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Literary Engagement in Blanchot: 
Focusing on the Concept of Literary Unworking

블랑쇼의 문학적 참여: 문학적 반-작업 개념을 중심으로

2018 년 2 월
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Abstract

Literary Engagement in Blanchot: 
Focusing on the Concept of Literary Unworking

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If a commonly shared answer to the question—what literature can do in our society? —it is natural to recall Sartre’s idea of “engaged literature” or the writers’ idea of Enlightenment era. The common trait of these answers is that literature can directly engage in society in ways that represent the social reality or directly criticize it based on the fixed and unified signification conveying a certain message. However, Maurice Blanchot was the thinker who believed that the singular and the most important aspect of literature was not its work of signification but, rather, ‘désœuvrement’ (unworking) that escapes it. Moreover, Blanchot criticized the general idea of community designed as a
result of sharing and agreeing on a certain value or ideology, but excluding others not included in the common trait, and suggests an alternative idea of ‘literary community.’ This study explores how Blanchot’s discussion of literary experience has expanded into the new discussion of political engagement in connection with the question of community.

In general, when we read a literary text, we expect to build a universal knowledge by reading and to embrace their understanding of the world. However, for Blanchot literary work recedes from (unworks) this kind of experience. For example, the reader cannot admit any interpretation as the final one; even the writer confronts a desolate situation wherein even he or she cannot be the best and the last judge of the meaning of the text. This is because, although there is an attempt to define literature into a single meaning, the meaning of the work is continuously contested by those who attempt to approach the work. From this viewpoint, Blanchot contends that literary experience is not oriented to secure certain knowledge but, rather, it refers to the ‘power of contestation,’ which the final meaning of work is never determined.

Blanchot compares two kinds of communication: first, the useful communication that produces useful relationships, that is, relationships constituted mainly of a firm commonality; second, useless communications
(in literature), which move toward endless discord without reaching a consensus. Blanchot claims that the second communication helps us to reject the power apparatuses—the authority maintained by the first communication, which produces a deceptive, but useful, unity. The first communication furtively forces us to make a consensual decision through institutional, public agreement; however, the second communication ceases this public consent and preserves a different voice from being reduced to a consensus. This is because the second communication allows for the possibility of a disagreement. And that is a good thing for Blanchot, because it means that community can allow for the voice of the others to be heard in the public system that pursues consent. Hence, the experience of contestation makes us confronted with constant inconsistencies without ending with a single public consent based on a certain authority or institution. From this, even if community is not a projected communion centered on a certain common trait, we can infer that community can work in a way that guarantees the freedom of contestation arising from the lack of commonality.

The power of contestation revealed in literature for Blanchot is a political condition that makes us reflect on the problem of community. It also means the condition of a new community, which reveals another sense of commonality that shares an experience of the absence of the absolute
commonality—that is, the commonality beyond the substantial commonality. Here is the possibility of new literary engagement rising, which is related to the problem of securing and ensuring freedom of contestation in community. Blanchot’s thinking of literature and community implies the rise of a new possible politics as an alternative form of politics by ensuring the freedom of contestation, without being involved in the politics of the public domain operating in the union community. Therefore, this study posits that, to view the question of community as a problem of literature it stops the blind acceptance of the modern people of the unity and stabilization of the community by pointing out and criticizing all the planning, institutional attempts for public consensus in our community.

Keywords: Maurice Blanchot, Unworking (désœuvrement), Literary experience, Literary engagement, Fixed and unified signification, Contestation, Literary Community

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Abbreviations

The following is a list of works used throughout this thesis. All other references appear in the footnotes, and the entire works used are reproduced in the bibliography.

Works by Blanchot:

A  L’Amitié
BC  The Book to Come
CI  La Communauté Inavouable
ED  L’Ecriture du désastre
EI  L’Entretien Infini
EL  L’Espace Littéraire
F  Friendship
IC  The Infinite Conversation
LV  Le Livre à Venir
PF  La Part du Feu
SL  The Space of Literature
UC  The Unavowable Community
WD  The Writing the Disaster

Works by Sartre:

WL  What is Literature?
QL  Qu’est-ce que la Littérature ?
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Introduction

This study aims to explore the concept of ‘unworking’ (désœuvrement) in Maurice Blanchot’s literary theory and discuss how Blanchot’s ideas on literary disengagement (désgagement) can be paradoxically identified with the political idea of “literary engagement” in relations to the issue of community. Through this exploration, I will argue that the “literary disengagement” espoused by Blanchot refers to on one level, the refusal of the general concept of community, which is composed of a common trait, such as blood relation, nationality, or religious conviction, while simultaneously, on another level, the engagement with a new conception of community, which we will refer later as ‘literary community,’ open to others.

If a commonly shared answer to the question—what literature can do in our society? —it is natural to recall Sartre’s idea of “engaged literature.” After the Second World War, Sartre recognized the need to expose the grim realities of the postwar era and to transform such grim prospects. Hence, in *What is literature? (Qu’est-ce que la littérature?),* 1948, Sartre argued that literature should aim to change the world by producing a message referencing the problems in our society, while aiming to arouse the people’s political consciences. That is, he suggested the theory of engaged literature, which
envisioned literature to bring change to society by designating, explaining, begging, or persuading something to the reader \( (QL \ 25/\ WL \ 19) \).\(^1\) This passionate tone of Sartre is founded on his firm trust on the communicative capacity of literary works, and such passion is not too distant from the general expectations that we have toward the writers of our generation—the writers’ responsibility to express political messages through their works and their direct contributions to social change. By reading a literary text, we expect a thoughtful message to be embedded in such text by the writer, and by communicating such message in common, a relationship founded on the common understanding of the text may emerge. In a certain sense, of course, this type of belief carries conviction and seems effective in arousing the reader. So perhaps, this could be the reason why Sartre’s claim of engaged literature had a great impact on French writers of the day. It was also well accepted by many writers in the colonial contexts. In Korea, in particular, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Sartrean ideas also triggered huge debate on the methodology of literary commitment concerning the controversy between pure literature and

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\(^1\) Sartre writes: “he [the writer] designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates.”
engaged literature. The idea of “engaged literature” obviously opens the eyes of the writers to the possibility that literature can be a useful mediator of communication and also function as a vehicle to transform an absurd society by persuading its members to agree with the relevant social transformation.

However, I believe that this line of thought places too heavy an expectation on the communicative capacity of literature. Of course, we generally expect a literary text to become a medium for effective communication; however, here lies the problems: first, literary works may be reduced to a tool in itself for a purposeful communication similar to the roles played by other texts including instructional manuals or descriptive writing. To frame this problem somewhat extremely, if literary works are limited to a mere communicative tool, the readers would no longer have any reason to read and write literary works. If literary work’s importance is in its communicative capacity, we may, albeit in extreme simplicity, argue that reading political treatises or news article would be better than reading a novel by Samuel Beckett, which is both unfathomable and difficult to read. Second, there is a risk that a literary work could serve to make certain values, such as

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2 윤정임 (Yoon Jeongim), “사르트르 한국 수용사 연구 (Study on the reception of Sartre in Korea)”, 『프랑스문화예술연구』 (French Culture and Art Research) 36, 2011.5. p.163.
a particular identity, religious faith, or political ideology, absolute in our community. Strictly speaking, however, we could establish and enhance a community by sharing messages derived from a literary text. However, in such case, a risk of making such message unassailable and absolute in that community is present; hence, a literary work, in the foregoing example, may serve as a barricade to exclude others who do not share the same value as the rest of the community.

Maurice Blanchot, whose work I plan to explore in this study, was the thinker and the writer who had pondered on this problem of the direct engagement of literary works with society. In the year following the publication of What is Literature?, Blanchot published The Work of Fire (La part du feu, 1949) wherein Blanchot gave a skeptical response to the Sartrean idea of engaged literature. In essence, contrary to Sartre, Blanchot doubted the utility and the ‘communicative’ potential of literature. Moreover, conversely, he believed that the singular and the most important aspect of literature was not its work of signification, but, rather, ‘désœuvrement’ (unworking) of literature. This strange word, ‘désœuvrement,’ is composed of the negative prefix ‘dés-’ and the word ‘œuvre,’ which can be translated into “work, task, operation, or assignment.” In general terms, we may interpret that ‘désœuvrement’ is an inversion of the word ‘œuvre’ or a body of work; hence,
in essence, it can be interpreted as a non-work, or an unworking, inertia, lack of work. Further, in Blanchot’s literary theory, the term ‘désœuvrement’ refers to the decisive work of literary text that escapes the general work of literature conveying a meaning, that is, ‘unworking’ of the unified and fixed signification of a language. From this unworking of literature, Blanchot argues that, intrinsically, literature “disengages” from communicating work of language. Since he believed that a literary work cannot be a mode of communication without issue because it withholds a part of itself, it cannot simply be a tool with which the writer engages with the world. However, is it really only disengagement? Is there no possibility of engagement with society in Blanchot’s thought?

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3 The English translation of ‘désœuvrement’ is fluid depending on the context. The terms, ‘workless-ness’ and ‘unworking,’ are used to indicate that the issue of ‘désœuvrement’ is an antithesis to the norms and functions of the completed, goal-centered works. However, when it is translated as ‘idleness,’ ‘inertia,’ ‘inactivity,’ ‘inoperativity,’ ‘désœuvrement’ means that literature is not reduced to ordinary works geared to achieving a certain purpose or to articulate that the work of literature is different from those other works. Among these, the most widely used translations are “workless-ness” used by Leslie Hill, one of the representative English-speaking researchers of Blanchot and “unworking” by Pierre Joris, the translator of The Unavowable Community. In this study, I will translate the French word, “désœuvrement,” as ‘unworking.’ The first reason behind such choice is that this term directly reveals the connection with the word ‘œuvre,’ which means work in French, as the origin of the word ‘désœuvrement.’ Hence, the term ‘unworking’ easily specify the concept of ‘désœuvrement’ from the most fundamental level of the idea. Further, the second reason is that, as this study will discuss below, in Blanchot’s mind, “désœuvrement” primarily referred to the work of literature that ceases to convey a meaning and, simultaneously, politically refuse all actions to strengthen and maintain a certain form of community. From this perspective, this study translates ‘désœuvrement’ as ‘unworking,’ expecting that such translation could embrace both literary and political aspects of ‘désœuvrement.’
My belief is that this is not the end of Blanchot’s discussion of literary disengagement. Let’s consider the literary texts of, say, Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet, the leading writers of the French “new” novels, which escaped the usual signification function and appeared to have no message, but, rather, moving further toward the innovation of their material signs, styles, and forms. In a glance, the Sartrean engagement is obviously absent, since the meaning of such works cannot be encapsulated into a single meaning and is difficult to communicate. However, though the foregoing works are not engaged in the manner of the Sartrean engagement, another sense of political ramification in these works is apparent—the attempts of formal changes by avant-garde writers delivered progressive and radical innovations to society by leading the disentanglement from conventional order, culture, and sense. So perhaps we could go a little further and suggest that another form of engagement exists in literature, which is the “disengaged” engagement of literature, as described by Blanchot as “the most disengaged literature is at the same time the most engaged” (PF 102/ WF 96-97).

Previous studies on Blanchot’s idea of literary disengagement were somewhat weighted towards his idea of literature and they tended to discuss it merely in the confrontational context vis-à-vis the Sartrean literary engagement. According to Kenneth Douglas, Blanchot is only little concerned
with the author who has the humble task of creating a literary work; however, he has an immense interest in the nature of literature “from the purely aesthetic point of view.” Yet, Sartre regards literary writing as “a goal-oriented striving” or oriented for a specific enterprise such as a social engagement.\(^4\) In general, literary engagement is considered as a definite part of Sartre’s theory, hence, the Blanchotian sense of literary disengagement is treated as an additional opposition to Sartre’s theory. Moreover, literary disengagement is generally regarded as an argument wherein literature itself is considered as unengaged with a certain purpose and as an attempt to express the new value of pure literature that lacks any intent to pursue social commitment. It is obvious that such prior discussions of the Blanchotian sense of literary disengagement provide a detailed account of how literature can be freed from the intentional purpose and how it can differentiate itself from the ordinary works that produce a certain result as their goal.\(^5\) However, the interpretation of

\(^4\) Soon after Blanchot published *The Work of fire*, Douglas wrote an article comparing Blanchot and Sartre. It seems that this article is the very first study that dealt with the difference between Blanchot and Sartre. See Douglas, Kenneth, “Blanchot and Sartre”, *Yale French Studies*, No.3, Criticism and Creation, 1949, pp.85-95

\(^5\) Hill suggests that Blanchot’s discussions on the autonomy of art and isolation of art are some of the origins of Blanchotian idea of literature. A similar theory came from Antonio Garcia Berrio. He connects Blanchot’s literary idea with the idea of art for art’s sake, and shows the traits of pure literature that makes an effort to explore the essence of art. See Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, London: Routledge, 1993, pp.121-127; and Berrio,
Blanchotian literary disengagement as another call for engagement still remains unarticulated.

Only Jean-Luc Nancy hints and prods us to explore Blanchot’s discussion of disengaged literature in terms of the question of community. He argues that the link between Blanchot’s literary idea and his political idea of community is one of the cores of Blanchotian thoughts. He points out that Blanchot’s concept of literary unworking is a clue to link them. By comprehensively reviewing Blanchot’s idea of literary unworking in the sphere of politics, he concludes, “community necessarily takes place in what

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Nancy’s argument is truly remarkable when considered from the following point. According to Haase and Large, the entire academia was reluctant to deal with Blanchot’s political ideas concerning community when speaking of his early idea of literature. This is because there is a contradiction between Blanchot’s early interest in the literary disengagement and his later interest in the politics of community. Young Blanchot was an active contributor to right-wing journals in France so that his idea of the disengagement of literature can be called into doubt in that it was part of an effort to secure a conservative position. However, Blanchot’s literary reflections after the Second World War led him to take, notably in 1958 and 1968, a different sort of position entirely—a left-leaning political ideology. In this sense, the relationship between Blanchot’s initial literary views and his later views of community is very complicated. Hence, the remarkable aspect of Nancy’s argument is that he actively attempts to find the connection between Blanchot’s literary theory and his later thought of community by using Blanchot’s concept of unworking and tries to discuss the political significance of Blanchot’s thought within such a complex connection. See Haase, Ullrich and Large, William, *Maurice Blanchot*, London; New York: Routledge, 2001. p.71; and about Blanchot’s change of political position, see Mehlman, Jeffrey, “Blanchot at Combat: Of Literature and Terror,” *Modern Language Notes*, 95, 1980: pp. 808-829.
Blanchot has called unworking \([désœuvrement]\).”

That is, according to Nancy, the attempt to discuss politics of literature in connection with the question of community is derived from the Blanchotian thought of literary unworking. Referring to Nancy’s discussion, hence, the stance of this study is as follows: in order to redefine Blanchot’s idea of literary disengagement as a form of engagement on another level, that is, the Blanchotian sense of literary engagement, we should refer to not only Blanchot’s early idea of literature, but also his later theory of community with a focus on his notion of unworking.

In this context, this study attempts to explore the Blanchotian sense of literary engagement, considering his thoughts on disengaged literature and community in the following manner. First, akin to what previous studies have pointed out, I will not overlook the point that Blanchot’s discussion of disengaged literature is opposed to Sartre’s theory of engaged literature. Sartre was a contemporary figure who led the debate on literary engagement. Therefore, in order to articulate Blanchot’s complex position on the literary engagement, which attempts to overcome the limitations of the Sartrean engagement and simultaneously establishes his own independent idea from the

7 See Nancy, Jean-Luc, \(La communauté désœuvrée\), Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986, pp.78-79 (Eng. p.31)
disengaged literature, more clearly, it is necessary to compare him with Sartre. Next, following Nancy’s view that I have mentioned above, by focusing on the notion of unworking, I will explain the connection between Blanchot’s idea of literature and community. This could be a necessary detour in order to further our investigation of a Blanchotian sense of literary engagement, which is related to the unworking of literature and the politics of community.

Taking all these considerations into account, this study will be constituted as follows. In Chapter 1, I will examine Sartre’s theory of engaged literature and its limitations. Sartre had planned the commitment of literature by using language; yet, engaged literature suffers from the issue of subordination of literature to the external purposes. This limit becomes the starting point for Blanchot to reflect on the essence of literature and to develop the idea of disengaged literature. In Chapter 2, I will analyze the concept of the unworking as a proper character of literature wherein literature has no relation to the external matters. Based on such analysis, I will identify the Blanchotian idea of disengaged literature. Subsequently, through Blanchot’s understanding of the communality developed by his idea of disengaged literature, I will confirm how such understanding can be related to the discussions on the idea of engagement that is proper to literature. In Chapter 3, I will examine the substance of Blanchot’s new thoughts regarding the
community in relation to his discussion on literature, which I have discussed in the previous chapter. Additionally, I will articulate how the concept of literary unworking can be linked to the discussion of literary community, which demands a new conception of community. In conclusion, based on these discussions, I will illustrate the fact that the political significance of Blanchotian sense of literary engagement was rooted in his reflection of literature and community.
1. Preliminary Consideration: Sartrean Engaged Literature

Before elaborating on Blanchot’s discussion of disengaged literature, in this chapter, we will examine Sartre’s theory of engaged literature on the opposite side of the Blanchotian idea. First, I will explore how Sartre had proposed his theory of engaged literature based on his philosophical background. Second, I will analyze the distinction between prose and poetry in his engaged literature theory, and prove that this distinction is based on his view of regarding literature as a ‘communicative’ tool for achieving goals. Finally, I will shed light on the significance and the limitation of Sartrean engaged literature theory; subsequently, I will explore how such a limitation became a starting point for Blanchot’s idea of disengaged literature.

A. Sartrean Literary Engagement

In the twentieth century, Sartre was one of the leading philosophers and writers who actively participated in the discussions regarding contemporary social issues. This is because he had emphasized the social responsibility and commitment of contemporary intellectuals to drive social change by resisting the conventional and oppressive social orders. In particular, in *What is literature?*, Sartre considers the signification function of literature and the role
of a writer in society. According to Sartre, “words are action,” (QL 28/ SL 23) which change the world. This is because, by mediating the communication within society, literary works provoke the idea that humanity must not become ignorant to the world and further persuade them to engage in a certain situation to change it. Under this conception of Sartre, hence, literary writing becomes a form of ‘action’ that aims at revealing an absurd situation and tries to change it in the name of ‘engaged literature’ (littérature engagée).

If literary writing is communicative and is useful to achieve a certain purpose such as a social change, it was not poetry but prose that was appropriate for the commitment (engagement) to the situation and its ultimate change for Sartre. This is the case since “prose is, in essence, utilitarian,” for such purposes. Further, an author of a prose is “a man who makes use of words” (QL 25/ WL 19) as opposed to a poet who deals with words as material objects. Sartre argued that “poets are men who refuse to utilize language” (QL 17/ WL 11). In order to understand these differences between prose and poetry, we need to accept another distinction between an ‘instrument’ and ‘things’ (choses). According to Sartre, an author of a prose deals with words as “signs” (signes), that is, a useful “instrument” (instrument) for purpose of signification; on the contrary, a poet considers words as “things,” which interrupt
signification (QL 17/ WL 12). Then, what is the difference between an ‘instrument’ and ‘thing’ and what does this difference signify? “"

When Sartre differentiates between an instrument (or a tool) and a thing, he bore in mind a similar distinction made by Heidegger in *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit).* Heidegger suggested the concept of ‘conspicuousness’ (*Auffälligkeit*) as criteria for distinguishing between an instrument and a thing. When we use something as a tool, its thingness (or materiality) must not be conspicuous, but rather forgotten, since it only exists as a tool to achieve a goal. Conversely, when something malfunctions, the things can be noticed and become conspicuous. For example, when one sits on a wooden chair, one does not mind the materiality that is being used. However, if the chair breaks down one day, it is no longer able to serve as a chair, and it turns out to be an eyesore or a nuisance, that is, a thing. When the chair appears as a thing, the rotten, scratched parts of the wooden chair, or its hoariness, which were

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8 지영래(Ji Youngrae), “문학의 문체와 미술의 화풍: 산문적 태도와 시적 태도, 사르트르의 두 미학적 입장 (Reflection on the notion of style: the prosaic attitude and the poetic attitude, two aesthetic positions of J.-P. Sartre)”, 『프랑스문화예술연구(Research of the French Culture and Art)』, 17, 프랑스문화예술학회 (Association of Studies of French Culture and Art), 2016, p.339

9 Heidegger says, “When something cannot be used—when, for instance, a tool definitely refuses to work—it can be conspicuous only in and for dealings in which something is manipulated.” Heidegger, Martin, (trans.) J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. *Being and Time, Oxford: Basil Blackwell*, 1962, p.406
unnoticeable until that moment, would become conspicuous. In this case, we can say that the materiality (the woodiness) that exists as the chair is remains inconspicuous (that is, it is transparent) when it functions well as a tool; however, once it breaks down and fails to serve its intended purpose as a tool, it becomes a conspicuous thing.

Influenced by this concept of conspicuousness, Sartre suggested the concept of ‘opacity’ (l’opacité) as a criterion for distinguishing between a prosaic language and a poetic language. He described that language can be used as a tool for signification or can be exposed conspicuously as things in itself. When language is used as a tool, its function is signification—a communicative sign to convey meanings. Hence, its materiality is reduced to something transparent, since it must not be conspicuous in its usage. However, when language appears as a thing, by manifesting itself as a material or an opaque signifier (signifiant), it exists there (être là) as itself. In other words, when the materiality of language becomes more prominent, it refuses to perform its general function—i.e., signification. According to Sartre, in the former case, an author of a prose regards language as a transparent and communicative tool. However, in the latter case, writers who regard language as a thing in itself and focus on the opacity of its materiality are the poets. In sum, prosaic language as a tool is transparent, while poetic language is opaque.
Let us examine these differences more closely. An author of a prose aims at only making words become privileged instruments for signification; in other words, under such formulation, words should work as useful signs to designate the object and communicate their meaning to the read. Such works identity as being the words themselves is not the interest of an author of a prose. An author of a prose deals with words as if he/she is treating a transparent glass. Sartre asserts that “there is a prose when the word passes across our gaze as the glass across the sun” (*QL* 26/ *WL* 20). By utilizing such transparent word, an author of a prose signifies the thing or a situation in accordance with his or her intention and communicates its meanings to the reader. However, on the contrary, a poet treats words not as a mere transparent instrument for signification, but, rather, as a material thing. When a poet creates his or her work, the materiality of language itself is the material of his or her work. Hence, unlike prose, poetic words do not pass across our gaze, but, rather, they attract our gaze through its opacity. According to Sartre, this opacity of poetic words interrupts the function of signification since the materiality of words no longer becomes a vehicle of meanings or a tool for communication; rather, the words exist in and by themselves. Therefore, Sartre contends that poetic word is “no longer a signification, but a substance” (*QL* 24/ *WL* 18).
Sartre points to Mallarmé’s poem as an example that explains concretely the characteristics of poetic words, such as materiality, opacity, and refusal of signification.

_Fuir, là-bas fuir, je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres_

(To flee, to flee there, I feel that birds are drunk)

*Mais Ô mon cœur entends le chant des matelots.*

(But, oh, my heart, heart the song of the sailors.)\(^{10}\)

Here, Sartre pays attention to the word ‘*Mais,*’ which means ‘but’ in English. In general, this word ‘*Mais,*’ is used as the adversative conjunction to show the reversal of the contents. However, Sartre points out that in this poem, ‘*Mais,*’ does not link the second verse with the preceding one in an adversative way. Instead, he argues that ‘*Mais,*’ rises “like a monolith at the threshold of the sentence…” (QL 23/ WL 17). This is the case since this conjunction ‘*Mais,*’ no longer inspires to the mind of the reader of an operation that is to be carried out, but, rather, it appears a monolith-like obstacle standing in front of the sentence based on its material form. In this case, ‘*Mais,*’ is, so to speak, an

\(^{10}\) Quoted in _QL_ 23/ _SL_ 17, Emphasis added.
opaque, material object, which no longer signifies its role in the poem, but rather exists as part of the deeper meaning of the sentence—having the life of its own as an object.

By considering these differences between prose and poetry, Sartre naturally admits only prose as a form of “engaged literature.” This is because only the language of prose can communicate and thereby is regarded as a useful tool to achieve the goal of a literary work: revealing a certain situation and bringing about the change in reality by persuading others (readers in particular) to act. The poetic language, conversely, is deemed useless by Sartre, since it goes against the work of signification, which is the ordinary function of language. In poetry, the materiality of language is accentuated and language cannot function as a tool for communication; instead, it is revealed as an opaque and uncommunicable object in itself. Now then, we can understand the reason why Sartre regards only prose as a form of “engaged literature,” and not poetry. As explained above, this is the case since only prose can communicate and invite the readers to engage in a certain situation by its function of signification.
B. Limits: Exclusion of Poetic Word and Instrumentalization of Literature

When Sartre introduced his theory of engaged literature, Europe was in a very difficult situation after the Second World War. Many French writers felt that they shared a task (œuvre) to expose the difficult realities of the postwar era by taking an active action of the artist-subject. In particular, as discussed above, Sartre attempted to justify the social engagement of writers and literature by making an argument for engaged literature, and actively encouraged other writers to follow his lead. However, since he overemphasizes the task of literature and its political role, his theory of engaged literature manifested the following limitations.

The first limitation is derived from the extreme demarcation drawn between prose and poetry. Sartre contrasts prose and poetry so decidedly to the extent that he asserted that “there is nothing in common between these two acts of writing except the movement of the hand which traces the letters.” Additionally, he further asserts that “their (prose and poetry) universes are incommunicable, and what is good for one is not good for the other” (QL 25/WL 19). Under such extreme adversary relationship lays Sartre’s intention to emphasize the communicative function of literary works. However, Sartre’s argument on literature and its role is controversial in that it completely
excludes poetry from literature and chooses to focus only on prose. Sartre contends that “the empire of signs is prose; poetry is on the side of painting, sculpture, and music” (QL 18/ WL 11). This implies that poetry is excluded from literature under the Sartrean conception, but, rather, it is considered to fall on the side of painting, sculpture, and music. This is because this type of art, such as poetry, refuses to be utilized as signs but only emerges as materials. Likewise, Sartre excludes the possibility of engagement by other art form other than prose, and thereby absolutely blocks the entire segments of art through his strict distinction between prose and poetry. Sartre appears to have a very restricted view of the engagement by art form. In art history, however, a poet, a painter, and a musician, who form new attitudes toward words, colors, and sounds have delivered great impact and shock to the world and led the world to change toward a more progressive direction. Although they do not deal with meaning and communication the way an author of a prose does, poets, painters and musicians still impacted and drove the world in a certain direction forward. In other words, rather than directly claiming a certain message, in a certain sense, the indirect manner of changing the style of processing a given material may create a greater impact on the world and trigger a radical change. In this sense, we may indicate that Sartre intentionally
ignores this kind of engagement by uncommunicable genres of art, such as poetry, music, or painting as being also possible.

The second limitation is the existence of fears that engaged literature may serve to enhance a certain politically or ideologically exclusive group. According to Haase and Large, Sartre's progress from Marxism to Maoism is not irrelevant to his idea of engaged literature, which clings to the idea of a direct and political stance. Why? In *Critique of the Dialectic Reason* (*Critique de la Raison dialectique*), No.2, Sartre argues that among the members of any political grouping, pledge of allegiance is necessary in order to create a standing organization of individuals and to achieve the common goal of protecting their freedom. As T. Storm Heter notes that this group formation (which Sartre calls an organic praxis of ‘group-in-fusion,’ that is, a fused group) is effective in securing the social group and its member's freedom. Hence, Sartre's claim encourages the flourishing of mutual reciprocity among the group members, which is good for modern democracy that requires its

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11 Haase and Large briefly comments on the Sartrean engagement. They argue that Sartrean engagement is an intimate attempt for a direct political action to achieve a goal of community and it may serve to establish a specific form of community. See Haase and Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p.123.
citizens or persons to voluntarily engage in social functions.\textsuperscript{12} In this context, the engaged literature can help the rise of mutual reciprocity between group members by mediating them with messages. It can be dealt with a very useful instrument for the formation of group. However, paradoxically, there lies the risk that the engaged literature could only enhance and fix a certain form of group that share the same goal with its members. Then, it can exclude others or other groups that do not share the common goals. In this sense, Sartre’s literary engagement cannot escape the criticism that it overlooks the problem of those who stand outside of the group and thereby it is in danger of playing a role in the enhancement of the fused group, which can transform into an exclusive community. That is, while Sartre’s literary engagement aims at a commendable purpose of changing the world for the better, it may also deteriorate into a mere propaganda calling for the enhancement of another oppressive and totalitarian community.

The last limitation is that, because of the overemphasis on its purpose represented by social change or engagement, literature itself could be instrumentalized to such end. Sartre contends that “the writer can guide you

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and, if he describes a hove, make it seem the symbol of social injustice and provoke your indignation” (QL 16/ WL 10). Here is a strong belief that this kind of Sartrean definition of literary function (or task) is effective in inviting a certain political action or active engagement from a literary writer. However, the problem is that if too much emphasis is laid on those works (and purposes) rather than on literature itself, literature degenerates into a tool for achieving a certain purpose, which might infringe the autonomy of literature.

Actually, Sartre was already aware of this criticism. Hence, he refuted this criticism by denigrating the ideas of art for art’s sake or autonomy of art as an old and disturbing theory. Moreover, he further criticized pure literature of having no interest in social engagement, but, rather, falling on the side of the discussions of the autonomy of art, by reason of its uselessness and idleness. He argued that “we know very well that pure art and empty art are the same thing” in criticizing pure art as espousing meaningless aesthetic purism (QL 32/ WL 27). However, it seems that we can also give another criticism on this view—does pure art really have no interest in active communication and no possibility of engaging in social change? Is it really an empty art form because it is useless to social change? Isn’t it Sartre himself who belittled such art from for having no possibility of affecting any interest in having or achieving its goal or communication functions in advance?
Blanchot was also aware of such limitations of the Sartrean thinking of engaged literature. His main difficulty with the Sartrean notion of engagement was, as Daniel Just had already argued, “the danger inherent in its propagation of narratives that wish to stabilize meaning and communicate to others.”

In the short essay “Literature and the right to death,” where we can peak into his early understandings of literature, Blanchot criticized engaged literature in the name of the ‘literature of action’ (littérature d’action). According to Blanchot, the idea of engaged literature “calls on people to do something (PF 307/ WF 317).” He further contends that, by encouraging people to do take certain actions, engaged literature eventually determines “something to do” (quelque chose à faire) and frames it as a task that everyone must strive to do. Blanchot warns that “something to do” eventually could be transformed into an “absolute value” (valeur absolue) (PF 307-308/ WF 317). What concerns him here is that literature of action, which overemphasizes its goal as an ‘absolute value,’ is likely to become totalitarian. In this respect, Blanchot takes a critical stance on all the attempts to regard literature as a communicative tool to accomplish its goals or tasks. With this awareness of

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the limitations of engaged literature as a momentum, Blanchot begins to reconsider the reversal of the signification inherent in language’s materiality, which Sartre regarded as the limitation of poetic language. Eventually, Blanchot proposes this character of the poetic word as the notion of literary ‘unworking’ (désœuvrement), which is a decisive feature of literature that poses an alternative to the Sartrean idea of engaged literature. Therefore, in order to understand the new idea of literary engagement in Blanchot, we shall turn to these issues in the next chapter.
2. Blanchot’s Disengaged Literature: Focusing on the Concept of Unworking

We have seen enough by now to know that Sartre had focused on the communicative capacity of literature when speaking of literary engagement. However, we could pose questions in regard to the Sartrean argument: Is literature really a communicative work? Is it possible to make a clear communication based on the same understanding of the literary text? In general, we believe that literary texts can produce certain meanings and create a community of readers that share such meanings. Such thinking is related to our naïve belief that the texts usually have a message to convey, the final message that could be communicated. However, when we listen to critics or experts telling us what it means, it does not appear to capture the truly final meaning of the texts; rather, it seems that there could be other possibilities of ‘contestation’ of meanings and abundant interpretations. Blanchot’s early thought on literature is essentially related to these problems. Moreover, in certain passages in his early writing of literature, he discusses the impossibility of any final signification of literature in terms of “unworking,” and suggests the idea of literary disengagement that is far from Sartrean concept of communication role, as we shall see herein.
In this context, this chapter has two aims in mind. The first is to articulate what the literary experience is for Blanchot by conducting a careful and patient analysis of literary unworking, which indicates literature’s escape from the final and fixed signification—making of the final meaning of the thing. In order to do this, I will refer to Blanchot’s analysis of the literary works, for example, particularly Kafka’s *The Castle* and Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* in his writings on literature, *The Space of Literature* and *The Book to Come* (*Le Livre à venir*, 1959). This will allow us to understand that there is another aspect of literary experience which is different from our general belief of literature that the literary work contributes to the achievement of general knowledge, culture, and values by becoming the medium of communication between readers. Next, based on Blanchot’s thinking of literary unworking, I will show such preconceptions could be broken and there could be another sense of literary experience that is linked to the absence of final meaning in literary work. Finally, this will allow us to think of disengagement of literature, which does not engage in the usual communication or the relationships, and its implications.
A. Characteristics of Disengaged Literature: Unworking

a. Background of the Concept of Unworking: Establishment of New Poetics

As I have articulated above, Sartre argues that literature can contribute to engagement with social changes since it is communicative. Then, how about Blanchot? In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot mentions that the writer’s ideal in classical art, at least in France, was to speak of the universal truth through the certainty of a language’s fixed and unified signification, which guarantees the stable meanings and communications (*EL* 24/*SL* 28). In *The Work of Fire*, Blanchot gives the example of Flaubert’s literature of realism that illustrates social situations through fixed signification of “meaningful prose” (*la prose significative*). Additionally, he admits that it contributes to social representation and makes reflection of such social representation possible (*PF* 321/*WF* 332). In this respect, like Sartre, Blanchot appears to also affirm

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14 In the essay “Literature and the right to death,” Blanchot distinguishes what we call the “two slopes of literature” (*PF* 321/*WF* 332). The first slope is a literature, like that of realism of Flaubert, which works its signification and communication functions through meaningful prose, by means of ordinary language which works for signification and communication in everyday life. The other slope of literature is poetical language. For example, Mallarmé or Ponge’s poetry or the works of Nouveau Roman are not interested in signification. He points out that they are concerned with the materiality of language itself and emerge with the idea that such works are absent of a single meaning. *See* Gasché, Rodolphe, “The Felicities of
that there is a useful and communicative aspect in literature. However, Blanchot points out that this kind of literature (what he calls ‘meaningful prose’) is only possible in so far as literary works are believed to have fixed and unified signification to produce final message. He thinks that it is not the proper work of literature, arguing that literature escapes intrinsically from the fixed and unified signification and that the so-called “unworking” is the very characteristic of literature. Then, what does this mean for Blanchot? How does he illustrate this point? In order to answer these questions, I will articulate first what the background of his idea of unworking was.

In his early writings, Blanchot explores the question of literature and literary experience. Specifically, in the context of the history of literature, Blanchot seems to consider the proper issue of literature—the so-called ‘the absence (or the lack) of fixed meaning’ or ‘the uselessness of literature’—under the influence of new poetics appearing from the history of French literature, which are particularly represented by Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé. In those days when Baudelaire and Mallarmé worked in the field of literature, there was a trend of realism literature taking precise and

fixed signification based on reason. The writers represent the social order, rules, custom and morality of the day empirically with their writings. It was based on the manner of thinking espoused by the bourgeoisie of the day, who had the belief that they can govern nature and develop the world by taking fixed signification with language based on human reason.

However, Baudelaire claimed that poetry must be written through imagination, not reason, beyond the usual, conventional literary writing practices. According to Cho Heewon, Mallarmé could not satisfy the conventional utilization of language, which works only to designate, i.e., naming the thing exactly, and produce a final meaning.\textsuperscript{15} This is because he thought that those works only replace an object into an ideal or a concept; they cannot express the vivacity of the thing (the object)—its reality. So he suggested writing pure poetry, a creation of “something” akin to making musical rhythm, which cannot be understood by reason and knowledge. For example, Mallarmé’s famous ‘Sonnet in yx’ (1887)—apparent description of his lover’s fingernails—contains the rhyming scheme of words ending in ‘yx,’ which takes over any representational and reasonable content the poem might

\textsuperscript{15} 조희원 (Cho Heewon), “보들레르와 모더니티 개념 (Baudelaire and the Notion of Modernity)”, 『미학 (Meehak)』, 68, 2011, pp.258-260.
otherwise have. The words come to have a fragile presence that no longer refers to the object or the concept, but, rather, the words represent the fragile absence of the fixed meaning in an object or a concept. These kinds of new poetry shocked the bourgeoisie, because the bourgeoisie could not fathom those poems by relying on reason alone, though they had prided themselves of their intellectual capacities and sophisticated tastes. Of course, the poems of Baudelaire and Mallarmé did not produce certain messages or fixed meanings aiming to criticize the bourgeoisie directly. However, by reading those poems, the bourgeoisie were forced a cruel awakening of the limit to their reasons and began to reflect on their particular manner of thought. By trying to interpret those poems and give a definition for them again and again, however, the bourgeoisie could not fix the meaning of the poems. This unexpectedly made the bourgeoisie contest their bourgeois identity and position themselves, which was never doubted until then. Here, we can see that, although the works themselves did not convey a fixed message of criticism against the bourgeoisie’s snobbism, they could nonetheless make them reflect on and criticize themselves in an indirect manner.

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Haase and Large, p.32.
Certainly, a reader could interpret the works of Baudelaire and Mallarmé on his or her own by reading them from the poets’ point of view or by following the contextual meaning or subjective impressions. Hence, a reader may be able to point out that the absence of a fixed meaning just indicates the existence of a latent polysemy, or an ambiguity in literature. However, I think that the issue of absence of fixed meaning in literature is not merely an issue on the level of discussion about literature’s polysemy; rather, it reaches beyond the level of discussion on literary polysemy. This is the case since, when the enumeration of literary polysemy is expanded, what stood out is not the message that the work intends to communicate and the number of meanings the work contains. Instead, the point that surfaces here is that, in the contestation provoked by the work, the work always takes a step backwards from those meanings or regulations, so as to prevent the formation of an absolute meaning. We can observe this once again from the difficulties that the bourgeoisie had encountered after reading Baudelaire and Mallarmé’s works. Every time they impose general values, concepts, and meanings on the aforementioned works from the authoritative stance of the bourgeoisie, the works always exceeded such impositions. This is the reason why the bourgeoisie went through an extreme hardship—they could not find any consensus on interpretations for the works that Baudelaire and Mallarmé
delivered at that time. Due to the refusal of the fixed and unified signification of such works, the bourgeoisie only faced endless inconsistencies.

When considering these embarrassing experiences that the works of Baudelaire and Mallarmé provoked for the bourgeoisie, we can understand the Blanchotian meaning of literary unworking. In the essay titled “Baudelaire’s failure” (L’Échec de Baudelaire), Blanchot argues that Baudelaire’s literary works are “supernatural,” which approaches more closely to the world than naturalist literature that attempts to empirically represent the world, society and situation (PF 133-151/ WF 132-152). According to Blanchot, this is because Baudelaire’s literature can show the living truth concealed behind the fixed meanings by going against fixed signification of language, turning objects and situations into concepts (PF 140/WF 139-140). Moreover, as de Man had emphasized, Blanchot had considered the strange, pure poems of Mallarmé. Blanchot argues that literary experience is not only related to the general work of developing culture and knowledge, but also concerned the refusal of generalized rules, values, or concepts by exceeding the fixed and determined signification, which we usually expect from the literary work.¹⁷

In this context, Blanchot defines this refusal and excess of literary work to fixed and unified signification, which is inherent in literature as concept of literary unworking. As we will see in more detail later, for Blanchot, if there is anything the literary work attempts to communicate to us, it is not the implicated or hidden message within the work, but, rather, it is the unworking itself, as the work rejects or refuses unified and fixed signification. Under Blanchot’s literary thinking, unworking is the main concept that represents the proper characteristic of literature and the cause of the absence of fixed meanings. Therefore, by considering this notion of unworking next, we will see another aspect of Blanchot’s literary thinking, which can show us new sense of literary experience.

b. Unworking of Literature: Resistance to Fixed Signification

Before exploring what Blanchot means by “literary experience,” I will examine the characteristics of literary unworking. For Blanchot, as we have seen above, literature goes against the fixed and unified signification, which contributes to easy communication in our everyday life, and he refers to this literary anti-work against signification as ‘unworking.’ Then, why does this
happen? How does literature go against the fixed and unified signification? Blanchot writes that:

“[Literary] language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book….it is no longer a name…in this way, language insists on playing its own game without man, who created it (PF 316-317/ WF 327-328).” ¹⁸

According to Blanchot, in literary works, there is no longer an end of the fixed and unified signification that replaces the being with the final concept. However, free interplay of the materiality of language, such as rhythm, weight, and mass, appears. This is irrelevant to the general work of language for the fixed and unified signification. In terms of Blanchot, unworking this general work for easy communication is an autonomous work inherent to literary language. In this point of view, Blanchot regards the protruding materiality as the key trait of literature differentiating it from other general works of

¹⁸ Emphasis added.
language that contribute to communication. Moreover, Blanchot considers the “unworking” of materiality of language, which undoes the work of signification and does not serve a certain external purpose, as the inherent core of the literary works. By focusing on literary language’s refusal of fixed signification, I would like to theorize that the traits of the unworking can be formulated as follows: “the absence of work,” “incompleteness,” and “the refusal of the subjective intention.”

The first trait of literary unworking is the absence of a collective, monolithic message in the literary work. If the interplay of materiality in a literary work is highlighted, a tendency of the works delivering collective, definitive messages may be interrupted. Blanchot refers to this trait of unworking as ‘absence of work’ (l’absence d’œuvre) (El 296/ CI 200) since the interplay of materiality in literary language cannot be reduced to the work of a fixed and unified signification. It continuously betrays the attempts to a final conceptualization. Blanchot gives the example of saying the word, ‘cat.’ When we refer to a cat as a cat in everyday life, fixed signification of language generally restores the cat only to the level of concept or definitive meaning. However, when we see the word ‘cat’ in a poem, it does not directly and decidedly refer to the thing, ‘cat,’ anymore, but, rather, its meaning remains unstable and fluid. Blanchot writes,
Now [in poetry,] there is access to other names, names which are less fixed, still vague, more capable of adapting to the savage freedom of the negative essence– they are unstable groups, no longer terms but the movement of terms, an endless sliding of – “turns of phrase” – which do not lead anywhere (PF 315/ WF 326).

From Blanchot’s above argument on poetic words, we can confirm that literature continues to betray fixed signification, which is the general function of language. Due to this abandonment of unified and fixed signification, literary works remain in the state of indecisiveness. Literary works exceed the fixed meaning defined as “the meaning of this work is like this,” thereby nullifying the general function of constructing a totalized and final message, which the works are expected to convey.

From this indecisiveness, the second trait of unworking— “incompleteness”—is derived from the first trait. Blanchot argues that “the essence of literature is precisely to escape any essential determination, any assertion that stabilizes it or even realizes it” (LV 271/ BC 201). As seen above, a literary work that does not deliver a collective message is always in
an “incomplete (incomplet)” state of meaning.\(^\text{19}\) This is because the interplay of material signifiers is neither appeased nor determined. It resists a final and closed interpretation.\(^\text{20}\) The horizon of meaning is opened infinitely to this state of indeterminacy when the collective, final message is absent. Thus, Blanchot writes that, while ordinary language gives us ease, “literary language is made of uneasiness” (\(PF\) 315/ \(WF\) 325). In other words, literary language breaks the seal that held the ungraspable, the indeterminate meanings within the guise of a general function of language—the fixed and unified signification—by bringing about the corrosion of the fixed meaning. As a result, by abandoning its fixed signification, literature always stays in a state of incompleteness, but, paradoxically, also in a state of abundant meanings (\(PF\) 316/ \(WF\) 327).

Finally, literary unworking is the same as the refusal of common understanding regarding literary work as a result of the subject’s intentional work (\(EL\) 14/ \(SL\) 23-24). Commonly, we think that the writer-subject predetermines the content of messages that he/she intends to convey to the readers and that the readers should decipher and interpret such messages.

\(^{19}\) About the incompleteness of literary work by its never appeased interplay of materiality, see \(EL\) 235-239/ \(SL\) 223-225.

\(^{20}\) Haase and Large, \textit{Maurice Blanchot}, p. 23
However, from Blanchot's perspective, this is intrinsically impossible in literary works. This is the case since the traits of literary unworking discussed above in the forms of absence of collective message and incompleteness both lead to the impossibility of defining the final meaning. Additionally, the more fundamental reason of this impossibility is also derived from the autonomous interplay of signifiers in literature—such autonomous interplay is always out of one’s control, so that the subject cannot fix it. For example, Mallarmé debases his position of the writer-subject by refusing a fixed and unified signification. This is because, in the conditions of the absence of work and the incompleteness, here is revealed the impossibility that the subject, who is the author and the writer, defines the final meaning of the work with his or her own intention. Thus, we can say that this trait of unworking, this refusal of the subject’s intentional work, has two implications: first, the active action (creation and reading) of the writer and the reader aiming at the absolute completion and the achievement of the final message of the text is continuously receded from the literary works.  

Second, the literary work cannot be reduced to the subject-writer’s intentional voice.

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21 Blanchot speaks of this trait of literary unworking, the literary work’s refusal of the subject’s intention, with an expression, ‘Do not read me’ (Noli me legere), by appropriating ‘Do not touch me’ (Noli me tangere) episode of the Bible. According to Blanchot, while a literary work fascinates the subject who attempts to control it following his or her intention,
Taken together, we can see that the significance of Blanchot’s approach to literature is not an assignment of fixed and unified signification imposed on literature, but, rather, it is more important for Blanchot to uncover the inherent core of literature that is not related to such an external task. For Blanchot, the most important aspect in literature is its autonomous unworking, which escapes from one’s intentions or goals. In this sense, we might say that Blanchotian disengaged literature reveals unworking as the distinctive essence of literature by escaping from the general functions imposed on literature. Blanchot argues that literature is “to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing” (*PF* 314/ *WF* 324). In other words, literature disengages in a certain signification, but it is its inherent function. The very unworking is its disengagement from all fixed and unified signification that is useful to our communication.

If we consider the notion of unworking in the heart of literature, our understanding of literary experience will become completely different. In general, when we read a literary text, we expect to perceive a message or have vicarious experience from it. When we encourage children to read prolifically, but it continuously rejects that attempt of the subject in this manner of ‘Do not read me.’ In this context, Blanchot recalls the episode of ‘Do not touch me,’ where the resurrected Jesus refuses the earnest request of Mary for him to stay on the ground by holding his sleeve. See *EL* 14-15/ *SL* 23-24.
we expect them to build a universal knowledge by reading and to embrace their understanding of the world. However, in Blanchot’s thought that regards the essence of literature as unworking, this kind of experience is not a literary experience, but, rather, it is merely a subsidiary experience of literature that is associated with an external goal and work imposed on a literary text. Then, we can pose a question here as follows: What is the real experience of literature if the literary unworking is its essence?

B. The Blanchotian Sense of Literary Experience

a. The ‘Solitude’ as Literary Experience

What is important in Blanchot’s discussion of literary experience is neither the setting of the meaning of literary text by the author, the reader, and the text, nor the understanding, interpreting and codifying of it. In terms of literary unworking, the experience of literature is related to the literary text’s recession from all the final analyzation, categorization, and definition for a closed interpretation. In the section titled “The Essential Solitude” in The Space of Literature, Blanchot calls this recession of the text “the solitude of the work,” and reflects on what the literary experience is.
In order to understand what “solitude of the work” is in Blanchot, we must first examine the fact that his discussion of solitude is developed in the dimension of the work, not in the dimension of the physical book. Blanchot distinguishes the dimension of the book as a physical substance, while associating that of the work with reading and writing. He writes:

The writer writes a book, but the book is not yet the work. There is a work only when, through it, and with the violence of beginning which is proper to it, the word being is pronounced. This event occurs when the work becomes the intimacy between someone who writes it and someone who reads it. (SL 22-3/ EL 16)

Here, the book means a physical book that the writer has written as a result of his or her work. What we call ‘the book’ is constituted with ink and paper and bears the author’s name on its cover. It can become the object serving literary critics to develop their ever new and resourceful theories. Moreover, the reader can possess it and put it on a bookshelf. That is, a book is a physical object that can be completed by the writer who puts a period at the end of a sentence. However, in the above passage, Blanchot points out that there is another aspect of the text related to the actual action of writing and
reading, and he calls it ‘the work.’ Then, what does he designate through the word ‘the work,’ which is different from the general term of the book?

To describe the difference between the book and the work, the two sides of the text, Blanchot gives us an explanation by using the biblical story of the resurrection of Lazarus. According to Blanchot, the reader is like Jesus who pronounces the command ‘Lazarus, come forth’ (Lazare, veni foras) standing in front of the tomb. The tomb corresponds to the text, and Lazarus, the meaning of the text that the reader expects to reveal in the act of reading. However, Lazarus who emerges from the tomb has two sides: the first side is the resurrected Lazarus who stands in front of Jesus (the reader), and the second is Lazarus whose dead body beneath the well-woven winding sheet still smells of the decomposing remains (IC 35-6, SL 194-6). The resurrected Lazarus signifies the substantial side of the text, which is the book, and allows it to be made part of the general interpretations and to be fixed as a stable meaning. The other Lazarus, the dead body which is always obscured by the resurrected Lazarus, depicts the opacity at the center of the text, which still remains like the secret after every interpretation, by unworking our comprehension. In this sense, this other Lazarus designates the aspect of the work that undoes every interpretation thereby and always remains in the state of indeterminacy of meaning. That is, the work signifies for Blanchot an aspect
of the literary text, which always resists analyzation, summarizing, and codification.

Through the example of Kafka’s *The Castle*, we can understand the two sides of text, the book, and the work, in connection with the real sense of literary experience (*SL* 78-80, *IC* 394-396). We generally want the text to convey a fixed, definite message; we want it to mean something evident. Thus, we want the figure of the castle in Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* to be signified as a symbol of the absolute. This is because we expect the function of language in literary works to be as straightforward as the signifying function of an ordinary language. However, in the actual experience of reading and writing texts, it ‘unworks’—if ‘working’ here means producing a stable meaning. This is because we cannot admit any interpretation as the final one. Even the writer confronts a desolate situation wherein even he or she cannot be the best and the last judge of the meaning of the text. Of course, we can understand its narrative consisting of a character named K., who searches endlessly for a castle. However, this only designates the aspect of the book, the resurrected Lazarus. In the actual reading, there is always a part that still remains in the state of the indeterminacy. For example, the castle is the center of Kafka’s novel. However, just as the castle recedes in Kafka’s story from the one who attempts to analyze it as a single meaning, so does the work from the book. As
Blanchot contends, the castle is “infinitely more and thus also infinitely less than all of its interpretations” (*IC* 395). Here, the indefinable castle represents the aspect of the work, the other Lazarus. At this point, the figure of the castle here makes us discern what the work means: in the dimension of the work, the text constantly asserts its independence from the interpretation of the writer and the reader. In this sense, the solitude of the work means, for Blanchot, when the reader and the writer attempt to determine the meaning of the work, the work resists such attempt and remains indeterminable. That is, the work is separated from the intention or decision of the individual; it becomes solitary from the control of the individual.

If the work is solitary, this situation is also same for the one who tries to approach the work; it is like the two sides of a coin. Because of the recession of the literary work, no reader has any evidence to convince that she or he understands the work best. Moreover, while speaking of the situation of the writer, Blanchot also argues that “the same situation [the solitude of the work] can also be described this way: the writer never reads his work. It is, for him, illegible, a secret. He cannot linger in its presence. It is a secret because he is separated from it” (*SL* 23/*EL* 17). This is because there is no reason to argue that the writer approaches the understanding of the work from the most proximate position. When reading the text, the writer is merely the first reader,
who is not different from other readers. The writer is not the best judge of his or her work; so the writer feels him or herself to be alienated from his or her own work. Additionally, even the writer sees some strangeness and foreignness in his or her own work. Regarding this, Blanchot writes as follows:

What speaks to him [the writer] is the fact that, in one way or another, he is no longer himself; he isn’t anyone any more. The third person (il) for the “I” (Je): such is the solitude that comes to the writer on account of the work. It does not denote objective disinterestedness, creative detachment. It does not glorify consciousness in someone other than myself or the evolution of a human vitality which, in the imaginary space of the work of art, would retain the freedom to say “I.” The third person is **myself become no one** (moi-même devenue personne), my interlocutor turned alien; it is my no longer being able, where I am, to address myself and the inability of whoever addresses me to say “I”; it is his not being himself (*SL 28/ EL 24*).22

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22 Emphasis added.
Here, Blanchot describes the experience of literary writing as follows: even if a writer introduces a narrator called “I” in his or her work, in the activity of reading, such “I” cannot be identified with the writer him or herself. Rather, “I,” the narrator in the work appears as a foreign and anonymous one (il), as it were, “myself becomes no one.” This is the experience wherein the writer discovers this anonymous other in his or her own work, despite the fact that the work was written by the writer him or herself. Regarding this, Blanchot gives the example of Samuel Beckett’s fiction entitled *The Unnamable* (L’Innommable). Blanchot points out that since the narrator of *The Unnamable* is “I,” then, we usually regard “I” as Beckett himself. However, Blanchot says that “I” is not Beckett himself but actually, the changed Beckett,  

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23 Here, the French word ‘il’ is usually translated into ‘he’ in English, the masculine singular pronoun. It is also put into ‘it’ when it functions grammatically as an impersonal subject. (i.e., the phrase ‘il pleut’ is translated into English as ‘it rains’) However, in Blanchotian sense, ‘il,’ as the narrator of the work, means the anonymous third person, who is neither “I,” nor “you,” but the impersonal out of the well-known position of a person such as “I” and “you.” For Blanchot, the narrator of the work is not of any subject, but is liberated from any individual’s position. Thus, he expresses ‘il’ in other words, for example, the “indeterminate One” (l’On indéterminé) or “faceless Someone” (Quelqu’un sans figure) whose identity is not fixed but remains impersonal. See *EL* 22/ *SL* 31 and *EL* 24/ *SL* 33.

24 Regarding this idea of the writer’s alienation from his or her own work, we can say that Blanchot’s direct genealogical descendent is Roland Barthes. According to Alanko-Kahiluoto, Blanchot’s idea of the writer’s disappearance and alienation from the literary work is a nascent form of Roland Barthes’ later popularized idea of the death of the author. This thought of Barthes owes to Blanchot’s consideration of language and literature which ran against the traditional thought of criticism that the work is regulated and intentionalized by the author. See Alanko-Kahiluoto, Outi, “Writing otherwise than seeing: writing and exteriority in Maurice Blanchot”, p.10.
the unnamable one who is anonymous even to Beckett (LV 312, BC 212-3).
Though the physical text is written by the writer, the work cannot be possessed
by the writer. This is because, even when the writer reads the work, the text
resists his or her understanding and the writer gets the impression that “I” who
speaks in the literary work seems alienated and different from him or her.
Rather, the “I” is close to the foreign, the anonymous one who the writer has
never met before. That is, by relating to the work, the writer experiences
certain foreignness within the work.  

First, taken together, “the solitude” means the solitude of the work for
Blanchot, which is the work’s autonomous recession from the writer.
Moreover, next, it also means the solitude of the one, who is alienated from
the work by its recession. Of course, in general, we usually believe that the
meaning of the work is located within the author, the reader or the text. Thus,

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25 In The Space of Literature, Blanchot gives another example of Kafka’s quotes. According
to Blanchot, Kafka’s confession can show us this solitary experience of the writer: when
Kafka is surprised with enchantment, when he substitutes “he/she” (il) for “I” in his work, and
he remarked that he has entered into literature (SL 26). That is, when the writer experiences
the work, he does not feel like the language belongs to himself, but to no one, anonymous one;
that is, he feels certain foreignness. The writer encounters not “I,” but the anonymous other in
his or her work. But, why is this? “I” is the person who realistically performs the physical
language action, but the anonymous other is created from the work when the author reads his
book. He gets the impression that he was not the author of this work, but, rather, he receives
the feeling that what he is reading is written by another. However, this is the real experience
of literature according to Blanchot, and this is the reason why Kafka confessed that he has
entered into literature.
one could think that this argument of Blanchot about the literary experience of solitude, at a glance, appears to be esoteric. However, we should think that the appeal of solitude of writers and readers is not that unfamiliar and unusual. Lee Kie Un, a researcher of French literature, gives another concrete example of Jean Bazaine’s quotes. When Bazaine received the question: “Do you think that what you express, what you are creating eventually is yours?” He replied: “It seems myself as I do not know.” Here, Lee points out that Bazaine’s expression of ‘myself as I do not know’ corresponds to Blanchot’s “myself becomes no one,”26 that is, “in me that which is exterior to me—an other than I who passively become other” (en moi ce qui est hors de moi, un autre que moi qui deviens passivement autre) (ED 7/ WD 1). In short, Bazaine’s “myself as I do not know” is similar to the anonymity, foreignness in “myself” in Blanchotian thought. Likewise, the experience of literature in Blanchot is neither to possess the book nor to analyze the work. For Blanchot, it is impossible because of the work’s unworking. Rather, it is the continuous

experience of separation and foreignness between the work and the one who attempts to approach and understand the work.

b. Meaning of Literary Experience

The experience of solitude revealed in the dimension of the work suggests to us to reconsider the general idea of literary experience. Once again, I would like to give some questions here which I have mentioned above. Why do parents request their child to read novel and poem? Why does school education highlight the importance of creative training and reading classics? I think that here lies an expectation that if children were to read various literary works, they could learn about the general knowledge, culture, or feeling. However, if we keep referring to Blanchot’s thinking, we may arrive at the conclusion that literary experience is not limited only to that kind of purpose; such emphasis and request could be useful in that they give the knowledge and make us to become cultured.

Of course, as we discussed above, in the dimension of the book, the writer could represent a message through the book, and the reader interprets that message conveyed by the book. Here, the writer is satisfied with the delivery of a single meaning and completes the book. Moreover, the reader
also stops reading the book after comprehending its meaning and puts it on the bookshelf. Here emerges a relationship that shares a common understanding of the book. However, in the dimension of the work, as mentioned above, there is no fixed meaning due to the unworking traits inherent in the work. Unlike the book, since the work cannot be possessed by the individual, such as the writer and the reader (in Blanchot’s word, because the work is in solitude), any individual’s interpretation cannot be approved in the final sense. The work, like Lazarus in the tomb, always leaves a secret and foreign part where its meaning is indeterminable. The absence of the monotonous meaning of the work and the indeterminacy of the meaning appear to the writer and the reader as foreign. On the one hand, this foreignness of the work becomes the basis for the impossibility of complete and fixed signification. However, on the other hand, this foreignness of the work is what requires the writer and the reader to write and interpret the text repeatedly. Hence, in the dimension of the work emerges the endless contestation between the activity of writing and the activity of reading to approach the work, which is not finished with the act of explanation or agreement.

In this sense, Blanchot claims that such experience of unworking is related to the literature’s power of contestation, which refers to going against
the norms and orders established by the unified and fixed signification, that is, institution, ethics, values and concepts. He writes:

    Literature is perhaps essentially (I am not saying uniquely or manifestly) a **power of contestation** (*pouvoir de contestation*): contestation of the established power, contestation of what is (and of the fact of being), contestation of language and of the forms of literary language, finally contestation of itself as power. (*A 80/ F 67*)

Likewise, from the literary work’s character of unworking, recessing from the retail of senses and final interpretations for itself, Blanchot discovers the power of contestation. The meaning of the work is continuously contested by those who attempt to approach the work. Hence, for Blanchot, the contestation (*la contestation*) from the work is never pacified, the reconciliation which is also rivalry. Here, Blanchot contends that, in such “power of contestation” literature turns against the world of established values and it is in this sense that such literature can be called the other model of

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27 Emphasis added.

28 In the following chapter, we will see the meaning of contestation for Blanchot again more in depth in connection with his reflection on the question of community.
politics, which is different from the established politics based on the usual communication aiming at forming a consensus. In this sense, the unworking of the literary work is not a mere flaw of literature; rather, in Blanchot’s terms, the unworking of literature is the true conditions of a contestation that can be called political: a movement of refusal, struggle against the linguistic economy to which power relationship, social unity, and institutions conform. Though some authorities, institutions, or customs try to fix the literary work into a single meaning, literature is resistant because it always exceeds such fixation on a single meaning and is open to the possibility of contestation. For this reason, Blanchot focuses on the power of contestation, which has no relationship with utility or interest, and even opposes them. From this point, I think that Blanchot had predicted literature’s proper political significance, which will be developed in the next chapter in terms of the discussion of community.

These discussions so far help us understand the fact that Blanchot’s idea of literature and literary experience are based on the consideration of literature’s unworking, which bothers continuously the fixed and unified signification contributing to the completion and the generalization of rules, values, and concepts. As we discussed above, any final meaning proposed for a literary text can be contested. Therefore, for Blanchot, literary experience is
not oriented to secure certain knowledge, but, rather, it refers to a contestation, which the final meaning of work is never determined.

Of course, one could point out that Blanchot’s idea of literature and literary experience cannot have a universal validity to the literary theory. Todorov points out that Blanchot had an Eurocentric illusion. This is the case since it seems that Blanchot’s literary thinking can only be applied to the literary works of Europe, and the work of 20th century France in particular. Yes, I think this criticism is correct. While explaining literature and literary

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30 Blanchot usually pays attention to the poetry of Stephan Mallarmé, Francis Ponge, and Henri Michaux, and the novels of the French Nouveau Roman, such as Samuel Beckett, Marguerite Duras, and others such as Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, those who only had interest in the formalistic and stylistic change; their works are distant from a fixed and unified signification and such signification’s function of communication based on the sharing message. All these writers have been mentioned and analyzed by Blanchot in his The Book to Come. According to Crowely, Blanchot’s interest on the works throughout the 1950s and at the start of the 1960s was evidenced by two emergent tendencies: on the one hand, he associated with the new combative journalism of Tel Quel, many of whom went on to become the leading figures of their post-structuralist and deconstructionist generation; on the other, a new literary grouping which took its part in a role which is far from the realist aesthetics and political commitments of existential fiction. The works of this group came to be known as the nouveau roman. They were grouped principally around the editorial influence of Alain Robbe-Grillet at Minuit (and supported initially by Tel Quel) whose main interest was the substantive importance of formal innovation of literature, not its direct commitment to the exterior world of objects, other people, and history. See Crowley, Martin, “The Modern French novel” in The Cambridge History of French Literature, ed. William Burgwinkle, Nicholas Hammond, and Emma Wilson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 570-572.
experience, Blanchot usually gives the examples of modern French literature. Moreover, the universal validity of Blanchot’s literary thinking has not been proved yet. However, what we should remember here is Blanchot’s intention. Through this discussion of literary unworking and its experience, what he really tries to do is to reconsider our usual understanding of literature, and universal theories of literature to reduce the work into a final definitional meaning. Blanchot has no interest in such an exploration of literature. Rather, as we have seen so far, he pays attention to the literary work’s refusal to engage in the function of fixed and unified signification. This is the reason why Haase and Large also claims that Blanchot’s thinking on literature is a sort of anti-theory.³¹

We should find significance in Blanchot’s literary thinking in other horizon as well. First, his thinking of unworking exposes the real experience with literature that we face in our daily lives. Second, given the notion of the power of contestation in relation to literary unworking, it implies a resistive force inherent in literature to the established order. From this point, we may

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³¹ See Haase and Large, p.30. Not only Haase and Large, but also Bruns argues that Blanchot’s philosophy, derived from his literary thinking, is a sort of a refusal of philosophy, a movement beyond a philosophical attempt to define a notion. See L. Bruns, Gerald, Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, xv, 2005.
find another political significance. In general, like Sartre, it is usually said that politics of literature is related to the literature’s specific political message. However, according to Blanchot, we know that literature itself has a power of contestation to the existing order, and we find here a new horizon of politics of literature. We have already seen this from the example of the poems by Baudelaire and Mallarmé—their refusal to depend on fixed and final signification is not merely the pursuit toward nonsense, but, rather, it works as a criticism to the society of bourgeoisie and their deceptive morals. If we consider this example again, we can see that Blanchot’s literary unworking is not only the characteristic of literature that attempts to explain it in the horizon of universal validity, but also a tendency and attempt to go against the pursuit of universal validity to regulate and code literature. Nonetheless, I think the concept of unworking also suggests another possibility for literature in terms of politics. And it seems that this concept implies that the political thought revealed in his later discussion of community is rooted in his early discussion of literature, focusing on the concept of unworking. Thus, bearing this in mind, next, we will see how he considers the question of community based on his literary thinking.
3. Thinking Community in Literary Terms: Literary Community

The preceding chapter illustrated the Blanchotian sense of disengaged literature in terms of the notion of unworking. Given that the notion of literary unworking refers to the continuous escape of literature from the fixed and unified signification, we can anticipate the following inquiry: Is it possible to redefine the disengaged literature in order to develop a sense of Blanchotian literary engagement? This last chapter is devoted to the answering of this question based on Blanchot’s discussion of the relationship between literature and community, which dominated his later writings. We shall begin this chapter by analyzing the background of the emergence of the Blanchotian sense of community. Next, by analyzing the analogous relationship between literature and community in Blanchot’s thinking, I will elucidate why the Blanchotian sense of community is called ‘literary’ or ‘community without community.’ Based on these discussions, finally, I will explore the political meaning of literature in light of the question of community. This will help us to understand that the politics of community for Blanchot is related to ensuring the freedom of contestation, which we can usually encounter from the literary experience as we mentioned above.
A. Background of Blanchot’s Discussion of Community: Reflection on Communion

Since the late 1960s, when Blanchot started to write the texts that appear in *The Infinite Conversation* (L’Entretien infini, 1969) and *Friendship* (L’Amitié, 1971), Blanchot’s journey exploring literature had changed in course. Influenced by Levinas, who emphasized the relationship with the others, and watching the historical events such as the May ’68 protests and the Algerian War unravel, the problems of the others and of the community began to constitute a major part of his discussions. Particularly, in the political criticisms collected under the titles *Political Writings 1953-1993* (Écrits politiques 1953-1993, 2008) and *The Unavowable Community*, (La Communauté inavouable, 1984) Blanchot points out the limits of a concept of community characterized by unity or communion, which led to the establishment of Nazism and Stalinist communism. Moreover, he invites the readers to reconsider the question of a totalitarian community.

Blanchot reflects on our shared conception of community wherein we are able to produce a unified community based on common traits, ideological consensus, and organizational production. Yes, these days, we still embrace the concept that a community sharing certain common traits as the norm and
discuss solely the question of how the form, i.e., the system of community, should be consented and organized in common. According to Blanchot, some of the major historical events underlie these preconceptions about the concept of community and such events work as blindfolds that make it impossible for a true reflection on community.

The representative example of such historical events in the view of Blanchot was communism. It has been regarded as the driving force of global transformation to produce a certain form of community for the ideal goal of real equality and the realization of justice against the totalizing power of capital. Initially, the communism emerged from antagonism to the inhumanity of a capitalist society. However, as we can see from the example of Stalinist communism, communism ultimately deteriorated into a body politics that was no different from a totalitarian state characterized by violence and oppression. Of course, such unified community seems to achieve their desired community in the form of institutional consensus on the level of public politics. Just as the ancient Greeks decided to banish those who didn’t agree through ostracism and thereby achieved a certain consensus. That is, ostracism was a political system that consistently ensured the collective purity of ancient Greeks, and was a means to determine the status of the others effectively following the principle of majority rule.
From these examples, we can say that here lies our old, usual dream of well-formed community in which all are united based on a common ground. We always dreamt of a community established based on a common ground, such as a shared language, history, customs, and the political ideology, which can be a firm foundation of a community. Conventionally, we have regarded that politics can only be thought of as a mechanism to answer the age-old question of how communicating and sharing of “something” in common with clear language can enhance and maintain a certain form of the concord in community. But indeed, can it be said that the “other” exists in such a community at all? Is the “other” clearly ‘handled’ in the manner of this unified consensus that has been made for the purpose of the completion of community?

I think that Blanchot’s answer would be ‘negative.’ While undergoing the May ’68 and the holocaust during the Second World War, he witnessed the coexistence of the “others” hidden from plain sight as invisible members of the community—they evidently existed within the community, despite the gilded exterior of unity. Even at the moment when we formulate certain communities through the form of public consensus and treat them in a way that either absorbs the “others” or excludes the “others” from society, the

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32 Ibid., p. 101
“others” have always existed in community. Hence, Blanchot argues that the communion is a deceptive conception that conceals and erases those who exist in a way that produces a fixed communal consensus and forces it on the individual. According to Haase and Large, based on Blanchot’s issue with community lies the modern community’s many problems derived from our general understanding that a community is constituted and sustained by public consensus. 33 Such unified, consensual community makes the individual members subordinate to the totalitarian values of the whole community under the name of completion, achievement of communal consensus. We can find this idea of Blanchot from his political writings from 1953 to 1993, which he wrote constantly in magazines and leaflets. 34 Also, in 1971, he bid farewell to the perspective of forming a community centering on unity and, through The Unavowable Community, proposed the idea of a community without community—that is, a community which he calls literary community.

33 See Haase and Large, Maurice Blanchot, p. 99
34 Blanchot’s political writings were collected in a book titled “Écrits politiques” (1953-1993) in 2008 by the publishing company Gallimard. In this study, I refer to the English version, which is entitled “Political Writings.”
B. Analogy of Literature and Community: Literary Community

As we have discussed above, communion is a concept of community that produces fixed and unified community through public consensus based on a certain common traits and that forces individuals to follow such common traits. However, for Blanchot, community means something else entirely. He designates a community that does not exist as a substantial community based on a common trait, such as nation, blood, or religion. This is somewhat strange, but he thinks that this community is intrinsically related to the political dimension of literature in an analogous way and puts the modifier ‘literary’ to express such community. This line of ideas by Blanchot is dotted in his political essays and *The Unavowable Community.* What then does the community without the substantive commonality mean and why does this community need a modifier such as ‘literary’?

Unlike the general ideas on communion, Blanchot argues that it is natural for a community to lack common traits. At a glance, this idea of Blanchot is somewhat strange. This is because it seems hard to understand

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35 The term ‘literary community’ is directly mentioned in *The Unavowable Community.* Moreover, his political essays, such as “An approach to communism” and “Communism without Heirs,” give us a hint of the analogous relationship between literature and community. We will see these writings of Blanchot in this thesis.
Blanchot’s claim that community is originally exposed to the lack of commonality and therefore not substantive, which is strange for common readers who always live in institutional and substantive communities bound together by nationality or religion. However, if we refer to Blanchot’s example of Sergey Nechayev, particularly as characterized in Dostoyevsky’s novel, *The Possessed*, we could understand Blanchot’s strange idea that community is intrinsically not unified and unstable. Nechayev was a Russian revolutionary who formed a unified group based on nihilism and anarchism. However, in 1869, one group member named Ivanov disagreed with Nechayev and left the group. Hence, Nechayev killed Ivanov and hid the body in a lake by digging a hole in the ice. According to Blanchot, as we have affirmed in *The Possessed*, this dramatic murder was intended “to cement the group of conspirators” and to enchain all the members “in the pursuit of a common revolutionary aim” (*CI* 29-30/ *UC* 14). Of course, Nechayev’s attempt was inspired by the commendable aim to destroy a certain oppressive order. However, it ended up creating another oppressive order that punishes any individual who goes against Nechayev’s order (*CI* 29-30/ *UC* 14). If we understand Ivanov as the “other” who disagrees with the common opinion in

36 *See CI* 29-30 and note 1 in p. 32/ *UC* 14 and note 7 in p. 58.
a social cell; then Nechayev’s attempt can be understood as an action aimed at removing such dissent and ultimately ruling the “community” in pursuit of the enhancement of communal and collective unity. However, in spite of this extreme effort, there was a breakage symbolized by Ivanov, and the unity of Nechayev’s group finally collapsed. As we can see from this example, community is neither a place absolutely ruled by a certain leader, nor a place wherein its aim can be determined as the sole and monolithic one. Rather, due to the externality (the “other”) that a community cannot master perfectly, a community is always exposed to the risk of being disrupted. Hence, I would like to argue that this somewhat extreme example reminds us of the following facts: though we try to conceal the breakage of unity under the commonality, such as nationality, religion, and blood, with the public endeavor, and maintain the form of the communion, community is actually always exposed to the absence of unity.

In this light, Blanchot argues in his political criticism, “An approach to communism,” that literary experience and the experience of community are structured similarly. According to Blanchot, just as literary experience is exposed to the danger of a fixed and unified signification, the experience of community also lacks an absolute commonality. Thus, considering this similar structure, Blanchot explains what we can learn from the literary work that
demands readers to approach the work again and again because of its lack of a final signification when dealing with the problem of community:

The literary work, the artistic work, if it speaks to us of something, speaks to us of that which is removed from all value or repels all evaluation, articulates the demand of beginning (again), which is lost and muddled as soon as it is satisfied in value…. It is undoubtedly the task of our time to move toward an affirmation that is entirely other. A difficult and essentially risky task. It is to this task that community recalls us with a rigor that it itself often shirks, and it is also this task that “artistic experience,” in the realm that would be proper to it, recalls us. A remarkable coincidence (PW 6).\(^\text{37}\)

Here, Blanchot suggests “a remarkable coincidence” between the literary experience and that of a community. He writes that just as the experience surrounding the literary work rejects fixed interpretations and asks for another attempt for new interpretations again and again, the experience of community also demonstrates that all the communities that we believe to be

\(^{37}\) Emphasis added.
the foundation of the public world, institutions, and communities are all at risk and are unstable; hence, they require other and further attempts for the sake of community. This thinking of community, which considers the problem of community in terms of the political dimension of literature, is repeated in Blanchot’s other political criticism, “Communism without Heirs”:

Community is what excludes (and excludes itself from) any already constituted community… community without any common denominator other than penury, dissatisfaction, and lack in every sense of the term (PW 93).³⁸

Here I think that, by reflecting on the analogous relationship between literature and community, Blanchot realizes that, like the ability to raise divergence inherent in literature, the Blanchotian sense of community is free from any already constituted community, and beyond all dominant identities, values, and norms, which are the bases of such community. The various names of the community that Blanchot mentions represent the characteristics of the Blanchotian sense of community: “the community of those who have no

³⁸ Blanchot wrote this article anonymously in a magazine named “Comité” in 1968, October. Emphasis mine.
community” (la communauté de ceux qui n’ont pas de communauté) (CI 45/UC 24) or unavowable community (la communauté inavouable) (CI 92/UC 56), which cannot be defined by a certain system and ideology and, in fact, recedes from them. Thus, for Blanchot, the experience of community is constructed similarly to the literary experience pivoting on the characteristic of unworking, since it also has the negative condition of lacking commonality. Therefore, just as a literary work cannot be defined, community also cannot be defined or affirmed with words—this is the reason why community is ‘literary’ for Blanchot.

One might argue that Blanchot’s discussion of community is a somewhat radical proposal that rejects real life community and forces the readers to move toward a community without communion. However, I think Blanchot’s real intention was not merely to argue that all established communions should be completely rejected. This is because I believe that what he really tried to point out was the fact that the conception of community is not a determined and fixed relationship as generally conceived, but, rather, it is an unstable and flexible concept. For Blanchot, the belief in fixed commonality in a general sense and the belief in a community operating for unity are nothing more than a dream of a homogeneous community that, in fact, works in a violent way to exclude or totalize others. In this sense, we can argue that Blanchot’s intention
to illustrate the point that communion, which is believed to be firm and united, is fictitious and is always exposed to the dangers of lacking in absolute commonality due to the existence of the others. This is because, as we have seen so far, Blanchot has insisted that literary experience provides a chance to reflect on the general idea of community within the analogous relationship between literature and community.

C. Mechanism of Literary Community: Ensuring Freedom of Contestation

We have seen so far the background of Blanchotian discussion of the literary community, and what Blanchot’s intention was in having such discussion. However, it is not enough simply to say that community is literary; instead, we have to explain how and why such a community can possibly exist. The question, “how is it possible for a group of people to form a community that has no common denominator,” still remains unanswered. Hence, we should look at how the Blanchotian sense of community works. Unfortunately, I think that Blanchot does not sufficiently elaborate the mechanism of the literary community in *The Unavowable Community*. The Blanchotian concept of community presented as a reflective concept for a substantive community or unity working on an institutional and public basis can be seen only in a
somewhat negative light (e.g. only with negative modifies such as “unavowable,” “without community”). However, I would like to contend that, if we were to refer to his commentaries on political events of the days of his writings, we can infer how community “without any common denominator other than the lack thereof in every sense of the term” can share such absence.

First, let’s return to “An Approach to Communism.” Here, Blanchot compares two lives that are linked to two kinds of communication:

One [life] is linked to the future of “communication,” when the relations between men will no longer, insidiously or violently, make them into things, but for this it engages us, profoundly, dangerously, in the world of things, of “useful” relations, “efficacious” works, where we always come close to losing ourselves. The other [life] welcomes another communication, outside of the world and immediately, but on the condition that communication becomes the upheaval of “the immediate,” the opening, the shattering violence, the fire that burns without waiting… (PW 5-6).

Here Blanchot suggests two kinds of communication: first, the useful communication that produces useful relationships, that is, relationships constituted mainly of a firm commonality, such as ethnicity and religion;
second, useless communications (in literature), which move toward endless discord without reaching a consensus. Additionally, he claims that the second communication helps us to reject the power apparatuses—the authority maintained by the first communication, which produces a deceptive, but useful, unity \((PW 6)\). Then, how does it work? The first communication furtively forces us to make a consensual decision through institutional, public agreement; however, the second communication ceases this public consent and preserves a different voice from being reduced to a consensus. This is because the second communication allows for the possibility of a disagreement. And that is a good thing for Blanchot, because it means that community can allow for the voice of the others to be heard in the public system that pursues consent.

In my opinion, the second communication, which Blanchot refers to here, reminds us of the contestation for raising dissent, which we have discussed above. As we have already discussed, contestation is directed at persistent dissent, disrupting the determination of the fixed meaning that can be derived from a consensus. At a glance, this seems to be useless, since it does not contribute to producing a useful and firm relationship. However, as we have seen above, Blanchot’s expectation for the power of contestation, which is in terms of political meaning of literature, is related to its sharing of
experience of lacking final meaning. This is identical to the experience of a place built on absolute commonality based on sharing of the same meaning of the book. Hence, the experience of contestation, which we can easily experience in terms of literature, makes us confronted with constant inconsistencies without ending with a single public consent based on a certain authority or institution. From this, even if community is not a projected communion centered on a certain commonality, we can infer that community can work in a way that guarantees the freedom of contestation arising from the lack of commonality.

To clarify the working mechanism of the Blanchotian community more clearly, I would like to broach once more the example of bourgeoisie’s communal experience when it confronted the poems of Mallarmé. At the public reading of Mallarmé’s poetry held every Wednesday, the bourgeoisie experienced an unfamiliar poetry, which was against the usual signification that produced fixed meanings. The bourgeoisie was surprised by such poetry because it was close to music, which lacked in meaning. The bourgeoisie could not find a way to share its communal appreciation for the new sensory experience provoked by such poetry. They could not produce a common
understanding of Mallarmé’s work. However, the impossibility of forming a consensus for appreciation opened up the freedom of different opinions and engendered a state of discord. The poems peeled away the class consciousness that had been holding the bourgeoisie class back for a while in approaching the poems of Mallarmé, which could not be interpreted by a particular way of thinking that the bourgeoisie was used to. However, by sharing the experience of dissent itself, a temporal, flexible community emerged, which is beyond the bourgeoisie’s identity characterized by bourgeois ethics, culture, and ideas, and such identity was sustained only by the contestation around the literary work. Due to this inexplicable experience, the bourgeoisie that gathered at the Mallarmé readings could be released from the certainty and the relief of their status, identity, culture and customs. In this case, we can assert that the bourgeoisie has been exposed and has sustained a strange community in fluid and temporal form, which exists outside of their dominant identity. In such case, I think that it is because of the literary experience presented by Mallarmé that the bourgeoisie was able to experience the possibility of a new community and to temporarily ensure the freedom of contestation as the refusal of the norm of community.

To sum up, we can see that the power of contestation revealed in literature for Blanchot is a political condition that makes us reflect on the problem of community. It also means the condition of a new community, which reveals another sense of commonality that shares an experience of the absence of the absolute commonality—that is, the commonality beyond the substantial commonality. I would like to argue that we can find here the possibility of new politics rising, which is related to the problem of securing and ensuring freedom of contestation in community. This is because Blanchot’s thinking of literature and community implies the rise of a new possible politics as an alternative form of politics by ensuring the freedom of contestation, without being involved in the politics of the public domain operating in the union community.
Conclusion

The main goal of this thesis was to identify the Blanchotian sense of literary engagement with a specific understanding of community by exploring the Blanchotian concept of ‘unworking’ as a characteristic of literature. The first chapter was devoted to articulate Sartre’s theory of engaged literature and the second chapter attempted to elucidate what Blanchot means by disengaged literature and literary experience as the antithesis of a Sartrean literary engagement. Finally, the third chapter explored the political meaning of disengaged literature again in terms of community. Then, why is this exploration of Blanchotian sense of literature and community important and what is its significance? What can we learn from it?

Today, the modern populace is diligently looking for stability as it feels that society is damaged by capitalism and the so-called “aggressive others,” who may swallow the society. Modern fanatic enthusiasm and preference for ethnocentric alliances, natural science facts, or social and scientific laws, averages, statistics, excessive trust in the law, or capitalist fashions of the cultural industry and institutionalization of almost everything—all these things are something that cannot be explained without presupposing the stabilization of the community and the need for loose convenience—are
suffered equally by many of the communities in the modern world. Community, which appears in many ways such as the state, the political institution in these days, achieves public consensus. In order to follow the path of stabilization for the community or its purpose, the community tends to exclude many others, such as refugees, expats, or sexual minorities, in the name of social rule or law and hides the possibilities of other communities nested within the community. As we have discussed above, the planning of such a community actually seeks a sort of lazy relief as an attempt to conceal the “others” that exist anywhere and anytime by subordinating the individual to a previously designed, fixed community. Like the community that the bourgeoisie dreams of and the community created by real communism, we generally only dream of accomplishing the fulfillment of a well-planned and unified community centered on a common trait only if it denies otherness and rejects the possibility of dissent. How, then, can we effectively criticize this general thinking of community and present a new and alternative community in terms of literature?

As mentioned above, Sartre’s engaged literature could be a good and convenient answer. We could identify the problems of community as they are directly revealed and criticized by the capacity of useful signification and communication of literature. This trend of literature and its politics are not
extraordinary and have their own history; for example, in Enlightenment era works, such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s “Education of the Human Race,” Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, and the trend of ‘novel of education’ (*Bildungsroman*), had dealt with the cultural and moral growth of man.\(^{40}\) Such works may contribute to cultural change and development of civilization with their capacity of active signification. However, as we have seen in the first chapter, here lies the risk that literature itself might be identified as a mere tool for fixation of civilization, moral, and knowledge as an absolute value. This can be a dangerous force for cultural and moral conservatism, which reduces other dissenting values within the community.

In this sense, we need to pay attention to Blanchot’s thinking on literature. As Theodore D. George has argued, Blanchot’s vision is not founded on the lineage of useful literature. From Blanchot’s literary theory focusing on the notion of unworking, we could see that Blanchot fields a resistance against the attempt to utilize the import of literature’s communicative capacity to cultivate and civilize as well as to educate and improve the readers. If there is anything new in Blanchot’s appeal of unworking inherent in literature, it is the

intent to escape any communicative aspiration, which argues that art should contribute to humanistic culture or knowledge. Surely, as mentioned above, one could point out that Blanchot’s idea of literature does not have enough universality to be a conceptual literary theory. However, what he really tries to point out here is the very totalizing attempt to define literature into a theory. Proposing the notion of unworking of literature is his attempt to resist defining literature into a certain theory, and this is why his position is deemed anti-theorist.  

Moreover, Blanchot’s literary thinking helps us to rethink the political capacity of literature in terms of the problem of community. As mentioned, for Blanchot, literature reveals its social critical significance when it is considered on the basis of its unworking, and this is possible in the following manner (this is different from literature’s contribution to politics in the way of propagating certain political messages). Since literary work is already unworking all norms, values, and concepts, the literary experience is also the experience of rejection of the existing order, which has been sustained by consensual communication. Moreover, this strange experience provides those who attempt to approach

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41 See Haase and Large, p.30; see also, supra, p.39
literature with a new method of thought regarding the issues of community. Literature’s unworking, which does not directly argue for any social revolution, but gives us this strange experience, allows us to understand the fact that we are in fact sharing a lack of homogeneous commonality. This is the reason why, in terms of Blanchot, literature indirectly informs the possibility of community that exists outside of public communion—that is, literary community.

In this sense, in terms of Blanchot, I would like to argue that thinking the problem of community in terms of literature does not mean to engage in community in the field of public politics, which pursues planned consensus. The problem of the community needs to be re-examined in literary horizons that announce the power of contestation that breaks consensus. Literary experience, as an extreme experience that does not allow artificially generated communities to be shared, shows the importance of ensuring freedom of contestation outside of the public consensus or institutional realm of politics. Therefore, I posit that, to view the question of community as a problem of literature is neither related to setting up traditional or conventional political problems focused on the distribution of power and resources nor recommended for overly willful practice that literature should directly transform society. On the contrary, it stops the blind acceptance of the modern people of the unity and stabilization of the community—that is, the pursuit of
lazy relief—by pointing out and criticizing all the planning, institutional attempts for public consensus in our community.

This understanding helps us to reconsider the literary engagement embedded in Blanchot’s thoughts. As mentioned above, Blanchot constantly discusses the utility of literature for a purpose in his main texts and we see this centering on his notion of unworking. On this level, it is evidently disengaged in the fixed and unified signification and works to achieve a certain goal. However, this unworking of literature is closely related with the criticism against the limitation of public politics, which pursues consensus and refuses to permit contestation of freedom. Blanchot’s thinking emphasizes the freedom of contestation and, hence, it can be characterized as a politics of the freedom of contestation rather than politics striving for a consensus. In fact, his theory of literature can be regarded as an engagement of this movement of politics, though it is not engaged in public politics directly.

Of course, one can pose the following question: Can this literary engagement, which has no political project, organization, or group, become a real political practice in our real community? Isn’t this too ideal? Frankly speaking, I cannot dare argue here that the exact ‘manner’ of the disengage engagement can be accurately defined. This is because, if the disengaged engagement itself becomes the aim, it is not different from another absolute
and suppressive value. Instead, I can only talk about it in an illustrative, explanatory manner by presenting the following examples. We have already seen these new political experiments from the “Occupy Wall Street” movement in 2011 and from the “Umbrella Revolution” in Hong Kong in 2014. Various groups of people, including youth, unemployed, wage workers and retirees, gathered in the plazas around the world and shouted that we should get out of the conventional practice of democratic institutional politics regarding voting as the only act of civic activity for political consensus. Their slogan, "they no longer speak for us," condemns the professionalization of politics, the bureaucratization of all decisions in the hands of experts, and the denomination of politics subordinated to finance and capitalism, and further points out that these public politics have now reached the limit. Many people rushed out into the streets and tried to resist the spokespeople of the system, who think, speak and decide according to their tastes under the guise of a public consensus. And these activities by the people vividly testified that our politics for consensus does not really consider the minority opinions that obviously coexist in our society, but, rather, fool us into thinking that a democratic consensus exists in society. In this sense, I think that such political activities show us a new sense of politics that ensure the freedom of
contestation from outside the sphere of public politics is possible. It could be said that we have already confirmed through sufficient examples that the discussions on the community and politics of Blanchot, which stem from his literary ideas, are fiercely at work to contest politics beyond the public and consensual politics.

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국문초록

문학의 사회참여에 대한 널리 알려진 답변은 사르트르나 계몽주의 작가들의 것으로서, 그들은 문학이 어떤 메시지를 전달하거나 사회의 문제를 직접적으로 드러낸다는 입장을 취한다. 그러나 모리스 블랑쇼는 독특한 주장을 펼친다. 그는 문학이 어떤 메시지를 산출하는 고정적인 의미작용을 하지 않고, 오히려 그에 역행하는 ‘반-작업’을 한다고 본다. thereby, 어떤 과제의 달성을 지향하는 세계 일반의 작업과는 다른 문학 고유의 본령을 밝힌다. 나아가 그는 어떤 가치나 이상을 공유하고 합의한 결과로 기획된 일반적인 공동체. 그리하여 그 공동성에 포함되지 않는 타자의 문제를 넣는 베타적 공동체에 대한 사유를 비판하며 문학의 반-작업과 그 경험이 대한 사유를 바탕으로 ‘문학적 공동체’라는 대안적 아이디어를 제시한다. 이에 본 논문에서는 문학적 경험에 대한 블랑쇼의 논의가 공동체 논의의 연관 아래 어떻게 문학의 정치적 참여에 대한 새로운 아이디어로 확장되는지를 규명한다.

일반적으로 우리는 문학작품이 어떤 메시지나 의미를 배태하고 있기를 기대한다. 그리하여 문학작품을 통해 보편적 지식이나 문화의 습득, 정서함양을 도모할 수 있다고 생각한다. 그러나 문학작품은 본질적으로 그로부터 한 발 물리나었다. 독자는 하나의 해석을 제출할 수 있을 뿐 그것을 확정할 수는 없으며, 작가마저도 자신이 자기 작품을 가장 잘 이해하고 있다고 확신할 수 없다. 이러한 점에서 블랑쇼는 문학을 경험한다는 것이 고정적이고 통일적인 의미작용에서 벗어나는 반-작업적이고 무용한 경험이라고 본다. 또한 그는 이 경험으로부터 통일적이고 고정적인 의미작용을 바탕으로 설립된 질서들, 즉 제도, 규범, 가치, 개념들에 반하는 이견체기의 능력이 발생한다고 주장한다. 어떠한 권위, 제도, 관습이 문학작품을 하나의 의미로 고정시키다고 해도, 문학은 언제나 거기에서 벗어나 이견의 가능성을 향해 열리기 때문이다.

이러한 견지에서 블랑쇼는 우리에게 유효한 관계, 즉 민족, 종교 등 허구적 공동성을 중심으로 작동하는 관계를 산출하는 유효한 소통과, 합의에 도달하지 않고 끝없는 불일치를 향하는 (문학에서의) 소통을 비교한다. 그리고 두 번째 소통이 우리로부터 하여금 기반적인 합일관계를 내는 첫 번째 소통으로 유지되는 권력 장치들을 거부하도록 도와준다고 말한다.
첫 번째 소통은 은밀히 제도와 법률을 통해 우리에게 ‘동의’의 결정을 공적으로 강요하나, 공동체의 지평에서 두 번째 소통은 이러한 공적 동의를 중단하면서, ‘동의’로 환원될 수 없는 다른 목소리, 즉 ‘이견’을 제도 바깥에서 드러내기 때문이다. 이견이기로서 이 두 번째 소통은 지속적인 불일치를 향하고 있기에, 합의를 통해 도출될 수 있는 결정적 의미의 산출을 방해한다. 따라서 이는 결코 무용한 것처럼 보이기도 한다. 그러나 블랑쇼가 이견체기의 능력에 거는 기대는 그것이 어떤 권위나 제도에 의해 단 한 번의 공적 동의로 끝나지 않고 끝임없는 불일치에 우리를 맞닥뜨리게 하는 당황스러운 경험, 즉 ‘절대적 공동성의 결핍’이라는 경험을 공유하게 한다는 점과 연관된다. 이로부터 우리는 공동체가 어떤 공동성을 중심으로 기획된 연합이 아니라라고 해도, 공동성의 결핍에서 제기되는 이견체기의 자유를 보장하는 ‘문학적 방식으로 작동할 수 있음을 추론할 수 있다.

이를 종합해보면, 문학에서 드러나는 이견체기의 능력이 연합적 공동체를 반성케 하는 정치적 조건이자, 공동성 없이도 타자와 관계할 수 있는 근원적 공동성, 즉 절대적 공동성이 사실상 부재한 경험을 공유한다는 의미에서의 공동성을 드러내는 새로운 공동체의 조건임을 알 수 있다. 여기에 문학의 새로운 정치참여의 가능성도 있다. 그것은 바로 공동체에서 이견체기의 자유를 보장하는 문제와 연관되어 있다. 문학적 공동체 개념은 연합적 공동체에서 작동하는 공적영역의 정치와는 다른 대안적 정치, 즉 제도적인 합의의 영역에 포섭되지 않으면서도 이견체기의 자유를 보장할 수 있는 새로운 정치의 가능성을 시사하고 있기 때문이다. 이렇게 문학의 문제로 공동체를 사유한다는 것은 권력과 자원의 분배에 치중하는 정치의 오래된 문제 설정과 무관하다. 또한 문학이 직접적으로 사회를 변화해야한다는 지나치게 의지적인 참여에 대한 권고도 아니다. 블랑쇼의 시도는 공동체를 위한다는 명분 아래 이루어지는 모든 기획적 시도들과 공적-제도적 합의들을 지적하고 비판함으로써, 공동체의 연합과 안정화를 향한 현대인의 맹목적 지향에 제동을 걸어보는 것이다.

주요어: 모리스 블랑쇼, 반-작업(무위), 문학적 경험, 문학적 참여, 고정되고 통일된 의미작용, 이견체기, 문학적 공동체
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