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# The war of writing: French literary politics and the decolonization of Algeria

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## Abstract

This article examines perceptions of the Algerian war among French intellectuals and in mainstream French culture. Against the background of France's social and political situation in the 1950s – declining international prominence, the loss of its colonies, rapid industrial modernization, and increasing moves toward individualism – the essay discusses the reactions of left-leaning writers and critics to the war and the way it was represented in popular culture after the escalating violence prompted more sharply defined political positions. Focusing on the issue of two types of engagements – political and literary – the author suggests that the redefined notion of commitment, as formulated by Albert Camus and Maurice Blanchot in response to Jean-Paul Sartre's emphasis on unconditional action, offered a conception of political, social and cultural transformation designed to undo the violence inherent in Sartre's promotion of self-assured values and insular ideas.

## Keywords

Algerian war, Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus, committed literature, decolonization, Jean-Paul Sartre

A major challenge of literary language 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 Jean-Paul Sartre and Stéphane Mallarmé faced perhaps most directly and resolutely. 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

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did not think it could be, overcome. Whereas Sartre 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 literary 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 – reveal is that both the effort to stabilize meaning and the attempt to dispose of it prove equally futile. The more one tries to make literary language convey the intended meaning, the more it slips away; and the more one tries to eradicate it, the more obvious it becomes that referentiality will not disappear. Since meaning can be neither fixed nor destroyed, literary language is forever suspended between the referential and the figural.

Much changed for Sartre and those who challenged his take on the indeterminateness of literary language in the decade following his *What is Literature?* (1948), with its appeal to committed writing and a renunciation of the Mallarméan approach as disengaged. The most crucial event, and one that for many redefined their understanding of literature and the role of the writer, was the war in Algeria that took place between 1 November 1954 and 18 March 1962. The Algerian war, that ‘battle of writing’, as Michel Crouzet dubbed it (Crouzet, 1963: 51), or, as Jean-François Sirinelli called it, a ‘war of petitions’ (Sirinelli, 1991), was both a decisive and a divisive event for the self-definition of many French intellectuals. With the dream of French universalism finally disintegrating, the ensuing discussions about freedom, violence and national identity produced both surprising alliances (between the left and conservative Christians, for example) and rifts and separations (the famous discord between Sartre and Albert Camus, 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 (Sartre’s move towards Tiersmondism) and detachments (Maurice Merleau-Ponty distancing himself from the far left, and especially from Sartre).

With the exceptions of Camus and later Pierre Bourdieu, however, most French intellectuals actually knew little about the situation in Algeria. Nor did they perceive it to be a problem. Personal experience and first-hand knowledge were often thought to act as a restraint, preventing them, 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 for instance in 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 presumptuous attitude that made Tony Judt label the post-war decade in France an ‘age of irresponsibility’ (Judt, 1998: 14) during which everyone – except Camus and Aron, according to Judt – accepted the fact that they had to pick sides: left or right, East or West, pro- or anti-colonialism.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding their perspective and

depth of insight, however, for most French intellectuals – perhaps with the exception of those affiliated with the French Communist Party (PCF), as Danièle Joly insists, who kept a dual and disingenuous stance (illustrated by the PCF abstaining from a vote on ‘special powers’) of being in favour of the ‘French presence’ in Algeria but not supporting military intervention: being in favour of ‘French Union’, as the party put it, in which Algeria would not have independence but ‘liberty’ (Joly, 1991: 69) – 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.

While intellectuals defending various positions either against state policy or in its support engaged in intense debates, popular writers within mainstream French culture 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, namely reflected taken-for-granted beliefs and presented unquestioned values as natural. One of the central topoi – or, rather, myths – 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 novel, *The Centurions* (1960), 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 catalyst of the view that the Algerian conflict was a defence of Western civilization. Although *paras*, as they came to be called, often went directly to Algeria from France’s humiliating 1954 defeat at Dien Bien Phu, they retained their heroic reputation and, as John Talbott showed, held an important place in French imagination as symbols of adventure, physical strength and high moral principles despite attempts to debunk this vision as a quasi-fascist delusion (Talbott 1976: 69–70). 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’ (Dine, 1994: 26) – 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 (Wall, 2008: 121; Wall, 2001: 165–74) – both a symptom and a consequence of the loss of grandeur. The very critical stance of the United States on the French involvement in Algeria, driven, as Matthew Connelly has

argued, by the concern that Algeria might become a Cold War battleground (Connelly, 2001: 221), only fuelled French complexes. 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 an atomic capability, and, most importantly, hold onto Algeria, as it was seen as a question of national identity and prestige.<sup>2</sup>

It was this old-fashioned sense of national identity and prestige that, together with their 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 cultural short-sightedness, axiomatic truths 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 people like Albert Camus, Maurice Blanchot, Dionys Mascolo, Marguerite Duras and Roland Barthes 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 pre-war far-right agenda to his late 1960s leftist radicalism; Mascolo and Duras were self-proclaimed communists 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. Camus and Blanchot, in particular, offered an important revision of the understanding of politics and literature, a revision directed against both national frustrations and the way they were culturally enacted, and the radical views of those such as Sartre. Refusing to use literature as a tool of agitation, whether for opposing the status quo or reinforcing it, Camus and Blanchot regarded Sartre's notion of engagement and action not as a solution, but as part of the problem from which their era suffered. Their main concern was that Sartre's rhetoric of action in fact replicated what it wished to overcome. More than just direct political action was needed, and literature, they insisted, was vital to the enterprise.

The dominant view of literary engagement in France at the beginning of the Algerian war was still that of Sartre's *What is Literature?* Defining literature as an active 'quest for truth that *utilizes* language' (Sartre, 1949 [1948]: 12, italics in original), Sartre stressed the obligation of prose literature to represent reality and communicate with a concern for clarity. Literature must be utilitarian, he argued, because writers work with words that refer beyond themselves, words that are a 'particular moment of action that [have] no meaning outside of' themselves (Sartre, 1949: 21) and that, with their power to uproot from the given, must be effective in stimulating readers' active responses. What this meant in the mid 1950s was that writers and critics who wanted to be politically committed needed to articulate an unambiguous opposition to mainstream culture. During the Algerian war this culture was at the peak of what Henry Rousso described as

'refoulement' (Rouso, 1990: 109): the time of repressed memory through which the Fifth Republic tried to suppress all past divisions (i.e. the Vichy regime) for the sake of a new beginning and in the name of modernization.<sup>3</sup> France's rapid socio-economic transformation and soaring prosperity – which, as Tony Judt has remarked, were surprisingly unaccounted for and often completely ignored by the intellectual left (Judt, 1992: 288) – were accompanied by a discourse of ahistoricity, brilliantly described by Kristin Ross (1995: 12), that enacted state-induced modernization, facilitated erasures of both the past (Vichy) and the present (Algeria), and promoted a de-historicized and form-driven art. An unequivocal opposition to this mainstream cultural trend was seen as paramount to any engaged response. Even Roland Barthes, an advocate of the neutral style of 'writing degree zero' just a few years earlier (Barthes, 1953), in 1955 decided to moderate his fondness for descriptively ascetic narratives in favour of concreteness and detail, coming to criticize – after a curious eight-year delay and thus clearly as an outcome of the Algerian war – the allegorical nature of Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* as inadequate for identifying historical evil (Barthes, 1993b [1955]), and later (Barthes, 1993c [1962]) even curbing his enthusiasm for Alain Robbe-Grillet's novels whose lack of content he had previously extolled (Barthes, 1993a [1954]).

During the course of the Algerian war Sartre further radicalized his view of engagement. In response to the expanding French military deployment in Algeria, and inspired by Francis Jeanson's dedication to direct action, Sartre concluded that literature is never engaged enough because even at its most committed it averts people's attention from real events. Calling for a turn from literature to politics in order to bring about a more effective critique of the French campaign in Algeria, Sartre, as Simone de Beauvoir attests, wanted to abandon literature altogether (Beauvoir, 1992 [1963]: 183), and even though he was ultimately unable to do so, he was adamant in promoting concrete political action in relation to which literature was relegated to an ever more inferior position – a mere diversion of attention. Literature was no longer a catalyst to action: it was an obstacle. In *Words* (1964) Sartre finally, even if nostalgically, admitted that during the Algerian war he had lost all his confidence in the writer's redemptive mission:

I have renounced my vocation, but I have not unfrocked myself. I still write. What else can I do? *Nulla dies sine linea* [No day without writing a line]. 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. (Sartre, 1967 [1964]: 157)

The war opened Sartre's eyes to the way that literature is deactivating because it turns events into images that by the same stroke become a mere source of aesthetic pleasure. According to Sartre's amended scenario of engagement in the late 1950s, one becomes part of history not by writing fiction, but only by taking part in political action.<sup>4</sup>

Two important texts that Sartre wrote at the height of the Algerian war – *Search for a Method* (1968 [1957]) and the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963 [1961]) – put an unprecedented emphasis on action (in literary terms, a similar emphasis can be found in his 1959 play *The Condemned of Altona*). The programmatic *Search for a Method* is permeated with the rhetoric of projects, actions and counteractions as attributes of an engaged praxis, and directed against idleness and lack of resolve. 'Man defines

himself by his project', Sartre writes, 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' (Sartre, 1968 [1957]: 150). It is project and action that make humankind historical, and the current historical task for humanity, as Sartre sees it, is 'to bring closer the moment when History will have *only one meaning*' (1968 [1957]: 90, italics in original). Sartre supports this call to organized action in the preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* with another invocation of history, which this text presents as a process with the inevitable goal of emancipation that one has to accept and act accordingly – embracing, if necessary, even violence (1963 [1961]: 21). At this time, Sartre is already convinced that this ideal of historical action justifies small injustices in the present in the name of an all-embracing justice in the future.

It was precisely the idea of History as Necessity that dominated Sartre's and other radical intellectuals' views of historical progress that Raymond Aron denounced as the opium of French intellectuals (Aron, 2009 [1955]: 161–90).<sup>5</sup> Aron was not alone in this critique in the mid 1950s, and others, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lefort, drew attention to Sartre's peculiar mix of necessity and voluntarism: to his reduction, as Howard Davis puts it, of all human relations to a conflict between consciousnesses, and of all historical activity to a voluntarism that bows to inevitable historical progress (Davis, 1987: 47). What is intriguing about these polemics 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 favoured negotiations with the FLN, suggesting that by that year 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 per cent of the population supported withdrawal from the war, with the figure rising to 78 per cent in April 1961 at the onset of negotiations with the FLN (Talbott, 1975: 358). 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 presented itself in the past (the Spanish Civil War, 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, perhaps even contributing, as James D. Le Sueur has claimed, to Algeria's 'epistemological recolonization' (Le Sueur, 2005: 284) by managing to influence Algeria's leaders with Manichaean categories of identity and ideas about the African race that, as Pierre Bourdieu affirms, were 'irresponsible' because they did not fit Algeria's demographics, dispersed agrarian character and Islamic history (Bourdieu, 1994: 282).

For Sartre, the epitome of passivity and disengagement during the Algerian war was Albert Camus (see Cohen-Solal, 1998). Though at the start of the war Camus's political position was little different from that of other leftist intellectuals – such as Dionys Mascolo, Robert Antelme, Marguerite Duras, Michel Leiris and even Sartre, who from late 1955 until late 1956 were all involved in the Action Committee of Intellectuals Against the Pursuit of the War in Algeria, a group which opposed violence and discrimination, and did not yet favour separation – his loyalty to the same ideas in the later stages of the war was becoming increasingly conservative. In 1958 Camus was still defending what he called the Algeria of 'communities with different personalities' (Camus, 1995a

[1958]: 149), and argued for the right of all those who were already in Algeria – meaning the Arabs, Berbers, Italians, Turks, Greeks, Jews and French (1995a [1958]: 145) – to remain there.

Camus's stance on Sartre's political convictions had been widely known among French intellectuals since the August 1952 public break between the two in the pages of *Les Temps modernes*. Although not entirely different from Blanchot, Camus was more direct in charging that Sartre was a blind activist, with a politics of action detached from reality, and instead driven by an abstract notion of history. According to Camus, the privileged place that Sartre gave to action in his political philosophy implied judgements 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 attitude 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 misjudgements (in cases when one was wrong for the right reasons, one was right to be wrong); and in the realm of politics, as Camus restated 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 (Camus, 1995b [1958]: 114–16).

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. Camus remained involved politically throughout the Algerian war, making low-profile interventions (mostly in defence of individual Algerian rebels) even after his formal retreat from public involvement in the matters of Algeria in the aftermath of the December 1957 Stockholm colloquium where, 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 notoriety after his impromptu statement that he would defend his mother before defending justice.<sup>6</sup> 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 political interventions, literature took on a vital role for Camus as a mode of engagement. Literature became central to his critique of the political paradigm propounded by Sartre, which measured engagement by the amount of action through which it was expressed and which it generated.

Camus formulated his idea of engagement most succinctly in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech of 10 December 1957. While not without its problems – the statement that the writer 'cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it' (Camus, 2000 [1957]: 92) posited history as an anonymous force to be resisted, an odd suggestion, given Camus's previous criticism of Sartre for a similar portrayal of history as an irrepressible force – the speech, together with other texts from the second half of the 1950s, reveals that Camus's vision of literature was not naïvely romantic. The argument that the role of the writer was to be in touch with the era while at the same time keeping 'a certain distance from our history' (Camus, 1995c [1957]: 238) was, indeed, rather vague, but it put forward a very self-reflexive notion of

literary practice. This notion was not disengaged, 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', Debarati Sanyal points out in this connection, and continues with this description of Camus's redefinition of 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. (Sanyal, 2000: 44)

Camus offered literary exemplars of what he considered engaged writing in his novella *The Fall* (1956), the collection of short stories *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957), and the unfinished, posthumously published novel *The First Man* (1960). These fictional reactions to Sartre presented a critique of direct literary representation and the self-involved discourse of action in favour of dialogue, empty memory and shifts in characters' perspectives. Looking for a principle that would neutralize violence – both the violence of self-assured action and the violence of direct, and hence one-sided, literary representation – in these stories Camus, as I have shown elsewhere (Just, 2010a; 2010b), offered an argument for a political appropriation of the behavioural principle of shame, because shame, according to him, could deactivate violence and secure a provisional sense of commonality among war-stricken peoples. As an alternative to guilt, which Camus saw as a mechanism that perpetuated the violent logic of self-involvement, the inter-subjective principle of shame was inseparable from dialogue. Shame made the acting self into a being for others and thereby acknowledged the singularity of each perspective while at the same time avoiding the dialectic that confined these perspectives into contesting opposites. Implying not a preoccupation with oneself but a concern for others, shame in Camus's narratives made each individual act in a way that avoided both experiencing shame and shaming others, as shame in these stories was experienced as shameful both by those who were subject to a shaming gaze and by those who witnessed the shame felt by others. Designed to oppose monologues – in 'The artist and his time' (1957) Camus stipulated that 'art cannot be a monologue' (1995d [1957]: 257) – shame in Camus's stories was about dialogue, uncertainty, and different perspectives, rather than about resolute action and unequivocal literary representation.

While many of the concerns regarding literature and politics addressed by Camus ran parallel to those expressed by Maurice Blanchot, their involvement in the debates over engagement is a story of a missed encounter: as Camus withdrew from them in early 1958, frustrated by their politics, which he believed only exacerbated the conflict, Blanchot entered them. Blanchot became involved in the political debates on Algeria in October 1958 when, prompted by Charles de Gaulle's assumption of power in May, seen by many as a *coup d'état*, he broke his long silence and wrote a one-page pamphlet for the second issue of the anti-Gaullist journal *Le 14 Juillet*, opening it with a declaration of refusal: 'At a certain moment, in the face of public events, we know that we must refuse. The refusal is absolute, categorical' (Blanchot, 1997a [1958]: 111). Initiating a collaboration

with the journal's editor, Dionys Mascolo, this tract was the first step that in September 1960 eventually led Blanchot to organize, together with Mascolo and Jean Schuster, the 'Declaration of the Right of Insubordination in the Algerian War' – the legendary 'Manifesto of the 121' – in which the signatories openly challenged the government and supported the right of French soldiers in Algeria to disobey. Although Paul Ricœur had already offered a milder version of this argument (Ricœur, 1957) – providing a prequel to 'For a Negotiated Peace in Algeria', a moderate counterpart to the manifesto, in which Ricœur participated together with, among others, Roland Barthes, Jean-Marie Domenach, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Le Goff, endorsing peace and negotiation, but not open rebellion, while at the same time pledging to follow the manifesto's signatories to prison should they be arrested for their political views – the manifesto was by far the most powerful act of political revolt to date. Not only did it set in motion impassioned political debates and mobilized many people against the war, it also incited governmental retribution, leading to arrests, trials and the blacklisting of the signatories, many of them artists, writers and filmmakers who were now denied public grants and state support.

Following the declaration, Blanchot returned to the role of literature and the link between political and literary types of engagement. In a December 1960 letter to Sartre praising his intention to adapt *Les Temps modernes* to the changing political environment and to 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' (Blanchot, 2000a [1960]: 37). In one of the documents that Blanchot prepared in the wake of the declaration, as part of a project for an international journal, 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' (2000b [1960–2]: 60), a commitment that Blanchot posited, somewhat differently from the letter to Sartre, as Christopher Fynsk notes (2007: 105–8), as divergent from Sartre's post-war idea of commitment. Literature was essential to politics and to 'a certain just demand, perhaps a demand for justice', according to Blanchot, because of 'its unique relation to language' and its indeterminateness (2000b: 57).

Devised as a response to Sartre's notion of committed literature and its emphasis on action, strong individuality and the instrumental use of language, Blanchot's postulation of literature is, like Camus's literary use of the principle of shame and narrative resistance to representation, a way of not establishing an identity. A product of language that in *The Space of Literature* (1955) Blanchot describes as one that 'does not speak any more, but is' (1982 [1955]: 27), literature is a site of resistance to action and identity because it questions, as Blanchot suggests in 'Idle speech' (1963), the heroism and authenticity of 'the resolute "I", laconic and heroic' (1997b [1963]: 125). The role of literature is to suspend action and the identity of the heroic self and to create a literature of slowness and weakness as an alternative to the drive for mastery of the resolute self (see Just, 2008). 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, as Leslie Hill has pointed out, that the political significance of the kind of writing to which Blanchot appeals lies, again similarly to Camus, in the refusal of a certain type of language, a language that Hill calls 'authoritarian, self-assured, peremptory, repetitive, oppressive' (Hill, 1997: 215).

Despite the fact that Blanchot and Camus were not personally very close – or even intellectually close, although Blanchot devoted several essays to Camus's work, most importantly, during the Algerian war, a review of the novella *The Fall* in 1956, and in 1960 a reassessment of Camus's oeuvre after the writer's sudden death earlier that year – what bound them together was their anti-Sartrean position of writers who wanted to be politically engaged while at the same time remaining writers. They were not unsympathetic to the questions raised by Sartre. They were not against political action and nor did they think that literature could be a substitute for action. What they nevertheless found objectionable was the pragmatic evaluation and functional comparison of literature and politics. To be sure, at times of great emergency literature interrupts itself in favour of action. But this interruption, Blanchot and Camus avow, cannot be posited as literature's duty. Although there are moments in history that are more acute than others, and that is when literature interrupts itself, there is never a time of absolute tranquillity and inconsequentiality of action when all is resolved and when one can finally turn to literature. Since there is always a need for 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. Unsettling the dichotomy between literary intransitivity and direct political engagement, Blanchot and Camus not only do not conflate the two in an attempt to encode the latter into the message communicated in the language of the former, they also do not separate political causes and literary practices, as the political in their conception of engagement is not consigned to a defence of particular policies and systems of administration. For Blanchot and Camus, the dilemma of literature and engagement is predicated on a much less impassable and vexing premise than for Sartre: they do not consider commitment, as Sartre understood it, to be a literary category.

According to Blanchot and Camus, the dichotomy between political commitment and 'art for art's sake' is false because, unlike politics, literature does not aim at immediate action. Literature pursues politics on its own terms, as a politics carried by literature. The writer's role is not to decide whether writing is action, to choose between literature and action, and to feel either guilty or self-righteous about this choice. Blanchot and Camus suggest that one does not have to be a Sartrean writer to be political. One simply has to be a writer, as Kevin Hart phrased it in reference to Blanchot, 'who is aware of being in relation with others and therefore of being responsible for what happens to them' (Hart, 2000: xx). Like Francis Ponge, who in 1956 declared that his political partisanship and work as a poet were one and the same vocation, while at the same time being adamant about keeping his allegiance to the Communist Party and dedication to poetry separate (Ponge, 1956: 276), and 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' (1973 [1955]: 201), Blanchot and Camus posit a fundamental difference between political and literary responsibility. They insist that political action and literature cannot be substituted one for another, nor can the principles governing one form of engagement be implemented by the other, because the role of the writer is not to express concrete political goals.

The main conviction behind Blanchot's and Camus's contribution to the issue of literary commitment is that true change, the aim of all engagement, cannot rely solely on

politics. One 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 would fall to barren ground. Blanchot and Camus propose that literature is central to this change. Insisting that literature cannot be measured by the same criteria as politics, they maintain that literature is not subordinate to political action, because literature and politics are driven by demands that emerge in particular domains of each venture. Since the writer's responsibility is determined by the truth specific to the writer, literature is not a matter of activist political engagement and the constitution of political subjects, but rather one of opening new social possibilities via literature. With instruments other than politics, literature follows its own path to social transformation. Even though writing always functions within larger historical and social contexts, its purpose is to interrupt normative forms of literary representation and social being and to be open to the possibility of a radically different set of perceptual forms. In Blanchot's and Camus's scenario, from the point of view of concrete politics, literature has to remain ambiguous and cultivate what Jacques Rancière has more recently called 'the perceptual disturbance of interruption' (Rancière, 2006: 63). What Blanchot and Camus advocate is a notion of literature that capitalizes on this specifically political nature of literature and remains in a state that repels any new hierarchies. For them the concreteness of meaning in which Sartre saw the strength of narrative literature and its obligation to be engaged is a symbol of clinging to the position of strength and action that was revealed by the events in Algeria as problematic.

Blanchot's and Camus's redefinition of literary engagement does not merely suggest that there is time for literature and time for action, and that one needs to find a balance between the two, or to know when one takes precedence over the other. Their literary engagements are not bereft of political considerations. In this respect their position is less extreme than that of Georges Bataille, who proclaimed that literature is in fact guilty, not only when measured against political, ethical and social concerns, but essentially and inevitably (Bataille, 1993 [1957]: x). 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 would transform it into utility. If Blanchot's and Camus's position complies with neither the rhetoric of duty nor the paradigm of guilt, this is because for them the choice is not between responsible politics and guilty literature. The issue of literature and politics is not in choosing between either retreating from politics altogether or dedicating all of one's energy to politics. Beyond either only utility or only a resistance to utility, theirs is a conception of literature that is engaged, but that practises politics as literature.

When Pavel Zemánek, a character from Milan Kundera's first 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 engaged action and political debate. They want to travel and do things, and that, he concludes, is how they will actually change the world. Blanchot and Camus would 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 now, at the time of political reforms in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, and a decade earlier during Stalinist repressions. When Pavel lectures 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, Blanchot and Camus are sceptical about both the privileging of activity and action, and the privatization of life that Henri Lefebvre described as a major systemic shift in post-war France (Lefebvre, 2008 [1961]: 88–95). Blanchot's and Camus's stance on engagement during the Algerian war is curiously dual: an active involvement in urgent political issues while fostering the principles of literary engagement that undermine action. If the common goal of active politics and inactive literature is to alter the established political models and dominant cognitive patterns and, to repeat Blanchot's statement from the years following the declaration, to pursue 'a certain just demand, perhaps a demand for justice' (Blanchot, 2000b: 57), literature's role in this task is to withdraw from action and representation because only this withdrawal holds the potential for a radical transformation of what could be thought, perceived and imagined.

The literary politics proposed by Blanchot and Camus challenges a propositional discourse of representation in order to suspend the violence intrinsic in the struggle for recognition that Sartre's emphasis on action reinforces. If Blanchot and Camus take anything from Mallarmé, it is the recognition that language cannot offer a stable, final and complete picture – something that, paradoxically, as Denis Hollier has noted, is confirmed by Sartre's own tempo of writing, which in order to stay connected with reality tries to take hold of the entirety of experience in a frantic attempt to record everything, thereby getting locked into a perpetual commentary in which words take the place of the present and reporting becomes the event itself (Hollier 1986 [1982]: 83). Blanchot and Camus deem the propositional discourse of representation politically questionable because it augments the impulse to judge events depicted in literary narratives. This impulse, which, as Hayden White has demonstrated, is inherent to narrativity and its drive to closure and an ordered plot, feeds our tendency 'to moralize reality and identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine' (White, 1980: 18).

In his Nobel acceptance speech in December 1957 Camus underscores that writers are 'obliged to understand rather than to judge' (Camus, 2000 [1957]: 92). Blanchot echoes this statement four months later when, criticizing writers who are 'informed about everything and judging everything immediately', he postulates a 'new situation in which the writer' sees himself as 'reduced to powerlessness and simplicity'. 'When the writer today becomes involved in politics', Blanchot explains, 'he is not yet involved with politics but only with this new, difficult-to-see relationship that literature and language want to awaken in contact with public presence' (Blanchot, 2003 [1958]: 248). If the aim of literary engagement is to minimize the impulse to judge and moralize, then the call to downplay verisimilitude, strong characters, straightforward plot and the narrative drive to closure is committed because it is directed against the nation-cementing role played by the traditional type of storytelling and the Sartrean conception of engagement in positing the audience as a group united by a common perspective on the true nature of events featured in literary narratives.

Blanchot's and Camus's problem with Sartre's notion of commitment was in its political and ethical implications. They regarded Sartre's notion as a manifestation of the deep-seated trend in Western modernity – of which Algeria was a grave victim – of an ever more vigorous social and cultural validation of an autonomous, active and strong self. This validation encouraged a dialectic of action that was violent because it closed in on itself, blind to what fell outside its field of vision. In their rethinking of engagement, Blanchot and Camus not only claimed that literary words were not swords, they demanded that words be disarmed and weakened because only the suspension of action and denotation could undermine the violence of the self-assured asserting that nurtures egocentrism, on an individual level, and nationalism and ethnocentrism, on a collective level. Their conception of engagement was not a symptom of the retreat from history, or a defence of a-historicism and a-political formalism. It implied neither political conservatism nor a compliance with the ideology of timelessness that dominated mainstream French culture and supported the status quo by extending de-politicization and social fragmentation. Directed against denotation and strong characters as agents of action, Blanchot's and Camus's literary politics espoused literature that was political precisely by being slow and uneventful, with weak plots and characters that did not stand out as sharply delineated individualities. Similarly to Theodor Adorno, who in his own take on commitment and critique of Sartre defended literature that educated the audience 'to a new attitude, that would be distanced, thoughtful, experimental, the reverse of illusory empathy and identification' (Adorno 1974 [1962]: 80), Blanchot's and Camus's engaged literature was not concerned with searching for political alternatives and producing coherent effects that would facilitate such a search. It was concerned rather with deactivating the internal dialectic of literary characters' projections and their interpersonal struggle for recognition.

The worry that Blanchot and Camus express regarding the notion of the self based on strength, self-assurance and an overtly active relation to the outside is that it makes everything outside the self into an image of the self, and thus instead of connectedness encourages self-enclosure – which, as Leo Bersani has recently argued, is flawed because it leads neither to self-possession nor to a possession of the outside, but to a loss of both the self and others (Bersani, 2008: 121; 2006: 171). Questioning the social and cultural dominance of this notion and its ethical and political implications, Blanchot and Camus propose a conception of engagement that circumvents the negative repercussions of strong individuality and determined action, and presents a literary figuration of a depersonalized self that relates to the outside more openly and less aggressively. Envisioning a different relational regime, which would not perpetuate self-involved action and the struggle for recognition, Blanchot and Camus posit the role of the writer as symbolically representing an increased connectedness to the world and to others. This conception is engaged because, contrary to a fatalistic capitulation in the face of the presumably unstoppable force of history toward individualism and self-assured judgements, the image it promotes of a de-interiorized personhood was formulated during the Algerian war as a reaction against the present situation and the political ideals that led to it.

Blanchot's and Camus's notion of engagement makes the two diverging practices of coming to terms with the indeterminateness of literary language, Sartrean and Mallarméan, lose their incompatibility. Paradoxically an heir to both Sartre and Mallarmé,

this notion borrows from Sartre the conviction that literature and politics are not isolated endeavours, and from Mallarmé the goal, with a substantially modified strategy of achieving it, of weakening signification. Trying to evade the vehement struggle with referentiality and the resulting dialectical return of either meaning or its volatility, this notion is not based on the premise that literary language is political because language and literature always take place in concrete social milieux and that their relation to it, or a refusal to assume one, inevitably generates political effects. What is more important is the problematic nature of the prevailing understanding of the relationship between literary language and politics introduced by Sartre. Blanchot and Camus share the conviction that language that serves as the foundation of political society – that is, conceptual language – is based on the myth of fixedness and semantic stability. It is this myth that supports what in the wake of the war in Algeria Blanchot and Camus addressed as a politically insular logic of the valorization of action and the strong self. Since the language that founds political society is not stable, because like all language it oscillates between the referential and the figural semantic fields, language is political precisely to the extent of being unstable. Literature, according to Blanchot and Camus, is where this instability is revealed, because literature is where the tension between the two semantic fields of language comes out into the open. Exercising the workings and indeterminateness of language in a rhetorically self-conscious fashion, literature is aware of its fictionality and dependence on figural language and, as Paul de Man has remarked, is therefore ‘condemned to being the truly political mode of discourse’ (De Man, 1979: 157).

## Notes

1. It should be pointed out that Judt has a certain proclivity for what he presents as Aron’s dispassionate analytical objectivity (Judt, 1998: 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’ (Judt, 2006: 223), was far from impartial and independent, having been financed by and being under the influence of the CIA, as Peter Coleman and Frances Saunders have shown (Coleman, 1989: 53–5; Saunders, 1999: 213–19).
2. 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 (Sorum, 1977: 79).
3. As Todd Shepard has 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 (Shepard, 2006: 4, 6).
4. Although it should be noted, as Suzanne Guerlac has 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* (Guerlac, 1993: 822).
5. Nonetheless, at the time Aron still believed in French Algeria – as his October 1955 article in *Le Figaro* demonstrates – before changing his stance in *The Algerian Tragedy* in 1957 and urging independence for Algeria (albeit primarily for economic reasons).

6. The incident has been widely commented upon. It happened in Stockholm on 12 December 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 – when 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 14 December and approved by Camus, with minor adjustments concerning a statement about freedom of the French press in a 17 December letter to *Le Monde* (See Lottman, 1980: 618–19, 725 n. 27).

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