such as André Gorz's.[17]

As in the late 1940s, a decade later it was still the idea of action on which Blanchot and Sartre disagreed. But even with his combatant political texts, the increasing distrust in the effectiveness of even the most committed literature, and the fervent rhetoric of projects, negations and actions that appear in *Search for a Method* (1957), Sartre did not find a way out of writing. As Simone de Beauvoir confesses in her memoir of the decade between 1952 and 1962, she and Sartre admired people who could dedicate themselves entirely to action, but neither she nor Sartre were able to sacrifice literature altogether.[18] Continuing working on his voluminous study of Flaubert and the autobiographical *Words* (1963), Sartre spent the second half of the 1950s struggling in vain to give up literature. In the closing pages of *Words* he corroborates Beauvoir's account: "I have renounced my vocation, but I have not unfrocked myself. I still write. What else can I do? *Nulla dies sine linea*. It is my habit and it is also my profession. For a long while I treated my pen as a sword: now I realize how helpless we are [à présent je connais notre impuissance]."[19] As in the foreword to *The Traitor*, Sartre still wanted literature to be action, but he was now ever more suspicious about whether it was possible. In direct proportion to his slow realization that, in fact, it was not possible, Sartre's plea for a literature of action gradually turned into a wish that literature *were* action – that it were in the nature of literature to be action.

Following the Declaration (the Manifesto of the 121), Blanchot returned to the issue of the role of literature and the link between political and literary engagement. In a letter to Sartre from December 1960, in which he praised Sartre's intention to adapt his journal *Les Temps Modernes* to the changing political environment and include more articles on literature, Blanchot emphasized the connection between the two engagements, stressing the importance of making "the new relations of political and literary responsibility more perceptible, as the Declaration showed they are."[20] In one of the documents that Blanchot prepared in the aftermath of the Declaration as part of the project for an international review magazine, he talked about the commitment that asks the writer to be engaged "as a writer and from his own perspective, with the responsibility that comes to

him from his writer's truth alone," a commitment that Blanchot posited, somewhat differently than in the letter to Sartre, as Christopher Fynsk noted, as divergent from Sartre's idea of commitment.[21] According to Blanchot, literature is essential to politics and to "a certain just demand, perhaps a demand for justice," because of "its unique relation to language."[22] If the Declaration drew attention to the fact that alongside the actual war there was also a war of writing, it also made it clear that the political significance of the kind of writing to which Blanchot appeals lies in the refusal of a certain type of language, a language that Leslie Hill described as "authoritarian, self-assured, peremptory, repetitive, oppressive."[23]

For Blanchot, the dilemma of literature and engagement is predicated on a much less impassable and vexing premise than for Sartre. Blanchot believes that commitment in the strict political sense of mobilizing political activity is not a literary category. The dichotomy between the literary intransitivity of "art for art's sake" and political commitment is false because unlike politics literature does not aim at immediate action. According to Blanchot, literature pursues politics on its own terms, as a politics conducted by literature. The writer's role is not to decide whether writing is action, choose between literature and action, and feel either guilty or self-righteous about the choice. One does not have to be a Sartrean committed writer to be engaged with reality and others. One simply has to be a writer who "is aware of being in relation with others and therefore of being responsible for what happens to them," as Kevin Hart explains Blanchot's position.[24] Similarly to Francis Ponge, who in 1956 declared that his political partisanship and his work as a poet are one and the same vocation, while at the same time being adamant about keeping the two allegiances separate – and also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who a year earlier in an allusion to Sartre argued that "to recognize literature and politics as distinct activities is perhaps finally the only way to be as faithful to action as to literature"[25] – Blanchot posits a fundamental difference between political and literary responsibility. Although a decade later he would write no literature and no literary essays for almost a year because of his political involvement in the events of May '68, even at this time political action would not replace literary engagement. For Blanchot, literature and political action cannot substitute one for the other. Nor can the principles governing one form of engagement be implemented by the other. Writers, when they write works of literature, do not articulate concrete political goals. They are not activists; they do politics as *writers*. Blanchot would agree with Jacques Rancière's more

recent argument that the politics of literature is not a matter of political engagement, but a politics particular to literature: "a politics carried by literature itself."[26]

Blanchot maintains that literature and politics are driven by demands that emerge only in particular domains of each venture. The task is not staying in contact with political reality while at the same time being unattached to it – incorporating elements of reality but keeping one's distance from it and one's independence as an intellectual who evaluates reality and corrects it. According to Blanchot, the task of the writer is not to stand somewhere in the middle between practical politics and self-involved literature. The writer's responsibility is determined by the truth specific to the writer. Literature is not a matter of activist political engagement, but a matter of opening new social possibilities via literature. As literature works with different instruments than politics, it follows a distinct path to social change. Literature does not try to institute new hierarchies; it is political to the extent of interrupting the established ones. Although modes of writing always function within larger historical and social contexts, their purpose is to interrupt normative forms of literary representation and social being, as well as to open for the possibility of a radically different set of perceptual forms. From the point of view of concrete politics literature remains ambiguous, and, as Blanchot suggests, has to, because it needs to cultivate the perceptual disturbance of interruption.[27] What the *récit* as a literary concept and the guiding notion of Blanchot's fictional writing proposes is a type of literature that, similarly to Barthes's concept of writing degree zero, capitalizes on literature's specifically political nature: By remaining in a state of neutrality, exhaustion, and blankness, exhausted literature interrupts old forms as well as repels any new hierarchies.

Literature is not subordinate to political action, and cannot be therefore measured with the same criteria as politics.[28] As a result of its unique relation to language, which was discussed in the introduction, literature's political contribution is not in describing reality and transmitting politically charged commentaries on it. According to Blanchot, literature is political by virtue of expressing the relation to the world as such and to the entirety of human experience. Blanchot agrees with Bataille that literature is not inferior to action. As a type of communication, literature is a form of relation that suppresses oneself as an isolated being.[29] Unlike Bataille, however, who considers language to be inherently mimetic and hence doomed to betray the "irrecuperable negativity" that can be affirmed only in fundamentally non-utilitarian acts, such as eroticism, ritual, and

sacrifice, Blanchot has a great trust in literary language.[30] In the closing sentences of his 1953 review of Mascolo's book on communism that appeared earlier that year, Blanchot argues strongly along these lines, claiming that literature is an irreplaceable mode of communication. Arguing that the current historical moment demands a move towards an affirmation that would be different from merely exchanging the present set of values for another set, Blanchot asks literature to answer this call, reject all valuation, and proclaim the exigency of the beginning. As a mode of communication that maximizes on its particular use of language, literature has to present a communication that remains in an inchoate state, beginning anew, again and again.[31] Referring to Barthes's writing degree zero as an example of this literature of the perpetual beginning, Blanchot proposes, in another article from the same year, that this type of literature is more than just "a writing that is blank, absent, and neutral [écriture blanche, absente et neutre]."[32] It is a writing that, beyond the confines of the text, generates "the experience of 'neutrality' itself," which, he insists, is the opposite of apathetic isolation, withdrawal, and disengagement.[33]

Although Blanchot's political involvement in the issues of the Algerian war in October 1958 confirmed that centripetal energy is necessary for political action, in literature action is not the primary objective. In response to Sartre, Blanchot argues that words not only cannot, but must not be turned into swords. On the contrary, literary language has to be disarmed and weakened. This emphasis on weakness, exhaustion, and blankness, while running in the opposite direction to Blanchot's political defense of a resolute refusal and the strength to resist, is nonetheless part of the same vision. In the same issue of the *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* where the review of Mascolo's book appeared, in an essay entitled evocatively "Communication," Blanchot claims that weak and exhausted literature is a withdrawal from action. It is a realized action, an action that is not entirely passive because it takes "part in the public dialogue" and functions "in the productive fashion of works of the world [travaille à la riche manière des œuvres du monde]."[34] Even the most exhausted literature – or, rather, exactly the most exhausted literature – *does* something. The commitment of both literature and politics follows, via different means, the goal of transforming given forms of social life. Similarly to Barthes's argument in the concluding parts of *Writing Degree Zero*, for Blanchot the goal of exhausted literature is a less atomized and more interconnected type of interpersonal relations.

Weakness, bareness, and fragility – words that appear frequently in *The Last Man* and in Blanchot's critical essays from the 1950s – are not a sign of

political escapism and capitulation to the forces of history.[35] They are part of the new model of literary politics that aims to open for a possibility of something fundamentally different from the current status quo, in both social and political terms. Blanchot, and similarly Barthes, deemed this opening necessary because of the shattering experiences of the near past (World War II and the Holocaust) as well as the discontents of the immediate present (the process of decolonization). The choice of the vocabulary of weakness, bareness, and fragility resonates with the provocative thesis of Robert Antelme's *The Human Race* (1947) that powerlessness, vulnerability, and nudity lay bare what people have in common – the "indivisible oneness" of the human race and the togetherness that people share and that cannot be destroyed even in situations of absolute expropriation (provocative because Antelme spoke of his experience of Nazi concentration camps).[36] Blanchot presents exhaustion, weakness, and powerlessness as literary answers to both history and reality. For him, the concreteness of meaning in which Sartre saw literature's strength, and thus its obligation to be committed, becomes an obstacle and a symbol of clinging to the position of mastery. In Blanchot's alternative conception of literary engagement, the role of literature is to foreground emptiness, stave off hierarchies, and weaken the subjective drive. As *The Last Man* demonstrates, the suspension of referentiality and the diminishing of the self in a literature that promotes weakness, slowness, and, as Antelme will later acknowledge, "disarmed speech [parole désarmée]," do not lead to self-involvement and further separation.[37] On the contrary, the characters' dissipated psychic energy creates a new arrangement of relations that supports firmer interpersonal bonds. Blanchot suggests, again similarly to Barthes, that rather than narcissistic retreat, the withdrawal from action and the lessening of psychic subjecthood in exhausted literature generate a higher level of interpersonal connectedness and openness to the other.

Several months after the end of the Algerian war in March 1962, and a few months after Bataille's death in July, Blanchot revisited *Inner Experience* and the figure of the last man. In his tribute to Bataille, he repeated that the last man, a man who puts himself radically in question, has to communicate his experience. In speaking, however, he does not communicate anything specific. His speech "affirms nothing, reveals nothing, communicates nothing."[38] By remaining slow, powerless, exhausted, and empty, and by starting anew at each instant, the last man's speech extends its own weakness, and thus openness to others.

The poverty of history and memory
Albert Camus's Algeria

Not unlike *In Search of Lost Time*, in which, as Walter Benjamin remarked, Proust sought to "conquer the hopeless sadness within him" – the "*'imperfection incurable dans l'essence même du présent'*" – Albert Camus's last novel, *The First Man*, served him as a site of recollections.[1] Camus spent the last year of his life stylizing the memory of his Algiers childhood in an attempt to overcome the isolation into which he fell as a result of his position on the Algerian war, as well as to end the creative paralysis that befell him after receiving the Nobel Prize in 1957, an award he perceived as a symbol of literary careers that were coming to a close. The fate of these recollections has by now become iconic: A draft of the unfinished novel was found in the car wreck in which Camus died in January 1960, but the rescued text remained unpublished until 1994 largely because of the political situation in Algeria. If Camus's lost past remained unretrieved, it was not, however, just an unfortunate consequence of his premature death. *The First Man* did not offer a regained time, not because Camus did not have time to finish it, but because its protagonist, Jacques Cormery, was, like the vast majority of those living in Algeria, poor. And for the poor, as Camus repeats throughout the novel, there is nothing to discover in their memories.

Camus's celebration of Algerian poverty and the trifling nature of Algerian memory was not entirely new at the time of *The First Man*, nor was it something that had gained Camus much popularity. At the time of the war for Algerian independence, representing Algerians as devoid of memory suggested the absence of common history and thus undermined a sense of national cohesion. The sober pride that Camus often associated with Algerians in his writings, portraying it as a consequence of life immersed in the present moment and in the world of poverty and sunlight, implied a controversially all-inclusive understanding of what it meant to be an Algerian, and endowed Algerians with little power to mobilize politically for collective action. And yet, Camus's emphasis on material poverty

and memory-deficiency was not an apolitical gesture that defended individualistic hedonism and the simple joys of life. Although Camus proposed neither concrete politics nor concrete ethics in his frequent appeals to justice, his work, as Serge Doubrovsky pointed out soon after Camus's death, steadily departed from the merely subjective towards the ethics of openness to the world and to others.[2] In *The First Man*, this openness, however politically impractical and reminiscent of a similar attempt by Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, took on the form of a narrative formulation of an ethically and politically more receptive model of subjectivity and identity that, as Camus hoped, would end violence.

Memory and poverty

When at the beginning of the novel Jacques Cormery, now an adult, returns to Algiers to visit his mother and recover his past, he is not surprised by the inability of his family to help him. Jacques has long believed that people in Algeria are without memory. As he observes his mother who spends long periods of time in baffled oblivion, staring absentmindedly out of the window onto the same street, he remarks that it is "poverty that creates beings without names and without a past," and that makes them slaves to the passing days.[3] To Jacques, his fellow Algerians appear as people who love life "as animals do [animalement]," compliantly and with "a resigned suspicion" (103), and onto whom their eventless lifestyles bestow only limited abilities to use language and a memory that remains blank. But all of this is not a sudden revelation upon Jacques's return to Algiers. He had already realized that poor people's memory is deficient when, as a child, he visited his wealthier uncle. Unlike his mother's house with only the bare necessities and "a poverty as naked as death" (48), his uncle's house had a variety of things that all had names. While the rich, in both Algeria and France, as Jacques notes, possess things and the language to name them, which allows objects to stand out in both space and time, thereby feeding the rich people's memory, the poor have neither things nor language, and thus no memory because their daily lives do not provide enough landmarks in space and a sufficient number of reference-points in time. As the impoverished Algerians not only do not have the immediate material comfort of the rich, but, lacking in words and memories, are deprived of the solace of recollection as well, the narrator solemnly concludes that "remembrance of things past is just for the rich [le temps perdu ne se retrouve que chez les riches]" (62).

Where does this skepticism about remembrance leave Jacques, who, after all, considers himself to be an Algerian – a *pied-noir*, a descendant of the French settlers, and thus, as Camus contentiously maintained throughout the 1950s, an Algerian? Unlike the people with whom he identifies, and more like the rich and the French, the adult Jacques is articulate and in search of recollections. Having been the first in the family to get an education and escape the life of ignorance, he became aware of the benefits of language and memory. But while Jacques showed immediate enthusiasm about the larger world revealed to him during his studies, the social success that came with education also meant losing what he now recalls as "the warm and innocent world of the poor" (137). One way to understand Jacques's present idealization of his poor origins would be to see it as merely a pathos of vanishing childhood. And, indeed, Jacques often expresses his fear that his childhood is slipping away forever, and Camus reports a similar worry in his letter to René Char from March 1959 in which he, like Jacques, does not hide his anxiety about the thought that once the vivid memory of his childhood is gone he will be a different person.[4] The inevitable loss of childhood, however, is not the only or even the strongest reason for Jacques's desperation. The difficulty Jacques finds himself in has more to do with the existential situation opened by his cultural dislocation than with the simple fact of aging. His admission to the lycée threw him into a desperate predicament between the two worlds that he experienced as mutually exclusive and yet each meaningless and disappointing on its own, and made him long, with all the accompanying self-defeating nostalgia, for both the world of history and the ahistorical innocence of the poor.

Telling the story of the effects of displacement, *The First Man* articulates the particular form of Jacques's estrangement by a series of impossible longings and unfeasible goals that, although legitimized by the historical circumstances that surround the adult Jacques, that is, the war in Algeria, contribute to the hopelessness of his situation. When Jacques decides to recover his memory and rescue his people from what he perceives as the fate of the poor, "which is to disappear from history without a trace" (238), he at the same time shows an opposing desire for "bareness and sobriety, his yearning also to be nobody [n'être rien]" (216), which in his imagination means being an Algerian again. The more Jacques becomes a part of history, the more he desires to return to the oblivion of his past, thereby seeking release precisely from the history for which he left his poverty. Interestingly, Jacques is acutely aware of all these contradictions. Adding to the disarray of his present condition, the longing he expresses for his

people takes place in full awareness of the fact that they are themselves alienated and that helping them out of oblivion would not only replace one type of alienation with another, but would destroy precisely what he now misses.

In many respects, Jacques's dilemma of memory and forgetting evokes the classical archetype of uprootedness according to which one finds oneself fundamentally out of place when upon departure from one's cultural environment it becomes impossible both to set down new roots and to return home. In *The First Man*'s evocation, however, the phenomenon of uprootedness (*déracinement*) is presented in a more intricate version. The recurrent emphasis in this novel on the cultural memory of Algeria and on the specificity of the collective Algerian identity transforms Jacques's displacement into something other than a sentiment of personal identity crisis. Although upon his return to Algiers Jacques acts more like a Frenchman than an Algerian, with the paternalistic tone of rescuing people who do not feel the need to be saved, his project of enunciating his and his people's identity has a distinctly collective nature. As Algerians have no memory and no history, Jacques's liminal position vis-à-vis memory – the fact that he shares with the French their compulsion to remember and with the Algerians the absence of any recollected object – allows him to articulate a common ground for Algerian identity outside the traditional appeal to a collective history of a uniform ethnic group.

History and violence

Whenever history manifests itself in *The First Man*, it is always as a destructive force and a dubious notion. History appears either as a history of violence, or a politically motivated concept which promotes a fabricated image of the common past that too leads to violence because it stimulates conflicts among groups included in this image and those excluded from it. Against the emphasis on historical origins that endorse ancestral uniformity, Jacques places Algerians on the sidelines of history and perceives them, in a disquieting gesture that gained Camus notoriety, as a diverse set of people without common historical roots.

Camus's belief that history is not just a possible site of violence, but that history coincides with violence, was not unprecedented in his work at the time of *The First Man*. He expressed his reservation about the notion of History as Necessity – something Raymond Aron would later denounce as the opium of French intellectuals[5] – already in 1946, first when he questioned the cult of abstraction and efficiency in the dialectical idea of

history in his talk at Columbia University in March, and then, more systematically, in a series of articles "Neither Victims Nor Executioners" published in *Combat* in November.[6] His argument against history suggested that the conviction of the inevitable progress of history, which had recently accumulated a considerable intellectual following, indirectly justified terror. As in *The Rebel* (1951) – as well as during the controversy this book sparked a year later in the letter exchange with *Les Temps Modernes* that led to Camus's dramatic break with Sartre – Camus was adamant that the privileged position of history in the discourse of political philosophy entailed a judgment of acts not by their intrinsic value, their "goodness" in Camus's lingo, but by their service to historical progress. According to Camus, the emphasis on history was feeding the dialectic of violence in which the formerly oppressed turned into tyrants who victimized their ex-masters.

Despite Camus's persistent calls, both in the postwar years and in the 1950s, for direct political interventions, his argument against history was clearly a stance that privileged ethics over pragmatic politics. In this respect Simone de Beauvoir was right to claim that whenever Camus discussed political issues it was, in fact, ethics that he talked about.[7] Indeed, Camus was wary of "political realism."[8] Not unlike history, politics implied a compromise of the ethical and a sacrifice of the immediate act of justice for the promise of a grand future justice. What would become a position infamously associated with Camus's 1957 impromptu statement that defending his mother is above defending abstract justice was what Sartre had criticized in 1952 as Camus's desire to be a "beautiful soul [belle âme]" – a moralist who evades history by balancing his critique of one side by a critique of the other, and who refrains from dirtying his hands with politics by promoting lofty ideals.[9] But Camus disagreed. For him it was Sartre who was driven by abstract ideals. In their polemic about history and politics Sartre and Camus accused each other of the same error of idealism detached from the immediate reality. While Sartre thought that Camus operated with a prefabricated notion of ethics that determined his contributions to political issues, Camus believed that the same applied to Sartre and his concocted understanding of history and politics: For Sartre, justice was an outcome of history, a question of historical action and the future; for Camus, it was a concrete act in the present, a question of ethical being, not political doing.

While Camus was planning a narrative version of his take on the Nietzschean topic of the "disadvantages of history for life" for a long time – he first announced the plan for *The First Man* in 1954 – his first

undertaking in this regard was indirect and ironic. In the *récit The Fall* (1956), which will be examined more closely in Chapter 5, Camus answered Sartre's and Francis Jeanson's attacks on his political expositions in *The Rebel* in an ironic way: Where Camus was criticized for being excessively preoccupied with style, the protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, mocks his own abundance of style, and where Camus was said to be serious and haughty, he gives the same features to Clamence. Insisting that his argument from *The Rebel* was misunderstood, Camus sarcastically presents Clamence's confession as a self-involved monologue and, hence, a seed of terror. And yet, the ironic narrative that exposes the violence of the politically committed literature only by participating in it was not Camus's last word. Unlike *The Fall*, with Clamence's self-loathing account of his past, *The First Man* was a return to the past with a nostalgia for a time outside of history, and thus outside of violence, rather than a Sartrean appeal to historical action or a testimony to one's inadvertent participation in it.

The evolution of *The First Man* records Camus's peculiar involvement with history – history from which he wished, in an equally troublesome way, to exit. Announced in 1954, this *roman d'éducation* as Camus called it, was mentioned in his journal several times throughout the following years still as a plan.[10] When he finally managed to focus on it in the second half of 1959, writing it, Herbert Lottman tells us, worked like a cure for the physical and mental incapacitation from which Camus had suffered in the preceding years.[11] But what exactly could this cure represent at the moment of the escalating brutality of the Algerian war? It is without doubt that Camus exited history for the timeless charm of the Mediterranean stillness at a very inopportune moment. Even though his political position in the mid-fifties was not diametrically opposed to other Leftist intellectuals such as Dionys Mascolo, Robert Antelme, Marguerite Duras, Michel Leiris, and even Sartre, who all from late 1955 until late 1956 engaged in the activities of The Action Committee of Intellectuals Against the Pursuit of the War in Algeria, and who at that time argued against violence and discrimination but still not for separation, in the late 1950s Camus's steadfastness to the same ideals was increasingly outdated. Where the previously politically disengaged literary figures, such as Maurice Blanchot, as seen in Chapter 3, took the opposite turn, on political issues Camus scandalously retreated to silence. In order not to invigorate the infinite circle of violence, he refrained from commenting on Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber's 1957 book about his experience as a soldier in Algeria, *Lieutenant in Algeria*, Henri Alleg's 1958 book on torture, *The Question*, or *The Gangrene*, the June

1959 testimony of five Algerian men tortured in Paris – all milestones in the changing course of the French intellectuals' political involvement. For Camus, the political issues pertaining to the Algerian war found an uneasy refuge in his fiction. *The First Man*, in particular, together with the short story "The Guest," as we will see in the next chapter, came to serve as literary vehicles for Camus's ethically motivated political warning that the current historical situation refused to accept. Literature was probably the only place that could accommodate a justified yet politically non-practical truism of the futility and the horror of violence.

Land and history

The First Man portrays Algerians as a heterogeneous group of people who, instead of being defined by their history, constitute an identity of their own on the basis of the land they share. What emerges strongly in Jacques's story is something that had been present in Camus's work since his early essays, namely a peculiar prominence of geography at the expense of history. It is the climate, the land, and the natural environment that define Algeria in Camus's writings, and the Algerian war did not alter this pattern. Even among the political talks from the midst of the war one can find a statement that the Algerian land – "our love of our common soil" – is what unites both sides in the present conflict in spite of their mutual animosity.[12]

The celebration of Mediterranean weather with its sun, wind, and the sea dominates the 1958 preface to a reedition of the collection of essays from Camus's youth *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, in which Camus famously confessed that it was poverty that "kept me from thinking all was well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history was not everything [m'empêcha de croire que tout est bien sous le soleil et dans l'histoire; le soleil m'apprit que l'histoire n'est pas tout]."[13] The climate and the land also feature as natural gifts capable of redeeming poverty in *The First Man*. Already in the opening parts – but the origin of this can be traced back to a journal note from March 1948 in which the Mediterranean poor are said to be less despondent than the poor in the industrial countries because of the climate[14] – the weather and the landscape serve as qualitative measures applied in the first chapter to Algeria and in the second to France, and leading in the first case to the poor but hospitable locals and in the second to the affluent but inhospitable French. It is the coarse beauty of the Algerian landscape and the joys its elements provide that explain the depiction of Algerians in *The First Man* as

straightforward and welcoming, and that in the stories in *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957) a few years earlier served as a source of a distinctive set of ethical principles. As a Mediterranean country, a category that in Camus's imagination defies the geographical split between Europe and Africa, Algeria is a unique place because its austere beauty brings those who live there together and raises them above their cultural and ethnic differences.

Although Camus wished to avoid politics, the meditative slowness with which he drew attention to his stories' locale was not without political charge. With the prominence given to the image of Algeria as a natural environment, *The First Man*'s primary political call besides the termination of violence was for an equal distribution of Algerian land. In the closing pages of the novel, the narrator, who has grown desperate in the face of social injustices, breaks the meditative slowness and demands, in a more urgent and beseeching tone, that the land be redistributed:

> Return the land, the land that belongs to no one. Give all the land to the poor, [. . .] to those in the country who are like her, the immense herd of the wretched, mostly Arab and a few French, and who live and survive here through stubbornness and endurance, with only pride that is worth anything in the world, that of the poor. [Rendez la terre, la terre qui n'est à personne, donnez toute la terre aux pauvres, [. . .] à ceux qui sont comme elle dans ce pays, l'immense troupe des misérables, la plupart arabes, et quelques-uns français et qui vivent ou survivent ici par obstination et endurance, dans le seul honneur qui vaille au monde, celui des pauvres.] (255)

As was obvious in the debate that raged in the second half of the 1950s, and from which Camus withdrew so as not to further incite it, the problem regarding such redistribution related to who was entitled to the land. Camus believed that as many *pieds-noirs* were born in Algeria they should be seen not as French but as local.[15] Because for them, like for Jacques's mother in *The First Man*, France was an empty word, an abstraction that had nothing to do with their day-to-day lives – a strange image from their school textbooks of the winter countryside with lots of snow (113) – the narrator predicts that after the violence is over, *pieds-noirs* and Arabs will continue living together. Through the character of an old settler who responds to the evacuation summons by destroying his crops and telling his Arab workers to join the rebels because they will win, the narrator admits that the only people who can understand this settler are Arabs: "We were made to understand each other. Fools and brutes like us, but with the same blood of men. We'll kill each other for a little longer [. . .], and then we'll go back to living as men together [on recommencera à vivre entre hommes]" (141).

In *The First Man*, Algeria is above all the land, and all those who are on it have the right to be there. In Camus's argument against violence land plays a crucial role – and that, as David Carroll demonstrates, not only in his last novel – because it represents an ahistorical force that repels the violence of history.[16] As the land, together with the poverty it nurtures, is a uniting element that the narrative opposes to the dividing effects of history, religion, and culture, Camus repeats his call for a socio-economic reform from *Algerian Reports*, in an essentially identical form, as Jean-Yves Guérin objects, without supplementing it with a plea for cultural, political, and religious changes.[17] From Camus's perspective, both the French military involvement and a repatriation of the *pieds-noirs* imply not only violence, but pointless ethnic purges because there is nothing that constitutes the identity of Algeria except the land shared by those who inhabit it. To an historical vision of homogeneous Algeria that, as Camus foresees, would perpetuate an endless dialectic of cleansing the country of the supposed foreign elements, he opposes a topographical vision of Algeria as a land of those who are already there: Arabs, Berbers, the French, Italians, Turks, Greeks, and Jews.[18] In the same way as he opposes poverty and memory, Camus also opposes land and history. While poverty emerges as both an outcome and an attribute of the Algerian land, memory remains an attribute of history, which itself is an outcome of violence. When, then, at the end of the novel the narrator calls for a return of the land, this demand represents a plea not only to end the current outbreak of violence, but also to move away from the violence of history as such and return to the peace of the land.

Yet despite the fact that in Camus's imagination the land is the proclaimed repellent of historical violence, even in Camus's literary world Algeria is not immune to violence. *The First Man* often depicts the heat, the cold, and the rough elements that exhaust and enfeeble any potential violence. Jacques insists that violence in Algeria evaporates "under the constant sun with the memory of those who made it [avec le souvenir de ceux qui l'avaient vraiment faite]" (151). But only shortly before Jacques makes this statement, he despairs over the chain of violence that goes from French to Arabs, Arabs to Berbers, and all the way to Cain to Abel, and surprisingly attributes the recurring violence, in an eerie echo of *The Stranger*, to the effect of "a ferocious sun" (149). Unexpectedly, there all of a sudden does not seem to be anything extraneous to violence. If the Mediterranean land inspires violence only to immediately erase its mnemonic traces, its timelessness does not absolve it from the same charge of violence that defines European history. In the end, lacking a history does not appear to be much different in its effects from having one.

Even though Camus celebrates land, sun, poverty, and sensuality as symbols of life, in *The First Man* these often serve to designate the opposite of life, namely a lack of desire, resigned oblivion, and even a source of violence they were supposed to terminate. As Jacques realizes, but feels unable to change, his desire to return to poverty is not only romantically hopeless but also contradictory. Although he knows that his escape from the anonymity of the ignorant life without words for the world of history did not lead anywhere, and that his death would "return him to his true homeland and, with its immense oblivion, would obliterate the memory of that alien and ordinary man who had grown up [le ramène dans sa vraie partie et recouvre à son tour de son immense oubli le souvenir de l'homme monstrueux et banal qui avait grandi]" (153), he also realizes that what he now imagines as a place of warm poverty that he lost with education was something that already at the time of his lycée years he often experienced as a place of alienation and dread. Exhibiting symptoms of what Jacques Derrida called "nostalgeria," Jacques suffers from an impossible recollection of something that was never really there, namely his vision of time before history.[19] For Jacques, land and history are incompatible, with alternately one being positive and the other negative, while at the same time they both appear as either positive (the pleasure of sensuality and the pleasure of knowledge) or negative (the miserable world of the poor closed onto itself and the alienating world of history). When the narrator states that poverty is "a fortress without drawbridges" (113), it is not so much because poverty is hard to overcome. It is rather that once one manages to conquer poverty and enter language, knowledge, and history, one realizes the losses this transition has instigated. In Camus's scenario the bridges never go down. One leaves one fortress for another, as one is either in poverty, and thus in oblivion, or outside of it, and thus in the burdensome and ineffectual awareness of history.

As a narrative about Algeria and Algerians, *The First Man*, with its unsteady opposition between, on the one hand, history, memory, and violence, and, on the other, poverty, oblivion, and sensual pleasure, does not offer an answer to the most crucial question it raises: whether life absorbed in the present moment is joy and sensuality, or a debilitating immediacy without reflection and a surrender to the mundane. This deficiency, however, can hardly be seen as a flaw. As the novel itself is a quest for the impossible – for the childhood innocence that is irrevocably tied to a place of memories, a place that is now getting lost in the violence of the war – the flaw of the novel is what *The First Man* is essentially about. As a figure that represents the moment of historical void, the first man,

a man who is in a direct rapport with the land he inhabits, is intentionally constructed as an imaginary and fundamentally unstable origin. Although it is sometimes the *colon* who is identified as the first man because of his strangeness to the land, it is more often the mother who, as a synecdoche for the *pieds-noirs*, functions as a trope of innocence to which one can always return. But even the mother is not the final instance of the imaginary origin, nor is it those who had been in Algeria before the first *colon* arrived. As Camus notes in the third volume of his journals and as becomes evident in *The First Man*, everybody in Algeria is the first man. No one, however, as he adds, can claim it.[20] The title of *The First Man*, with its singular noun, is therefore misleading, because in Algeria each generation is that of the first men, and all first men – and women – have to learn anew how to live in the land they inhabit.

History and memory: a question of identity

In the second half of the 1950s it was in the fictional world of literary narratives where Camus dealt with the political issues of Algeria, Algerian identity, and Algerian war, demonstrating the madness of violence by enacting situations that, as David Carroll describes them, defied unequivocal solutions and pointed to possible but only partial answers.[21] While ethically oriented literary critics, such as Colin Davis, find the ethical, political, and "intellectual deadlocks" in which Camus's texts engage his readers fascinating, more politically oriented critics, such as Sartre, consider these deadlocks highly problematic.[22] The situation is best exemplified by Daru's dilemma in "The Guest" of either releasing the Arab criminal or delivering him to prison: Although Daru is obliged to follow the ethical rules of hospitality regardless of the political circumstances, neither of the choices is good, as both will be seen as a political gesture of taking sides, thereby awakening violence. *The First Man* depicts several similar scenes of daunting decisions and ethical and political impasses. However, in this story what assumes the role of an impossible situation that is recurring and central to the unfolding of the plot is something that does not become an object of a direct description, namely the impossible and self-defeating quest both for and against memory and history.

The question for someone such as Conor Cruise O'Brien regarding Jacques's mnemonic project is less the inherent contradiction of this quest and the ethical implications Camus wished to convey by staging it, and more the way in which this project posits Algerian identity. What is problematic about Jacques's conclusions about Algerians – and precisely

because Camus wished to embrace Algeria's cultural and ethnic diversity – is that they are based on only one segment of the population. Moreover, this segment is a relatively small faction, the estimated proportion of the *pied-noir* minority in Algeria in the 1950s being around 10 percent. Jacques assumes without vacillation that, like his family, all Algerians are ahistorical and obliviously sensual. Although he is convinced that this perception of Algerians as a mixed nation is a positive view, he never questions whether this is a genuine hybridity or a French delusion. In virtually all Camus's works, the characters are French-Algerians, with Arabs, as O'Brien insists, being turned into French Arabs, that is, what the European vision of Algeria imagines them to be.[23] An omnipresent yet never acknowledged aspect of the daily reality in Algeria as Camus represents it is the fact that *pieds-noirs* were rarely able to speak Arabic, while the Arabs' knowledge of French was a given that determined their social prospects. But even the knowledge of French was not a guarantee of prosperity, let alone political influence. Even those Algerians who spoke French but were not *pieds-noirs* had little effect on the administration of their country and little say and participation in its government, with only eight out of the total of 864 posts of higher administration held by Muslims as late as 1956, as Alistair Horn details.[24]

The questionable turn from history to the imaginary point of an ahistorical beginning that *The First Man* suggests, including the striking demographic distortion it entails, is something that Camus proposes as a necessary precondition for remodeling the notion of Algerian identity on ethical and political grounds. In this novel, Camus offers a narrative articulation of his vision of a union of different ethnic groups via the theme of the Algerian land that is freely inhabited but never owned. In a similar way as some of Camus's other later fiction, here too the envisioned cohabitation of various groups hinges on the assumption of a widespread nomadism (of the nomadic attitude to the land, not necessarily the nomadic wandering). In *Exile and the Kingdom*, where several stories feature nomads as mysterious tribes living in nature, it is they who epitomize the title of the collection and symbolize the kingdom of exile, the kingdom that, as the *prière d'insérer* declares, stands for a free and naked life to which exile shows the way. For Camus everybody is a nomad in Algeria, including the *pieds-noirs*. After making all Algerians, as O'Brien protests, into *pieds-noirs*, Camus, then, presents these Frenchified Algerians as local nomads. Although this is clearly wishful thinking on Camus's part, the intention is unmistakable: an attempt to establish a collective identity that commends the absence of subjugated people and dominated areas, and thus aversion to conflicts over the possession of the land.

For Camus, nativeness to Algeria is not a question of who has been there the longest, whether the nomads, Berbers, Arabs, or the French. As the land turns all of them into nomads and poverty prevents them from acquiring memory, Camus suggests that what unites Algerians is a memory of their rootlessness and oblivion. Even though in *The First Man* memory has an ambiguous status because it is often aligned with history, wealth, and the West, as an empty instrument, a memory based on the absence of anything tangible and concrete in it, it is something that stands against history and on the side of the communal land. For Camus memory and history are far from conceptual counterparts. Camus would agree with Pierre Nora that whereas memory is life borne by living societies, and as such remains in permanent evolution, history is "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" – "memory is always a phenomenon of the present [un phénomène toujours actuel], a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past."[25] For Camus too, history represents a particular take on memory, which in turn sustains history and makes it alive. But in Camus's evocation of empty memory, the Algerian land stands for a peculiar place of memory because, although Camus invokes it at the time of crisis and thus ultimately in order to promote a sense of commonality, it does not represent an appeal to a common history, nor does it try to consolidate a sense of a distinct and homogeneous identity.

On both the personal and the collective level of Jacques's effort to recover his and his people's memory, Camus poses a very non-temporal and non-historical moment of origin to which Jacques aspires. It would not have much explanatory value to simply dismiss this origin as imaginary, however fantasmatically Camus sets it up. As Sigmund Freud reminds us, the constitution of both individual and national identity is fantasmatic regardless of its content because it represents a later reconstruction of the past.[26] This re-enactment, as Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis add, always institutes an imaginary point of the beginning that gives reality its shape and coherence.[27] Although Camus dramatizes the quest for the individual and the national identity as a question of origins, it is a dramatization that deliberately refuses to pose a concrete imaginary moment of the origin. In *The First Man*, this moment is left empty: not just openended in a remote past, but vacant and thus virtually not in the past at all, as there is simply nothing to remember. While it is true, as John LeBlanc has argued, that Jacques's recovery of memory implies a socially constructive act of a community and its history because he needs others to collaborate in his memory-recovery, the problem is that not only are the

others unable to help him but, more importantly, that the communal history that Jacques supposedly builds is not history at all and that it determinedly presents itself as opposed to history.[28]

As a story of empty origins, *The First Man* attempts to construct neither personal memory nor collective history. By drawing attention to the contradictions inherent to Jacques's quest, the novel maintains that shared memory and history cannot – and, if we follow Camus's ethically inspired political agenda, *must not* – be a foundation of the Algerian sense of commonality. If this commonality has any temporal origin, it is, as Camus claims, vacant and ungraspable. As not only Jacques but all poor Algerians in Camus's portrayal are the first men without the past and only with the present (the landscape, the family, and other Algerians), affiliating oneself with the imaginary group of one's people against other ethnic groups is absurd. In Camus's representation of Algeria, any appeal to a common history is an indication of a discriminatory version of history that is put forward by a group that erases the realities of historical violence in the name of creating an image of the past that justifies the group's current political claim.

The trying proposition that Camus offers in *The First Man* suggests that Algeria is a nation of nationless people without history for whom memory recalls only the poverty of memory and thus oblivion. After the numerous instances in which Edward Said and other postcolonial critics drew attention to the Western erasures of precolonial local histories and to representations of colonies as being outside of history, this is a questionable suggestion, to say the least.[29] Even some of Camus's fellow Algerian writers – Mouloud Feraoun and Kateb Yacine, for example – found the paternalistic tone in Camus's depiction of Algerians objectionable because the historical exchanges between those ethnic groups that were there before the French could not be denied.[30] In the same fashion as an act of positing the imaginary moment of beginning that establishes a sense of a uniform nation reflected a political rationale, Camus's attempt to circumvent this act by hypothesizing the emptiness of memory as a binding trait of Algerian identity, nevertheless, had an important political justification. In accordance with his widely criticized position at the time of writing *The First Man*, Camus was opposed to the violent birth of the Algerian nation because this vehement new start – resembling Blanchot's argument from Chapter 3 about any resolute gestures of overcoming the shortcomings of Western humanism ending by reproducing them – would lead to the exclusion of those he believed were Algerian as well. If Camus repeats the Western belief that the non-West is outside of history, he does not do

so in order to justify Western superiority. Camus shows that the con-
sciousness of itself, of the other, and of history that the West supposedly
possesses implies violence – the violence, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and
Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrate in greater detail, of making the non-West
a part of Western history.[31]

The ethics of empty memory

Sartre and Beauvoir were right to claim that Camus's politics was merely a
disguised ethics. But the opposite is true as well. Camus's ethical appeal to
non-violence and the ethnic inclusiveness of the future Algeria was not an
apolitical statement. Just as *The Fall* was an answer to Sartre and others
who in the early fifties dismissed Camus's views, so *The First Man* was a
response to the critics of Camus's political views from the late fifties.
Where Camus was accused of ignoring history, *The First Man* turned this
disregard into a carefully constructed theme. As an antidote to history and
historical violence espoused, among others, by Sartre, and directed against
Camus's ahistorical moralism in the name of one's duty to condone
violence as a necessary tool for emancipation to which the inevitable
historical progress leads, *The First Man* offered a blank memory and empty
recollection attached to space and the present moment.[32]

   As a narrative reaction to the events and debates that took place in the
late 1950s, *The First Man* was not opposed to Jean-Paul Sartre's political
views alone. With those views, Camus suggests, comes an existential stance
based on strength and confidence that allows one to argue for unmitigated
action and, moreover, be certain about their politically committed beliefs –
to the point of being sure that whenever one misjudges the situation, one is
right to be wrong (is wrong for the right reasons).[33] Against this self-
certainty, action, and strength, Camus's narrative of empty recollection
poses weakness. With the impossible longing for the lost childhood and for
the suppressed immediacy of life lived in the present moment, *The First
Man* depicts Jacques as someone who, not unlike the character of the last
man in Blanchot's *The Last Man*, is exhausted, weak, and self-effacing.
Jacques is weak especially in his conviction about how to act, to the point
of an utter renunciation of any confident action, because he assumes that
others should always be consulted. Together with the empty memory,
weakness is presented here as both the route to a more immediate life and
the means of resisting the violence of history. Because in *The First Man*
wealth and strength appear as symptoms of a struggle for recognition, and
thus in the novel's axiological design serve as symbols of history and

violence, Camus, similarly to Barthes's and Blanchot's emphasis on slowness, emptiness, exhaustion, and powerlessness, proposes that poverty and weakness be utilized as ethical tools because they represent states that undermine the drive to dominate others and reduce them to a sphere of one's self-sufficiency.

Camus's emphasis on poverty, weakness, and mnemonic – and thus descriptive – void in *The First Man* is an outcome of history entering the narrative as essentially a traumatic experience. The ethical underpinning of trauma in *The First Man* does not nonetheless reside in an attempt – not even an inadequate or failed attempt – to tell a story. Even though the narrative features several depictions of harrowing violence, it is less these descriptions and more the very act of telling a story that figures trauma indirectly, as a stimulus for the change of conditions that led to it, where trauma becomes the site of the ethical: in the act of recollection in a situation of lacking both memory and history. It is perhaps here where Camus is not only intriguingly original and provocative in what he believes will ease violence but also most vulnerable to criticism. Inasmuch as his ethics presupposes the exclusion of history, such ethics should address, or at least acknowledge, the fact that the erasure of history in the name of moderation, solidarity, and collective existence implies a forgetting of the colonization of Algeria that had made the *pieds-noirs'* presence, and therefore their current call against history, possible. But Camus refuses to relativize his call for an all-inclusive Algeria and instead argues for an empty mnemonic return that exposes the common plight of *all* men. The non-aggressive rapport with the present opened via empty recollection, Camus maintains, helps us realize that we face the human condition together and thus *should* face it together.

Although admitting that the mutual exclusion of historical existence and of the life lived in the present moment cannot be overcome, *The First Man* suggests that weakness and the ensuing lowering of egocentric drives can attenuate this irreparable human condition. The ethical principles that served as guiding notions of Camus's ethics in his previous works – dialogue, compassion, humility, and shame – are revealed in *The First Man* as resting on a more fundamental call for poverty, weakness, and emptiness. The way Camus articulates this call via the topos of empty memory demonstrates that the function of literary language in this novel is not primarily to depict situations that raise ethical and political questions and point to their solutions. An outcome of Camus's conviction that recent historical events have rendered direct accounts of moral issues, accompanying emotions, and concrete political solutions inadequate, the

narrative evocation of empty memory in *The First Man* creates such an aesthetic in which the ethical and the political transcend the explicitly discussed ethical and political issues. With the ambition of fashioning a memory that does not deliver cultural identity rooted in common history, *The First Man* creates a story that, rather than simply describing this memory as a theme, performs it. As this vision of literature put forward a very reflexive notion of literary practice, it was not naively romantic. As Debarati Sanyal argued, Camus's conception of literary practice was engaged because it was attentive to the implications of the representational models it conceptualized and used. "Writing, by its very nature as a representational practice enmeshed in other discursive forms, was inescapably woven into its historical moment and participated in its violences," Sanyal pointed out, and continued with the description of Camus's conception of literary engagement:

> If committed literature was to bear witness to those who suffer and are betrayed by the violence of esthetic and historical processes, this could only occur by somehow turning the act of writing against itself and by gesturing toward what, in the world of living, suffering, and embodied beings, was irreducible to and resisted the powers of representation.[34]

The First Man's aesthetic codification of poverty and emptiness makes Camus's novel display some of the traits that Blanchot and Barthes associated with the anti-novelistic *récit* and writing degree zero. Needless to say, Camus's novel is much more directly engaged with immediate reality, even if just for the simple fact of mentioning Algeria, colonization, and the war for independence. But similarly to Blanchot and Barthes, Camus expounds weakness, exhaustion, and emptiness as sites of the ethical and the political in literature by such narrative devices that make the ethical and the political in literature irreducible to the dilemmas depicted in well-drawn scenes and statements articulated in propositional language. The referential make-up, as Michael Eskin has argued more recently, is not the only place in literary works where critics should look for ethical and political meanings. The ability of literary works to "incorporate, encompass, embody, engage in live contexts, illuminate from innumerable perspectives, and thus transform – in short, interpret – the propositions, problems addressed, and 'truths' attained" is equally relevant.[35] But *The First Man* asks us to do even more. It does not really interpret from innumerable perspectives specific ethical and political propositions, showing their applicability, or the lack thereof, in concrete situations. Instead, it demonstrates that the ethical and the political in

literature are inextricable from literary language and form. In this story, the political and the ethical reside in the narrative's performative dimension. Form and style here serve as dynamic vehicles through which the political and the ethical emerge aesthetically, and through which, in turn, the aesthetic transpires as political and ethical. If we consider ethics and politics, as James Phelan suggests, as inherent in the act of bringing the themes and the form together as parts of the complex undertaking of artistic communication, the political and the ethical in *The First Man* cannot be separated from the aesthetic effect as such.[36] Similarly to Blanchot's *The Last Man*, in Camus's *The First Man* politics, ethics, and aesthetics are bound together, each designed in conjunction with the other so as to exhaust characters as well as the text itself. Politics and ethics in *The First Man* are the politics and ethics of blank aesthetics: an attempt to formulate an alternative to our understanding of personal and collective identity in a literary story that draws attention to its performative powerlessness and withdrawal from action.

Albert Camus and the politics of shame

The concept of shame in Western discourse has often carried a lesser moral significance than guilt. Unlike guilt, which pertains to one's actions and intentions, shame relates to one's affects and emotions. While guilt is of an essentially mimetic and identificatory nature, the logic that underlies shame is of a specular kind: The experience of shame depends on the awareness of being exposed to a shaming gaze, and therefore on the consciousness of an autonomous self that is not immersed in the interpersonal dynamic to the same extent as the guilty self. Although shame is clearly not without ties to action, as it is mostly experienced as an immediate consequence of one's deeds, the feeling of shame indicates both a shortcoming in behavior and a flaw in personality. One can, indeed, experience shame as a result of faulty conduct. But unlike embarrassment or regret, shame touches one on a deeper existential level, and even though it does not necessarily reveal a real personality flaw, it always implies self-questioning. As Ruth Leys has recently phrased it, whereas "guilt concerns your actions, that is, what you do, or what you wish or fantasize you have done," "shame is held to concern not your actions but who you are, that is, your deficiencies and inadequacies as a person as these are revealed to the shaming gaze of the other."[1] According to this conceptual convention, a product of the long tradition in psychoanalysis and psychology – Leys's principal references include Sigmund Freud, Sandor Ferenczi, Anna Freud, Silvan Tomkins, Donald Nathanson, Paul Ekman, and Carroll Izard, but one could add a parallel tradition in phenomenology and existentialism from Max Scheler to Jean-Paul Sartre and Karl Jaspers – shame is secondary to guilt in terms of morality and ethics because it is too entangled in the struggle for recognition, and thus too absorbed in the self rather than the other.

The ethical significance of guilt and shame becomes more ambiguous once these concepts are applied to historically and politically complex events, and in ethically challenging and morally troublesome situations. As seen in Chapter 4, Albert Camus believed that the war in Algeria was

one such situation. Pointing to the intricacy of the conflict, he argued against Algerian independence because he feared that it would lead to the expulsion of peoples, cultures, and values deemed foreign by many in Algeria, but considered by Camus intrinsic to Algeria's social fabric. Although Camus's stance of keeping Algeria French was controversial, and at some point even inseparable from the official state policy – despite his non-partisan politics and desire to avoid taking sides – Camus defended it with his argument against violence. Following the thesis from *The Rebel* (1951) that terror is inadmissible as a principle of political action – both the real violence and its discursive counterpart, the violence of "an interminable subjectivity which is imposed on others as objectivity"[2] – Camus condemned political justifications of violence in the name of historical progress even in the early stages of the war as an unacceptable kind of political messianism. His assertion of non-violence was, however, increasingly dismissed as an apolitical moralism. As a result, Camus, wary of fueling further violence, turned away from politics, choosing literature as a means of explicating his politics. *The Fall* (1956) and *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957), the last literary texts published during his life, returned to *The Rebel* to recast its call for dialogue. These short narratives also revived the theme of guilt and shame that was prominent in Camus's writings since *The Stranger* (1942). In these stories from the early stages of the Algerian war – that is, a time when Camus still hoped for a peaceful coexistence before the escalation of violence in 1957 increased his despair, inciting his withdrawal from public life and the writing of *The First Man*, a novel in which, as Chapter 3 showed, the vehicle of his political vision became the literary theme and form that emphasized weakness, poverty, and empty memory – guilt and shame marked the troubled relationship between ethics and politics. Presenting guilt and shame as two diverging notions, *The Fall* and *Exile and the Kingdom* served Camus as literary figurations of his ethical and political argument in favor of shame.

Guilt in *The Fall*

The Fall is a *récit* in which the main mental force driving the protagonist is guilt. The *récit* tells the story of a Parisian lawyer, a self-proclaimed defender of the wretched, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, who, after realizing the hypocrisy of his humanistic principles when he failed to help a drowning woman, settles in Amsterdam and spends his days recounting his tale to strangers. When the *récit* was published in 1956, Maurice Blanchot immediately hailed it as a story of existential disobedience. In Blanchot's

reading, *The Fall* becomes – somewhat surprisingly, despite the fact that this was still before Blanchot's 1958 engagement in the political debates on the Algerian war discussed in Chapter 3 – a tale of metaphysical lucidity and self-interrogation. Blanchot likens Clamence to Oedipus, and argues that Clamence tumbles because he is too close to truth. Leaving Paris for Amsterdam, Clamence chooses exile because there he can live courageously, not "quietly and hypocritically."[3] As seen in Chapters 2 and 3, in his critical texts Blanchot often did not pay much attention to the historical context of the works he analyzed. Interestingly, in "The Fall: The Flight" (1956) he does not even consider very closely the content of Clamence's self-reproaches. The fact that Clamence's conversation with the unknown traveler is in fact a monologue is, in Blanchot's comparison of Clamence's talk and Oedipus's "solitary dialogue [dialogue solitaire]" with "the silence of the gods" (201), not Clamence's fault. Clamence's speech falls into unreality only on account of his interlocutor's vagueness and lack of responsiveness. Blanchot reads *The Fall* as an enactment of Camus's argument from *The Rebel* and interprets this *récit* as a story of revolt against the exile of the human race in the world.

The link between *The Fall* and *The Rebel* is undeniable. But it is not so much the metaphysical argument about universal revolt that is at stake here and to which Camus is returning. Given the publicity of the 1952 controversy between Camus and Sartre regarding *The Rebel* and the devastating effect it had on Camus, it is unlikely that Camus would even want to repeat *The Rebel*'s plea for revolt in an identical form in a work of fiction. *The Fall* does more than exemplify the logic of revolt. Above all, it is a narrative of Clamence's monologue and self-confessed guilt. As Debarati Sanyal showed, by performing the kind of totalizing approach criticized in *The Rebel* as the logic of mastery that leads to terror, *The Fall* stages Sartre's critique of *The Rebel* and responds to it.[4] Offering a literary stylization of the oft-quoted passage from *The Rebel* in which Camus denounces monologues as manifestations of violence – "dialogue, as personal relation between people, has been replaced by propaganda or polemic, which are two kinds of monologue [le dialogue, relation des personnes, a été remplacé par la propagande ou la polémique, qui sont deux sortes de monologue]"[5] – *The Fall* is an extension of Camus's political case against self-enclosed monologues. Clamence's monologue, as well as the *récit* that conveys it, reveals not only that private revolt is inconsolable and that the seemingly virtuous bourgeois lifestyle is far from innocent, but also, and arguably with even more force, that what lacks in dialogue and abounds with aggression is as much overt propaganda as a self-punitive confession of guilt.

The boundary between virtue and vice, admiration and shame, and pride and guilt in *The Fall* is very thin indeed. Clamence himself draws attention to this liminality on a number of occasions. Very soon after walking away from the cries of the drowning woman, Clamence realizes that as a lawyer he was helping others only in safe situations in which he could be admired for his honorable behavior. Clamence needed and cherished the wretchedness of others so that he could continue helping them and be adored for his charity. Like Saint Augustine who in his *Confessions* – a book dear to Camus[6] – reports a similar fondness for the suffering of others, Clamence admits that he did not want to eradicate injustices, for they allowed him to be popular and to feel good about himself. Clamence romanticized and over-identified with the misery of others – a sign not of genuine care, but self-involvement, as Camus suggests elsewhere.[7] After realizing what was behind his generosity, Clamence, instead of staying in Paris and repenting or running far away, decides to go to Amsterdam. *The Fall* presents Amsterdam as a replica of Paris, with the canals replacing the Seine and the scandalous deportation of Jews the drowning woman. Neither too close nor too far, Amsterdam offers Clamence an environment in which he can remember the past and examine the self-centeredness of his former life – but only in a semi-detached fashion. In the cultural familiarity and yet geographical distance of Amsterdam from Paris, Clamence's atonement turns into a diatribe of self-accusations. What Clamence practiced as an honorable behavior for his sympathetic witnesses in Paris, he now performs in the form of self-derogatory monologues for his quiet companions in Amsterdam. Like the Parisian intellectuals, whom he condemns as "judges-penitents" for reproaching themselves only so that they could attack someone else, he accuses himself in order to justify his judgment of others. Turning Clamence into just another remorseful judge, *The Fall* unfolds a complex system of identifications and disidentifications that mimics the logic of liminality between virtue and vice, admiration and shame, and pride and guilt. Not only are Clamence's self-accusations inextricably bound with his accusations of others, but his repentance repeats the same selfishness that governed his life in Paris.

The question in *The Fall* is less whether Clamence is responsible for his actions and whether his guilty feelings are the appropriate response to the event of drowning. It is rather a question of whether the way in which Clamence presents his guilt, and the way in which *The Fall* enacts this presentation, does justice to ethical demands. Blanchot, for example, when he returned to *The Fall* after Camus's death in 1960, tried to exonerate

Clamence, arguing that he cannot be held responsible because, if he is guilty at all, his fault "is not to be found on the level of the soul but of the body."[8] As in "The Fall: The Flight," Blanchot omits the story's factual details and downplays the event of drowning into a secondary accident, one among many in Clamence's life of revolt. Blanchot speculates that unlike Clamence, who is a city-dweller and therefore naturally afraid of the cold water, Meursault, with his "youthful vigor" (303), would have saved the woman. Shoshana Felman shifts Blanchot's emphasis from the question of Clamence's accountability for his actions to the question of his experience of the event. Felman is particularly interested in Clamence's inability to recall the event of drowning. Following the hypothesis that certain events disrupt the ability of those who undergo them to bear witness, while at the same time exposing them to the unconscious compulsion to return to these events, Felman interprets Clamence's failure to recall the woman's drowning as a protective shielding from his trauma. For Felman, *The Fall* is a narrative stylization of the "missed encounter with reality" because the event around which the narrative is built enters Clamence's speech "only in so far as it is *not experienced*, in so far as it is literally *missed*."[9] According to Felman, by staging Clamence's failure to bear witness, *The Fall* turns the reader into Clamence's silent interlocutor, thereby succeeding in drawing attention to the event without, nevertheless, representing it directly.

   The issue underplayed by both Blanchot and Felman is the role of irony in *The Fall*, as well as the simple fact that Clamence is not nearly as traumatized by the event of drowning as Felman makes it seem. Clamence relates to the traumatic event lucidly and often lightheartedly, oscillating facetiously between confessing his guilt and sarcastically undermining these very confessions. For example, when in a crucial moment he laments, "O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have a chance of saving both of us!" he teasingly adds that it is fortunately too late for this: "A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion! Just suppose, *cher maître*, that we should be taken literally? We'd have to go through with it. Brr. . .! The water's so cold! But let's not worry! It's too late now. It'll always be too late. Fortunately! [Une seconde fois, hein, quelle imprudence! Supposez, cher maître, qu'on nous prenne au mot? Il faudrait s'exécuter. Brr. . .! L'eau est si froide! Mais rassurons-nous! Il est trop tard, maintenant, il sera toujours trop tard. Heureusement!]."[10] Or, similarly, when at the beginning he guides his companion to the hotel, he stops in front of the bridge saying that he never goes further because, should someone jump into the water, he would either have to fish him out,

which is a great risk in the cold weather of Amsterdam, or leave him there, which "sometimes leaves one strangely aching [laissent parfois d'étranges courbatures]" (13). With his witty and playful self-reproaches, Clamence, as Dominick LaCapra remarked, is far from a bystander and a victim of trauma.[11] Clamence's speech deliberately displays its playfulness and sophisticated interlacing of recurring themes. He enjoys his articulateness, clever rhetoric, and amusing way of storytelling, as the opening scene of meeting his interlocutor demonstrates:

> Are you staying long in Amsterdam? A beautiful city, isn't it? Fascinating? There's an adjective I haven't heard for some time. Not since leaving Paris in fact, years ago. But the heart has its own memory and I have forgotten nothing of our beautiful capital, nor of its quays. Paris is a real *trompe-l'œil*, a magnificent dummy setting inhabited by four million silhouettes. Nearly five million at the last consensus? Why, they must have multiplied. And that wouldn't surprise me. It always seemed to me that our fellow-citizens had two passions: ideas and fornication. Without rhyme or reason, so to speak. Still, let us take care not to condemn them; they are not the only ones, for all Europe is in the same boat. I sometimes think of what future historians will say of us. A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers. After that vigorous definition, the subject will be, if I may say so, exhausted. [Ferez-vous un long séjour à Amsterdam? Belle ville, n'est-ce pas? Fascinante? Voilà un adjectif que je n'ai pas entendu depuis longtemps. Depuis que j'ai quitté Paris, justement, il y a des années de cela. Mais le cœur a sa mémoire et je n'ai rien oublié de notre belle capitale, ni de ses quais. Paris est un vrai trompe-l'œil, un superbe décor habité par quatre millions de silhouettes. Près de cinq millions, au dernier recensement? Allons, ils auront fait des petits. Je ne m'en étonnerai pas. Il m'a toujours semblé que nos concitoyens avaient deux fureurs: les idées et la fornication. A tort et à travers, pour ainsi dire. Gardons-nous, d'ailleurs, de les condamner; ils ne sont pas les seuls, toute l'Europe en est là. Je rêve parfois de ce que diront de nous les historiens futurs. Une phrase leur suffira pour l'homme moderne: il forniquait et lisait des journaux. Après cette forte définition, le sujet sera, si j'ose dire, épuisé] (7).

And yet, it is precisely Clamence's display of sophistication, pleasantries, and speech-making that backfires. Clamence's playful and elegant discourse, which is supposed to be seductive not only for the silent interlocutor, but, because the narrative contains only Clamence's monologue, also for the reader, attempts to turn both the interlocutor and the reader into Clamence's accomplices. Depending on the perspective, this narrative gesture can be interpreted with Felman as an ethical device in the service of witnessing, or with Colin Davis as a narrative act of domination that extends Clamence's violent monologue.[12] However, at least on some level,

the interlocutor and the reader do not comply with Clamence's game. In fact, Camus frequently reminds the reader to resist Clamence's eloquence and the persuasiveness of *The Fall*, and not to acquiesce to their seductive discourse. With Clamence's ironic and highly self-conscious speech – "I, I, I is the refrain of my whole life [Moi, moi, moi, voilà le refrain de ma chère vie]" (37), as he admits – the act of domination on which the narrative principle of *The Fall* rests is never hidden. As Camus draws attention to it, this act can be hardly seen as either an innocent staging of witnessing or an effective feat of domination.

The central place of guilt in *The Fall* is determined both by the logic of terror, violence, and selfishness borrowed from *The Rebel*, and by the prominent role of irony in telling *The Fall*'s story. Clamence's guilt brings both sides together, as it, on the one hand, ironically embodies Sartre's critique of Camus's fear of history – in his "Reply to Albert Camus" (1952), Sartre painted a vivid picture of Camus's fear of entering the waters of history and merely testing them with his finger – and, on the other hand, draws attention to the self-involved and violent logic of guilt that Camus believed was the driving force of Sartre's political activism. Clamence declares that the violence of guilt is the foundation of our culture. We lay blame on each other and then all feel guilty, but by the same stroke we seek, and grant ourselves, absolution. By linking our culture of guilt with a bourgeois goal of "a good clean life [une vie propre]" (8), Clamence posits Paris and Amsterdam as exemplars of the lifestyle of remorseful judges: Everyone there conforms to a desire for a clean and proper life, and abides by the never-ending ritual of blame, guilt, and absolution.

Although Clamence often seems to believe that he passes judgment on others from a safe distance, he is not immune to what he criticizes. Like others in Paris and Amsterdam, he appreciates cleanliness, purity and emptiness, having chosen to live in the Jewish quarter that, as he puts it, was "cleaned" of Jews: "Seventy-five thousand Jews deported or assassinated; that's real vacuum-cleaning [le nettoyage par le vide]. I admire that diligence, that methodical patience!" (10). He is also full of guilt and blame. He evokes historical events, such as Nazism, collaboration, and colonialism, with an uneasy mix of condemnation and irony that betray his deeply seated anxieties. These events bring to the fore – both for Clamence and for readers of *The Fall* – the choices that Clamence made in the past as well as his erasures of the past. By blaming himself, then justifying his behavior, only to insist that he cannot be forgiven, Clamence reveals that the cleansing of guilt is impossible, because the logic of guilt and absolution reproduces it endlessly.

Similarly to Blanchot's critique of all resolute gestures of overcoming the Western ego- and ethnocentrism discussed in Chapter 3, Camus is skeptical of any vehement gestures of a final cleansing. Perhaps the original title intended for *The Fall* – *The Last Judgment* – would be more apt to underscore the *récit*'s irony and bring its critical purpose into a sharper relief: Although guilt is a form of remembering and repenting, it is irrevocably self-involved. Camus suggests that guilt and the monologic brooding over one's guilt are hopeless because they perpetuate the violence and self-absorption that have led to the unethical action and the ensuing guilt in the first place.

Land in *Exile and the Kingdom*

Although *The Fall* was originally conceived as part of the collection of stories *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus decided to publish it separately. This decision was not only a result of the ironic tone of *The Fall*, which did not suit the other stories. Two other facts were equally important: first, that the exile represented in *The Fall* by Amsterdam did not offer the kind of authentic refuge that *Exile and the Kingdom* presents as leading to freedom; and, second, that the main emotion through which the characters in *Exile and the Kingdom* relate to others is not guilt, but shame.[13]

Stories in *Exile and the Kingdom* are much less garrulous and flamboyant than *The Fall*. They lack *The Fall*'s fast pace, biting irony, and the rambling preoccupation with the self caught in the net of memory and guilt. Emphasizing spatial rather than temporal motifs and focusing on moral dilemmas, these stories minimize the drive for representational definiteness and narrative closure by drawing attention to their slowness, rhetorical plainness, and descriptive and compositional simplicity, as the opening of "The Guest" demonstrates:

> The schoolmaster was watching the two men climb toward him. One was on horseback, the other on foot. They had not yet tackled the abrupt rise leading to the schoolhouse built on the hillside. They were toiling onward, making slow progress in the snow, among the stones, on the vast expanse of the high, deserted plateau. From time to time the horse stumbled. Without hearing anything yet, he could see the breath issuing from the horse's nostrils. One of the men, at least, knew the region. They were following the trial although it had disappeared days ago under a layer of dirty white snow. The schoolmaster calculated that it would take them half an hour to get onto the hill. It was cold; he went back into the school to get a sweater. [L'instituteur regardait les deux hommes monter vers lui. L'un était à cheval,

l'autre à pied. Ils n'avaient pas encore entamé le raidillon abrupt qui menait à l'école, bâtie au flanc d'une colline. Ils peinaient, progressant lentement dans la neige, entre les pierres, sur l'immense étendue du haut plateau désert. De temps en temps, le cheval bronchait visiblement. On ne l'entendait pas encore, mais on voyait le jet de vapeur qui sortait alors de ses naseaux. L'un des hommes, au moins, connaissait le pays. Ils suivaient la piste qui avait pourtant disparu depuis plusieurs jours sous une couche blanche et sale. L'instituteur calcula qu'ils ne seraient pas sur la colline avant une demi-heure. Il faisait froid; il rentra dans l'école pour chercher un chandail.][14]

In *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus offers the slow and meditative rapport to the landscape in which one is exiled and which forms a bond common to those who are equally cast out in it as an alternative to the failed exile of *The Fall*. In these stories, and similarly to *The First Man*, as discussed in Chapter 4, land is what binds people together. The harsh but shared land – "The Guest" describes it as a "solitary expanse where nothing had any connection with man" (92) – represents a genuine exile, because despite their differences, those who inhabit it inevitably share it: "no one in this desert, neither he nor his guest, mattered; and yet, outside this desert neither of them, Daru knew, could have really lived" (98). As a literary counterpart to Camus's argument from his essays, the motif of the land in *Exile and the Kingdom* is a defense of a peaceful cohabitation of the various ethnic groups living in Algeria. As no one has any exclusive rights to the Algerian land, as Camus insists, all living there should share it actively, as a form of revolt against what *The Rebel* presented as the human condition of being exiled in the world.

As seen in Chapter 4, Camus's emphasis on shared land that makes poverty as well as political antagonisms bearable was not well received. Francis Jeanson stressed the problematic nature of Camus's disregard of history in favor of geography as early as 1952.[15] The challenging suggestion of many of Camus's works from the second half of the 1950s is that what Algerians have in common is not history, but the land on which they all happen to be. In *The First Man* the narrator argues that what unites Algerians is the fact that they are "without roots."[16] Given the extent of Western dismissals of precolonial histories, this is a provocative sugges-tion.[17] While introducing ethical dilemmas that provide a contribution to the issues of ethics and morality, *Exile and the Kingdom* is politically problematic because the principle of tolerance it espouses erases history, thus circumventing the political relevance of the ongoing struggle for Algerian independence. In order to justify the federalist mode of coexist-ence and the continuing French presence in Algeria, Camus invokes the

austere beauty of the land that elevates those who live there above their ethnic and cultural differences. In some of the stories, Camus indeed gets disturbingly close to the depiction of colonies as a source of ecstatic vastness, purifying passivity, and facile unanimity that has dominated Western portrayals of colonies for centuries. In "The Adulterous Woman," for instance, the protagonist Janine, a French woman who lives in Algeria alienated from other colonists and wishing to open herself to the foreign land, perceives the Algerian desert as a silent void without people. When she invokes the nomadic inhabitants of the desert, it is only as imaginary figures that suit her acute need to change her life, stop time, and start living in the present moment, without having much to do with the actual place and people. Unlike D'Arrast from "The Growing Stone" who makes an attempt to talk to the natives – showing preference not for the local elites who are reverent of him, but for ordinary people who are reserved and wary of him – and who in the end manages to win the sympathy of those who previously kept their distance from him, Janine remains locked in her private dream of freedom in the desert. In some way, she is not too far from Clamence, who wishes for a second chance, but admits that keeping it only as a dream is easier because one does not have to actually enter the cold water, or, in Janine's case, the inhospitable Algerian desert.

But despite the fact that *Exile and the Kingdom* balances precariously on that convenient ignorance and self-serving Orientalism that has helped the West to relate to the rest of the world, the land and the people in these stories are never mere vehicles for Europeans to deterritorialize themselves. While it is true that Janine perceives the Arabs and the nomads in a stereotypical fashion by focusing on their unusual attire, watchful gaze, and composed pride, Camus, similarly to his foregrounding of the seductive but deeply problematic elegant rhetoric of *The Fall*, draws attention to these clichés, rather than hiding them or mechanically reproducing them. Unlike Clamence, Janine shows a genuine, even if romanticized, admiration for the locals, repeatedly emphasizing her concern for her corpulence and dependency, wishing to shed both her weight and possessions and be more like the locals. While not without its problems, the motivation behind Camus's emphasis on the land in *Exile and the Kingdom* is unequivocal: The land in these stories functions as an ahistorical force that, in the same way as in *The First Man*, alleviates the dividing effects of history, memory, and national identity. Following Camus's argument that Algeria is a place of "communities with different personalities [communautés aux personnalités différentes],"[18] the plainness of the Algerian land in *Exile and the Kingdom* is a medium that brings people closer to each

other. The emptiness and silence of the land allows people to see the otherness of others and accept it. Muteness, slowness, and the void in these stories do not separate – they connect.

Ethics and politics in "The Guest"

Ethically complex and challenging situations unfold on the same barren stage and with the same prominence of land in most stories in *Exile and the Kingdom*. It is in "The Guest," however, where they receive the most thorough treatment. "The Guest" also articulates most powerfully Camus's emphasis on shame as an ethical notion with the political potential of promoting coexistence.

In "The Guest [L'Hôte]," a story about a French-Algerian schoolteacher and his dilemma about whether to deliver an Arab criminal to prison or set him free, the theme of shame enters the story via the topoi of hospitality and fraternity. Deliberately playing on the semantic polyvalence of its title – *hôte* means both guest and host – the story depicts a situation in which it is not clear who the host is and who the guest, and in which each of the three characters has to accommodate the other two in spite of their conflicting political convictions and group allegiances. On the most manifest plane, Daru is the host and the Arab and Balducci (a gendarme who brings the Arab to Daru's house) the guests, although both Balducci and the Arab are uneasy about their role as guests and Daru is equally troubled by his role as the host. On a more figurative level, it is Daru, a *pied-noir*, a French-Algerian, and Balducci, a Corsican, who are the guests. They are, in Jacques Derrida's phrase, "chez soi chez l'autre," at home in someone else's home.[19] Daru and Balducci are at home in the land to which the Arab has his own, and arguably more legitimate, rights. The historical situation here changes the polarized opposition between the colonizer and the colonized, according to which the colonizer is away from home but dominant and the colonized is at home but subordinate. Colin Davis describes this particular situation as one in which the colonizer "is neither at home nor away from home (or is both), and is neither persuasively dominant nor genuinely subordinate."[20] This duplicity of roles and identities creates a discomfiting tension between hospitality and suspicion, fraternity and opposition, and kindness and anger that determines the way in which the events in "The Guest" unfold.

When at the beginning of the story Balducci brings the Arab to Daru's house, Daru invites them in without inquiring into the purpose of their visit, as the rule of hospitality prescribes. Kneeling beside the Arab, Daru

offers him tea, and, ashamed that the prisoner's hands are tied, unties him. Daru's hospitality is not effortless though. After learning that the Arab killed his own cousin in a family squabble, Daru has to fight his anger and hesitation about whether to offer the Arab another cup of tea. Daru is increasingly uneasy about the situation into which the Arab's crime put him, refusing to have anything to do with the Arab, as well as with Balducci's orders to deliver the Arab to prison the next day. Mirroring the struggle to grant it, hospitality is equally difficult to accept. In the opening scene, the Arab looks at Daru with the same mistrustful gaze as Daru looks at him, and is very surprised when later Daru offers to share a meal with him. The same difficulty pertains to fraternity. Although there is a sense of fraternal union in the relationship between Daru and Balducci – Daru confirms that he would join Balducci in the suppression of the Arab revolt, should it occur – Daru is reticent to Balducci's signs of camaraderie and evocations of his national duty to bring the Arab prisoner to justice. This simultaneous openness to and reserve about fraternal bonds applies to Daru's relation with the Arab as well. While Daru undergoes a fleeting experience of brotherhood with the Arab when they, like "soldiers or prisoners" (102), sleep in the same room at night – a sentiment shared by the Arab who tries to find out if Balducci will be taking him to prison, and asks if Daru could go with them – all three characters are for the most part alert and anxious. Similarly to Camus's essay "Terrorism and Repression" and its statement about the "danger of fraternity," and *The Fall* and its ironic reference to "a great feeling of fraternity [un grand sentiment de fraternité]" (103), "The Guest" is suspicious of any strong emotion of fraternity under the present political circumstances.[21]

The political situation depicted in "The Guest" puts both fraternity and hospitality to a test. But instead of arguing against them or merely showing their impossibility, Camus's story redefines them. As Eve Célia Morisi suggested, fraternity and hospitality in "The Guest" are deritualized because they are divested of their ritualized routines and adapted to the historical moment of ambiguous roles and identities.[22] The process of deritualization – not only of hospitality and fraternity, but also of shame and honor, as well as ethics and politics – culminates in the penultimate scene in which Daru brings the young Arab to the juncture and lets him choose between the path that leads to prison and the one that leads to the nomadic tribes in the desert. Following the rules of hospitality, Daru provides the Arab with food and money in case he chooses the desert. Even this act, however, is not without harshness, as Daru rebuffs the Arab's desire to talk to him, and simply walks away. Daru, again, cannot

conceal the difficulty he experiences in dealing with the demands of the situation, showing that he is far from exemplifying, as some critics have argued, a decidedly ethical stance as opposed to Balducci's unethical one.[23] Fraternity is equally fickle. When after leaving the Arab Daru looks back, he sees the Arab staring at him, and feels nauseous; and when he later finds him walking to prison, he realizes that although the political situation turns both of them into exiles, this common exile does not bestow on them a truly fraternal bond. We do not know whether the Arab chose prison because he thought he deserved punishment or because he did not want Daru to be persecuted by the French authorities for disobeying the order. But regardless of whether he, like Daru, wished not to curtail the other's freedom, the outcome was precisely such. As the warning "You handed over our brother. You will pay for this [Tu as livré notre frère. Tu paieras]" (109), which Daru finds in the school room upon his return, demonstrates, the conventional type of fraternity in the end gains the upper hand, with Daru facing retribution from the Arabs who think that he delivered their comrade to jail.

Although "The Guest" renders Daru's and the Arab's ethical decisions politically ineffective, as any decision is bound to be interpreted as either an act of treason by the French or a sign of colonial allegiance by the Arabs, the story does not oppose ethical acts to politics. In this sense, the story does not personify what Albert Memmi, in the same year as *Exile and the Kingdom* came out, christened "the colonizer of good will [colonisateur de bonne volonté]": someone who points to injustices of colonialism but remains ambivalent and politically castrated, and thus abandoned by both the colonizers and the colonized and reduced to silence.[24] "The Guest" shows an awareness of the problematic stance of neutrality represented by Daru's refusal to take sides. It reveals the fact that this stance is not only politically ineffectual, but also ethically inconsequential. The story does not hide Daru's search for an alibi and repeatedly draws attention to both Daru's uneasiness about hosting the Arab and his hopes of being relieved of this burden of responsibility when imagining the Arab's escape at night. But in spite of Daru's refusal to make the political choice of either delivering or releasing the Arab, his decision to give a choice is not apolitical. Although Daru's action does not represent a resolutely political act, it is political to the extent that giving the Arab a choice goes against Daru's obligation to bring him to prison. This non-choice does not endorse the status quo by refraining from taking political sides. "The Guest" shows that even when the colonial situation dooms ethical acts to fail on the political level, such acts are necessary because, as David Carroll points out, they threaten the value system of a colonial society.[25]

Shame in "The Guest"

In situations when the ethical and the political are in conflict, and yet when individual acts are never without ethically and politically charged motivations and consequences, shame, Camus proposes in "The Guest," can serve as a guiding principle of action. It is from the point of view of shame that Daru's choices appear as necessary. Daru acts the way he does because acting differently would mean a betrayal of either Balducci or the Arab, and thus shame. As Pierre Bourdieu shows in *Sociology of Algeria* (1958), in Algerian society at the time one's actions were subject to an unremitting gaze of others, which put in place the behavioral framework of shame and honor in which one's self was first and foremost a being for others.[26] In "The Guest," the scopic nature of shame and its effect on the notion of an autonomous self that Bourdieu associates with the Arabic culture is extended onto all three characters, regardless of their ethnicity. Daru, Balducci, and the Arab constantly observe each other, ponder each other's actions, and, aware of the difficulty of the other's position, often avert their gaze in shame when their eyes meet. Shame here both allows for hospitality and fraternity, and undermines and redefines them at the same time. The narrative not only stages the logic of shame but, similarly to hospitality and fraternity, subjects it to a deritualizing trial. By imposing the behavioral paradigm of shame on characters with different national and cultural identities, "The Guest" shows that in a volatile milieu inhabited by ethnically diverse people with politically incongruent interests, shame guarantees a provisional sense of coexistence.

In "The Guest," shame binds people together into a whole that remains, like hospitality and fraternity, shattered – both called for and incomplete. For example, when Daru tells Balducci that he will not deliver the Arab to prison because it is dishonorable, Balducci admits that he does not like it either: "You don't get used to putting a rope on a man even after years of it, and you're ashamed—yes, ashamed [Mettre une corde à un homme, malgré les années, on ne s'y habitue pas et même, oui, on a honte]" (95). Convinced that it nonetheless has to be done, Balducci appeals to his sense of duty, something he believes he shares with Daru. For Daru, however, whatever he and Balducci have in common in terms of their fraternal obligations because of the imminent Arab revolt is not a reason enough to justify shameful acts. And yet, although Balducci's evocation of fraternity and duty does not fall on fertile ground with Daru, it nevertheless precludes Daru from taking an easy way out of his predicament by simply putting shame above fraternity. When Balducci abruptly leaves in disappointment – after Daru acted

insulted when asked to sign the delivery papers, considering it a matter of personal honor that he would, if need be, corroborate the receipt of the prisoner – Daru suddenly feels ashamed of his rejection of Balducci's advances of sociality. Paradoxically, Daru's refusal of Balducci's political appeal to fraternity in the name of ethical behavior leads to a bout of shame, and thus Daru's failure exactly in the realm of ethics. In this scene, and again in the episode of Daru and the Arab eating the meal together, shame is deritualized because it both creates and hampers interpersonal bonds. "The Guest" shows that although under the present political circumstances shame cannot deliver a decisively positive sense of community, shame is the only principle of interaction that can secure some level of cohabitation, however shattered this cohesion must remain so as to curtail the dividing effect of fraternity.

Endowing shame with not only ethical, but also political significance, Camus posits it as a standard of action in conflict-ridden situations. Unlike in *The Fall* where shame leads to an aggressive imposition of social order – exemplified by the scene in which Clamence, after being punched by an angry motorist to the shaming gaze of onlookers, imagines beating him back, saving his face, and, "half Cerdan, half de Gaulle" (41), ruling by power and respect – in "The Guest" keeping one's honor in the face of others implies respect for others rather than concern for recognition. The spectatorial mechanism of shame prescribes the kind of behavior that shields everyone, not just oneself, from experiencing shame. The bond of shame, inasmuch as it is fractured and composed of individuals with incompatible political positions, constitutes a collective dimension not only because as a shared code of morality it makes each individual act in a way of avoiding experiencing shame, but also because it forces all individuals to act so that their behavior does not put others in shame. The fact that someone else's shame is also experienced as shameful by those who witness it appears several times in "The Guest." The importance of this fact for Camus's defense of shame as a regulative principle of action – and opposed to the use of shaming as an instrument of socially cleansing violence – is illustrated by the prominence of an anecdote that appears in *The Stranger*, *Reflections on the Guillotine* and *The First Man*, and in which the father's witnessing of the public execution leads to his feeling of shame as a result of participating in the collective act of shaming someone else. Similarly, in a crucial scene in *The First Man*, the protagonist's pride at winning the fight with his schoolmate turns into sadness when he, after seeing his crestfallen friend, realizes that "vanquishing a man is as bitter as being vanquished" (121).

In Camus's narratives from the time of the Algerian war, shame func-
tions as an ethical principle that is inseparable from the interpersonal
dimension. While bestowing personal identity by making one aware of
oneself, shame also implies dialogue. In these later works, shame does not
point to the solipsistic self-interrogation typical of Camus's early fiction,
but to what E. L. Constable has called a "responsive ethics" of Camus's
mature work.[27] Shame, particularly in *Exile and the Kingdom*, is less an
appeal to emotions, and more a form of empathy and dialogic self-
questioning. This is not the case only in "The Guest." In "The Silent
Men," for instance, the owner of a shop, who empathizes with the shame
experienced by his workers when they return to work after their unsuc-
cessful strike, is himself ashamed that the bad financial situation of his
shop prevents him from raising their salaries. And although the workers
initially reject the owner's attempt to ameliorate their feelings, they in turn
become ashamed of their unresponsiveness when they find out about their
boss's misfortune in his personal life. As in "The Guest," also here the
ethical disposition of shame implies a peculiar kind of humanism. In
Camus's fiction, including early works, shame determines whether one is
or is not a man – whether one is part of a community and humanity, or
not. When in "The Guest" Balducci wants to show his respect for Daru, he
only says: "you're from hereabouts and you are a man [tu es d'ici, tu es un
homme]" (96). In the same way, when Meursault is tried for murder in
The Stranger, Céleste, wishing to safeguard Meursault's honor in front of
the shaming gaze of the audience, defends him by declaring that everyone
knows that he is "a man [un homme],"[28] a call reiterated in both *The
First Man* where Jacques expresses his desire "at last to be born as a man
[à naître enfin comme homme]" (152) and in *The Plague* where Rieux
confesses that "what interests me is being a man [ce qui m'intéresse, c'est
d'être un homme]."[29] In Camus's narratives, shame is a key guideline for
one's actions, because it pertains both to deeds as well as the resulting
emotions, and to whom one is as a person as well as to whether one belongs
to humanity.

Camus's politics of shame

In response to, on the one hand, Sartre and his emphasis on guilt, and, on
the other hand, the escalation of violence in the Algerian war, the literary
figuration of shame in Camus's late narratives posits shame as an ethically
and politically engaged type of affect and principle of conduct. Whereas
guilt is rooted in the past and in internalized values, shame is embedded in

the present moment and the presence of others. Unlike guilt, which is prone to self-brooding and self-enclosedness, and which, as *The Fall* demonstrates, can be rationalized, one cannot talk oneself out of shame. Shame pertains to how others see me and questions, as Martha Nussbaum argues, "the very being of the person who feels it," thereby urging me to take a note of others and respond to them.[30] Camus stresses the socially cementing effect of shame and insists that the ethical and political dimensions of shame are inseparable. *Exile and the Kingdom* and *The First Man* confirm Bernard Williams's observation that shame raises the question of who one is as related others, but these narratives also introduce a situation in which shame does not imply a facile communality in which differences are simply overcome.[31] In a situation in which social roles are unstable and in which one's political allegiance based on ethnicity and nationhood becomes equally problematic, the behavioral paradigm of shame represents a model of interpersonal relationships that does not suppress identities. Unlike guilt, shame affirms – without moralism and against the psychoanalytic conception of identity-formation as a regressive identification with the traumatic scene – the irreducibility of each identity in its difference from others. Camus proposes that the exposure to the other's gaze in shame both contests one's identity and institutes it, all the while preventing this identity from being forcefully imposed on others. According to Camus, shame offers a political model of interaction that acknowledges the singularity of identity without instigating the dialectic which confines identity into a violent oppositionality.

Although Sartre believed that *The Fall*, with its scathing critique of the logic of guilt, was Camus's "most beautiful and the least understood [book]," he was unmoved by Camus's argument against guilt and in favor of shame.[32] Indeed, Sartre was aware, as *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946) reveals, of the precarious nature of the identificatory logic of guilt and the bond of complicity and regressive identification with the aggressor and the original traumatic scene this logic entails. But in spite of these difficulties, he considered guilt to be a vital political force. For Sartre, the drawbacks intrinsic to the logic of guilt – the fact that guilt implies a questionable link of interdependence between the victim and the perpetrator, thereby perpetuating the violent dialectic of hatred and self-hatred[33] – are mere philosophical problems in comparison with the issue of guilt's political utility. According to Sartre, guilt must be cultivated because it stimulates action. Serving the important task of instigating political life, guilt remains at the center of Sartre's political and literary activities during the Algerian war, continuing to be the driving force of his politics, as well as the main

thrust, as *The Condemned of Altona* (1959) demonstrates, behind the actions of his literary characters. Guilt is what pushes Sartre to political engagement and active compensation for both his inadequate past engagements in the Resistance and his identity as a bourgeois rather than a worker, a writer rather than an activist. It is precisely guilt and desire to overcome it by a sudden action that would rectify it that, as was illustrated in Chapter 3 with respect to Blanchot's argument about Western humanism and resolute gestures of overcoming it, leads to unyielding gestures of heroic action that perpetuate that which they wish to overcome.

Interestingly, Sartre and Camus accused each other of the same political myopia caused by the abstractness of the ideal of justice the other promoted – in Camus's case, according to Sartre, this ideal stems from Camus's abstract understanding of revolt, and in Sartre's case, in Camus's view, from Sartre's ideologically fabricated model of history and historical progress. What Camus finds problematic about Sartre's notion of political engagement is that it rests, on the one hand, on a very narrow conception of politics and, on the other, on the dismissal of ethics as an alibistic avoidance of politics. In his late stories, Camus questions these two presuppositions. Insisting that politics cannot serve as a vehicle for mollifying one's guilty self, because guilt, like physical violence and the psychic struggle for recognition, is a dialectical trap and a self-perpetuating cycle – an argument already encountered in Barthes and Blanchot – Camus introduces shame as a form of ethically and politically engaged suspension of Sartre's emphasis on resolute action and self-assured politics. From *The Fall* to *Exile and the Kingdom* and *The First Man*, Camus moves away from irony – the instability of which, as Wayne Booth has shown, triggers the dialectic of negations and an attempt to stabilize them in interpretation[34] – and turns to a literature of slowness and subjective weakness in which shame serves as a repellent of the dialectic of selfhood and its identifications and disidentifications. For Barthes, Blanchot, and Camus, the literature of austere style, exhausted narration, and minimal form suspends action, deactivates the dialectic of meaning and its negation, and weakness the violence of the self-involved struggle for recognition. In Camus's narratives, shame as a principle of one's conduct and the rule of interaction among characters deactivates the self and reorients it not toward the fullness of history in search of an identity, but to the present moment and to others with whom it is shared.

Marguerite Duras, war traumas, and the dilemmas of literary representation

Ever since Hayden White's magisterial *Metahistory*, historiography and poetics have become indivisible companions. Historiography is now recognized as a form of poetics, because describing past events in narrative prose discourse implies emplotment and use of tropes, and literature is accepted as a mediator of historical understanding that makes the past and the present alive by capturing it in its vivid detail. Although the trend in modern literature has been increasingly to display the inability to capture reality and represent history – a trend that White explains as an outcome of the changed understanding of history for which the Realist paradigm driven by verisimilitude has lost its applicability[1] – this shift, nevertheless, does not always indicate an act of questioning the possibility of relating to reality and history. As seen especially in Albert Camus's *The First Man*, the refusal to give the past a fixed shape can be driven by ethical and political reasons. The question that has emerged on several occasions, especially in Chapters 3 and 4, is whether a literary story that is driven by the narrative principles of slowness and exhaustion, in an attempt to avoid invoking a definitively represented history and reality, can carry all the notes of the past and the present. The question is whether the type of literature that uses ellipsis, fragment, simple sentences and parataxis, instead of insisting on direct representation, linear narrative form, expressive language and elaborate syntactic structures, is ethically and politically engaged. As seen in Chapter 4, this question made Camus supplement his emphasis on empty recollection and the past with no positively retrievable substance – discussed in Chapter 4 as an empty memory attached to the land and all people on it, rather than the common history of a specific group – with the appeal to shame as a guiding standard of action with the firm ethical and political underpinnings.

At the same time as Camus was working on *The First Man* at the peak of the Algerian war, Marguerite Duras wrote *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1960), following similar principles of exhaustion, slowness, and emptiness described

in the preceding chapters. The distinct contribution of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* to the issue of politically committed representations of history and reality resides in its unique use of the literary device of displacement and the technique of foregrounding the difficulty of the text to convey reality. But more is at stake in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*'s method of evoking historical events by means of obstructing their portrayal than demonstrating that some events are ungraspable and reconstructable only through memory and representation. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* shows that absences and silences can serve as instruments of literary interaction with events in both the past and the present. In *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the combined display of the technique of displacement and the inability to represent Hiroshima is designed as a form of engagement with the present: The displacement of the present into the past and the failure to represent this past draw attention to the parallels between the past and the present and the continuity of the past (Hiroshima) in the present (Algeria).

Remembering the past in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*

Hiroshima Mon Amour was written by Marguerite Duras in July 1958, amidst the growing presence of the Algerian war in metropolitan France, as a script for Alain Resnais's film. The text was revised before the shooting in December 1958 and rewritten after the film was completed in 1959 in order to reflect the changes that the production of the film brought to the original script. The story concerns a two-day love affair in Hiroshima in August 1957 between a French actress and a Japanese architect, both of whom suffer, each in their own way and with different implications for the story, from traumatic pasts. Although the enigma of crime, trauma, and the difficulty of narrating them had appeared in Duras's work before – in *Moderato Cantabile* (1958) and *The Viaducts of Seine-et-Oise* (1959) for instance – the crime evoked in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is on an unprecedented scale and without the aura of fascination it had in the previous works. In the synopsis included at the beginning of the text, Duras declares that what she wanted to avoid most of all in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* were descriptions of horror and that instead of portraying the crime, she tried to "make this horror rise again from its ashes" by making it part of a story set at a later date.[2] Echoing Resnais's professed failure to make a documentary about Hiroshima and his subsequent appeal to Duras to help him redraft the project as a literary story, Duras suggests that one can talk about the bombing of Hiroshima only by incorporating it into a fictional story that will not be about Hiroshima.

Hiroshima Mon Amour opens with an anonymous male character telling an unnamed female character that her effort to learn about what happened in Hiroshima can never succeed. "You saw *nothing* in Hiroshima [Tu n'as *rien* vu à Hiroshima]," he states, "Nothing" (15; translation modified). The woman insists that she saw Hiroshima, that she visited museums, observed people in hospitals, and watched historical newsreels, but the man rejects her reliance on the visual as deceitful and repeats, "in an impersonal, unbearable way" (8), that she saw nothing. Although very little happens in the opening scene, the painstakingly repetitive exchange between the characters about the possibility and impossibility of understanding the past events and each other prefigures what will follow. From the very start, knowledge associated with direct representation, whether visual or verbal, is discredited and what is emphasized, both thematically and stylistically, is telling and listening over both showing and narrating. It is clear that this will not be a plot-driven story. Although the woman becomes increasingly the speaker and the man the listener as the story advances – this advance takes place less through action and more through the changes of the locale, from the hotel room, via a street sidewalk, the man's house, a railway station, to a café – the text remains locked into a slow-paced conversation accompanied by patient and fixated listening.

Immediately after the discussion about the impossibility of understanding Hiroshima, the man asks the woman what the end of the war meant for her, thus shifting the conversation suddenly, unexpectedly, and more or less permanently, from Hiroshima to the French town of Nevers. The woman dismisses the question with a quick answer, but the man presses the issue. She tries to evade the topic again, then pleads deficient memory, only to start to recount, slowly and in increasingly longer segments, a story of the death of her German lover who was killed by the Nevers townsmen as the occupying army retreated. Her speech is epigrammatic, abrupt, laborious, and repetitive, revealing her difficulty in telling the story, as well the difficulty of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* to proceed with its own story:

> At six in the evening, the bells of the St. Etienne Cathedral ring, winter and summer. One day, it is true, I hear them. I remember having heard them before—before—when we were in love, when we were happy.
>
> I'm beginning to see.
>
> I remember having already seen before—before—when we were in love, when we were happy.
>
> I remember.
>
> I see the ink.
>
> I see the daylight.

I see my life. Your death.
My life that goes on. Your death that goes on
(*Room and cellar Nevers.*)

and that it took the shadows longer now to reach the corners of the room. And that it took the shadows longer now to reach the corners of the cellar walls. About half past six.

Winter is over.

[A six heures du soir, le cathédrale Saint-Étienne sonne, été comme hiver. Un jour, il est vrai, je l'entends. Je me souviens l'avoir entendue avant— avant—pendant que nous nous aimions, pendant notre bonheur.

Je commence à voir.

Je me souviens avoir déjà vu—avant—avant—pendant que nous nous aimions, pendant notre bonheur.

Je me souviens.

Je vois l'encre.

Je vois le jour.

Je vois ma vie. Ta mort.

Ma vie qui continue. Ta mort qui continue

Chambre et cave de Nevers.

et que l'ombre gagne déjà moins vite les angles des murs de la chambre. Et que l'ombre gagne déjà moins vite les angles des murs de la cave. Vers six heures et demie.

L'hiver est terminé.] (63)

The woman often does not register the man's questions as she tells her story, or answers those he does not pose. When asked, "Was your lover during the war French?" she answers, "No, he wasn't French. Yes it was at Nevers" (47). The man never asks her to clarify her sketchy explanations, abrupt shifts, and to fill in the gaps in her account. If anything, his questions encourage them. When at one point he all of a sudden inserts himself into the woman's story, assuming the place of the German lover with the question, "When you are in the cellar, am I dead?" (54), she accepts the substitution and continues with her story, simply replacing "he" with "you."

From very early on in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the man's position in his conversation with the woman is that of the facilitator of her story. And yet, despite this fact, Hiroshima is not just a vehicle and an excuse for articulating other, merely personal, traumatic events. The juxtaposition of the events of Hiroshima and Nevers in which Nevers gets disproportionately more space than Hiroshima is not a result of the woman's imposition of her story onto the man and of the man offering himself selflessly to it. It is a result of the man's refusal to tell his own story. Although the

female character often likens her experience to his – "like you, I have a memory" (23), "like you, I know what it is to forget" (22) – while he emphasizes their incompatibility – for him Hiroshima was a catastrophe in which he lost his family, while for her, as she admits, it was a symbol of the long awaited end of the war – the transferential nature of their verbal exchange works in both directions. Her interest in Hiroshima and his in Nevers are complementary and their symmetry broken only because the man actively resists telling his story. Although the woman is as reluctant to speak about Nevers as the man is to speak about Hiroshima, he success-fully insists that she continue, while her attempts to hear about Hiroshima and make him talk about it end in reiterations that she cannot understand it and that she saw nothing. It is because of this refusal that the woman will not be able to play the same role in the man's reconciliation with his past as he does in hers. Rather that the story shifting inexplicably from Hiroshima to Nevers, and controversially because Hiroshima is clearly a disaster on a different scale than Nevers, it is therefore the man's determination to talk only about Nevers and not Hiroshima that precipitates the change of focus in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* from Hiroshima to Nevers – a shift to which the text persistently draws attention and which becomes crucial in its challenge of literary representation of history and reality.

The dilemmas of remembering and narrating

With the female protagonist marked from the onset as an outsider who is denied understanding, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* displays its resistance to representation and tells about Hiroshima only metonymically by telling about Nevers. From the beginning, Nevers is a *terra incognita* that is open to scrutiny and knowledge, while Hiroshima is posited as beyond under-standing. The medium of this metonymic displacement on the narrative level is the woman's recognition of the man's plea to tell her story. Unlike the man who a priori decides that whereas he believes that he can understand her trauma she will not be able to understand his, the woman is willing to face her past and, moreover, allows for his understanding of it. After confessing that she cannot go to Nevers anymore, she affirms, "It's true. I suppose you must understand that too" (37), an admission that is in sharp contrast to his insistence on her understanding nothing. The man evidently underestimates the woman when he assumes that she wants to know what happened in Hiroshima in a simple empiricist way. Her actions, as Michael S. Roth points out, demonstrate that she knows very well that returning to the past "is about the confrontation with absence

and forgetting," and not a straightforward recollection.[3] While facilitating the metonymic displacement in the text, from a psychological perspective the male character's skepticism about the woman's understanding is a defense mechanism against his own trauma and an excuse for his refusal to return to the past (even if some of it arguably manages to resurface as he listens to the woman's story).

But it is not only because of the asymmetry in sharing painful memories that the encounter in Hiroshima is something more than a mere exchange of histories in which Nevers gets more space than Hiroshima. Both characters have to cope with the impossibility of knowing, not only the man, with his uncertain prospects of understanding the woman through her story and with his refusal to return to his own past, but also the woman. Like him, she is not in possession of her past. To her too, the past is lost and accessible only via sharing it with him. It is only by trying to recall her memory in order to narrate it that her lost past enters her conscious mind.

Even though it becomes clear as soon as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* opens that it is not going to provide a direct representation of the disturbing events – immediately, as Martin Crowley writes, "tearing a hole within synecdochic representation" by making parts stand for the inaccessible whole in a blatantly insufficient way[4] – it becomes clear as well, even if less overtly, that it will not try to establish an assured line, however agonizing and difficult to follow, to the repressed past. As the woman continues with her story, the text concentrates on the ambivalence in her attempt to integrate her traumatic past into the present. At a crucial moment, and in spite of the man's joy about being the only person who has heard the Nevers story, she begins to doubt whether she should have told him. Because her trauma concerns the death of her lover, and thus the disappearance of something irreplaceable, in her interior monologue she wonders if she did not betray the past by turning it into the present: "I told our story. I was unfaithful to you tonight with this stranger. I told our story" (73). Telling, she suggests, transforms the past, which, regardless of its misery, has become part of her and her fidelity to her lover. She suddenly remembers her madness after her lover was killed and her refusal to overcome it. Pain was already then a sign of faithfulness to the past. Locked in the cellar by her parents, she inflicted on herself both physical pain by hurting her fingers and mental pain by recalling her lover in order not to forget the past. But her memory weakened all the same. Just as her hair, shaved by the Nevers people to stigmatize her as a collaborator, imperceptibly grew back, her memory started to fade. "It's horrible," she

says while placing herself in the past and addressing her dead lover, "I'm beginning to remember you less clearly" (64). Her lover's death, which she now becomes aware of as something she knew already in the Nevers cellar but did not want to accept, became memory and as such was susceptible to the pain of forgetting. Then, as well as now, both forgetting and holding onto memory entailed pain. In the end, even this pain disappeared, and so did "the horror of no longer understanding at all the reason for remembering" (23), and all that was left was "only one memory, your name" (57).

In Hiroshima, the woman faces her original dilemma of memory and forgetting again. Although the Japanese man allows her to remember the German lover, she is afraid that the act of remembrance will again lead to forgetting. Only this time forgetting is more threatening: She is afraid that she will forget the German lover altogether by narrating, externalizing, and hence overcoming her loss. On the one hand, the transferential relationship with the Japanese man revives her memory and makes her enthusiastic about visiting Nevers again in order to heal her pain, arrive at closure, and bequeath "the little girl of Nevers with shaven head" (80; translation modified) to oblivion while, as she addresses her German lover, her "body is still on fire with your memory" (79). On the other hand, however, the therapeutic transference takes place through another impossible love that she knows she will eventually forget as well. In a similar way as after leaving the cellar, she realizes the necessity of both forgetting and stubbornly clinging to memory because she knows that she will forget the Japanese lover, and with him the German lover, but, as her exclamation "I'll forget you! I'm forgetting you already!" (83) underscores, she is horrified by the prospect.

In *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the faithfulness to the past implies two incompatible demands: a return to the past in an attempt to understand it because forgetting it and giving up on understanding it means relinquishing it; and a refusal to return and understand it in order not to secure, domesticate, and overcome the past. This ambivalent demand is evident in the characters' relations both to their own past and to each other's pasts. Strangely enough, it is not in spite of, but because of their status as outsiders to their own and to each other's pasts that the characters in this story can relate to one another and try to understand each other. Although not yielding full comprehension, the personal tragedy of Hiroshima helps the male character to relate to the woman's story, and her Nevers past in turn allows her to relate to Hiroshima and the man's past (or whatever she imagines about it). The interaction between the two characters suggests that one's trauma is a condition of possibility of understanding someone

else's trauma, however partial and incomplete, as *Hiroshima Mon Amour*
insists, such an understanding will necessarily remain.

Displacement and commitment

With the paradoxical nature of preventing those who undergo traumatic
events from recording them while at the same time enforcing the uncon-
scious compulsion to return to them, traumatic events challenge literary
narratives into preserving the duality of the missed encounter with reality
that keeps returning. In *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, similarly to Camus's *The Fall*
and Felman's reading of it examined in Chapter 5, the missed encounter
enters the story not as actually experienced, but as missed. And yet, what is at
stake here is not just a refusal of representation or a display of how repre-
sentation fails. Although the characters' fragmented discussion of Nevers
mirrors *Hiroshima Mon Amour*'s obstructed representation of Hiroshima,
announced by Duras at the beginning by her warning that it is "impossible
to talk about Hiroshima" and that "all one can do is talk about the impossi-
bility of talking about Hiroshima [tout ce qu'on peut faire c'est de parler de
l'impossibilité de parler de Hiroshima]" (9), the woman's story of Nevers
"works-through" the traumatic past instead of mindlessly circling around its
imperviousness.[5] The female character is increasingly capable of returning to
the past, and while she cannot reclaim it completely, some of the less elliptical
and more descriptive accounts of Nevers in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*'s appen-
dices indicate that the struggle with representation in the main part of the
book should not be too quickly accepted as a plain refusal. Such a refusal, the
appendices suggest, would posit a sublime image of the past that is paralyzing
in its unrepresentability and that, as Dominick LaCapra cautions, runs the
risk of confining the attachment to the past to an alternation between
"melancholic repetition and superficial manic agitation."[6]

What we see in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is neither a denial of representa-
tion nor a conviction that one can come to terms with traumatic events
simply by narrating them. Although by marking Hiroshima as impossible
to talk about and redirecting the discussion to Nevers the text highlights
the centrality of its device of displacement, the Nevers trauma is treated in
an equally ambivalent manner as the trauma of Hiroshima. The displace-
ment of Hiroshima onto Nevers thus leads neither to a hiatus in bringing
out the woman's past – in which case it would demonstrate the general
unrepresentability of trauma – nor to a definite recuperation of her past –
in which case it would point to the heuristic value of this narrative shift.
Hiroshima Mon Amour talks about the past. But it does so only by exposing

the failure to represent it conclusively. By staging the traumas of World War II while simultaneously impeding their portrayal, the text abstracts from the specificities of different traumas and raises the issue of war trauma as such, thereby calling attention to other war traumas and to the parallels between the past and the present.

Hiroshima Mon Amour was written at the time of escalating violence of the Algerian war, a time when the ferocity with which the growing contingent of French soldiers clashed with the National Liberation Front (FLN) stirred passionate debates about colonialism, oppression, and violence, debates that were further intensified by reports of torture and rumors of the imminent right-wing *coup d'état* in France. Duras was deeply involved in these discussions. The statement of the female character in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* about the "inequality set forth as a principle by certain people against other people, [...] certain races against other races, [...] certain classes against other classes" (22), clearly indicates which side she took, and the readers in 1960 would certainly understand the innuendo. Duras was committed to opposing the war nearly from the outset, writing journalistic pieces about Algeria, torture, and mass murder between 1956 and 1957, and proposing to make a documentary about Algerians living in France as early as November 1955.[7] In that same year she participated in founding the committee of intellectuals opposed to the war and in 1960 she joined the rebellious "Manifesto of the 121" discussed in Chapter 4. Her decision to leave Gallimard in 1958 and publish *Moderato Cantabile* with Les Éditions de Minuit can be seen as a political move as well, and a declaration of support for a more distinctly anti-Gaullist publisher. Alain Resnais, on his part, was also engaged in these debates. Soon after completing the film version of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* in 1959 he embarked on a new project that was directly about Algeria, *Muriel, or the Time of Return* (1963), but in his previous film, a documentary about the Holocaust, *Night and Fog* (1955), he had already wanted to offer an indirect commentary on the issue of the Algerian war. When later asked about his motivation for making *Night and Fog*, Resnais responded that "the whole point was Algeria."[8] The political convictions that Duras and Resnais brought to *Hiroshima Mon Amour* were not left unnoticed. When the movie was inaugurated at film festivals, it was thought it would cause a major controversy not so much because of its account of the bombing of Hiroshima or the mention of French collaboration. The problem was Algeria. In the ongoing war, the film was dangerous because it questioned the sense of national identity for which Algeria was still deemed by many irreplaceable.[9]

There were many literary works in France in the second half of the 1950s that offered stronger allusions to the Algerian war than *Hiroshima Mon Amour* – Camus's *Exile and the Kingdom*, for example, as seen in Chapter 5 – and a more tangible repositioning of the Algerian conflict onto the subject matter of World War II – such as, for instance, Camus's *The Fall* and Sartre's *The Condemned of Altona*. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* contains no references to the French colonies in Northern Africa. Nor did Duras, unlike Resnais, make any such reference in her interviews or other meta-narratives in which she often suggested how to read her texts, as she mostly avoided being didactic in her literary works. Beside the textual devices that in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* draw attention to the issue of war trauma in general – the universal denunciation of colonial oppression and the emphasis on displacement (the shift of focus from the story about Hiroshima to the story about a love affair in Hiroshima, to a partial and inconclusive story about the death of the German lover in Nevers) – Duras stressed the continuity of war traumas from the past to the present more explicitly in her journalistic pieces from that period.

In a short text, "Racism in Paris," written several months before *Hiroshima Mon Amour* when Duras was writing journal articles on colonialism, racism, and immigration for *France-Observateur*, she reported the case of police harassment and arrest of a French woman and an Algerian man who, although presented by Duras as similar – she a waitress, he a bartender – were considered by the police an unacceptable couple because Algerians were at the time marked as enemies.[10] In another article, "Paris, August Six," from August 1958 Duras brought together the same three themes of the atomic threat, World War II, and colonization that she had included in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* just a few weeks before. Opening with the statement that on the preceding Friday radioactive rain had apparently fallen on the capital but that the news was suppressed because for the past two months French routines had been sufficiently disrupted to justify such action – hinting at the landing of the military in Corsica, the threat of *coup d'état* in metropolitan France, and the takeover of power by Charles de Gaulle – the article describes a police raid on a group of FLN rebels in Paris the day before, and ends with a reference to the German occupation of Paris.[11] Lastly, in "The Two Ghettos" a few years later, Duras interviewed an Algerian man and a Parisian survivor from the Warsaw ghetto. After the Algerian likened his life in Paris to, as he put it, "the Jews under the German occupation," Duras asked the ghetto survivor whether his experience in Warsaw was comparable to other situations.[12] Describing his fear during the SS raids on the Warsaw ghetto and using words that uncannily

resembled the Algerian's depiction of his fear of being killed by the French police that raided his hotel every night, the ghetto survivor mentioned Algerians and spoke about the infamous event from a few days earlier when a large group of Algerians drowned after being forced by the police into the Seine.[13]

The themes of fear, hatred of the enemy, and positing the enemy as different, as well as the historical parallels between the past and the present with respect to these issues, which appeared in Duras's journalism at the time of writing *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, also appeared in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Like "Racism in Paris," *Hiroshima Mon Amour* speaks of the stupidity of punishing the female protagonist by shaving her head for loving "an official enemy of her country" (12). Provocatively choosing an enemy and a former enemy as the two lovers of the French woman, the text also emphasizes the similarity between the characters. Duras even insists that the difference in type between the two protagonists has to be minimized, and, as she argues in the appendix, that for the film they would need to select a Western-looking Japanese man in order to evade "the involuntary racism inherent in any exoticism" and underscore "the equalitarian function of the modern world, and even cheat in order to show it" (109). But even more importantly, there is a significant thematic overlap between *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and Duras's journalism. This overlap pertains, as "Paris, August Six" and "The Two Ghettos" demonstrate, to the joint reference to nuclear disaster, colonization, and the German occupation of France. Appearing both in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and in the journal articles from the same period, these three themes, their intersections across the two genres, and the fact that the newspaper articles clearly link them to both the past and the present, bring to the fore the performative dimension of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and the interaction of this story with both the past and the present.

Addressing the question of how to represent contentious events from the past and the present, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, similarly to Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*, Blanchot's *The Last Man*, and Camus's *The Fall*, *Exile and the Kingdom*, and *The First Man*, was Duras's contribution to the revived debate on committed literature. In the 1950s, Sartre emphasized that even the most committed literature ran the risk of taking us away from real events in the present and, by turning these events into images, becoming a mere source of aesthetic pleasure. Sartre believed that all postwar literature, including literature of the terrifying power of pure form by which some postwar writers tried to capture the intensity of distress, had to accept the fact that it lacked legitimacy to exist in the world of

brutality and injustice. Against Sartre, Duras, not unlike Barthes, Blanchot, and Camus, insisted that literature, however illegitimate, had to accept a duty to persist in the world of injustice. Appealing in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* to the political potential of literary experimentation with the representation of reality, Duras proposed that literature had to embrace the dilemma of duty without legitimacy, a stance echoed a few years later by Theodor Adorno who in 1962 in his reply to Sartre argued that it was "now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it."[14] As an answer to the predicament of art's legitimacy vis-à-vis history and politics, Duras devised the form, the technique, and the themes of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* so as to maintain the work's relevance as a socially, historically, and politically engaged type of literature, while at the same time endowing it with a resistance to being turned into a positive artifact.

Ethics, politics, and literary language

The technique of displacement and inhibition of representation that Duras presented in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* went against the dominant view of committed literature, and in particular against Sartre's emphasis on the obligation of all prose literature to represent reality and communicate politically engaged messages. During the Algerian war, Sartre further radicalized his view of engagement, no longer arguing for committed literature, but for unmitigated action for which literature was no longer a catalyst, but an obstacle. As seen in Chapter 5, Sartre was convinced that this ideal of action justified small injustices in the present in the name of an all-embracing future justice, and endorsed guilt as a stimulator of this action. According to Sartre's changed scenario in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one can placate one's guilty self and become part of history not by writing, but only by political action. In the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Sartre supported his call to action with an invocation of history, which he presented as a process with an inevitable goal of emancipation that one had to accept and act in accordance with, embracing, if necessary, even violence.[15] For Sartre, freedom is not a given. It is something one must actively assume. As freedom means first and foremost that one is not constituted passively and externally, but self-constituted, actively and by oneself, the path to freedom, in political as well as psychological terms, leads though radicalization of what until now has restricted one's freedom. Sartre insists that if oppression and violence have hitherto shaped and determined oneself, the first step toward regaining

freedom is to appropriate and redirect this violence. According to Sartre, this "radicalization of evil" pertains directly to Algeria:

> He [colonist] has to make them [natives] suffer, he claims, in order to destroy or repress the evil they have inside them [il leur fait du mal, à l'entendre, pour détruire ou pour refouler le mal qu'ils ont en eux]. How come he cannot recognize his own cruelty now turned against him? How come he can't see his own savagery as a colonist in the savagery of these oppressed peasants who have absorbed it through every pore and for which they can find no cure? [. . .] This irrepressible violence is neither a storm in a teacup nor the reemergence of savage instincts nor even a consequence of resentment: it is man reconstructing himself [c'est l'homme lui-même se recomposant].[16]

Even though Duras, unlike Camus and Blanchot, was in agreement with Sartre's political position on the Algerian war from its very beginning, she was, like Camus and Blanchot, skeptical about the self-righteousness of Sartre's rhetoric and the force of his theoretical justification. The exclusive place of history in Sartre's political philosophy meant that actions were valued on the basis of their purported advancement of historical progress, the goal of which Sartre was confident of identifying, and thus perpetuated what Camus described as the violent dialectic of the formerly subjugated becoming persecutors of their former oppressors. It was this confidence that Duras, as well as many others, found problematic. If literature had any political function, it was above all to suspend the self-perpetuating cycle of violence and the dialectical trap that guilt, by nourishing this cycle, promoted.

Many of the political and ethical aspects of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*'s technique of displacement, representational absence, and narrative fragmentation resonate with two books that were important to Duras, both intellectually and personally: Robert Antelme's *The Human Race* (1947) and Dionys Mascolo's *The Communism* (1953). What Duras found striking in Antelme's poignant analysis of his experience in Nazi concentration camps was not so much the revelation of the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust, however under-represented it still was when his text was published, but rather Antelme's emphasis on the humanity that he encountered in the camps, and on the act of talking and listening that this encounter elicited. The prominence of slow and austere dialogues in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* echoes Antelme's description of how the camps stripped one of everything but how, by the same stroke, they brought this impoverished self in contact with other, equally expropriated selves. In *Hiroshima Mon Amour* the slow and measured dialogues that are frequently interrupted with

prolonged moments of silence expose the characters to one another, open them up to each other in their otherness, and enable a genuine conversation – albeit one, as Sarah Kofman describes Antelme's language, in which the participants' speeches are smothered [suffoquées] and in which they "speak without being able to speak or be understood."[17] A similar emphasis on the link between a particular kind of language – slow and exhausted – and the task of undermining the position of confident action appears in Mascolo's work. In his book on communism, Mascolo opposes Sartre's voluntarism and argues that language should not be a utilitarian tool used by intellectuals to enlighten the masses. According to Mascolo, language should most of all try to establish unhindered communication.[18] In Mascolo's theory of communism, unobstructed communication and its concomitant practices – "personal weakness" (475) and "destruction of interpersonal boundaries" (476) – are the necessary preconditions to an unbridled sharing and a just satisfaction of needs.[19]

In *Hiroshima Mon Amour* we see a similar ethical and political plea as expressed by Antelme and Mascolo for a specific type of language and its correlates in subjective weakness and interpersonal openness. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* creates a slow and exhausted language that is fundamentally opened to the other person. A similar language and literary effect was seen in Blanchot's *The Last Man* and in Camus's "The Guest," as well as in Barthes's and Blanchot's theoretical texts, but the prevalence of dialogue in Duras's text makes the subjective weakness here an even more unrestrained form of exposure to the other person. The ethical and political dimension of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* does not reside in direct representation of historical events nor in descriptive details that would reveal the characters' motivations. The ethical and the political here reside in expressive plainness and the characters that emerge only by their exposure to one another. What is ethical and political about this language of "clumsy and stammering patience [maladroite et balbutiante patience]," as Paul Thibaud described Duras's style, is the attention it gives to the act of speaking and the other person.[20] With very little solidity of their own, the two characters in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* are inextricable from the slow and exhausted dialogue that lays them bare in their weakness and openness to the other, and their dialogue, as Cathy Caruth describes it, inextricable from an address – "an address 'listen to me'."[21]

With its ethical and political ambitions, and delicate and complex approach to historical representation, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is clearly not a self-involved experiment with style. The annihilation of the city of Hiroshima enters the story only briefly and is quickly dropped because it

represents a destructive act that was intended to end the war by escalating its horror. In much the same way as the bombing of Hiroshima repeated the violence of the war it wished to end, the text refuses to portray this violence – as well as the violence of the ongoing war in Algeria – so as not to reproduce it. In *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the slow and exhausted language, together with the technique of displacement, evoke historical events while at the same time not replicating the violent logic that these events and their direct representation entail. Rooted in the conviction that direct descriptions perpetuate violence in the name of the belief that, once represented, violence will be overcome – an argument that, as Danielle Marx-Scouras has shown, was shared by several Algerian writers[22] – the form, the style, and the language of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* accentuate the text's illocutionary force and a performance directed towards readers. Upholding the fundamental difference between political and literary responsibility discussed in Chapter 3, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* suggests that the role of literature is not to describe, explain, and pose well-defined alternatives. Literature's role is to interrupt. As Chapter 3 proposed, by interrupting normative structures of literary representation and social being literature offers radically different perceptual forms, as well as new narrative, ethical, and political models.

Relating to reality politically

Similarly to literary works examined elsewhere in this book, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is also susceptible to an accusation that its evasion of direct representation of the present, while perhaps ethically motivated, is not politically committed. Surely enough, dehistoricized modes of writing in postwar France were all too common companions to painful historical events. So much so that even Roland Barthes, the advocate of the neutral mode of writing just two years prior, felt the need to moderate his penchant for ascetic narratives in favor of concreteness and detail, coming to criticize – with a curious eight-year delay and thus clearly as an outcome of his engagement in debates about the Algerian war – the allegorical nature of Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947) as inadequate in identifying historical evil, and later even curbing his enthusiasm for Alain Robbe-Grillet's novels, whose apparent non-engagement he had previously extolled.[23] For politically committed literary critics, stories that were cleansed of history assisted in augmenting the effort of mainstream French culture to erase realities of the Algerian conflict. As such, these stories were unacceptable because they showed no critical distance from state-induced

modernization and its discourse of cleanliness and an ahistorical future so vividly described by Kristin Ross.[24]

Despite the resemblance between *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and some of the stylistic experiments of the *nouveaux romanciers*, however, the indirect technique of relating to reality in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is not a symptom of an apolitical turn to stylistic formalism. Although Leo Bersani is right to note that in Duras's works it is sometimes difficult to ignore the milieu of bourgeois love with its delusions and luxurious masochisms, this setting does not automatically make these works politically disengaged. As seen, Hiroshima in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is certainly more than a backdrop for mulling over a self-tortured bourgeois love that, as Bersani claims, is only accidentally and on a second plane embellished with a "pseudo-political intensity about the horrors of Hiroshima and the Nazi occupation of France."[25] Far from expressing bourgeois elitism and upholding the dominant cultural trend of untroubled erasures – enacting the eradication of historical reality, thereby apolitically endorsing whatever was happening in the present by merely hiding behind a secondary repoliticization of the story – *Hiroshima Mon Amour* denounces both the past and the present and refuses to move to a history-free future. Where Robbe-Grillet's new novels of immobile surveillance and looking without being seen, as Kristin Ross pointed out, reproduced the colonial gaze, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* rejects it, challenging this gaze, as well as what it politically stands for, with a brazen distrust of the measuring eye, the timeless present, and the language of naming, categorizing, and comprehending.[26]

Written and published at the time that Henry Rousso identified as the peak of stubborn amnesia that enveloped many sensitive issues in postwar France (e.g., the Vichy regime, collective guilt, postwar *épurations*, and the Algerian war), a time of a cultural strategy of focusing on the future and one's private life, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* questioned not only the compulsion to forget, but also any attempts to answer forgetting by comfortable transpositions of the negativity of the ignored events into the positivity of consciousness and memory.[27] The pain of memory and the difficulty of representation staged in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* suggest that an effort to remedy forgetting by providing historical and referential detail is not always the right choice. Not all erasures in France in the 1950s were in service of historical forgetting, and not all compulsive attempts to bring back memory and record the erased events in a positivist fashion are automatically ethical and political.[28] The indeterminateness of memory and referentiality in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* shows that detailed information corrects the memory of the distorted, disregarded, or erased

historical events, but does not necessarily respond to the ethical and political demands these events have raised.

Setting the rapport with the past by undermining transparently intelligible language and form, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* draws attention to the resistance of the past to be captured in a positively given content and finished form. Although minimalist in some respects, this technique does not fit the proverbial "less is more" that has come to define aesthetic minimalism. Nor does it comply with Hemingway's metaphor of the literary story as an iceberg in which a few visible sentences offer a peek into the hidden mass floating under the surface. While literature has often utilized understatements as a narrative device intended to display the unrepresentability of certain events, or disclose the more in the less and thereby stimulate, as some critics have argued, readers' effort, in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* lessness is a paradigm in which what is left unarticulated is not absent because it cannot be represented or because one has to decide upon it.[29] Lessness is a technique in which what is left unarticulated is absent because leaving it out and making it present only in its absence offers, as well as incites, ethically and politically engaged answers to both history and reality. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* demands from its readers that they recognize its technique as a literary form chosen in response to the specific historical condition of war, violence, and exploitation. As Chapter 7 illustrates, in Duras's subsequent narratives the minimalist style of blanks, displacements, repetitions, and slow and fragmented dialogues will be pushed even further and extended beyond the telling of traumatic events.

The form of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* – the elliptical conversation, inhibited narration, and multiple displacements – and the themes – the irreconcilable perspective that the French woman and the Japanese man have on the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, and their revised but still mismatched views of the event in 1958 – serve to oppose the nation-cementing role played by the traditional type of storytelling in creating a shared memory. The group-augmenting function of storytelling and its emphasis on a shared past, as Hayden White demonstrated, has been vital to modern historiography. Faithful to its Hegelian heritage, the telling of history as a story in modern historiography emphasizes narrative closure and a complex, yet orderly plot. According to White, modern historians write histories in which story elements are mere manifestations of the plot structure. The result is a story that not only exudes such a high level of coherence that it leaves no room for human agency, but whose demand for closure begets a demand for moral meaning. Although

literary narratives adhere to a different set of standards than scientific consistency and historical objectivity, they share with historical narratives their disposition to moralize the depicted reality and, as White argues, "identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine."[30] *Hiroshima Mon Amour* challenges this group-forming morality that accompanies narratives of verisimilitude and closure with the literary language that offers an alternative rapport with both history and reality.

With the emphasis on displacement and inhibition of representation, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* repels closure and the group-forming morality. Its literary technique and form introduce history and reality, but without reinforcing collective identity and conceiving the audience as a group united by a common perspective on the true nature of events. Instead of evoking memory as either a hegemonic force – following Ernest Renan's definition of nation as a construct based on the legacy of memories[31] – or a counter-hegemonic force – questioning such a definition as homogenizing and ignoring both local memories and the extent to which colonization has shaped nations' memory formations – *Hiroshima Mon Amour* undermines the link between collective memory and a narrative foundation of the nation by refusing to offer a positively given description of both memory and counter-memory. With all of its characters and sites epitomizing expansive powers (German, American, Japanese, and French), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* does not try to offer a positively defined counter-memory, because this, in its axiological design, would reproduce the dialectic of historical violence. Instead, the text's minimalism and critique of the measuring eye lay bare the detrimental consequences of the position of strength, concreteness, and identity.

With its refusal of representation and closure, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*'s apparent disengagement is a form of engagement that has its own politics: *Hiroshima Mon Amour* envisages a literary mode that abandons representation as ethically and politically inadmissible because of its tendency to reduce difference to sameness, and history of this difference to either an ahistorical present or a particular perspective on difference. Challenging all appeals to a distinct and positively defined identity – whether personal or national – founded on a unifying memory and common history, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* promotes a purely negative unity and commonality based on difference. In *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the openness to the fragments of the past that resist being incorporated into memory is ethical and political because it challenges both personal identity and a collective identity of uniform groups defined by their history as notions that

perpetuate exclusion. Similarly to Camus's literary project, the poverty of memory and history in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is a literary way of relating to both the past and the present: It is not an erasure of reality, but an attempt to evoke reality's shattering effects in order to introduce a literary image of a more inclusive type of personhood and a less antagonistic form of cohabitation.

Literary void

Ethics and politics in Marguerite Duras's hybrid stories

In an interview with Jacques Rivette and Jean Narboni from November 1969, Marguerite Duras attributed the brusque style of her recent narrative, *Destroy, She Said* (1969), to her distaste for novels. She argued that "because of the sentences" she could not read novels anymore, and that what as a result she tried to do in her new book was to destroy all conventional grammar and create a narrative as free of style as possible.[1] Similarly to *Hiroshima Mon Amour* a decade earlier, this preference for an antinovelistic and less stylistically indulgent storytelling was a choice that was both aesthetic and political. Duras conceived the austerity, brevity, and exhaustion of *Destroy, She Said* as a politically committed literary response to the May '68 events and their appeal to social change. The style of *Destroy, She Said* was an outcome of Duras's politically motivated refusal to conform to the hectic pace of contemporary life and the lack of patience of present-day readers. But how exactly was the slow, fragmented, and seemingly style-free narrative in support of change? *Destroy, She Said* does not depict social injustices and decisive moments of strong-minded characters, or any scenes for that matter that would activate readers and stimulate their increased engagement in public affairs. In addition, Duras's goal was not to provide readers with shorter books in order to give them more time for political activities. *Destroy, She Said* neither reinstates literature of representation nor calls for a shift from literature to politics, from reading to action. In the aftermath of May '68, Duras asks literature to *do* nothing: suspend action, description, and prescription.

The question of whether literature that wished to be engaged beyond the sphere of "art for its own sake" should convey politically charged messages was nothing new at the time of Duras's interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1969. As seen on many occasions throughout this book, this issue was widely discussed in the years following Jean-Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?*, inspiring various reactions to Sartre's concept of literary commitment in the 1950s, including Barthes's, Blanchot's, Camus's, as well as

Duras's own in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. What made Duras come back to this question ten years later was the political turmoil surrounding the events of 1968. Similarly to *Hiroshima Mon Amour* at the time of the Algerian war, Duras insists that only a particular type of literature can respond in a committed fashion to the present moment. This time, however, she proposes a kind of literary aesthetic that pushes the principles of narrative exhaustion, slowness, and emptiness to the extreme, testing and stretching the very limits of storytelling. Continuing the discussion of the relationship between literature, ethics, and politics, this chapter widens the primary focus of this book on the decade of the 1950s and the issue of decolonization and the Algerian war. It examines Duras's aesthetic of blankness and literary void, developed by Duras in her later hybrid stories, as an extension of her earlier literary experiments and in direct response to another political event: May '68.

The politics of refusal

Considering the fact that in 1968 the countless political debates, protests, and even the general strike did not lead to the radical transformation of the state that the protesters demanded, the premise of Duras's position expressed in the interview with Rivette and Narboni that "May was a success" (111) is surprising. Duras does not agree with the argument that May failed because it did not achieve its goals. She rejects the view that those who participated in the May events were unsuccessful because they did not establish a unified political front and did not articulate and put into practice a clear political program. Duras insists that political success and the means of reaching it by amassing a uniform political platform were never May's ambitions. The May participants were never interested in realistic goals, practical considerations, and politically pragmatic decisions. Their collective action was non-unified because it expressed something that was political in a fashion different from conventional political action. The demonstrators managed to mobilize an unprecedented opposition to the state, not despite remaining fragmented in the diversity of their discussions, protests and demands, but because of it. It was precisely because they persisted in their fragmentation and formed a variety of collectivities without any common ground that the demonstrators succeeded. Duras argues that this type of politics is more important than anything traditionally associated with political action. In a phrase reminiscent of Blanchot's oxymorons, she suggests that May "was a failure that was infinitely more successful than any success at the level of political action" (111). The fragmented unity of

demonstrators, which from the perspective of orchestrated political action was incapacitating, was not a failure of action, but a form of politics that put forward its own standard of action. This politics was one of refusal and destruction. Not so much a refusal of specific policies and an appeal to change them, but refusal of everything. "This is a slogan from the May revolution," Duras declares, "we are all strangers to your State, to your society" (109).

The politics of categorical refusal was not entirely new in the late 1960s, nor was it exclusively of Duras's conception. In the second half of the Algerian war – between the aftermath of Charles de Gaulle's takeover of power in 1958 and the Manifesto of the 121 in 1960, a short period that received more attention on the preceding pages than any other in the Algerian war – the politics of refusal was a cornerstone of the collective opposition against the war in which, as seen in Chapter 3, Duras was involved with, among others, Dionys Mascolo and Maurice Blanchot. In response to what this group perceived as de Gaulle's *coup d'état*, Mascolo wrote "Unconditional Refusal" (1958), a short article in which he announced that the group's "first and last word is NO."[2] Blanchot echoed Mascolo in the opening of his one-page pamphlet "Refusal" (1958): "At a certain moment, in the face of public events, we know that we must refuse. The refusal is absolute, categorical."[3] In the same year, Duras joined Mascolo and Blanchot with her own expression of categorical refusal: Her "no" was expressed in her journalism and literature. As seen in Chapter 6, before signing the Manifesto of the 121 she wrote political articles for *France-Observateur* against colonialism, racism in France, and police harassment of immigrants, and, when writing *Hiroshima Mon Amour* in the summer of 1958, designed its themes, form, and style as a literary articulation of the politics of refusal.

In 1968, Duras, Mascolo, and Blanchot revived the notion of refusal at the meetings of the Students-Writers Action Committee. In an anonymous pamphlet, which was later attributed to Blanchot, published as an outcome of these meetings, the Committee was described as a loose group of people with only one sentiment that bound them together: "the power of refusal."[4] According to Blanchot, those who attended the meetings rejected all political programs and all existing political alternatives that were in any relation, whether positive or negative, to the state. In her own, at the time also anonymous, contribution to the Committee, Duras repeated that the participants remained outside any programmatic scheme and that no political program held the group together, except refusal. She argued that the Committee's meetings created spontaneous alliances

among people and an environment of radical freedom because they deper-
sonalized those who took part in them. According to Duras, the paradox-
ical strength of the Committee, and the May events in general, was exactly
the fact that no positive content defined the group's politics of refusal, only
subjective depersonalization, rejection of the state, and refutation of all
political teleologies.[5]

In Duras's contribution to the politics of refusal and depersonalization,
the general strike plays a central role. The goal of the general strike that
took place in the second half of May and brought France to a virtual
standstill – lasting for almost two weeks and engaging an estimated ten
million workers, that is, about half of the labor force[6] – was to bring the
system down by, as Duras believed, *doing* nothing. Stressing the power of
passivity, Duras's politics of refusal implies a peculiar notion of politics: a
withdrawal from all constructive action and a repudiation of all concrete
solutions and articulations of alternatives. As seen in Chapter 6, Duras had
already defended inactivity, exhaustion, and weakness during the Algerian
war. At that time, however, these principles related almost exclusively to
literature. Although in some cases, such as Camus's, the literary critique of
action, strength, and mastery was accompanied by a partial retreat from
politics and direct political engagement, this critique served chiefly as a
regulative ideal that did not prevent those who defended it from making
concrete political interventions, as was the case with Barthes and Blanchot,
and less publically Camus. Even this bipolar practice, as Chapters 3, 4, and
5 showed, was by many deemed useless. Sartre was most intense in arguing
that any personal investment into politically inexplicit endeavors with no
clear political agenda was ineffectual, and thus vain. From a Sartrean point
of view, Duras's earlier position was not diametrically different from
Camus's. Criticizing the war in Algeria as well as the 1956 Soviet invasion
of Hungary – de Gaulle as much as the communists – Duras too was
exposed to Sartre's reproaches that targeted all those who were unable to
see the larger picture and "think politically": to know when to downplay
one injustice and draw attention to another for the sake of facilitating the
politically necessary changes and assisting the course of History. The
problem with Duras's concept of refusal for an activist of Sartre's stripes
was its idealism. As Leslie Hill pointed out, Duras's politics maintains a
strange idea of innocence and uncorrupted future that is problematic
because it institutes an extrahistorical vantage point that "marks off the
end of progressive history and embodies the possibility that the innocence
and gaiety at the origin of time may be experienced anew."[7] From Sartre's
standpoint, Duras's politics of refusal – both in its milder version from

the time of the Algerian war and in its radicalized form from the late sixties – is idealistic, because it entails a purely abstract notion of rejection, and deactivating, because it rests on subjective depersonalization instead of on principles that encourage formation of a strong political identity and agency.

With no practical considerations for reality and the kind of transformations it could permit, Duras made it easier for her critics to divorce her politics from her literature, and dismiss both as a result. From very early on, Duras's narratives were interpreted as romantic stories about human misery, love, and suffering, an image strengthened, as Jane Bradley Winston argued, by René Clément's 1958 film adaptation of *The Sea Wall* (1950) and the ensuing circulation of Duras's photographs in popular magazines next to exotic pictures of colonies.[8] The Duras of controversial political convictions and fervent political engagements from the time of World War II was introduced to French readers in the fifties as a depoliticized writer. In order to resist this trend, Duras aligned herself with communism. In spite of her increasing critique of the PCF, its obedience to the Soviet dictate, and alibistic detachment during the process of decolonization, Duras continued to assert her adherence to communist ideas. To be sure, her understanding of communism was always idiosyncratic: a communism with strong anarchist leanings, in favor of "no state at all, an absence of power,"[9] a communism that was "violated, slaughtered [bafoué, égorgé],"[10] a communism that was upheld by a communist "who thinks that communism is impossible."[11] But Duras was obstinate in overstating her alliance with communism even long after many abandoned it. For Duras, communism became a tool of fighting the distorted popularization of her works, of repoliticizing her literature, and of underscoring the political nature of her ideals of refusal, destruction, and depersonalization.

The literature of void

The argument about refusal and destruction formulated by Duras in the 1969 interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma* applies to literature as well as politics. Linking the politics of refusal to her narrative *Destroy, She Said*, she claims that in this story all power is undone. The story wrecks a total destruction: "destruction of knowledge" (114), "destruction of memory" (108), "destruction of judgment" (109), and "destruction of someone as a person [destruction de l'être personnel]" (108). The goal of *Destroy, She Said* was not to destroy one ideology and replace it with another, but to destroy everything and replace it "with a void, the complete absence of man" (114). Proposing

that literature does not merely assist politics but that it is integral to politics, Duras argues that when literature finds an appropriate form, it is instrumental in cultivating void. Literature is integral to politics, and especially to the politics of refusal, because it is a privileged place for doing nothing.

According to Duras, *Destroy, She Said* is "a fragmented book from the novelistic point of view" (91). In this story, the pivotal mechanism of creating literary void is fragmentation of narrative perspective. When asked by Rivette and Narboni to compare the book and the film versions of *Destroy, She Said*, Duras finds them alike because the fragmented narrative point of view in both the book and the film liberate characters from the rigid hierarchy of fixed perspective that has dominated storytelling under the influence of novelistic principles. Duras argues that characters in *Destroy, She Said* are "completely interchangeable" (96), "all the same" (96), with none having any primacy over another. This interchangeability is the effect of the way the narrative voice tells the story and how the camera moves on the set. Similarly to the film, in which the camera has no fixed perspective and changes constantly by moving along with the characters, the narrative voice in the literary text glides inconclusively from one character to another, and from characters to descriptions of the locale and back, as becomes evident as early as the opening sentences:

> An overcast sky.
> The bay windows are shut.
> From where he is in the dining room he can't see the park.
> But she can. She is looking. Her table touches the windowsill.
> Because of the obtrusive light, she squints. Her eyes move to and fro. Some of the other guests are watching the tennis matches too. But he can't see.
> He hasn't asked for another table.
> She takes no notice of being watched.
> It rained this morning at around five.
> [Temps couvert.
> Les baies sont fermées.
> Du côté de la salle à manger où il se trouve, on ne peut pas voir le parc.
> Elle, oui, elle voit, elle regarde. Sa table touche le rebord des baies.
> A cause de la lumière gênante, elle plisse les yeux. Son regard va et vient.
> D'autres clients regardent aussi ces parties de tennis que lui ne voit pas.
> Il n'a pas demandé de changer de table.
> Elle ignore qu'on la regarde.
> Il a plu ce matin vers cinq heures.] (3; translation modified)

In this passage the narrative voice is not anchored to any given person or place. It moves around without stopping and thereby prevents readers

from identifying with only one character and securing a stable point from which to survey the story. This shifting technique transforms the power dynamic both within the narrative and in its reception. Within the story this technique makes it impossible for characters to dominate each other, nor for the narrative voice to dominate characters. Similarly, when reading the story this technique, according to Duras, makes it impossible for readers to dominate literary characters (95).[12] By making readers part of the constantly shifting movement that destabilizes characters as distinct individuals – Blanchot describes characters in *Destroy, She Said* as "*points of singularity*," positions in a "rarefied space [in which] almost nothing can take place"[13] – the narrative voice turns readers into an intrinsic part of the narrative movement, making them more intricately bound with the featured material. In Narboni's reading, which is confirmed by Duras, the effect of the narrative voice in *Destroy, She Said* cannot be separated from the reader because the unhinged movement of narration is a result of "an interaction between the reading of the book and the function of the speaker," coming from "between the reader and someone who is not the narrator but the speaker" (98).

The disjointed syntax, fragmented narrative perspective, and inhibited flow of storytelling in *Destroy, She Said* deactivate both narration and description, and undermine the subjective agency of characters as well as readers. Duras admits that the long scenes in which nothing happens are "dull. Banal. Dirty and grey [terne. Banale. Grise et sale]" because characters "exchange nothing but banalities" (100). However, she adds, this is exactly what she wanted. Readers who cannot set themselves off from the text and separate characters from one another can neither identify with a character nor search for hidden meanings. Immersed in the slow, exhausted, and for some undoubtedly even boring story, the reader of *Destroy, She Said* is not encouraged to take an active approach in response to the encountered destitution. The narrative style makes the act of reading anything but active and energetic. With a similar effect as Blanchot's *The Last Man*, the exhausted text here makes the reader undergo a similar devastation of the self as characters. In Duras's vision, a more active reader, one who is not reduced to a passive receptacle, as is the case of readers of novels, emerges only from a literature that is tiresome and that deprives not only literary characters, but also readers of the position of dominance, mastery, and self-assured action.

The politically motivated literary aesthetic of *Destroy, She Said* is more than a literary foil to Duras's politics of refusal and an expression of the all-encompassing NO. Contrary to what Duras sometimes claims in the interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the void of the story, political programs,

and the future in this narrative is not an outcome of the struggle to negate. Similarly to Barthes's concept of writing degree zero and its divergence from Leo Bersani's notion of impoverished literature discussed in Chapter 1, the void in *Destroy, She Said* is not limited to that aspect of refusal that Georges Bataille called the accursed share (*la part maudite*) and that forever resists being incorporated into political programs.[14] In *Destroy, She Said* the void has, as it were, a positive form and some, even if minimal, utility. It is an essentially affirmative and positive void because the way in which literary language in this story undoes characters is not consumed by negation. When Rivette suggests to Duras that *Destroy, She Said* is less about destruction per se and more about "a passage from numbness to a waking state" – "state of drowsiness, with escapes, with arousals from this state of numbness" (128) – Duras concurs. She agrees that this narrative is "not a rejection but a waiting period" (120). The state of void this narrative creates is not an expression of despair but a mild form of hope: "There is a gap between hope and despair where it's both together. A gap that can't be described yet. [. . .] Where sensitivity regroups and rediscovers itself" (120–121). What takes place in the drowsiness of literary void in *Destroy, She Said* is a nondescriptive, nonexpressive, and nonprescriptive kind of communication that is neither purely destructive nor manifestly creative, and in which the reader, whose involvement is also beyond activity and passivity, participates in the preparation for opening new social and political possibilities.

The literary politics proposed by Duras in the aftermath of May '68 resides neither in description nor in destruction of description, but in an attempt to create and sustain literary void. In an essay from 1968, Lucien Goldmann argues that because in contemporary society "the motor of events is no longer man but inert objects," literature that wishes to be committed can no longer "speak with the aid of the story of an individual or even an account of a lived event, because the individual himself is no longer an essential element of contemporary society."[15] According to Goldmann, literary engagement "must take place on an abstract level," by finding new forms of expression that relate to a society, but that are "unlike those which that society has created and in which it has traditionally seen itself."[16] Duras's effort to create and sustain literary void could not be further removed from these traditional expressive means. She presents a story that is slow, exhausted, and aesthetically blank, proposing that this type of story dismantles novelistic principles, undoes the normative production of meaning, and sustains the resulting literary void. In an echo of Barthes and Blanchot's definition of literature as a movement "toward its

essence, which is disappearance," Duras calls this void "the zero point [le point zéro]" and "the neutral point [le point neutre]" (120).[17] This neutral void is political because it contains a transformative power of preparing for something fundamentally different. Duras believes that the technique of exhausting sentences and weakening literary characters makes readers undergo the same depersonalization, with the ensuing void and exhaustion suspending all power: In this void and exhaustion one can neither exert power over others (one character over another, and the narrator, the reader, and the writer over characters), nor withdraw into self-protective individualism.

Curiously enough, toward the end of the interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma* Duras confesses, in a way reminiscent of Barthes's dissatisfaction with how concrete texts always seem to fall short of the ideal of *Writing Degree Zero*, that *Destroy, She Said* does not fully succeed in creating literary void. Although satisfied with the technique of shifting the point of view – the technique that refuses to carve out an inner space for individual characters by metonymically dislocating them along the gliding movement from one character to another – Duras calls for a more unadulterated form of literary void. She announces that her future stories will offer an even less traditional model of storytelling than *Destroy, She Said*, and that the character construction in these stories will "not be psychological in any way" (133).

The poetics of hybridization

When in November 1969 Duras talked to Rivette and Narboni about the joint destruction of the novel and the individual, she indicated that *Destroy, She Said* was a prelude to a more thorough destruction that would take place in her future "hybrid texts [textes hybrides]" (132). However, these hybrid texts would not be literary narratives anytime soon. In the 1970s, Duras turned to other genres and worked mainly in film and theater. At the same time, she lent her voice to less indeterminate political programs than those she defended in the late 1960s, most importantly the feminist movement.[18] When she finally returned to writing literary narratives in the early 1980s, these stories revealed an unmistakable influence of her experiments in film and theater undertaken in *India Song* – a "texte-théâtre" (1973) and a film (1974) – an improvised filmed reading of a script in *The Truck* (1977), and a series of film-narrative monologues, *Aurélia Steiner* (1979). Even a fleeting look at the hybrid literary narratives from the early 1980s shows a distinctive intersection involving film, drama, and

narrative literature. Although the film *The Atlantic Man* (1981), the play *Agatha* (1981), and a crossbreed of a *récit* and a play, the *récit-théâtre The Malady of Death* (1982) – or, the film *Agatha* (1981), the play *Savannah Bay* (1983), and the *récit-théâtre The Man Sitting in the Corridor* (1980) – technically fall into different genres, they introduce a relatively uniform subject matter and very similar aesthetic effects. Not surprisingly, the material of *The Atlantic Man* became a basis for both a film and a *récit-théâtre*, the play *Agatha* was turned into a film, *The Malady of Death* was encouraged for its dramatization in the appendix that included directions for staging, and both *The Malady of Death* and *The Man Sitting in the Corridor* were considered for film adaptations.

The most prominent feature of the promised hybrid literary narratives that finally appeared in the early 1980s is dialogue. With a few exceptions – *The Lover* (1984), for example, with its *écriture courante* and explicit use of the first-person narrator identified with Duras, or the metaphorical composition in *Savannah Bay* – Duras now tells stories in a dialogic mode with only sporadic use of narrative voice. With no narrator to situate dialogues, survey the progress of action, and bring narrative tensions to their resolution, the story loses its predictable direction and the narrative weight falls entirely on characters' utterances. The problem with these utterances, nevertheless, is that they are anything but invigorating. What dominates characters' exchanges in these texts are prolonged moments of silence. Characters are mostly quiet, resting, sleeping, and waiting for the other person to talk. Instead of compensating for the lost action by accentuating characters' interpersonal dynamic, or revealing their hidden depth and emotional intricacies, dialogues in these hybrid narratives remain startlingly uneventful. Moreover, they deliberately draw attention to their uneventfulness, obliqueness, repetitiveness, and hindered tempo. As the following two passages from *The Malady of Death* and *Agatha* show, exhausted dialogues have the same low dramatic voltage in two generically different, yet stylistically almost indistinguishable texts:

SHE STIRS, HER EYES HALF OPEN. SHE ASKS: How many paid nights left?
      You say: Three.
SHE ASKS: Haven't you ever loved a woman? You say no, never.
SHE ASKS: Haven't you ever desired a woman? You say no, never.
SHE ASKS: Not once, not for a single moment? You say no, never.
SHE SAYS: Never? Ever? You repeat: Never.
[ELLE REMUE, LES YEUX S'ENTROUVRENT. ELLE DEMANDE: Encore
      combien de nuits payées? Vous dites: Trois.

ELLE DEMANDE: Vous n'avez jamais aimé une femme? Vous dites que
      non, jamais.
ELLE DEMANDE: Vous n'avez jamais désiré une femme? Vous dites que
      non, jamais.
ELLE DEMANDE: Pas une seule fois, pas un instant? Vous dites que non,
      jamais.
ELLE DIT: Jamais? Jamais? Vous répétez: Jamais.][19]

Silence
HE.   — That's what you want me to do.
SHE. — Yes.
HE.   — This suffering.
SHE. — Yes.
HE.   — Agatha, Agatha.
SHE. — Yes.

[Silence
LUI.   — C'est ce que vous vouliez me faire.
ELLE. — Oui.
LUI.   — Cette souffrance.
ELLE. — Oui.
LUI.   — Agatha, Agatha.
ELLE. — Oui.][20]

Literary critics have pointed out a variety of influences on Duras's style of
blanks, ranging from poetry, through the sublime, to the role of Duras's
multi-language childhood.[21] But a more direct influence on the stylistic
distinctiveness of her later hybrid stories is her experimentation in theater
and film. These stories bear a mark of the dramatic staging of dialogue and
the cinematic use of still-frame images that became the hallmark of Duras's
plays and films. At the same time, however, these stories endow these
cinematographic and theatric techniques with an accentuated effect that
we do not find in her film and drama. In spite of the similar impression of
stalled action, Duras's hybrid stories suspend the residual narrative ten-
sions that can be still found in her films and plays. Duras's film characters
often do not speak to each other on screen and when they do, it is off-
camera. In *India Song*, for example, the first instance of this disjunctive
practice appears in the dance scene, in which we see two characters dance
without opening their mouths and their conversation takes place off-
screen, as if added later. In another instance, characters who appear on
the screen do not speak, but other characters comment on their actions off-
screen. And in yet another instance, the presumably same commentators
talk off-screen about the events that are not represented visually at all:

When the female protagonist sits quietly with four male characters in a room after the ball, what we hear is the sound of birds and the sea during their trip to off-shore islands the next day and the words of the off-camera voices that describe the trip; all the while the camera remains static and focused on the woman and the four men who sit in silence. In all these instances, the gap between the on-screen action and the off-screen commentaries and sounds introduces tensions between the visual and the aural that have important narrative consequences. Although these tensions cannot generate enough momentum to create a strong narrative thrust forward – even with these tensions, Duras's films remain rather static – they nevertheless introduce a level of expressiveness and simulation of action that are further reduced in Duras's hybrid literary narratives.

Composed of short exchanges, brief descriptions, moments of silence, and simple questions that precipitate series of short and circular answers, Duras's later hybrid stories are slow and monotonous. The simplicity of the grammar and the abruptness and thinness of the textual matter no longer support the use of parataxis that was the characteristic trait of her earlier narrative style. Even stage directions that are frequently included in these hybrid stories are highly impersonal, and while they do provide some information about the settings, they contain no narrative agency capable of moving the story into its next phase. These auxiliary dramatic mechanisms merely frame dialogues and accentuate the impression of temporal immediacy that is normally associated with plays and not works of narrative literature. Similarly to *Destroy, She Said*, but with techniques more suitable to Duras's politically inspired goal, her hybrid stories create a blank aesthetic in which the intimacy of the narrative voice is entirely removed, and in which the faltering language creates the effect of stalled movement and absolute temporal immediacy.

The aesthetic of blankness

Duras's dramatization of literary story and her technique of inhibiting narrative progress pose a challenge to narrative theory. If prose is inherently metonymical because it advances by contiguity, with each clause taking its impetus from the previous one, Duras's hybrid stories undermine the prosaic foundation of their genre, because they relinquish metonymy. Whenever this happens, as Roman Jakobson argued, the text moves to the opposite pole, namely metaphor.[22] According to Jakobson, all literary texts tend toward either one pole or the other: A text is either metonymic, as in prose (especially Realist prose), or has metaphoric

tendencies, as in poetry (above all, Symbolist poetry). Although the two poles are extremes that never appear in a pure form, Jakobson insisted that the ratio of their mixture of metonymy and metaphor depends proportionately on the distance from one pole and proximity to the other. This schema, he noted, also explains language disturbances: Among aphasiacs, the use of metonymy and synecdoche compensates for the inability to select words, and the use of metaphor for the inability to combine them. Jakobson's chart has been often questioned by literary theorists because it is too one-dimensional. When applied to Duras's hybrid stories, this one-dimensionality becomes immediately apparent: The problem with Duras's *récit-théâtres* is that they depart from metonymy, and thus prose, but do not get any closer to metaphor and poetry. These hybrid narratives resist Jakobson's chart because they do not gravitate toward either one pole or the other. At the same time, they present us with something other than a balanced mixture of the two poles. Retaining the least amount of contiguity, these texts remain narratives, but their low level of metaphoricity brings them closer to plays rather than poetry. The metonymic and metaphorical poles are not combined here, but both are reduced to a minimum. As a literary genre, the hybrid *récit-théâtre* is narrative with almost no metonymy and almost no metaphor.

With their brusque utterances, phraseologic repetitions, and sudden silences, the language of Duras's hybrid stories resembles a pathologically deformed speech. Delirious characters had already appeared in Duras's works – Lol V. Stein and Alissa Thor being the most memorable – but it is only in her later hybrid narratives when they are matched with the corresponding language and form. If we apply Jakobson's model to it, it confirms its eccentricity: Relying neither on metaphor nor on metonymy, this language exhibits all aphasiac symptoms. The language of *récit-théâtres* does not compensate for its inability to use one trope by using the other. The main question regarding this peculiar language is the purported meaning of this kind of literature. Julia Kristeva, for example, wondered what Duras's style wished to accomplish in its barren prose and "aesthetics of awkwardness [esthétique de la *maladresse*]."[23] Kristeva concluded that it cannot achieve anything because it offers nothing artistic in response to the pathological states in which it originates – only unerotic ravishment and undiluted expression of suffering. When compared with Samuel Beckett and Stéphane Mallarmé – writers whom Kristeva considers similar to Duras in terms of their literary approach to language, but more successful in creating meaningful artistic correlates to the objectless psychic states expressed in their works – Duras's stylistic clumsiness proves to harbor no recuperative

dimension. Where Beckett presents a refined syntax and Mallarmé an elaborate orchestration of words as remedies to the objectless psychic states that are the source of their artistic inspiration, Duras offers nothing. With no redemptive value, Duras's narratives, much like the pathological speech, have no purpose and no tangible meaning.

Save for the critical tenor, Kristeva is correct in her diagnosis. Indeed, Duras offers nothing. But rather than a sign of failure, the blank aesthetic, hollowness of meaning, and vacuity of style are an outcome of literary practices that, as the interview with Rivette and Narboni attests, were deliberate strategies. The blankness of Duras's non-style is a style of its own accord. Not unlike Beckett's refined syntax and Mallarmé's orchestration of words, Duras's non-style, instead of being a symptom of an unprocessed anguish and lack of reflection, is a calculated mode of writing the aesthetic effect of which is a result of a specific grammar, syntax, and typography. Duras's style of repetitions, isolated monosyllabic expressions, nominal phrases that scarcely use adjectives, sentences with no verbs or no personal pronouns, personal pronouns with very little referential solidity, and the overall arrangement of the text into small segments separated by empty spaces, as the following passage from the opening of *The Atlantic Man* demonstrates, is not an indication of meaningless replication and a pathologically circular kind of speech, but a distinctive literary technique:

> You will not look at the camera. Except when you are asked to do so.
> You will forget.
> You will forget.
> You will forget that it's you.
> I think it's possible for it to happen.
> You will forget the camera as well. But most of all you will forget that it's you.
> You.
> [Vous ne regarderez pas la caméra. Sauf lorsqu'on l'exigera de vous.
> Vous oublierez.
> Vous oublierez.
> Que c'est vous, vous l'oublierez.
> Je crois qu'il est possible d'y arriver.
> Vous oublierez aussi que c'est la caméra. Mais surtout vous oublierez que c'est vous. Vous.][24]

In this passage, repetition has the effect of both heightening the presence of what is repeated and emptying it out. Duras often strengthens this dual effect by using indicative mode, the conditional, and the future perfect

(*futur antérieur*). For instance, *The Man Sitting in the Corridor* does not start with a declarative statement depicting something definite, but with a much more tentative one: "The man might be sitting [aurait été assis] in the shade of the corridor."[25] *The Malady of Death* creates an equally speculative situation when from the beginning it expresses a possibility instead of describing a fact: "You wouldn't have known her [. . .]. You may have paid her. May have said [. . .]."[26] Duras often turns to the conditional and the future perfect in order to reduce narrative tensions: "Sometimes I unveil destiny by putting events in the future perfect. 'She would have been beautiful', 'she would have swum far. . .' In such a way that the present partakes of the end, of death, that it is stamped by it."[27] The resulting style of repetitions, future perfect tenses, conditionals, and indicative modes of addressing the text to the second person plural (*vous*) prevents drama and action from building up, releases narrative tensions prematurely, and thereby undermines narrative progress.

One of the most obvious features of Duras's hybrid narratives is that not much happens in them. Instead of moving forward, stories, such as *The Malady of Death*, give the impression that they are merely extending the present moment:

> She sleeps.
> You switch the lights off.
> It's almost light.
> It's still almost dawn. These hours are as vast as stretches of sky. It's too much, time can't find a way through. Time has stopped passing.
> [Elle dort.
> Vous éteignez les lampes.
> Il fait presque clair.
> Toujours c'est presque l'aube. Ce sont des heures aussi vastes que des espaces de ciel. C'est trop, le temps ne trouve plus par où passer. Le temps ne passe plus.][28]

Although moments of stasis similar to this one sometimes take an unexpected turn to a more dynamic denouement – for instance, the violent scene in *The Man Sitting in the Corridor* – for the most part what prevails is a state of slowness, exhaustion, and bareness. In this ascetic textual environment in which each moment is plain and non-climactic, characters do not gain depth by moving from one scene to another. They enter as destitute and remain so. Slowness and exhaustion rob them of everything that could make them into independent individuals – their memories, a sense of personal identity, and even names. With no distractions and free of all mundane concerns, literary characters in these stories are just there,

inactive and empty, in the presence of other, similarly dispossessed characters. In these moments when nothing happens and when even dialogues are short and sporadic, the atmosphere is one of utter blankness. Unlike in Alain Robbe-Grillet's narratives, however, in which, as seen in Chapter 1, similar conditions push the visual aspect of relationships between literary characters to the fore; in Duras's *récit-théâtres* the decrease of the verbal does not increase the role of the visual. Not only do these stories not compensate for the reduction in narration by expanding description, but the characters that appear in them rarely see each other well. Characters' gaze and verbal exchanges provide neither comfortable intimacy nor secure distance in these stories. On the contrary, characters often acknowledge their lack of intimacy as well as safe distance, admitting that they do not understand each other. Martin Jay calls this type of ethics "the ethics of blindness," because it refuses to build interpersonal relations on visual interaction and specular fusion.[29] What is left in Duras's stories of sparse description, minimal action, and emaciated dialogues is something very non-dramatic: opening oneself to the other person in the emptiness of waiting and listening.

Instead of a manifestation of psychotic breakdown or a symptom of regression into the narcissistic stage, the blank aesthetic of Duras's hybrid stories is an attempt to give waiting and listening a literary form. Even late in her career Duras still insisted that literary narratives must be slow, plain, and epigrammatic: "A brief writing, without grammar, a writing of words alone. Words without supporting grammar. Lost. Written, there. And immediately left behind [Égaré. Là, écrits. Et quittés aussitôt]."[30] For Duras, this type of literature is engaged both ethically and politically because it changes the dominant representation of the self. By depleting characters' psychological interiority and bringing the resulting blankness into the open, the literature of void and aesthetic blankness deinteriorizes characters and renders them inoperative as self-enclosed individuals. Duras's hybrid narratives perform in a more radical fashion the kind of opening of the self to others that appeared in *Destroy, She Said* and that, as seen in Chapter 6, was first introduced in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

The politics of blankness

Where *Hiroshima Mon Amour* challenged personal identity and collective identity of uniform groups defined by their common history by exposing these identities to the traumatic fragments of the past, and while *Destroy, She Said* undermined the self by blurring the divisions among characters by

constantly shifting the narrative perspective, hybrid *récit-théâtres* are stories of an utmost narrative slowness, exhaustion, and stylistic bareness in which the self emerges as a void. There are still characters in these stories, but the simplicity of language and the austerity of form that carry them do not provide enough support to allow them to retain a sense of the self. These characters are stripped of individual attributes, private concerns, as well as the ability to relate to the past, situate themselves in the present, and project themselves into the future. The slow and weary dialogues make characters attentive and listening, but subjectively weak as personalities. Their cohesion as individuals is not a result of their self-awareness, but of their bond to other characters who are equally insubstantial. This unguarded exposure to others almost never leads to easy harmony, effortless union, or even actual understanding. The slowness and exhaustion here do not yield anything specific and final, because anything definite, conclusive, and positively defined, including understanding, is a threat to the empty singularity of each character.

Similarly to elsewhere in the book, here the conception of committed literature is as much political as it is ethical. For Duras, the domains of the ethical and the political are not separate, neither in literature nor in real life. Reviving Mascolo's political ideal of the unison between equality and difference – what Mascolo calls a "double act" of recognizing, on the one hand, political equality as a figure of sameness and reciprocity, and, on the other hand, ethical acceptance of absolute otherness and weakness of the other as a figure of difference – Duras insists on both radical political solidarity and the ethical recognition of otherness.[31] This political ideal makes literary politics inseparable from literary ethics. In the same way as for Barthes, Blanchot, and Camus, for Duras literary politics implies neither discord between ethics and politics, nor a shift from politics to ethics, but an interconnection of literature, ethics, and politics, which, as seen in Chapters 3 and 4, only literature can convey. In Duras's later hybrid stories, the ethical and the political emerge neither in negative nor in positive terms. In the same way as the ethical in these stories is not moralistic, normative, and prescriptive, the political in them is nondoctrinal and nonregulatory. Inextricable from the blank aesthetic that expresses them, the ethical and the political here are not in specific descriptions and propositions, because any specific guidelines would negate the dual demand of the absolute political equality and absolute ethical otherness. Transferring the site of the ethical and the political from portrayed situations and explicitly discussed issues to literary form, style, and language, Duras's hybrid stories impart the ethical and the political via their

blank aesthetic. Against the traditional view, which insists on the mimetic principle and the priority of the novelistic fullness of description as a medium of the ethical and political in literature, Duras presents a type of literature in which ethics and politics reside in the aesthetic effect itself. Her hybrid literary narratives are ethically and politically engaged, because of the fact that they exhaust action, description, and narrative tensions, rather than in spite of it. Similarly to Barthes and Blanchot, Duras regards the technique of narrative exhaustion as non-novelistic. By emphasizing weakness, blankness, and exhaustion, this technique creates the effect of presence in which the slow, gradual, and non-aggressive process of the corrosion of characters' egocentric drives exposes human togetherness.

Duras's blank aesthetic shows that the question of whether a politics that refuses all authority and does not compromise itself with provisional political solutions does not lead to ineffectuality, and thus ultimately to an abdication of the political as such, hinges on the equation of the political with pragmatic politics. This same misconstruction, as Kristin Ross shows, has been frequently made by those who dismiss May '68 as a politically unsuccessful event, pointing to the failure of various ethically motivated demands to materialize into a coherent politics.[32] Duras believes that this misconstruction is not just a mistake, a result of erroneous information, or a product of one's unquestioned beliefs, but a strong ideological position. To the same extent as there is a nonmoralistic conception of ethics, there is also a nondoctrinal conception of politics. From the viewpoint of Duras's blank aesthetic, the reduction of the political to a defense of particular policies and systems of administration is an ideologically motivated distortion designed to rule out any radical political stance as utopian by depoliticizing it and relegating it to the sphere of a mere ethics. If for Camus political realism implied too much of politics – a *Realpolitik* in which the end justifies the means – for Duras it implies too little: only slight adjustments that largely replicate what exists. For Duras, a true political realist, who at the same time remains a writer of literature, needs to ask for more and, as the famous May '68 graffiti advised, demand the impossible, because only then can literature generate powerful political and ethical effects.

Duras's blank aesthetic shows that the political and the ethical in literature are not limited to articulating support for particular political agendas and concrete ethical guidelines. Furthermore, literature that does not express the political and the ethical directly in conceptual discourse does not need to define the law of concordance between the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political it presents. By remaining in a state that repels any

concrete agendas and guidelines, the literature of void capitalizes on the politics and ethics that are specific to literature, staking even less on its impoverished edifice than any other form of exhausted literature examined in this book. The hybrid *récit-théâtre* supports referentiality to an even lesser extent than Barthes's writing degree zero and Blanchot's *récit*, provides structures that are even less complex and apt for formulating alternative behavioral patterns than Camus's short stories, and lends itself much less readily to historical representation than the evocation of empty memory in Camus's *The First Man* and the textual mechanism of displacement in Duras's earlier *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. What takes place in the blankness of these later hybrid narratives is nothing, and that in itself, as Duras insists, is political and ethical. As the peculiarly circular logic of Duras's argument goes, questioning the political and ethical nature of the literature of void shows a misunderstanding of its aesthetics, politics, and ethics; accepting this aesthetic, on the other hand, inevitably leads to an enactment of its politics and ethics. Aiming to undo all forms of power, the blank aesthetic is not a temporary suspension of action. The suspension of action in the blank aesthetic is itself the goal. It is literature's general strike. Duras proposes that only this suspension can shift the emphasis from the self to the other, from the individual to the interpersonal, and by changing what can be thought, perceived, felt and imagined, open for a possibility of something radically different.

Conclusion
The literature of exhaustion, weakness, and blankness

Work in Western modernity is the production of more than is needed, and regardless of whether the surplus is regulated by the state or reinvested by individual entrepreneurs, the social space that work brings to being is inseparable from alienated labor. Paradoxically, work has been also the preferred means for curing alienation. A crucial component of political ideologies, work has played a central role in various totalitarianisms, their social ideas, and political organizations. Fascism, for example, posited work as the essence of man, and with the vision of community in fusion, implemented work as a tool of self-appropriation, collective strength, and expulsion of otherness. Work retained its systemic significance after World War II as well. Although no longer a vehicle of collective defense against finitude, work was still the trusted answer to alienation. And not only in the Eastern bloc, where the doctrinal status of work was crucial for the project of building socialism. Work remained the fundamental cultural value and principle of social life also in the West. Key to the plan of postwar reconstruction, work was adopted as a shield against both fascism and communism, as a catalyst of progress, and as a means of overcoming the past and moving resolutely to the future. As Theodor Adorno argued, in the postwar era work became an ideological device and instrument of self-imposed amnesia, which, however, led not to an overcoming of the past, but to its permanence and a systemic continuity of fascism in late capitalist societies.[1] In postwar years work was not "worked-through" but, as Werner Hamacher quipped, merely "worked-off."[2]

In this scenario of modern life as a *vita activa* governed by work, non-work does not seem to have a place. Non-work is incompatible with the ideology of labor, the intensifying historical tendency of erasing the labor/leisure division, as well as with the growing trend of functionalizing leisure and activating the recreants. However, non-work and practices that belong to the sphere of non-work have not been completely eradicated. Although expelled from modern life, non-work has retreated to, among other places,

literature. Or, more precisely, a specific type of literature: a literature that operates under different principles than those associated with active life and that displays a distinct relation to work, action, and activity.

The novel: work, action, and the self

Within the framework of modern life as active life, literature is a type of work that fosters the social ideal of the self as an active agent. Perhaps most powerfully within this framework, as seen throughout this book, Jean-Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?* (1947) defines literature as a dynamic "quest for truth [that] *utilizes* language."[3] According to Sartre, "prose is in essence utilitarian [la prose est utilitaire par essence]" (19), because writers work with words that refer to something beyond language and that, therefore, are a "particular moment of action that has no meaning outside of it" (21). Knowing the words before writing them down and only "controlling the sketching of the signs" (41), writers use literature as a medium of their relation to the present and a way of projecting themselves to the future. Because of this power to uproot from the given and offer an outline for the future, literature has a duty to communicate with the concern for clarity. As writers' premeditated projections, words act on readers' freedom, and have to be clear and effective in order to elicit their active response. Sartre stresses that only active writing, one which is both engaged and engaging, belongs to its time. For Sartre, writing in many respects *is* time, because even though as a form of projection it is directed at the future, it happens in the present and has to remain rooted in it. As Sartre's legendary bananas that taste the best when eaten directly from a tree (74), writing that is committed has to be both created and consumed immediately, without temporal delay and geographical displacement.

When endorsing the primary dimension of time for the act of writing, Sartre often oscillates between the present and the future. Although literature is supposed to give an account of the present – to the extent of describing everything in a perpetual commentary in which, as Denis Hollier observed, words take place of the present and reporting ironically becomes the event itself – the value of the present depends on the future.[4] In his study of Genet, Sartre declares that "future is here, more present than the present [l'avenir est là, plus présent que le présent]," a statement rephrased several years later in directly political terms: "For a man in China the future is more true than the present [pour un Chinois l'avenir est plus vrai que le présent]."[5] This oscillation between the present and the future, and the emphasis on their indissoluble bond, stems from Sartre's vision of

the present moment that is not isolated and hence meaningless in its autonomy. Already in his first literary essays, Sartre supplemented his attack on narrative omnipresence, a technique that institutes a privileged observer and thus violates narrative perspective, with an equally skeptical attitude to past perfect tense.[6] As a foil to narrative omnipresence and its mutilation of space, past perfect mutilates time because it cuts the past from the present and thereby eliminates the future. American novelists, such as William Faulkner, and "Americanized" writers, such as Albert Camus, were Sartre's primary examples of this tendency to decapite narrative time and deprive it of the dimension of intentional actions – that is, the dimension of freedom and the future.[7] For Sartre, committed writing has to take place in the present; but it is also a writing of the future, because it shuns away from the present that is absorbed in itself, disconnected from the future, and lacking in direction. Committed literature is such a use of denotative language in which the writer's act of projection integrates the present and the future with the aspiration of generating further action and projection on the side of the reader.

In Sartre's portrayal, the notion of commitment has nothing to do with the image of literature as an altruistic act of a writer who sacrifices himself in order to incite social change. Committed literature is essentially a redundant concept, a pleonasm that states what literature is as a form of art. As literature *is* engaged prose, committed literature takes responsibility for what constitutes it as an art. Whenever literature refuses this responsibility, the result is a literature of noncommunication, which, strictly speaking, is not literature anymore because it betrays its essence. Reviving traditional notions of referentiality and intentionality, this conception of commitment rejects the crisis of the sign announced by Saussure and Mallarmé in favor of literature as direct communication of meaning. The conceptual underpinning of this politically motivated preference is unambiguous: meaning, action, intention, language that is not preoccupied with itself, and consciousness that is in the act and that does not reflect on itself. There is no space for intimacy here, whether of the self or of language, because man, according to Sartre's existentialist theory of consciousness, is always outside of himself, his consciousness always of something other than itself, and his ego a pure transcendence that, on its own, is empty.[8] In this self-transcending movement, language plays the same active role as the self. Emulating the same motion that drives the self, speaking and writing have to be constantly in the act of stepping outside of themselves and their entrenchment in the present moment. They need to be forever in a movement towards the world and the future. As a form of action, language

is obliged to avoid intimacy and advance active agency. Only introspective language – a decadent and bourgeois language that is "inside out [le langage à l'envers]" (20) – leaps back on itself and gives the self the solace of wrapping itself comfortably in its ego. Against inactivity and narcissism of such a language Sartre postulates openness and energy of committed literature: an active language that does not listen to itself, that is always *in actu*, and that is permanently in the middle of an interminable movement outward and forward.

In Sartre's model of engagement, the vision of the self as an active individual finds its symbolic representation in committed literature, which, in turn, finds its privileged expression in the genre of the novel. Although conventionally a genre of acculturation and a symbol of the bourgeois social project – bourgeois subjectivity as universal and the world of work as an apprenticeship in the formation of the self, as Georg Lukács showed[9] – for Sartre the novel becomes the genre of committed literature par excellence. Only novels, according to Sartre, are complex enough to provide synthesis between the subject and the object, unite the three dimensions of time, and establish a historical whole. But however much Sartre wants the novel to shed its bourgeois disposition of instituting work as a conservative value of self-restraint and seeks to turn it into a site of work as a progressive value of change – condemning, for example, the bourgeois novel's retrospective narration that emphasizes the calm and distance of both the narrator and the character from their chaotic past and turbulent youth – his reappropriation of this genre for the purposes of literary commitment does not evade what the novel shares with the bourgeois project: its nemesis, laziness.

The cult of work, purposeful deeds, and goal-oriented action, instead of assisting Sartre in breaking away from bourgeois values, makes him a continuator of the tradition he longs to dismantle. The transformative power of the present and the future that Sartre opposes to the once-tumultuous but now safely overcome past featured in bourgeois novels does not beget as radical a transformation of novelistic principles as Sartre believes. The emphasis on action, projects, and the future challenges the outdated bourgeois calm only to replace it with the historically more appropriate time of rapid change. Instead of overcoming the old tradition, Sartre extends it by modifying its constituent elements, adjusting the latter to the contemporary social condition of accelerating time and of work consuming an ever-larger part of life. Although developed as a critical response to the postwar social order, Sartre's notion of commitment, together with its rhetoric of projects, work, and activity, reinforces the

status of the present as something that has shrunk to almost nothing: an always ahead-of-itself place of work and future-oriented action.

Exhausted literature: against the novel, work, and the self

Describing the Paris Commune as an event that subverted the state at the moment when capital expanded to its imperialist phase, Kristin Ross presents Arthur Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* (1873) as a literary complement to the Communards' refusal of work, productivity, and the state. Addressing Rimbaud's prose poem as a *récit*, Ross opposes it to the novel: Whereas the novel describes action from a distance, and thereby as a genre identifies with the state by epitomizing bourgeois values of work and calm meditation on the past, Rimbaud's *récit* embraces the attitude of laziness that allows it to capture the present in its immediacy. The *récit*'s laziness, nevertheless, is not total indolence and absence of anything active. According to Ross, this laziness is a kind of "absolute motion [that] escapes from the pull of gravity" and that hides "activity not subordinated to certain necessities."[10] There is an immense power in the kind of laziness embraced by the *récit*.

In the aftermath of Sartre's call for a literature of stronger and more clearly defined political commitments, Maurice Blanchot returns to the genre of the *récit* with a renewed interest in its political potential. As Rimbaud before him, Blanchot is keen on the ability of the *récit* to bypass representation and detached contemplation, and enact the event itself. In Blanchot's take on the *récit*, nevertheless, this genre's laziness – or work-lessness (*désœuvrement*), as he prefers to call it – undergoes a significant modification. Retaining both the *récit*'s connection to the immediacy of the present and its generic difference from the novel, Blanchot adapts the *récit* to the changed historical situation and refashions it as a genre that contests the dominance of work and action in contemporary society. For Blanchot, the *récit* becomes an antinovelistic mode of narration that employs feeble characters, austere style, and inhibited tempo of storytelling. Instead of straightforward depiction, realist detail, instrumental use of language, and characters' self-conception and active projection to the future – all cornerstones of Sartre's notion of committed literature – the narrative foundation of the *récit* as Blanchot envisions it is dramatic slowness, stylistic asceticism, exhausted characters, and simplicity of plot. Not much happens in this type of *récit*, and this paucity of action is carried out by equally weak characters and language. In this mode of writing, saying less – and saying it more slowly and wearily – is not a manifestation

of the proverbial "less is more." Unlike in traditional minimalism in which small forms are devised to either display the unrepresentability of certain events or, via understatements and litotes, disclose the more in the less (as Hemingway's metaphor of literature suggests: an iceberg of which only a modest part is visible, but that small part reveals the richness underneath), "lessness" in the *récit* does not hide anything under the surface. Avoiding rhetorical figures and stylistic embellishments, the *récit*'s slow and cautious manner of narrating offers a language the goal of which is to be just there, in its inactivity and preinstrumental lack of expressiveness.

Formulated as a response to Sartre's conception of commitment and its emphasis on strong individuality, action, and instrumental use of language, Blanchot postulates the *récit* as a narrative strategy of not establishing an individual identity. As the essay "Idle Speech" (1963), examined in Chapter 2, shows, Blanchot's theory of literature targets the heroism and authenticity with which Sartre endows the speech of a resolute individual who is determined to transmit specific messages.[11] The *récit* is an alternative to the novelistic image of the self as a strong individual. Following an earlier portrayal of the *récit* in "The Song of the Sirens" (1954) – in which Blanchot opposes the *récit* to the novel on the basis of its refutation of the novel's drive to completion, construction of robust selfhood, and mastery of the story's content – the emphasis in "Idle Speech" is on the *récit*'s frail narrative voice and characters' difficulty to exert their voices. In the emptiness of words and the absence of things to which they refer, the *récit*'s stylistic and compositional asceticism upholds a language in which the self does not achieve the fullness of a speaking subject capable of generating discourse. In the *récit*, the self is weakened, flattened, and depersonalized. In the *récit*'s slow and exhausted language, the self is emptied out, stripped of its activities, and divested of its identity.

Blanchot's main difficulty with Sartre's notion of committed literature is the danger inherent in its propagation of narratives that wish to stabilize meaning and convey it to others. For Blanchot, and similarly for Barthes, Camus, and Duras, as seen, the problem with Sartre's notion is that it promotes self-involved values, narrow views, and intransigent actions. Against this predicament, these writers and critics present a different kind of literature: a literature of weakness, exhaustion, and slowness. The effect of this literature is very anti-Sartrean: hindrance of the activity of reading and immobilization of readers' appropriative movement toward the story. Slowness and exhaustion also preclude any ardent struggle with language. Unlike "impoverished literature" – Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's concept discussed in Chapter 1 with regard to Samuel Beckett's narratives[12] – exhausted

literature is not preoccupied with staging a breakdown of meaning and "boring one hole after another into language," as Beckett once described his early technique.[13] Utilizing literary devices neither for their positive function of denotation nor for their negating faculty, exhausted literature deactivates both language and the self in a slow, controlled, and sustained manner that prevents meaning and action from being dialectically reintroduced. By withdrawing from work and action, and by draining the energy out of the dialectic of positing and opposing meaning, this narrative form foregrounds the present moment and exposes the mediacy of language as such.

Interpretation of meaning does not do justice to literary works. Emphasis on meaning, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argued, disregards the "presence effect": a sudden experience of the materiality of the thing that comes as a result of silent perception and the ability "to be 'quiet for a moment'," and that Gumbrecht associates with Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit* (serenity, composure, capacity to let things be).[14] Exhausted literature generates a similar effect. But here the effect of presence is inextricably linked with language. In exhausted literature the effect of presence has nothing to do with the fullness of the present envisaged by Sartre as an excess of energy that spills over into the future, nor with the present of Heidegger's unveiling (*alētheia*) in which art brings out into the open the revelation of Being. Nothing can be brought to a disclosure here, as no positively given truth can transpire in the threadbare presence this literature creates. In this essentially "non-dialectical experience of language," as Blanchot describes it, literary language, while not unaware of *différance*, exhausts it and renders it inoperative.[15] A discourse based on neither negations nor on constative or performative utterances – acting as if it could either fix meaning or coincide with itself and render itself present in the act of self-performance – exhausted literature presents a language that is prepositing, preinstrumental, and preperformative, and which generates a presence that is minimal: indeterminate, light, and thin to the point of near inexistence.

Unlike for Rimbaud, for Blanchot what makes up the texture of the *récit* is not the burst of a pure transformational energy. While Rimbaud opposes the *récit* and the novel on account of presence or absence of this energy, and while Sartre keeps the same perspective but delegates this energy not to the lazy *récit* but to the industrious novel, in Blanchot's *récit* calm and unrest are not unyielding opposites. If for Rimbaud the determining principle of engaged literature is youthful energy and non-work, and for Sartre it is youthful energy and work, for Blanchot and others analyzed in

this book, it is calm and exhaustion. Calm and exhaustion for these writers and critics do not imply distance from the object of narration, as they do for Sartre, for whom they are attributes of the bourgeois novel. Defiant of the novel as a genre of acculturation and mastery over reality, the modes of writing formulated by Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras undo the opposition between non-work, youth, and energy, on the one hand, and work, adulthood, and calm responsibility, on the other hand. Valorizing non-work, calm, and absence of energy, exhausted literature undermines the dialectic of work, action, and the self.

The ethics of exhausted literature

"There is no literature," Barthes declares at the beginning of *Writing Degree Zero*, "without an ethic of language [morale du langage]."[16] Sartre would not dispute this statement, if it meant that for a text to be literary it must bestow an ethic on the language it uses. For Sartre, literature must make an effort to create ethical language. But Barthes's declaration is not prescriptive. Leaving his statement deliberately equivocal, Barthes, as the first chapter showed, leads his readers to identify the Sartrean preoccupations of *Writing Degree Zero* and to disentangle them only slowly from its anti-Sartrean suppositions. It is soon clear that Barthes does not share the view of literature as a medium in which language has an ethic only when it communicates meaning. In *Writing Degree Zero*, ethics still implies a relation to others, but this relation is deemed to take place in literature regardless of whether its language communicates clear messages. Barthes proposes not only that all literature produces an ethic of language. He insists that the ethical relation appears most prominently in a literature of noncommunication in which language emerges as an empty medium and a means that is largely divorced from content.

In an echo of Rimbaud's celebration of laziness, Barthes returns to the attitude of inactivity and idleness. In one of his late interviews he talks about a gradual disappearance of this attitude from modern life. Obsessed with work and activity, modern society, he argues, "does not get along very well with neutral attitudes, and it finds laziness intolerable."[17] Admitting that laziness can be a very trivial and absentminded attitude, Barthes points out that, nonetheless, it can also be the most thoughtful. To banal boredom and stereotypical laziness he opposes the laziness of "'not decid-ing', of 'being there,' of doing nothing, of 'moving nothing', determining nothing."[18] He refers to the following Zen poem to illustrate this kind of idleness: "Sitting peacefully doing nothing, Springtime is coming, and the

grass grows all by itself." Drawing attention to the poem's anacoluthon, Barthes notes that the break in the poem's grammatical construction, which makes the one who is sitting not the subject of the sentence, as it is not springtime that is sitting, is indicative of the situation of idleness. According to Barthes, in idleness, and correspondingly in literature that embraces it, the subject is "dispossessed of his consistency as a subject [dépossédé de sa consistance de sujet]": "He is decentered, unable even to say 'I'. That would be true idleness. To be able, at certain moments, to no longer have to say 'I'."[19]

As nonpossessive states that neutralize the violence of positing, work and appropriation, idleness, exhaustion, and weakness, the writers and critics studied in this book propose, are ethical literary principles because, by exhausting language, they exhaust subjectivity. Literature of exhaustion withdraws from work and action, empties the self, and lessens its subjective drives. At the same time, it also exhausts the dynamic that threatens to turn the suspension of language and the self into what Bersani interprets as ego's libidinal investment. As seen in Chapter 1, for Bersani the dynamic of meaning and its destruction is a form of libidinal investment of the ego that violently enjoys the moment when signification collapses, as this situation revives the narcissistic self-containment that defined its existence before the acquisition of language.[20] The situation is different in exhausted literature. Creating neither intimacy into which the self could retreat nor an opportunity for it to experience destruction of its self-contained identity, the principles of exhaustion, weakness, and idleness enervate the self as well as take away the ground for its immediate reconstitution.

Exhausted literature is ethical because instead of the return to the self it generates a greater connectedness to the outside. As Blanchot remarks, in exhausted literature language does not engage in work, it "does not speak any more, but is [la parole ne parle plus, mais est]," it gives itself to "the pure passivity of being," suspended in "the tension of an infinite beginning."[21] Driven not by intentionality – Jacques Derrida reminds us that intentionality entails a *telos*, authority, and the power to perform – but by performative weakness, language in this type of literary narrative purposely displays its impersonality and powerlessness.[22] What weakens the self, and is thus ethical, is not an act of positing language as personal, but the exposure of language's impersonality. Unlike Emmanuel Levinas who conceived of ethical relation as a personal bond – that is, in absolute terms (Good) because it is always directed at a third observer (God)[23] – Blanchot contends that no third party can rescue ethical relation from its uncertainty, as one cannot replace the I of speech with the Other and make

the Other speak in the first person. Ethics cannot be limited to prescription. What is ethical is the specificity of the relation in which, as Blanchot maintains in his answer to Levinas, both entities, not just the Other, are unhinged.[24] It is precisely this double dissymmetry that is both revealed and experienced in the slowness, weariness, and impersonality of exhausted literature.

As a means of recovering the preindividual experience of sharing language, exhausted literature serves as a narrative codification of ethical intersubjectivity. In the semantic thinness and phenomenological blankness of exhausted narratives, the frail and weary words deplete the self and divest it of its subjective (narcissistic, sadistic, masochistic) drives. The self is no longer a carved-out interior. It is also not destroyed in a self-shattering *jouissance*, or disseminated into the outside world. Instead, it is thinned out, flattened, and exposed to other equally weakened and reduced selves. Unlike the novel, which remains attached to the symbolic role of representing the monadic kind of individuality, exhausted literature depersonalizes the individual and replaces it with a nondialectical inter-subjectivity. In a twist on Mikhail Bakhtin, Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras suggest that what is truly dialogic can never be found in the novel. Dialogism functions on ethical grounds, not when it gives the other person a role that is as important as the self. It is ethical when it rids the self of the drives that lead to the all-embracing struggle for recognition. As seen, these writers and critics purport not only that words cannot be turned into swords; they demand that words be weakened and disarmed. Only in a slow language that leaps back onto itself and at each moment begins anew can words move toward an affirmation that is not a mere exchange of one set of values for another. Guided by different principles than work, action, and the dialectic of positing and negating, exhausted literature is a form of engagement that rejects valuation as such.

Exhausted literature is directed not only against Sartre's conception of literary commitment. It also runs against the dominant view in more recent literary theory that considers only stories rich in descriptive detail to be ethically and politically committed. An unexpected successor of Sartre, this position insists on the priority of the novel in forming our ethical sensibilities. Only the genre of the novel, critics such as Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth claim, can record the historical detail, emotional richness, and the dilemmas of human action that are necessary for an engaged response. Only the fullness of description and complexity of situations offered in novels – the subtle ethical conflicts depicted by, for example, Henry James, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, and Vladimir

Nabokov – allow readers to follow, as Nussbaum phrases it, the "relevant activities of searching and feeling, especially feeling concerning their own possibilities as well as those of the characters," and by making them "reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling" extend their experiences and propose specific norms of behavior.[25] By emulating what Booth calls "moral sensitivity" – "not so much," as he explains, "the sensitivity of any one character (because sometimes there is no dramatized character who exhibits special moral insight) but, rather, that of the author who insists that I *see* what these people are doing to each other" – novelistic prose carries out its ultimate ethical value in "educating in full human perceptiveness."[26] According to this scenario, even literature that does not promote concrete ethical standards can still make ethical requests on readers, for instance by forcing them to resist the depicted values. However, on the condition that the literature in question is one of representation, depiction, and explanation.

While Booth and Nussbaum's model of literary ethics takes for granted the stability of literary expression, and thereby, like Sartre, disclaims the crisis of the sign and entrusts readers with the work of abstracting general morals from given situations, exhausted literary narratives display the instability of both the sign and the moment in which it takes place. In exhausted literature, the ethical does not manifest itself in the particularity of situations and norms of behavior, as exhaustion undermines referentiality as well as depiction of emotion. The ethical here is in the language that refuses to work. The primary function of language here is not to portray situations that raise ethical questions and point to their solutions, as literary ethics, as these texts show, cannot be limited to the described ethical dilemmas and statements articulated in propositional discourse. Language, style, and form are equally important, if not more so, as vehicles of the ethical in literature. Consigning the question of literary ethics to a domain outside of the mimetic principle, exhausted literature suggests that the type of personhood other than individualized interiority can materialize only in a particular literary aesthetic: an aesthetic that accentuates the story's performative powerlessness and withdrawal from action.

The politics of exhausted literature

Growing out of Sartre's postwar effort to reconcile his literary and political ambitions, and continued in Blanchot's and Barthes's reactions to Sartre in the late forties and early fifties, discussions about committed literature were revived again in 1954, thanks to a major event that erupted later that

year and further complicated and polarized the debate by getting other writers, such as Camus and Duras, involved: the Algerian war. In response to the expanding French military deployment in Algeria, Sartre intensified his political campaign and increasingly emphasized that literature is never engaged enough, because it takes us away from real events in the present moment. Although by the early 1950s Sartre had already lost confidence in the writer's redemptive mission, the war in Algeria finally forced him to accept that literature, even when at its most committed, is deactivating. Literature turns events into images and makes the latter a source of aesthetic pleasure. For Sartre, the issue was again work and action. As in *What is Literature?* (1947), the programmatic *Search for a Method* a decade later was permeated with the rhetoric of projects, actions, and counter-actions as attributes of praxis, and directed against idleness, silence, and lack of concreteness. "Man defines himself by his project," Sartre wrote in *Search for a Method*, and "this material being perpetually goes beyond the condition which is made for him, and reveals and determines his situation by transcending it in order to objectify himself – by work, action, and gesture [le geste]."[27] Work, action, and their symbolic representation make humankind historical, and the current historical task, according to Sartre, was "to bring closer the moment when History will have *only one mean-ing.*"[28] In this quest, literature was now clearly marked as inferior to any other form of action, lacking any legitimacy in the unjust world.

In the course of the Algerian war Camus became for Sartre, like Blanchot and Bataille a decade earlier, the epitome of political nonengagement and a literature of passivity, ahistoricity, and self-involvement. Camus's position vis-à-vis Sartre's political convictions was widely known even before the outbreak of the war as a result of the infamous quarrel between the two in 1952. Although not different from Blanchot and Barthes's reproaches, Camus was more direct in criticizing Sartre for being a blind activist, arguing that Sartre's politics of action, strength, and self-certainty was detached from the immediate reality and driven by an abstract notion of history. According to Camus, the privileged place that Sartre gave to work and action in his political philosophy implied judgments of acts, including literary undertakings, by their service to historical progress, the outcome of which Sartre was confident of knowing. Camus criticized the self-righteousness of Sartre's rhetoric and the force of his theoretical justification as an existential stance that was both ethically and politically contentious as it entailed violence. In the realm of ethics, Camus saw Sartre's approach as problematic because it justified misjudgments: in cases when one was wrong for the right reasons, Sartre believed, one was

right to be wrong. And in the realm of politics, as Camus stated in the 1958 preface to *Algerian Reports*, the emphasis on action nourished the dialectic of resentment in which the oppressed turned into victimizers of their former oppressors.[29]

Although the dispute between Camus and Sartre regarding engagement and action took the form of a political argument over history, justice, and rebellion, literature became ever more essential as a platform in Camus's continuing disagreement with Sartre. Similarly to Blanchot and Barthes, Camus remained involved politically throughout the Algerian war. Even after his formal retreat from public involvement in matters regarding Algeria, he brought low-profile interventions in defense of individual Algerian rebels. In the aftermath of the December 1957 Stockholm colloquium, asked pointedly by a young Algerian why he did not speak out against injustices in Algeria as he did against those in Eastern Europe, Camus agreed that justice was important, but ending terror was even more so, a position that gained him notoriety after an impromptu statement that he would defend his mother before defending justice.[30] Camus's controversial decision to withdraw from all political discussions was, he insisted, inevitable, so as not to fuel the conflict's violence by taking sides. After this withdrawal, and as a counterpart to his ongoing private interventions, literature took on a vital role as a mode of engagement. As for Barthes, Blanchot, and a few years later Duras, for Camus literature became central to his critique of the political paradigm propounded by Sartre, a paradigm that measured engagement by the amount of work and action through which it was expressed, and which it generated.

Marguerite Duras addressed the negative social effects of the espousal of work and action most directly. Several years after the end of the Algerian war, in the interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma* with Jacques Rivette and Jean Narboni discussed in Chapter 7, Duras argued that narrative exhaustion and blankness are literature's way of abstaining from the detrimental effects of work. Work, according to Duras a "notion invented in the nineteenth century," has been progressively elevated above all other values, with literature now becoming increasingly important as a way of staying outside "this circuit of production."[31] For Duras, exhausted literature is political because it deliberately and thoroughly refuses work and action. A truly political literature is not work, but non-work: a "getting to non-work and creating an empty space in order to allow the unforeseen, the obvious to come."[32] The blank aesthetic of non-work, according to Duras, can ward off the pervasiveness of work and action, as well as the unremitting need to give meaning to life. "We are taught to be afraid of

emptiness," Duras argued, "we've been taught since childhood that we should strive to give meaning to life."[33] This attitude has crippling social and personal consequences because it perpetuates fear and anxiety. Despite the attempt to overcome fear and anxiety, working them off, filling in the fear of emptiness with various projects, and neurotically trying to overcome the anxiety of purposelessness with abundant activities have led to persistence in the return-of-the-repressed fashion.

Exhaustion, weakness, and blankness are not principles that are universally applicable to all forms of engagements. They are specific to literary engagement, and perhaps not even at all historical moments. While on the narrative level the most obvious manifestation of this literary form of "disengaged engagement" is ethical, just as the aesthetic of exhausted literature cannot be divorced from its ethics, as seen in Chapters 4, 5, and 7, its ethics cannot be separated from its politics. As an ethical stance of weakness that undermines the drive to dominate others and reduce them to the sphere of one's self-sufficiency, the narrative principles of exhaustion, weakness, and blankness promote a political conception of commonality that defuses the divisiveness of identity. Exhaustion is as much ethical as it is political because, as a literary response to the social and cultural validation of work, action, and strong individuality, it hampers the violence intrinsic in the struggle for recognition to which this validation always gravitates.

The conjunction of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political in exhausted literature unsettles the dichotomy between literary intransitivity and direct political engagement. This type of literature does not bring the two together in an attempt to encode political engagement into a message communicated in the language of denotation. Such attempts tend to reproduce conventional syntax, recitative tone, and the time of the narrator, and are thus merely "nominal" forms of commitment, as Barthes concludes his reading of Sartre's novels, specifically *The Reprieve* (1947), because they fabricate a homogenous time that "burdens the unfolding of History with a parasitical unity [encombre le dévoilement de l'Histoire d'une unité parasite], and gives the novel the ambiguity of a testimony which may well be false."[34] What is more, this mode of literary writing does not separate political causes and literary practices. It does not illustrate the aporia of ethics and politics that tells us that ethics needs to reject the political in order not to compromise the ethical, and that politics needs to curb the ethical in order to be able to pursue political goals. Instead, it exemplifies Simon Critchley's more recent declaration that "ethics without politics is empty, [and] politics without ethics is blind."[35] In exhausted

literature, the political is neither opposed to the ethical nor relegated to a defense of particular policies and systems of administration. The ethical here is political not despite, but because of interrupting both the ethical (situational ethics articulated in propositional language and functioning as prescription to action) and the political (specific agenda determined by the political choices delimited by the existing system).

Despite the fact that literature that upholds a radical ethical vision inexorably runs the risk of abdicating actual political solutions and dissolving into an all-caring aimlessness, an act of delegating all such visions into the province of a utopian ethics effectively depoliticizes something that is not always apolitical. Although from the point of view of concrete politics exhausted literature remains ambiguous because it offers no positively defined alternatives, this indeterminateness is not apolitical. Exhausted literature is not concerned with searching for political alternatives and producing coherent effects that would facilitate such a search. It is concerned with what it can do, not as a socially and politically useful type of work, but as literature. The political here is not in positing and counter-positing, but in suspending the established hierarchy in both literature (the normative system of representation) and reality (the current mode of being). What comes with the disordering particular to literature, as Jacques Rancière argued, is not a negation of everything, but a reconfiguration of the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable. This is particularly valid for exhausted literature. Although it undoes the hierarchy of representation while offering nothing concrete in its place, its political dimension lies precisely in this perceptual disturbance that resists signification – what Rancière explains as a product of negotiation between "the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art" and "the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning."[36] The political and ethical here are contained in suspending the act of positing and, ipso facto, in suspending act and action as such. By interrupting linguistic instrumentality and setting aside positing as a violent performative act, exhaustion lays bare both the mediacy of language and – because people share language as an irrevocable bond as human beings – the mediacy of the social. As in the non-work of the general strike, in which, according to Werner Hamacher, the social is exposed *tout court*, in "the sheer mediacy of all social relations," in exhausted literature the abstention from work, action, and the dialectic of negation introduces a new mode of relating to oneself, the world, and others, one which is governed by principles other than positing, mastery, work, and action.[37]

Exhausted literature and history

The destruction of oriented time, which Sartre saw as the effect of the capitalist industrialization of information on modern storytelling, is not always reactionary. Even less so is it a sign of ideological compliance with the status quo by those who do not share Sartre's view. Although the kind of literary narrative envisioned by Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras undermines oriented time and carries the detail and the intricacy of reality in a muted way, this response to Sartre's model of commitment is not a symptom of an apolitical turn to stylistic formalism with no critical distance from the politics of modernization and ahistorical timelessness that, as Kristin Ross showed, dominated mainstream French culture in the 1950s.[38] Rather than a sign of withdrawal from politics, an indication of a naive belief in an ahistorical present, or, as Fredric Jameson insisted, a correlate of society with the triumph of individualism, this narrative form is an answer to the forces of history and an attempt to engage critically with both the past and the present.[39] The apparent disengagement of this narrative form is its distinctive form of engagement. Non-work and non-action in exhausted literature are designed to undermine the group-forming morality that accompanies narratives driven by verisimilitude, action, oriented time, and closure. Unlike stories that enact these principles – hence, as Hayden White demonstrated, moralizing the depicted reality even when presenting themselves as stories of factuality and historical objectivity – exhausted literature repels acts of positing any single morality because its own narrative principles suspend the propositional discourse of representation that augments the impulse to judge the depicted events.[40] As Camus stressed in his Nobel Prize speech in December 1957, the role of writers and literary critics is "to understand rather than to judge."[41] Echoing this statement, four months later Blanchot criticized writers who are "informed about everything and judge everything immediately."[42] "These know-it-all *interferers* [*curieux* universels], these know-it-all *loudmouths* [*bavards* universels], these know-it-all *pedants* [*cuistres* universels]," Blanchot argued, borrowing words from Dionys Mascolo, need to give way to a writer who loses his personal certainty and becomes "reduced to powerlessness [and] simplicity."[43]

The notion of exhausted literature proposes that by exhausting the signification of the text, referentiality of the objects in the world, as well as the subjectivity of the character, the writer, and the reader, literary narratives serve as deterrents of judgments and single moralities. Exhaustion prevents the audience from being drawn together as a group united by

a common perspective on the described events. Instead of fostering collective identity founded on a shared judgment, unifying memory, and common history, exhausted literature puts forth a purely negative form of commonality that resists both fusion and oppositional relational structures. That commonality is based neither on positivity nor on difference, as nothing positively given, not even difference, can arise from exhaustion. It is a commonality based on a type of relational mode that circumvents the image of subjectivity based on self-enclosure and appropriative relation to the outside. This kind of interconnectivity, which appears in the emptiness of language before the advent of meaning and in the blankness of subjectivity before the crystallization of the self, is fundamentally nonfused, nonaggressive, and nonappropriative. Revealing this interconnectivity and drawing attention to it, the writers and critics studied in this book suggest, is a precondition for any fundamental social and political change.

For Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras, Sartre's ideal of *vita activa* and committed literature are symptoms of the larger historical tendency of privileging work and action as the main organizing principles of modern life. Slowness, emptiness, and worklessness replace Sartre's rhetoric of projects, action, and the struggle for recognition. In order to resist the functionalization of literature and its transformation into a form of praxis anchored in work, literature is asked to destabilize the status of productive work and offer itself as a literature of expressive thinness, emasculated agency, and weak subjectivity. For Sartre, weakness, emptiness, and absorption in the present without the future are exactly the kind of attributes that need to be eliminated in favor of active language and direct communication. Unlike for Sartre, however, for the proponents of exhausted literature the futureless present does not imply an excess of presence, and thus nausea caused by its meaninglessness and self-absorption. Instead, it solicits a bare, plain, and minimal present in which the dissolved psychic energy opens for a possibility of a different type of relations.

Presenting withdrawal from work, action, and signification as literature's way of making it impossible to personalize existence, Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras posit a goal that is paradoxically not too far from Sartre's. Although aimed to ultimately strengthen subjectivity and instigate its more active engagement, Sartre's concept of commitment also promotes depersonalization. Presupposing consciousness that is always in the middle of action, and thus outside of itself, Sartre postulates personalization as but a futile attempt to escape into the artificial shell of the self. As Denis Hollier noted, because in Sartre's theory "nothing of man escapes commitment, but on condition that consciousness itself absolutely escapes the human," the ego's

unavoidable engagement in the world allows for its deactivation, thereby making engagement indistinguishable from depersonalization.[44] However, for Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras the issue of literary engagement cannot be reduced to the contradiction of deactivation and commitment and to the fact that this opposition falls apart as consciousness dissipates into flimsiness and personalized self turns into subjective impersonality. They insist on a particular way of reaching the indivisibility of commitment and depersonalization, engagement and disengagement. Against Sartre, their dictum of no self-enclosed intimacy contends that disengagement becomes a form of engagement only when it suspends the self-involvement inherent in the social valuation of action, work, and the self.

Notes

Introduction

Parts of the introduction were published as "The War of Writing: French Literary Politics and the Decolonization of Algeria." Copyright © 2013 Sage. *Journal of European Studies*, Volume 43, Issue 3, 2013, pp. 227–243.

[1] Stéphane Mallarmé, "Préface à 'Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard'" (1897), in *Œuvres complètes*, Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (eds.) (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 455.

[2] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 157.

[3] Roland Barthes, "Literature Today" (1961), in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972 [1964]), p. 160 [translation modified].

[4] Michel Crouzet, "La bataille des intellectuels français," *La Nef*, 12–13 (1963): 51; Jean-François Sirinelli, "Guerre d'Algérie, guerre des pétitions?," in Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli (eds.), *La Guerre d'Algérie et les intellectuels français* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1991), pp. 265–306.

[5] Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 14. It should be pointed out that Judt has a certain proclivity for what he presents as Aron's dispassionate analytical objectivity (*The Burden of Responsibility*, p. 17). The journal *Preuves* with which Aron was associated, and which elsewhere Judt calls "the only liberal, anti-Communist forum" in France whose "contributors were among the best writers of the post-war decades" was far from impartial and independent, as Peter Coleman and Frances Saunders have shown, having been financed by and under the influence of the CIA. Tony Judt, *Postwar: History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 223; Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp. 53–55; Frances Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), pp. 213–219.

[6] Danièle Joly, *The French Communist Party and the Algerian War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), p. 69. The PCF publicly criticized military intervention in Algeria, but voted in favor of the Guy Mollet government's proposal

to grant special powers to the Minister-Resident in Algeria, Robert Lacoste, in March 1956 for political reasons. As George Ross argued, this vote, which supported policies that the party openly denounced as abhorrent, was a strategic vote of keeping alive the alliance between the PCF and the Socialists in government. This blatant contradiction was untenable for long though, leading to the June abstention in a parliamentary vote of confidence on Algeria and in July to a vote against the government's military budget. George Ross, *Workers and Communists in France: From Popular Front to Eurocommunism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 92–93.

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Words*, trans. Irene Clephane (New York: Penguin Books, 1967 [1963]), p. 157.

8 John Talbott, "The Myth and Reality of the Paratrooper in the Algerian War," *Armed Forces and Society*, 3.1 (1976): 70.

9 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993 [1957]), p. 145.

10 Philip Dine, *Images of the Algerian War: French Fiction and Film, 1957–1992* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 26.

11 Irwin Wall, *France, the United States, and the Algerian War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 165–174; Irwin Wall, "France in the Cold War," *Journal of European Studies*, 38.2 (2008): 121.

12 Matthew Connelly, "Rethinking the Cold War and Decolonization: The Grand Strategy of the Algerian War for Independence," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 33.2 (2001): 221.

13 According to Paul Clay Sorum, the concern that if France lost its colonies they would be taken either by the Americans or the Soviets played an important role as well. Paul Clay Sorum, *Intellectuals and Decolonization in France* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 79.

14 As Todd Shepard demonstrated, the end of the war did not alter this trend. According to Shepard, the fact that in the late stages of the Algerian war French bureaucrats, politicians, and journalists suddenly started presenting the move toward independence as an inevitable outcome of history was part of this trend. Detailing the political motives and consequences of this "invention of decolonization" – the abrupt severing of links with Algeria once independence was granted and the effect of this break on issues such as citizenship – Shepard shows how this practice effectively rewrote the history of imperialism and anti-imperialism "so that decolonization was the predetermined end point" and so it was consistent with a "narrative of progress" and the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity introduced by the French Revolution. Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 4, 6.

15 Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), p. 288.

16 It should be noted though, as Suzanne Guerlac pointed out, that after being dismissed in the 1950s by the militant Sartre, the social and political relevance of literature was revived at the start of the following decade by Sartre's analysis

of praxis in the second part of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). Suzanne Guerlac, "Sartre and the Powers of Literature: The Myth of Prose and the Practice of Reading," *MLN*, 108.5 (1993): 822.

17 Howard Davis, *Sartre and Les Temps Modernes* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 47.

18 John Talbott, "French Public Opinion and the Algerian War: A Research Note," *French Historical Studies*, 9.2 (1975): 358.

19 James D. Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), p. 284; Pierre Bourdieu, "Interview with James D. Le Sueur, 30 March 1994, Paris," cited in Le Sueur, *Uncivil War*, p. 282.

20 Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Marion Boyars, 1985 [1957]), p. x.

21 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. 2*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 2008 [1961]), pp. 88–95.

22 Vincent P. Pecora, "Ethics, Politics, and the Middle Voice," *Yale French Studies*, 79 (1991): 205.

23 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 40–53.

24 Martha C. Nussbaum, "'Faint with Secret Knowledge': Love and Vision in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*," *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2004): 698.

25 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 68.

26 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 2000 [1947]), p. 136.

27 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 59. More recently, Jacques Rancière has reiterated that ethics has become a fashionable word, with the turn from political to ethical criticism serving as a compensation for what is perceived as decades of excesses of literary visions of political utopias. See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Steven Corcoran (ed.), trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 184–204.

28 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 60.

29 Fredric Jameson, "Criticism in History" (1976), in *The Ideologies of Theory. Essays 1971–1986. Volume 1: Situations of Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 126.

30 Carol Jacobs, *Skirting the Ethical* (Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. xvii–xviii.

31 Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 2. Keenan argues that "ethics and politics—as well as literature—are evaded when we fall back on the conceptual priority of the subject, agency, or identity as the grounds of our action," and adds that "the experience of literature, ethics, and politics, such as it is (and it cannot be the experience of a subject), emerges only in the withdrawal of these foundations." Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, p. 3.

[32] Jan Mukařovský, "Poetic Designation and the Aesthetic Function of Language" (1938), in *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, trans. and edited by John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 68.

[33] Ellen Rooney, "Form and Contentment," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 61.1 (2000): 29.

[34] Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, revised edition (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1983), p. 234.

[35] Dominique Rabaté, *Vers une littérature de l'épuisement* (Paris: José Corti, 1991), p. 11.

[36] Leo Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry*, 26.4 (2000): 643, 656.

[37] Leo Bersani, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject," *Critical Inquiry*, 32.2 (2006): 171; Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 121.

Chapter 1

An earlier version of Chapter 1 appeared under the title "Against the Novel: Meaning and History in Roland Barthes's *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*." Copyright © 2007 The Johns Hopkins University Press. *New Literary History*, Volume 38, Issue 2, 2007, pp. 389–403.

[1] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967 [1953]), p. 2 (hereafter cited in the text).

[2] Susan Sontag argues that all the while insisting on a historical perspective, *Writing Degree Zero* employs "a generalized, thin notion of history": "Barthes is not so much referring to a real state of affairs as he is using a metaphor, which allows him to describe literature as a process rather than as a static entity." Susan Sontag, "Preface" (1967), in Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967 [1953]), p. xix.

[3] Roland Barthes, "Of What Use is an Intellectual?" (1977), in *The Grain of the Voice, Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 260.

[4] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1920]), p. 86.

[5] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 56. According to Lukács, the novel – that "adventure of interiority," that "story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and, by proving itself, to find its own essence" – attempts to restore the lost immanence of the meaning of life through the use of irony. Lukács argues that irony is "the sole possible *a priori* condition for a true, totality-creating objectivity" because it "sees the lost, utopian home of the idea [of immanence]." It is therefore irony which "makes that totality—the novel—the representative art-form of our age." Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, pp. 89, 92–93.

[6] Marcel Proust, "A propos du 'style' de Flaubert," in *Contre Sainte-Beuve précédé de Pastiches et mélanges et suivi d'Essais et articles*, ed. Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Pléiade, 1971), p. 590.

[7] Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 60 [translation modified].

[8] Leo Bersani, *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 185.

[9] Leo Bersani, *Balzac to Beckett*, p. 189.

[10] Gérard Genette, "Flaubert's Silences" (1966), in *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982 [1966]), p. 199.

[11] Gérard Genette, "Flaubert's Silences," in *Figures of Literary Discourse*, p. 200.

[12] Gérard Genette, "Flaubert's Silences," in *Figures of Literary Discourse*, p. 199. Roland Barthes, "Flaubert and the Sentence," in *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990 [1972]), p. 70.

[13] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Typography" (1975), in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, trans. and edited by Christopher Fynsk (Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 127.

[14] According to Lukács, unlike other genres that are based on the finished form, the novel is formless and "appears as something in the process of becoming." Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, pp. 72–73. The composition of the novel, he continues, is "the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over again." Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 84. More recently, Franco Moretti has explained the central cultural position in the modern age of the genre of the novel – and particularly its subgenre, the *Bildungsroman* – by its formlessness and ability to absorb elements of other genres, the capacity that Moretti shows has served the role of symbolically integrating and containing the contradictions generated by modern life. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The* Bildungsroman *in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 10. The novel's leading role among modern literary genres, as Moretti notes elsewhere, has been to train people to adjust to modern life and attain happiness. Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller (London: Verso, 1988), p. 40.

[15] Paul Ricoeur insists that no literary narrative can do without the organizing role of emplotment and progression of narrative time. He calls emplotment and the temporal dimension it implies "the base of the edifice" of literary narratives. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 2*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1990 [1984]), p. 97.

[16] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Vintage, 1993 [1957]), p. 135.

[17] Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1946 [1942]), p. 2 [translation modified].

[18] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Camus's *Outsider*" (1943), in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (London: Rider and Company, 1955), p. 35.

19 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Camus's *Outsider*," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, p. 41.
20 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 296.
21 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Camus's *Outsider*," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, p. 35.
22 Gérard Genette, "Style and Signification" (1991), in *Fiction and Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993 [1991]), p. 125.
23 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" (1961), in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 17, 30, 31.
24 Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills" (1970), in *Image Music Text*, p. 54.
25 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982 [1980]), p. 51.
26 Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
27 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 3.
28 Leo Bersani, *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 22, 271, 315.
29 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, trans. Samuel Beckett, in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 291.
30 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, p. 24.
31 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, pp. 90, 156.
32 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965 [1963]), pp. 14, 29, 147.
33 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965 [1957–1959]), p. 58.
34 Roland Barthes, "Literal Literature" (1955), in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972 [1964]), p. 53.
35 Maurice Blanchot, "The Clarity of the Novel" (1955), in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford University Press, 2003 [1959]), p. 159.
36 Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge University Press, 1990 [1978]), pp. 28–30.
37 For the argument about ethical aspects of Robbe-Grillet and the New Novel in general, see Oana Panaïté, "La Discipline du refus: sur le formalisme des écrivains," *L'Esprit Créateur*, 48.2 (2008): 66. For the argument about the social aspects of Robbe-Grillet's descriptive technique, which attests to the increasing absence in modern society of any active individual participation, see Lucien Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1975 [1964]), pp. 147–150. For the argument about the centrality of colonial motifs in Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, see Jacques Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman. La Jalousie d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1973), pp. 25–26. And for the argument suggesting that *Jealousy* stages a trauma of colonization, see René M. Galand, "La Dimension sociale dans *La Jalousie* de Robbe-Grillet," *French Forum*, 39.5 (1966): 707–708.

38 Roland Barthes, "The Last Word on Robbe-Grillet?" (1962), in *Critical Essays*, pp. 198–199.

39 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 129.

40 Fredric Jameson concludes that writing degree zero is a correlate of society with the triumph of individualism and solitude. See Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 158. Given Jameson's sensitivity to literary form as a vehicle of social and historical meanings in literature, this is a surprising conclusion. Jameson does not believe in rigorous homologies between class situations, world views, and artistic forms. Although he deems it necessary for any critical approach to literature that wishes to be political to establish a relationship between these three spheres, he warns against simple homologies that suggest that at some level of abstraction the structure of the three spheres is the same. The relationship between the text and its social subtext is not mechanical, with the former reflecting the latter in a straightforward fashion. Jameson calls for a more dynamic approach that would operate with terms such as projection, compensation, repression, and displacement, and that would consider literary works as "symbolically resolving the contradiction in the subtext." Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 43–44. In light of these arguments, writing degree zero is not a simple correlate of individualistic society. Barthes's statement about the anticipatory gesture of writing degree zero, which clearly emphasizes collective dimension, suggests otherwise. In fact, it is exactly this statement that begs for an approach, emphasized by Jameson, that literary critics exercise simultaneously "functional" and "anticipatory" methods for analyzing texts: both ideological analysis and a positive kind of hermeneutic, as a "decipherment of the Utopian impulses of these same still ideological cultural texts." Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 296.

Chapter 2

An earlier version of Chapter 2 was published as "The Politics of the Novel and Maurice Blanchot's Theory of the *Récit*, 1954–1964." Copyright © 2008 University of Nebraska Press. *French Forum*, Volume 33, Issue 1–2, 2008, pp. 121–139.

1 Ann Smock, *What is There to Say? Blanchot, Melville, des Forêts, Beckett* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 120.

2 Maurice Blanchot, "The Secret Law of the Récit" (1954), in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford University Press, 2003 [1959]), pp. 5, 6 (hereafter cited in the text).

3 Kevin Hart, "Introduction: Philosophy and the Philosophical," in Kevin Hart (ed.), *Clandestine: Philosophy in the Narratives of Maurice Blanchot* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 18.

4 Georges Bataille, "Silence et littérature" (1952), in *Œuvres complètes*, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–1988), vol. 12 (1988), pp. 173–174.

5 Roger Laporte, "Une passion" (1973), in Roger Laporte and Bernard Noël, *Deux lectures de Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973), p. 73.

6 The two most crucial articles are "The Silence of Mallarmé" (1942) and "The Myth of Mallarmé [Mallarmé et le langage]" (1946). The former is included in *Faux Pas*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford University Press, 2001), the latter in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford University Press, 1995 [1949]). The latter will be discussed later in the chapter.

7 Dominique Rabaté details Blanchot's engagements with des Forêts's works, which started earlier than the 1963 essay "Idle Speech," and describes Blanchot's encounter with des Forêts's writings as crucial in shaping Blanchot's theory of literature. See Dominique Rabaté, "The Critical Turn: Blanchot Reads des Forêts," *Yale French Studies*, 93 (1998): 69–80.

8 Maurice Blanchot, "Idle Speech" (1963), in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 1997 [1971]), p. 125 (hereafter cited in the text).

9 Louis-René des Forêts, *Le Bavard* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 8, 10.

10 Maurice Blanchot, "The Narrative Voice" (1964), in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1969]), p. 384.

11 Maurice Blanchot, "The Search for Point Zero" (1953), in *The Book to Come*, pp. 207, 208. Christophe Bident offers compelling details of the exchange between Barthes and Blanchot, particularly in and around the year 1953, when *Writing Degree Zero* and Blanchot's review of it were published. See Christophe Bident, "R/M, 1953," *Paragraph*, 30.3 (2007): 67–83. See also Chapter 3, note 33.

12 When tracing the notion of the *récit*, Kevin Hart compares Blanchot's understanding of the *récit* with its earlier formulation by Ramon Fernandez, pointing out that for Blanchot the *récit* is not just another literary genre, one among many others, but "the hidden process of literary composition." Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 63.

13 Maurice Blanchot, "The Myth of Mallarmé" (April), "Mystery in Literature" (May), "From Lautréamont to Miller" (June), "The Paradox of Aytré" (June), and "Translated From. . ." (July). All included in Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire* (hereafter cited in the text).

14 Leo Bersani, *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 148 (italics in the original).

15 Pierre Klossowski, "On Maurice Blanchot" (1949), in *Such a Deathly Desire*, trans. Russell Ford (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007 [1963]), p. 89. Although this kind of language defies absolute knowledge, it is also a language that, as Allan Stoekl points out, aspires to it by constantly confronting the point at which language "impossibly embodies or knows the experience that most radically escapes it." Allan Stoekl, *Politics, Writing, Mutilation: The Cases of Bataille, Blanchot, Roussel, Leiris, and Ponge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 28.

16 Maurice Blanchot, "Literature One More Time" (1963), in *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 400.

[17] Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p. 11.

[18] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967 [1953]), p. 39.

[19] In both the French original and the English translation of *The Book to Come*, "The Song of the Sirens" is the title of the first section of the book that includes two chapters: the text originally published as "Le chant des sirènes" (1954) and now renamed "La rencontre de l'imaginaire," and "L'expérience de Proust," published originally as two separate essays, "Proust" (1954) and "Jean Santeuil" (1954).

[20] For this argument, see also Kevin Hart, "The Counter-Spiritual Life," in Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman (eds.), *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 171.

[21] In the *récit The Madness of the Day* (1973), the narrator, who is trying to give an account – a *récit* – of what happened to him, tells us that it is impossible to do so and that he cannot write *récits*, turning *The Madness of the Day* into a proof of this impossibility and closing by stating: "A story [*récit*]? No. No stories, never again." Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1981), p. 18. This narrative has an emblematic role for the *récit* as Blanchot conceives of it. First published in 1949 under the title "A Story [Un récit]" – on the cover of the journal in which it appeared it was listed as "A Story?" – and republished as *The Madness of the Day* in 1973, when Blanchot no longer wrote literary narratives, this story not only announces and brings to closure Blanchot's *récits*, but introduces them as a mode of writing that is uncertain of itself and constantly doubting and interrupting itself while narrating. The story has been widely commented upon, among others, by Jacques Derrida. See Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre" (1979), in Derek Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature*, trans. Avital Ronell (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 221–252.

[22] Maurice Blanchot, "The Pain of Dialogue" (1956), in *The Book to Come*, p. 151.

Chapter 3

This chapter is a revised and extended version of an article published under the title "Weakness as a Form of Engagement: Maurice Blanchot on the Figure of the Last Man." Copyright © 2008 Oxford University Press. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Volume 44, Issue 1, 2008, pp. 40–52.

[1] Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie A. Boldt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998 [1943]), p. 61.

[2] For factual details of this encounter see Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998), pp. 175–176. For a discussion of the role of Nietzsche's concept of the last man in this encounter, as well as in Bataille's and Blanchot's subsequent exchanges and writings, see Michael Holland, "Bataille, Blanchot and the 'Last Man'," *Paragraph*, 27.1 (2004): 50–63.

3   Discussing reeditions of this narrative, Leslie Hill analyzes *The Last Man* and its later modifications, drawing attention, among other changes, to a deletion of the genre specification "récit." Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 229–252.

4   Maurice Blanchot, *The Last Man*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987 [1957]), pp. 6, 2 (hereafter cited in the text).

5   Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1969]), p. xx (italics in the original).

6   Nathalie Sarraute, *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1963 [1939, 1956]), p. 88.

7   Georges Poulet, "Maurice Blanchot as Novelist," *Yale French Studies*, 8 (1951): 81.

8   Paul de Man, "Impersonality in the Criticism of Maurice Blanchot" (1966), in *Blindness and Insight*, revised edition (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1983), p. 71.

9   Hans-Jost Frey, "The Last Man and the Reader," *Yale French Studies*, 93 (1998): 256.

10 See Paul Ricoeur, *État et violence: la troisième conférence annuelle du Foyer John Knox* (Genève: Association du Foyer John Knox, 1957).

11 Maurice Blanchot, "Pre-texte: Pour l'amitié" (1993), in Dionys Mascolo, *A la Recherche d'un communisme de pensée* (Paris: Fourbis, 1993), p. 7.

12 Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (1935), trans. John Shepley, *October*, 31 (1984): 17–32. Reprinted with a preface and in a new translation by Claudine Frank and Camille Naish in Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, Claudine Frank (ed.) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 89–103.

13 Maurice Blanchot, "The *Igitur* Experience" (1953), in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982 [1955]), p. 118.

14 Maurice Blanchot, "Forgetting, Unreason" (1961), in *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 199.

15 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004 [1960]), pp. 253–269.

16 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface" (1958), in André Gorz, *The Traitor*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Verso, 1989), p. 9.

17 Maurice Blanchot, "The Passion of Indifference" (1958), reprinted as "The Terror of Identification," in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 210.

18 Simone de Beauvoir, *Hard Times: Force of Circumstance II (1952–1962)*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Paragon House, 1992 [1963]), p. 183.

19 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Words*, trans. Irene Clephane (New York: Penguin Books, 1967 [1963]), p. 157.

20 Maurice Blanchot, "Maurice Blanchot to Jean-Paul Sartre" (1960), in *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 37.

21 Maurice Blanchot, "The Gravity of the Project" (1960–1962), in *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, p. 60. Christopher Fynsk, "Blanchot in *The International Review*," *Paragraph*, 30.3 (2007): 105–108.

22 Maurice Blanchot, "The Gravity of the Project," in *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, p. 57.

23 Leslie Hill, *Blanchot, Extreme Contemporary* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 215.

24 Kevin Hart, "Foreword: The Friendship of the No," in Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, p. xx.

25 Francis Ponge, "La Pratique de la littérature" (1956), in *Le Grand recueil. Tome II: Méthodes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 276. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph J. Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973 [1955]), p. 201.

26 Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Literature," *Substance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*, 33.1 (2004): 18. Literature, according to Rancière, performs the role of "side-politics or meta-politics." The principle of literary politics "is to leave the common stage of the conflict of wills in order to investigate in the underground of society and read the symptoms of history": "This politics of literature emerges as the dismissal of the politics of orators and militants, who conceive of politics as a struggle of wills and interests." Rancière, "The Politics of Literature," pp. 19–20. Elsewhere, Rancière explains that literature is not political, in the first instance, because of "the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world." Neither is it political because of "the manner in which it might choose to represent society's structures, or social groups, their conflicts or identities." It is political because of the "distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space." Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009 [2004]), p. 23. See also the following note and Conclusion, note 36.

27 In Rancière's terms, the political dimension of literature is in the latter's ability to recast what he calls the "distribution of the sensible." Literature interrupts the established hierarchy – both aesthetic (the normative system of representation) and political (the current mode of being, *ethos*) – and reconfigures the established perceptual forms. This interruption and disordering [*dérèglement*] do not mean, however, that literature immediately replaces the old hierarchy with a new one (new *ethos*). In the same way as the interruption instigated in literature is not limited to negation, the reconfiguration that literary works perform does not entail offering politically comprehensive and positively defined alternative modes of being. The reconfiguration of perceptual forms that takes place in literature is first and foremost aesthetic. According to Rancière, literature's political role lies in its ability to recarve [*redécoupent*] the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without immediately substituting new hierarchies for the old ones. See Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans.

Charlotte Mandell (Stanford University Press, 2004 [1998]), pp. 94–112. See also Conclusion, note 36.

28 As Blanchot's numerous reactions to works by Emmanuel Levinas suggest, literature is also not subordinate to philosophical discourse. As a result of its singular rapport with language, literature is not secondary to philosophical argument and cannot be assimilated by it. According to Blanchot, literature is unique in that it does something that neither philosophical nor political discourse, with their reliance on the referentiality of language, can do. For a discussion of the exchange between Blanchot and Levinas on this issue, see Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 97; William Large, *Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot: Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2005), pp. 79–82; and Paul Davies, "A Fine Risk: Reading Blanchot Reading Levinas," in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (eds.), *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 223.

29 Maurice Blanchot, "The Work and the Errant Word" (1952), in *The Space of Literature*, p. 56; Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Marion Boyars, 1985 [1957]), pp. 188–189.

30 For a thorough analysis of the difference between Bataille's and Blanchot's conceptions of politics and political engagement, see Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), pp. 107–150.

31 Maurice Blanchot, "On One Approach to Communism (1953), in *Friendship*, p. 95.

32 Maurice Blanchot, "The Search for Point Zero" (1953), in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford University Press, 2003 [1959]), p. 209 [translation modified].

33 Maurice Blanchot, "The Search for Point Zero," p. 209. According to J. Hillis Miller, here Blanchot revises Barthes by emphasizing that neutrality is not a product of writers' search for a featureless style. Neutrality is not created by writers. It does not come from them, but from infinitely outside of them – from the Outside they experience when writing. J. Hillis Miller, "Three Literary Theorists in Search of 0," in Barbara Cohen and Dragan Kujundžič (eds.), *Provocations to Reading: J. Hillis Miller and the Democracy to Come* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 220.

34 Maurice Blanchot, "Communication" (1953), in *The Space of Literature*, p. 206.

35 In addition to the aforementioned texts on Mallarmé and Barthes, the most notable essays are "Where Now? Who Now ?" (1953) on Samuel Beckett, "The Clarity of the Novel" (1955) on Alain Robbe-Grillet, and "The Pain of Dialogue" (1956) on Marguerite Duras (all collected in *The Book to Come*).

36 Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 6. For Blanchot's reading of *The Human Race*, see Maurice Blanchot, "The Indestructible" (1962), reprinted as "Humankind," in *The Infinite Conversation*, pp. 130–135. The encounter between Antelme and Blanchot, their friendship and mutual influence is discussed by Martin Crowley in *Robert Antelme: Humanity, Community, Testimony* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), pp. 28 ff.

37 Robert Antelme, *Texte inédits/Sur L'espèce humaine/Essais et témoignages* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 68. The crucial passage from Blanchot's later work would be the following appeal from *The Writing of the Disaster*: "May words cease to be arms; means of action, means of salvation." Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995 [1980]), p. 11. Geoffrey H. Hartman discusses the notion of disarmed speech in Blanchot's writings, and especially in *The Writing of the Disaster*, as an attempt to come to terms with the event of the Holocaust. See Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Maurice Blanchot: The Spirit of Language after the Holocaust," in Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman (eds.), *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

38 Maurice Blanchot, "The Limit-Experience" (1962), in *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 208.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 first appeared in a somewhat different form as "Literature and Ethics: History, Memory, and Cultural Identity in Albert Camus's *Le Premier Homme*." Copyright © 2010 The Modern Humanities Research Association. *The Modern Language Review*, Volume 105, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 69–86.

1 Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust" (1929), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992 [1955]), p. 199 (French italics in the original).

2 Serge Doubrovsky, "La Morale d'Albert Camus," *Preuves*, 116 (1960): 44.

3 Albert Camus, *The First Man*, trans. David Hapgood (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995 [1994]), p. 151 (hereafter cited in the text).

4 Albert Camus, "Lettre d'Albert Camus à René Char, 18 mars 1959," in Albert Camus and René Char, *Correspondance 1946–1959* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

5 Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009 [1955]), pp. 161–190. Aron, it should be noted, at the time still believed in French Algeria – as his October 1955 article in *Le Figaro* demonstrates – before changing his stance in 1957 in *The Algerian Tragedy* and urging independence for Algeria (albeit primarily for economic and administrative reasons).

6 Albert Camus, *Neither Victims Nor Executioners: An Ethic Superior to Murder*, trans. Dwight Scott Macdonald (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008 [1946]).

7 Simone de Beauvoir, *Hard Times: Force of Circumstance II (1952–1962)*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Paragon House, 1992 [1963]), pp. 206–207.

8 Martin Crowley traces the development of Camus's rejection of "political realism" as a guiding idea of engaged interventions in "Camus and Social Justice," in Edward J. Hughes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 93–105.

9 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Reply to Albert Camus" (1952), in *Situations*, trans. Benita Eisler (New York: George Brazillier, 1965 [1964]), p. 79.

10 Albert Camus, *Carnets III, mars 1951–décembre 1959* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 182, 183, 192–194.

11 Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (New York: George Braziller, 1980), p. 622.

12 Albert Camus, "Appeal for a Civilian Truce in Algeria" (1956), in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brian (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 133.

13 Albert Camus, "Preface" (1958), in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 7.

14 Albert Camus, *Carnets II, janvier 1942–mars 1951* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 240.

15 Albert Camus, "Letter to an Algerian Militant" (1955), in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*, p. 127.

16 David Carroll, "Camus's Algeria: Birthrights, Colonial Injustice, and the Fiction of a French-Algerian People," *MLN*, 112.4 (1997): 529.

17 Jean-Yves Guérin, "Des *Chroniques algériennes* au *Premier Homme*," *Esprit*, 211 (1995): 5–16.

18 Albert Camus, "Algeria 1958" (1958), in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*, p. 145. It should be noted that this, at the time, apolitical gesture of denouncing ethnic, religious, and cultural homogeneity, in the 1990s stimulated, as Emily Apter points out, a renewed interest in Camus as an Algerian writer and defender of freedom among the Algerian dissidents and exiles who opposed the political repressions and religious censorship of the post-independence Algeria. Emily Apter, *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 61–62.

19 Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford University Press, 1998 [1996]), p. 52.

20 Albert Camus, *Carnets, tome III: Mars 1951–décembre 1959*, p. 142.

21 David Carroll, *Albert Camus, the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 83.

22 Colin Davis, "Violence and Ethics in Camus," in Edward J. Hughes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 116.

23 Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus: Of Europe and Africa* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p. 9.

24 Alistair Horn, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962* (New York Review Books, 2006 [1977]), p. 34.

25 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History" (1984), in Pierre Nora *et al.*, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Vol. 1*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996 [1984]), p. 3.

26 Sigmund Freud, "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis" (1909), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–1974), vol. 10 (1955), p. 206, n. 1.

27 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Fantasme originaire: Fantasmes des origines, origines du fantasme* (Paris: Hachette, 1985), p. 51.

28 John LeBlanc, "Memory and Justice: Narrative Sources of Community in Camus's *The First Man*," *Philosophy and Literature*, 30.1 (2006): 155.

29 See, for example, Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 175.

30 Mouloud Feraoun, "La Source de nos communs malheurs" (1958), in *L'Anniversaire (et autres écrits)* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 35–44. Kateb Yacine argues that Camus, who promoted anti-colonial attitudes and called for peaceful coexistence, all the while presenting stories with only French-Algerian heroes in which Algeria was an idealized place – "the beautiful Algeria, the Algeria of beaches" – was much less relevant to local writers than someone like William Faulkner whose heroes were African Americans from the American South, which in the eyes of these writers resembled Algeria, "with this strong white minority and quite similar problems." Kateb Yacine, "Kateb Yacine délivre la parole," *El-Moudjahid Culturel*, 156 (1975): 9.

31 In *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty criticized Sartre's concept of Otherness as a tool for explaining the dynamic of history, because under the aegis of this concept history is there only to exemplify the drama "I versus the Other" that was decided beforehand by means of reflection. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph J. Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973 [1955]), pp. 95–201. In "History and Dialectic" (1961), Lévi-Strauss offered a critique of Sartre's notion of history from *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) from the anthropological perspective of a variety of social and cultural systems. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "History and Dialectic," in *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld (University of Chicago Press, 1968 [1962]), pp. 245–270.

32 See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface" (1961), in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005 [1961]), p. lxii. Fanon insists that violence unifies the colonized people and as such is not merely a means to freedom, but already the sign of it. Ibid., p. 94. See also notes 15 and 16 in Chapter 6.

33 Historians have been questioning the complacency with which Sartre admitted errors in his political statements from the period towards the end of the Algerian war. As James Le Sueur has argued, Sartre's proclamations contributed to Algeria's postwar problems because Sartre managed to influence Algeria's leaders with his Manichean categories and ideas about black Africans without realizing their incompatibility with the dispersed agrarian character of Algeria and its Islamic history. See James D. Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pp. 282–284.

34 Debarati Sanyal, "Broken Engagements," *Yale French Studies*, 98 (2000): 44.

35 Michael Eskin, "On Literature and Ethics," *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2004): 587.

36 See James Phelan, *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 1–30.

Chapter 5

¹ Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 11.

² Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Penguin Books, 1962 [1951]), pp. 209–210.

³ Maurice Blanchot, "The Fall: The Flight" (1956), in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 1997 [1971]), p. 205 (hereafter cited in the text).

⁴ Debarati Sanyal, "Broken Engagements," *Yale French Studies*, 98 (2000): 37. As Germaine Brée pointed out, *The Fall* was also a deliberate and sardonic allusion to Sartre's *Saint-Genet, Comedian and Martyr* (1952), in which Sartre venerated Jean Genet – writer, thief, informer, inmate, and homosexual – as a "hero of our time," words that echo ironically in the epitaph of *The Fall*. Germaine Brée, *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment* (New York: A Delta Book, 1972), p. 38.

⁵ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 206 [translation modified]. Camus reiterated this argument in 1957 in "The Artist and His Time" in which he stipulated that "art cannot be a monologue." Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brian (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 257.

⁶ Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (New York: George Braziller, 1980), p. 690, n. 5.

⁷ Albert Camus, "Avant-propos à 'La Maison du Peuple' de Louis Guilloux"(1953), in Albert Camus, *Essais*, Roger Quilliot and Louis Faucon (eds.) (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 1111–1112.

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, "The Detour toward Simplicity" (1960), in *Friendship*, p. 303, n. 3 (hereafter cited in the text).

⁹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 167, 168 (italics in the original).

¹⁰ Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brian (New York: Penguin Books, 1963 [1956]), p. 108 (hereafter cited in the text).

¹¹ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 85–86.

¹² Colin Davis, *Ethical Issues in Twentieth-Century French Fiction: Killing the Other* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 77.

¹³ One can imagine the short story "The Renegade," which appears in *Exile and the Kingdom*, published on its own as well, as it differs from the rest of the collection in both theme and tone. Arguably, "The Renegade" shares more with *The Fall* than with other stories in *Exile and the Kingdom*. Following the argument from *The Rebel*, "The Renegade" demonstrates how zealotry turns the ideals of love and perfection into their violent imposition, thereby, like *The Fall*, representing an essentially flawed type of exile.

¹⁴ Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, trans. Justin O'Brian (New York: Vintage Books, 1958 [1957]), pp. 85–86 (hereafter cited in the text).

¹⁵ Francis Jeanson, "Albert Camus ou l'âme révolté," *Les Temps modernes*, 79 (1952): 2089.

16 Albert Camus, *The First Man*, trans. David Hapgood (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995 [1994]), p. 151 (hereafter cited in the text).

17 Lawrence D. Kritzman follows this argument and points out that Camus's ethic of accommodating differences is predicated on forgetting and thus on the act of simply erasing the past wrongs. Lawrence D. Kritzman, "Camus's Curious Humanism or the Intellectual in Exile," *MLN*, 112.4 (1997): 560.

18 Albert Camus, "Algeria 1958" (1958), in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*, p. 149.

19 Jacques Derrida, "Fidélité à plus d'un: Mériter d'hériter où la généalogie fait défaut" (1998), in Jean-Jacques Forté (ed.), *Idiomes, nationalités, déconstructions: Rencontre de Rabat avec Jacques Derrida* (Casablanca: Les Éditions Toubkal, 1998), p. 255.

20 Colin Davis, "Diasporic Subjectivities," *French Cultural Studies*, 17.3 (2006): 343.

21 Albert Camus, "Terrorisme et répression" (1955), *Essais*, p. 1871.

22 Eve Célia Morisi, "Camus hospitalier, Camus fraternel? Les impossibilités de 'L'Hôte' dans le contexte colonial," *French Forum*, 32.1–2 (2007): 155.

23 See, for example, Elizabeth Hart, "Face à face: l'éthique lévinasienne dans 'L'Hôte'," in Lionel Dubois (ed.), *Les Trois Guerres d'Albert Camus* (Poitiers: Éditions du Pont-Neuf, 1995), p. 173.

24 Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfeld (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991 [1957]), p. 43. Memmi more directly identified Camus as a colonizer of good will in "Camus ou le colonisateur de bonne volonté," *La Nef*, 12 (1957): 95–96.

25 David Carroll, *Albert Camus, the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 82.

26 Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), p. 85.

27 E. L. Constable, "Shame," *MLN*, 112.4 (1997): 643.

28 Albert Camus, *L'Étranger*, in *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, Roger Quilliot (ed.) (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 1191. The emphasis disappears in English translations that tend to render the sentence "Il [Céleste] a répondu que j'étais un homme" as "he said that I was 'alright'." Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1946 [1942]), p. 115.

29 Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1991 [1947]), p. 255.

30 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 207.

31 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 90–93.

32 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Albert Camus" (1960), in *Situations*, trans. Benita Eisler (New York: George Brazillier, 1965 [1964]), p. 109.

33 Giorgio Agamben argues that the logic of complicity that has been traditionally associated with the notion of guilt is ethically problematic. Agamben, for example, questions the concept of the survivor's guilt, suggesting that the

reaction of those who returned from concentration camps, feeling guilty that it was they who survived and not someone else, be seen as an inability – quite an understandable one, given the extreme circumstances – to deal with one's feeling of shame. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999 [1998]), p. 88.

[34] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Irony* (University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 253–277.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 is a revised version of an essay published under the title "The Poetics of Elusive History: Marguerite Duras, War Traumas, and the Dilemmas of Literary Representation." Copyright © 2012 The Modern Humanities Research Association. *The Modern Language Review*, Volume 107, Issue 4, 2012, pp. 1064–1081.

[1] Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 74.

[2] Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1961 [1960]), p. 9 (hereafter cited in the text).

[3] Michael S. Roth, "*Hiroshima Mon Amour*: You Must Remember This," in Robert A. Rosenstone (ed.), *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 93.

[4] Martin Crowley, *Duras, Writing, and the Ethical: Making the Broken Whole* (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 153.

[5] Sigmund Freud defines "working-through" (*Durcharbeiten*) as a way of actively dealing with the repressed past by engaging in a process of understanding one's symptoms and trying to remember the past, and differentiates it from "acting out" (*Agieren*), a passive repetition of the unconscious compulsion to reiterate the repressed psychic material. See Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through" (1914), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–1974), vol. 12 (1958), esp. pp. 150–155.

[6] Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 182.

[7] No such film was made but the effort is documented by Laure Adler in *Marguerite Duras: A Life*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1998]), p. 197.

[8] Alain Resnais quoted in Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 369.

[9] Geneviève Sellier details the controversy that the film *Hiroshima mon amour* instigated at the 1959 Cannes Film festival, and subsequently in the French press, in *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, trans. Kristin Ross (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008 [2005]), pp. 49–52.

10 Marguerite Duras, "Racism in Paris" (1958), in *Outside—Selected Writings*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986 [1981]), esp. pp. 58–59.

11 Marguerite Duras, "Paris, August Six" (1958), in *Outside—Selected Writings*, esp. pp. 67–70.

12 Marguerite Duras, "The Two Ghettos" (1961), in *Outside—Selected Writings*, p. 121.

13 Marguerite Duras, "The Two Ghettos," in *Outside—Selected Writings*, pp. 124–125.

14 Theodor Adorno, "Commitment" (1962), *New Left Review*, 87–88 (1974): 85.

15 See Chapter 4, note 32, as well as the following note. Maxwell Adereth describes how in the late fifties and early sixties Sartre, disappointed with the impotence of his generation and disillusioned about the prospects of the left in France after de Gaulle's return to power in 1958, put all his political hopes on the struggles of nations against colonial exploitation and on the peasant masses of colonized countries. See Maxwell Adereth, *Commitment in Modern French Literature: Politics and Society in Péguy, Aragon and Sartre* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 134–135.

16 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface" (1961), in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005 [1961]), pp. li, lv. Interestingly, Sartre later applies the principle of the radicalization of evil as a path toward reclaiming one's freedom and active position on literature as well. When discussing Flaubert's approach to language, he argues that Flaubert, frustrated by the poor expressive capacity of words, discovered style as a means of dealing with the restrictions of practical language. For Flaubert, style is the radicalization of the limitations that language imposes on us, a deliberate practice of language derailed from its practical ends. Sartre describes Flaubert's stylistic strategy of "the superexploitation of language [la superexploitation du language]," intensification of its constraints, and their redirection against language itself by "tightening all the material ties between words," as "the radicalization of Evil [la radicalisation du Mal]." Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821–1857, Volume 3*, trans. Carol Cosman (University of Chicago Press, 1989 [1971]), p. 500.

17 Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeleine Dobie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998 [1987]), p. 39.

18 Dionys Mascolo, *Le Communisme: révolution et communication ou la dialectique des valeurs et des besoins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), pp. 418–435 (hereafter cited in the text).

19 For a discussion of Mascolo's political ideas and their role in his conception of politically engaged art, see Martin Crowley, "Dionys Mascolo: Art, Politics, Revolt," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 42.2 (2006): 139–150.

20 Paul Thibaud, "Marguerite Duras: Les Ambiguïtés de la compassion," *Esprit*, 116 (1986): 77.

21 Cathy Caruth, "Literature and the Enactment of Memory (Duras, Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour*)," in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 34.

22 Danielle Marx-Scouras refers to the Algerian writers Assia Djebar, Yamina Mechakra, and Mohammed Dib who reiterated this argument in direct reference to Algeria, its colonial past, and the Algerian war. Danielle Marx-Scouras, "Muffled Screams/Stifled Voices," *Yale French Studies*, 82 (1993): 180.

23 See Roland Barthes, "*La Peste*. Annales d'une épidémie ou roman de la solitude?" (1955), in *Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols., ed. Eric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993–1995), vol.1, pp. 452–456; and Roland Barthes, "Le point sur Robbe-Grillet?" (1962), in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 1317–1322.

24 Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies—Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 12.

25 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 189.

26 Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, p. 76. For a contrasting view from Ross's, see note 37 in Chapter 1.

27 Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991 [1990]), pp. 60–97. According to Rousso, the end of the Algerian war saw only a mild alleviation of this amnesia – Todd Shepard even argues that there was no alleviation at all, as France wished to immediately forget French Algeria and emerge from the conflict as a new and progressive state – with the final "crack in the mirror," as Rousso puts it, taking place after the May 1968 events. Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, p. 98. For Shepard's argument, see Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 2.

28 Hue-Tam Ho Tai argues that an overabundance of memory of erased historical events is often a product of "compulsive remembering," which, instead of relating to the events themselves, is a result of the impulse to overcompensate for decades of willful amnesia. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory," *The American Historical Review*, 106.3 (2001): 919.

29 Luisa Passerini, for example, proposes that understatements in literary works stimulate readers' responsibility by activating their effort and prompting their decision taking. Following a similar argument, Ann Rigney argues that in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) the technique of understatement and passive observation provokes readers and engages them in reflection because it draws their attention to the incongruence between the literary technique used in the novel and the horrendousness of the narrated events. See Luisa Passerini, "Memories between Silence and Oblivion," in Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds.), *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 249; Ann Rigney, "All This Happened, More or Less: What a Novelist Made of the Bombing of Dresden," *History and Theory*, 48.2 (2009): 20.

30 Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (1980): 18 (italics in the original).

31 Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation" (1882), in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 19.

Chapter 7

An earlier version of Chapter 7 appeared under the title "Aesthetics of Blankness: Political Imagination in Marguerite Duras's Hybrid Narratives." Copyright © 2011 Columbia University Press. *The Romanic Review*, Volume 101, Issue 3, 2010, pp. 359–376.

1   Marguerite Duras, "Destruction and Language: An Interview with Marguerite Duras by Jacques Rivette and Jean Narboni" (1969), in *Destroy, She Said*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Press, 1970 [1969]), p. 91 (hereafter cited in the text).

2   Dionys Mascolo, "Refus inconditionnel" (1958), in *A la recherche d'un communisme de pensée* (Paris: Fourbis, 1993), p. 149.

3   Maurice Blanchot, "Refusal" (1958), in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 1997 [1971]), p. 111.

4   Maurice Blanchot, "By the Power of Refusal" (1968), in *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 80.

5   Marguerite Duras, "20 May 1968: Descriptions of the Birth of the Students-Writers Action Committee" (1968), in *Green Eyes*, trans. Carol Barko (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1980]), p. 57.

6   Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2003), pp. xix, 160.

7   Leslie Hill, *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 38.

8   Jane Bradley Winston, *Postcolonial Duras: Cultural Memory in Postwar France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 50.

9   Marguerite Duras, "The Path of Joyful Despair" (1977), in *Outside—Selected Writings*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986 [1981]), p. 140.

10 Marguerite Duras, "Un acte contre tout pouvoir," *Cinéma*, 223 (July 1977): 58.

11 Marguerite Duras, *Abahn Sabana David* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 94.

12 Duras makes the same argument in an interview with Vircondelet. See Alain Vircondelet, *Marguerite Duras ou le temps de détruire* (Paris: Seghers, 1972), p. 162.

13 Maurice Blanchot, "Destroy" (1970), in *Friendship*, p. 114 (italics in the original).

14 See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991 [1949]), and Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vols. 2 & 3*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993 [1950–1954]).

15 Lucien Goldmann, "The Revolt of Arts and Letters in Advanced Civilizations"(1969), in *Cultural Creation in Modern Society*, trans. Bart Grahl (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1976 [1971]), pp. 60, 62.

16 Lucien Goldmann, "The Revolt of Arts and Letters in Advanced Civilizations," in *Cultural Creation in Modern Society*, pp. 62, 58.

17 Maurice Blanchot, "The Disappearance of Literature" (1953), in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford University Press, 2003 [1959]), p. 195.

18 It should be noted that even when pursuing these new political directions, Duras still kept to her ideal of radical absence of power. When, for example, supporting the feminist movement and encouraging the empowerment of women and founding of non-patriarchal modes of representation, she made it clear that women's liberation and inclusion in public governance were not her ultimate political goals. According to her, giving women their identity and share of power meant only incremental changes and perpetuation of other forms of exclusion. See Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier, *Les Parleuses* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1974), p. 73.

19 Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Press, 1986 [1982]), pp. 30–31.

20 Marguerite Duras, *Agatha* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1981), p. 13.

21 Florence de Chalonge, for example, emphasizes the poetic nature of Duras's style of storytelling. Florence de Chalonge, "Genre, texte, sujet: quelques enjeux de l'écriture durassienne dans les annés 70," in Bernard Alazet (ed.), *Marguerite Duras. La tentation du poétique* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2002), p. 186, n. 27. Bernard Alazet often speaks about the experience of the sublime and Duras's attempt to invoke it in literature. See Bernard Alazet, "La Tentation du sublime," in Alain Vircondelet (ed.), *Duras Dieu et l'écrit. Actes du Colloque de l'ICP* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1998), pp. 85–101; and Bernard Alazet, "Le je ne sais quoi de l'écriture," in Stella Harvey and Kate Ince (eds.), *Duras, femme du siècle* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 37–45. And Jean Cléder reminds us of Duras's childhood in Vietnam, arguing that Duras's sentences appear formless to French speakers because they imitate Vietnamese syntax by placing important words at the end of sentences. See Jean Cléder, *Duras entre littérature et cinéma* (Rennes: Ennoïa, 2003), p. 68.

22 Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956), in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle (eds.), *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1956), pp. 53–82.

23 Julia Kristeva, "The Malady of Grief: Duras," in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989 [1987]), p. 225 (italics omitted in the English translation).

24 Marguerite Duras, *L'homme atlantique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982), p. 7.

25 Marguerite Duras, *The Man Sitting in the Corridor*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: North Star Line, 1991 [1980]), p. 11.

26 Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, pp. 1–2.

27 Marguerite Duras, "In the Gardens of Israel, it was Never Night" (1985), in *Green Eyes*, pp. 186–187.

28 Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, p. 25.

29 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 554–555.

30 Marguerite Duras, *Writing*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Cambridge, MA: Lumen Editions, 1998 [1993]), p. 47.

31 Dionys Mascolo, *Le Communisme: révolution et communication ou la dialectique des valeurs et des besoins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 475.

32 Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 73–79.

Conclusion

An earlier version of this chapter was published as "Exhausted Literature: Work, Action, and the Dilemmas of Literary Commitment." Copyright © 2013 The Johns Hopkins University Press. *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 37, Issue 2, 2013, pp. 291–313.

1 See Theodor Adorno, "Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit" (1959), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt-on-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), p. 555; and Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005 [1951]), pp. 106–107, 144. Elsewhere Adorno argues that work plays a central role in cultivating the ideal of hardness as the correct type of personality, which he associates with fascism and the turning of people as self-determined beings into an inert material "willing to treat others as an amorphous mass," the most recent manifestation of which he finds in the obsession with progress and technology. "There is something exaggerated, irrational, pathogenic in the present-day relationship with technology," Adorno writes, because work, progress, and technology, as means to ends, become fetishized, and the end – "a life of human dignity" – "concealed and removed from the consciousness of people." Theodor Adorno, "Education After Auschwitz"(1966), in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.) (Stanford University Press, 2003 [1966]), pp. 26, 29. Adorno applies the same critique of work also on art, arguing that art must not be associated with a socially useful form of work. "To the extent to which art makes a mockery of honest, socially useful labor," he remarks, "there is something to be said in its favor." Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984 [1970]), p. 359.

2 Werner Hamacher, "Working Through Working," *Modernism/modernity*, 3.1 (1996): 25. See also Chapter 6, note 5.

3 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1949 [1947]), p. 12 (italics in the original) (hereafter cited in the text).

4 Denis Hollier, *The Politics of Prose: Essay on Sartre*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1982]), p. 83.

5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963 [1952]), p. 598. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1968 [1957]), p. 97.

6 Jean-Paul Sartre, "François Mauriac and Freedom" (1939), in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (London: Rider and Company, 1955), p. 23.

7 See Jean-Paul Sartre, "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner" (1939) and "Camus's *The Outsider*" (1943), in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, pp. 79–87 and 24–41, respectively.

8 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday Press, 1957 [1936]), pp. 48–49.

9 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1920]), pp. 132–143.

10 Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 54.

11 Maurice Blanchot, "Idle Speech" (1963), in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997 [1971]), pp. 121–122.

12 See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, "Beckett: Inhibited Reading," in *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 11–93.

13 Samuel Beckett, "German Letter" (1937), in *Disjecta. Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, Ruby Cohn (ed.) (London: Calder Publications, 1983), p. 52 (translation modified).

14 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 143.

15 Maurice Blanchot, "Forgetting, Unreason" (1961), in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1969]), p. 201.

16 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, p. 6.

17 Roland Barthes, "Dare to Be Lazy" (1979), in *The Grain of the Voice, Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 343.

18 Roland Barthes, "Dare to Be Lazy," in *The Grain of the Voice*, p. 342.

19 Roland Barthes, "Dare to Be Lazy," in *The Grain of the Voice*, p. 342.

20 Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 114–115; Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, pp. 6–7. It should be noted, however, that more recent works by Leo Bersani offer an important revision of his earlier emphasis on self-shattering *jouissance* and self-interested investment in the aesthetic domain by developing a model of nonsubjective interiority and nonantagonistic relational regime in conjunction with the art of ascetic expressiveness, calm openness, and representational unfixedness. See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004); Leo Bersani, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject," *Critical Inquiry*, 32.2 (2006); Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

21 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982 [1955]), pp. 27, 153.

22 Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward An Ethic of Discussion" (1988), in *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 121–122. In another text, Derrida describes speech acts as messianic and promissory types of performances: as soon as I speak, I am promising because "believe me" is immediately in play. Jacques Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism" (1996), in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 82. In yet another text, Derrida argues that if this performative promising is not to be taken for an expression of authority (of promising) and conventions (contexts of legitimization of speech acts), it has to be driven by a "performative powerlessness." Jacques Derrida, "Performative Powerlessness: A Response to Simon Critchley," *Constellations*, 7.4 (2000): 467.

23 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: En Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999 [1961]).

24 Maurice Blanchot, "The Relation of the Third Kind" (1962), in *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 70.

25 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 46, 47.

26 Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep—An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 287, 288 (italics in the original).

27 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1968 [1957]), p. 150.

28 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 90 (italics in the original).

29 Albert Camus, "Preface to Algerian Reports" (1958), in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brian (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 114–116.

30 The incident has been widely commented upon. It happened in Stockholm on December 12, 1957, two days after Camus received the Nobel Prize – not, as some have claimed, in Uppsala, where, before delivering his lecture, "The Artist and His Time," Camus's talk with local students contained no political questions. In Stockholm, what was supposed to be a discussion with students about literature quickly turned into a heated argument over Algeria. A text of the exchange was published in *Le Monde* on December 14 and approved by Camus, with minor adjustments concerning a statement about freedom of the French press, in a December 17 letter to *Le Monde*. See Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (New York: George Braziller, 1980), pp. 618–619, p. 725 n. 27.

31 Marguerite Duras, "Destruction and Language: An Interview with Marguerite Duras by Jacques Rivette and Jean Narboni" (1969), in *Destroy, She Said*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Press, 1970 [1969]), pp. 121, 117.

32 Marguerite Duras, "Non-Work" (1980), in *Green Eyes*, trans. Carol Barko (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1980]), p. 7.

33 Marguerite Duras, "The Path of Joyful Despair" (1977), in *Green Eyes*, p. 140 (translation modified).

34 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, pp. 83, 85.

[35] Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 13.

[36] Jacques Rancière, "The Janus-Face of Politicized Art" (2003), in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 63. According to Rancière, because modern art has ceased to adapt its modes of expression to its subject matter, we have no criterion for establishing a correspondence "between aesthetic virtue and political virtue" (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 61). A particular work, or even narrative device, can be seen as both politically revealing (raising political awareness of the contradictions inherent in society) and politically regressive (embodying these contradictions). This absence of unequivocal criteria nevertheless does not diminish art's political engagement. For Rancière, art implies a politics without providing a rule that establishes their concordance, and it is "up to the various forms of politics to appropriate, for their own proper use, the modes of presentation or the means of establishing explanatory sequences produced by artistic practices rather than the other way around" (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, 65). In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière builds on *On the Shores of Politics* (1990) and *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1995), where he also presents the aesthetic dimension as inextricably bound with the political. He argues that both the aesthetic and the political are founded on the act of redistributing the sensible, rather than establishing a particular form of political administration (what Rancière associates with politics as police). As both the aesthetic and the political are concerned with interrupting the present distribution of the sensible into specific social groups, modes of being, forms of social behavior, and types of representation, they transform the aesthetic-political realm of what can be seen, said, and thought. According to Rancière, literature is political because it opens new modes of visibility. In many respects, the politics practiced by exhausted literature exemplifies Rancière's arguments. As pointed out in notes 26 and 27 in Chapter 3, Rancière insists that literature interrupts the established order in both literature and reality without immediately substituting new hierarchies for the old ones. In exhausted literature, the principle of exhaustion, weakness, and emptiness prevents these new hierarchies from rising. In *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren* (1996), Rancière finds a similar mechanism of resisting hierarchies, which he identifies as a politically democratic type of literary gesture, in the quasi-nothingness of *rien* created in Mallarmé's poetry. Beside the difference between Mallarmé's mode of writing and exhausted literature, discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, exhausted literature represents an extreme point of Rancière's theory. Although recarving the established distribution of the sensible and making visible a different mode of cohabitation, exhausted literature does not embody the principle of non-preference and equality that, in Rancière's account, makes the literary project essentially democratic, because it undoes hierarchies of representation by giving each individual self an equal value. In exhausted literature, equality, as the principal value defended by Rancière, rests on a more fundamental premise. Exhaustion, weakness, and emptiness in this type of literature give preference neither to the self nor

equally to each individual, but, as seen throughout the book – and particularly in Chapters 3 and 7 – to others. In exhausted literature, equality can be conceived only by starting with inequality – not with nonpreference, but with preference given to the other.

37 Werner Hamacher, "Afformative, Strike," *Cardozo Law Review*, 13.4 (1991): 1149.

38 Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 4–11.

39 See Chapter 1, note 40.

40 Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (1980): 26.

41 Albert Camus, "Nobel Banquet Speech" (1957), in Ottar G. Draugsvold (ed.), *Nobel Writers on Writing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc, 2000), p. 92.

42 Maurice Blanchot, "The Power and the Glory" (1958), in *The Book to Come*, p. 248.

43 Maurice Blanchot, "The Power and the Glory" (1958), in *The Book to Come*, p. 248 [italics in the original].

44 Denis Hollier, *Absent Without Leave: French Literature under the Threat of War*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997 [1993]), p. 156.

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