

OXFORD CENTRE FOR LIFE-WRITING

AUTOFICTION AND MAURICE BLANCHOT: reading group Hilary Term 2023

Dates: January 23, February 6, 20, March 6 (Mondays, 5PM-7PM)

Location: Wolfson College (Seminar Room 2)

Organizers: Michael Holland (St. Hugh's College) and OCLW visiting doctoral student Kim Schoof (Open University, The Netherlands)

Registrations: will open soon via [the OCLW website](#)

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The French author Annie Ernaux, “the grande dame of autofiction”, having received the 2022 Nobel Prize in literature, autofiction seems to have consolidated its status as an established literary genre. Yet, definitions of the genre are often cloudy: What exactly is at stake in autofiction? Is the genre, as Merve Emre has argued, nothing other than “the gimmick of metafiction, which, unwilling to part with its one-time trick of referring to itself, has recently been rebranded as autofiction” (*New Yorker*, November 9th 2020)? Or is it rather, as Sam Ferguson claimed, the preferred literary form of contemporary authors seeking to “respond to certain crises in their relation to writing, their self, and the world” ([blogpost](#), March 26th 2020)?

In this reading group, we will make a joint attempt at extracting a coherent perspective on the genre of autofiction from the work of the twentieth-century French philosopher and literary author Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot was arguably a practitioner of the genre. His major 1980 work, *The Writing of the Disaster*, contains autobiographical passages about childhood experiences of his that he framed as fiction: “(A primal scene?) You who live later, close to a heart that beats no more, *suppose, suppose* this: the child – is he seven years old, or eight perhaps? – standing by the window, drawing the curtain and, through the pane, looking.” (Blanchot 1980, 161, italics ours). Yet, Blanchot has also written extensively on the autobiographical writings of other authors, such as Kafka’s letters and diaries, Rousseau’s *Confessions*, and Proust’s *Recherche*, often with a keen eye for their fictional aspects.

In Blanchot scholarship, his writings on literary fictions have been granted much attention, but his work on autobiographical texts less so. We will look into some of Blanchot’s texts on autobiographical writings, paying special attention to the passage of the writing “I” into the “impersonal” that Blanchot traces in these writings. We hypothesize that this focus may lead us to a welcome perspective on the genre of autofiction, judging from the way Ernaux has described her writing “I”: “The *I* that I use seems to me an impersonal form, barely gendered, sometimes even a word belonging more to ‘the other’ than to ‘me’” ([Ernaux 1993](#), 222).

READING PROGRAMME – topics, dates and readings

In preparation for each meeting, we ask participants to carefully read one relatively concise text by Blanchot, which we will go through in detail. The small lists of thematically related texts we added are optional readings we may loosely refer to during the meetings.

Autobiography and literature’s demand – January 23rd 5PM

- Blanchot, Maurice (2003 [1959]). “Rousseau.” *The Book to Come*. California: Stanford University Press, pp. 41-48.

Optional additional readings:

- Blanchot, Maurice (2003 [1959]). "The Search for Point Zero." *The Book to Come*. California: Stanford University Press, pp. 202-209.
- Gronemann, Claudia (2019). "Autofiction." *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* (Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf ed.). Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 241-246.

"Saving" the self from annihilation: diaries and/as autofiction – February 6th 5PM

- Blanchot, Maurice (2003 [1959]). "Diary and Story." *The Book to Come*. California: Stanford University Press, pp. 183-188.

Optional additional readings:

- Blanchot, Maurice (1995 [1955]). "The Essential Solitude." *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 19-34.
- Blogpost Sam Ferguson on Roland Barthes as a contemporary autofictional writer: <https://samfergusonresearch.com/2020/03/26/roland-barthes-a-contemporary-autofictional-writer-or-barthes-loses-the-habit/>.

Kafka's diaries and/as autofiction – February 20th 5PM

- Blanchot, Maurice (1989 [1955]). "Kafka and the Work's Demand". *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press pp. 57-84.

Optional additional readings:

- Blanchot, Maurice (1995 [1949]). "Kafka and Literature." *The Work of Fire*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 12-26.
- Holland, Michael (2018). "Writing as Überfluss: Blanchot's Reading of Kafka's Diaries." *Understanding Blanchot, Understanding Modernism* (Christopher Langlois ed.). London: Bloomsbury, pp. 342-380.

Blanchot as practitioner of autofiction – March 6th 5PM

- Blanchot, Maurice (1992 [1973]). *The Step Not Beyond*. Albany: State University of New York Press, excerpt: pp. 1-13.

Optional additional readings:

- Nelson, Lycette (1992). "Introduction." *The Step Not Beyond* (Maurice Blanchot). Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. v-xxi.