

Review

William S. Allen, *Illegibility: Blanchot and Hegel*. London et al.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. ISBN 978-1-5013-7675-7 (hbk). Pp. 244. £95.00.

Theodor Adorno writes at the beginning of ‘Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel’ in his *Drei Studien zu Hegel* that ‘In the realm of great philosophy Hegel is no doubt the only one with whom at times one literally does not know and cannot conclusively determine what is being talked about, and with whom there is no guarantee that such a judgment is even possible.’ Similarly, in the œuvre of the twentieth century French writer Maurice Blanchot, William S. Allen finds the idea, both thematized and performed, that ‘philosophical discourse can only proceed if it recognizes the necessity of becoming a dis-course, of losing itself as much as it finds itself’ (199). In this careful and highly adroit study, Allen excavates a kind of dialogue between Hegel and Blanchot to do with thinking and language, and the impossible demands each can make of the other. Although Blanchot was not born until more than seventy years after Hegel’s death, ‘dialogue’ is the right word in the sense that, on Allen’s reading, Hegel is shown to be far more attuned to the non-teleological distractions, diversions and fragmentations of a semi-autonomous (literary) language than he typically has been given credit for by Blanchot and his peers.

Illegibility might be described as comprising three preparatory essays—whose topics, respectively, are Raymond Roussel and the Comte de Lautréamont/Isidore Lucien Ducasse, Jacques Derrida and Hegel—followed by two essays explicitly on Blanchot, whose writings on literature and on Hegel have nonetheless oriented the first three pieces. Allen’s text as a whole gradually shifts its focus from Blanchot’s writings about (Hegel and) literature to Blanchot’s literary writings; he seems to achieve this shift without a clear caesura, as though to show how each ‘mode’ in Blanchot is at once partly constituted by the other. Hegel and Blanchot are fairly old adversaries in the literature, and Allen actually refrains from staging too many direct exchanges between them. Indeed, his work offers a forceful corrective to the simplifications or even outright parodies of Hegel one sometimes finds in work on Blanchot and many of his fellow-travellers in twentieth-century French literary philosophy, where Hegel’s thought becomes a kind of twee *Bildungsroman* structured around dialectical flourishes. Allen’s Hegel—and I take him to be drawing on Adorno here, whose 1956 essay, ‘Aspekte’, is introduced forcefully in the book’s final chapter—is an altogether more trepidatious thinker, ‘incompatible with any harmonious tendency, no matter how much the late Hegel may

subjectively have had such tendencies', as Adorno has it (quoted on 171). Allen argues for a similar understanding of Hegel throughout, noting more than once, with Jean-Luc Nancy, that the Hegelian dialectic only exists in its disparate concrete occurrences, and never in an abstract, programmatic form. This brings it into suggestive connection with the Blanchotian experience, practice and understanding of literature: 'Literature, in this aporetic delicacy, is not offering itself up to the unity of the concept but remaining stubbornly attached to its deviations' (157). This is a point very well made, and countervails effectively the Hegel strawman one often encounters in literary studies, which is usually based on little more than an extrapolation, by way of Alexandre Kojève, of the Lord/Bondsman dialectic whereby the latter is made to constitute the rule of Hegel's thought. Even a thinker as procedurally delicate as Derrida was at times culpable when it came to strategic simplifications of Hegel, as Allen shows here in his accomplished essay on the former.

Literature, according to Blanchot, is 'the work, the power, and the thought of the negative' (143); but readers approaching these matters from a more, or exclusively, philosophical background ought to be forewarned that there is already in Blanchot's conception of literature a privileging of a certain assemblage of literary works—of which it might be said uncharitably that they just happen to do things which conform to what Blanchot thinks literature ought to do. The more magnanimous way of putting this is to say that this is a literature explicitly concerned with agitating, in various ways, the relationships with the world by which it is constituted, and constituted as (sort of) in the world and also as (sort of) not in it. Writers whose works do this kind of thing (in variously experimental, surrealist or transgressive modes) include Georges Bataille, Samuel Beckett, Friedrich Hölderlin, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Stéphane Mallarmé, Francis Ponge and the Marquis de Sade (there are not, by the way, too many women in this literary-philosophical picture); the figures Allen foregrounds here are Raymond Roussel and the Comte de Lautréamont/Isidore Lucien Ducasse.

Allen's reading of Roussel focuses on Roussel's surrealist, rhyme-led technique, known as his *procédé*, which establishes a kind of relationship between the two terms it will connect (through homophony or near-homonymy), such as 'Phonotypia' and 'fausse note tibia'. But in what sense, asks Allen, can we say that therefore 'Phonotypia is fausse note tibia'? Allen contends that such a sentence would bear some relation to the Hegelian speculative sentence, for example 'God is being', in which two universals express the essence of one another, in contrast to the relationship of subject to predicate ordinarily expressed by the copula 'is'. The relationship between the two terms of the speculative sentence means that, in such a sentence, 'the subject is *and* is not expressed through the predicate' (30), in a process of oscillation or 'endless self-relation' (102) which can only be brought to an end arbitrarily (the sentence 'being is nothing' is considered in a similar way later on in the book). Similarly, the sentence 'Phonotypia is fausse

note tibia', by which Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique* (1909) may partly be paraphrased, is a quasi-speculative sentence: Roussel charges these quotidian words with a kind of transcendental force by virtue of his *procédé*. Unlike in the Hegelian speculative sentence, this is not in order to posit a relationship of identity, but one of a sort of virtuality: 'each expresses what the other is not but could be' (32). This is a way of using language in order to show that language's ordinary instrumentality (its 'material affinity'), and the identities it presupposes and posits, are not its only mode—and to stage an encounter of the one mode with the other: 'The *procédé* then becomes a way in which the mimetic lining of language can be reflected and reflected upon in order to expose the swarming undercurrents of its affinities in all their objective dimensions' (34).

As for Lautréamont, Allen traces Blanchot's reading of him in his *Lautréamont et Sade* (1949), which seeks to show, among other things, that in the case of Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868-69), we should not think of a mind which creates a literary work, but of a literary work whose development brings into being the mind of the one to whom we attribute the work's authorship (37). Blanchot's and Allen's readings of Lautréamont's text argue that 'we are engaged with a different form of rational conception, one that is to be understood according to its generalized speculative possibilities rather than as determined *a priori*' (40). One does not occupy the relatively stable position of the literary critic, deciphering the text; instead, the reading of it occasions a kind of experience of having one's thinking process changed quite fundamentally. This is a situation which corresponds in some ways to the transformational development of consciousness in the process of knowing as outlined by Hegel; but, Allen argues, in the case of reading Lautréamont it is a process which tends not in the direction of progression and unification, but, if anything, towards deterioration and endlessness (41).

In both literary cases—and I have had to give abbreviated accounts of Allen's erudite close-readings—what Allen seeks to establish are the 'perverse parallels' (42) with Hegelian thought (and thought processes) which a Blanchotian account of the experience of literature sets up. The general idea, for Allen, is that literature and literary language present a sort of indigestible matter, where many of Hegel's characteristic philosophical operations, and especially negation, are concerned. This is not the same as being an outright challenge, as putting it in these terms would already evince the sort of dialectical co-option that the literary is said to frustrate. Indeed, Allen's thesis is not that the Hegelian project is thwarted by (literary) language, it is that it has an importantly self-reflexive quality where its linguistic and textual materialities are concerned: at one point, Allen likens Hegel's thought to the work of Mallarmé (102). These ideas about literature and its relation to philosophy were propounded energetically by Blanchot across his long career, in that post-Hegelian twilight from which much important twentieth-century French

thought emerged: ‘in Blanchot’s eyes, for instance, literature would not be a poetic creation and evocation of being but a non-thought, a material thinking in writing that seeks to avoid its own conceptualization the better to draw out its peculiar force, which animates and fractures thinking’ (110). This way of putting it elegantly formulates the Blanchotian tradition of literary philosophy. It is a tradition in which it is fair to situate Allen’s book, although it is worth reiterating that *Illegibility* is distinguished by its entertaining of a more deconstructive spirit in Hegel’s own œuvre than one often finds in this subfield. Blanchot’s literary-philosophical writings exhibit a priestly quality, which they share with Bataille’s (while never drifting into the Sadean tedium by which the latter was sometimes seduced), and this has in turn led to much critical writing on him which is discipular, and which accordingly conceals its procedural building-blocks. Allen’s construal of Blanchot counters this tendency: what we get here is a rigorous delineation of a thought which is engaged in what we might, in short, term an immanent critique of dialectical thinking.

It is a fact, at once simple and complex, that language is the constant in philosophical thought—sometimes only for the simple reason that it is its vehicle, sometimes because it also becomes its theme—and yet the inconstancies of language, many of them exploited in the kinds of literary writing which interest Blanchot, mean that meaning-making is characteristically at risk of playing up: ‘language transcends itself within language, it has no absolute exteriority, no other or beyond, only its own endless internal reflections and displacements, which become its infinite “totality”’ (109/10). This neatly expresses why the relation of Hegel’s philosophy to its language (or to the language which makes that philosophy its) has acquired such special interest for Continental philosophers: its behaviour resembles that of thought in Hegel’s programme, but also does not resemble it. Language, for Blanchot, is ‘already thoroughgoing scepticism, about what it is and what it does, what it means and what it intends’ (121).

One sometimes has to take the Blanchotian *argot* at face-value here, such as when Allen writes of his *L’Attente l’oubli* (1962) that ‘it is neither a narrative with meditative asides, nor an essay with narrative moments, but that which maintains itself through a suspension of the decision between them, between *histoire* and thought, description and analysis, fiction and truth, or praxis and theory, and thereby places itself at the very border of the world’ (188). Beguiling as this coda is, it is also fair to say that it reflects, in Blanchot and his critics, a tendency to allow the thesis to get carried away with itself. On the other hand, one might argue that such acephalous commitment to the rhythms of the argument can be important for the possible adoption of unforeseen perspectives.

Allen’s book is unlikely to be surpassed as a philosophically robust and clear-sighted guide to the *entretien infini* between Hegel and Blanchot, philosophy and literature, and negation and negativity. There is a good deal more to it than I have

been able to summarize here, many resistant remainders and loose ends (appropriately enough). Allen has peppered his book with a number of sentences which seem to lay down its fundamental argument, but each time with a little shift of accent, emphasis or focus; I don't know if this is deliberate, but it is certainly fitting. One such quasi-transcendental sort-of-synopsis reads:

Rather than seeking to understand change through a form of dialectics or phenomenology, Blanchot finds in the movements of sentences a kind of material transcription that allows thinking to emerge in and as the wake of its experience, as that which results from it without ever completing itself. (177)

The continually belated sentence as the posthumous form of thinking, which is also its only actualized form; thinking emerging as somehow only 'present' if attendant at its own wake. These are strange scenes, literary no doubt. Yet, Allen has shown us, they are also unmistakably Hegelian ones, if, like Adorno, one is attuned to Hegel's work in all its constitutive illegibility.

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